

THE MODERN CONQUEST OF THE ROMANIAN CARPATHIANS*

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The thesis of this contribution is that organised tourism, first as sport and then as an independent activity, was the reason, mean and purpose of the modern and peaceful conquest of the Romanian Carpathians.

In order to do that, the following four points of interest shall be taken into consideration: 1) a brief overview of the *pros* and *cons* of idea that the Carpathians represent the “backbone” of the Romanian nation; 2) an outline of the travel accounts on the Carpathians as travel and tourist destination in the 19th century, at the dawn of organised tourism; 3) the roots of organised tourism, namely the Transylvanian Saxon and Romanian organisations aiming to integrate the Carpathians among the leisure destinations for the masses; and 4) the connection between “sport” and “tourism” as shown by the particular case of skiing.

I. THE *BACKBONE* OF THE NATION

In a textbook for high-schools, written in 1929 by two of the founding fathers of the Romanian geographical science, Simion Mehedinți and George Vâlsan, one could read the following statement: “So, from the need to defend towards the north and east the *limits of the Roman empire* (which, back then, included all the civilized countries of Europe), a *border nation* was born here, in the Carpathian Mountains and on the neighbouring fields, remembering even today, through its name, the Roman dominion at the Lower Danube”¹.

The above mentioned quotation synthesises a certain theory: since the 19th century, both the geographical and historical science hailed the Carpathian Mountains as the “backbone” of the Romanian nation². The scientific argumentation of

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¹ Simion Mehedinți, George Vâlsan, *România pentru clasa VII secundară*, București, Socec, 1929, p. 16–17.

² Cf. Ion Conea, *Geografie și istorie românească*, București, Dacia Traiană, p. 85–88.

this thesis (based on height, massiveness, and passes) has always been doubled by an emotional touch³. The Carpathians were not only providing for economy, through rich mineral resources (gold, salt, charcoal, iron, etc.), pastures or woods. The Carpathian Mountains were also the source and the set for folk tales, songs and legends, the perfect place for spiritual retreat and, even today, the ultimate line of defence. This approach of the mountains as a factor of unity and not as a “natural border” was unsuccessfully challenged by A.D. Xenopol at the end of the 19th century⁴.

But in the first half of the 19th century, the Carpathians were still appearing to the Western travellers heading for the Ottoman Empire as the border of civilized Europe⁵. Adolf Schmidl, author of a travel guide through Hungary, Dalmatia, Serbia, Wallachia and the Ottoman Empire, wrote that only Romanian shepherds and Austrian border patrols, consisting of Romanian soldiers, were the only human beings whom ever set foot in the Carpathians⁶. However, despite the harshness of life conditions, the travellers noticed the existence of villages⁷ located into landscapes which invited to comparisons with those in the Swiss and Austrian Alps⁸.

II. WILDERNESS, MINERAL SPRINGS AND QUARANTINES

For those in search of leisure, the main attractions of the Carpathians were the mineral springs, known and hailed since the Antiquity⁹. In the 19th century, most travellers would break a voyage down the Danube in order to visit Mehadia, with its famous bathes dedicated, since the Roman Antiquity, to the Greek hero Hercules. The number of the accounts is impressive, but the best description was written by the German geographer Johann Georg Kohl. He described not only the ancient ruins and modern pavilions built by the Austrian military authorities in a breathtaking gorge in the South-Western Carpathians, close to the border with Wallachia, but also the categories of visitors (aristocrats and commoners) and the rules they had to follow¹⁰. The discovery of new mineral springs led to the foundation of new bathes and also to the development of the neighbouring settlements through private investments in guesthouses rented seasonally¹¹.

³ For a summary of this thesis and suggestions on its evolution see the short essay of Gheorghe Platon, “Carpații în istoria poporului român”, in *De la constituirea națiunii la Marea Unire. Studii de istorie modernă*, VI, Iași, Editura Universității “Al. I. Cuza”, 2006, p. 15–24; see also Vasile Surd (ed.), *Monografia turistică a Carpaților românești*, Cluj, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2008, p. 21.

⁴ A. D. Xenopol, *Istoria românilor din Dacia Traiană*, I, București, Cartea Românească, 1925, p. 18; Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, București, Humanitas, 2005, p. 218–219.

⁵ Wyburn, in *Călători străini despre țările române în secolul al XIX-lea*, new series, volume I, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2004, p. 971–972.

⁶ Adolf Schmidl, in *ibidem*, volume III, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2006, p. 263.

⁷ S. F. Dobronravov, in *ibidem*, III, p. 36.

⁸ F.J.A. Scheidawind, in *ibidem*, III, p. 66; F.S. Chrismar, in *ibidem*, III, p. 75.

⁹ Cf. Vasile Surd (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ J.G. Kohl, in *ibidem*, IV, 2007 p. 130–133.

¹¹ See the case of Zizin, as described by R. Neumeister, in *ibidem*, V, 2009, p. 142–143.

A Russian diplomat of Baltic-German origin, married into a Moldavian family, wrote a literary description of a summer travel to the mineral springs in the Eastern Carpathians. In his short story, “Băile de la Slănic”, Wilhelm von Kotzebue pointed upon the origins of mineral water tourism into another region of the Carpathians. He stressed upon the difficulties of the travel through the wilderness of the Eastern Carpathians, given that an aristocratic family (like his own) had to transfer an entire household in carriages pulled by horses. Kotzebue’s literary memoirs account of the early tourism, motivated by the cure of mineral water, the new fashion of the summer holidays away from home and the first public works meant to make the surroundings of the mineral springs more pleasant for the public (lodging, music pavilions, fireworks at the end of the season)¹².

However, the natural wilderness was not the only difficulty for the travellers. Since the late 17th century, the Carpathians were the frontier between the Habsburg occupied Transylvania and Wallachia and Moldova, both Romanian principalities being under the dominion of the Ottoman Empire, yet without a “direct rule”. During the 18th century, the Austrian authorities introduced the “sanitary cordon”, a line of quarantines and permanently patrolled watch-posts, officially aimed to prevent the breakthrough of the plague from the Balkan territories controlled by the Ottoman Empire into Central and Western Europe¹³. Given this medically, economically and politically motivated extreme experience of the border crossing, the image of the Carpathians as a kind of a wild, unexplored territory, almost forbidden to modern travellers and tourists, passed from travel relations into literature.

Should anyone wonder that, following the trail opened by several French writers, and after carefully reading travel accounts from the second half of the 19th century, one Irish author named Bram Stoker set his masterpiece, *Dracula*, into an even today wild and isolated Borgo Pass (Pasul Bârgăului)¹⁴?

III. SAXONS AND ROMANIANS: THE MODERN TOURISM IN THE CARPATHIANS BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In analysing the birth of the Romanian mountain tourism, one must actually study two different organizations: the *Siebenbürgische Karpatenverein* (SKV) and *Touring-Clubul României* (TCR). Both aimed to turn the Carpathians into a friendlier place, opened to respectful leisure, study and sports. As the SKV was at

¹² Wilhelm von Kotzebue, *Din Moldova. Descrieri și schițe*, București, Ig. Haimann, 1884, p. 59–96.

¹³ Bogdan Popa, “Experiența fizică a frontierei: carantina”, in Romanița Constantinescu (ed.), *Identitate de frontieră în Europa largită. Perspective comparate*, Iași, Polirom, 2008, p. 95–96.

¹⁴ *Bram Stoker’s Notes for “Dracula”*, Jefferson, London, McFarland & Company, 2008, p. 304–305, lists the writings of travelers and foreign residents like William Wilkinson, Emily Gerard, E. C. Johnson, Charles Boner, and Andrew F. Crosse, read by the writer.

least 45 years older than the TCR, another point of interest for my paper will be the impact of the first organisation on the second, given that in 1918 Transylvania became part of “Greater Romania”.

In investigating the origins of the interest for the Carpathian Mountains, one needs to look also at the developments from Western Europe and, above all, those from the German language space. The creation of the Alpine Societies (British, Swiss, German and Austrian)¹⁵ should be seen as an impulse for the *Siebenbürgische Alpenverein*. But this Alpine organization lasted for only 8 years (1873–1881). It later became the Braşov/Kronstadt Section of the new *Siebenbürgische Karpatenverein*, founded on November 28, 1880, in Sibiu/Hermannstadt. The SKV aimed towards a scientifically study of the “Transylvanian Alps”, but also to make the mountains familiar to the inhabitants of Transylvania. In order to apply its programm, the eight sections of the SKV started building lodges, organizing public lectures and collective trips, publishing books, albums and a valuable yearbook. Following the integration of Transylvania into “Greater Romania”, SKV stressed upon the idea that the Carpathians were an important identity issue for all the inhabitants of the province. Hence, the SKV stressed the importance of the Carpathian studies of geology, geography, and natural life¹⁶.

On the other side of the Carpathians, in “the Old Kingdom of Romania”, leisure tourism was given an important impact by the decision of King Carol I of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1866–1914) to build his summer residence in Sinaia. The Peleş Castle was completed around 1900. Impressive hotels, a wonderful casino and a monumental railway station, private villas of the politicians whom had to be near the king while he was taking his summer residence turned the mere village surrounding an orthodox monastery into an expensive “pearl of the Carpathians”. Sport was part of it: the first tennis courts in Romania were built there and, out of some kids’ games, the first boy-scouts patrols were created. All this say that Sinaia was not easily affordable place for a regular tourist and it remained as such during the interwar decades¹⁷.

But the Carpathians were rather a set for, rather than part of the summer joy. Only a few people dared to venture a climb. The first steps were taken again by King Carol I. Following his orders, the paths he used to walk and mark in the park

¹⁵ Dagmar Günther, *Alpine Quergänge. Kulturgeschichte des bürgerlichen Alpinismus (1870–1930)*, Frankfurt, New York, Campus Verlag, 1998, p. 35–36.

¹⁶ Friedrich Kepp, “Der Werdegang des S.K.V. in seinen ersten fünfzig Jahren (1880–1930)”, in *Jubiläums Jahrbuch des Siebenbürgischen Karpathenvereins 1880–1930, XLIII. Jahrgang*, Sibiu, 1930, p. 5, 8–9; *Jahrbuch des Siebenbürgischen Karpathenvereins XL. Jahrgang*, Sibiu, 1927, p. 41. See also Michael Wedekind, *Asociația Carpatină Transilvăneană (1880–1944). O contribuție la istoria socială a Transilvaniei*, in „Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai. Historia”, vol. 50, nr. 2, 2005, p. 91–108 and especially H. Heltmann, H. Roth (Hrsg.), *Der Siebenbürgische Karpatenverein 1880–1945. Gedenkband*, Thaur bei Innsbruck, 1990.

¹⁷ Jack Berariu, *Sinaia, feerică citadelă a sporturilor de iarnă!...*, in “Rampa”, December 17, 1930, p. 2.

around the castle were opened to the public. Unfortunately, the King also had to order the removal of the wooden benches, which were several times destroyed by tourists¹⁸. The slope in front of the Peleş Castle was the venue of the first winter sports championships staged in Romania: primitive wooden bobsleighs and skeletons were to be seen in 1912 and 1913, in the eve of the First World War. Crown Prince Carol (the future king Carol II) was later hailed as the initiator of winter sports in Romania¹⁹.

However, the beginnings of tourist associations are not linked to the royal family, but to a person coming, one must admit, from the inner circle of Queen Elisabeth. We are talking about an extraordinary woman, better known after her pen name, "Bucura Dumbravă". Fany Seculici was born in 1868 in Bratislava, came very young to Romania, and died in 1926 in Egypt, while coming back from a trip to India. A traveller and a writer, she was hailed as godmother of an association called *Hanul Drumetilor* ("The Travellers' Inn"), founded in 1921. Bucura Dumbravă aimed to build a lodge with affordable accommodation in an expensive resort, adding to it a library, a museum and conference rooms. She failed after one difficult year (1922). Thus, her heritage is the 1924 *Cartea munților* (*Book of the Mountains*), a collection of advices for travellers. According to her, punctuality, joy of life, respect for the peers, mountain and their inhabitants, and a good preparation, were the most important rules to be followed while taken a Carpathian path.

On the foundation laid by the "Travellers' Inn", a Touring Club of Romania (TCR) was created in 1925. The decision for this name was motivated by the pressure of similar organizations in Europe, who, the Romanian leaders claimed, would not engage into a partnership but to a "touring club" or "alpine club". TCR started with 1847 members, about 1000 coming from Bucharest. This issue, together with the easier accessibility of the mountains, made the Southern Carpathians the most important destination for excursions and investments into an adequate infrastructure, as well. Following the pattern of other touring clubs, but also that of the SKV, TCR consisted of different sections. One of the most important was the Braşov Section, which, within three years from its opening in 1927, had about 3500 members, though this number was not matched by the expected income from yearly membership fees. Like the sections of the SKV, the TCR sections started their own autonomous activities, among them the construction of own lodges and group excursions being the most important. The publishing of books of geography and advises, maps and the marking of the paths by a system partially in use today were the main achievements of the TCR²⁰.

¹⁸ Mihai Haret, *Castelul Peleş*, Bucureşti, Cartea Românească, 1924, p. 4.

¹⁹ Cf. Neagu Boerescu, *FSSR, UFSR şi ONEF. Începuturile şi organizarea sportului în România*, in "Boabe de Grâu", II, 6–7, 1931, p. 315.

²⁰ For a concise history of the TCR and of its predecessor organizations, see Mihai Haret, *Touring-Clubul României*, in "Boabe de Grâu", I, 3, 1930, p. 152–167.

During the interwar decades, the relations between SKV and TCR remained polite. TCR started the construction of own lodges because of alleged conflicts between the Saxon-German and Romanian tourists. Yet, whenever possible, the achievements of the SKV were openly praised²¹. More, when SKV turned 50, the president of TCR, Mihai Haret, encouraged all the tourist movement in Romania, regardless of nationality, to share the pride for its achievements. However, before 1918, the ethnicity was not a strong rule in admitting members of the SKV: Romanians from Transylvania were allowed to join the organisation and to contribute to its yearbooks²². Also, the publications edited by the TCR were sold at the same member-only special price also to the adherents of the SKV.

IV. TOURISM AND SPORT: A CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Let us now take a look at the relation between tourism and sport. Two quotations I found are meant to illustrate the separation between the two. Both come from moments when the traditional view of sport as an individual or collective recreation was challenged by professionalization discussions.

In 1930, Mihai Haret wrote about the organization he was leading: “Many consider the TCR as a sportive institution, which is not the case. TCR is mainly a tourist organization, deeply linked to the geographical, biological, ethnographical [...] progress of our Country”²³. Here one may find a link to the “Travellers’ Inn”, which held itself as a national association meant to promote tourism and also the establishment of national parks.

A similar idea may be depicted from an anonymous reviewer of the a book on ski by A. Hermann and J. Dieterlen²⁴: “Sport is a completely different notion of tourism, [the latter] absorbing in its vastness all that may be useful to get inside the huge labyrinth of nature, to acknowledge its secrets, to subdue it. The tourist needs an arsenal of knowledge. He is a geographer but, at the same time, does not neglect history, knows geology without being a stranger to natural sciences, has an idea of meteorology and easily gets along with mathematics”²⁵.

²¹ Emil Țeposu, Valeriu Pușcariu, *România balneară și turistică*, București, Cartea Românească, 1932, p. VII; Romulus Dianu, *Păltinișul, sau lecția munților*, in “Curentul”, January 9, 1936, p. 1; *Se apropie sezonul de turism*, in “Buletinul Săptămânii”, March 27, 1938, p. 26.

²² Cf. Romulus Th. Popescu, *Frecker See – Budislav – Surul*, in “Jahrbuch des Siebenbürgischen Karpatenvereins”, XXIX, 1909, p. 27–48. Cf. Emil Țeposu, Valeriu Pușcariu, *op. cit.*, p. VIII.

²³ Mihai Haret, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

²⁴ Identified by us as A. Hermann, J. Dieterlen, *Le ski pour tous. Ce que tout skieur doit savoir*, Paris, Flammarion, 1936.

²⁵ Serviciul Municipal București al Arhivelor Naționale, Fond Asociații Turistice, dosar 2/1936, f. 101.

Yet, there is an important link between tourism and sport: skiing. From the exclusive Sinaia to the creation of the elite mountain troops in 1916, skiing was considered utility, leisure and sport at the same time. In the 1930's, skiing became a democratic sport (young men and women travelling together, sharing slopes, equipment, advises and lodges) and, thus, a mark of youth. Moreover, ski generated a literary sub-genre of its own²⁶. One might say, without a doubt, that skiers were both sportspeople and tourists.

V. CONCLUSION

In the last decades of 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, the Romanian Carpathians were conquered in a modern and peaceful manner, using tourism, sport and middle-class sociability as “weapons”. Lodges, marked paths, ski slopes, not to forget an impressive amount of scientific research, tamed the natural wilderness of the Carpathian Mountains. Even if after the Second World War the SKV and TCR, as well as other private tourist associations were dissolved by the communist regime, their parallel programs set trends of development which are still observed today.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the origins of the modern tourism in the Romanian Carpathians. Given both their wilderness and status as border between Austria and Wallachia, the Carpathians were not a favourite destination for leisure travellers, with the notable exception of those in search of mineral waters and bathes. In the late 19th century, under the influence of the Western European new approaches towards alpinism, sports and tourism, the Transylvanian Saxons created their first tourist organizations. Following the integration of Transylvania into Romania, the Saxon and Romanian organizations led a parallel existence, yet both set trends which are still observed today.

Keywords: Carpathian Mountains, tourist organisations, sport; Transylvanian Saxons, Romanians.

²⁶ Mihail Sebastian, *Accidentul*, București, Paris, Jerusalem, EST-Samuel Tastet Editeur, 2001 (first published București, 1940); Ieronim Șerbu, “Fata zăpezilor”, in *Dincolo de tristețe. Nuvele*, București, Socec, <?>, p. 63–116; I. D. Stănescu, *Sportul și iubirea. Schițe sportive*, Sibiu, <?>, Tudor Teodorescu-Braniște, *Prințul*, București, 100+1 Gramar, 1998 (first published 1944).