

# Conquering the Mountain Forests on the Eastern Edge of Transylvania: Community, Resources and Redistribution

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## Abstract

This chapter examines the case of a village located on the eastern edge of Transylvania, deep within the pine forests of the Eastern Carpathians. Founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a logging settlement, the village experienced rapid economic and demographic growth, evolving into a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups. However, this economic boom was accompanied by setbacks, and nearly every period of prosperity in the village's history has been followed by crises. The most recent crisis occurred in the 1990s, after the collapse of socialism in Romania. Despite these challenges and a continuous decline in population, the village persists and even attracts new settlers. The chapter explores the contradictions and uncertainties of mountain life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the cultural-ecological frameworks of mountain studies and the findings of socialist and post-socialist anthropology. Building on previous research, it aims to apply the social-ecological system (SES) approach by investigating the interplay between natural resources and human practices and decisions.

## Introduction

Szeklerland (Ținutul Secuiesc in Romanian, Székelyföld<sup>1</sup> in Hungarian) is commonly known as a mountainous area, although much of its territory lies in hilly or subalpine zones. Permanent settlements located at elevations above 900–1,000 m<sup>2</sup> in the actual mountainous regions have been documented primarily since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The utilisation of the mountainous areas in Szeklerland mainly occurred through temporary camps, summer huts, shepherd shelters and logging camps. Some of these, such as Vărsașag (Varság in Hungarian; see Báráth, 1998), became permanent settlements during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, we know of settlements that emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries but have since disappeared (Kinda, 2021). The formation of these settlements was influenced by population pressure from the originating villages and the pull factors of the available resources (land, pastures, meadows, forest areas suitable for clearing). On the other hand, their disappearance was often due to isolation and lack of modernisation (such as road networks and electrification), or due to the abolition of private property and nationalisation of communal forests and pastures during socialism.

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1 The eastern part of Transylvania, inhabited mostly by Szeklers, a Hungarian subgroup. As Transylvania is a multi-ethnic region, I give the names of the settlements in Romanian and Hungarian. From the Middle Ages it was part of the Kingdom of Hungary as a voivodship, then an independent principality, then a province of the Habsburg Empire and, finally, from the Compromise (1867) until the end of World War I, it was part of Hungary as the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the peace treaties that ended World War I, it became part of Romania (during World War II, its northern part was reannexed to Hungary for 50 months by the Second Vienna Decision, and its status was finalised by the treaties that ended World War II).

2 Surprisingly, it is difficult to find universally valid, global criteria for defining mountainous areas, as it is mostly the local perception that perceives and names a landform as a mountain (Byers et al., 2013, p. 2–6). The highest settlement in Romania is Fundata, at 1,360 m above sea level. Retrieved 5 September 2024 from [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundata,\\_Brașov](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundata,_Brașov)

3 The creation of the Ghimeș Valley (Gyimesek in Hungarian) is a special story, which we will not discuss in detail here for reasons of space. The area, which lies on the border between Transylvania (Hungary) and Romania, began to be populated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

In this context, the story of Comandău (Kommandó in Hungarian)<sup>4</sup> in Covasna County is particularly unique. It was established during the rapid industrialisation and deforestation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Initially operating as a logging station, it skipped the typical developmental phase of slowly transitioning from a temporary camp to a permanent settlement. Kommandó quickly turned into a developed town, described in local narratives as being in its “heyday” (e.g., with electricity and telephone services in households, and even a casino). What is most intriguing is that despite the logging and wood processing industries no longer being the primary livelihoods for the population, the settlement still exists today. Moreover, it seems that, despite all the difficulties, it will continue to exist for a long time to come. The question, of course, is: when will it re-enter a “thriving” phase? The natural resources (remoteness, mountains, forests and waters and rich and attractive natural environment) are present; however, the attitudes of social institutions and socio-political measures remain uncertain.

In this study, I analyse Kommandó’s unique situation, based on ethnographic fieldwork<sup>5</sup> and literature. I examine how the conquest of this mountainous area, situated 1,000 m above sea level, began and developed, and whether this conquest has been completed or is still ongoing. The analysis is framed by two approaches: studies on mountainous areas and analyses that, starting from ecological perspectives, seek to study nature and society together, with a particular emphasis on political factors. Additionally, I draw inspiration from the cultural anthropology of socialism and post-socialism in Romania. An important question raised in this study is how the settlement,

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4 Today’s Kommandó is located in the easternmost part of the former Kingdom of Hungary, later Principality of Transylvania, then the Habsburg Empire, and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today, it is part of Covasna County, and although it has changed from a border settlement to one of the most geographically central settlements in the country, it is still characterised by a strong peripheral position. Among the current developments, the village’s tourism development should be highlighted, with a significant number of holiday homes, guesthouses and villas being built in the vicinity of the village. Population inflow has not stopped; rather, it has changed in character.

5 Participant observation and interviews in 2016 and the summers of 2018 and 2024. I use interview material recorded with 22 people from or originating from the commune (former and current leaders, engineers, ordinary workers). In 2018, Zsombor Csata and I conducted fieldwork in the framework of the project “Attempts of Institutionalization of Ethnic Economy among the Hungarians in Transylvania and Slovakia” (OTKA FK125276). I plan to conduct further fieldwork in the settlement, so this chapter is part of ongoing research and presents the preliminary findings.

despite its isolation and exposure to environmental elements, is considered a distinct point in broader national and global networks, with its life being shaped by economic and political regimes as much as by the often harsh and unfriendly natural environment and climate. Kommandó came into existence in this global context, and its two periods of prosperity (pre- and post-war, and socialist) can be linked to these broader contexts. Its decline and current quest for direction are similarly linked to these global frameworks.

Mountain research has a specific role in cultural anthropology. This interest is understandable given that about 12% of the world's population live in mountain areas and a further 26% live in close proximity to mountains and depend on the resources provided by mountain areas (Veteto, 2009). Furthermore, mountain areas provide essential resources (hydropower, subsoil resources, timber and non-timber products) and biodiversity; a significant proportion of the plants that play a key role in feeding human populations have been domesticated in mountain areas (Byers et al., 2013; Veteto, 2009). It is no coincidence that cultural ecological approaches in anthropology have been the most open to research on mountain areas and that cultural anthropology has been inspired by ecological approaches in its interest in this direction. However, the duality of mountain areas should also be highlighted: "Mountain people are typically *independent, innovative, resourceful, adaptive, and outstanding entrepreneurs*. At the same time, they include some of the *poorest, most remote, and disadvantaged* people in the world" (Byers et al., 2013, p. 6). Many of the above statements, including the dichotomy, also apply to the area under review.

The interest of anthropologists and scholars of related disciplines, and the development of related sub-domains, has led to the emergence of terms such as Alpine, Andean, Appalachian and Himalayan studies. This interest, in line with the geography and topography of the country, has led to remarkable scientific results in Romania, where cultural anthropology and ecological approaches have been inspiringly combined. Research has been carried out – just to give a few examples of the richness of the topics – on hay cultures in Maramureş (Máramaros in Hungarian; Iuga, 2016; Ivaşcu et al., 2016), on the transformation and financialisation of the lives of forest-dwelling families (Vasile, 2015), on the transformation of gold extraction (Püsök, 2021) in the Apuseni Mountains, on transhumant pastoralism in the Southern Car-

pathians (Huband et al., 2010), on ecological knowledge in the Ghimeș (Babai et al., 2014; Babai & Molnár, 2016) and on the transformation of forest ownership in Vrancea (Măntescu, 2014). The latter topic and geographical area are important because they are related to Kommandó in terms of the history of logging and also because Vrancea has a special place in one of the first, still influential works on the research of forest exploitation in Romania, by Henri Stahl (1958). Access to forests and the changes of regulations (or customary laws) have been an important topic of studies in Romania from the very beginning (see for example Vasile 2008), and the issue can also be conceptualised in terms of the emergence of foreign investors and land grabbing (Ciu-tacu et al., 2017).

The present study continues this line of previous works by complementing or thinking beyond the social and ecological system (SES; see Gunderson et al., 2019) approach: it interrogates resources, the human community and the interaction between the two. Its particular analytical focus is on the question of structures that transcend historical periods and on paternalistic distribution in approaches to socialism and post-socialism (see Kideckel, 1993, 2004; Verdery, 1996). Drawing on the aforementioned literature, the chapter in fact addresses the question of how people who are settled here and who are almost always dependent on a central distributive institution navigate between dependence and autonomy, poverty and innovation (or control and agency). Moreover, the analysis also addresses the dynamics of the interactions between institutions, people and the environment. In this context, the study interrogates both transience and duality – even in the sense that a kind of “localness” was created within this transience.

The first part of the analysis presents the history of the village very briefly and with only the most necessary references. The second part first reviews the natural resources and access to them (paying special attention to the ambiguous access to local resources and paternalistic redistribution as long-standing local patterns), then discusses community organisation and presents both the close ties that create solidarity among the locals and the tensions between them and the newcomers. The third part finally focuses on the issue of competition for resources and also asks to what extent the complex situation of the locality can be interpreted with the “entitlement trap” approach. The chapter concludes with a summary of its findings.

## Where We Are: A Short History of the Settlement<sup>6</sup>

On military maps from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Kommandó and the surrounding territories were entirely covered by forests. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in response to the increasing customs conflicts between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, smuggling across the mountainous border regions flourished. To control this, the Austrian army established a border control station called *Kommando* or *Grenzkommando*. However, no permanent settlement formed at this time, and such a settlement only emerged with the economic boom following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. This post-compromise period, particularly the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, brought significant economic development and radical social and legal reforms, many of which were prefigured by the Revolution of 1848. Large modernisation projects were implemented throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including drainage systems, flood control measures, road and railway construction, as well as industrial development and urbanisation. These efforts required building materials, and the traditional, small-scale logging methods used to extract timber (seasonal logging, floating logs down rivers or transporting by cart) were modernised with new technologies.

This economic boom was accompanied by a legal reform and a social shift: the abolition of serfdom in 1848 made land transferable and purchasable. However, a significant portion of land, especially communal land that included forests and pastures, remained restricted. An important proportion of Transylvania's forested areas fell into this category. A new legal reform introduced private ownership to forest lands, allowing these forests to be bought and sold. At the same time, the wealthy bourgeoisie and entrepreneurial class rose, paralleled by the gradual emancipation of the Jewish population.

David Horn, a wealthy merchant of Jewish origin from Upper Hungary, saw a unique opportunity in the forests around Kommandó, despite their be-

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6 In this section, and in summarising the historical data in general, I draw heavily on the interview with and also on the book of local teacher and historian Mária Szabó. I owe thanks for her valuable help! My other sources are: Álmos József: A kommandói Erdélyi Erdőipari Részvénytársaság [The Transylvanian Forest Industry Joint-Stock Company in Kommandó]. <https://www.hirmondo.ro/kultura/a-kommandoi-erdelyi-erdoipari-reszvenytarsasag/> Gyula, Miholcsa: AC vs DC – The history of electric light in Transylvania until 1900. XIII. Tudomány- és Technikatörténeti Online Konferencia. 2020. <https://ojs.emt.ro/TTK/issue/view/18>

ing difficult to access. In 1882, he bought the rights to the area's timber from the original owner, Gyula Zathureczky, and began large-scale construction. The timber plant was inaugurated in 1889, starting in a settlement named Gyulafalva (which no longer exists but was located east of the current village and locals still remember it) in honour of the former owner. The operation was later transferred to the current settlement, where transport was facilitated by the construction of railways and funiculars. Railways extended on both sides, even reaching into what was then Romania, making the Kommandó owners active participants in the capitalisation of formerly communal forest properties in Vrancea (see Măntescu, 2014). Narrow-gauge railways were also built into the forests, connecting major logging points. At its peak, the settlement had around 200 km of railways linking logging camps with the village and the nearby town of Covasna (Kovászna in Hungarian).

Kommandó soon outgrew its temporary character: a school, library, casino and public baths were all built. The upper class even had access to a tennis court. By the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the settlement had gained significant appeal, attracting people from various nationalities within the empire to work as engineers, railway specialists, machine operators and labourers. Local tradition speaks of seven or eight different nationalities and about 6,000 to 7,000 workers in the village and surrounding logging camps during its peak. While the multi-national aspect is attested by surnames, available sources do not back up the large population numbers. According to reliable statistics, Kommandó had approximately 3,000 residents in 1910 (Varga, 1998). The settlement was a melting pot, blending various groups of people. In 1936, under Romanian rule, it gained the status of an independent commune. The unique technical advancements of the village were apparent from the beginning, as it already had electric lighting during the inauguration of the plant – not just in the logging station but also in residential homes.

However, Kommandó's development and prosperity were not without setbacks and crises. The founding investor, Horn, encountered financial difficulties early on and sold the company to the Groedel family from Marureş in 1897. The timber from Kommandó had to compete on European markets in terms of both quality and price, which often led to tensions. Between the two world wars, the Groedel family also faced difficulties, but the operation ultimately survived. However, the depletion of high-quality forests

and the declining quantity of harvestable timber foreshadowed that the village's survival was at risk. For a while, the incorporation of more distant forests provided a temporary solution, allowing the plant and village to survive through state nationalisation and the establishment of socialist rule (despite the Second Vienna Award leaving most of the forested areas in Romania and temporarily closing the plant).

The plant was incorporated into the state system and placed under county administration (while the central administration of the factory was in Braşov [Brassó in Hungarian]). The decline was also hastened by centralised economic management: a regulation prevented machinery repairs from being done locally, and many items sent away for repair never returned. Despite this, the 1970s and 1980s are still remembered by locals as a "second golden age", when the workers favoured by the socialist heavy industry system received good wages and benefits and the village had a functioning institutional network that supported a liveable lifestyle. By the 1980s, the depletion of high-quality forests once again signalled a crisis, but the plant lasted until the regime change. The final blow came in 1995 when a windstorm devastated large areas of surrounding forests. According to locals, the chaotic privatisation process that followed further compounded the problem. After exactly 110 years of operation, the Kommandó plant was shut down in October 1999.

## A Village and a Railroad

One of the unique aspects of Kommandó, aside from other factors, was its counterweight funicular, a marvel of engineering. This funicular was essential for overcoming the steep hillside that rose sharply over a short distance – something only achievable with railway technology. A proper road to the village was not constructed until 1969; until then, it had been served by the railway and a forest cart track leading to the nearby village of Păpăuți (Papolc in Hungarian). The funicular has since become unusable due to fire, intentional vandalism, storms, human negligence and, finally, a lack of maintenance.<sup>7</sup> Only a small section of the lower Kovászna railway line remains

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<sup>7</sup> See Szabó (2004), and the sources in the previous footnote.

functional, but remnants of the railway can still be seen in Kommandó in several places. As travellers ascend the mountain plateau along the road built in 1969, they can spot the old railway tracks embedded in the road's surface. The bumpy ride on the cobblestone road often follows these tracks, almost as if the journey mirrors the village's entire history, reminiscent of a Márquezian metaphor: both in memories and physical structures, elements of the village's founding era continually resurface, even though they are often no longer usable. The lack of a proper road is an important element in locals' narratives on their precarious situation (see Roseman, 1996).

Some of the buildings that were part of the former plant still stand, while others are in ruins, serving as reminders of earlier times. A few locals work in wood processing for local companies, but besides these, job opportunities are limited to small shops, bars, local businesses (e.g., a bakery) and public institutions (e.g., the mayor's office, school). Most of the village's residents live in former company-owned terraced houses (a row of joined, usually small wooden houses with shared side walls) or apartment blocks. Property ownership is rare among the locals; it could be said that nearly everything here is owned by the former company, the municipal council or the state. This has created a unique fabric of dependence on centralised distribution systems and local communal life, unlike anywhere else in the country. Perhaps the closest parallels are mining towns or former industrial cities, where the collapse of mono-industrial facilities and their markets, combined with the collapse of the socialist system, left the region struggling to find new footing (Kideckel, 2008; Püsök, 2021). The picturesque landscape and the abundance of available resources stand in stark contrast to the social reality that greets visitors.

### Resources, (Paternalistic) Redistribution, Global Competition and Grey Zones

The ownership of land, and the changes in ownership, has been a central question in all social systems since ancient high cultures. Forest ownership, especially in mountainous regions where forest-covered areas dominate, is particularly important. The human history of the Kommandó forests begins at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On one side of the story, we have large estates

and the rise of capitalism, while on the other side, we have small landholders and traditional (Szekler and communal) forest management. The transformation of forest ownership rights in Szeklerland, and in the Carpathians in general, was not without conflicts and lawsuits. The history of the forest areas used by the Kommandó logging plant is also marked by disputes and legal battles. One of the characteristics of forest use, already established by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was that the workers employed in the forests could not gain property rights, neither in the forests nor in any other land-based ownership context, with very few exceptions. The surrounding forests are today still owned by municipalities, the state or private individuals. While the forests remain one of the most important resources, locals have limited access to them. This presents two problems: first, in ensuring that local residents have enough firewood and, second, in securing raw materials for local timber harvesting and wood processing.

Winters in Kommandó are long and cold. Although climate change has made its effects felt here as well (e.g., less snow), the heating season still lasts from the end of August to June, sometimes even into early July. This increases pressure on households, as they must secure enough firewood for nearly the entire year. The municipal council provides a certain amount of wood at regulated prices per household, but it is not enough. To maintain affordable prices for the often cash-strapped locals, the wood is not delivered fully processed. This supports a dual moral discourse maintained by local leaders: alongside the narrative of “we are responsible for the locals” and “we take care of them”, there is also an idea that everyone should work for their firewood and decide whether to pay someone to chop it or do it themselves. However, since the allocated wood is insufficient, people have to obtain wood from other sources as well. The state forestry service also supplies wood at regulated prices (in fact, the municipal council uses the state forestry prices), but locals must still find ways to acquire more wood.

The preservation of ownership structures and the retention of central ownership has created situations that maintain both paternalistic distribution discourses (characteristic of socialism) and the survival of grey zones where locals can find ways to get by. Firewood can be obtained through central distribution systems, but that alone is not enough, leading to various forms of resourcefulness:

- So how do people get wood if it doesn't come from the council?
- There are haulers.
- Yes? But where do they cut it? What do they cut?
- In the forest. Whatever they can (laughter). Everyone knows this. Everyone knows. (female, 73, 2024)<sup>8</sup>

Although the local forests had already been threatened with depletion between the two world wars, new forest areas were continuously brought into use to bridge the gap. During World War II, the shifting borders and the fact that much of the forested land remained in Romania posed a problem, leading to the plant's temporary closure. After the war, these obstacles were removed, but local timber processing companies still face challenges: they must compete on a market where global corporations are also present. One of the major players, a company with two large operations in Romania (one of them located about 40 km from the village), practically purchases logs at preferential prices, pushing out local companies. "Since [company name] arrived near us, it's been very hard... (...) This [company name] is wiping out smaller businesses" (male, 50, 2018).

Paradoxically, in this area rich in forests, access to raw materials remains the main issue: "The problem is more with getting logs. It's not even an issue if you have money; it's just that the prices are so high that you can't compete with [company name]. They'll take the logs instead" (male, 50, 2018).

The paternalistic behaviour of the local council follows a long-standing pattern. The workers and residents of Kommandó have essentially depended on a central, almost totalitarian distribution system since the settlement's inception. This was further reinforced by the socialist redistribution systems. Workers lived in company-owned houses, and during socialism, they barely had to pay for firewood, electricity or water. An interesting parallel is David Kideckel's observation that dependence on the central structures of the state and paternalistic structures in Romania predate socialism (Kideckel, 1993) and the way in which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, local petty rulers (almost kings) rose to power and tied the employees of the companies that they had privatised to themselves in almost feudal systems of depend-

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<sup>8</sup> The direct quotes are taken from recorded interviews with locals. In brackets are the gender and the age of informants and the year of the interview.

ence (Humphrey, 1991). According to locals, even during the shortages of the 1980s, they received such good supplies that when they visited relatives living down in the valleys, they could bring them oil, sugar and flour.

While elsewhere in Romania the collapse of the centralised distribution systems after the regime change caused significant disruption, Kommandó preserved certain structures. One example is the centralised distribution of firewood. Another is the peculiar situation of the housing stock: although some residents managed to buy the houses that once belonged to the company (and later the commune), land registration has only been completed in a few rare cases. The unique situation in Kommandó is that while many residents own their terraced houses, the land beneath them still belongs to the municipal council. The council has taken on the slow task of registering the land, framing it within the paternalistic discourse.

The irony, and strangeness, of the situation is that while many residents struggle to obtain land registration for their homes, luxury villas, often with near-luxury amenities, have sprung up around the village and even deeper in the forests. The construction of these villas suggests that their land registration must be in order, at least theoretically. This is highlighted by the following conversation:

- So, the guesthouses are all outside the village, right?
- Yes, yes, yes.
- And where did they buy the land from?
- Good question. We'd like to know that too. That is why we don't have land registration, and probably never will... (male, 45, 2024)

Aside from timber, the forests also provide significant resources in the form of fruits and mushrooms, which are, in some sense, even more important. Historically, this was considered when the plant was closed during World War II: it was suggested that other local resources could be utilised, such as hydropower (for electricity production from a water plant), health tourism (resorts, villas and a sanatorium) or even a canning factory (see Szabó, 2004, pp. 61–63). Access to timber is restricted, both for households and wood-processing companies. In theory, though, they have free access to fruits and mushrooms. However, the situation in this area is not necessarily straightfor-

ward, and therefore it gives rise to the deflection of responsibility by both the local council and the authorities in general; there is dissatisfaction with the lack of some sort of regulation on the part of the locals and with the presence of large numbers of non-local collectors and competition between the receiving centres, which pushes prices down.

In short, the mayor's office's view is that there are indeed no jobs, but anyone who goes to the forest for a decent summer of foraging can manage. So, in a way it passes on the responsibility for the truly worrying labour market situation of the villagers. The opinion of the mayor's office is sharply contradicted by the opinion of the locals: the picking season is essentially very short, the quantity that can be picked varies from year to year, there is a lot of competition from (Roma) pickers from the valley who are exploiting the land, there is a lot of fluctuation in prices and it is virtually impossible to know how many of the mushrooms picked in the morning will sell for at noon. Moreover, the receiving centres are competing for the favour of the big buyers ("I'll give the driver, let's say, 20 leis, 30 leis, I'll put in the petrol, look, come back tomorrow" [male, 54, 2018]), and they struggle to check the quality of the goods they deliver and to avoid tricks, for example, by filtering the blueberries brought in buckets filled with water ("if there was a wooden crate, we bought a roll of foil and drilled holes in the foil, put it inside, the water flowed out of the hole, we put it on the scale, we didn't weigh the water" [male, 54, 2018]).

Having said that, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the people of Kommandó lead a life of struggle, which also has its origins. Life was not easy when the factory was in operation, and in many cases even the women had to do hard manual labour. The conversations recorded here support this view in many ways: hard work, lack of work, the particular distribution of resources and getting to the nearest town from the village all test the local people. In such a situation, the analyst would expect the grey zones that promote prosperity to be strongly articulated. Moreover, while this is the case in some areas, specific dynamics in household functioning can be observed. There is no doubt that the area is not suitable for agricultural cultivation. It is also clear that people/households do not have access to land. However, at the same time, recollections also show that there was once a greater embeddedness of household production: "I'm telling you, there were 500 [pigs], over

500. Now, if we go around in the village (...), we won't get a 100" (male, 52, 2018).

People grew vegetables in backyard gardens. Many also kept cows. There was even a dairy cooperative in the village (which ceased due to a lack of clear regulations over milk quality). Now most of this is a thing of the past: "they used to produce more, but at the current prices, 50 or 60 bani, it's better to buy, you think, I put work, and the harvest is nowhere" (male, 52, 2018). The combined effect of local production conditions and global/national food prices has meant that the tradition of the somewhat self-sufficient household in the village has been almost completely eclipsed. In other words, the question can be asked whether an institution as global and trans-historical as the household (Gregory, 2009; Smith & Wallerstein, 1992) can still keep alive dynamics that might point towards greater autonomy, agency and possibly resilience (see Netting, 1993, p. 320).<sup>9</sup>

The establishment of the local paternalistic redistribution system dates from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the period between the two world wars. In the new settlement, where the company initiated the conquest of the forest and established the settlement itself and took care of the workers who arrived, everyone was dependent on it. Under socialism, this became even more pronounced, reinforced by the paternalistic nature of the whole system (see Kideckel, 2004). In the post-socialist period, the municipal hall took over part of the role of the former company, but with it came the neoliberal transition, in which the local people had to find their positions in a system of multiple dependencies. They are dependent on the state and its local representation (through welfare schemes, fuel subsidies, centralised land registration); they are exposed to labour market fluctuations, competition for foraged products and rapid price movements and property relations that are financialised yet caught in bureaucratic traps. In other words, in their search for a position, they have to find points of alignment with the state, the market or the specific intersection of state, market and the local world (community; Wacquant, 2012). In Kommandó, this positioning and the specific frontier situation – as

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<sup>9</sup> We know from research on workers' colonies that partial self-sufficiency was also observed elsewhere (Várkonyi-Nickel, 2017, p. 92) and that the particular dynamics of households may be influenced by occupational mentalities that often differ from those of the peasants (Paládi-Kovács, 2007, p. 196).

in other mountain regions or isolated areas – lead to the creation of an intermediate space, known and frequented by the locals and occupied by various practices. The specificity of these practices is that the narratives of the authorities and the locals describe them in fundamentally different ways: responsibility on the part of the authorities and autonomous coping on the part of the locals are central to this. Both describe the same local reality, so it is difficult to take a position on the veracity of either version. However, perhaps this is not necessary: it is through these dichotomies that the specific local nuances and dynamics of subordination and resistance can be highlighted (see Reed-Danahay, 1993; Roseman, 1996).<sup>10</sup>

### Community: Locals and Newcomers

Visitors arriving in the village, especially those who have been to other Transylvanian villages, are often first struck by the lively traffic and bustling activity in Kommandó's centre – its busy agora. Getting from the village to the nearest town can be somewhat challenging. There is not a regular daily bus service, but the local council operates a bus route on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays (again highlighting the paternalism and dependencies in the village). On other days, residents must find their own means of transportation, which is both time- and fuel-intensive, not to mention the need for frequent vehicle repairs due to poor road conditions. That is why various services are available in the village, even though there were more services available during the socialist era than today. Alongside the mayor's office, there are shops, bars and restaurants. As of the summer of 2024, both medical and dental services were also operational, and the village had a pharmacy. Thus, locals handle many of their everyday tasks within the village itself. This is one reason for the visible hustle and bustle. Another reason, however, is likely related to the limited access to land and other means of production, which gives the residents more time to organise their activities in public spaces.

Although not directly part of this analysis, it is worth noting that person-

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10 Both Deborah Reed-Danahay and Sharon Roseman carried out fieldwork in rural/mountain regions in Europe (France and Spain) and pointed towards the ambiguities and the interplay of top-down and bottom-up discourses. My understanding of the local practices in this intermediate space is informed by their approach and concept (and practice) of *débrouillardise* (Reed-Danahay, 1993, p. 221; Roseman, 1996, p. 837).

al transportation to and from the village has long been an issue, involving certain ambiguities. As I have mentioned earlier, until 1969, the only ways to reach the village had been by train (and funicular) or via a forest cart track leading to Papolc. Passenger transport on the railway was not always entirely legal, while the cart track was neither possible nor practical for many. Some locals recall that passenger transport did happen on the train (there are even memories of tickets being sold), but it is also well known that such transport was forbidden because using train cars, particularly on the funicular, posed significant risks. Therefore, traveling to and from the village has always been challenging, and some of the transportation occurred in grey zones of legality. Thus, locals developed certain practical knowledge of how to get to the nearest town without formal public transportation.

This local wisdom and creativity and everyday practicalities stand in sharp contrast to two phenomena: some of the new settlers, or more precisely, second-home owners, include individuals with considerable wealth. Specifically, two people who are consistently ranked high on Hungary's national wealth lists have homes in Kommandó. One of them even has a helicopter landing pad next to his house, and it is said that he arrives by helicopter. This is in stark contrast to the locals, who have to contend with poor roads. The contrast is further amplified by another factor: for "a few hiding businessmen or politicians" (male, 42, 2018), the vast forests and the mountainous terrain provide an opportunity to lead a more secluded life, away from public attention. Some locals have voiced the opinion that the prolonged delay in road repairs may stem from the differing values between locals and newcomers: the bad roads and isolation are a hindrance to locals, but for the settlers or tourists, it adds to the village's charm, becoming part of its image. In other words, it is clear that different value systems position the village's significance in different places. The meanings of remoteness are just as context dependent (Ardener, 2012) as the meanings of mountains themselves (Byers et al., 2013).

Several unavoidable questions arise: what is this community, regularly displayed in the agora (or at least part of it)? Who shapes these value systems? Ultimately, in a settlement established in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, who is considered a local? Behind the visible activity in the village centre is an intense network of relationships. Locals do not just gather in the agora; a lively social life also takes place between the terraced houses, with neighbours visiting each

other and participating in each other's lives, especially in the summer. The use of the village centre and these neighbourly visits blur the line between public and private life. For some, even the thin walls between the terraced houses create a kind of openness: "I knock on the wall to the neighbour to tell them to be quiet because I need to sleep. The walls are so thin" (male, 74, 2024).

In many cases, they also rely on each other. As I mentioned earlier, in recent years, winters have not been as harsh, and the snowfall has not reached the levels of previous years. Nonetheless, locals still speak about snow removal in terms of reciprocity and solidarity: "Yes, yes, we had to free each other because the snow was so high that from the house... we couldn't see the shed... We just watched through the window as the men dug each other out. We hadn't even cleared one lot, and another snowstorm came" (female, 65, 2024). Elsewhere they stress solidarity: "When a big snow comes, and you can't get out of the yard, it's nice to have someone help, and I do the same for others" (male, 42, 2018).

Solidarity is not only practiced during extreme weather. In 2018, when the school tragically burned down, the people of Kommandó displayed exemplary cooperation: "It's unbelievable what happened. Miracles happened... people managed to get everything out of the classroom under the burning roof, even the impossible" (male, 42, 2018). Locals describe their community as generally helpful: "God forbid, if anything happens, the whole of Kommandó is there to help" (male, 74, 2024). In other words, helping one another is a general norm in the village: "There is strong solidarity among the people" (male, 42, 2018).

Another important aspect of community formation and solidarity is the funeral. This life-cycle event also activates support networks: "Basically, everyone goes to funerals. (...) It shows how, in such an isolated village, people come together and have to come together" (male, 42, 2018). Beyond this, the funeral as a ritual has shaped a unique "Kommandó identity". Since people's lives were so intertwined with logging, and the railway that played a crucial role in this, it was a tradition until recent times to transport the deceased on an open railway carriage, accompanied by both train whistles and church bells (Szabó 2004, p. 93).

Despite the village's relatively short history (less than 150 years), and the fact that workers came from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire when it had been founded, an idea of being rooted, a sense of rootedness, indigeneity and belonging<sup>11</sup> has emerged. It is important to note that Kommandó is now primarily a Szekler settlement: many of the workers who arrived from other parts of the empire moved away, assimilated into the local Szekler majority or settled in nearby Szekler towns or villages. The presence of Romanian guest workers was more significant during socialism, but they did not settle in large numbers (workers from neighbouring Romanian counties, such as Bacău, Vrancea and Buzău, were usually weekly commuters, transported home by the company on weekends). Thus, the village has become somewhat homogeneous, even though many of today's residents arrived in the 1950s, or can trace their ancestry back to someone who moved there during the early or later socialist period in search of work.

The sense of homeliness and rootedness is thus reinforced by one's exposure to natural conditions, isolation, the solidarity that somewhat derives from it, the insight one another's lives and the rituals that are built on them. In other words, however strange it may sound, when someone says that "my roots are in Kommandó",<sup>12</sup> we cannot question the validity of the claim. This obviously leads to the conclusion that there are newcomers in the village. A difference of a few generations, even a generation or two, may result in perception shifts of considerable magnitude. Someone who only moved to the village in the 1990s may perceive this, as well as a somewhat dismissive attitude towards them from the "real Kommandó people": "We don't go to him because he is a newcomer, we go to the other one" (male, 50, 2018, the interviewee runs a commercial unit). The following interview sheds light on the whole situation:

- Everybody is a newcomer in Kommandó, right?
- Yes, but some people were born here.
- Does that count elsewhere?

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11 Similar to what Imola Püsök, drawing on Tim Ingold's term, calls 'dwelling' (2021, p. 166).

12 Hungarian: *tősgyökeres*. It refers to someone who is a native resident of a particular place. It carries a sense of deep-rootedness and belonging, often implying that the person or their family has lived in that place for many generations.

- It sure does. The mayor's family, for example, they were born here.
- Did it work to his advantage when he was elected?
- Well, yes, 90% of the village are their relatives. (male, 50, 2018)

The issue is not only important in itself: where there are so many natural, climatic and social challenges to be met, the existence of a community of solidarity can be crucial. However, there is also a future-oriented part to the question. Since its foundation, the existence of the commune has been linked to logging and sawmilling. In the context of the repeated crisis and now almost total collapse of the logging industry, it is almost miraculous that the commune still exists. Its future is also in question, as the locals are well aware: "Kommandó is not developing, but is developing backwards, as can be seen year after year" (male, 42, 2018). In the absence of jobs, young people move temporarily or permanently. However, local reports suggest that they regularly return home (and indeed, in the summer of 2024, there were more cars with Hungarian plates on the streets). Thus, how locals plan for the future is not unimportant. Beyond the compulsion to stay in the village, two striking opinions are worth pointing out. The first is a kind of suspension of the sense of home: "I said I would never build anything here in Kommandó again, my children would never come to live or work here, and so what for" (male, 50, 2018). The second, on the contrary, confirms that there also exists a deep sense of loyalty towards Kommandó among some inhabitants: "I will not move away from here, and that I will not leave Kommandó even if I am offered a luxury house and a salary in any nice place in the world" (male, 42, 2018).

For locals, the question of whether to stay or go, in the context of the transformation of resources and the way they are accessed, is being raised, at least in cases where the families or individuals concerned can even consider this as a realistic option. This is because for many, in the absence of other options, staying is the only option: they have a home there (whatever its status) and they cannot look for work elsewhere because of their age or health. They stay and try to manage locally. This can be seen as a kind of constrained (or narrowed) agency. However, there are an increasing number of people (whom I have already mentioned because of the unsettled state of the land registers and the land) who choose Kommandó for one reason or another, who are at-

tracted by the very things that might push the locals away and who no longer see the landscape and its elements as a productive resource but consume the landscape itself as a source of recreation and leisure. Tourists, second home owners and guesthouse and villa owners belong to this category.

The history of leisure and tourism in the village, though not the same age as the village itself, dates back to early times. The Hungarian National Archives have a photo of an excursion to Kommandó in 1919 with the participation of the local aristocracy (HU-MNL-OL-P 1494-I.-4.-2.-94/149). During World War II, a skiing competition was held in the village, and plans were also made to use the village's resources for tourism (Szabó, 2004, pp. 62–63). Also at that time, villas were built around the village. Thus, although the production landscape was dominant in the dichotomy of the production versus the recreation landscape, recreation was also present. Today, however, recreation is increasingly displacing production – and foreigners and other newcomers seem to be displacing locals from the use of new resources. The question is perhaps most strikingly illuminated by the situation of the two Hungarian businessmen already mentioned. They have concessioned hunting rights (the hunting of the gentry class has always played an important role in the history of the area around Kommandó), and overall their relationship with the village is peculiar and seems to fit into the paternalistic patterns explained earlier: “for example, this [entrepreneur's name]. He used to bring an ox every time when we have Kommandó-days. And then they roast it and then everybody gets one (...), and then we'd get a slice... and we'd run and get a slice of meat (laughter)” (female, 68, 2024).

The relations (often tensions, conflicts) between locals and foreigners are a central issue in the anthropology of tourism (Glup, 2021). Perhaps it is not to be expected that these conflicts do not exist. The presence of foreigners in Transylvanian villages can be observed elsewhere, and in many cases, it is these outsiders who seem to be the ones who are successful or more successful than locals in reallocating resources (Szabó, 2013). The allocation of tourism resources, despite a long local history of leisure activities, is now taking place in the village. In the light of past experience and given the specificities of access to forest resources, the question of how locals (especially Kommandó people from simple working-class backgrounds) can participate in these processes is a logical one. With a few exceptions, they are currently

working (for minimum wages) as kitchen and cleaning staff in service units or as caretakers in larger facilities.

## Competition for Resources and Mountain Traps

The first people, both temporary and then permanent settlers, were attracted to Kommandó by the abundant resources available. This idea can even be extended to the period before the village's official establishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the creation of the border station itself was related to the border as a resource. Borders, from the development of modern border control onwards and across ages (Borbély, 2022; Chelcea, 2000; Nagy, 2007), have shaped the movement and transactions of goods, placing them into different value regimes on either side of the border through differing regulations. In other words, smuggling – which involved avoiding the payment of duties – created new opportunities and made certain resources more accessible. As always with resources, the key questions are: how are they made available, who controls the flow of them and how is their distribution within the community organised?

Returning to the forest and timber, it is clear from what has already been discussed that the existence of Kommandó, a settlement built on logging and wood processing as its primary activities, has repeatedly been threatened, as forests became depleted or, in the case of changing borders (as during World War II), logging became impossible. In other words, one must pay attention to the specific dynamics and changes in resources, as well as to how access rights to these resources evolve. It is worth viewing this system as a highly complex socio-ecological system, where the abundance of resources is not an objective factor but depends on human decisions (knowledge, culture, social institutions, value regimes). In many cases, the functioning of social institutions may be just as important – if not more so – than so-called objective factors. In the history of Kommandó, ordinary people had little actual, direct access to forest timber, except through the grey zones, once again highlighting the significance of social institutions. As long as the logging plant and the overarching paternalistic central distribution system, spanning different eras, were operational, the limited access to resources was not necessarily a problem at the everyday level. In fact, perhaps paradoxically, locals look back

nostalgically at the time when the plant was in operation, even while emphasising the difficulties of the work involved (see Püsök, 2021, p. 171): “I don’t mind, but during the Ceauşescu era, there was work, and we could earn a living... It was very hard, very hard work. We did heavy, difficult jobs” (female, 65, 2024, and she shows how her hands were ruined by the work).

However, as we have seen, the plant has since closed. Timber processing in the village is minimal, and obtaining raw materials is a challenge. Access to the forest’s timber remains highly restricted, and the distribution of other resources is not entirely transparent. Inevitably, we must ask: what keeps people here? If we argue that people were initially attracted to Kommandó by the resources, the most natural response to the depletion of these resources – or, more precisely, the restrictions on access to them – would be to leave. We have also seen that while the village does not have a centuries-long history, the approximately 130 years of history and the successive generations, despite the frequent crises of liminality, transitions, arrivals and departures, have created a sense of belonging to Kommandó, both in terms of community and family. People also have property here, even if the full establishment of a private ownership system has not been fully realised.<sup>13</sup>

It may not be an exaggeration to describe the current situation in Kommandó as a “trap”. People were drawn there by the forest and the promise of work. The forest still exists, but its function as a resource is limited by social institutions, and there are little to no job opportunities. The factors that were key in establishing and maintaining the village now play a much smaller role, yet the settlement still exists. This is why we cannot explain the availability of resources and access to them solely through natural and ecological factors. We must also consider the functioning of social institutions. The Irish potato famine provides an interesting parallel, directing our attention toward the concept of entitlements. Although food was available in Ireland, the potato famine affected roughly 25% of the population, leading to the death or emigration of the affected individuals (Fraser, 2003). In this interpretive framework, vulnerability is not solely, or even primarily, the result of resource availability. In his comprehensive work on poverty and famine,

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13 The study asks these questions at the community and system levels, but it also takes account of the fact that beyond any systemic explanation and inertia, the dilemma of staying and moving is embedded in life-historical choices. This could be the subject of a future study.

Amartya Sen emphasised the importance of entitlements (Sen, 1981): famine occurs not just when food is scarce, but often through indirect chains of events, where people lose their entitlements in a broader sense. This is highly relevant to understanding not only access to timber (firewood and furniture wood) but also the distribution of other natural resources.

If we momentarily imagine the village as an entity managing a well-defined resource base, excluding access to timber (since the entitlements and distribution there would require mobilising other institutions and different levels of decision-making), we can highlight further trap situations. Understanding this is aided by the fact that there was a dairy cooperative operating in the village until a few years ago, but its operations became unsustainable due to fluctuations in the quality of the milk delivered and related abuses. This can be explained by the lack of some elements of the Ostromian model (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 88–102). The situation is similar regarding other resources, particularly forest fruits and mushrooms: one can point to the lack of collaboration (or inability to cooperate), the resulting internal competition and the local leadership's inability or unwillingness to regulate the situation in any meaningful way (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 88–102). Once again, we must view this situation as a complex socio-ecological system, where human and institutional decisions are just as important as the resources available.

When discussing social and ecological systems, as well as the changes that have occurred or are still taking place within these systems – driven by decisions or at least by practices – the concepts of agency, resilience and adaptation must also be incorporated into the analysis. This is particularly important in light of the earlier argument that the plant, as a total institution, and the central paternalistic distribution system created a unique dynamic for the agency of locals. For this analysis, I borrow the concept of infantilisation from studies on socialism: when a state or authority practices paternalistic government and acts on the limitation of agency<sup>14</sup> (see Kligman, 1998, p. 265; Mihăilescu, 2018). Yet, I do not claim that the locals are entirely without agency. Earlier, I used the term “constrained agency” to describe their situation.

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14 Infantilisation, in socialist and postsocialist contexts, means that a state or authority treats its citizens as if they are incapable of independent thought or responsible decision-making. This might involve excessive control or a provision of services in a way that limits individual autonomy; it could foster dependence on the state/central planning and could discourage individual initiative.

Returning to the examples of firewood acquisition or the collection centres, the grey zones and small gestures of flexibility do open up opportunities for the kind of manoeuvrability we associate with agency (that could point to the concept of *débrouillardise*; see Reed-Danahay, 1993, p. 221; Roseman, 1996, p. 837). The residents of the terraced houses have renovated their homes almost without exception, adapting them to modern needs and tastes. This has led to a colourful streetscape that dissolves the former uniformity of the area. The same applies to the questions of resilience and adaptation. There is no doubt that the system is rigid – both at the individual level (how people adapt) and at the level of institutional decisions. However, there is also no doubt that families have survived and reproduced and that the village has existed, despite multiple and recurrent crises (i.e., it has adapted to and managed to cope with difficult situations in some way).

There is clear evidence, however, that new resources (particularly recreational resources) have come to the fore alongside the forest and its timber and other traditional forest benefits. Kommandó is also becoming increasingly touristified, but as with traditional resources, there is no consensus on the use of these resources. In many discussions, the problem of ski slopes was raised: “in order to make winter tourism viable, one would need ski slopes. At least at a minimum level..., the way it used to work” (male, 42, 2018). It is spoken of by locals as an example of under-use and poor planning. Decisions on the use of resources are generally not transparent: the lack of transparency is very often mentioned by villagers about the forest, fruit, the situation of plots, the authorisation process, the lack of paving of the road and many other problems that directly affect the local people. In addition, decisions on new resources seem to be slipping out of the hands of decision-makers. However, it is clear that there is usually competition for resources, and when access rights are unclear, when there are liminal situations or when there are peripheral situations, this competition is intensified. There is also competition for traditional resources. Tourism is also conquering the region, and what makes the whole thing particularly exciting is that in a settlement situated on the border of two former empires, yet today in the middle of the country but still in a peripheral position, a nation-building competition is taking place, which in many cases overlaps with regional culture-building. For example, a huge Szekler gate welcomes the visitors at the border of the former melting

pot, now predominantly inhabited by Hungarians (Szeklers), but an Orthodox monastery is being built on the outskirts of the village, with Maramureş<sup>15</sup> motifs on its imposing gate, inaugurated in 2022.

## Concluding Remarks

In Szeklerland, the conquest of the mountains was marked by a temporary character. The few permanent mountain settlements (mostly settlements that grew out of temporary mountain camps and farms) established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Kommandó, are an exception. Moreover, although foresting and logging played key roles in its creation and survival, local (especially ecological) conditions and global processes have always forced the locals to reposition themselves. Either the resources have changed or the social systems through which they are distributed have shifted. The competition for the exploitation of the village's new resources is not accidental: on reaching the mountain plateau, the imaginary traveller is greeted by a truly picturesque sight. The village, in the middle of a plateau surrounded by mountains, is crossed by streams. Everywhere you go, you find yourself almost immediately in pastures and then in forests. Yet, the village is a curious sight, and as a continuation of the Márquezian metaphor, it is a peculiar combination of forgetting and remembering: the railway that emerges from the road leading to the village and in many places in the village itself, the rusting roofs of the wagons that have been pulled aside, the buildings of the former factory, the contrast between the terraced houses and blockhouses and the new villas, sometimes entire estates and the colourful and confusing sight of terraced houses converted to suit modern needs and tastes. All of these elements show how difficult it is to break away from the past that created and ran the village for decades.

In the introduction, I referred to the independence and innovativeness of mountain people – as opposed to poverty, isolation and disadvantage (Byers et al., 2013). This dichotomy is also very evident in Kommandó. However, it would be presumptuous to venture to decide which of these two opposing

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15 A region (in northern Transylvania) of symbolic importance for Romanian national identity.

sides predominate in this context. Perhaps such a judgment may not even be necessary: the mountain region constitutes a distinctive *locus* in which the interplay between authoritarian responsibility and autonomous coping strategies (see again: *débrouillardise*), as well as individual and communal modes of functioning, can be observed. One can perceive this as an unfinished process and/or dichotomy that is reinforced by the prevalence of the socialist structures and mentalities. Kommandó is specific not just because it became a permanent settlement but also because it features different aspects of liminality. It lies on the border of a former empire, it has no paved road and it is somehow under the impact of previous historic times. In our case, this specificity is defined by the dominant character of the total institution and central paternalistic distribution over the ages and the inadequacy or lack of rules for the use of resources, alongside the abundance of resources. It is also defined by the particular system of neighbourhood relations and solidarity that, through the thin walls of the terraced houses, encapsulates both the exposure of private life and the ethos of community formed in harsh conditions, and also the antagonism between the old Kommandó people and the newcomers.

All this creates a complex social and ecological system where issues of agency, resilience and adaptivity are understood in the context of time-varying resources and, more importantly, human choices. The forest and the mountain presented significant resistance to human control. However, at certain times they have provided a relatively good life. The conquest of the area began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but almost as soon as the conquest began, difficulties arose. The founder's financial problems led to the business being sold off (human factors), then the forests were depleted relatively quickly (ecological factors). Moreover, this process of conquest was characterised by almost continuous changes and crises, including changes of power and regime, changes of borders, the depletion of forests and the inclusion of new forests, technical achievements and their collapse, storm damage and forest regeneration and the inclusion of new resources. The conquest, it seems, is still not complete. However, the very existence of the settlement and the locals' ongoing struggle for survival show that they are capable of navigating the harsh conditions. The questions remain: who will be the winner in today's competition for resources, and where does the Kommandó community stand in this competition?

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