

Culture, Travels and National Identity in Transylvania in the Aftermath of the Great War

Maria TĂTAR-DAN

George Emil Palade University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science, and Technology of Târgu Mureș

E-mail: maria.tatar-dan@umfst.ro

Article: history; Received: 04.09.2023; Revised: 10.11.2023

Accepted: 13.12.2023; Available online: 30.01.2024

©2023 Studia UBB Historia. Published by Babeș-Bolyai University.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Abstract: In the aftermath of the Great War, the Kingdom of Romania significantly expanded its territory and population by incorporating Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bucovina. Despite the enthusiasm that accompanied the “Great Union”, integrating these culturally distinct areas proved to be a complex and challenging process. Alongside political and administrative unification, the Romanian state faced the task of bringing together populations with different histories and cultural backgrounds. This integration involved not only formerly dominant ethnic groups but also Romanians who had lived and defined themselves as a national community within different contexts. Various debates emerged among the Romanian elites regarding the means of achieving cultural and spiritual unity. One of the factors perceived as hindering the profound unification was the fact that the Romanians from the Old Kingdom and those from the newly acquired provinces were unfamiliar with each other’s culture, habits and customs. Although cultural contacts and transfers had indeed existed before the war, the new context necessitated broader engagement, and the ties needed to be extended to a larger segment of the population. One suggested solution was to promote tourism and travel between the Old Kingdom and the new provinces, so as to foster better understanding, familiarity, and unity among Romanians. By examining journal articles, travel notes and memoirs, the main issue addressed by the present paper is the manner in which tourism and travel fostered cultural and social bonds among Romanians from different areas of Greater Romania, reinforcing a shared sense of national identity.

Keywords: Greater Romania, unification, integration, nation, culture, Transylvania, travel, memoirs.

Rezumat: La sfârșitul Marelui Război, Regatul României și-a extins semnificativ teritoriul și populația prin încorporarea provinciilor Transilvania, Basarabia și Bucovina. Deși aceste provincii aveau o populație majoritar românească, ele erau dominate politic, cultural și economic de alte grupuri etnice. În pofida entuziasmului „Marii Uniri”, integrarea acestor zone cu o istorie și culturi diferite s-a dovedit a fi un proces complex și plin de provocări. Chiar și comunitățile românești din aceste regiuni trăiseră și se definiseră ca și comunitate națională în contexte diferite. Anii de debut ai perioadei interbelice au fost marcați de dezbaterea privind mijloacele de realizare a integrării și unificării spirituale a noilor provincii. Unul dintre factorii percepuți ca fiind un obstacol în calea unității depline era faptul că românii din Vechiul Regat și cei din provinciile nou dobândite nu sunt familiari unii cu alții, nu își cunosc cultura, obiceiurile și tradițiile. Deși contacte și transferuri culturale au existat și înainte de război, noul context al României Mari necesita un angajament mai larg, iar legăturile trebuiau extinse la un segment mai mare al populației. Printre soluțiile propuse s-a aflat și aceea a cunoașterii reciproce, prin călătorii și vizite de o parte și de alta Carpaților, pentru a încuraja o mai bună înțelegere, familiaritate și unitate în rândul românilor. Analizând articole de presă, note de călătorie și memorii, prezenta lucrare abordează modul în care turismul și călătoriile au stimulat legăturile culturale și sociale între românii din diferitele regiuni ale României Mari, consolidând sentimentul de apartenență la aceeași comunitate națională.

Cuvinte cheie: România Mare, unificare, integrare, națiune, cultură, Transilvania, călătorie, memorialistică.

In the history of the Romanian people, the year 1918 stands as one of the most important dates, as the end of the First World War marked the creation of Greater Romania, extending the Old Kingdom's borders to include the provinces of Bessarabia, Bucovina, Transylvania - areas where there were significantly large Romanian communities who had long lived under the rule of the neighbouring Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. The profound significance of this moment has long dominated Romanian historiography's approach to the interwar period, an approach that emphasized the successes and accomplishments of the period, disregarding its challenges and failures. This perspective, shaped

in the aftermath of the Great War,¹ was abandoned after the Second World War, only to be rediscovered by the national-communist regime and reasserted after its fall, when Romanians looked once again towards the West, re-embracing the model that governed the development of modern Romania. Consequently, post-communist Romanian historiography has viewed the interwar period through the lens of a “golden age” in Romanian history, focusing, once again, more on its accomplishments and less on its hardships.²

However, the transition towards a democratic society proved to be longer and harder than expected. Old conflicts and dilemmas were revived, revealing the incomplete path towards the modernity of Romanian society, as many of its important lessons were still ongoing when the Iron Curtain fell on Europe. One of the darkest episodes of the aftermath of the fall of Ceausescu’s regime was the interethnic conflict of March 1990 in the town of Târgu Mureș, known as the “*Martie Negru*” (Black March), a violent confrontation between Romanians and Hungarians, proving that old wounds were still open. Furthermore, the challenges encountered during the transition toward an open and liberal society rekindled a sense of peculiarity among the historic provinces comprising Romania. Resurging sentiments of distinctiveness reflected the limitations of the Greater Romania project undertaken in the aftermath of the First World War to forge a seamlessly united nation. As these feelings of particularity and specialness persist, they disrupt the view of the interwar period as an ideal national era, compelling a deeper introspection on the manner in which Greater Romania chose to integrate both the different ethnicities of the areas it incorporated, and the Romanians themselves. Despite sharing a common ethnicity, they had lived for a long time in different national and cultural background and had their own particularities. In fact, despite the enthusiasm for the “Great Union”, it soon became clear that merging different cultural areas was not an easy task and frustrations arose on both sides of the Carpathians. On the one hand, the Romanians from Transylvania started to feel once again oppressed by the state, criticising the policy of Bucharest:

¹ One of the works considered a model of interpretation in this regard is the monograph by Ioan Lupaș, entitled, *Istoria Unirii Românilor* [The History of the Union of the Romanian], published in 1937 in the collection “*Cartea satului*,” edited by “Prince Carol” Cultural Foundation.

² For the historiography of the Great Union, see Valer Moga and Sorin Arhire, *Anul 1918 în Transilvania și Europa Central-Estică. Contribuții bibliografice și istoriografice* [The Year 1918 in Transylvania and Central-Eastern Europe: Bibliographical and Historiographical Contributions] (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română. Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2007).

“Like the Hungarians, who came from the Puszta - with the mission of great patriots, with airs and graces of making us Hungarians - to teach us the Hungarian mind, some of our ‘brothers’ from Bărăgan have come to teach us, once again, us, whom in their opinion, we don’t even know Romanian (the Hungarians persecuted us for knowing too much). But as Hungarians left, so will go these ones if they don’t behave well. They need to learn this once and for all: Transylvania is not a colony.”³

On the other hand, in the Old Kingdom “...words that, before the Great Union, no one would have dared to whisper,”⁴ were starting to be loudly and vehemently expressed, generating a feeling of distance and separation among brothers:

“...who, although are now together, so close, they are still so far away... however great was the love that pushed us together, with its majestic impetuosity, in an embrace that shall live forever, to assume that in a few years of living together, a people shaped in a different background from ours, can be moulded into our physiognomy is an approach that on the long way can generate only the opposite of what we want.”⁵

The necessity to discourage these attitudes and consolidate the nation preoccupied the social and cultural elites, who emphasized the urgency of a cultural and spiritual unification of the Old Kingdom and the new provinces. But this was a difficult and an “à la longue” objective and the ways and means of putting it into practice generated debates amongst those advocating for one way or another. Some emphasized the role of education, and subsequently of the school and of the state, others advocated the role of the Church, which had a long tradition, especially in Transylvania, in the process of educating the nation. Many emphasised the potential role of cultural and social associations, which had long served as primary conduits for dialogue between the Old Kingdom and

³ “Din « fapte » celor ce produc desbinare în Sibiu” [From the “actions” of those causing disorder in Sibiu], *Foia poporului*, no. 28 (13 July 1924): 5.

⁴ “Gânduri de ziua învierii: autonomia Transilvaniei” [Thoughts on Resurrection Day: The Autonomy of Transylvania], *Patria*, IV, no. 88 (16 April 1922): 1.

⁵ Al. Ciura, “Scrisori din Ardeal” [Letters from Transylvania], *Viața românească*, XII, no. 1 (March 1920): 131-132.

Romanians residing in neighbouring empires before the war. These associations played a crucial role in initiating and promoting significant cultural exchanges, fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging.

The debates around the necessity of accomplishing, alongside the administrative and political unification, the cultural and spiritual integration of the new areas and their communities into the Romanian state and society, also raised the issue of the causes that favoured the persistence of a feeling of separation and difference, of the sentiment of "two worlds that are constantly trying to unite but constantly reject each other."⁶ One of the recurrent factors asserted as nourishing this feeling of estrangement between the "old" and "new" Romanians was the fact that they knew little of each other. This lack of knowledge was a fertile ground for those attempting to undermine the strength of the Romanian state. Hence, the need to get acquainted, to become familiar with the "other", with their habits, customs, interests, concerns, or joys, was considered of a great importance in the accomplishment of the desired national unification.

"We don't know our country - and this is a great shame! To accomplish the spiritual unification of our new Romania, it is mandatory to get to know our brothers from the other provinces and their lands."⁷

All things considered, the present paper addresses the role played by tourism and travelling in the aftermath of the Great War in this process of reciprocal acquaintance between the Romanians from the Old Kingdom and those from the new provinces. Why tourism and travelling? Many of the voices raising the issue of the Romanians' unfamiliarity with each other considered that this could change, if more and more people crossed the Carpathians and got to know the others, within the reality of their everyday lives:

"In this way, we will get well acquainted, and we will honour the efforts made by each of us for the emancipation of our economic and ethnic life, which is in fact the same in Transylvania and in the Old Kingdom, as it is in all the other

⁶ I. Joldea Rădulescu, "Călătorind prin Ardeal" [Traveling through Transylvania], *Patria*, V, no. 78 (15 April 1923): 1.

⁷ Ion C. Roboșanu, "Cursuri de vară și excursiuni de studii la noi și în străinătate" [Summer Courses and Study Trips at Home and Abroad], *Lumea universitară*, 1, no. 4 (1st of April 1922): 55.

parts of the country, which have been for so long kept apart. By falling into the habit of travelling, we will come to know each other better, and the chaff will sift from the wheat. We could see the flaws each of us has and we won't pay so much attention to exaggerations. On the contrary, we would be in a better position to see the good features, on the grounds of which one could build the long-lasting skeleton of our bonding, so needed by our people in the days we are living."⁸

Travelling and visiting the country were deemed as a good way of acquiring a profound perspective on the particularities and characteristics of each area, thus generating a better understanding of those who lived there:

"To know your country, not through the venom of the daily gazettes, nor through the defamatory political newspapers, but with your own eyes, chatting with a peasant in a rail station or a village, or with a priest, a teacher or an intellectual. And to honestly share thoughts and wishes for wellness. This is the true path to heal our country's sins and pains."⁹

Furthermore, those having these experiences could share their new knowledge with those back home, inspiring others to open their horizons and encouraging the desire to know and appreciate the truth of the country for further generations:

"And I always reflect on this. The teacher all the way from the Ceremuş River or the priest from a village of Orhei will return to his quiet household, to his school or to his church, and will plant the seeds of truth in the hearts of the youngsters who will replace him."¹⁰

As a matter of fact, travels played an important part in the process of the modernization of Romanian society before the First World War, as they represented one of the main channels through which Romanian

⁸ I. Simionescu, "Ateneul din Tătărași" [The Athenaeum of Tătărași], *Viitorul*, 22, no. 6448 (11 August 1929): 3.

⁹ Const. Cerhan-Racoviță, "Înfrățire sufletească" [Spiritual Brotherhood], *Cultura Poporului*, IV, no. 69 (20 July 1924): 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

elites encountered, in the long nineteenth century, the European culture and started to embrace its model, gradually estranging the Romanian society from the Orient and pushing it towards the Western civilization – a model that remained the reference point after the Great War. Nonetheless, travel memoirs have raised little interest in the Romanian historiography, although their cultural and educative utility, alongside their aesthetic value has been well established in the European historiography. Historians frequently infused an ideological perspective when addressing this subject, often taking the memoirs out of their context. When the testimony did not correspond with the doctrinal imperatives, such as the historical indestructible unity of the Romanian people, it was suppressed.¹¹ As travel testimonies not only reveal information about the places and the people they describe, but they also reflect the changes of mentalities and perceptions, the metamorphosis of taste and daily sensibilities, they offer an insightful perspective on the way in which the merging of the new provinces into the Old Kingdom was experienced, both by the “old” and by the “new” citizens of Romania. Thus, the present paper, primarily focused on journal articles, travel notes and memoirs addresses the trips undertaken in and from Transylvania with the purpose of getting acquainted and establishing a spiritual bond among the Romanians. It delves into the initiators and participants of these journeys, explores the itineraries and areas visited, examines the insights these experiences provided about one another, and assesses the impact these journeys had on enhancing familiarity and connection among Romanians from different areas of Greater Romania.

Cultural Trips and Travelers

Starting with the 19th century, the contacts between Romanians across the provinces increased. Their travels and peregrination contributed to the growing feeling of a common belonging and culture and to the diffusion of the national ideology,¹² which made the great moment of 1918 possible. Although these cultural contacts and transfers had a long history, the context of the period before the Great War limited them to a small part of the population – a reality that, in Greater Romania, many considered had to change, as the expansion of these contacts to a larger part of the

¹¹ Alexandru Istrate, “Călătoria,” [Travelling] in *Enciclopedia imaginariilor în România* [The Encyclopedia of Imaginaries in Romania], vol. III *Imaginar istoric* [Historical Imaginary], ed. Sorin Mitu (Iași: Polirom, 2020), 326.

¹² See Ioan Bolovan, “Transilvania pe drumul unității naționale (de la Revoluția din 1848 la Primul Război Mondial)” [Transylvania on its Way to National Unity (from the Revolution of 1848 to the First World War)], *Akados*, 4 (2017): 88-95.

population could contribute to the strengthening of the eagerly sought-after and demanded “spiritual unification.”

“We do not know our country – and this is shameful! To accomplish the spiritual unification of our new Romania, it is essential to know our brothers from the other provinces and their lands.”¹³

Thus, “the need to know our country” became one of the features required in order to be a good Romanian, asserted on numerous occasions:

“To be a good Romanian implies knowing your country, understanding its needs, its aspirations, loving and embracing it in one’s daily thoughts and deeds, even if this requires a personal sacrifice...¹⁴ To know your country, the resting place of your forefathers, is a duty for anyone who has a consciousness, even when its foundation is as precarious as quicksand...¹⁵ To know your country, and especially the specific life of every town, even if only through reading – isn’t this a duty and a moral requirement of every citizen?”¹⁶

Among the first to embrace the mission of unifying the nation through travel – in order to become acquainted with the country and its inhabitants – were the social and cultural associations. These institutions played an important part in the modern evolution of Romanian society and facilitated a significant part of the cultural contacts amongst Romanians from all provinces before the Great War. In its aftermath, they continued to compensate for the lack of state initiative in many cultural and social domains, including by stimulating travel and trips to foster national unity. This was not unfamiliar territory to these associations; even before the war, they were involved in organizing trips in conjunction with cultural events, this placing them in alignment with the broader movement of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the

¹³ Roboșanu, “Cursuri de vară și excursiuni de studii la noi și în străinătate,” 53.

¹⁴ Ion Simionescu, *Tinere, cunoaște-ți țara!* [To the Youth: Get to Know your Country!] (Bucharest: Editura Cartea Românească, 1938), 152.

¹⁵ Idem, “Cunoaște-ți țara!” [Get to know your country!], *Mișcarea*, XIX, no. 93 (26 April 1925): 1.

¹⁶ Const. Șăineanu, “« Orașe din România », de I. Simionescu” [Towns of Romania by I. Simionescu], *Dimineața*, XXII, no. 6897 (5 February 1926): 3.

20th that supported physical and outdoor activities as a mean of diminishing the negative impacts of modernization and the sense of degeneration it engendered within intellectual, artistic and scientific communities.¹⁷ For example, "Astra" (*Asociațiunea pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român*), the main cultural association of the Romanians from Transylvania, by the end of the 19th century, began organizing, on its annual assembly, a trip to explore the area in which the gathering was taking place. The Association's interest in promoting knowledge of Romanian-inhabited areas is further evidenced by a proposal from one of its sections in 1913. This initiative called for "the development and publication of guidebooks of the picturesque regions inhabited by Romanians and for organizing annual trips to these areas"¹⁸ – a promising initiative that was unfortunately interrupted by the outbreak of the war.

In the aftermath of the Great War and during the first decade of the interwar period, cultural and professional associations emerged as the most important initiators of trips. The goal was to increase and strengthen the cultural and professional ties of the old and new provinces of Romania. Under their patronage, various groups – including teachers, tradesmen, manufacturers, railway workers – were taken across the country, not only "to strengthen the spiritual bonds," but also to acquaint themselves with each other's professional lives. For instance, the Commerce and Industry House of Timișoara organized a trip in the main cities of Oltenia with the goal of strengthening the economic ties between Banat and Oltenia.¹⁹ Similarly, the Association of Christian Women of Cluj arranged a trip to Bessarabia and Bucovina, with "the beautiful and useful purpose of helping Transylvanians to know the Moldavians from the Carpathians to the Nistru."²⁰ In 1928, the railway workers from Timișoara travelled to Bucovina and Maramureș,²¹ while their colleagues from Banat visited the main balneal resorts and the cities of Tușnad, Brașov, Sinaia, Bușteni, Azuga, with the aim of familiarizing themselves with their coworkers and the picturesque sceneries of their country.²²

¹⁷ See Roger Griffin, "Modernity, Modernism and Fascism. A 'Mazeway resynthesis,'" in *Modernism și antimodernism: noi perspective disciplinare* [Modernism and Anti-modernism: New Disciplinary Perspectives], ed. Sorin Antohi (Bucharest: Cuvântul, 2008).

¹⁸ "Proces verbal" [Meeting Report], *Transylvania*, no. 4-5 (July-October 1913): 365.

¹⁹ *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, LXXXV, no. 121 (9 June 1922): 3.

²⁰ "Excursiunea Reuniunii Femeilor Creștine din Cluj" [The Excursion of the Christian Women's Association of Cluj], *Viitorul*, 20, no. 5834 (5 August 1927): 3.

²¹ *Dimineața*, XXIV, no. 6493 (6 April 1928): 2.

²² "Excursiunile ceferiștilor din Banat" [The Excursion of the Railway Workers from Banat], *Adevărul*, 41, no. 13665 (9 July 1928): 3.

One leading example of organizing cultural trips in the new provinces of Romania, aimed at strengthening cultural connections between the old and new provinces, was provided by the association *Ateneul Popular Tătărași Iași*. A young association, established in 1919 with a limited scope of cultural education through theatre and cinema, it soon expanded its objectives, undertaking the mission to foster the consolidation of a cohesive national culture by organizing cultural trips into the new provinces of Romania.²³ Thus, from its very first years of activity, the Association coordinated pilgrimages to the nearby region of Bucovina, where participants could visit sites of great importance to the history of the Romanian nation, such as the Putna Monastery and the tomb of one of Romania's greatest heroes, Stephen the Great [Ștefan cel Mare]. By 1922, the association had already organized its third such pilgrimage to Bucovina, these trips proving to be significant occasions, during which:

"Thousands of souls came together and got to know each other. The national sentiment was awakened in some and reinforced in others. Ideas regarding the cultural, artistic and economic life were exchanged. Many came to realize that the nation is a historical reality, not merely a conceit of the mind. Spiritual bonding thrived, and the education of the people grew."²⁴

The success of these cultural trips expanded the initiative to the other two provinces, Bessarabia and Transylvania. By the end of the first interwar decade, the Association had organized several such cultural tours, with "almost 5.000 Moldavians being lead all across the historic and picturesque provinces newly re-united with their Motherland."²⁵ All these trips were conducted under the patronage of the Cultural Foundation Prince Carol and in collaboration with other regional or local associations, such as "Miron Costin" of Roman or "Casa Națională Viitorul" of Vaslui.²⁶

²³ For the activity of the association *Ateneul Popular Tătărași Iași* see: C. Cloșcă, "Un prestigios lăcaș de cultură: «Ateneul Popular Tătărași» (1919-1940)" [A Prestigious Cultural Venue: The 'Tătărași Popular Athenaeum' (1919-1940)], *Cercetări istorice a Muzeului de istorie a Moldovei* (1970): 317-328.

²⁴ Hug., "Pelerinajul în Bucovina" [The Pilgrimage to Bucovina], *Opinia*, VIII, no. 4545 (21 July 1922): 2.

²⁵ "Excursia Ateneului Popular „Tătărași” din Iași" [The Excursion of the 'Tătărași' Popular Athenaeum of Iași], *Universul*, XLVI, no. 161 (15 July 1928): 9.

²⁶ Corneliu Meza, "Moldovenii în Ardeal și Bucovina" [The Moldavians in Transylvania and Bucovina], *Cultura poporului*, V, no. 130 (17 October 1925): 3.

The first trip to Transylvania took place in the summer of 1924, gathering around 500 participants “among whom were 100 persons from Bessarabia, 100 persons from Bucovina, and 200 representatives of several cultural societies from all towns of Moldavia.”²⁷ These participants travelled all across the province for two weeks, visiting the most important cities and getting to know their Romanian compatriots. In the following year, the association organized another trip to Transylvania and Maramureș, and in 1928, the journey covered parts of Transylvania, Banat and Walachia. The accounts of these visits, published in the press, generally portray an atmosphere of great enthusiasm. The Moldavians were warmly received wherever they went, by both local authorities and representatives of the elites, as well as the general public.

“Our brothers from Moldavia, Bessarabia and Bucovina came to see and know us, thus strengthening the bonds of brotherly love that must exist between Romanians – between Transylvanians and their brothers from the other Romanian provinces – who came to meld their souls with ours. Transylvania welcomed them with open arms as proof that, on both sides of the Carpathians and both sides of the Prut, Romanian hearts beat as one.”²⁸

These visits involved significant mobilization in the destination areas, with local authorities and intellectuals welcoming the visitors with open arms. Simultaneously, there was a general effort to encourage public participation, as these trips were associated with various cultural events. Organized by the visiting associations, the events provided a great opportunity for them to showcase their cultural expressions. During the trips organized by the *Ateneul* Association, a cultural soiree was held in almost every city they visited. These soirées included choral performances and conferences led by prominent intellectuals who played an active role in these tours, such as Nicolae Iorga, Ion Simionescu, Gala Galaction, C. Nedelcu, C. Stamboliu, Gheorghe Ghibănescu, V. Todicescu. Their lectures usually addressed contemporary issues, with topics such as: *How do we look after the minorities*, *Ways and means in the cultural activity of the Ateneul Popular Iași*, *The connections between Iași and the memory of the*

²⁷ “Excursiune culturală în Ardeal” [A cultural trip in Transylvania], *Universul*, XLII, no. 152 (9 July 1924): 5.

²⁸ Septimiu Popa, “Oaspeți iubiiți” [Beloved Guests], *Cultura poporului*, IV, no. 69 (20 July 1924): 1.

*great Simeon Bărnuțiu, Tradition and ideals, On the significance of the spiritual bonding strengthen by the activity of the Ateneu.*²⁹

While newspapers generally highlighted the large attendance of the public, there were instances when visitors felt that their enthusiastic welcome was somewhat contrived. One account reflects this sentiment:

“Although grateful in our souls that the army is everywhere maintaining good standards and fulfilling its duty thoroughly, we still felt that this army, present on the streets, actually filled the voids that should have been occupied by all the Romanians and the civilians of Careii Mari, including the minorities, who, I hope, do not feel too ill-treated in our good country.”³⁰

An explanation for this attitude lies in the significance attached to these gatherings, as their attendance reflects the level of interest for the cultural expression of the compatriots from another region. However, the public did not always respond in the expected manner, an attitude harshly criticized by the press. An example in this regard is the concert organized by the choir of Săliște during their trip to Pitești. Although a good opportunity for the people of Pitești “to hear our Transylvanian songs, admire our beautiful garments and appreciate the beauty of our girls,” the turnout was disappointing:

“In the concert hall, there was not a single priest from the town – only one from the countryside. Not even one teacher was present. The schools of the town were represented by a handful of students from a secondary course – they occupied one bench – and a few high school students – 7-8-10 in a corner. No officers were in attendance, as the two reservists in the hall, I believe, can hardly be considered representative of the officer corps. There were no magistrates, no lawyers, and no doctors. One might think that the politicians would be there, but only the prefect attended. Apart from him, none of those who proclaim their love for the spiritual unification of all Romanians at public gatherings showed their faces... One can easily surmise the impression the people of Săliște might have formed. No one spoke to them, except for the town’s

²⁹ Meza, “Moldovenii în Ardeal și Bucovina”: 3-5.

³⁰ Ibid.

policeman. He was the sole individual from the town, from the entire county, who exchanged a few words with 'our brothers from beyond.' This is how the people of Pitești received the Transylvanians."³¹

This is not an isolated example, nor is it an attitude isolated to one area of the country. The Transylvanian press occasionally expressed disappointment over the limited interest stirred by the visits organized by *Ateneul* in some of the Transylvanian towns. As one publication noted:

"We point out once again the lack of warmth with which the people of Sibiu embrace those who carry the Romanian language and culture throughout the country. It was very hurtful to see the meagre welcome extended to our guests and the half-empty hall at the cultural soiree. Our beloved Romanians were perhaps occupied in the coffeehouses, cinemas, in Dumbrava, or at the festivity (*Kertimulatság*) of the Hungarian artists. Such disappointment!"³²

Highlighting these unpleasant moments serves to raise awareness and prevent the recurrence of similar episodes in the future. As one observer noted: "We are writing this so that such occurrences are never repeated. Words like 'here' and 'there' should disappear forever. We should be what we ought to be: loving and understanding brothers."³³ Despite these inherent situations, these cultural trips were generally appreciated for their positive moral impact, gathering participants from different social classes – teachers, magistrates, doctors, lawyers, priests, soldiers, pharmacists, engineers, students, peasants³⁴ – they were seen as a cornerstone upon which a new Romania could be built. This new Romania should firstly be "spiritually united, forming a bond of indestructible solidarity, so that it can command respect both within and beyond its borders."³⁵ These cultural encounters through travel were also

³¹ "Cum ne cunoaștem" [Getting to Know Each Other: How Are We Doing It], *Unirea poporului*, X, no. 30 (29 July 1928): 1.

³² "Din Sibiu" [From Sibiu], *Cultura poporului*, IV, no. 72 (10 August 1924): 6.

³³ "Cum ne cunoaștem," 1.

³⁴ Meza, "Moldovenii în Ardeal și Bucovina," 3-5.

³⁵ C. Stamboliu, "Excursiunea de propaganda culturală a Ateneului Popular din Iași în Ardeal, Maramureș și Bucovina" [The Cultural Propaganda Trip of the Popular Athenaeum of Iași in Transylvania, Maramureș, and Bucovina], *Cultura poporului*, V, no. 124 (27 August 1925): 2.

considered healthy manifestations of the Romanian spirit, which strengthen national feeling and contribute to the unification of the national culture: "No one, since the war has undertaken such a nationally significant, profoundly useful and insightful endeavour."³⁶

Alongside cultivating love for the country and stimulating genuine and active patriotism,³⁷ these trips were valued for their important role in counteracting the negative effects of foreign propaganda. They provided an opportunity for individuals to see and judge the realities of the country with their own eyes, rather than being misled by malevolent insinuations.

"From what they will see with their own eyes in the Old Kingdom, those from Bessarabia will no longer believe the malevolent voices who keep saying, as the Russians did before, that here lies a hell and a Turkish leisure. Those from Transylvania will see that in Bessarabia people do not kill each other, as in Turkish times, just because they are not in the grace of the rulers."³⁸ [...] "One could realise the profound transformation that has occurred in the 'Turkish pashalik' in a shorter period than the one during which the almighty Russians ruled the poor Moldavia between the Prut and Nistru rivers. 'The devil is not as black as he is painted,' a teacher from Orhei once told me. Significant work has been done here, and it has been done thoroughly."³⁹

Often, the travel notes reflect the astonishment of those who discover that what they were told is far removed from the truth. Visiting Bessarabia in 1919 for a teachers' congress, Iuliu Maior, a teacher from Blaj, is surprised to discover the beautiful and well-constructed public institutions of Chişinău. "I haven't seen such in our country," he notes, "everywhere, there is an exemplary level of cleanliness which – once again, with no exaggeration – I've never seen anywhere else."⁴⁰ Admiring the Spiritual School for the future priests and the Eparchial School for girls, the traveller wonders, "How is it that we, the 'Europeans', do not

³⁶ Simionescu, "Ateneul din Tătăraşi," 3.

³⁷ I. Ş. Cernăţianu, "Prilejuri pierdute" [Missed Opportunities], *Universul*, XLI, no. 165 (25 June 1925): 1.

³⁸ Ion Simionescu, "Excursiile" [The Excursions], *Viitorul*, 15, no. 4628 (12 August 1923): 1.

³⁹ Idem, "Ateneul din Tătăraşi," 3.

⁴⁰ Iuliu Maior, "Impresii din Basarabia" [Impressions from Bessarabia], *Unirea*, XXIX, no. 161 (2 August 1919): 3.

have, and have not had, these institutions, while the Russians – who are so often depicted as ‘uneducated’ and so much tainted by the Judeo-German and Hungarian press – have had them for a long time.”⁴¹ Although he acknowledges the fact that the Romanian national movement faced harder opposition in Bessarabia than in Transylvanian because of the oppressing Russian rule,⁴² the architecture and the condition of the education institutions in Chişinău, lead him to conclude that:

“Russians haven’t actually been the culturally backward people they were portrayed by the Jewish press.” Quite the contrary, as “they are a people who love art and are deeply religious, having built churches for Our Lord, as few other nations have – certainly not the Germans, and even less so, the chatty Hungarians.”⁴³

Thus, travelling across the various regions of the country offers not only the opportunity to become acquainted with Romanians who have lived in different cultural contexts but also to recognize the similarities and understand the differences. Although the main initiators of such cultural trips were, in general, the associations, the role of travelling in exploring and embracing new areas and cultures within the country was also assumed on a personal level. Personal trips to acquaint oneself with their country and its inhabitants, were also a widespread practice:

“My belief is that the best way to know your country is to travel extensively,” one observer notes, “stopping in its towns and villages and immersing oneself, even if briefly, in their way of life. Maps and geography books, of course, have their importance, but they are silent and cold. They speak nothing to the soul.”⁴⁴

With respect to the involvement of the state in stimulating cultural cohesion through travel, in the first years of the interwar period, it was mostly limited to supporting such initiatives by offering railway

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., no. 178 (24 August 1919): 3.

⁴³ Ibid., no. 161 (2 August 1919): 3.

⁴⁴ Stella Şerbănescu-Şăineanu, “Impresii de călătorie” [Travel Impressions], *Adevărul*, XXXVII, no. 12484 (26 September 1924): 1.

transport, travel tax reductions, or various financial aids. Although these aids were of great importance – as demonstrated by the fact that a cultural trip planned for the year 1926 by the *Ateneul Popular Tătărași* from Iași to Transylvania could not take place in the absence of this support – the state remained a rather passive active actor in these endeavours.

Getting acquainted: Places, People, Customs

To fulfil the purpose of strengthening the bonds among Romanians, the cultural trips included in their itineraries not only the main cities of the visited region, but also places of significance for the Romanian nation and history. Among the sites that became mandatory pilgrimage destinations in Transylvania were those associated with the figure of Michael the Brave [Mihai Viteazul], whose political and military actions united the provinces of Walachia, Moldovia and Transylvania at the beginning of the 17th century. Examples of such sites include the location of his glorious battles at Goroslău, or the spot near Câmpia Turzii where he was “murdered in a despicably cowardly way.” Visits to these sites included sermons and laying of garlands to honour the “sacred place that, for the last 300 years, has been telling the Romanians of Transylvania: Do not lose your hope. Mihai Viteazul may have been meanly killed, but his great vision survived.”⁴⁵ Pilgrimage sites also included the birthplaces or final resting places of those who fought for the Romanian nation and culture, such as the tomb of the great educator Gheorghe Lazăr in Avrig or the tomb of the influential revolutionary of 1848, Simion Bărnuțiu, in Bocșa, Maramureș. All these sites became places of reverence, inspiring both a spiritual mood and a sense of national sentiment.

“Even if someone was as emotionless as ice,” one observer noted, “they could not have missed the most moving image, when an elderly man from our group, in tears, kneeled and humbly kissed the ground that piously sheltered the bones of the great man who was no longer among us. On the way to the railway station, it seemed that the spirit of Bărnuțiu was watching over us, reminding us of the great moments from the plain of Blaj, from the inauguration of the Romanians history course at the Iași Academy, and so many other uplifting moments.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ V. Misicu, “Ateneul Popular Tătărași din Iași” [The Tătărași Popular Athenaeum of Iași], *Cultura poporului*, IV, no. 69 (20 July 1924): 3.

⁴⁶ Meza, “Moldovenii în Ardeal și Bucovina,” 4.

A place that inspired great devotion was the “Field of Liberty” in Blaj, where 40.000 Romanians gathered in 1848 to demand rights for the Romanian nation, “on this field where every corner of land – if it could speak would have so much to say – we think humbly of the great strides of the apostles of Romanian culture.”⁴⁷ Not only the “Field of Liberty”, but the entire city of Blaj, becomes a landmark destination for those visiting Transylvania in the aftermath of the Great War. Although a “modest city”, this is the citadel, “where the advocates of the national movement were made,” holding so much significance for the Romanian nation and culture. Here, one could admire the schools of Blaj, the first Romanian higher education institutions; the metropolitan cathedral, “this holy place where Simion Bărnuțiu gave his famous speech in 1848 to guide the nation”; the printing house; the library; the museum; the botanical garden; the cemetery, “this Pantheon”, where beneath its “humble crosses lie those who loved their nation deeply: Timotei Cipariu beside Alexandru Șterca-Șuluțiu, with the engraving on his cross: *‘Only death will separate me from the nation.’* Close by, one can see Nicu Moldovan, resting under a humble wooden cross. Facing the Liberty Field rests Axente Sever, the fighter of 1848. Below lies all the clergymen, who loved their nation as deeply as the former figures”⁴⁸; “all these become holy relics before which we walk as if in a procession, and they grant us immense strength.”⁴⁹

Near Blaj, Alba Iulia is another town with a great significance for Greater Romania. It is here that one could visit the Unification Hall and the new Orthodox Cathedral where Ferdinand and Maria were crowned as kings. For visitors to these sites, “every corner reveals a piece of the turmoil of that great day when the union with the Kingdom was proclaimed, when the dream that had grown year by year, decade by decade, century by century, in the hearts of those who felt Romanian – and were separated by the mighty Carpathians – prevailed.”⁵⁰ In other respects, Alba Iulia was perceived by some as a monotonous city, but one “with a beautiful, expansive coffeehouse scene, good and inexpensive restaurants, and waiters who speak Romanian. Overall, the general impression is of a quintessentially Romanian town.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ M. Alexiu, “Colindând prin Ardeal” [Traveling through Transylvania], *Opinia*, XVIII, no. 4550 (17 July 1922): 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 4535 (9 July 1922): 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 4551 (22 July 1922): 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 4566 (16 August 1922): 1.

⁵¹ Șerbănescu-Șăineanu, “Impresii de călătorie,” 2.

The notes from these travels reveal a general search for Romanian symbols and connections. Even an excursion into a Szekler-dominated area can be an opportunity to highlight Romanian markers. The road through Szekler land and cities, such as Sfântu Gheorghe, Covasna and Miercurea Ciuc, make travellers feel like they are walking in the footsteps of the Romanian army, which stirs truly profound emotions. As one account puts it: “the white road is not just a simple Szekler road. For us, it was a path of triumph strewn with flowers and a path of agony, littered with the dead and wet with tears and rage. It is a Romanian historical road.”⁵² Thus, in every town, Romanian symbols and institutions from both the past and present, such as schools and churches, are always included in the itineraries. Alongside them, the tours usually guide the visitor through various landmarks of the area – from public institutions like townhalls, the prefect’s offices, public gardens, museums, factories, quarries, and mills –, all of which offer an opportunity to experience the daily rhythm of the visited communities. These visits were meticulously prepared by local notables, eager to present their customs in the best light.

Each area offers the visitor a different experience and perspective on the culture and background of the “other”, while also providing a valuable opportunity to draw comparisons between places, people and customs. For example, on a trip to Moldova, a Transylvanian teacher, Marian Sasu, attending a sermon, notices minimal differences between how the priests here and those in Transylvania conduct their services – except that “the deacon said the ektenes without the book, and holding his right hand up.”⁵³ At the same time, these travel notes reveal how quickly some habits of the “other” can become a shared patrimony. On the same trip, Marian Sasu encountered practices that he “had never seen in any of our churches in Transylvania,” as people – especially women attending the sermon – pass by to kiss the holy icons and then enter the altar to give the priest money for him to “mention their names in prayers.”⁵⁴ However surprising this habit might have been for the Transylvanian traveller of those times, it is now a common practice in Romanian churches, all across the country. Some observations highlight practices deemed as positive examples that could be adopted in other parts of the county. On the same trip, Dumitru Antal meets a priest from Bacău who coordinates a youth association and has established a football

⁵² Constantin Kirişescu, *Drumuri pitoreşti în România nouă* [Picturesque Roads in New Romania] (Bucharest: Editura ziarului Universul, 1937), 20.

⁵³ Marian Sasu, “Note şi impresii de călătorie III” [Travel Notes and Impressions], *Amicul Şcoalei*, I, no. 8 (18 June 1925): 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

team (which he describes as “a game with a big ball”), noting that this significantly contributes “to the physical and moral education – an example that should be followed by our priests in urban areas as well.”⁵⁵ For a visitor from the Old Kingdom in Banat, the practice of transporting children to school from long distances in wagons pulled by cars could potentially end “our system of having them lodged with various families, where they learn more bad habits than good ones.”⁵⁶

One of the main issues that preoccupied public opinion and was considered a factor that hindered the true integration of Transylvania into the Romanian state, was the foreign nature of the urban areas.⁵⁷ This reality was also frequently observed in travel notes, with Transylvanian towns generally resembling foreign islands in a sea of Romanian villages. On the town streets, the Romanian language was barely heard. “We were leaving a town, which, despite the grace of the authorities, we did not find to be Romanian at all. Almost everywhere, one could hear only the Hungarian language,” one traveller noted, highlighting the difficulty of understanding and of being understood: “For three weeks, the time we spent in this town, we had to make ourselves understood by signs and gestures, as almost no one spoke Romanian.”⁵⁸ Even in situations where the state enforced the use of Romanian, such as in the public names of business or institutions, the Romanian language often seemed foreign, as these signs were mostly improper translations from Hungarian.

Some travellers found, to their great and unpleasant surprise, that even in the towns where there were larger Romanian communities, the residents – especially among the intellectuals, such as teachers, lawyers, civil servants, and sometimes even priests – often chose to speak Hungarian, rather than Romanian:

“A particularly disheartening discovery for us”, one account noted, “is the fact that in almost every town of Banat and Transylvania, our Romanian brothers, especially the intellectuals, very often choose to speak Hungarian – not only with Hungarians but also amongst themselves. They argue

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gn. I. Chițibura, “Călătorie prin Banat” [Traveling through Banat], *Cultura poporului*, 4, no. 72 (10 August 1924): 6.

⁵⁷ For details see Maria Tătar-Dan, “Din « greutățile începutului ». Preocupări privind « coloritul străin » al orașelor ardeleni în presa interbelică” [‘The Hardships of the Beginning’. The ‘Foreign Character’ of Transylvanian Towns in the Interwar Press], *Acta Marisiensis. Seria Historia*, IV (2022): 87-100.

⁵⁸ Șerbănescu-Șaineanu, “Impresii de călătorie,” 2.

that they have a better understanding of this language, and that it serves their needs very well."⁵⁹

The remnants of the old regime are palpable in various other aspects as well, with some Transylvanian towns being perceived as having been designed to manifest the strength of the former Hungarian rule. An example in this regard is the town of Târgu Mureş: "The town of Târgu Mureş surprises the first-time visitor with the monumental aspect of its centre. It is a miniature metropolis. A grand promenade, featuring a central alley and extensive asphalt with sparse vegetation, is lined with imposing buildings that seem disproportionate to the town's size."⁶⁰ The presence of these luxurious palaces is not attributed to the good fortune of the town in having had an ambitious and enterprising mayor during the Hungarian regime. Instead, it is seen as a reflection of the policy of Budapest to bolster the Hungarian minorities of Transylvania, and, at the same time, to showcase to the non-Hungarian populations the grandeur of its rule. Simultaneously, travellers note the competition between the old and new regime, which is vividly visible on the streets of Transylvanian towns, as the Romanian government is seeking to enforce its own symbols:

"In every corner of the grand municipal palace, one can see Romanian symbols. The old Hungarian symbols, escutcheons, paintings, and frescos have been removed and replaced with Romanian ones, without compromising the aesthetic appeal. In place of the apostolic kings, arrogant magnates, and Hungarian popular heroes, now stand our great voivodes, and especially our Transylvanian martyrs: Avram Iancu, Horea, Cloşca and Crişan... Today, Avram Iancu is the most preeminent symbol of Romanian rule in Târgu Mureş. His bronze statue rises in the centre of the promenade, depicting the hero mounted on his horse, casting a stern gaze."⁶¹

In contrast to the new Romanian symbols, the efforts of the old Hungarian regime to emphasise its power are viewed as grotesque exaggerations:

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Constantin Kirişescu, *Drumuri pitoreşti în România nouă*, 72-73.

⁶¹ Ibid., 74.

“The old cultural palace, with its heavy proportions and adorned in marble, bronze, varnish, and coloured glass, resembles a lavishly dressed *parvenu* who seeks to spite her humble relatives in the village to which she returned after making a name for herself in the big city.”⁶²

The sense of foreignness in the urban areas is also experienced by Transylvanians who travel across the Carpathians. In Moldavian cities, they find that “all the main cities, like our cities back home, belong mostly to outsiders, not to us.” Still, there is a distinction, in some opinions: “There, the outsiders strive to strengthen their rule, while in our case the battle is reversed: Romanians are reclaiming the cities.”⁶³ However, despite this optimism, the issue of the foreign nature of Transylvanian towns persisted. Even at the end of the first decade of Greater Romania, as the nation celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Great Union, debates around the foreign nature of Transylvanian towns continued to be a preeminent topic. Nonetheless, not everyone was so critical. Some appreciated that the considerable liberty offered by the Romanian state to its minorities – to express and cultivate their own language and culture – could be a positive step towards the much-desired national unification, a unification that must also occur between Romanians and minorities. For example, a traveller to Arad in 1925, observing the Hungarian culture that is visibly present everywhere – the town is filled with announcements for performances by artists or opera singers from Budapest, paintings by Hungarian artist adorn the museums, cinemas screen Hungarian films, and the windows of bookstore are filled with Hungarian books – concluded that wherever a connection between Romanians and minorities is missing, one must be made.

“Every mutual sacrifice in this regard would not be in vain. Everyone should do everything in their power in order to achieve this, through the honest and thorough understanding of the culture and traditions of the others. Only in this way will the citizens of the same country learn to embrace and respect each other.”⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 75.

⁶³ Dumitru Antal, “Prin celelalte orașe ale Moldovii. Note de călătorie” [Through the Other Cities of Moldavia: Travel Notes], *Foiaia poporului*, XXXII, no. 3 (20 January 1924): 4.

⁶⁴ Alex Cusin, “De la granița de Vest... note de călătorie” [From the West Border... Travel Notes], *Neamul Românesc*, XX, no. 152 (8 July 1925): 1-2.

The aftermath of the Great Union of 1918 was a period of great challenges, many of which were generated by the state's politics of integrating different cultural backgrounds and populations into its own rhythm and physiognomy. Although many argued that a different approach – one more sensitive to differences and more orientated towards merging all these areas, while at the same time adapting to them – would have been more appropriate, generally, the successor states of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire adopted a centralization policy. In the long term, this approach generated results opposite to those intended. Thus, the motto presented at the International Exposition in New York, in 1939 – *'Romania has over 20 million inhabitants, all united in language, traditions and culture'*⁶⁵ – was more wishful thinking than a reality. Many argued that building a common culture and strengthening the nation required time and patience, conditions that could not be met in the context of the difficult 1930s. However, despite the unfinished integration and homogenization project, important steps were made in creating a common background and culture. In this process, getting acquainted and knowing each other through travels played an important part. Step by step, phrases like “on this side” and “on the other” disappeared, and trips were no longer made “to know the others”, but to “embrace our country”.

⁶⁵ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România Mare* [Culture and Nationalism in Greater Romania] (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 9.