BALNEARY RESORTS IN TRANSYLVANIA. CROSSING SYMBOLIC BORDERS

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Abstract: *This essay examines the way in which the balneary resorts in Transylvania and the Banat are presented in two monographs (issued in 1921 and 1932) and a booklet (dating from 1929), with special interest in the authors' acknowledgement of diversity and the acceptance of differences.*
Stress is laid on the texts' attempt to cross various symbolic borders: between the national and the international, between Romanians and other ethnic groups in Transylvania, between past, present and future. In most cases, this attempt proves to have been successful.

Keywords: *Transylvania, Romania, Europe, balneary resorts, symbolic borders*

Introduction

The curative properties of many springs and lakes on Romanian territory have been known for ages, in some cases for millennia.[1] Attempts at turning to use some of the waters and at converting various spots into health resorts were made since the 17th and 18th centuries and increased in the second half of the 19th century. But balneology as a medical discipline, subject in university curricula and object of scientific research, was founded in Romania by Dr. Marius Sturza (1876-1954), a Transylvanian scholar who graduated from the University in Vienna in 1901.[2] Most of his activity, especially in the *inter-bellum* era, unfolded in Transylvania.

When speaking about balneology in Transylvania, several factors have to be taken into account, which lend it special characteristics. The most important one is that several ethnic communities have always inhabited Transylvania and continue to do so to-date. Transylvania had been part of the Austrian-

[1] The waters from Băile Herculane, Moneasa and Băile Felix, to mention but a few, were known in the Roman Empire.

[2] Before World War I, Dr. Sturza practiced in Vienna and specialized in balneology in Paris and Nancy. In 1931, he became Professor of balneology at the Universities in Cluj and Bucharest. He initiated the complex study of balneology, hydrotherapy, physiotherapy and medical climatology. In 1938, he was elected honorary member of Romanian Academy. When Communists came to power, Dr. Sturza was thrown out of the Academy and his private clinic was confiscated. He continued to work in the Ministry of Health.

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Hungarian Empire. On December 1, 1918 this province was united to the kingdom of Romania. Under the circumstances, a few identity issues were bound to appear and solutions to these problems were necessarily found and put into practice.

This essay will deal with the development of balneology in *inter-bellum* Transylvania. It will concentrate not so much on balneology proper, as on the way it was presented in books dedicated to this topic, on the enunciation strategies made use of in order to express identity and alterity, to refer to Transylvania in relation to Romania and to Europe, and to designate various ethnic groups living in this province of Romania.

The main sources of this research are two monographs and a presentation booklet of Romanian spas published in the *interbellum* era (1921 and 1932)[3] and authored by disciples of dr. Marius Sturza[4]. These books present in detail balneological resorts in Romania: geography, location, transport and communication facilities, weather, lodging facilities, restaurants, leisure, tourism, but especially the waters' properties and medical infrastructure. In most cases, comparisons are also made with similar spas in Europe. A close reading of these books reveals a few interesting facettes concerning the presentation of the self and its relations to the Other. It is these aspects which will be emphasized in what follows.

At home and abroad. Within borders and beyond

In all three books, the authors' acknowledged aim was to *inform* readers about the richness of mineral waters and the degree of comfort of Romanian spas and health resorts, and thus to *persuade* people to choose to visit resorts within this country rather than go to resorts of the same kind, albeit much more famous, abroad. The main reason for this persuasion policy was a financial one: "Why should we yearly throw over the border […] hundreds of billions lei for air and waters which prove by far inferior to those we have at home?" (1921: 2) The explanation of this state of the art lies in the insufficient exploitation and weak turning to value of the "natural gifts" (1932: V) Romanian soil was endowed

[3] The monograph to be referred to as having come out in 1921 was actually the book's second edition; the first edition probably dates from a year earlier.

[4] The authors of *Apele minerale şi staţiunile balneoclimaterice din Ardeal* (1921), Dr. Emil Ţeposu and Dr. Liviu Câmpeanu, were assistant Professors at the surgery clinic in Cluj. Ţeposu is also one of the authors of *România balneară şi turistică* (1932); then he was full Professor at the School of Medicine in Cluj. The other author of the 1932 monography was Valeriu Puşcariu, assistant Professor at the Institute of Speology in Cluj. Dr. Friedrich E. Mayer, the author of the presentation booklet issued in 1928, was a country physician. The booklet was distributed with the daily newspaper *Conştiinţa naţională,* issued in Craiova.

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with: "Unfortunately, the valorization of these resorts is still far from satisfactory […], the State does not get involved to a sufficient degree." (1932: V).

Another cause of the decay lies in the destructions caused by the war and by the Bolshevik "revolution[5]" in Hungary, which had also left deep traces in Transylvania: "Part of what had been done [under the Austrian-Hungarian administration] has fallen to decay or was destroyed, especially in the zones of operation." (1921: 2)

The insufficient publicity made for Romanian spas, as compared to the overwhelming publicity made in other countries is yet another cause of the few visitors of Romanian resorts, who were persuaded to "cross the border" and go abroad (1929: 5): "The great majority of the faithful visitors of Romanian spas have crossed the border, enticed by the well-conceived and insistent advertisements of foreign resorts." (1929: 5) And in this way, once again, "billions of lei have been lost during the deepest financial crisis" (1929: 5), namely at the very moment when this country could by no means afford it.

This being the case, the authors of the three books explicitly urged the authorities to take the necessary steps with a view to remedying the situation, removing the traces of the immediate past and developing the spas at European level. Here is an example of their rhetoric: "It is the urgent duty of the State, wherever the spas are state-owned, to turn them to best exploitation. If the springs have private owners, the State ought to encourage them, and if they are unwilling, to compel them." (1921: 2)

The authors also intended to inform the public opinion at large about the curative properties of the waters and the relaxation potential of the spas, so as the persuade more and more people to choose to go there instead of elsewhere in Europe, and also, more important still, to persuade potential investors that Romanian spas were worth their money. It should also be kept in mind that Transylvania's unification to Romania was very recent, therefore the potential investors and the potential visitors from the "Old Kingdom"[6] had to be informed about the spas in Transylvania, of which so far they had had very little knowledge, while the Transylvanian readers needed to become

[5] The texts refer in this way to the Hungarian upsurge led by Bela Kun which led to the proclamation of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic on March 21, 1919; it lasted till August 1, 1919, and its echoes were felt throughout the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire, including Transylvania.

[6] After the Unification of 1918, the former territory of Romania (i.e. the territories of Moldavia, Wallachia and Dobrudjia) were unofficially called "the Old Kingdom", whereas the post-1918 territory of Romania (which included Transylvania, the Banat, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina) was unofficially called "Greater Romania".

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acquainted with the curative potential and investment opportunities lying in wait for them in Transylvania, as well as in the Old Kingdom. The Romanians' "new" identity could be enhanced in this way, too. The *symbolic* character of the former border between Transylvania and the Old Kingdom was also enhanced.

Description of spas. From awareness of drawbacks to well-grounded pride

Over three scores of Transylvanian watering places are recorded in each of the three works taken into consideration. Obviously, not all of them were able to offer every convenience and the highest degree of modern comfort. When this was the case, the monographs acknowledged the fact: "The living conditions are satisfactory" (1921: 249) – which probably means "satisfactory, but not extraordinary" – or "*Bretfö* purgative water is only of local interest." (1921: 154) Things can be even worse, as in the case of Rupea, where "a modest establishment, endowed with 10 cabins, provides hot baths." (1932:145) Moreover, no hotels, restaurants or entertainment possibilities were mentioned in this case, which leads to the conclusion they did not exist.[7] On occasions, the state of the art was even worse, i.e. "primitive:" At Fiatfalva, there was a "primitive establishment of cold and hot baths," while in a few houses "some 25 rooms were available for visitors." (1921: 139)

All the above examples are meant to support the conclusion that descriptions are accurate and true to fact, that the authors of the two monographs did not suffer from any superiority or inferiority complex, and neither did the author of the booklet. Such descriptions confer even more credibility to those paragraphs in the books in which several spas in Romania, in general, and in Transylvania, in particular, were considered to be on a par with similar resorts from abroad, both regarding the properties of water and as far as comfort and luxury were concerned. The most telling examples was that of Băile Herculane, "the oldest and most up-to-date balneary resort in Romania […]; the radioactivity of waters to be found here is almost of the same order as the radioactivity displayed by the waters of Vichy and Mont Dore." (1932: 75) As for leisure and entertainment, the resort had a beautiful casino with ballroom, billiard room, *soirées*, periodic concerts of classical music, daily military music, library, cinema, radio, skating, tennis, etc. (cf. 1932: 81). Many of these leisure facilities were characteristic of other Transylvanian resorts, too, while the waters in many Transylvanian spas compared favorably with those to be

[7] Nevertheless, the authors of the monograph could have mentioned the possibility of making trips to the city of Braşov, located in the neighborhood. They had done so in quite a lot of similar cases.

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found in several other European resorts. Additional examples would be superfluous.

References to Oneself: Pride without Prejudice

As already mentioned, since December 1, 1918 the spas in Transylvania and the Banat (like the two provinces themselves) were governed by Romanian administration. From that historic moment on, several spas had developed, bathing installations had been restored, hotels had been dedicated, restaurants had been opened, etc. The monographs register these facts, but without undue emphasis. References to Romanian administration are made in a neutral, matter-of-fact way, without any tinge of nationalism. The authors state facts and figures, without boasting about them.

One of the very few cases in which the Romanian administration is openly referred to is supplied by the description of the baths at Lipova, in the Banat: "The springs have been known since the beginning of the 16th century, during Turkish administration. However, the baths have been developed only lately, under Romanian administration." (1932:91) To note that no open reference is made to the Austrian-Hungarian administration which had preceded the Romanian one. The authors' aim was to achieve an objective description of the baths, including their history, not to give rise to antipathies or to strengthen them.

On some other occasions, the reference to Romanian administration is implicit: "All the bathing installations [at Ocna Mureşului] have been recently built and offer all the facilities of modern comfort." (1932: 115) Obviously, the "recent" installations dated from the dozen or so years elapsed since the Great Union, but the authors lay stress on the baths' comfort and modernity, not on the achievements of the Romanian administration.

In other cases, the text only mentions the exact year in which a spa was modernized: "In 1929, a beautiful swimming place with brand new dressing cabins was inaugurated at Sângeorz-Băi" (1932: 194), without undue stress on who exactly did it. It is the result which matters, not the ethnic factors involved in it; Romanian administration meant to continue the race towards progress the province of Transylvania had embarked upon since the latter half of the 19th century.[8]

[8] The Communist administration, which took over in this country after World War II did exactly the opposite. While their official discourse appropriated the achievements of the past and boasted about them, with a few exceptions, most of the actual steps they took were towards actually destroying them.

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If the achievements of Romanian administration are only indirectly alluded to, a "purely Romanian atmosphere" is considered an attraction: "Turnu-Roşu offers visitors [from the baths of Ocna-Sibiului] a pleasant image owing to its purely Romanian atmosphere and the beauty of traditional Romanian clothes". [1929: 19] The country's assets have to be turned to value. A "purely Romanian atmosphere" and "the beauty of traditional Romanian clothes" were therefore signaled out to the admiration of potential visitors.
But attractions are not only ethnic Romanian ones. Turkish traditions and a Turkish environment are also highly recommended to potential visitors: "An interesting place to visit [from Băile Herculane] is the isle of Ada-Kaleh, which strikes an original key, as visitors can witness the daily life of a Turkish community." (1929: 18) This example speaks for itself.

A diversity of Others: the magnates, the Bolsheviks, the poor

Euphemism characterizes not only references to oneself, but also references to the Other. The Hungarians, who had owned Transylvanian spas before the Great Union, are designated in an indirect way. In some cases, they are referred to as "magnates". "The spas [in Ivanda] were turned to value in mid-nineteenth century, when they were owned by the magnates Ronay and Karácsony […]" (1932: 89-93). On other occasions, Hungarians are designated as "the former owners:" "The former owners understood and acknowledged the value [of the spas]. From the second half of the 19th century, encouraged by the government and supported by private initiative, they started a strong campaign of putting the waters in exploitation". (1921:2)
The above examples show that the "former owners'" susceptibility was tactfully spared and also, more importantly, that their merits in developing the spas before the outbreak of World War I were fully acknowledged. If anything was to blame for past mischiefs it was "Hungarian Bolshevism." The books offer countless examples in this respect; one will be conclusive enough: "The baths of Moneasa have been functional since 1880; during Hungarian Bolshevism they were completely destroyed, but today they are completely restored, functioning to perfection." (1921: 93) The description is almost word for word the same in the 1932 monograph.

Past and Present

The Austrian-Hungarian administration, which had owned the springs and the resorts before December 1, 1918, is never explicitly mentioned. Whenever references to pre-WWI events have to be made, these events are spoken of as having taken place "in the past" or "past times." The post-WWI Romanian

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administration is very seldom mentioned; contemporary; *inter bellum* events are usually referred to as "present-day" ones or events "of today." As already stated, as a rule, "the present" is inferior to the past: "In the past, Bodoc used to be a much frequented resort with drinking water; nowadays it is almost deserted." (1921:70)

There are, therefore, several "pasts" in these three books: (1) the more remote, pre-World War I, past, which is usually acknowledged as glorious, and (2) the more recent past, namely the war and the Bolshevik revolution.

As for the "Present," it has multifarious faces: (1) sometimes, it continues the glory of the remote past, (2) it does away with the traces of the recent past or aims to do so, or (3) it is not yet at the level of the remote past, and so its own drawbacks are to be remedied in the future.

Owing to this enunciation strategy, nobody's pride or sensitivity could be hurt.

Poor people and peasants

While the utmost care was taken not to hurt the members of former administration's susceptibility, an entirely different attitude can be noticed towards visitors of lesser means. These people are crudely designated as "poor people" and the authors seem completely unaware that some readers might have taken offence:

"[Băile Felix] include […] *America* baths, fitted out for the poor visitors […] and *Felix* baths […] are also at the disposal of the poor people." (1921: 39; 1932: 106)

The authors' rhetoric did not change during the eleven years separating publication of the two monographs. It is also obvious that the use of such designations as "for poor people" for some intended visitors, while making descriptions accurate and true to fact, could hardly encourage people to visit the spas referred to in this way.

Along the same line, on occasions, potential visitors were also referred to as "peasants." "Alföld Hotel [at Băile Felix] is basically destined to the peasants." (1921:42) Obviously, the designation "peasants" was by no means insulting at the time; nevertheless, the implicit distinction between "townspeople" and "peasants" and consequently between sophisticated needs and basic ones was rather crude and lacking subtlety.

Food diversity

Diversity is sometimes strengthened and acknowledged through food. For many reasons, neither the monographs, nor the brochure could possibly give lists of restaurants, and even less so – of menus. However, they do specify the

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possibility of getting diet food: "At Bazna, two elegant restaurants offer lunch and dinner; diet food on request." (1932: 130)
More important still, in some resorts, orthodox Jews could get kosher food: "A special cuisine restaurant is available for Jews [at Geoagiu Băi]." (1921: 48), or "[At Vâlcele] there are several comfortable hotels and some 25 villas, 4 big restaurants and a special restaurant for Jews, as well as cafés and sweetshops." (1932: 146)

Other nations, other areas

As already mentioned, all three books about the spas have a separate chapter presenting similar resorts in other European countries; they also explicitly urge readers to choose resorts in this country instead of going abroad. This means that not a few Romanians did go to cures at Vichy, Carlsbad, Wiesbaden, Baden-Baden and other famous places in Europe; it is also an oblique indication of the living standards of (upper) middle class Romanians in the *inter bellum* era.
But the monographs are also a good source of information about the way in which the authors – and most middle class Romanians they stand for – positioned themselves in relation to the Other, to other nations and geographical zones, about their intention to put Romanian spas on the map of famous European resorts.
Sometimes, the intended map is a *regional* one. Thus, Sovata is said to "fulfill many conditions enabling it to become an attraction in the South-East of Europe." (1921: 123)
In other cases, Transylvanian spas are projected on a broader European map. Covasna is presented as "one of the most interesting resorts in Europe, well-famed for its rich and sometimes violent emanations of carbonic acid." (1921: 79)
In a few cases, spas in Romania are considered on a par with famous European ones also as far as comfort and elegance are concerned: "Băile Herculane is one of the most modern and elegant resorts in Europe." (1929: 10) Therefore, between the two World Wars, it was in a position to attract foreign visitors, too, but none of the three books goes as far as to suggest that. The authors' modesty vouches for the accuracy of the information they supply.
On other occasions, baths had been known for centuries; names of important visitors are invoked in order to strengthen the waters' fame: "Outstanding visitors like Janus Pannonius, the poet of king Mathias Corvinus, as well as Gabriel Bathory, Prince of Transylvania, came for a cure at Băile Episcopale and thus contributed to spending the spa's fame." (1932: 10)

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In some other instances, springs discovered in Transylvania are mentioned in the works of foreign scholars; it is the case of the mineral springs in Bazna: "In the 18th century, they were quite well known beyond the borders of Transylvania, being also mentioned in Rothen's work *Memorabilia Europae* (Ulm 1749)." (1932: 130)

All these examples prove that the monographs' authors had done serious research and their praise of Transylvanian spas was always well grounded. The authors had also taken a few steps towards crossing some of the symbolic borders separating certain modern spas in Romania from similar spas abroad. However, quite a lot remained to be done.

More on modernity

While several resorts were in a state of decay because of the indolence of their owners and the lack of interest of local administration, or because of the destruction brought about by war and by the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in Hungary, many of them had been modernized after the Great War and were well cared for in the *inter bellum* era. The description of Ocna Sibiului is conclusive: "Nowadays, owing to its modern, comfortable facilities: aqueduct, sewers, electric lighting, etc., Ocna Sibiului is one of the best appreciated spas in Transylvania." (1921: 117)

The existence of swimming-pools was one of the tokens of modernity. At Sângeorz-Băi, besides the traditional bathing installations, "a swimming pool with new cabins was opened in 1929." (1932: 194) The presence of cable railways was yet another sign of modernity. The visitors of Covasna "could make longer trips – by means of the *cable railway*." (1929: 15) In the original sentence, the word "cable railways" was written in italics, which means the authors were aware that both the word and its referent were new realities.

There were, certainly, several other modern facilities in Romanian resorts, in general, and in Transylvanian resorts, in particular. As all three books indicate, electric lighting and telephones had been installed in many spas and at the time they were quite a new urban facility, adopted only in some European resorts, not everywhere.

Instead of a conclusion: Past, present, future

This essay has dealt not only with what balneological resorts in Transylvania in the *inter bellum* era were like but especially with what they *looked* like, that is to say the way in which they were presented in specialist literature.

Several mineral and thermal springs in Transylvania had been known since the 2nd century A.D. and mentioned in Late Antiquity works. A few of them had

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been also exploited in the 16th century, while many springs were in function in the 19th century. The destructions caused by war and by the extension of Bela Kun's Bolshevik Revolution in Transylvania did not spare the balneary resorts there. When Romanian administration took over, the installations and living facilities in many spas were almost completely damaged. Other spas were in a state of decay, because of the local authorities' indolence. Nevertheless, many resorts were restored and modernized after the war in a comparatively short time (a year or two). Still, many potential visitors from Romania were in the habit of going for health cures at famous spas from abroad (in France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Switzerland). Therefore, a considerable lot of money which could have been invested in the development of spas in this country also went abroad.

This is one of the reasons for which two monographs (1921, 1932) and a presentation booklet (1929) were issued with a view to informing the public at large about the curative properties of the waters and about the health and living facilities to be found at the spas and thus persuading people to choose to visit balneary resorts in Romania rather that spend their money at much similar spas elsewhere.

Various persuasion strategies had to be used by the authors of these books in order to achieve this complex aim. First of all, while stating the new, post-WWI state of the art, they were careful not to hurt the susceptibilities of other ethnic groups in Transylvania, of Hungarians, in particular. That is why the former administration was euphemistically designated, if at all. In most cases, the authors only referred to "past circumstances" and to "present-day" ones.

People of modest means were also among the target public of these books, but in this case the authors were less cautions: they spoke of "poor people" and "peasants;" probably, this was in accordance with *inter bellum* rhetoric and people did not take offence.

As a considerable percentage of Jews existed in Transylvania and the Banat at the time and they were prospective clients of the resorts, kosher restaurants existed in several places, and the monographs duly reflected this fact.

The modernization of balneary resorts involved the installation of medical and bathing facilities but also the introduction of various urban, living and pastime facilities. Obviously, in this respect, some resorts were more advanced than others. None of the books attempts a comparison between the spas in Romania, on the one hand, or between the spas in Romania and those abroad, on the other hand, but all three books claim that the natural properties of many waters in Transylvania (and in Romania, in general) can stand comparison to

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similar waters from other European countries. This conclusion is based on the chemical analysis of waters, supplied in both monographs.
The presentation made in all three books is accurate and true to fact, devoid of exaggerations and tinges of nationalism. It reflects the state of the art of the resorts and sets aims for the future; it urges the government to get more involved in the development of balneary resorts.
But a close reading of these three books also reveals the fact that several steps were being taken towards crossing various symbolic borders: between past and present, between present and future, between Romanians and other ethnic groups, between Romania and other European countries, between reality and make-believe. Diversity was acknowledged and most differences were accepted.

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This paper was supported by UEFISCDI, Project PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0841, Contract Nr. 220/31.10.2011 ***Crossing Borders: Insights into the Cultural and Intellectual History of Transylvania (1848-1948)/Dincolo de frontiere: Aspecte ale istoriei culturale si intelectuale a Transilvaniei (1848-1948).*** Cercetarea pentru aceasta lucrare a fost finantata de catre UEFISCDI Proiect PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0841, Contract Nr. 220/31.10.2011, cu titlul *Crossing Borders: Insights into the Cultural and Intellectual History of Transylvania (1848-1948)/Dincolo de frontiere: aspecte ale istoriei culturale si intelectuale a Transilvaniei (1848-1948).*

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