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БАЛЧИК – ИЗГРАЖДАНЕТО НА СИМВОЛИЧНА ИСТОРИЯ НА НАЦИОНАЛНАТА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТ В МЕЖДУВОЕННИЯ ПЕРИОД В РУМЪНИЯ

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**BALCHIK – BUILDING A SYMBOLICAL HISTORY OF NATIONAL
IDENTITY IN THE ROMANIAN INTER-WAR PERIOD**

The “belated” nations and states – including Romanians and Bulgarians, who obtained independence only during the second part of the 19th century – have formed after a long preparation of an anticipatory national consciousness, disseminated through propaganda, whose main actors were intellectuals and, in some cases, politicians. *Balchik* – as an idea of the *sacred, symbolic territory*, which also represented the will of remaining within the 1913/1918 frontiers – is an almost exclusive creation of Queen Maria, who determined location as *Saint Balchik*.

Two decades of financial and administrative efforts, until the summer of 1940, have sufficiently changed the architecture, the infrastructure and the daily life of Balchik, and there were many remarkable achievements. Especially during the term of the last Romanian mayor, Octavian Moşescu, the public utility work contained a note of absolute modernity of the public space: introducing electricity to the locality, a sewer system, medical and administrative utilities. However, even so, until 1940, Balchik has managed to unite the efforts of the entire Romanian intellectual elite in the project of configuring one of the greatest identity-related cultural achievements, in extremely varied artistic fields. There is no important person – or unimportant, for that matter, today forgotten – during the ’20s or the ’30s, who has not left an account of this place. Plastic arts have found, here and now, the power to build a genuine identity project, the first in its unitary history: technically, the transition from “the Baia Mare School”, from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, to Balchik represented, among other things, *the artistic expression of the State’s political achievements*. Furthermore, a rich literature of fiction and memoirs gave birth to unmatched pages about the “white town” on the Black Sea shore.

The overwhelming personality of the sovereign, with the whole emotional and financial investment in the construction, development and promotion of the symbolic history of the royal domain in Balchik, together with the infusion of interest – especially artistic, touristic and of the high society – from the most refined elite that Romanian society possessed have slowly but surely made possible that the little town on the Black Sea’s shore, absolutely unknown until the middle of the ’20s, got access to the highest steps in the hierarchy of the national memory’s places. Queen Maria exploited, in a political manner included, the afferent mythology of her property/ the place designed to suggest her power over her subjects, and insisted, in her will

and testament, that her heart – after her death – should be placed in the minuscule orthodox chapel of the domain. Undoubtedly, being a first-class politician, Maria took into account, and not lastly, the profound obligation that she would have reserved to the future Romania, in the effort to maintain the *Cadrilater*, or most of it, in the relentless territorial dispute with Bulgaria, triggered with even more vigor after the signing of the Peace Treaty of 1913.

The heart itself and Maria's political will power have constituted the beginning of a fairly bitter argumentation of the politicians and of the public opinion at the thought of ceding the town on the seashore, when it had become obvious that none of the *Cadrilater* could be saved any more. So as to strengthen the opposition, symbolic religious rituals were carried out in Balchik, meant to outline as visible as possible the importance of this territory to the mythology of national history. Furthermore, the presence of the Queen's *heart* in Stella Maris church was to be the supreme weapon of political and diplomatic debates (with Germany, Italy and Bulgaria) in favour of keeping the town, in any form, regardless of how bizarre or inconstant it would have been.

Keywords: Balchik; sacred territory; national identity; Queen Maria; Romanian politics in inter war period.

Entirely structured as a privileged place for memory and as a political symbol¹, Balchik launched its projection during a fairly warm October day, in 1924, during a car trip through southern Dobrudja: Queen Maria, accompanied by Prince Nicolae, after a short stop at the Cape Caliacra, arrived, in a locality that had little importance until then. In her memoirs, edited seven decades after this autumn day², Nicolae does not mention to the founding moment: moreover, his visits to the royal properties on the seashore always were rare and short. However, the Queen had the intuition of that *coup de foudre* that you involuntarily know will mark your existence. Balchik – as the Queen confesses in an autobiographical text – “awakened an utterly special feeling inside of me: I had a sort of omen that this place had either waited all this time for me or that I had always lived waiting for it”³.

Two of the most complete occidental biographies dedicated to Queen Maria – drawn up by Hannah Pakula⁴ and Guy Gauthier⁵ – have passed with some timidity over the beginnings of the construction of one of the most complete Romanian symbolic histories of the Inter-War period. In a modern analytical approach, the Queen is regarded, in the mode of the mythologizing discourse, as “the only woman that ascended on the highest peaks of the myth”⁶, “royal and democratic”⁷ at the same time, “a breaker of rules who anticipated a world where women will be freer and leaders closer to the ones they lead”⁸, a expression of an “extravagant romanticism”⁹, who built her *own style*. “Maria – as Lucian Boia writes in one of his texts – combined in Romania a characteristic form of *art nouveau*, by mixing, in a very personal manner, Celtic, Byzantine and Romanian decorative elements, bathed in golden, as in the Russian churches. *People may like it or not, but its originality is certain*”¹⁰(italics belong to us).

The chosen place – which rapidly became a political symbol and immediately a centre of inter-war intellectual history – had the chance of royal will. Because, depending

on inner perceptions or interests, Balchik was not regarded, from the very start, as a challenge of the symbolic and national-identity projects. Other Eastern, Central and South-East European nations also have, in turn, similar symbolic national histories. Past victories and defeats, betrayals of the greater world powers, civilizing missions for the ones that belonged to other religious creeds and profound victimizing feelings represent characteristics of the region. Another example is that of the Polish attitude towards what we could call *sacred territory*. The parent and codifier of the Polish “cultural nation” was the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz: more because of him, *Vilnius (Wilno)* and not Warsaw or Krakow has become capital of the Polish feeling of identity*.

The “belated”** nations and states – including Romanians and Bulgarians, who obtained independence only during the second part of the 19th century – have formed after a long preparation of an anticipatory national consciousness, disseminated through propaganda, whose main actors were intellectuals and, in some cases, politicians. *Balchik* – as an idea of the *sacred, symbolic territory*, who also represented the will of remaining within the 1913/1918 frontiers – is an almost exclusive creation of Queen Maria. When she discovered Balchik, in 1913, painter Al. Szathmáry found it was an “ignored town, sunk deep into the slumber of oblivion, kept alive only by sunlight and water”¹¹. More accurate than the artist’s vision, Roman-Catholic archbishop Raymond Netzhammer, forced to make a halt here, does not restrain his revulsion at all: “*in Balchik, everything was so disgusting and dirty, that we were obliged to wash in the well, in the open air*”¹². Nicolae Tonitza, an early visitor himself, who rendered the place in dozens of colourful ways, also had no doubts when he wrote that “the painters breathed life” into the town, because otherwise, “it would have died like a frail plant”¹³. Camil Petrescu, who loved abundant vacations, declared himself shocked by the “frightening lack of comfort in this town”¹⁴. In an exclusive article, not at all laudatory, he believes that “a clean room in which to rest and a restaurant that would give you a fork and a napkin on your table could go well with the sea’s beauty and the fez of the locals”¹⁵. Despite these, Queen Maria determined location as *Saint Balchik*.¹⁶

Two decades of financial and administrative efforts, until the summer of 1940, have sufficiently changed the architecture, the infrastructure and the daily life of Balchik, and there were many remarkable achievements. Especially during the term of the last Romanian mayor, Octavian Moșescu, the public utility work contained a note of absolute modernity of the public space: introducing electricity to the locality, a sewer system, medical and administrative utilities¹⁷. However, even so, until 1940, Balchik has managed to unite the efforts of the entire Romanian intellectual elite in the project of configuring one of the greatest identity-related cultural achievements, in extremely varied artistic fields. There is no important person – or unimportant, for that matter, today forgotten – during the ’20s or the ’30s, who has not left an account of this place. An relatively short editorial project – a few issues, between 1929–1929, under the leadership of Octavian Moșescu – as the one of the “Coasta de Argint” (*Silver Coast*) publication, edited in Balchik¹⁸ itself, managed to gather effortlessly, despite its sporadic appearances, almost all the best that the moment’s elite could offer: Queen Maria¹⁹, N. Iorga²⁰, Mihail Sadoveanu²¹, Camil Petrescu²², Adrian Maniu²³, Ion Simionescu²⁴, Emanoil Bucuța²⁵.

The Balchik's motif is constant throughout Romanian Inter-War painting, sometimes exhibiting extraordinary achievements²⁶. Plastic arts have found, here and now, the power to build a genuine identity project, the first in its unitary history: technically, the transition from "the Baia Mare School", from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, to Balchik represented, among other things, *the artistic expression of the State's political achievements*. Furthermore, a rich literature of fiction and memoirs gave birth to unmatched pages about the "white town" on the Black Sea shore²⁷.

The Royal complex in Balchik – the fundament of this symbolic history – totals a little more than 24 hectares of constructions (including the main villa), gardens and specially fitted lakes, all conceived by architect Emil Guneş. *Tenहा Juvah* (Quiet Nest) is visible from most of the city, especially owing to the daring tower shaped as a minaret; it was built (until 1929) by the Italian firms "Agostino Fabro" and "Giovanni Tomasini", under the direct supervision of the Queen's private secretary, Gaetan Denize²⁸. To this, they have added, in the form of a horseshoe, a villa called "Mavi Dalga" ("Prince Nicolae's Pavilion"), several pavilions – "The Steward's House", "The Rest pavilion", "The Administration's Pavilion", "The Guard's House", "The Victory" (Cinema salon), "The Mushroom", "The Frontier Guard's Pavilion", "Princess Ileana", "Cara Dalga" – and a "Roman lodge", on stone pillars²⁹. The group is completed by as very small Byzantine style orthodox church, named "Stella Maris", painted in 1930 by Anastase Demian and Take Papadriandafil³⁰ and where, in 1938, the casket with the Queen's heart has been placed.

The overwhelming personality of the sovereign, with the whole emotional and financial investment in the construction, development and promotion of the symbolic history of the royal domain in Balchik, together with the infusion of interest – especially artistic, touristic and of the high society – from the most refined elite that Romanian society possessed have slowly but surely made possible that the little town on the Black Sea's shore, absolutely unknown until the middle of the '20s, got access to the highest steps in the hierarchy of the national memory's places. Queen Maria exploited, in a political manner included, the afferent mythology of her property/the place designed to suggest her power over her subjects, and insisted, in her will and testament, that her heart – after her death – should be placed in the minuscule orthodox chapel of the domain. "With my body – wrote the sovereign on June 29th 1933, at Tenहा Juvah, in Balchik – I will rest in Curtea de Argeş, with My beloved husband, King Ferdinand, but I wish that My heart be placed under the ledges of the church that I have built"³¹. The seashore residence – already a political and artistic symbol – was, on the other hand, the materialization of its spiritual universe, the place that "had something related to the true foundation of my being, with peace and beauty", "*the wrought place*"³², as the Queen considered. Undoubtedly, being a first-class politician, Maria took into account, and not lastly, the profound obligation that she would have reserved to the future Romania, in the effort to maintain the *Cadrilater*, or most of it, in the relentless territorial dispute with Bulgaria, triggered with even more vigor after the signing of the Peace Treaty of 1913.

The funeral and the ceremonies – official and religious – which took place in Balchik have outlined, through the discourse and through the highlighting of the whole system of values, the entire image of the myth displayed during her life. *The heart*, the

symbol with the greatest impact of an image – public and/or political – became the central factor of the action: an impressive naval procession gave the necessary colour to the gesture. On October 29th 1938, the “Queen Maria” destroyer (coincidence?!) brought the sovereign’s heart to Balchik, awaited by King Carol II, Prince Mihai, Great Voievode of Alba Iulia, Prince Nicolae, Prince Anton of Habsburg, Princess Elisabeta and Princess Ileana³³. Subsequently, in the summer of 1940, *the heart* became the central element of the symbolic discourse, of the argument favoring the keeping of the town, in the conditions of the obvious ceding of the *Cadrilater*. Thus, on July 18th 1940 (commemorating 2 years from her death), vice-admiral Petre Bărbuneanu, ignoring all diplomatic and military clues, assured Carol II that “on this day of spiritual reflection, the sailors watch from the positions whence the most loving Queen gazed over the endless sea praying for them, and with deep devotion we declare to Your Majesty that the land shall be protected on water with the price of our lives, so that it will not be subjugated by foreign powers, even if it will be sprinkled with broken bayonets and heroes’ cemeteries”³⁴. Right before the conclusion – with predictable results – of the negotiations in Craiova, concerning the ceding of territories, the Romanian media still thought that the sole argument that could keep our dignity (and some territories that acquired symbolic value) was that of *the heart*. *Queen Maria’s Balchik* – wrote Romulus Dianu on August 24th 1940, around the time of the ceding – *is the sore point of the pain*. From a gulf that lacked any importance whatsoever, one which was never a Bulgarian, but a Turkish region, *it became a value only through what man has created when he returned there*.³⁵ Balcica Măciucă, daughter of the last Romanian mayor of Balchik, Octavian Moșescu, remembered that in a New Year 1940 Balchik street party, straight in the Mairy Square, in downtown, Romanian enjoyed together with their Bulgarians, Turks and Tatars neighbours. Everybody knew that, until following autumn, Romanians (2500 from all 6500 inhabitants)³⁶ must packed all things and traced their homes, built in last years on the town. It seems like a mutual and tacit agreement: that New Year night was a farewell night³⁷.

A type of ritual, unusual but complete, through the force of suggestion, is the one carried out the day after the signing of the Craiova Treaty, in Balchik, in an exclusive and illustrating presence: Romanian authorities that left permanently, the Bulgarian ones that had barely been appointed, the military attachés of Germany and Italy in Bucharest. In their presence, as in a religious ceremony, the casket with the Queen’s *heart* was taken out of the *Stella Maris* chapel and the Queen’s aide, General Eugen Zwiedinek, took the priceless treasure onboard the “Queen Maria” destroyer, the same that brought it there two years before³⁸.

The heart itself and Maria’s political will power have constituted the beginning of a fairly bitter argumentation of the politicians and of the public opinion at the thought of ceding the town on the seashore, when it had become obvious that none of the *Cadrilater* could be saved any more. So as to strengthen the opposition, symbolic religious rituals³⁹ were carried out in Balchik, meant to outline as visible as possible the importance of this territory to the mythology of national history⁴⁰. Furthermore, the presence of the Queen’s *heart* in *Stella Maris* was to be the supreme weapon of political and diplomatic debates (with Germany, Italy and Bulgaria) in favour of keeping the town, in any form, regard-

less of how bizarre or inconstant it would have been. The idea, immediately diffused in the media, was obstinately promoted. A daily paper of great circulation and influence wrote, on August 24th 1940, that “Balchik must remain part of Romania, *as a free, open city, under Romanian rule*. The Bulgarian people must be concessive and *respect the cause of the Romanian soul*”⁴¹. It was claimed, and in a very respectable daily paper at that, as “Universul”, that the Bulgarian media, in this case Radio Sofia, had made an appeal, on August 10th 1940, “to the duty of Bulgarians to keep forever regions so beautiful as Balchik, Cavarna and Cape Caliacra”⁴².

“The fate of this watery town – prophesized, in 1931⁴³, Emanoil Bucuța – which is Romanian only since 1913, seems decided for a long time”⁴⁴

This place of exceptional symbolic resonance – acquired from the second part of the '20s – conferred unprecedented features during the diplomatic negotiations of August 1940, for the clarification of the Romanian – Bulgarian territorial dispute.

NOTES

¹ Pippidi, 2000.

² Prințul Nicolae de Hohenzollern, 1991.

³ Regina Maria, 1930:66–67, Regina Maria 1927: 1–4, Regina Maria 1938.

⁴ Pakula, 2004.

⁵ Gauthier, 2000.

⁶ Bizomescu, 1995: 171–198.

⁷ Ionescu, 1997: 34.

⁸ Boia, 2002: 221.

⁹ Pakula, 2004: 5.

¹⁰ Boia, 2002: 221, Boia 1997: 317–322, Pepene, Stoian 2005. Also, the Dobrudjan press mentions something a few months after the trip from October 1924 on the declared intention of Queen Maria to build a castle in Balchik: *M. S. Regina în Dobrogea*, „Dobrogea jună”, Constanța, XIX, nr.165, May 10, 1925.

¹¹ Măciucă, 2001: 42.

¹² Dimitriu-Snagov, 2000: 80–81.

¹³ Măciucă, 2001: 42.

¹⁴ Petrescu, 1928: 2.

¹⁵ Petrescu, 1928: 2.

¹⁶ Simona Lazăr, Tudor Cireș, *Balcic, o poveste de iarnă*, „Jurnalul Național”, XIV, nr.4196, 7.01.2007, p. 11.

¹⁷ Tudor, 1939: 1. Also, *Balcicul se modernizează*, „Răsăritul”, Constanța, I, nr. 28, November 30, 1939.

¹⁸ Apostoleanu, 2003: 5–6.

¹⁹ Regina Maria, 1928: 1.

²⁰ Iorga, 1928: 2.

²¹ Sadoveanu, 1928: 1.

²² Petrescu, 1928: 3.

²³ Maniu, 1928: 1.

²⁴ Simionescu, 1928: 1.

²⁵ Bucuța, 1928: 1.

²⁶ **Păuleanu**, 2003, **Blazian**, 1931, **Cruțeru**, 2000. Many others should be mentioned: Constantin Artachino, Hrandt Avakian, Lucia Dem. Bălășescu, Marius Bunescu, Henri Catargi, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Micaela Eleutheriade, Dumitru Ghiță, Lucian Grigorescu, Petre Iorgulescu Yor, Iosif Iser, Kimon Loghi, Rodica Maniu Mutzner, Paul Miracovici, Samuel Mutzner, Theodor Pallady, Take Papatriandafil, Gheorghe Petrașcu, Ștefan Popescu, Vasile Popescu, Magdalena Rădulescu, Alexandru Szathmary, Jean Al. Steriadi, Francisc Șirato, Ion Theodorescu-Sion, Nicolae Tonitza, Ion Țuculescu. An interesting point of view, about so-called *idéologie plastique de l'État*, at Manchev 2006: 200-207.

²⁷ **Emanoil Bucuța**, *Maica Domnului dela mare*, Cella Serghi, *Pînza de păianjen*, Pia Alimănișteanu, *Dobrogea*, Oscar Walter Cizek, *Tătăroaica*. The diaries of Mihail Sebastian, Balica Măciucă, Jeni Acterian, Alice Voinescu, Agatha Grigorescu-Bacovia (*Terase albe*), Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck (*Fresca unei vieți*). Ion Pillat, whose villa still strands today („White House”), published a volume of poems named *Balcic*, printed at *Scrisul Românesc* Publishing House in Craiova, in the spring of 1940, with illustrations signed by his wife, Maria Pillat-Brateș. On this achievement, immediately after the ceding of the Cadrilater, Constantin Fântâneau, *Ion Pillat-Balcic, monografie lirică*, „Universul literar”, XLIX, nr.42, October 12, 1940.

²⁸ **Ion**, 2002: 141.

²⁹ **Ion**, 2002: 141, **Păuleanu**, 2003: 96, **Lambov, f.a., Regina Maria**, 1938b.

³⁰ **Regina Maria**, 1930b, **Păuleanu**, 2003: 95–96. A close account, referring to the entire complex in Balchik and its illustrious lodger at Odette Arnaud, *Regina Maria în micul său regat dela Balcic*, „Dobrogea jună”, XXXV, nr.63, July 18, 1939. The general frame can be revealed by Valsan 1930, Păuleanu 2006: 69–73.

³¹ **Testamentul Reginei Maria**, „Universul”, nr. 205, July 31, 1938.

³² **Pepene, Stoian**, 2005: 141.

³³ **Pepene, Stoian**, 2005: 153. See also during the period: *La Balcic s-a închis o inimă de Regină*, „Dobrogea nouă”, Bazargic, nr.128, November 9, 1938; Const. N. Sarry, *regina Maria la Tenha Juvah. Inima de la Balcic*, „Dobrogea jună”, Constanța, XXXV, nr. 64, July 21, 1939.

³⁴ *Marina de gardă la inima Reginei Maria*, „Marea Noastră”, Constanța, IX, nr.7–8, July-August, 1940.

³⁵ **Dianu**, 1940.

³⁶ Anuarul statistic al României, vol. I, 1938, p.28.

³⁷ Simona Lazăr, Tudor Cireș, *Balcic, o poveste de iarnă*, „Jurnalul Național”, XIV, nr.4196, 7.01.2007, p. 11.

³⁸ **Pepene, Stoian**, 2005: 163.

³⁹ For example *Doi ani dela moartea Reginei Maria*, „Dobrogea jună”, XXXVI, nr.73, July 20, 1940

⁴⁰ Historical heritage of national identity reborn after 1990, when thousands of Romanians going to Balchik. For more impact, also emotional, at Sotirova 2007.

⁴¹ **Dianu**, 1940.

⁴² „Universul”, nr. 219, August 11, 1940.

⁴³ **Bucuța**, 1931.

⁴⁴ **Bucuța**, 2003: 45.

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