



3.1 Roma Oral History Story 1



Alexandru Silaghi

Born in 1960, Alexandru Silaghi grew up in Surduc, a small village in Romania (Transylvania). He remembers his grandfather's harrowing stories about the Second World War. Alexandru recalls his experience of living under Communism and after its collapse, and the impact it had on the Roma community.

Alexandru Silaghi ©RSG

Life in Romania

Alexandru comes from a large and hard-working brick making family, and being Roma they were often marginalised. As a child, he travelled a lot with his family in a caravan, moving from April to October for his father's brick making work. Making the bricks resembled an assembly line: first they dug the land, then they mixed the clay, shaped the bricks, laid them out to dry, and finally put the dry bricks in a big oven to bake.

For many centuries some Roma were skilled craftsmen and were organised into groups according to the family's craft. These guilds were destroyed with the advent of Communism in 1944 and Roma were forced into employment such as factory work and into a settled lifestyle. Alexandru's family stopped making bricks and his father ended up working in a charcoal factory in Surduc.

Alexandru went to secondary school to study metallurgy (working with metals) and afterwards began working in a laboratory extracting gold from rocks in Baia Mare, north-western Romania.

Since Communism ended in 1989, previously state-owned companies became privatised. Alexandru was sacked from his job in the laboratory along with other Roma, who were the first people to lose their jobs. After this, Alexandru began a jeans trading business between Turkey and Romania and opened a grocery shop in Baia Sprie. After separating from his wife in 1994, he sold both businesses and moved to Dej, a city in Romania, but where he couldn't find a job. At the age of 37 he left Romania.

Second World War

Roma, like the Jews, were persecuted and killed during the Second World War. Alexandru's grandfather, Francisc Brandusan, a name he made up for himself to conceal his Roma identity, was a survivor of the Second World War.

During the War Francisc was sent to a labour camp in Transnistria where he was forced to work in freezing temperatures (-35 to -40 degree Celsius), without proper clothing, food and shelter. *"Fellows were dying in front of them, dropping on the floor – nobody cared, bodies were buried in common graves..."*

In the camp, Francisc and other prisoners made a makeshift shelter and they were taken to a forest every single day to cut trees for wood. The army officers would allow one person, usually a woman, to stay behind to keep the shelter warm for their return, sometimes Francisc was that person. After three years in the camp, he ran away one night when he was left behind to keep the shelter warm. To escape he walked about 75 km to Chisinau, where he found some clothes and climbed onto a train that was going to Romania. At Albita he saw some guards forcing a lot of people off the train, so he hid behind a large Moldovan woman's skirt and managed to escape. Francisc then went to a small village in Romania, bordering Moldova, where his father was making bricks and from there, he managed to return to Surduc in around 1942. Grandfather Francisc Brandusan died at the age of 88.

Coming to the UK

When Alexandru left Romania, he went first to Hungary and worked in agriculture, then to Italy (where he couldn't find permanent work) and then to England where he is to this day. Alexandru was 51 when he arrived in the UK in 2011. At first he found it very difficult to settle and had to stay with his nephews. However after he obtained the right to work in the UK he began working on construction sites.

Now Alexandru feels like an equal, he is proud he has a job and good health, and feels he has integrated into UK society, despite not speaking much English and having experienced some discrimination. He hopes that all Roma in Europe are "emancipated" and can enjoy a life free of discrimination and prejudice. *"This is a country with a high level of democracy, where the human being is valued to his real value, where all people regardless of their colour are treated like human beings."*

Alexandru would like to create a Roma centre where Roma culture is celebrated and valued.

Romanipen

Alexandru considers Romanipen an unwritten law, where the spoken word acts as Roma law. This is because there has been a high level of illiteracy among Roma people and Romanes is an oral language.

Romanipen is also about respect towards the elders, who uphold Roma traditions through language, customs, clothes and important events, like births, marriage and funerals. A Roma person who does not follow these expected rules could be excluded from the community.

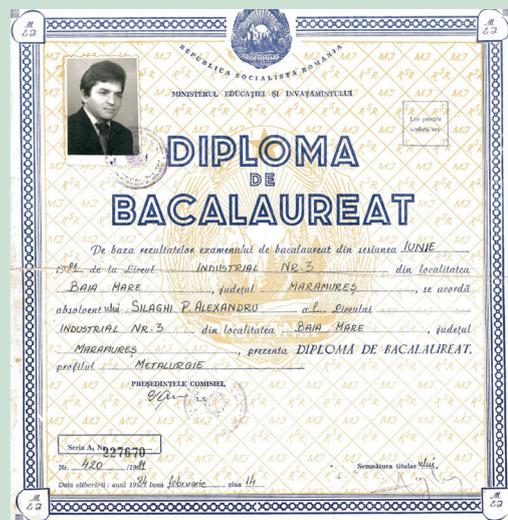
Alexandru Silaghi's Photos



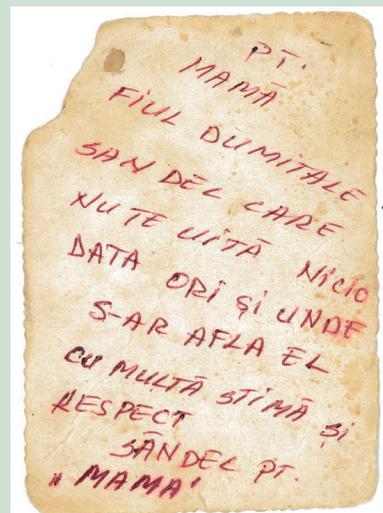
Alexandru with his brother Emil (left) and deer taxidermy ©RSG



Alexandru in 1980 doing compulsory military service ©RSG



Alexandru's Diploma of Metallurgy, 1984 ©RSG



A postcard Alexandru wrote to his mother 'For mum. Your son Sandel [short for Alexandru] who will never forget you wherever he will be. With regards and respect, Sandel. For mum' ©RSG