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Sabrina Tosi Cambini:
Other Borders: History, Mobility and Migration of Rudari Families
between Romania and Italy
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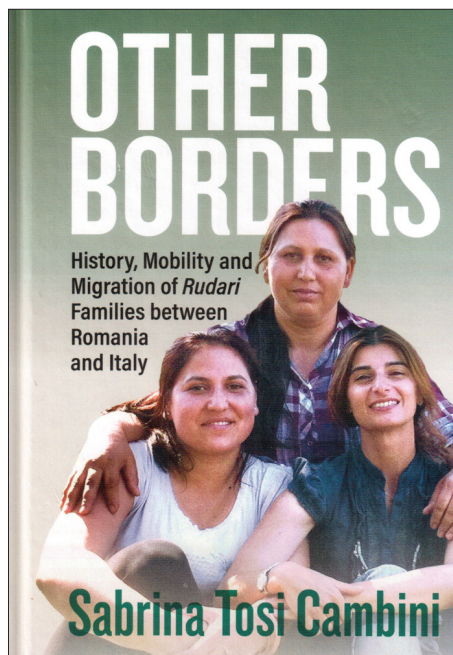
The Rudari are a Romanian-speaking ethnic group currently living in scattered communities across Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Americas. They are frequently perceived by outsiders as “Gypsies” or, in other contexts, as Roma. They themselves, however, prefer the ethnonym *Rudari*. They are also known by a variety of other names, including *Boyash* and *Beás* in Hungary; *Bajaši* and *Banjaši* in Croatia and Serbia; *Karavlas* in Bosnia and Herzegovina; *Lingurari* in Moldova; Rudari in Greece; *Rudari* and *Kopanari* in Bulgaria; and *Ludar* and *Ludari* in the Americas. As a result of labor mobility after 1989, many Rudari migrated from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, where new communities formed and families adapted to their new social environments by securing housing and employment, with varying degrees of success across countries, and by enrolling their children in local schools. Despite an increasing number of publications in recent decades, particularly those focusing on their identity and mobile ways of life, this group has remained relatively marginal within scholarly debates (Achim, 2002; Kovalcsik, 1996; Marushiakova & Popov, 1998; Marushiakova & Popov, 2008; Neagota & Benga, 2016; Rotaru & Gaunt, 2023; Șerban, 2007; Sikimić, 2003, 2005; Slavkova, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2017; Sorescu-Marinković, 2013; Sorescu-Marinković, Kahl & Sikimić, 2021). Academic attention to the Rudari has largely been overshadowed by the broader focus on the Roma as both an ethnocultural group and a category of migrants. This book seeks to challenge that tendency by presenting an extensive study of Rudari from southern Romania who migrated to Italy and subsequently returned to Romania.

At first glance, the title of the book *Other Borders* appears to promise an exploration of encounters and tensions between Romanian Rudari migrants (referred to by the author, using a lowercase r, as *rudari*) in Italy and the local population, as well as a methodological reflection

on distance and the challenges arising between the researcher (the author) and her interlocutors (Tosi Cambini, 2024). From the very beginning, however, it becomes clear that this is not the book's primary focus. Instead, Sabrina Tosi Cambini offers a detailed reconstruction of the interlocutors' family histories, Rudari who move between Romania and Italy in search of work and income, foregrounding the strategies they employ to cope with the challenges of migratory life and to navigate the tensions between their own cultural understandings and the interventions of state authorities and local bureaucratic systems.

The researcher not only refrains from distancing herself from her interlocutors, with whom she spends many hours, days, and months, but, with exceptional delicacy and sensitivity, adapts to their way of life and gains a deep understanding of their social reality. This approach enables the Rudari to share with her both the most curious aspects of their lives and their most intimate experiences, which she conveys through an ethnographic narrative in a distinctive and compelling manner. She adopts a dynamic approach in documenting and presenting the changing mobility patterns of Romanian Rudari, addressing contexts of both voluntary migration and forced resettlement, as well as the diverse migration strategies they have employed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This detailed description, together with the methodological choice to integrate the insights emerging from the lives of her interlocutors in a sensitive and non-intrusive manner, constitutes one of the book's most significant contributions. The author's ethnographic point of departure in this book is her involvement in the struggle of the Rudari families (perceived by local authorities as Roma) against their eviction from an abandoned building in the outskirts of Florence. She met them in 2008 and subsequently engaged more deeply with their situation; a year later, she undertook her first ethnographic trip to southeast Romania. This engagement serves as a prism through which Sabrina Tosi Cambini explores who they are, how they arrived there, and the opportunities and constraints that life in the occupied space created. Tosi Cambini maintains long-term relationships with these families, seeking both to support them and to address the tensions surrounding migration, particularly those shaped by state institutions' perceptions of foreigners. She immerses herself so deeply in the lives of these families, aiming to understand and describe them in the fullest possible detail, that at times her narrative appears deliberately abstracted from historical reality. The author chooses to present the story of Rudari to the readers as seen and interpreted through their own eyes and according to their narratives of this story.

The book comprises an introduction, fifteen chapters and a conclusion, too many to be summarized individually in a review, yet sufficient to demonstrate that Tosi Cambini succeeds in portraying the lives of Rudari families in a comprehensive way. The chapters are organized so that the author first introduces readers to the official historical and social framework, and



then weaves stories from the lives of the Rudari families. The narrative begins with the story of the nine sisters, referred to by the author as *rudari lingurari*, in chapter one, and concludes, in chapter fifteen, with their great-granddaughters, seven sisters now living in Florence.

The first part of book, comprising five chapters, examines the history of the group, weaving together the author's understanding of space and time, shaped by her informants' own interpretations of their past, with the external dynamics imposed by changing borders, such as the land boundary between Bulgaria and Romania in the Dobruja region, as well as by deportations and assimilation policies. Sabrina Tosi Cambini examines how the social and family organization of the Rudari developed in relation to territorial changes, as well as how families perceived, interpreted, and adapted to the scope of these transformations. The author approaches the family histories of her informants in a multifaceted way, attending to various aspects of their lives and presenting them as ethnographic *morceaux*. Some of these are particularly insightful, for example, chapter five examines the conversion to evangelical Pentecostalism, illustrated through the story of Ionica (Tosi Cambini, 2024, pp. 76–84). While this aspect may initially seem unrelated to the Rudari's economic journeys and migrations, it is in fact deeply connected to the broader cultural and social transformations occurring among different population groups in the 1990s in Romania, including Romanians, Roma, and the Rudari themselves.

From chapter six onward, the focus shifts to recent travels, exploring their significance and the ways in which they have influenced family organization and notions of belonging. Tosi Cambini discusses the self-organization of social life and how it shapes the ways in which the Rudari interact with Italian institutions and engage with citizens' rights to access housing. This social organization also influenced and facilitated changes in Rudari migration patterns. In the early stages of labor mobility, individual men or women migrated to seek work in Italy, but the case of Luzzi illustrates a different path, involving entire families. Equally important is the strategy adopted by the Rudari, which they call "migration opportunity," aimed at protecting themselves from the risk of being depersonalized by the process of migration (Ibid., p. 100). In the following chapters, the author emphasizes how the local environment and the pressures experienced during migration foster new skills and perspectives, which are then applied upon their return to Romania.

For the Rudari, a particularly important aspect of returning home is the construction of a house, which must occupy a precisely defined space near relatives. These elements of socio-spatial organization are crucial for understanding the relationships between family members. In this context, house construction takes on a dual significance: it is both the physical act of building a house and the creation of a home, representing one of the central factors in migration processes (Ibid., p. 165). The author demonstrates that kinship was the primary organizing principle for the Rudari, both in their home country and within the context of labor mobility, as it helped them navigate their search for employment and support in different national contexts.

Although the chapters presented by the author are detailed and informative, Tosi Cambini's approach to structuring the book sometimes comes at the expense of clarity, placing additional demands on the reader. At times, it can be difficult to keep track of the characters, raising questions about whether a particular experience is unique to an individual Rudari or is representative of the group more broadly.

In conclusion, the book is written with exceptional delicacy and care for the informants. While conducting field research among the Rudari in Italy and Romania, Tosi Cambini developed close relationships with them, and this sensitivity is evident throughout the text.

Between the lines, one can sense the author's careful deliberation about how to present the Rudari in an authentic way, how to describe, analyze, and even name them, so as neither to harm them nor to portray them in an overly idealized manner. The methodological reflections embedded in the individual chapters are particularly valuable, enriching the text further. For me, the chapter "At Home" (Ibid., pp. 162–189) is especially compelling, as it vividly conveys the depth of the author's connection with and understanding of the Rudari. Although I have many years of experience with the Rudari, both in Bulgaria and in the context of migration, I gained new and valuable insights from Sabrina Tosi Cambini's ethnography. The book provides a nuanced understanding of the cross-border experiences of Rudari families, making it a valuable contribution for specialists in Eastern European labor mobility and migration, history, ethnology, anthropology, cultural studies, and ethnic studies.

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