

SENTIMENTAL GEOGRAPHY – TOPOS AND MEMORY

BALCHIK – THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY AND A NATIONAL IDENTITY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

FLORIN ANGHEL

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 the founding moment: moreover, his visits to the royal properties on the seashore were always 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 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

¹ In Romanian historiography, this type of discourse is of very recent date. A good example in this respect: Andrei Pippidi, *Despre statui și morminte. Pentru o teorie a istoriei simbolice*, Iași, 2000.

² Prince Nicolae of Hohenzollern, *În umbra Coroanei României*, ed. by Gh. Buzatu, Iași, 1991.

³ Queen Maria, *Casele mele de vis*, in “Boabe de Grâu”, year I, April 1930, no 2, pp. 66-67. Narrations about this meeting with Balchik appear also in another two of the Queen’s autobiographical texts: *Cum am ajuns la Tenha Juvah*, in “Analele Dobrogei”, VIII, 1927, pp. 1-4 and *Ce înseamnă marea pentru mine*, in “Cele trei Crișuri”, XIX, July – August 1938.

⁴ Hannah Pakula, *Ultima romantică. Viața Reginei Maria a României*, București, 2004.

⁵ Guy Gauthier, *Missy. Regina României*, București, 2000.

⁶ Maria Bizomescu, *Un mit feminin: Regina Maria*, in Lucian Boia (editor), *Mituri istorice românești*, București, 1995, pp. 171-198.

⁷ Adrian Silvan Ionescu, *Statele Unite văzute de o regină*, in “Magazin istoric”, July 1997, 7 (364), p. 34.

freer and leaders closer to the ones they lead”⁸, an 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, like in the Russian churches. *People may like it or not, but its originality is certain*”¹⁰ (emphasis mine).

The chosen place – which rapidly became a political symbol and immediately a center 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 identity¹¹.

*

The “belated”¹² nations and states – including the Romanians and the Bulgarians, who obtained independence only during the second part of the nineteenth 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*, that also represented the will of remaining within the 1913-1918 frontiers – is an almost exclusive creation of Queen Maria. When she discovered

⁸ Lucian Boia, *Regina Maria*, in Idem (editor), *România, țară de frontieră a Europei*, București, 2002, p. 221.

⁹ Hannah Pakula, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Lucian Boia, *op. cit.*, p. 221. In an identical mode, Lucian Boia, *Mitologie feminină. Regina Maria*, in Idem (editor), *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, București, 1997, pp. 317-322. For a well-documented biography, in the same form, see Nicolae Pepene, Emil Stoian, *Inima Reginei Maria*, Brașov, 2005. The Dobrudjan press mentions something a few months after the trip of October 1924 on the declared intention of Queen Maria to build a castle in Balchik: *M. S. Regina în Dobrogea*, in “Dobrogea jună”, year XIX, 10 May 1925, no 165, p. 1.

¹¹ A relevant discussion in this respect at Ilya Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy: Nationalism and Leadership in Poland, Ukraine and Russia*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 12-37.

¹² The Polish case is analyzed at Irena Grudzinska Gross, *Mickiewicz și problema teritoriului sacru*, in Sorin Antohi, Vladimir Tismăneanu (coordinators), *De la utopie la istorie. Revoluțiile din 1989 și urmările lor*, București, 2006, pp. 579-593.

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”¹³.

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*”¹⁴. Nicolae Tonitza, an early visitor himself, who rendered the place in dozens of colorful 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”¹⁵. Camil Petrescu, who loved abundant vacations, declared himself shocked by the “frightening lack of comfort in this town”¹⁶. 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”¹⁷.

*

Two decades of financial and administrative efforts, until the summer of 1940, had 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 utilities¹⁸. However, even so, until 1940, Balchik had 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 did not leave an account of this place. A 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 Balchik¹⁹ itself, managed to gather effortlessly, despite its

¹³ Apud Balcica Măciucă, *Balcic*, București, 2001, p. 42.

¹⁴ Apud Ion Dimitriu-Snagov, *Amintirile arhiepiscopului Netzhammer*, in “Magazin istoric”, June 2000, no 6, pp. 80-81.

¹⁵ Balcica Măciucă, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ Camil Petrescu, *Balcicul*, in “Coasta de Argint”, year I, 23 April 1928, no 3, p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ I. Tudor, *Mari lucrări edilitare la Balcic*, in “Răsăritul”, year I, 20 November 1939, no 18, p. 1; *Balcicul se modernizează*, *ibidem*, 30 November 1939, p. 1.

¹⁹ For a study of the magazine’s evolution see Corina Apostoleanu, *O revistă din Dobrogea de Sud: “Coasta de Argint”*, in “Tomis”, November 2003, no 11, pp. 5-6.

sporadic appearances, almost all the best that the moment's elite could offer: Queen Maria (*Câteva gânduri despre Balcic*, year I, 2 April 1928, no. 1, p. 1), N. Iorga (*Pe Coasta de Argint*, year I, 2 April 1928, no. 1, p. 2), Mihail Sadoveanu (*Bazargicul*, year I, 10 May 1928, no. 4, p. 1), Camil Petrescu (*Balcicul*, year I, 23 April 1928, no. 3, p. 3), Adrian Maniu (*Pe țărnuț alb al Mării Negre*, year I, 1 August 1928, no. 8, p. 1), Ion Simionescu (*Balcic*, year I, 1 July 1928, no. 6, p. 1), Emanoil Bucuța (*Podul Balcicului*, year I, 30 August 1928, no. 10, p. 1).

The Balchik's motif is constant throughout Romanian inter-war painting, sometimes exhibiting extraordinary achievements²⁰. 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", of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth 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 shore²¹.

*

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 designed by architect Emil Guneș. *Tenha 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

²⁰ For a generous retrospect of these works see Doina Păuleanu, *Balcicul în pictura românească*, București, 2003. See also H. Blazian, *Balcicul în artă*, București, 1931; Florica Cruceru, *Artele în Dobrogea 1877 – 1940. Mărturii. Documente. Imagini*, Constanța, 2000. Many others should be mentioned: Constantin Artachino, Hrandt Avakian, Lucia Dem. Bălăcescu, Marius Bunescu, Henri Catargi, Cecilia Cuțescu-Storck, Ștefan Dimitrescu, Micaela Eleutheriade, Dumitru Ghiață, Lucian Grigorescu, Petre Iorgulescu Yor, Iosif Iser, Kimon Loghi, Rodica Maniu Mütznér, Paul Miracovici, Samuel Mütznér, Theodor Pallady, Take Papatriandafil, Gheorghe Petrașcu, Ștefan Popescu, Vasile Popescu, Magdalena Rădulescu, Alexandru Szathmáry, Jean Al. Steriadi, Francisc Șirato, Ion Theodorescu Sion, Nicolae Tonitza, and Ion Țuculescu.

²¹ Emanoil Bucuța, *Maica Domnului de la mare*; Cella Serghi, *Pânza de păianjen*; Pia Alimănișteanu, *Dobrogea*; Oscar Walter Cizek, *Tătăroaica*. The journals of Mihail Sebastian, *Balcica Măciucă*, Jeni Acterian, Alice Voinescu, Agatha Grigorescu Bacovia (*Terase Albe*), Cecilia Cuțescu Storck (*Fresca unei vieți*). Ion Pillat, whose villa still stands today ("the White House"), published a volume of poems *Balcic*, printed at the 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 Fântâneanu, *Ion Pillat – Balcic, monografie lirică*, in "Universul literar", year XLIX, 12 October 1940, no 42, p. 2.

private secretary, Gaetan Denize²². To this, they 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 pillars²³. The group is completed by a very small Byzantine style orthodox church, named “Stella Maris”, painted in 1930 by Anastase Demian and Take Papadriandafil²⁴, where, in 1938, the casket with the Queen’s heart was 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 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 29 June 1933, at Tenha 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.”²⁵

²² Narcis Dorin Ion, *Castele, palate și conace din România*, vol. I, Bucureşti, 2002, p. 141.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 141-142; Doina Păuleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 96; Alexandr Lambov, *Castelul de la Balcic*, Varna, s.a. (in a rudimentary, poor Romanian). For a romanticized presentation see Queen Maria, *La palatul “Tenha – Juvah”*, in “Cele Trei Crişuri”, XIX, July – August 1938.

²⁴ Regina Maria, *Stella Maris, cea mai mică biserică din ţară*, in “Boabe de Grâu”, year I, November 1930, no 9; Doina Păuleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96. For a close description of the entire complex in Balchik and its illustrious lodger see Odette Arnaud, *Regina Maria în micul său Regat de la Balcic*, in “Dobrogea jună”, year XXXV, 18 July 1939, no 63, pp. 1-2. From the point of view of its architecture value, the complex was minutely analyzed in *Castelul Balcic*, in “Arhitectura”, 1941, no 1, pp. 126-127 (presentation of the main components). The general frame is revealed by Gheorghe Vâlsan, *Coasta de Argint a României*, Bucureşti, 1930. Also, Doina Păuleanu, *Balcicul Coastei de Argint*, in “Magazin istoric”, October 2006, no 10 (475), pp. 69-73.

²⁵ *Testamentul Reginei Maria*, in “Universul”, 31 July 1938, no 205, p. 1.

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*”²⁶, 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 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 color to the gesture. On 29 October 1938, the “Queen Maria” destroyer (coincidence?!) brought the sovereign’s heart to Balchik, awaited by King Carol II, Prince Mihai, great ruler of Alba Iulia, Prince Nicolae, Prince Anton of Habsburg, Princess Elisabeta and Princess Ileana²⁷.

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 18 July 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”²⁸. 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 24 August 1940, around

²⁶ Nicolae Pepene, Emil Stoian, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 153. See also during the period: *La Balcic s-a închis o inimă de Regină*, “Dobrogea nouă”, 9 November 1938, no 128; Const. N. Sarry, *Regina Maria la Tenha Juvah. Inima de la Balcic*, “Dobrogea jună”, year XXXV, 21 July 1939, no 64, p. 1.

²⁸ *Marina de gardă la inima Reginei Maria*, in “Marea Noastră”, year IX, July – August 1940, nos 7-8, p. 253.

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*²⁹.

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 before³⁰.

*

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 rituals³¹ 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* 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. The idea, immediately diffused in the media, was obstinately promoted. A daily paper of great circulation and influence wrote, on 24 August 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*"³². 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 10 August 1940, "to the duty of Bulgarians to keep forever regions so beautiful as Balchik, Cavarna and Cape Caliacra."³³

²⁹ Romulus Dianu, *Balcicul reginei Maria*, in "Curentul", 24 August 1940, no 4502.

³⁰ Nicolae Pepene, Emil Stoian, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

³¹ For example: *Doi ani de la moartea Reginei Maria*, in "Dobrogea jună", year XXXVI, 20 July 1940, no 73, p. 1.

³² Romulus Dianu, *op. cit.*

³³ "Universul", 11 August 1940, no 219.

“The fate of this watery town – prophesized, in 1931³⁴, Emanoil Bucuța – which is Romanian only since 1913, seems decided for a long time”³⁵. 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.

³⁴ Emanoil Bucuța, *Balcic*, Craiova, 1931.

³⁵ Idem, *Orașe și locuri de artă românești. Balcic*, București, 2003, p. 45.