

DEMOGRAPHIC POLICIES, ECONOMIC DYNAMICS AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

THE EXPLOITATION OF THE ESTATES OWNED BY PERA OPRAN

Ileana CIOAREC*

Abstract: One of the representatives of Opran's family was Pera Opran, the son of the merchant Gheorghe Opran, from Orșova, and of Bălașa. He also inherited from his father numerous estates in the counties of Dolj and Mehedinți, as Ișalnița, Românești, Cioroiașu, Velești and Botoșești.

The socmen from the estates that belonged to Pera Opran had numerous obligations to him. They needed to work the corvee and to sharecrop, as there had been stipulated in the Law of Caragea and the Organic Regulation. These farming services could be different from one area to another, from one locality to another, or one estate to another.

The numerous estates from the property of Pera Opran, and the great number of socmen that worked on them, demonstrate the important economic role that he played in the Romanian society.

Keywords: the exploitation, the estates, the socmen, the corvee, Pera Opran.

Amongst the most well-known families from Craiova and Dolj County, in the 18th century, with numerous descendants in the 19th century too, Opran family is a remarkable one. They evidenced especially due to the events from the 19th century. Having their residence in some of the significant centres from the era, such is Craiova, Calafăt, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Cerneți and Orșova, Opran family sustained and supported a combat that was not only economic and political, but also ideological.

One of the representatives of this family was Pera Opran, the son of the merchant Gheorghe Opran, from Orșova, and of Bălașa. The year of the birth of this character is not exactly known, the historians analysed the activity he carried out in the city on the Jiu River bank, offering several hypotheses. Thus, C. D. Fortunescu, the director of "Arhivele Olteniei" magazine, in a study called *Alegătorii doljeni de pe la 1862* (The electors from Dolj in 1862), published in 1926, mentioned that, in 1862, Pera Opran was 45 years old, which would mean

* 3rd Degree Scientific Researcher, PhD. "C.S. Nicolăescu-Plopșor" Institute for Research in Social Studies and Humanities from Craiova, of the Romanian Academy; E-mail: ileanacioarec@yahoo.com

that he was born in 1817¹. The same birth year is also recorded on a list of the candidates from Dolj County, eligible for the Senate, in 1871². A totally different opinion from the already mentioned ones was that expressed by the historians Dim. R. Rosetti, Aurelia Florescu and Paul Rezeanu. They believe that Pera Opran was born in 1815³. The belief of the three specialists was shared by Milcu Petre and Stanciu Eliza Laura, the authors of a monograph dedicated to the commune of Işalniţa⁴. The hypotheses proposed by them are nonetheless contradicted by the death certificate from the collection belonging to the Register Office within the Dolj County Department of the National Archives. In the document, there was registered that Pera Opran passed away on the 23rd of June 1885, at the age of 69. If the age of the man is subtracted from the age of dying, it results the year of birth, which is 1816⁵. The same year, 1816 is also mentioned in a list of the candidates from Dolj County, eligible for the Chamber of Deputies, in 1871⁶. In 1839, he married Efimia, also called Fima, daughter of polkovnik Ioan Solomon, being wedded by the lady sword-bearer Ecaterina Bibescu, the mother of the rulers Barbu Dimitrie Ştirbei and Gheorghe Bibescu. From their marriage, there were born three children: two boys, Constantin and Ioan, deceased when they were very young, and a daughter, Eliza. M. Theodorian-Carada provided us with much information about Efimia, wife of Petre Opran. According to her, “the unhappy wife of Pera Opran did not have the wit of Magheru’s daughter (Alexandrina – n.n.), but she was equally kind. She used to wear similar black silk skirts, but her hats were always black, adorned with lilac flowers. She also had a barouche, but it was deteriorated, and pulled by two lean-and-lank horses, which could barely walk, the same as the coachman that would drive it. She had spent her fortune to provide Eliza, her and Opran’s daughter, with a good education, and to travel with her through France and Italy”⁷. Petre Opran deceased, as resulted from the registrar’s papers, on the 23rd of June 1885, at Işalniţa⁸, where he had retired since 1877, preferring to live in solitude, helped only by his servant Ioan Păunescu. From his father, Pera inherited numerous houses in Orşova, Craiova on Petru Boji outskirts,

¹ C. D. Fortunescu, *Alegători doljeni de pe la 1862*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, year V, no. 25-26, May-August 1926, p. 228.

² SJAN Dolj, Dolj County Prefect’s Office, Administrative Department, file 163/1870, f. 10.

³ Dim. R. Rosetti, *Dicţionarul contemporanilor*, Bucharest, 1897, p. 143. Aurelia Florescu, *Familia Opran. Prezenţe în judeţul Dolj*, in “Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane C. S. Nicolăescu-Plopşor”, no. III/2002, p. 214; Paul Rezeanu, *Craiova. Amintirile oraşului*, Craiova, Alma Publishing, 2006, p. 56.

⁴ Petre Milcu, Eliza Laura Stanciu, *Monografia comunei Işalniţa. Studiu geografic şi istoric*, Craiova, Agora Publishing, 2013, p. 209.

⁵ SJAN Dolj, Register Office Collection- commune of Işalniţa, file 3/1885, f. 6v.

⁶ Idem, Dolj County Prefect’s Office, Administrative Department, file 163/1870, f. 6.

⁷ Petre Milcu, Eliza Laura Stanciu, *op. cit.*, p. 210; M. Theodorian-Carada, *Câteva craiovence din secolul al XIX-lea*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, year XVI, no. 92-94, July-December 1937, p. 286.

⁸ SJAN Dolj, Register Office Collection – commune of Işalniţa, file 3/1885, f. 6v; Idem, Romanian Ladies Committee, file 1/1877-1878, unnumbered.

Botoșești and Ișalnița. In 1877, during the War of Independence, Pera Opran offered the Ladies of Craiova his house from this city, situated behind the Electric Factory, for them to use it as a hospital in which there were nursed the wounded from the battle fields around the Danube area⁹.

He also inherited from his father numerous estates in the counties of Dolj and Mehedinți, as Ișalnița, Românești, Cioroiașu, Velești and Botoșești.

The socmen from the estates that belonged to Pera Opran had numerous obligations to him. They needed to work the corvee and to sharecrop, as there had been stipulated in the Law of Caragea and the Organic Regulation. These farming services could be different from one area to another, from one locality to another, or one estate to another.

The socmen from the estate of Ișalnița had to work the corvee and to sharecrop for the landlord. This estate had been bought in the period 1828-1831 by Gheorghe Opran, from Zinca Samurcaș. After the death of Gheorghe Opran, it became the property of his son, Pera. Between the socmen from the estate of Ișalnița and Pera Opran there was no written agreement that would regulate the obligations that they had, everything was established according to the owner's will. Thus, for the grazing of the cattle the villagers had to pay three lei for the big cattle, 20 farthings for sheep and a penny for pigs. Dissatisfied with the tasks that they were subjected to, in the summer of 1848, the socmen from the estate of Ișalnița refused to do the farming works, motivating that they would become ill with cholera¹⁰. On the 30th of July the same year, Pera Opran addressed to the authorities, requesting the sending of five soldiers that would determine the peasants to perform their duties¹¹. In order to stop the eventual other socmen from other estates to oppose their landlords, the authorities decided to send five soldiers that would re-establish the order in Ișalnița¹². In 1855, the owner of the estate from Ișalnița complained to the administration of Dolj County that the villagers had grazed their cattle in the forbidden orchards, although they had been given enough land of the commons. He also denounced the fact that when the cattle were caught and enclosed by the administrator of the estate, the socmen, instead of acknowledging their guilt and pay seven pence each as compensation, they started to threaten him¹³. He asked for a person in charge to come and to record that the villagers had grazed their cattle without permission. The deputy administrator of Ocolul, arrived and interrogated both the owner and the socmen. The latter ones said that the commons for grazing was insufficient, most of it being ploughed by

⁹ I. Theodorian-Carada, *Pera Opran*, in "Arhivele Olteniei", year XX, January–December 1941, p. 287.

¹⁰ Ileana Petrescu, *Documente privind revoluția de la 1848 în Oltenia*, Craiova, Romanian Academy Publishing, 1969, p. XXVI.

¹¹ Petre Milcu, Eliza Laura Stanciu, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 165.

¹³ SJAN Dolj Dolj, Dolj County Prefect's Office, Administrative Department, file 17/1855, f. 448.

the landlord. Pera Opran replied that although the commons had been diminished in surface, he had given the peasants other plots, “old ones that were not productive anymore”, which they would use for grazing their cattle. The deputy decided that the villagers needed to pay the compensations of seven pence, due to the fact that there was enough land¹⁴.

On the 11th of March 1860, 18 families from the village of Ișalnița complained to the prefect of Dolj County that Pera Opran, the owner of Ișalnița estate, asked them to shift the huts that they owned, owing to the fact that the land was to be used for growing wheat and hay¹⁵. The villagers were also complaining about the fact that, once moving, their families would not be able to support themselves anymore, or pay their taxes to the state¹⁶. They were arguing that they would accept the moving only if the landlord provided them with the necessary materials for building new houses, or paid them compensations for the loss suffered after the moving¹⁷. On the 13th of March 1860, the prefect of Dolj asked the administrator of Ocolul to inform Pera Opran that the villagers are willing to move provided that their requests were heard, and they are given five months to move their houses¹⁸. On the 15th of March, the landlord addressed to the authorities, saying that due to the fact that he intended to extend his mansion, and needing more land, he had to make the decision of moving the 18 families. He was promising that he would provide the peasants with both land where to build their new houses, and the necessary materials¹⁹. On the 30th of June, the same year, Pera Opran addressed to the prefect of Dolj, addressed the prefect of Dolj County, saying that the villagers from the estates of Ișalnița and Românești refuse to hoe the corn field. He asked for a person that would come and state whether the peasants had refused to hoe the corn field, declaring that they had been instigated by Ioan Diculescu, the village secretary. In order to stop the instigations, the prefect asked the council of Ișalnița village to replace Ioan Diculescu from his position²⁰.

On the 12th of September 1860, Pera Opran complained to the prefect of Dolj County that the villagers from his estate refused to do the autumn ploughing. Two days later, the prefect addressed to the deputy prefect of Ocolul, asking him to verify whether the villagers from this estate carried out the obligations they had to the owner²¹. If the deputy stated that the autumn ploughing had not been done, he would address the gendarme commander. This one would send an officer and 4–5 gendarmes to determine the villager to do the work²². Dissatisfied that the

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 525.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, file 18/1860, f. 346.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, ff. 363-364.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 441, 723.

²¹ SJAN Dolj, Dolj County Prefect's Office, Administrative Department, file 19/1860, ff. 313–314.

²² *Ibidem*, f. 313.

authorities did not take any measure, Pera Opran complained again to the prefect that it was the end of September, and the 300 villagers from the estate of Ișalnița did not do any work on the 50–60 acres, motivating that they either did not have ploughs or they had been gone at the time the works had to be done. The landlord was asking the authorities to intervene and send even more gendarmes that, in three days, would obligate the villagers to do the ploughing²³. He was also stating that after the villagers had finished ploughing the 50–60 acres, he would allow them to pick the grapes from their vineyards and share the hay²⁴. On the 20th of September 1860, the prefect of Dolj County addressed the deputy, asking him to verify whether the works had been done. The second day, when the deputy went there, he recorded that the villagers had already ploughed the land next to Jiu, and the ones next to the forest were to be finished after the picking of the grapes.

At the beginning of June 1878, Pera Opran addressed the prefect of Dolj, stating that the dwellers Mihai Duță, Maria Pătru Marin, Dincă Preda Arapu, Ghiță Preda Arapu and Staicu Tucă refused to fulfil their obligations to the owner. On the 26th of June, the same year, the prefect asked the mayor of the commune of Ișalnița to take the necessary measures to determine the five dwellers that, in very short time, to fulfil their duties²⁵.

The same obligations had the socmen from the estate of **Românești**. Pera Opran had bought the estate in 1854 from Ana Argetoianu, paying 6,600 ducats for it²⁶. On the 24th of September 1864, several villagers complained to the authorities, saying that, although they had had an agreement with Pera Opran that he would receive annually, for the vineyards that they used, a vine shoot with grapes, chickens, thirteen lei and thirty pence, he refused to allow them to pick the grapes, motivating that they would not accept the new conditions that he wanted to impose them. The landlord wanted, besides the previous obligations, that the socmen to work an acre on the field, for every half of acre of vineyard²⁷. Dissatisfied with the fact that the authorities did not take any measures, the socmen addressed a new complaint, on the 7th of October, the same year, to the prefect of Dolj County, asking him to send a person that would investigate and would bring justice to them. On the 8th of October, the deputy prefect of Ocolul, going to the commune of Ișalnița, heard both the claimants and the defendant²⁸. The defendant stated that the villagers had been told the new conditions of agreement since April 1864, but they ignored them. According to him, the only one who observed the new agreements was Teodoru, priest of the village of Românești, the rest of the socmen working the vineyards abusively²⁹. Pera Opran also declared that the villagers who did not agree

²³ *Ibidem*, f. 356.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, file 33/1878, f. 92.

²⁶ *Idem*, Dolj Court, Department I, file 6/1859, f. 11.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, file 16/1864, f. 47.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, ff. 48, 55.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, ff. 56–57.

with signing the new contract, would lose their right to use the vineyards from his estate³⁰. Asking the claimants why they did not accept the new conditions proposed by the landlord, they answered that they already had agreements signed with Pera Opran, and they would not accept the new ones, because the old ones are more advantageous³¹. On the 13th of October 1864, the deputy prefect sent a report to the prefect of Dolj County, in which there were stated the declarations³². According to the deputy prefect, Pera Opran had the right to impose the new agreements to the socmen from his estate. He was requesting that the villagers to be obligated that, in 1864, to give the owner, for the vineyards that they used, the taxes as pretended by him. The ones that had already picked the grapes and taken the wine would pay compensation to the landlord³³. He would recommend the prefect to ask Pera Opran, the owner of the estate, that in the following year to make a new agreement with the socmen, with more advantageous conditions for the both parties³⁴.

The socmen from the estate of Botoșești, in 1831, had to work the number of days specified in the Law of Caragea, and if they failed to do so, each had to pay 12 thalers a year. Besides the corvee days, they also needed to provide a cart of logs. If they could not provide transport, they had to pay 5 thalers each. The socmen from the estate of Botoșești had to give the landlord, from all the products they obtained after cultivating the land, the tenth part of them. The metayage for the hay had to be paid in money. They would also give the landlord, every year, a lamb, 30–45 lbs of cheese, 2 or 3 chickens. In order to breed the cattle necessary for farming, the peasants had to pay a tax for grazing, which would differ from one animal to the other. If for a sheep they would pay only 2 farthings, for a cow had to pay 6 farthings a year³⁵. In only two years, the amount of money the socmen would have to pay if they could not work the 12 days of corvee, increased. If in 1831 they had to pay 12 thalers, in 1833 had to pay 15 thalers per year³⁶. In 1864, some of the villagers from this estate who had received some land, were in a difficult situation. Thus, Barbu Papucu, a poor socman, who had only a cow and five sheep, and had received only 3 acres for ploughing and hay fields, could barely support his family. They could only managed to grow two acres of wheat and two of corn, but the unfavourable climate made the production very weak. They had obtained only 1500 lbs of wheat, the corn harvest being totally compromised³⁷.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem*, ff. 68–69.

³³ *Ibidem*, f. 68.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 69.

³⁵ SJAN Mehedinți, Mehedinți County Prefect's Office, Administrative Department, file 17 (1847)/1831, ff. 302–308; Nicolae Chipurici, *Un secol din viața satelor mehedințene 1800–1907. Catalog de documente*, vol. I, Bucharest, 1982, pp. 77–80.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 117; SJAN Mehedinți, Mehedinți County Prefect's Office, Administrative Department, file 1(11160)/1833, ff. 377–378.

³⁷ Ion Ionescu de la Brad, *Agricultura română din județul Mehedinți*, Bucharest, 1868, pp. 484–485.

The same obligations to the landlord had the socmen from the estates of Cioroiași and Velești from Dolj County and Tâmpeni from Olt County.

When exploiting the estates that Pera Opran owned, he used, besides the socmen, the gypsy serfs too. Yet, few years before the emancipation of the gypsies, the landlord of Ișalnița estate started to renounce at them, preferring to sell them to the state. In September 1852, Pera Opran addressed the authorities of the state, expressing his intention to sell few families of gypsies from the estate of Ișalnița, with the price of ten thalers each. The administration of Dolj County announced him that they agree with the selling, but only after they received from him a census with the names, age, nickname, house and status of each gypsy he wanted to sell³⁸. In March 1853, Pera Opran sold to the state 24 families of gypsies, made of 102 people, who lived on the estate of Botoșești³⁹. On the same date, he would sell other 20 gypsy families, this time from Ișalnița, the other property of his⁴⁰.

Besides the socmen and the gypsies, Pera Opran used numerous Italian peasants from the region Friuli-Venezia-Giulia to work his estates. In 1850, after a journey to Italy, Pera Opran noticed that in the region of Friuli there were many very good farmers. Thus, he invited 30 families of Italian peasants to work his land from Ișalnița⁴¹. If in the first years, the farmers that had been brought from Italy, would remain on the estate of Ișalnița only for the period of the farm works, later on, starting with 1860, Pera Opran allowed them to settle on his property, and to build houses here⁴².

Not only the dwellers that used to live and work on the properties of Pera Opran had to suffer due to his management, but also the landlords of some neighbouring estates. On the 13th of August 1865, Pera Opran, dissatisfied that the dwellers of Cornetu were trespassing his part of estate from this village, addressed the prefect of Dolj County, asking him to designate a person that would come and identify the right plots. The prefect charged the deputy prefect of Ocolul, Emil Bițoianu, with the solving of this misunderstanding. On the 14th of August, the deputy prefect went to the village of Cornetu and heard both parties. Being interrogated, Pera Opran asserted that he had 16 feet of estate in Cornetu that he had bought from Niță Dragomir, Ion Turcitu and Constantin Dosa. In order to confirm what he denounced, he brought three witnesses too: Ioan Iacov, Ghiță Foleanu and Preda Foleanu. They confessed that Pera Opran owned, in the village of Cornetu, an estate of 16 feet that would stretch “from the water of Amaraza to that of Teslui”, and as a wide “from the boundary of Cioroiași and to the

³⁸ SJAN Dolj, Dolj County Prefect's Office, file 93/1852, f. 7.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, file 63/1853, ff. 51, 57, 66, 81, 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 87.

⁴¹ Ion Pătrașcu, Pârvu Elena, *Friulanii din Craiova: Interferențe socio-culturale italo-române*, Craiova, Aius Publishing, 1999, p. 118; Ion Pătroi, *La cumpăna a două epoci 1849–1877*, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing, 1983, p. 78

⁴² Bokor Zsuzsa (coord.), *În căutarea tărâmului promis. Italienii din România*, Cluj-Napoca, Institutul pentru studierea problemelor minorităților naționale Publishing, 2017, pp. 303, 307.

possession of the freeholders from Cornetu”. This part of land, according to the three witnesses, had been chosen and measured since 1864 by the engineer Nicolae Dicu Iota⁴³. Being asked, the freeholders from Cornetu answered that indeed Pera Opran had a part of land in Cornetu, but it stretched only from “the old ravines next to the house of Niță Dragomir and to the pond across the great road, and not as the claimant said⁴⁴. On addressing the work done by Nicolae Dicu Iota, the freeholders said that it had not been finalised, the engineer creating only three hillocks “from the ravines on the edge of the village, up the hill, and to the part of Moscu”⁴⁵. On the 23rd of August, the deputy prefect presented a report to the prefect, in which he was describing everything he had noticed. He also recommended that Pera Opran to further own the 16 feet strip of land that he had bought from Niță Dragomir, Ion Turcitu and Constantin Dosa⁴⁶. The misunderstandings between Pera Opran and the freeholders from Cornetu continued in the next year too. At the beginning of June 1866, Pera Opran addressed the prefect of Dolj County again, saying that the freeholders from Cornetu had ploughed and sown his strip of land from this village. The deputy prefect of Ocolul was charged to go and analyse the claims⁴⁷. On the 3rd of August 1866, he handed a report to the prefect, in which he wrote that he recommended the two parties to solve these misunderstandings in court⁴⁸.

The numerous estates from the property of Pera Opran, and the great number of socmen that worked on them, demonstrate the important economic role that he played in the Romanian society.

⁴³ SJAN Dolj, Dolj County Prefect’s Office, Administrative Department, file 381/1865, ff. 5–6.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, ff. 19–20.