From the history of the Romanian-Czech cultural relations

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Abstract:

The beginning of the cultural relations between the Czech people and the Romanian people dates back since the beginning of the 19th century, when the Czech intellectuals manifest an increasing interest in the Romanian political life, culture and publications.

Numerous travelers, artists and translators, along with specialized institutions contributed to the improvement and development of the Czech-Romanian relations in time. Nowadays, the Romanian Section of the Department of Philology from Prague and the Czech-Romanian Association ensure a permanent possibility to better know each other's realities and to get closer to each other.

Key words: Czech-Romanian, Romanian Section of the Department of Philology from Prague, Czech-Romanian Association, artists, translations

Introduction

The beginning of the cultural relations between the Czech people and the Romanian people dates back since the period that preceded the 1848 Revolution, when the Czech intellectuals manifest an increasing interest in the Romanian political life, culture and publications. In December 1846, the well-known Czech publicist **Karel Havlíček Borovský** offers his counterpart from Ardeal, **George Barițiu**, his periodical *Pražské noviny*, in exchange for *Gazeta de Transilvania*, being convinced that this relation would contribute to a better knowledge on the exploited nations of Austria: "This exchange will be a first step in our getting closer. Even though in the beginning we will not understand each other perfectly (you and my Bohemian, me and your Romanian), in time things will get better. Our goal here is to get closer to all the not-dominated peoples (nicht herschenden) from Austria." (Ionescu-Nişcov, 1981)

The development of the Czech-Romanian relations

The same ideas are present as well in a series of unsigned articles, published after the defeat of the 1848 Revolution in the Parisian magazine *Le Nord*. Their author, **František Ladislav Rieger**, one of the most significant Czech politicians of the 19th century, defends in these articles the right of the Romanians from Transylvania to self-determination and expresses his opinion in favor of a more intense collaboration between the Czechs and the Romanians.

In the summer of 1858, the Romanian prose-writer **Nicolae Filimon** visited the towns of Prague and Brno, and his impressions, related to the historical monuments, and also to the Czech music, were included in his book *Escursiuni în Germania meridională* (Trips to southern Germany). In the chapter entitled "Boemia istorică" (Historical Bohemia), the author shows compassion for the Czechs' destiny: "But if this unfortunate country played such an important role on the world's scene, if it gave to the proud Germany several renowned emperors, what was her reward? As we know, it lost her freedom and became an Austrian province." (Nicolae Filimon, 1957)

In another chapter, dedicated to the cultural institutions, we find out, among others: "Prague has a conservatory, which is considered to be one of the most famous in Europe. In this conservatory all the specializations in music are studied, but its fame comes from the instrumental music, and especially the wind instruments, in which the Bohemians have been the best for a long while." (Nicolae Filimon, 1957)

Eleven years after Filimon, in September 1869, appears in Prague a 19-year old Moldavian, Mihai Eminovici. Unfortunately, we do not know much about the short stay of the future great poet

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Mihai Eminescu, yet the main evidence concerning his stay in the capital of Bohemia is his well-known photo – the portrait of a young man with long hair, a tall forehead and a proud look on his face – achieved in the workshop of the photographer Jan Tomáš in the central market of the town (Václavské náměstí). It seems that Mihai, advised by his brother Şerban, intended to get enrolled at the Caroline University. Bu there he was not admitted because he had not obtained the final graduation exam in high school. We know how things worked out in the end: Eminescu went to Vienna, where he was enrolled at the Faculty of Phylosophy, as extraordinary auditor. We are sorry no notes have been preserved from the poet with his impressions on Prague, except one: the manuscript no. 2306, with the following paragraph describing a dream: "Am ieşit parcă în târg şi am mers pe uliți largi ca bulevarde (ulița mare din Praga). / I seemed to go out in the market town and walk on large streets like boulevards (the large street from Prague)". This "large street" may well be identical to Václavské náměstí, given the fact that this "market place" looks like a large and long boulevard.

During the spring of the following year, 1870, the great classic of the Czech literature, **Jan Neruda**, traveling through the Balkans, stopped for a short while in the capital of the United Principalities. In 1871 he publishes in the newspaper *Národní listy* from Prague the series entitled *Bukurešt'*, where he describes, with an extraordinary sense of observation and sincere sympathy "the Paris situated on Dâmbovița River". Here are the first impressions of the Czech poet and prose-writer: "Bucharest – "the town of joy" (…) What a beautiful town! From the train station, a slight slope moves down to Dâmbovița and on the other side there is an unbelievably large town surrounded by green gardens and parks. Everything is fresh, as if the town bloomed yesterday! The houses are large and white, and the roofs made of metal are silvery-white or purple. In the middle of each roof there is a cupola made of glass which lights like a lantern the inside of the house. A hundred of Orthodox churches scattered here and there, each one with a few cupolas and steeples – everything bathed in the southern brilliance of the sun of May. Everything shines and glitters so brightly, that the eyes shudder and look for a fresh refuge in the forests surrounding the town like a green crown." (Jan Neruda, 2000)

An important role in the development of the Czech-Romanian relations goes to the professor **Jan Urban Jarník** (1848-1923), founder of the Romanian studies in the Czech area. He began to be interested in the Romanian language since his studies in Paris, in the 70's, and beginning with 1882 he introduced the study of the Romanian language at the Department of Romanic languages of the Caroline University of Prague. So, our university became the fifth higher education institution outside the boundaries of Romania – after those of Petrograd, Turin, Budapest and Vienna –which held courses of Romanian language. The interest of the philologer from Prague was directed not just towards the Romanian linguistics but also towards the Romanian literature and folklore. During a visit in Bucharest, in the spring of 1879, Jarník came in touch with the most significant members of the literary society Junimea (T. Maiorescu, M. Eminescu, B. P. Hasdeu, A. D. Xenopol) and, on the proposition of A. Odobescu, he was elected a contributor-member of the newly-founded Romanian Academy. The collaboration of Jarník with the poet and folklorist **Andrei Bârseanu** was extremely fruitful for the Romanian patrimony in this domain, as their anthology *Doine şi strigături din Ardeal*, of 1885, has preserved to this day its value of an extremely important folklore collection. The professor of Prague collaborated as well with the first publication of Romania dedicated to the popular culture, *Şezătoarea* (1892-1929), exchanging numerous lettrs with the Romanian folklorist **Artur Gorovei**, who wrote about him after his disappearance, namely in 1923: "He loved us extremely passionately and he identified himself with our soul."

Towards the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the following century in our country appeared the first translations from the Romanian literature in the Czech language: *Moara cu noroc*, de **Ioan Slavici** (1880), *Păcat şi alte nuvele*, de **Ion Luca Caragiale** (1895), *România pitorească* de **Alexandru Vlahuță** (1913), a few stories written by **Ion Agârbiceanu, Mihail Sadoveanu, Ioan Al. Brătescu-Voineşti** (1916).

An extremely favorable atmosphere for the amplification of the cultural relations between the two countries was instituted after the creation of Czechoslovakia and the completion of the state

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unity of Romania, an important impetus being represented by the conclusion of the Little Entente (1920-1921). A few Czech philologists and journalists had the opportunity to study at the University of Bucharest. In 1927, in Prague, was created the Czechoslovakian-Romanian Institute, whose elected president was the abbot **Metod Zavoral** from the Strahov Monastery of Prague. To the creation of the Institute's library contributed as well Czechoslovakia's devoted friend, professor **Nicolae Iorga**, who, a few years before that, had offered the incipient Czechoslovakian-Romanian Society a number of books on behalf of Casa Şcoalelor from Romania. The illustrious Romanian historian had held, at the beginning of the 20's, a few conferences at the Universities from Prague and Brno; in 1924 he was elected member of the Royal Bohemian Society of Sciences, in 1931 he was elected member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts and the following year he was awarded the title of doctor honoris causa of the University of Bratislava. The cultural activities of the Czechoslovakian-Romanian Institute were supported by the Ministry of Education of our country, and by the Romanian Embassy, where, between 1927 and 1928, the Romanian poet **Lucian Blaga** worked as press attaché. At the Institute functioned Romanian language courses held by **Gheorghe (Jiří) Staca**, reader at the Faculty of Letters and, later on, teacher of Romanian, Italian and Spanish at the Commercial Academy.

In 1929, in the town of Brno, capital of Moravia, was created a Czech-Romanian association by the name of "Česko-rumunský spolek". Its leader was **Hertvík Jarník** (1888-1938), the son of the founder of the Romanian studies in our country, professor of Romanic philology and director of the Romanic Seminar of the Faculty of Letters from Brno. Already since 1924, H. Jarník held at this faculty courses of Romanian, completed by text interpretations. Until his premature death, this person who knew so well the Romanian language and idioms took care, as part of the Czech-Romanian Association from Brno, of the organization of cultural and scientific events for the large public.

In the official history of the relations between Czechoslovakia and Romania, a special significance goes to the year 1930: on January 21 is concluded *Acordul de colaborare româno-cehoslovacă* (The Romanian-Czech collaboration agreement) and on March 1, *Aranjamentul privind relaţiile şcolare şi intelectuale* (The arrangement concerning school and intellectual relations), which together will ensure during the following decennium the development in an organized environment of the various forms of cultural collaboration between the two states.

In Czechoslovakia, between the Two World Wars, a vivid interest was shown for the music and art coming from Romania. The public from Prague and Pilsen had the opportunity to see several concerts held by the choir Cântarea României in 1924. In December 1928, the Czechoslovakian-Romanian Institute organized, under the patronage of **Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk**, Festivalul muzicii româneşti (The Romanian Music Festival). In 1931, at the Opera from Ostrava (Northern Moravia) was held the absolute premiere of the ballet *Iris* by **Constantic C. Nottara**. The Czech music lovers appreciated the works of the Romanian composer **George Enescu**, who was chosen, in 1937, member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts. The amateurs of arts met, for the first time, the sculptor **Constantin Brâncuşi** ever since the period around the First World War, at the Modern Art Exhibition presented in the Kinský palace from Prague in February-March 1914, where 5 of the artist's sculptures were presented: *Danae*, *Cap* (de ghips)/*Head* (made of gyps), *Cap* (de bronz) *Head* (made of bronze), *Muza adormită* / The sleeping muse, and *Sărutul* / The kiss. The Romanian artist visited our country in 1921. Three years later, in November-December 1924, a few vanguard Czech painters presented their works at the First international exhibition of the review *Contimporanul* in Bucharest, next to those of **Brâncuşi** and of **Miliţa Petraşcu**.

The period between the Two World Wars also brings with it a remarkable intensification of the preoccupations related to translating from Romanian. In this domain, a significant contribution goes to the Czech professor of the Faculty of Philology of Bratislava, **Jindra Hušková Flajšhansová**, to the translator from Prague **Marie Karásková Kojecká**, and later on, in the '30s, to the teacher of French and Romanian literature **J. Š. Kvapil**. These praise-worthy translators have managed to present successfully the works of certain remarkable Romanian writers, such as **Liviu**

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Rebreanu, **Mihail Sadoveanu**, **Octavian Goga**, **Tudor Arghezi**, **Cezar Petrescu**. A significant detail: several contemporary Romanian literature novels were translated and introduced on the lityerary market surprisingly fast, such as *Calea Victoriei*, edited in 1929, which appeared in translation the following year, or *Ochii Maicii Domnului* (1934), translated in 1936 and the novel *Baltagul*, translated in 1938.

The dismantling of Czechoslovakia and the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia by fascist Germany in 1939 led to the interruption of the existing cultural connections. After the liberation o our country in 1945, to which the Romanian army contributed as well (over 66 000 Romanian soldiers died or were wounded on the territory of Slovakia, South Moravia and Eastern Bohemia), the diplomatic relation were soon resumed. During the following years, the relations between the two countries became much ampler in actually all the domains.

Beginning with the '50s, the presentation and popularization of the Romanian literature was made especially by the SNKLHU Publishing House (later on Odeon) from Prague. So, the readers begin to know the classics of the Romanian literature – **I. L. Caragiale, M. Eminescu, I. Creangă, I. Slavici**, along with representatives of the different trends of the prose between the Two World Wars – **L. Rebreanu, G. Călinescu, G. Bogza**, and a few significant poets, such as **T. Arghezi**. Among the contemporary writers, a privileged situation was enjoyed by **M. Sadoveanu** and **Z. Stancu**, while other writers belonging to the younger generations were less translated (and almost exclusively in literary reviews). In the '70s, the number of translations from the Romanian literature became stable – two titles a year, which was however insufficient for the Czech reader to have a complete image on the Romanian literary phenomenon. During the following decennium it was finally possible to publish certain really valuable books which arouse the interest of the Czech public such as *Cinci nuvele româneşti* (**M. Eliade, V. Voiculescu, Al. Philippide, Cezar Petrescu, H. Pătraşcu**), *Sarpele* by **Mircea Eliade**, *Fascinația* by **L. Fulga**, *Nuvele* by **G. Mihăescu**.

The Romanian Studies of Prague

In the history of the Romanian studies from our country an important year is the academic year 1950-1951, when at the Faculty of Philology of the Caroline University is created the Section of Romanian Language and Literature (similar sections functioned since then in Brno and in Olomouc; but in these two university centers from Moravia, this section is no longer present now). To the creation of the section from Prague, a significant contribution was that of **Marie Kavková** (1921-2000), who had been active for a while as cultural attaché at the Czechoslovakian Embassy from Bucharest, but who dedicated the rest of her life to the promotion of the Romanian language and literature in our country. For 30 years she was the head of the Romanian Section of the Chair of Romanic Languages, elaborating a whole series of academic courses, anthologies and studies concerning the history of the Romanian literature and civilization and guiding a few series of Czech specialists in this domain. Her preoccupations of literary historian were completed by a rich activity as translator, oriented both towards the classical writings of the Romanian literature (folk tales, I.L. Caragiale, L. Rebreanu, T. Arghezi, G. Călinescu, M. Sadoveanu, Cezar Petrescu) and also towards the discovery of new values (the short story *Dor* / Missing by D.R.Popescu, the novel *Prins* / Caught by Petru Popescu, the verses of Ana Blandiana etc.). Together with some of her former students, the professor Kavková wrote the first *Dictionary of the Romanian Writers* in the Czech language, for which she also wrote a substantial introductory study – a short synthesis of the history of the Romanian literature. Since the beginning of the '60s, in the Romanian Section of the Faculty of Philology from Prague deploys his pedagogical and scientific activity the linguist **Jiři Felix**, who was between 1979 and 2001 the head of the section, and who wrote a modern textbook of Romanian language appeared in three editions and always used by the Czechs who want to learn Romanian, as well as dictionaries, conversation guides and a series of specialized studies dedicated to the Romanian language. The two representatives of the Romanian studies from Prague were awarded the title of professor honoris causa by the University of Bucharest: Marie Kavková in 1994 and Jiři Felix in 1998.

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At present, the section functions as part of the Institute of Romanic Studies of the Faculty of Philology, being represented by three people: a literary historian, a specialist in the teaching of the Romanian language, a lecturer from Romania. The entrance contest is organized every two years, the number of candidates oscillating between 20 and 25. During the academic year 2005-2006, in our section we have in the second year 11 students, in the fourth year 10 students and in the fifth year 7 students and the facultative course of Romanian language is attended by a variable number of students coming from other chairs and even from other faculties. In general, the students of the Romanian section opted for one more philological discipline: Czech, Italian, Polish. After five years of studies, a final graduation examination takes place, and in most cases the students defend a thesis (when Romanian is their main subject). With a special success were defended the papers concerning the second wave of the Romanian surrealism, the image of the war on the territory of Czechoslovakia in the works of several Romanian prose writers, the characters of **Panait Istrati**, the fantastic prose of **Mircea Eliade**, the works of **Constantin Brâncuşi**, the Romanian literary exile in France and in the United States etc. Lately, the most ample action of the Romanian Section has been the organization of the First International Symposium of Romanian Studies in the Czech Republic, in November 2005. In collaboration with the Cultural Romanian Institute from Prague we have managed to gather at this symposium a few scores of specialists in Romanian from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and the Republic of Moldova (such as professor **Sorin Alexandrescu**, the literary critic **Gabriel Dimisianu**, the linguist **Gheorghe Doca** and the writer **Vitalie Ciobanu**), who debated, for two days, different problems related to the Romanian language and literature, to the history of Romania and Moldova and also to the perspectives of the Romanian studies in today's Europe. The tome including the scientific papers presented is now being published.

The graduates of the Faculty of Philology from Prague can work in diplomacy, in different firms or in education. According to our expectations, certainly some of them will also become well-trained and enthusiastic translators of Romanian literature.

Nowadays' possibilities of mutual knowledge

The truth is that the translations from Romanian appeared during the last few years (in tomes or literary reviews) arouse the vivid interest of the Czech readers for the Romanian literature, which is relatively little known in our country. In this sense I would like to highlight the works that were met with great warmth: **Mircea Eliade** – *Maitreyi* (translated by Eva Strebingerová), *Nunta în cer*, three tomes of fantastic short stories (translated by Jiři Našinec), *Pagini bizare* de **Urmuz** (translated by Petr Turek), the novel *Întoarcerea lui Ulise* de **Modest Morariu** (translated by Jitka Lukešová), *Întâmplări în irealitatea imediată* and *Inimi cicatrizate* by **Max Blecher** (translated by Hana Janovská), the novel of the Basarabian writer **Aureliu Busuioc** *Pactizând cu diavolul* (translated by Jiři Našinec), *Jurnalul* by **Mihail Sebastian** (translated by Jindřich Vacek). Significant seems as well the fact that the recently edited *Dictionary of Romanian writers*, presenting a total of 310 authors from Romania, Basarabia and exiled, has been sold out fast.

Another possibility for a better knowledge of the Romanian realities and for mutual understanding is represented by the Czech-Romanian Association, created in Prague in February 1991 (then under the name of the Czechoslovakian-Romanian Association). This non-governmental association has been preceded by numerous other institutions, namely: the Czechoslovako-Romanian Institute, from the period between the Two World Wars, then the Society for Cultural and Economic relations (1946-1951, eliminated by the Stalinist regime) and, finally, the Czechoslovak-Romanian Association, born in the atmosphere of the "Spring of Prague", eliminated by the so-called "normalization" regime). Today the Association reunites around 130 members from different Czech localities (mostly Czech but also Romanians established in our country), for whom it prepares conferences on cultural, political and historical topics, round tables with guests from Romania and Moldova, and book launches and artistic and documentary films launches. Its activity comprises as well the publishing of a bulletin (two issues a year) and brochures concerning the Czech-Romanian relations. On the organization of certain cultural actions (concerts, exhibitions), the Association's Committee collaborates with the Romanian Embassy and with the

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Romanian Institute from Prague, created in April 2004. Beside the official contacts, achieved through the Czech and Romanian institutions, the Czech-Romanian Association represents an efficient alternative to understand and know each other better.

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