

Article

## Faith Church: Roma Baptists Challenging Religious Barriers in Interwar Romania

Iemima Ploscariu

School of History and Geography, Dublin City University, Dublin, D09, Ireland; E-Mail: iemima.ploscariu2@mail.dcu.ie

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### Abstract

In interwar Romania, the numbers of Baptists grew exponentially among the ethnic majority population in the border regions of Transylvania, Banat, and Bessarabia. In the competition over souls and for cultural space in the newly formed Greater Romania, the Roma became an important minority to win over. In 1930, Petar Mincov visited Chişinău and spurred outreach to the Roma among Romanian Baptists as he had in Bulgaria. It was here and in the cities of Arad and Alba-Iulia that some of the first Romanian Roma converted to the Baptist denomination. The first Roma Baptist (and first Roma neo-Protestant) Church, called *Biserica Credința* (Faith Church), was founded in Arad city around 1931. Confessional newspapers in English, Romanian, and Russian from the interwar period reveal the initiative taken by members of the local Roma community to convert and to start their own church. The article analyses the role of Romanian Baptist leadership in supporting Roma churches and the development of these new faith communities in the borderland regions. Unlike outsider attempts to foster a Roma Baptist community in Bucharest, the Faith Church survived World War II and communist governments, and provides insight into the workings and agency of a marginalized double minority. The article also looks at the current situation of Roma evangelicals in Arad city and how the change in religious affiliation has helped or hindered attempts at inclusion and policy change.

### Keywords

assimilation; Baptist; Faith Church; minorities; religion; Roma; Romania

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The interwar has become an important period for understanding Roma emancipation efforts, particularly in Romania, as seen through the works of scholars such as Viorel Achim, Petre Matei, and Ion Duminica, among others (Achim, 2010; Duminica, 2019; Marushiakova & Popov, 2017; Matei, 2010). For example, the first Romanian Roma organizations, such as the General Association of the Gypsies in Romania, the General Union of the Roma in Romania, and the Association of the General Union of Roma in Romania, were set up between 1933 and 1934 (Matei, 2010, pp. 159–173). Recent anthropological studies have focused on current religious aspects and the international significant increase of Roma converting to Pentecostalism in the last decades

(Bițiș, 2017; Roman, 2017; Thurfjell & Marsh, 2014). However, no studies have brought the two together to show the appeal and early development of so-called neo-Protestant churches for interwar Roma in Romania. The present article fills this gap through the study of Baptist-affiliated Faith Church (*Biserica Credința*) in the city of Arad, Romania, and of other churches with Roma members in the 1930s.

The historical context of Romania in the 1920s and 1930s was one of escalating political and religious tensions among groups seeking to influence consolidation policies of the newly formed Greater Romania (the result of territories added to the Kingdom of Romania after World War I, more than doubling its size and population; Livezeanu, 1995). The government sought to bring cohesion between the different administrative

systems in the newly joined territories, previously under Austrian, Hungarian, or Russian rule, and bring a sense of unity and 'Romanianness' across the regions. Religion was an important factor in achieving this cohesion and national unity, specifically through the dominant Romanian Orthodox Church, representing the majority of ethnic Romanians in the country (Clark, in press). The Romanian Orthodox Church served as a legitimizing tool for Romanian nation-statehood based on ethno-religious/linguistic homogeneity: To ensure the state kept its new territories, Romanian politicians wanted to present a unified Orthodox Romanian people across the annexed regions.

However, the Romanian Orthodox Church's authority was challenged by the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church and by the rapidly growing so-called sectarian groups of evangelicals (or as they came to be known during the communist period: neo-Protestants). The largest of these were the Adventist, Baptist, Brethren, and Pentecostal denominations, and among these Baptists were the most numerous. Although still representing less than one percent of the population, they were growing exponentially among the Romanian peasants, who were leaving the Romanian Orthodox Church (considered their ancestral church), to join these new churches (Ploscariu, 2015). Their new members also included an increasing number of Roma families, traditionally part of the Romanian Orthodox Church, or, in Transylvania, part of the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church. However, the latter two dominant churches did not realize the threat these new denominations would pose to their Roma parishioners.

The number of Roma in the country, though small, was not negligible. The 1930 census claimed 262,501 self-identified Roma. Though officially only 1.5 percent of the population, other figures ran as high as 525,000. Professions for Roma significantly changed in the interwar period but they remained the poorest segment of society. Though many followed traditional professions, such as blacksmith, their crafts were becoming obsolete due to industrialization. The majority were socially and economically marginalized, social/economic vestiges of centuries of enslavement in Romanian territories, which only ended with emancipation in 1855. Following World War I, some sedentary Roma received land during the agrarian reforms which encouraged more assimilation into Romanian culture. Historian Viorel Achim argued that Romanian society and many scholars at the time considered assimilation the inevitable outcome for all Roma (Achim, 1998, pp. 145–161). However, many continued to face some kind of stigma due to their Roma heritage (Bucur, 2002; Drăghia, 2016, pp. 28–29; Matei, 2011, pp. 20–21). The development in the 1930s of Roma-led organisations seeking advancement for Romanian Roma reveals important breakthroughs for emancipation and Roma social action to end their marginalization (Matei, 2010, pp. 159–173). This was done initially with the support of the Romanian Orthodox Church and ecclesiastical authorities, but soon also apart from them.

Despite their relatively small numbers, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church considered the Roma an important group to win over in their fight for religious space. In Transylvania, the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church was dominant among Romanians, seen as the preserver of Romanian culture during the years of Hungarian rule as part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. With the annexation of Transylvania by Romania after World War I, both the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church saw themselves as the dominant religion, as the protector of the Romanian people and of 'Romanianness' (language, culture, traditions, etc.; Banac & Verdery, 1995; Boia, 2001; Hitchins, 1977, 1979; Mitu, 2001). However, the Romanian Orthodox Church maintained predominance because of its specific Romanian leadership (the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church had the Pope as the head of their church while for the Romanian Orthodox Church it was the Romanian Patriarch) and the majority of Romanians across the newly formed Greater Romania ascribed to the Orthodox faith.

In the competition for souls in interwar Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church hierarchy was concerned about the number of Roma converting to the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church faith. The Roma in Romania were traditionally and mostly Orthodox Christian, with some Catholics in Transylvania. They historically adopted the religion of the majority populations where they lived. The first Roma organization (one which encompassed all Roma) was linked to the Romanian Orthodox Church, founded by Archimandrite Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu and led by Gheorghe A. Lăzurică. The Romanian Orthodox Church appointed Lăzurică as missionary to the Roma. He described his job as that of a special missionary tasked with making 'Orthodox propaganda' among the Roma across Romania. He held conferences and sermons on the Orthodox Christian religion, entering into polemical debates in Transylvania and in the north-eastern region of Bucovina with Roman Catholic or with Greek Catholic/Uniate Church priests, Calvinists, and other Protestants (Matei, 2010, p. 166). However, as Petre Matei reveals, Șerboianu converted to Catholicism, as did Lăzurică later. This made the Romanian Orthodox Church afraid of losing ground among the Roma; the Romanian Orthodox Church leaders did not want to relinquish any more of their social influence to the Greek Catholics as evidenced by police reports from the time ("Fond DGP, Direcția Generală a Politiei," 1936, pp. 5–8).

Interestingly, though the Romanian Orthodox Church feared Greek Catholic/Uniate Church influence among the Roma and evangelical proselytism among Romanian peasants, they seemed unaware of or not concerned with the spread of evangelical or neo-Protestant faiths among the Roma. In 1931, the first Roma Baptist church was established in Arad city, in Transylvania, western Romania, seemingly the first Roma-led Protestant Church in Romania. This opened the way for later evangelical movements among the Roma, such as

Pentecostalism, though not until after World War II (Thurfjell & Marsh, 2014). The comparatively slow early growth may account for the Romanian Orthodox Church negligence in this regard.

Prior to World War I, such developments were already occurring across the border in Bulgaria. Jacob Klundt from Lom baptized Petar Punchev, the first Roma convert, in 1910 and started the first Roma Baptist church in Europe in Golintsi Village, what is today the Mladenovo district of Lom, Bulgaria. They became an independent church from the one in Lom in 1921 and Punchev was ordained as pastor in October 1923. After Punchev's death, the church was led by Petar Mincov, an ethnic Bulgarian, and later by Georgi Stefanov, a local Roma (Füllbrandt, 1931, p. 6; Marushiakova & Popov, 2015, p. 27; Wardin, 1991, p. 151). Though the Romanian Roma Baptists had a later start, their numbers grew encouraged by the work they heard was developing in Bulgaria.

Taking the tense religious and political situation in Romania during the 1920s and 1930s, the present study draws out the hitherto unstudied double minority of the Baptist Roma through the establishment of the first Roma evangelical/neo-Protestant Church in Romania: Faith Church. It presents a different dimension of Roma self-awareness and agency—their association with a religious group that was itself marginalized. The openness of the Baptists' theology, their diverse multi-ethnic, multi-lingual services, and their lack of anti-Roma history drew Roma to leave the Romanian Orthodox Church and become Baptists.

The research relies on archival material and on church records in three languages (English, Romanian, and Russian). These include police reports from the Romanian National Archives in Bucharest and Baptist newsletters from the 1930s. A rare article written by a Roma member of Faith Church, including a family photo, makes this study an important contribution to European Roma history. Due to a limited number of published works on interwar Roma, the study relies mostly on non-Roma authors, but that are analysed together with Roma authors and scholars from both the 1930s and nowadays. The limited number of secondary sources published point to the need of the present study and its value for historians and lay people alike. Roma Baptists in Transylvania whom the author talked to during the course of research either did not know about the first Roma protestant church in Romania or only know it existed and nothing more. This case study will provide these communities with an almost forgotten part of their history as well as help scholars in a better understanding of Roma interwar agency.

## 2. The Baptists and the Roma in Arad

Some of the first Roma evangelicals in Greater Romania, were converted at the Baptist church in the Şega suburb of Arad City, in the region of Transylvania. The work among Roma in the area began around 1930 in the

Checheci district within the Şega suburb, led by Baptist pastor Ioan Cocuț (editor of the Baptist newspaper *Farul Creştin*, 1933–1939, and secretary of the Romanian Baptist Union, 1937–1939) and lay member Emil Jiva (Demşea, 2015; Popovici, 2007, p. 467). For a religious community, such as the Baptists, based on each member being able to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, they remarked that the major obstacle to working in the Roma community was illiteracy. Therefore, the American Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, which supported Romanian Baptists both financially and in spiritual matters, hired Cocuț's wife to hold a three-month literacy course for the Roma in Checheci (Cocuț, 1936, p. 20).

In 1931, two Roma members at the larger majority Romanian Baptist church in Arad-Şega decided to start a prayer house for Roma in one of their homes, with just three to four members attending. They soon rented a larger house and founded Faith Church, also in the Arad suburb of Şega. They remained at this same location until 1942. The initial members were Ilie Roman, Pavel Lugas, Iosif Bogovici, Petru Ghiura, and Anton Lingurar. Baptist historian Ioan Bunaciu claims they were baptized in 1932 in the larger Arad-Şega Romanian Baptist Church along with 15 other Roma, but if the Roma church was formed in 1931, it is likely some of them were already (baptized) members at the previously mentioned larger church (Bunaciu, 2006, p. 33). For example, Dumitru Lingurar (Figure 2), Anton's son, was part of the Sunday school at the Arad-Şega Romanian Baptist Church and was baptised in 1930 by Ioan Cocuț, the pastor of the church ("Early life of Dumitru Lingurar," n.d., p. 1).

American missionaries Walter and Hazel Craighead described a visit to Faith Church, likely in the summer of 1932, as already composed of 20 members and just as many waiting to receive baptism (see Figure 1). The church's Sunday school, choir, and part of a brass band impressed them. Craighead wrote:

As we passed through the Gypsy section of the city, the Gypsies followed us to the meeting hall, so many that we had to arrange the meeting outside. There we saw and heard from the leader a literal fulfilment of Isaiah 35. (Craighead, 1932, p. 4)

Isaiah 35 deals with the theme of the wilderness transformed into a place of abundance and of the joy of those who recognized God's rescue/redemption. Verses 9 and 10 of Isaiah 35 state:

But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Craighead saw and perhaps heard in the sermon how this rescue and joy was taking place among the Roma of Arad.



**Figure 1.** Faith Church members in 1932. Source: Craighead (1932, p. 1). Notes: (1) Ioan Cocuț, (2) Dumitru Vrânceanu, and (4, below Dumitru Vrânceanu, on the left) Walter Craighead. The Roma lay leader (3, upper line, second from the left) is perhaps Anton Lingurar.

A rather uncommon scripture for a sermon, the passage selected and Craighead's description reveals the Roma leader's advanced Bible knowledge and some level of theological training. Within a few years the Baptist influence provided avenues by which Roma could break barriers and social stigma, one of which was theological training of Roma leaders. Cocuț claimed he often saw Roma believers preaching in the streets of Arad with the New Testament in their hands (Cocuț, 1936, p. 20), revealing a rupture in local illiteracy but also Roma agency in initiating outreach. These were again factors provoked from interaction with the local Baptists.

In October 1930, the Craigheads had previously been in Arad for the Baptist Regional Conference and did not mention a Roma church in the city at that time (Craighead, 1931, p. 8). The talk given at the conference by the Bulgarian pastor of the Lom Roma, Petar Mincov, may have spurred Roma Baptists to start their own church on hearing of the Roma church in Golintsi. The transnational element of Baptist and other evangelical churches, perceived as dangerous by the Romanian Orthodox Church and state authorities, proved to be a source of empowerment and impetus for Arad's Roma.

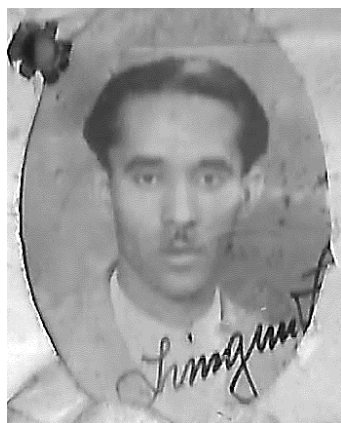
In the following years, Faith Church had two baptisms, with at least 30 members. The majority of new members were students from the Sunday school, led in 1932 by Emil Jiva, with around 35 local Roma children attending (there were more children than adults).

By 1934 there were between 8 and 10 groups of students whose teachers were themselves former students. On 25 June 1933, Jiva and Ioan Cocuț held an evangelization meeting, which included examinations for the Sunday school children and youth. After a sermon and the song "Cu blândete și drag Isus ne chiamă" (Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling), approximately 30 students and other young people responded to the altar call and gave a confession of adopting a new faith. Dumitru Lingurar (1913–2003) whose father Anton was among the founding members, became the first Roma student at the Baptist seminary in Bucharest in 1934. However, due to the premature death of Anton Lingurar, Dumitru, as the oldest son in the family, gave up seminary studies and was employed by the Romanian Railroad Company to support his mother (Corneliu Lingurar, personal communication, 19 May 2019; "Early life of Dumitru Lingurar," n.d., p. 1).

He published an article on the short history of Faith Church in the Russian language newsletter *Svetilnik* of the Bessarabian Baptists in which he described that many parents of the Roma children attending the Sunday school soon followed their children to the Baptist church and were baptised (Lingurar, 1934, pp. 2–3; "Țiganii și Isus," 1933, p. 12). He reveals the role of younger generations of Roma being drawn to the inclusiveness of the Baptists and subsequently drawing their parents as well. This article is the only Roma-authored Romanian Baptist



publication found thus far from the period. Interestingly, the Bessarabian Baptist periodical showed more interest in Roma believers than their co-religionists in Bucharest, in whose publications no similar article has been found, despite the fact that Lingurar was a student at the seminary. This was perhaps due to the more ethnically diverse churches in Bessarabia and especially in its capital of Chişinău, analysed further in the next section (Averbuch, 1931, pp. 25–26).



**Figure 2.** Dumitru Lingurar, 1948. Source: Corneliu Lingurar.

In his article, Lingurar identified the Baptist faith with a superior moral and spiritual status. He mentioned a turn away from “sin, immorality, cursing, and violence” among the Roma in Arad-Şega. This, he argued, was a result of their exposure to the teachings in the Bible: the good news of God’s rescue plan for humanity through Jesus and the equality of all humans before God (Lingarar, 1934, p. 12). He did not identify negative characteristics specifically to Roma, but pointed to the role of Bible teaching in prompting change and providing the Roma community, and its young people in particular, with avenues to advance socially through education.

It seems that due to the limited resources of the Roma lay leaders, and to prevent difficulties with local authorities regarding authorization to meet, Faith Church remained under the auspices of the Baptist church in the Pârneava suburb of Arad, whose pastor was also the official pastor of Faith Church. These official pastors included Ioan Cocuţ, David Dumitraşcu, and Alexa Popovici between 1931 and 1942 (Popovici, 2007, p. 481). However, Faith Church had its own Roma lay pastors leading the congregation.

Unfortunately, very little information is available on the history and development of this first Roma church and this marginalized double minority: Roma and ‘sectarian.’ No mention of it has yet been discovered in the police files, gendarmerie reports, or in reports from the Ministry of Religious Denominations at the Romanian National Archives. Documents that include very detailed accounts of Baptist, Adventist, and Nazarene buildings and property requisitioned by the state after the ban on

religious associations in 1943, do not mention a Roma church (Achim, 2013, pp. 625–634, 836–841). State or ecclesiastical authorities may have just grouped it with the other ‘sectarians,’ but the lack of any reference to Faith Church by police further reveals their marginalization. There are however traces of Faith Church activity in denominational newsletters.

In 1936, Faith Church members requested a small harmonium for their meetings. They mentioned poverty and lack of regular employment as a reason for members being unable to procure it themselves (“O Rugămintе,” 1936, p. 7). In December 1937, the church held a burial service officiated by Nicolae Oncu, treasurer of the Romanian Baptist Union (1935–1937), for Sister I. Topor, a member at Faith Church (“Din lumea religioasă,” 1938a, p. 7; Popovici, 2007, p. 928). The Baptist Union newsletter published an appeal in November 1938 to help the members obtain their own building since the rent was very high. The group of 30 regular attendees was paying the equivalent of five dollars a month. Donations were sent to Oncu at 4 Blanduziei Street, Arad (Cocuţ, 1936, p. 20; “Din lumea religioasă,” November 1938b, p. 7). However, due to limited finances, increasingly restrictive legislation, and local resentment of religious associations such as Baptists whom the Romanian Orthodox Church and state authorities viewed as dangerous sectarians, they did not succeed in purchasing their own land until 1945. The land and subsequent prayer house built on it was situated at 24 Aprodul Purice street in Arad, where the church remains today (Figure 3).

By 1942, and in the midst of repressive legislation, Faith Church recorded over 100 members (Popovici, 2007, p. 481). In 1945, they held one of their largest baptismal services with 25 candidates and in 1946 they formed a choir lead by Nicolae Moţ from the Şega Baptist church. Faith Church grew to include two smaller church plants. They were all described as vibrant and active churches, although the location and fate of these sister churches is still unclear. However, out of about 5,000 Roma in the city, 3,000 have in some way interacted with the evangelicals/neo-Protestants in Arad. Faith Church was involved in outreach to the local Roma through the NGO *Organizația Misionară Izvorul de Viață* (River of Life Missionary Organization; Ardelean, 2016). Fănică Bârniş, Roma pastor of Faith Church, before passing away in April 2018, also pastored the Roma church in Sadova and produced a translation of the New Testament into the local Roma dialect after 1990 (Emanuel Jurcoi, personal communication, 19 February 2018). Due to internal disputes, some members likely joining the growing Pentecostal churches, as well as to emigration, the figures fell to 46 members in 2006 (Bunaciu, 2006, p. 33). However, its continued existence is remarkable. A look at the situation of other Roma evangelical believers (specifically Baptist) across Romania at the time will show the uniqueness of Faith Church, and perhaps why it went under the radar of the Romanian Orthodox Church and state authorities’ surveillance schemes.



**Figure 3.** Faith Church in Arad-Sega in 2014. Source: Google (n.d.).

### 3. Roma in Other Churches

It seems that 1930 was the breakthrough decade for Romanian Roma organizations, growing Roma self-awareness and social action, as well as a greater attentiveness to Roma in general, if not to Roma evangelicals, by political and religious groups. However, there are several other mentions of Roma joining evangelical/neo-Protestant churches across the country during this time. Their association with Baptist churches in the regions of the Banat and Transylvania in particular is in stark contrast to the more distant and outsider missionary scene occurring in Bucharest. This was a result of more assimilated Roma in the western parts of the country, regions historically more accepting of ethnic diversity, who though assimilated were still more likely to identify as Roma. While in Wallachia, the southern and eastern region of Romania, assimilated Roma were less likely to retain their Roma heritage. Baptists in Bucharest (Wallachia) were therefore working among very poor Roma communities. Roma in the western regions of the country, despite aggressive assimilationist policies of the Hapsburg Empire, included families that fared better economically and still associated themselves with the Roma community (Achim, 1998, pp. 141–161; Drăghia, 2016, p. 32). The heightened sense of opportunity among them accounts, in part, for the more self-identifying Roma neo-Protestants in these regions.

In Dognecea village, Caraș County, in the Banat region, another majority Roma Baptist church was established, separate from Faith Church in Arad. Villagers sold limestone in the Almaș Valley in exchange for grains, and on one trip in 1918 local Roma Todor Corolan met Baptist pastor Dumitru Drăgilă from Prilipeț village. Corolan invited Drăgilă to Dognecea and the latter began to hold meetings in Corolan's home, and later in the home of Ioan Moise between 1918 and 1920. In 1920, Drăgilă

baptised the founding members of what would become the Baptist church in Dognecea at 'Lacul Mare' (the Big Lake): Todor Corolan, Lazar Dobre, Ioan Moise, and Matei Tismănar. Baptist historian Alexa Popovici identifies Lazar Dobre as an ethnic Roma, converted while serving as a soldier in World War I (Popovici, 2007, pp. 467, 481). Dobre also attended the Baptist seminary in Bucharest, like Lingurar, but not until after World War II (from 1947 to 1951). After seminary, he served as pastor of the Dognecea Baptist Church until authorities revoked his authorization, the date of which is unknown, in an attempt to curtail neo-Protestant activity (Bătea, 2018, courtesy of Ovidiu Copăceanu).

In September 2018, the Dognecea Baptist Church celebrated its 100th anniversary, which would make it older than Faith Church. However, the mix of Roma and Romanians differentiated it from the latter, leaving Faith Church as the 'first Roma Baptist Church' in the collective memory of Romanian Baptists. Many Dognecea Roma Baptists later joined the churches in the nearby city of Reșița and the town of Bocșa (Bătea, 2018). The Dognecea Church jubilee brochure made no mention of their Roma heritage, though Bunaciu claimed that in 2006 it held the highest percentage of ethnic Roma from any church within the Romanian Baptist Union (Bunaciu, 2006, p. 729). Unfortunately, Bunaciu's account must be taken with a grain of salt as much of his research cannot be corroborated. It is unclear why Faith Church did not hold the highest percentage of ethnic Roma within the Baptist Union considering it is specifically a Roma church. Bunaciu's statement nevertheless points to the overwhelming association of Dognecea Baptists with the local Roma.

In Alba-Iulia city, Transylvania, two Roma families joined the Baptist Church pastored by Pavel Boșorogan in 1930/1931 (Boșorogan, 1931, pp. 1–2). Unfortunately, more information on these two families is not available.

Another church in Lăpușnicul Mare, one of the largest churches in the Almaș Valley (today in Caraș-Severin County in the Banat), was recorded as having Roma members and being financially disadvantaged. They nonetheless contributed over 30,000 Lei, a vast sum both then and now (equivalent to \$220 in 1936 and about \$4,000 today), to various activities in the Baptist Union (Hera, 1937, p. 6).

In Cuvin village, Arad County, the members' registry from 1951 lists Florița Tigan as born in 1899 in Covasint village, with the date of baptism unlisted but believed to be before World War II (Vereș, 2007). Covasint and similar towns and villages in Arad County, such as Șiria, had large Roma villages, but no mention is made of Roma members in the denominational histories, either because there were none (which is unlikely) or because they chose not to record the ethnicity of members to avoid the associated stigma, or in an attempt to overcome ethnic barriers (Ban, 2004; Emanuel Jurcoi, personal communication, 19 February 2018).

By the mid-1930s, there is also mention of Roma in the Baptist churches in Bucharest. The London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews reported a group of converted Roma in an unnamed town, likely near Bucharest, who formed a choir and sang in a local evangelical church in 1933. Jewish Christians visiting the town joined the church service and remarked how their opinion of Roma as thieves and vagabonds was challenged after the service (London Society for Promoting Christianity, 1934, p. 56). Lingurar and other Roma members keyed into the vital role of these new churches in challenging such widespread prejudices. It is puzzling that in Bucharest neither the police nor the Romanian Orthodox Church authorities seem to have documentation on the evangelical mission of Roma. However, a young seminary student was arrested while preaching at a Roma evangelization meeting in Bucharest in 1937 and spent five days in jail (Muirhead, 1937, p. 7). The reason for the arrest was likely that he did not possess proper preaching authorization and the account is only found in an American missionary newsletter.

Roma often appear in descriptions of church musical events. An orchestra composed of Roma musicians played at a service of 45 baptismal candidates on 10 September 1939 in Slobozia village, Cetatea Albă County, in the easternmost region of Bessarabia ("Biserica din Slobozia," 1939, p. 5). Roma believers also joined Lev Averbuch's Jewish Christian congregation in Chișinău, the capital of Bessarabia, during a Christmas gathering in 1934. Averbuch reported that they sang a song in Romani during the service, adding to the already rich multi-lingual service (Averbuch, 1935, pp. 21–22). Again, an image of inclusiveness pervades these early churches, which greatly influenced Roma conversion.

Apart from these, no other cities or villages reported Roma evangelical believers. This does not mean there were none. The Roma were not on the Romanian evangelical radar until 1930, otherwise more attention would

have been given to the development in Dognecea with Lazar Dobre in the 1920s. The ethnic Romanian evangelical churches were themselves very young and still developing in the first decade after World War I. This accounts for outreach efforts emerging only in the 1930s and concentrated in the more diverse border regions of Transylvania and Bessarabia.

The Bessarabian Baptists occasionally published articles on the Roma in their newsletter *Svetilnik*. These included stereotypical claims about Roma beliefs and traditions ("Tsiganah," 1934, pp. 17–18); however, as mentioned previously, *Svetilnik* was the only publication in Romania at the time that included an article written by a Roma Baptist. The article, published in 1934, is thus far also the only contemporary account of the first Roma Baptist Church in Romania from the perspective of one of its Roma members: Dumitru Lingurar (Lingurar, 1934, pp. 2–3). Lingurar studied at the Baptist seminary in Bucharest, received a law degree after World War II, and served as a judge in Sannicoleaul Mare, a district in the Banat region in western Romania. Brother Lingurar, as he identified himself at the end of the article, linked the improvement of the Roma community in Romania, and in Arad in particular, with the growing evangelical religious movements across the country.

Though the editors of *Svetilnik* continued to refer to Roma as *țigani* (gypsies), one article acknowledged that they called themselves *Rom(i)* (in Romanian) derived from *om* or 'human/individual.' The negative association of the label *țigan* with 'unclean' or 'untouchable' was indeed present in Roma publications of the time (Nastasă & Varga, 2001, p. 222). Editors of *Svetilnik* called on readers to recognize their shared status as humans whom God loves and for whom He died through his sacrifice on the cross: "Dumnezeu ii iubește și sa jertfit și pentru ei" ("God loves them and sacrificed himself for them as well;" "Nyekotoriya Svyedyeneeya o Tsiganah," 1934, p. 13). Articles by or about British Roma evangelist Rodney 'Gipsy' Smith (1860–1947) also began to appear in the 1930s Bucharest-based Baptist publication *Farul Creștin* ("Știri Diverse," 1934a, p. 5, 1934b, p. 7). There was a clear initiative by these groups to engage with the Roma in their churches and across the country. It is unclear, however, why no separate Roma churches developed in Bessarabia during this time with such interest among the Baptists of the region for Roma missionary endeavours. An explanation could be the lack of Roma leaders to take initiative or the influence from Bessarabian Baptists discouraging a separate ethnic church (especially as tensions ran high in the early 1930s with separate Jewish evangelical congregations forming across the region; see BWA Minute Books, 1931).

In Bucharest, the Baptist Women's Missionary Association spearheaded the Roma Mission in 1934, led by Earl Hester, director of the women's seminary James Memorial Training School (1930 to 1937). Hester visited Faith Church on 27–30 June 1933 and gave, what could essentially be called, a sermon on the topic "If Jesus



had never come" ("Țigani și Isus," 1933, p. 12). This trip may have influenced her to begin work with the Roma in Bucharest, on the other side of the country, where little was being done. The fact that she, as a woman, was invited to speak in a Baptist church and to a majority Roma congregation—whose culture is also very patriarchal—reveals a more modern view of women's role in the church at the time than previously thought. The fact that she was American, however, may explain the leniency not afforded to other women. However, the work in Bucharest among the Roma during the interwar period did not see the flourishing that occurred in Arad. It was barely mentioned in Baptist newsletters after 1936 and donations significantly decreased by 1938 (Truța, 1939, p. 7). The Romanian Baptists in Bucharest lacked a leader to help support local Roma Baptists similar to Mincov and Georgi Stefanov in Golintsi, Bulgaria, or Lingurar in Arad.

#### 4. Reasons for Conversion and Reactions

Unfortunately, there is very little from the Roma themselves on why they joined these churches and on how they were treated by other Roma once they did so. Recent anthropological studies analyse Roma conversion to evangelical groups after the fall of communism in Romania; their observations can help shed light on how interwar Roma may have seen their conversion. Using both past and present studies, we see that overwhelmingly, social inclusion/advancement, the mix of ethnicities, and a lack of history of Roma prejudice in these new churches drew Roma to become evangelical. They were offered something new that the Romanian Orthodox Church or the Greek Catholic/Uniate Church had not offered them. As analysed above, Dumitru Lingurar conveyed social advancement and an appealing new moral outlook as reasons for Roma joining the Baptists. Pavel Boșorogan's article from 1931 allows further insight regarding the equality these churches and their theology seemed to offer, as similarly argued by Jewish converts in Romanian evangelical churches at the time. Concerning the Roma in his Alba-Iulia congregation, Boșorogan wrote: "They are joyous that a place has been found for them also in the arms and on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd," and they believed that Jesus loved them the same as he did the king (Boșorogan, 1931, pp. 1–2).

Stefan Lipan's recent study of current migrant evangelical Romanian Roma in Belgium identifies today as well this principle of an inclusive theology through the words of one of the Roma pastors: "God has chosen the entire Gypsy people from all around the globe. God has found his pleasure in us, the Gypsies, and that means the lowest stratum" (Lipan, 2017, p. 64). The theme of equality with surrounding people groups and within society comes up frequently in recent publications on Roma evangelicals. Johannes Ries's study of a contemporary largely Roma Pentecostal congregation in Transylvania draws this out through a quote from the

church's Saxon pastor:

We are all very different. Here in this hall are sitting different races, different nations and different cultures. Brothers and sisters, we are all very different. One of us might be a musician, another a mathematician or a doctor. Here are sitting poor and rich, strong and weak, thick and thin...We are all very different. But what connects us? There is something in us, which is common to all of us and which unites us: the desire to be with the Lord. And this desire makes us all equal. (Ries, 2011, p. 274)

Equality in the spiritual realm was linked to equality in the physical/social realm. Belief in access to the Bible for all and the required ritual of individual reading and study of the Bible resulted in increased literacy among Roma evangelicals and more opportunities for social integration (Lőrinczi, 2013, p. 213). Sînziana Preda identified this focus on Bible study as a "guiding principle for inter-ethnic and interconfessional relations" (Preda, 2018, p. 293). For some Roma these mixed 'transethnic' congregations offered important spaces for social inclusion (Ries, 2011, p. 278). However, the persistence of separate Roma churches reveals the limits of conversion as an avenue of social integration (Dejeu, 2015). Ries identifies how more traditional Roma groups use the development of separate Roma churches to express ethnic exclusiveness (Ries, 2011, p. 278). The case of Faith Church complicates this approach as members both sought social inclusion, and saw the Baptists as an avenue to achieve it, yet opted for an ethnic exclusive church for missionizing purposes.

Today, the evangelical or neo-Protestant churches are considered some of the main institutions for generating inclusion (Fleck & Rughiniș, 2008, pp. 43–45). However, to avoid painting too idyllic a picture, it is important to note that Roma may face prejudice from individuals even in some evangelical churches as Sînziana Preda's recent interviews show (Preda, 2017, p. 90). In Arad, the county plans for Roma integration include anti-segregation policies in schools and intentional desegregation resulting in an increase of Roma students enrolled in 2018 (Morar, 2018, p. 8). However, the Checheci area in the Șega district, where Faith Church is located, is still considered one of the most disadvantaged areas of Arad, with a population of about 3,000 Roma. A lack of property and identification papers, absence of basic utilities, and few paved roads are issues still faced by residents. They are also fighting a high level of illiteracy and high dependency on social welfare benefits. However, city officials remark the continued active presence of evangelical/neo-Protestant churches organizing religious, cultural, and humanitarian activities among Roma in the area (Morar, 2018, pp. 11, 14). The legacy of Faith Church remains, though further study is needed on the present involvement of church members in Roma outreach and activism.



## 5. Conclusion

Although the surge of European Roma Protestant and especially Pentecostal churches occurred with the religious revival movement among Roma spread from France in the 1950s, this research on Faith Church and other churches that included Roma points to early conversion of Roma to non-Romanian Orthodox or Greek Catholic/Uniate Churches in Romania prior to World War II. It is evidence of a new stage in Roma identity formation through engagement with a minority religious group that lacked a history of Roma prejudice as was present in the Orthodox Church.

The political and religious tensions of the interwar period doubly affected Roma as Baptists. They were targeted in social, political, and economic ways for being Roma and for being Baptists. Keeping Roma within the Romanian Orthodox Church as they traditionally had been, was of value to the state and Romanian nation-building projects. Their conversion to neo-Protestant groups would be an obstacle and a threat, just as state and the Romanian Orthodox Church authorities viewed Romanian peasants turning to these so-called sectarian groups. Yet, the authorities failed to catch on to the specifically Roma Baptist conversions, mostly because of their concern over Greek Catholic/Uniate Church competition. There was no way to predict just how big a threat to their Roma members these new churches would pose after World War II. Their concern with rapidly growing sectarian churches among the Romanian peasants may have kept the Romanian Orthodox Church and police attention away from the Roma converts.

The study reveals the initiative and agency of Roma in Arad to start their own Protestant church, named Faith Church. Ioan Cocuț, secretary of the Romanian Baptist Union, and lay member Emil Jiva took an active part in the development of the Faith Church as mentioned by Roma member Dumitru Lingurar. However, the teachers of the Sunday school and the church founders were clearly from the Roma community. This spurred Romanian outreach and mission among the Roma in Alba-Iulia, Bucharest, and Chișinău, among other places, as mentioned previously. However, in these latter cities, there was no Roma leadership and no lasting Roma church was founded as in Arad until after World War II and increasingly after 1989, with the fall of the communist dictatorship. The continued existence of Faith Church, this small Roma-founded-Roma-led church, is remarkable and a telling legacy of interwar Roma agency. Although these evangelical churches were an important means toward Roma social inclusion and equality, Romanian society still has a long way to go, as evidenced by the current situation of the Roma in Chececi, Arad, and by Sînziana Preda's recent interviews, in achieving the advancement and equality hoped for by the founding members of Faith Church.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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#### About the Author



**Iemima Ploscariu** holds a MLitt from the University of St Andrews and a MA from Central European University. She is a PhD Researcher funded by the Irish Research Council at Dublin City University in Ireland.