

REVIEW

Delia Roxana, Cornea, *Reședințele regale de la Marea Neagră. Casele de vis ale Reginelor României [Royal residences from the Black Sea. The dream houses of the Queens of Romania]*, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2021, 254p.

One of the most scandalous and sad stories about the mutilation of Constanta's memory belonged to a local administration that illegally sold one of the country's architectural and historical landmarks: the Royal Palace in Mamaia. From June 25, 2003, when the building was taken over by a company, and until August 17, 2022, when it returned to the state, the former residence was exploited and devastated, without ever in the twenty years being concerned about putting it into value. It is about the only Royal residence in Romania that has not been renovated and that is not exploited historically, culturally or for tourism.

The sad story of the Royal Palace in Mamaia, but especially the return of the memory of the Dobrogean royal residences in the circuit of scientific, professional or civic interests, is one of the most important commitments that a diligent researcher of the Museum of National History and Archeology in Constanța, as it is Delia Roxana Cornea, felt the need to undertake it through the present volume. Delia Cornea's most important historiographical contribution so far is one that managed to rediscover the value of Constanta as a residence, with official status, for the Royal Family of Romania in the last decades of the 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th century. It is certain that, in this competition of memory and the value of decisional and institutional importance, only Sinaia (with Peleş and Pelișor) can compete with the Constanța residences of the 20th century.

Delia Cornea's volume aims to systematize the most important moments of the appearance and functioning of the four royal residences on the shores of the Black Sea: the Royal Palace of Constanța, the Royal Pavilion (the Queen's Nest), the Palace of Mamaia and the Palace of Balciș, the last two creations of the will and the involvement of Queen Mary.

King Carol I is the one who opened the story of the relationship between the Royal Family and Dobrogea, from the first official visit to the province (which began on October 15, 1879 and included, among others, Isaccea, Tulcea, Ghecet, Măcin, Cernavodă, Hârșova, Medgidia, Murfatlar and Constanța) (p. 7) and until the peak of the sovereign's popularity and involvement, after the inauguration of the modern port of Constanța. In these last years of his reign and life, the King had become "the most beloved of the regulars of Constanța", where "without the boring pomp for a king, he crossed the city every day, almost alone in his

carriage, to go to the harbor to the Queen's Pavilion and to return to the palace” (p.59).

Chapter I of the volume, *Constanța, Royal residence*, motivates the reasons for the institutional, economic and administrative choice of Constanța as a summer residence for King Carol and Queen Elisabeta, starting in the 1880s. If on his first visit to Constanța, in October 1879, the sovereign was housed in the one of the British Edward Harris, director of the Danube and Black Sea and KÛstendge Harbor Limited Railway Company (p. 9), from the 1890s the idea of building a Royal Palace in the new city appeared on Dobrogea. Most of the projects brought to the scientific circuit by Delia Roxana Cornea (archival documents or the return to valuable edited bibliographic sources) establish the need for the existence of an Administrative Palace that includes both institutions (Court, Court of Peace, Mohammedan Court) and official residences (of the prefect, of the sovereigns) (p. 19-24). In 1902, for example, the local authorities believed that the residence of the prefect of Constanța county could honorably serve as a temporary residence for the King (p.24). The works began in 1903 and, after administrative and technical vicissitudes, were completed in the winter of 1906 (p.44), the Royal Palace also serving as the headquarters of the Prefecture until the First World War. The first stay of the Royal Family in the new Palace in Constanța was mentioned in September 1907 (p.49), after which this happened annually, until the summer of 1914 (inclusive). On June 1/14, 1914, the Royal Palace in Constanța experienced the most lavish day in its history, when the Royal Family of Romania welcomed the Imperial Family of Russia, led by Tsar Nicholas II, to an official dinner. It is about the last visit of the Tsar of Russia abroad, about the last official reception of a head of state by King Carol, about the last event hosted by the Royal Palace in Constanța.

After the inherent destruction during the German-Bulgarian occupation (1916-1918), the Royal Palace in Constanța was rebuilt and passed, from 1923, into the heritage of the Ministry of Justice, where the Court of Appeal was opened (p.60). For a century, the building has functioned as the seat of various judicial institutions, with very few elements remaining that remind us of the royal visits and supreme administrative attributes with which it was invested, from 1906 until the First World War.

What must be emphasized is the documentary value of the chapter in question of the book, as it is about the first history of this building in Constanța, with important reverberations from the point of view of local and national memory.

Chapter II, *the Royal Pavilion in the port of Constanța - the Nest of the Two Queens*, focuses on the residence first built by Queen Elisabeta and, after the First World War, rebuilt and rethought by Queen Maria. The Royal Pavilion, beyond being the sovereign's marine refuge until 1914, represented an important venue

for symbolic acts, which reflected the indissoluble link between the new Romanian territory, Dobrogea, with the executive institutions and with the economic, military and security heritage of the state. Queen Elisabeta is often depicted on the terrace of this residence, greeting the young Romanian commercial and military fleet, as also from there, the Carol I Lighthouse watched over the safety of the largest infrastructure work during the sovereign's long reign: the port of Constanța. On June 1/14, 1914, the small Royal Pavilion brought together the Royal Family of Romania and the Imperial Family of Russia, in one of the most important high-level visits to Romania since the beginning of the 20th century. Also devastated during the First World War, the Pavilion will be rebuilt by Queen Maria, who will spend here her first stays on the Black Sea, as sovereign, in the summers of 1924, 1925 and 1926 (p. 95-101), before of the completion of the palaces of Mamaia and Balcic. The residence was destroyed by a fire in 1927. After that, Queen Maria was housed here for very short periods, only in 1933 and 1936 (p. 106), the Queen's Nest being used, however, more often by King Carol II. The current building, a small port museum, represents only a small part of the original constructions initiated by Queen Elisabeta and Queen Maria.

Chapter III, *The Royal Residence of Mamaia*, focuses on the least known and exploited royal residence on the Black Sea. The Royal Palace in Mamaia (Royal Villa, Club Castel, as it is also called in various documents) came to the public attention and the scientific circuit almost exclusively following the media scandal of the sale to a company for a ridiculous amount and the final conviction of the main decision maker and beneficiary. It was only the effort of many years of voices that did not accept this act, and the favorable decisions of the courts, that brought the residence back to the level of hope of the community and to the wide opening of the doors of memory to capitalize on the fabulous history of the 1920s-1930s.

It is the first time in historiography that a work puts in the scientific circuit archival documents of great importance, the construction plans but also the testimonies of some participants and visitors of the residence. Until the editorial appearance signed by Delia Roxana Cornea, the Royal Palace in Mamaia remained a place of memory almost unknown, little capitalized and without the importance it richly deserves in the framework of professional dialogue (among historians, architects, art historians).

Queen Maria had already decided in 1922 that she wanted a residence by the sea, before rediscovering the land at Balcic, and that this place was the (still) wild beach at Mamaia. In the meeting of the City Council of Constanța, on December 5, 1924, chaired by the mayor Virgil Andronescu, the councilors voted and drafted a text asking "His Majesty King Ferdinand and Her Majesty Queen Maria to receive as a donation the land with an area of 34,968 square meters, located on Mamaia beach, near the park Ioan I.C. Brătianu, as a place intended

for the summer castle of Their Majesties and with absolute and personal property rights" (p.121). Work began in 1924, the plans being made by the very young Italian architect Mario Stoppa (b. 1897) (p. 122). Queen Maria closely supervised the details of construction although, in the meantime, the project of the residence at Balcic, in Southern Dobrogea, had also begun. "It is exactly what I want, wrote Queen Maria on January 30, 1923, only it is very problematic to be able to build such a beautiful house at the current prices, but if a house is built for us in Constanța or, rather, in Mamaia, I cannot bear to even an ugly one, it would be a desecration of the place" (p. 122-123).

The only documented visit of King Ferdinand to the Palace in Mamaia is the one in the spring of 1926, the one in which, together with Queen Maria, he was present in Constanța and in the almost finished building between the sea and Siutghiol lake (p. 128). The interior details of the residence were completed in the summer of 1927 (p. 130), during the agony and death of King Ferdinand (July 1927) and the first stay of the Royal Family in the residence is documented in the second half of August 1927, when the child King Mihai (born in 1921) and his mother, Princess Elena, entered the Royal Palace in Mamaia (p. 142).

The Royal Palace in Mamaia had 12 rooms on the ground floor, with two halls, a wardrobe room, a buffet, three terraces, four bathrooms and four toilets. In the attic, where the house was set up for the child King Mihai, there were seven rooms and a bathroom, and in the basement were the residences of the service staff and the technical spaces: 16 living rooms, a bathroom, four toilets, a laundry, a cafe, a kitchen and a garage (towards Lake Siutghiol) (p. 129-130). The political changes in the state (the proclamation of the child Mihai as King of Romania in July 1927) also led to an administrative and legal change regarding the new residence in Mamaia. In December 1927-January 1928, the transfer of the Palace from the property of Queen Maria to Princess Mother Elena was finalized, the sovereign retaining a plot of 2,780 square meters, on which, in 1928, she would complete a small villa with a minaret and a garden (p. 132-133), the current ruin of the former *Bar Orient*.

Delia Roxana Cornea provides, for the period of the construction of the Mamaia Palace and the period in which it functioned as an official royal residence (1927-1930), an abundant photographic and documentary material, most of it unpublished, which will constitute a formidable basis for research for a place of memory so neglected in Romanian historiography. What is worth emphasizing in the economy of this chapter is that the author accepts the primacy of Queen Maria on the subject but also mentions the relevance of the influences, tastes and actions of Princess Mother Elena on the heritage, ceremonial and official and unofficial activities of the stays in the Mamaia residence (p. 142-143).

The proclamation of Carol as King (in 1930) also marked the decline of the status of the Mamaia Palace as a royal residence. On April 27, 1932, through the intermediation of Minister Constantin Argetoianu and the government led

by Nicolae Iorga, the Royal Palace in Mamaia was sold to the Ministry of War, a fate that, a few weeks later, will also befall the small villa of Queen Maria, from neighborhood (p. 145-147). The last visit of a member of the Royal Family to the Palace in Mamaia was recorded in the summer of 1947, when Archduchess Ileana, the youngest daughter of Queen Maria, entered the residence devastated by the Soviet troops, without finding anything that had existed in the interiors and in the splendid (once upon a time) gardens (p. 168).

After being exploited as an elite tourist facility during the communist period, the Royal Palace of Mamaia experienced the darkest period in its centenary history after the local administration of Constanța sold it to a company in 2003. A media and civic campaign, launched in 2014 together with colleagues Andreea Pavel and Cristian Andrei Leonte (from the Constanța publication "Info Sud Est"), to which were added a few voices from the media and local civil society, accompanied by long lawsuits against the sale, they returned the Royal Palace from Mamaia to the Romanian state, officially, only on August 17, 2022.

Chapter IV, *The Balcic Royal Residence*, refers to probably the most important royal residence in the country (except for those in Sinaia), with an exceptional touristic, historical and scientific impact. Delia Roxana Cornea has managed to integrate in this chapter both original documents and plans, accompanied by an abundant fund of photographs, as well as edited bibliographic sources regarding the choice, construction and evolution of the royal estate in Balcic, since the start of the construction site, in 1925, and until the final transfer, to the Bulgarian communist state, in 1961, in exchange for the building of the Romanian Embassy in Sofia. The Balcic domain, dominated by the Tenha Juvah residence, is one of the strongest places of memory in Romanian interwar history and bears the defining imprint of Queen Maria's thinking, aspirations and actions in the years immediately following her loss of sovereign status (after July 1927).

The first stay in the new, unfinished residence is recorded by Delia Cornea in April 1926 (p. 214), when Queen Maria arrived in Balcic from Constanța and Mamaia, accompanied by King Ferdinand, on his first and last visit to Tenha Juvah (p. 216). The author wants to emphasize the difference in approach between the two sovereigns towards the new construction: if King Ferdinand, according to Queen Maria, was "really impressed by the splendid house" raised on the sands of Mamaia, the same cannot be said about the impression left by residence in Balcic. (p. 216). Continuous changes, between 1925-1936, composed a domain of buildings, gardens, stone furniture, religious artefacts, the Stella Maris chapel, which both officials (dignitaries, diplomats, military) and those close to the Queen were delighted with. The last architectural changes bear the signature of Henrietta Delavrancea Gibory, in 1936, and Queen Maria's last visit to Balcic is recorded between September 29 and October 23, 1937, when she left with the hope of a return (p. 231). Also, the last Romanian

royal visit to Balcic took place during the Easter Holidays of 1939 (April 9-13), when King Carol II and his son, Mihai, lived in the residence (p. 234).

According to the bilateral Romanian-Bulgarian Convention of May 29, 1948, the Government of the People's Republic of Romania placed at the disposal of the government of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, for use, "the castle of Balcic, the property of the Romanian state, to be used for the establishment of a rest and creation house for the people of science, art and culture in Bulgaria" (p. 241). What had been miraculously saved following the Treaty of September 7, 1940, the royal domain from Balcic, was definitively ceded in 1961, when a Romanian-Bulgarian financial arrangement recorded the entry of the residence into the heritage of the Bulgarian state (along with four other Romanian properties in Bulgaria) in exchange for building a headquarters for the Embassy of the People's Republic of Romania in Sofia (p. 243).

The volume signed by Delia Roxana Cornea represents the most important bibliographic and documentary resource so far dedicated to the royal residences in Constanța and Mamaia and brings into the scientific circuit less known or addressed places of the memory of Romanian history.

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