

NAȚIUNI, NAȚIONALISM ȘI PERSPECTIVE INTERETNICE ÎN TRANSILVANIA

IN HONOREM SORIN MITU LA 60 DE ANI

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Romanian Women in the Early Photography of Emil Fischer

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Throughout the twentieth century, Romanian ethnography exploited images of Romanians as peasants dressed in folk costumes that could be catalogued and classified to define a national identity that was, as Sorin Mitu argued in relation to the eighteenth century, ethnocentric and yet nuanced, distanced from reality and designed to pander to national pride.¹ Ethnographers spoke on behalf of their subjects, telling them about peasant culture and explaining how they should perform their national identities in order to be authentic.² But what if the images that ethnographers relied on to define Romanian cultural heritage were created for very different purposes to those ethnographers put them? By examining images of women in the early photography of Emil Fischer (1873–1965), I show that Romanians used photography to perform a modern personal identity that reflected prosperity and success rather than a timeless folk culture.

I focus on women in particular because they were spoken about far more often than they were listened to, and as Alin Ciupală argues, throughout this period the image of the feminine was superimposed on and intertwined with that of the nation. At the same time that they put them on a pedestal, Romanian men used representations of women to reinforce male privilege and to articulate their own concerns about nation and society.³ Women's lives reflected the rapid changes sweeping through Romanian society, but many still thought of marriage and women's roles as bastions of "tradition" – a mythologized past outside of time that embodied the national essence.⁴ Women were portrayed as "mothers of the nation," which was an image that feminists were only too happy to use as an argument in favor of educating women and increasing their

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¹ Sorin Mitu, *National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania*, trans. Sorana Corneanu, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2001, p. 43, 279.

² Constantin Bărbulescu, *The Ignored Peasants of Romanian Ethnology: Ovid Densusianu, Henri H. Stahl and the Recalibration of Research on Rural Romania*, in „Journal of Romanian Studies”, 5, 2023, no. 2, p. 131–154.

³ Alin Ciupală, *Femeia în societatea românească a secolului al XIX-Lea: Între public și privat*, București, Editura Meridiane, 2003, p. 105–106.

⁴ Liliana Andreea Vasile, „Să nu audă lumea”. *Familia românească în Vechiul Regat*, București, Tritonic, 2009, p. 16; Alex Drace-Francis, *The Traditions of Invention: Romanian Ethnic and Social Stereotypes in Historical Context*, Leiden, Brill, 2013, p. 187.

very limited legal and political rights.⁵ If men wanted their nation to be recognized as civilized, Elena Densușianu insisted in 1869, they had to prove it through the rights they granted women.⁶ On the other side of the coin, in 1895 the Hungarian politician Gusztáv Beksics argued that Romanians in Transylvania were a backward race who did not deserve rights “because of the inferiority of their women vis-à-vis the civilized people of the Occident.”⁷ Women were tied to the nation because they reproduced it as mothers, educated it as parents and represented it as symbols. Their successes or failures reflected directly on the nation.

As Griselda Pollock famously demonstrated, paying attention to images of women also shifts the historian’s focus away from representation to the question of production. One cannot ask why women appear as second-class citizens in photographs without asking who commissioned, took, produced and distributed those photographs and to what purpose. “Women’s studies are not just about women,” Pollock reminds us, “but about the social systems and ideological schemata which sustain the domination of men over women within the other mutually inflecting regimes of power in the world, namely those of class and race.”⁸ Photographs of Romanian women, that is, tell us about how male Saxon photographers viewed them and to what extent Romanian women were able to control how they were represented.

Images of Romanians in Transylvania

The corpus of Emil Fischer has significantly influenced thinking about photography and the national identity of Romanians in Transylvania in recent years. In 2009, over 12,000 photographs and negatives belonging to the brothers Emil and Josef Fischer were found in the attic of the Protestant rectory in Cisnădioara, a village near Sibiu where the brothers had their summer house.⁹ The Fischer brothers were already well known as important photographers from the region, and this discovery made their photographs into one of the most frequently cited collections on early-twentieth century Transylvania. The Brukenthal National Museum in Sibiu had already obtained a large collection of the Fischer brother’s work in 1980 and received a second donation in 1987, making it the obvious home for these new photographs as well.¹⁰ Delia Voina presents these photographs as reliable representations of the “traditional architecture, folk costumes, handiwork, occupations, holiday celebrations, household interiors [and] religious ceremonies” of ethnic Romanians in the early twentieth century.¹¹ She

⁵ Maria Bucur, *Between Liberal and Republican Citizenship: Feminism and Nationalism in Romania, 1880–1918, „Aspasia”*, 1, 2007, p. 84–103; Cristina Sircuța, *Viața femeilor în România interbelică*, București, Oscar Print, 2016, p. 127.

⁶ Paraschiva Câncea, *Mișcarea pentru emanciparea femeii în România 1848–1948*, București, Editura Politică, 1976, p. 28.

⁷ Gusztáv Beksics, *La Question Roumaine* (1895) apud Marius Turda, *The Idea of National Superiority in Central Europe, 1880–1918*, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 2004, p. 129.

⁸ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, 3rd Edition, London, Routledge, 2015, p. 1.

⁹ Konrad Klein, and Christian Lindhorst, *Jenseits des Verschwindens: aus dem fotografischen Nachlass der Gebrüder Fischer, Hermannstadt/Sibiu*, Sibiu, Schiller Verlag, 2012, p. 7, 58.

¹⁰ Delia Voina, *Satul românesc din sudul Transilvaniei reflectat în fotografii semnate ‘Fischer’*, in „Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane Sibiu”, 24, 2017, p. 110.

¹¹ Eadem, *Un atelier fotografic. Trei generații de fotografi și imaginile lor etnografice*, in „Angvstia”, 12, 2008, p. 281.

and others describe such photography as a “testament” to the past and “an important research tool” for uncovering ethnographic information.¹²

Few anthropologists or folklorists share Voina’s confidence about the straightforward ability of photographs to represent the ethnographic subject. Such assertions were common in the nineteenth century, but photography went out of vogue in Anthropology during the 1970s and 1980s, when it became associated with the objectifying gaze of the outsider. More recently, scholars such as Elizabeth Edwards have reminded us that despite not being an objective window onto social realities, a photograph nonetheless retains the presence, or the trace, of its subjects.¹³ The challenge is not to view the photograph itself as a record, but rather to understand its original purpose within its historical context, to recover the different “ways of looking” that shaped how people have understood the photograph over time, and to see those fragments of the past that the photographer has, perhaps accidentally, captured on film. By paying attention to the cultural codes about ethnicity, class and gender embedded in the photographs we can learn to understand how and to what extent Emil Fischer and his contemporaries saw national identity in their photographs of Romanian women.¹⁴

Photographs do not reproduce reality – they create it. As Homi Bhabha argues, “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”¹⁵ Even when the photographer was a Saxon male like Emil Fischer, Romanian women were often the clients who commissioned these photographs, and as such they retained some control over how the photographs were framed and circulated. In her book on photography in nineteenth and twentieth century Poland, Ewa Manikowska argues that Poles used photography to project a modern, civilized and European image to the world, one that contradicted the orientalising Western gaze that saw Eastern Europe as backward and primitive.¹⁶ In the Ottoman Empire, insurgents had photographs taken of themselves dressed in sometimes exotic national costumes that were far from their everyday clothing, but which allowed them to portray themselves as “Bulgarian national heroes” in the *carte de visite* that they could give to friends and acquaintances.¹⁷ Much the same thing was happening in Transylvania at this time.¹⁸ The women in Fischer’s photographs represented themselves on their

¹² Anda-Lucia Spănu and Delia Voina, *Vederi generale ale Sibiului din colecțiile Muzeului Național Brukenthal Sibiu*, in Raluca Teodorescu, Alexandru Constantin Chituță, Adrian Georgescu and Anamaria Tudorie eds., *In honorem prof. univ. dr. Sabin Adrian Luca: Istorie și destin*, Sibiu, Editura Muzeului Național Brukenthal, 2019, p. 425.

¹³ Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography: A Long History of Knowledge and Affect*, in „Photographies”, 8, 2015, no. 3, p. 235–252.

¹⁴ Sarah Edge, *The Extraordinary Archive of Arthur J. Munby: Photographing Class and Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 19–26.

¹⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd Edition, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 3.

¹⁶ Ewa Manikowska, *Photography and Cultural Heritage in the Age of Nationalisms*, London, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019, p. 5.

¹⁷ Martina Baleva, *The Heroic Lens: Portrait Photography of Ottoman Insurgents in the Nineteenth-Century Balkans—Types and Uses*, in Markus Müller and Staci G. Scheiwiller eds., *The Indigenous Lens? Early Photography in the Near and Middle East*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018, p. 237–256.

¹⁸ Gabriela Boangiu, *Contribution of Photography to the Recognition of Great Union of Romania*, in „„C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor” Yearbook”, 20, 2019, p. 69–80.

own terms, and to show the world what *they*, in collaboration with the photographer, wanted it to see. Far from being naïve, their use of markers of cultural heritage was deliberate. These photographs are evidence of Romanian women altering and selecting elements of their heritage in ways that increased their cultural capital within their communities.

The fact that these photographs were taken in Transylvania adds another layer of complexity to the interpretation. As Mitu states, when speaking about “Romanians,” people from Transylvania “use the term to refer to the whole nation, yet their perspective is shaped by a certain bias and the examples they use to illustrate their opinions have to do, more often than not, with specifically Transylvanian issues.”¹⁹ Despite seeing themselves as a downtrodden and oppressed minority, Romanians in Transylvania also insisted that they had a more refined culture and higher levels of education and material prosperity than Romanians in the Old Kingdom.²⁰ Images of them therefore had to assert their right to be acknowledged as distinct but equal to the Saxons and Hungarians around them as well as their claim to superiority over other Romanians living further south and east. Transylvanian Romanians also suffered from the fact that by and large they were less economically secure than their Saxon or Hungarian neighbors. Whereas the Saxons in the countryside usually owned commercial farms and used mechanized equipment, most rural Romanians in the villages around Sibiu ate their own produce and/or hired themselves out as day laborers, often to Hungarians who ran the larger estates. Segregation into different churches, civic activities and festive occasions aggravated ethnic stereotypes and the negative perceptions that each group held about the others.²¹

Saxons began to play a new leadership role in Sibiu in the mid-nineteenth century, although the city’s administrative and military importance diminished after the Ausgleich of 1867, when it was relegated to a secondary role by the centralized government in Budapest.²² Sacha Davis has described in detail how Saxon ethnographers such as Emil Sigerus used photography as a political tool to celebrate Saxon achievements in the region, helping improve their cultural capital vis-à-vis the Hungarians, Romanians and Roma.²³ Just because they were proud Saxons does not mean that they were not able to work together with members of other ethnic groups, but it is a reminder that whatever the ethnic Romanians who commissioned the photographs wanted, the results were mediated by Saxon nationalism.

Romanian nationalism too was widespread in this part of Transylvania.²⁴ In a memorandum written by the choir director of the largest Romanian Orthodox Church in Brașov in 1907, the author referred to the love his choir had for “our people” and claimed that singing was a “moral obligation” they had following the “great and difficult struggle” that Romanians had faced in

¹⁹ Mitu, *National Identity of Romanians in Transylvania*, p. 4.

²⁰ Florian Kührer-Wielach, *Siebenbürgen ohne Siebenbürger? Zentralstaatliche Integration und politischer Regionalismus nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2014, p. 357.

²¹ Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 232–269.

²² Harald Roth, *Hermannstadt: Kleine Geschichte einer Stadt in Siebenbürgen*, Köln, Böhlau Verlag, 2006, p. 167–171.

²³ Sacha E. Davis, *Ethnophotography, Nation Branding, and National Competition in Transylvania: Emil Sigerus’ Durch Siebenbürgen*, in „Nationalities Papers”, 51, 2023, no. 6, p. 1375–1396.

²⁴ Roth, *Hermannstadt*, p. 179–181.

order to get their own churches and schools.²⁵ Leaders of the Romanian national movement took two distinct approaches to winning these rights at the turn of the century. The first, championed by Aurel C. Popovici and the older generation of nationalists, insisted that Romanians were at least the equals of anyone else in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in terms of civilization and culture, and fought for their legal recognition within the empire.²⁶ Moreover, whereas the Magyars had invaded Europe in the ninth century and their civilization was now in “decline”, the Romanians had preserved the best of both the Latin and Aryan races and were only now coming into their ascendancy.²⁷ The other approach, led by young intellectuals such as Octavian Tăslăuanu and Octavian Goga, emphasized cultural rather than racial distinctiveness and argued that the future of the national movement lay in celebrating Romanian folk culture.²⁸ Both currents – that of “civilization” and that of the “folk” – animated the Romanian photographs in Fischer’s collection, where peasant motifs were enhanced by markers of civilization and prosperity.

Emil Fischer

According to his application for Romanian citizenship in 1926, Emil Fischer was a Czechoslovak citizen of German nationality, and was born in Plovdiv, then part of the Ottoman Empire.²⁹ His father came from Výsluní in Bohemia, and the family obviously felt insecure in Plovdiv because they left for Romania in 1877.³⁰ A year earlier, Plovdiv had been the center of the Bulgarian April Uprising, which was met with harsh reprisals from Ottoman troops. British reports stated that “60 or 70 villages have been burned,... [and] some 15,000 people have been slaughtered, of whom a large part were women and children.” German railway officials spread reports “of the bodies of men cut up and flung to the dogs in villages near their own railway stations; of little children of both sexes maltreated and brutalised until they died; of a priest, whose wife and children were outraged and slaughtered before his eyes, and who was then put to death, after the most fearful torture.”³¹ Having left Ottoman Bulgaria under such circumstances, Emil’s parents presumably presented Romania to him as a place of comparative safety and civilisation.

Fischer learned his trade working for Gustav A. Waber, whose advertisements promised a “studio of the first rank. Equipped with the best technology. Elegant arrangements. Moderate

²⁵ Memorial coriștilor conduși de Gheorghe Dima adresat comitetului, 19 May 1907; reproduced in Vasile Oltean ed., *Acte, documente și scrisori din Șcheii Brașovului*, București, Editura Minerva, 1980, p. 384.

²⁶ Keith Hitchins, *A Nation Affirmed: The Romanian National Movement in Transylvania, 1860–1914*, București, The Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 1999, p. 345–357.

²⁷ Turda, *The Idea of National Superiority*, p. 142–157.

²⁸ Răzvan Părăianu, *Octavian Goga: Sacerdote of the Nation. Revisiting the Romanian National Idea*, Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut, 2018, p. 111–236.

²⁹ “Monitorul Oficial”, 21 December 1926. Delia Voina describes his father as „a Kapellmeister of Bohemian origin”. Voina, *Satul românesc*, p. 109.

³⁰ Klein and Lindhorst, *Jenseits des Verschwindens*, p. 51.

³¹ J. A. MacGahan, *The Turkish Atrocities in Bulgaria*, London, Bradbury, Agnew & Co, 1876, p. 11–12. For an eye-witness British account, see Robert Jasper More, *Under the Balkans: Notes of a Visit to the District of Philippopolis in 1876*, London, Henry S. King & Co., 1877.

prices.”³² Waber had only recently set out on his own when Fischer joined as his apprentice, and his advertising suggested that customers were still confusing him with another studio located next door. Presumably, Fischer learned about both photography and about the challenges of establishing a new business from Waber. Portrait photography was a booming industry by the 1890s. Originally dominated by Germans and Austrians, by now a number of Romanian-born photographers were also setting up their own shops. Adrian-Silvan Ionescu writes that “by the turn of the century there was at least one photographer in every town of united Romania.”³³ Photographers distinguished themselves not only through the quality of their images, but also through the ways they arranged their clients, using furniture, flowers, or other props to celebrate – and sometimes inflate – the subject’s social standing. Uniforms and other clothing, as well as weapons or the subject’s pose could also communicate heroism or particular occupations in addition to one’s class. Far from being anonymous representatives of an ethnographic type, the people pictured in these images deliberately chose to present themselves in this way, using the photographs as calling cards that encouraged acquaintances to remember them in particular ways.³⁴

Fischer moved to Brașov once his time with Waber came to an end, and here he worked for the celebrated photographer Carl Muschalek. Muschalek specialised in studio photography, but his photographs also portrayed Brașov as a historic city, focusing on the crumbling walls of the Goldsmith’s Tower, the newly-built Schuller villa, or panoramas looking down on the city from Mount Tâmpa.³⁵ By now Muschalek was in the final years of his short career. He was also an active member of the city’s Saxon community, as Fischer would later become in Sibiu, and his photographs portrayed the Saxons, and the city as a whole, in the best possible light.³⁶ Saxon publications suggest that the community saw itself as an island of civilisation and culture in a backward East European sea, with its own dialect, customs, and even its own form of “Saxon Christianity”, and an emphasis on Saxon particularity is also visible in Muschalek’s photography.³⁷ Fischer travelled to Magdeburg to attend an art school during the time he was working for Muschalek, joining other Transylvanian Saxons who also saw Germany as a logical destination for further study.³⁸

Emil Fischer moved to Sibiu in 1897, where he took over the studio run by Camilla Asboth and her sister. Nieces of the famous photographer Theodor Glatz, the Asboth sisters were known

³² *Fotografia nouă a lui Gustav A. Waber*, in „Universul”, 14 April 1892, p. 2.

³³ Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Early Portrait and Genre Photography in Romania*, in „History of Photography”, 13, 1989, no. 4, p. 271–85.

³⁴ Emanuel Bădescu, *A Phenomenology of Photography in Nineteenth-Century Romania*, in „Uncommon Culture”, 5, 2014, no. 9/10, p. 136–141; Baleva, *The Heroic Lens*, p. 213–233.

³⁵ Brașov County Archives, Fond Primăria Brașov, Dosar Chestiuni referitor la arhiva orașului, BV-F-00001-5A-3-1-1889-2.

³⁶ *Ordentliche Mitglieder für 1893*, in „Jahrbuch des Siebenbürgischen Karpathenvereins”, 14, 1894, p. 114; *Lokal- und Tagesnachrichten*, in „Kronstadtter Zeitung”, 28 November 1904, p. 1.

³⁷ Mircea Gheorghe Abrudan, *The Confessional Identity of the Transylvanian Saxons (1848–1920)*, in Sorin Mitu ed., *Entangled Identities: Regionalism, Society, Ethnicity, Confession and Gender in Transylvania (18th–19th Century)*, Cluj-Napoca, Argonaut Publishing, 2014, p. 127–159; Sacha E. Davis, *Constructing the Volksgemeinschaft: Saxon Particularism and the Myth of the German East, 1919–1933*, in „German Studies Review”, 39, 2016, p. 41–64.

³⁸ Konrad Klein, *Foto-Ethnologen. Theodor Glatz und die frühe ethnografische Fotografie in Siebenbürgen*, in „Fotogeschichte”, 103, 2007, no. 27, p. 38.

for their chromophotography, a technique that involved superimposing two identical images with different colourings in order to achieve a deeper, more 3D effect. The studio was situated on Großer Ring 16 (today Str. Nicolae Bălcescu) in the centre of town, and had been run by another famous photographer, Carl Koller, before the Asboth sisters took it over. Fischer moved his premises to the old Transylvania Insurance Company building in 1900, where it became something of a fixture in Sibiu's commercial landscape.³⁹ After travelling to Munich for his Master's qualification, he was able to open a second studio on Elizabethgasse (today Str. 9 Mai) in 1904 and another on Fleischergasse (today Str. Mitropoliei) in 1912, taking over the laboratories of other local photographers. His interests extended beyond purely commercial photography, and he won numerous national and international prizes between 1903 and 1910, as well as being named photographer of the Imperial Court of Austro-Hungary in 1904 and of the Romanian Court in 1920.⁴⁰ His photographs were published not only in Romania but also sought after across Central Europe.⁴¹ Emil's younger brother Josef joined the business in May 1914. Alpine photography quickly became one of his driving passions, and over the next few decades he produced numerous iconic images of Transylvania's mountains, adding to an already emerging corpus begun by his older brother.⁴² The two of them comfortably dominated the market for postcards of the Carpathians and consequently encouraged a new market for alpine tourism to the region.⁴³

Fischer applied for Romanian citizenship in 1926, finally being naturalized in 1936.⁴⁴ He was an active member of Sibiu's cultural community, donating time, money and photographs not only to Saxon causes but even to a Greek Catholic school in Blaj during 1908.⁴⁵ He was a leading member of Sibiu's photography club from at least as early as 1909, when he gave a demonstration of the ozone-bromide procedure for photography enthusiasts and delivered lectures with his magic lantern projector.⁴⁶ As Sacha Davis has shown, Saxons used photography extensively for political purposes and "national branding" during this period, and the Saxon politician Karl Wolff made effective use of Fischer's photographs to show off his building works and electrification of the city.⁴⁷ The Saxon community became increasingly radicalized during the interwar period, with Nazis such as Hans Otto Roth and Andreas Schmidt taking control of

³⁹ *Jubileu de 50 ani*, in „Gazeta Sibiului”, 1 January 1940; *50 jähriger Geschäftsbestand*, in „Kirchliche Blätter”, 29 October 1947.

⁴⁰ Voinea, *Satul românesc*, p. 110.

⁴¹ *Zeitungen und Zeitschriften*, in „Ostland”, 3, 1921, no. 1, p. 531; *Unterhaltung und Wissen*, in „Landwirtschaftliche Blätter”, 1 May 1927.

⁴² Klein and Lindhorst, *Jenseits des Verschwindens*, p. 59–66. For some of Emil Fischer's early alpine photography, see Romulus Th. Popescu, *Frecker See-Budislav-Surul*, in „Jahrbuch des Siebenbürgischen Karpathenvereins”, 29, 1909, p. 27–48.

⁴³ Konrad Klein, *Grüße aus dem Bärenland: Siebenbürgen in alten Ansichtskarten*, Munich, Verlag Südostdeutsches Kulturwerk, 1998, p. 16.

⁴⁴ „Monitorul official”, 21 December 1926; „Monitorul official”, 11 July 1936.

⁴⁵ *An Geschenken erhielt das Museum im Jahre 1899*, in „Jahrbuch des Siebenbürgischen Karpathenvereins”, 20, 1900, p. 22; *Raport despre institutele de învățământ Gr.-Cat. din Balázsfalva-Blaj*, Blaj, Tipografia Seminariului Teologic Gr.-Cat., 1909, p. 72; *Conductul festiv*, in „Transsilvania”, 1 July 1930; *D.-l Emil Fischer*, in „Gazeta Sibiului”, 6 January 1944.

⁴⁶ *Photoklub Hermannstadt*, in „Die Karpathen”, 10, 1910, p. 317.

⁴⁷ Davis, *Ethnophotography, Nation Branding, and National Competition*, p. 1375–1396; Franz Herfurth, *Dr. Karl*

key leadership positions in ethnic organizations.⁴⁸ Fischer embraced this pro-Nazi stance and worked together with German Nazis in Sibiu during the war, including having his photograph taken standing on a German tank.⁴⁹ The Communists did not remember his wartime activities fondly, and he was temporarily blacklisted within Sibiu for a few years after the war, his business finally being nationalized in 1959.⁵⁰

Portrait Photography

Fischer photographed a large number of girls and women, almost always categorizing them in his notes as either Saxons and Romanians rather than according to where they lived, their occupations or their families. His “Romanian woman in popular holiday dress” (Fig. 1) taken in 1897 is typical of the studio portraits he sold in Sibiu. Stuck to a piece of light cardboard, it features the photographer’s name below the image and an advertisement for the studio on the back.

The woman has her head covered in a plain white scarf (*pahiol*), wears a light, loose-fitting blouse (*ie*) embroidered with the same pattern of hammers as her handkerchief, an embroidered vest (*ciupag*) with tassels, and a black apron (*zadie*) that again shows careful embroidery on the edges. The entire costume is distinctive of the Romanian communities around Sibiu. She has a ring clearly visible on the middle finger of her left hand, at the very centre of the photograph, where the viewer’s eyes naturally come to rest. She looks directly at the camera with the beginnings of a smile, and her expression certainly does not convey any strong emotions, whether of malice, disdain, excitement or an invitation to romance. She stands behind some young birch branches that have been lashed together to resemble a gate, and decorated with vines and clumps of larger leaves from the sorts of trees that still grow in Fischer’s neighborhood today. Other flowers are visible on the wall behind her. Despite the use of flowers, leaves and branches for decoration, no-one could mistake this for an outside photograph. The lighting, the woman’s pose, and the arrangement of the leaves communicate that this is a carefully arranged studio portrait that woman can give to her suitor or to family members and which puts her in the best possible light. Behind the camera is not the orientalising gaze of the ethnographer, but the artistic professionalism of a studio photographer.

Both through the representation itself and through the material fact of having had a studio portrait taken, the photograph suggests success, prosperity and confidence in the modern world of a Transylvanian town. One has only to compare this photograph with those which Fischer took of Saxon women at the end of the nineteenth century to see some stark differences, however. Clothes and luxury goods do, as Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu has shown, speak volumes about

Wolff und seine Kirche, in „Die Karpathen” 3, 1910, no. 13, p. 399–403; Karl Fritsch, *Dr. Karl Wolff als Sparkassadirektor*, in „Die Karpathen”, 3, 1910, no. 13, p. 407–411. On Wolff’s achievements, see Roth, *Hermannstadt*, p. 175.

⁴⁸ Tudor Georgescu, *The Eugenic Fortress: The Transylvanian Saxon Experiment in Interwar Romania*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2016; Sacha E. Davis, *Constructing the ‘Volksgemeinschaft’*; James Koranyi, *Migrating Memories: Romanian Germans in Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 117–124; Andrei Corbea-Hoisie and Rudolf Gräf eds., *Kulturtransferprozesse im postimperialen Umfeld: Deutsche Sprache und Kultur im rumänischsprachigen Raum um das Schwellenjahr 1918*, Konstanz, Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2024.

⁴⁹ Victori Văleanu, *Patronii fotografi cer satisfacție*, in „România viitoare”, 27 February 1947.

⁵⁰ Voinea, *Satul românesc*, p. 110.

class, social and political networks, and access to ideas.⁵¹ While this woman wore costly holiday clothes, they still reflected a peasant culture associated with ethnic Romanians and her blouse would have been made from cotton, linen or borangic silk – all relatively cheap materials. A Saxon woman that Fischer photographed in 1897, on the other hand, wore a much more elaborately embroidered dress, had her hair permed, displayed a dangling earring, a pearl necklace, a large ornate broach and a jewel-encrusted belt (Fig. 2).

Whereas the impromptu fence that the Romanian woman stood behind evoked a village gate, the Saxon girl needed no such decorations – she sat on a pedestal.⁵² The Saxon girl *sat* when the Romanian stood, and while the Romanian woman confronted the viewer with her straightforward gaze, the Saxon girl stared off to the side. Not needing to assert herself to realise her status, she was there to be admired like a precious object. Fischer's studio photography celebrated his subjects as successful women, but also situated them within an ethnic hierarchy that was being performed in the studio through dress, posture and props.

The Romanian Countryside

When Fischer ventured outside, he insisted on a gender hierarchy as well as an ethnic one. His photograph “Collecting dry wool at Răşinari” (Fig. 3) pictured two men and five women. 94 percent of Răşinari's population were ethnic Romanians in 1900, and the area was famous for its relatively wealthy shepherds.⁵³ With their healthy, upright posture, the blue sky of spring or early summer and the copious amounts of wool lying around, the photograph spoke of abundance, health and a good work ethic.

The oldest man of the group stands front and centre, and is the only one with a tool in his hands. Very much in the background, the five women gather up the fruits of his labour. Like the wool, their presence is a reflection on his character and they are far from being the focus of the photograph despite their numbers. Nor is female beauty important here in the way it was in Fischer's studio portraits. A teacher from Sibiu, Victor Păcală, wrote in 1915 that the women from Răşinari were “well-built and robust, with strong thighs and a pleasing appearance but, in general, not as beautiful as Romanian women from elsewhere.”⁵⁴ If we assume that Păcală was reflecting a local stereotype that was shared by other men in Sibiu then it is safe to say that Fischer had not gone to Răşinari looking for striking examples of Romanian beauty. Instead, he recorded women in their work clothes, their hair covered, not looking at the camera, and it is the bulging sacks of wool, not the women surrounding them, that capture the viewer's attention.

Another photograph taken that day (Fig. 4) gives us a different angle but by and large sends the same message. The women are at the forefront of this photograph, and they are actively stuffing wool into the sacks while the man stands at the centre of the frame holding another sack

⁵¹ Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, *Introduction*, in Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu ed., *Women, Consumption, and the Circulation of Ideas in South-Eastern Europe, 17th–19th Centuries*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, p. 1–11.

⁵² At the turn of the century Fischer frequently used plants in his studio portraits of Romanians, both male and female. See Muzeul Astra Sibiu. *Colecția Grafică documentară*, Nr. 137, 153. URL: <http://digital-library.ulbsibiu.ro/xmlui/handle/123456789/3831>. Accessed 29 December 2024. Also Muzeul Național Brukenthal – Sibiu, Fond Emil Fischer, Nr. F 763, F 767, and F 768.

⁵³ Victor Păcală, *Monografia comunei Răşinariu*, Sibiu, Tiparul Tipografiei Arhidiecezane, 1915, p. 93.

⁵⁴ Păcală, *Monografia comunei Răşinariu*, p. 106.

and talking to two other women. There are two boys here who were not in the previous image; a reminder that there were usually more people present than appear in any of these photographs.⁵⁵ This time the sacks are genuinely overflowing, and it looks like the wool is coming *out* of the sack on the right rather than going into it. Whereas the first photograph shows us a nearby barn that presumably will store the wool, the second looks downhill across land stretching over a creek and all the way to the road. Here the extent of the pastureland as much as the quantity of the wool speaks to the material prosperity of the shepherd. The organisation of the various figures in the photographs, their freshly washed faces and perfectly clean clothes, the fact that no-one in the pictures were doing any actual work and the decision to capture precisely the stage of the process when abundance was most obvious, all suggests that like the studio portraits, these photographs were arranged to put this shepherd in the best possible light. Even though they were not mounted on cardboard, they still reflect precisely the image that a shepherd might have wanted to show the world.

Baptism

Fischer's photographs of Orthodox baptisms achieved a similar purpose. Like folk costumes and shepherding, Orthodox Christian rituals such as baptism communicated Romanianess along with prosperity and virtue. Women were known to attend church far more often than men did and were the ones who primarily handled the child during the ceremony, meaning that the baptism of infants was closely associated with a woman's sphere of influence. Fischer's undated "Orthodox baptism at a church near Sibiu" (Fig. 5) pictures eight women and six men, one of them a priest.

The priest's sticharion (*stihar*) is plain black, he is missing an epimanikion (*rucaviță*) or other ornate priestly garments, and his relatively plain epitachelion (*epitrahil*) is draped over the head of the woman holding the child being baptised, as a sign of blessing. This is closer to an ethnographic photograph than any of the images discussed above in that it does not necessarily speak of prosperity. The mortar above the door of the church is crumbling, the kiosk surrounding the cross (*troiță*) is made of cheap wood and corrugated iron, and the elaborate folk costumes seen in some of Fischer's other photographs are not on display. Among other things, the photograph portrays the second-class status and relative poverty of the Romanian Orthodox Church within the Austro-Hungarian Empire compared to the churches of other ethnic groups.⁵⁶ This is not to say that the people in the photograph did not dress up for this important occasion. Rather, the photograph was taken on a cold day: The men have their thick woollen trousers (*cioareci*) tucked firmly into their sandals (*opinci*), and any ornamentation is covered by their heavy coats (*sumane*). The women all have their heads covered and the men their heads uncovered, as was appropriate during a church service. The women are also all on their knees while five of the six men are standing. Kneeling during a church service might be seen as a sign of piety, but in this

⁵⁵ Other photographs of this scene show even larger numbers of people. See Muzeul Național Brukenthal – Sibiu, Fond Emil Fischer, Nr. F 727, F 730, F 731.

⁵⁶ Johann Schneider, *Der Hermannstädter Metropolit Andrei von Șaguna: Reform und Erneuerung der orthodoxen Kirche in Siebenbürgen und Ungarn nach 1848*, Köln, Böhlau, 2005, and Paul Brusanowski, *Reforma constituțională din Biserica Ortodoxă a Transilvaniei între 1850–1925*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2007.

case it also gives the visual impression that the women are lower, more humble than the men. The men's faces are much more visible than those of the women, and everyone's attention is directed towards the baby, who occupies the centerpiece of the photograph, invisible beneath his or her swaddling clothes.

The crumbling church and the lack of ornate folk costumes might mislead us into thinking that this photograph shows life as it really was, a snapshot of Romanian reality during one of its most intimate and meaningful rites of passage. Like the others, however, this photograph was also carefully arranged. It was possible for baptisms to be held outside, for example, but this was usually only when the crowd of worshippers was too large to fit inside the church. These fifteen people would certainly have been able to fit, but the lighting inside the church would not have been good enough for a satisfactory photograph. There is also no hint of the baptismal font (*cristelnită*) or of the holy oil that would have been used to anoint the child, although one of the women is holding a pile of towels for drying the baby after the ceremony.⁵⁷ The fact that the towels have not been used yet suggests that the baptism is yet to take place, and it probably happened inside the church, where the child would have had at least some protection from the cold that the adults were warmly rugged-up against. We are therefore either seeing the prayers (*exorcisme* and *lepădările*) that precede the blessings or else Fischer had arranged the worshippers outside specifically for the photograph, without capturing any particularly meaningful part of the ceremony.⁵⁸ The fact that there were no children present is also curious given that baptisms are typically festive occasions for the whole family. It is possible that the child being baptised had no young relatives, but it would also not be surprising if the children had temporarily been asked to stand aside because they could not be trusted to keep still during the photography.⁵⁹ Once again, the artificiality of the photograph suggests that this is a commemorative object for a special occasion, not an ethnographer's attempt to record quaint folk customs from the region.

The artificiality of this particular photograph is highlighted by the fact that another photograph of an Orthodox baptism, also attributed to Emil Fischer, appeared in the magazine *Romania in Pictures* on 12 February 1931 (Fig. 6). The two photographs are identical except for the priest, who is much younger and clean-shaven when he appears in the magazine.

Even the shadows in the two images are identical, suggesting that either Fischer took two pictures within minutes of each other, using two different priests and without anyone else moving a muscle, or – more likely – that the photograph was edited after the fact, with a younger priest being carefully cut and pasted into a blacker doorframe. We will probably never know why Fischer felt it necessary to replace the priest at a later date. Perhaps the original priest fell out of

⁵⁷ The baptismal font often appeared in photographs of baptisms from the 1930s, but usually played an ornamental part in a group photograph and rarely involved a photographer capturing „the action” of the baptism. See *Botezul de la ‘Radio-Bucureşti’*, in „Radio și radiofonia”, 13 December 1931; *Petrache Lupu a botezat al zecelea copil al unui sătean*, in „Timpul”, 5 December 1938.

⁵⁸ Petru Pruteanu, *Liturghia baptismală. Schema rânduielii cu comentarii istorico-liturgice*. URL: <https://www.teologie.net/data/pdf/PP-liturghia-baptismala.pdf> Accessed 5 November 2024.

⁵⁹ Children did appear in photographs of baptisms from the 1930s, but always standing as a group and displaying the baby after the ceremony, never at prayer, and usually when the presence of children was a key part of the occasion. See *Regele, prințul reprezentant al său, a botezat al 16-lea copil al unui țăran*, in „Realitatea ilustrată”, 22 January 1936; *Stolul școalei de fete C. Romanescu a botezat două fete gemene*, in „România”, 5 March 1939; *Trecerea la creștinism a unei familii mahomedane*, in „Universul”, 3 June 1939.

favour following a quarrel, or the new priest needed evidence that he had successfully integrated into his parish community. Either hypothesis reminds us that photographs such as these had multiple uses and were significant to different audiences for different reasons.

Conclusion

The photographs discussed above represent only a tiny fraction of Fischer's corpus, but they show how carefully constructed his "ethno-photography" was and give us hints about the various influences that shaped the final result. While the studio portrait of the young woman was clearly designed to show off her beauty and prosperity, it did so by emphasizing her Romanianess first and foremost and by placing her in a rural setting, however artificial the rurality was. When compared to a similar photograph of a Saxon woman from the same year, the Romanian quickly fades into second place as she could not compete with the wealth and various status symbols of her Saxon counterpart. Female beauty was less apparent in Fischer's photographs taken outdoors, and here the women's role in the photograph was to illustrate the man's success. The emphasis of these photographs was on the quantity and quality of the shepherd's wool, and the different photographs taken that day show how carefully arranged these shots were. Far from capturing Romanian society *in situ*, Fischer created it with the active involvement of the people in the picture. The same artificiality becomes apparent in Fischer's photograph of an Orthodox baptism. Instead of showing the baptismal rite in progress, the photographer moved it outside the church and arranged the crowd to illustrate gendered patterns of piety and the material poverty of the crumbling building. Women are central to all three situations, helping Fischer create a particular image of Romanianess that reflected the gender, class, religious and ethnic relations of his world.



Figure 1. „Romanian woman in popular holiday dress” (1897).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Româncă în port popular de sărbătoare, Muzeul Astra Sibiu, Colecția Grafică documentară, Nr. 157. URL: <http://digital-library.ulbsibiu.ro/123456789/1932>. Accessed 29 December 2024.



Figure 2. „Young Saxon woman in popular holiday dress” (1897).⁶¹

⁶¹ Tânără în port popular săsesc de sărbătoare. Muzeul Astra Sibiu, Colecția Grafică documentară, Nr. 1169. URL: <http://digital-library.ulbsibiu.ro/xmlui/handle/123456789/1934>. Accessed 29 October 2024.



Figure 3. „Collecting dry wool at Răşinari”.⁶²



Figure 4. „Collecting dry wool at Răşinari”.⁶³

⁶² *Strânsul lânii uscate la Răşinari*. Muzeul Național Brukenthal – Sibiu, Fond Emil Fischer, Nr. F 729. URL: <https://clasate.cimec.ro/Detaliu.asp?tit=cliseu--Emil-Fischer--Sransul-lanii-uscate-la-Rasinari&k=472667883B09462EA8591DBE30CBA565>. Accessed 29 December 2024.

⁶³ *Strânsul lânii uscate la Răşinari*. Muzeul Național Brukenthal – Sibiu, Fond Emil Fischer, Nr. F 728. URL: <https://clasate.cimec.ro/Detaliu.asp?tit=cliseu--Emil-Fischer--Sransul-lanii-uscate-la-Rasi-nari&k=35ADDEF30DD843D4BA4F50C741A16E9D>. Accessed 29 December 2024.



Figure 5. „Orthodox baptism at a church near Sibiu”⁶⁴



Figure 6. „Baptism in Sibiu County”⁶⁵.

⁶⁴ *Botez ortodox la o biserică din zona Sibiului*. Muzeul Național Brukenthal – Sibiu, Fond Emil Fischer, Nr. F 818. URL: <https://clasate.cimec.ro/Detailu.asp?tit=cliseu--Emil-Fischer--Botez-ortodox&k=C68EF74362DF47E3A42942C42F2BB097> Accessed 29 December 2024.

⁶⁵ *Botez în județul Sibiu*, in „Ilustrațiunea română”, 12 February 1931.