

## MONARCHY IN INTERWAR BESSARABIA: PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES, REMEMBRANCE. A STUDY BASED ON MEMOIRS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS

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**Abstract.** *In this article, the author aims at systematizing and analyzing the data from memoirs published in the last three decades in the Republic of Moldova about public events involving members of royal family, in order to contribute to the reconstruction of the image of the Romanian Crown, as it emerges from analyzed testimonies, to circumscribe the events and the main actors on the mental and emotional map of the memorialist's personality.*

**Keywords:** *memory, autobiographical narrative, interwar Bessarabia, royal visits, perceptions of royal authority in Romania, public holidays, elements of identity framework.*

Since the late 1980s, numerous memoirs have been published in Moldova about events and traumatizing situations that accompanied the first decade of Soviet occupation. The texts refer in particular to the deportations of the inhabitants from Bessarabia, Northern Bucovina and Herța region to the northern and eastern regions of the Soviet Union, to various prison experiences, to the change of the ownership system in agriculture, etc. Usually, when addressing their biographical trajectory, memorialists make a clear distinction between the years before the sovietisation of the former Eastern territories of Romania and the period after June 28, 1940. The social context of the biographies, shaped by interactions with state institutions, public events, meetings with leading figures, incorporates information about the monarchy in interwar Romania.

The testimonies about kingship focus on topics such as royal visits to interwar Bessarabia; the celebration of the 10th of May – a national holiday related to the founding of the Romanian Royal Family by Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1839-1914) and the achievement of Romania's state independence; the existence of material evidence regarding the monarchs of Romania (photographs, monuments).

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Their documentary value highlights and puts into perspective the stories of people who met the kings in everyday situations and communicated personally with the sovereigns for a (relatively) long time.

### *Testimonies about Royal Visits in Bessarabia*

Documentary information – press reports, police reports, etc. – about official visits made by the Romanian monarchs to Bessarabia in 1920, 1935, 1940 and 1942, reveals multiple aspects of the events: the solemn ceremonies of greeting and meeting the guests, the institutions visited by them, their gestures and actions, the population's morale.<sup>1</sup> The first-person eyewitness' narrations published in the post-communist era add to the available documentary material, detail and refine the historical overview and enrich it with a vivid, personal tone.

The 1920 royal voyage to Bucovina and Bessarabia began on May 16th. King Ferdinand I (1865-1927) and his suite: Queen Marie (1875-1938), Princess Elizabeth, General Alexandru Averescu (1859-1938) – the Prime Minister, and other Romanian dignitaries passed through Suceava, Putna, Rădăuți, Cernăuți, Noua Suliță, Hotin, Bălți, Chișinău, Cetatea Albă, Șaba, Leipzig, Basarabeasca, Trajan's Wall, Bolgrad, Reni and Ismail.<sup>2</sup> It is said that in Șaba – a village in southern Bessarabia with a population of French Swiss origin – the monarch left an inscription made with a sword on a barrel; the locals were so excited about the king that they decided to erect his bust in their village.<sup>3</sup>

The high-ranking guests arrived in Bălți on the morning of May 19th and were greeted on arrival by the town's notables. On the same day, officials attended an Orthodox religious service and then visited places of worship of other confessions, including a synagogue, and a hospital for infectious diseases. In Chișinău, the king arrived the following day (May 20th) when the Ascension Day was celebrated, and he remained in the political-administrative center of Bessarabia until the evening of May 22nd. Guests attended religious services in the Nativity Cathedral, visited a number of institutions (the Museum of the Zemstvo and the Church Museum, the Military High School and the School of Viticulture, a children's orphanage, a nursing home, a girls' high-school and the Eparchial School for Girls, the Conservatory, a weaving school, a boarding house for war veterans and one for war orphans, the Jewish hospital, the People's victualing-house in Chișinău, etc.), and honored the invitations of important locals to visit their homes.<sup>4</sup>

The presence of Queen Marie at the girls' high school in Chișinău is recorded in an autobiographical text of the son of one of the pupils who had occasion to

<sup>1</sup> Daniel-Valeriu Boboc, "Ritualurile puterii: vizita regelui Ferdinand I în Bucovina și Basarabia, în 1920", in *Pontes. Review of south east european studies*, vol. 5, 2009, pp. 122-131; Ana Grițco, "Vizita regală la Chișinău (1920) – imagine și istorie", in *Tyrageia. Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei*, vol. VIII (XXIII), no 2, 2014, pp. 349-355.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel-Valeriu Boboc, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> Ilie Gulca, "«Toate busturile regelui Ferdinand I au fost ridicate în interbelic pe banii localnicilor». Interviu cu avocatul Iulian Rusanovschi", <http://www.jc.md/toate-busturile-regelui-ferdinand-i-au-fost-ridicate-in-interbelic-pe-banii-localnicilor/>, accessed on 06.02.2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ana Grițco, *op. cit.*, pp. 350-352.

see the sovereign of Romania in these circumstances: “The visit Queen Marie of Romania paid to the school was a special event for my mother, who was in her last high school year. The girls were waiting, full of excitement; they had been earnestly rehearsing the reverence they had to execute at the time of the visit. Queen Marie was a beautiful and noble woman and was admired for the dedication she displayed during the war, when she had cared for the wounded and had relieved the sufferings of soldiers admitted to the field hospitals. She was known by the sobriquet “Mother of the Wounded”. The visit was short, but after the departure of the sovereign, every girl was convinced that Queen Marie had a smile and a warm glance addressed to her”.<sup>5</sup>

It is noteworthy that in 1922 the Chişinău choir led by the famous musician, priest, professor and cultural activist Mihail Berezovschi (1868-1940) was invited to the ceremony of King Ferdinand I and Queen Marie’s crowning in Curtea de Argeş. On this occasion, Mihail Berezovschi received a gold watch with a dedication and the monogram of the king, and the choir performed a concert at the Romanian Athenaeum.<sup>6</sup>

In June 1935, Carol II, Prince Mihai and several members of the Romanian government visited Bessarabia. On June 2nd, the party attended the consecration of the Episcopal Cathedral, having the Holy Emperors Constantine and Empress Helen as patron saints.<sup>7</sup> The cathedral was built between 1924 and 1934 in Bălţi county, which was then, together with the counties of Hotin and Soroca, under the jurisdiction of the Hotin diocese, founded in 1922, with Visarion Puiu (1879-1964) as bishop.<sup>8</sup> A Jewish witness who described the life of Bălţi and the local Jewish community in the first half of the last century mentions the following about this royal visit: “It was then that I first saw a king in flesh and blood. He was neat and handsome, and looked taller than all those present. Looking at him, I doubted that I, being of small height, could be king”.<sup>9</sup>

Valentina Scafaru-Sturza, head of the Association of Former Deportees and Political Prisoners of the Republic of Moldova, remembers the ceremony occasioned by the route of King Carol II and Prince Mihai through Hânceşti. Grigore Scafaru, Valentina’s father, was a landowner, Liberal deputy in the Romanian Parliament, and, between 1932 and 1939, Mayor of Ciuciuleni commune in Lăpuşna County. He was given the honor of welcoming the King: “The most beautiful and incredible memory of my life previous to 1940, writes Valentina Scafaru-Sturza,

<sup>5</sup> Iurie Colesnic, *Chişinăul din amintire*, “Grafema Libris” SRL, Chişinău, 2011, p. 405.

<sup>6</sup> Gheorghe Cunesco, “Protoiereul Mihail M. Berezovschi”, in *Patrimoniul. Revistă de lectură istorică*, no 1, 1993, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> *Fototeca Ortodoxiei Româneşti*, <http://fototecaortodoxiei.ro/6-222-carol-al-ii-lea-la-sfintirea-catedralei-din-balti/album>, accessed on 04.02.2017.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop Visarion Puiu, scholar, founder of several churches and monasteries in Bessarabia, active supporter of the school life in the country. He also contributed to urban modernization in Bălţi (water and electricity supply, the development of railway transport, the establishment of public baths and printing houses, a slaughterhouse, maternity hospital and so on.). “Visarion Puiu (1879-1964)”, in *Calendar Naţional 2009*, Imprimeria BNRM, Chişinău, 2008, pp. 73-74.

<sup>9</sup> Абрам Пустыльник, “Эпитафия родному городу. Воспоминания о Бельцах между двумя войнами”, <http://esp.md/podrobnosti/2016/09/30/epitafiya-rodnomu-gorodu-vospominaniya-o-belcah-mezh-du-dvumya-voynami>, accessed on 16.03.2017.

is linked to Carol II. It was in 1936 (perhaps the author of the narrative refers to the royal visit of 1935 – n. A. F.) when the King was to come to Chişinău with Prince Mihai. My father met him at Hânceşti. Carpets were covering the center of Hânceşti and the road from Chişinău was sprinkled with green grass. I was seven years old, but I still remember that day as a beautiful dream. When the King got to the carpets, he stepped out of the car with Mihai. Mihai was very serious, as opposed to the king, who smiled sometimes. The uniform fit him very well. My father met the King with a big kalach on the most beautiful towel”.<sup>10</sup>

The village headman, whose mayor’s mandates resulted in the (re)construction of four schools in the village, in the building of the town hall and a sauna, in the development of the territory and in other works of public utility, was awarded the “Golden Cross” insignia. On June 13th, 1941, the Scafaru family and other Ciuciuleni families were deported by the Soviets to Kazakhstan. In Tiraspol, Grigore Scafaru was separated from his family, then sentenced to death, a sentence later commuted to 25 years of hard labor, which were served in Ivdel labor camp in the Sverdlovsk region and in other places of incarceration in the Gulag. The track record of his life, illustrative of the effort of a generation that has given many personalities in the public sphere, can be summarized in the words of Valentina Scafaru-Sturza: “The King decorated him, the Communists deported him”.<sup>11</sup>

Carol II and Prince Mihai visited Bessarabia in January 1940 too, on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The schedule of the royal visit to Chişinău on October 31st – November 1st, 1942 included attending the consecration of the Metropolitan Cathedral after the restoration of the holy place, visiting the Church “Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel”, also called the Old Cathedral, as well as the inauguration of some propaganda landmarks: the Tower of Manumission and the Exhibition of Manumission.<sup>12</sup>

At the time, the Old Cathedral’s priest was Paul Mihail (1905-1994), a theologian and historian who organized the Museum of Church History in Chişinău, brought the wooden church “Saint Dumitru” from his native village of Cornova and installed it in the Old Cathedral’s courtyard, as a sample of native architecture at the exhibition dedicated to the celebration of a quarter century since the Great Union. Paul Mihail noted in his diary his impressions about the visit of King Michael and Queen Mother Elena, who were accompanied by the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers Mihai Antonescu (1904-1946), Ion Petrovici (1882-1972: Minister of National Culture and Cults in 1941, 1943-1944 ), the governor of Bessarabia, General Constantin Voiculescu (1890-1955): “It was God’s gift to me, who arose from the poverty and the mire of Cornova, to receive, to speak and to

<sup>10</sup> Valentina Scafaru-Sturza, “Regele I-a decorat, comuniştii I-au deportat”, in *Jurnal de Chişinău*, no 182, 13.06.2003, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Valentina Scafaru-Sturza, “Viţa de vie tot învie, iar cea de boz, tot rogoz”, in *Jurnal de Chişinău*, no 81, 08.06.2001, p. 5; “70 de ani de la deportările românilor din Basarabia şi Bucovina”, in *Flux ediţia de vineri*, no 22 (802), 17.06.2011, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Almanahul ziarelor “Basarabia şi Bucovina”, ediţia 1943*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/specials/1447\\_almanah\\_1942/index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/specials/1447_almanah_1942/index.shtml), accessed on 04.02.2017.

have the attention of the King and the Queen of the Realm, of great commanders, ministers and notable individuals. God has rewarded me for all my efforts, my toil and my faith. On this October 31st, in the wooden church brought from Cornova, arranged and adorned with old objects and icons, dressed in 200 years old garments, on the open porch of the church I met Michael I, King of all Romanians. After kissing the Gospel, they entered the church and I gave them all the necessary explanations, showed the old books and the old church registry books of civil documents and put my eloquence in service for Governor Voiculescu in front of the audience. Queen Mother Elena was impressed when I showed the manuscript of the folk novel from Bessarabia, whose source text “came to us from Byzantium.” In the altar of the church, in the light of the candle, I showed the king the gospel, the chalice, the cross, and the old stall chair. During my explanations, the king put his hand on the Gospel and said, “Father, pray for Me and for the peace of everyone.” Overwhelmed by this request, I took the cross from the prelude, and I asked for permission to present it to HM The Queen Mother. Almost whispering, the King was kind enough to say: “You do that, as She suffers so much.” In these moments of high spirituality, face to face with the King in the altar, the nave was quiet, all were waiting for us to exit the altar. The King steps out, I follow with the cross that I soon offer to the Queen, kissing her hand. She thanks me, extends her hand, kisses the cross, admires her again, and once again extends her hand to reach out for me (...) The officials came out, the people burst forth and, over space and time, above the crowd’s clamor and the smoke of incense, I heard cantor Justin Mihail’s voice coming from the church of Cornova’s kliros, now covered with books that stop me from falling down as my heart throbs...”<sup>13</sup>

The inclusion of the Church of the “Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel” in the royal itinerary can be explained by the symbolism invested in this place. The Old Cathedral is an excellent illustration of the persistence of the Romanian ethnic element, of the national spirit, an idea that gained even stronger significance while Romania was fighting on the Eastern Front. The church, recorded in the XVIII century documents as being under the voivode’s patronage, was destroyed by the Tatars and Turks on several occasions, rebuilt with stone and bricks (1802-1806) in baroque style before the occupation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire. The architectural model was the Metropolitan Iacob Stamati’s Church of the “All Saints’ Sunday” in Iași, but the one in Chisinau was smaller than the latter. The residence of the first Metropolitans of Bessarabia under the Russians, the Church of the “Archangels Michael and Gabriel” kept, until 1940, the original architecture, as well as books printed all over the Romanian territory, some – several centuries old, and objects of worship dating from the time of the founders.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Paul Mihail, *Jurnal (1940-1944) și corespondență*. Ediție îngrijită de Eugenia Mihail și Zamfira Mihail. Argument de Gheorghe Buzatu. Vol. 1: *Jurnal, Paideia*, Bucharest, 1999, pp. 91-93. Also, *Luminătorul. Revistă bisericască*, no. 10-11-12, October-November-December, 1943, p. 756.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Mihail, “Biserica Sf. Arhangheli «Soborul Vechi» din Chișinău (1747-1802)”, in *Vocea Poporului. Săptăminal al Sindicatelor din Moldova*, no 18, 03.07.1990, p. 6. Reprinted in *Patrimoniul. Revistă de lectură istorică*, no. 1, 1993, pp. 114-118.

On the same day, the Tower of Manumission, a monument dedicated to the 1941 military operation that drove the Soviet troops out of Bessarabia, was inaugurated. The description of the event, which is due to the same witness, Paul Mihail, contains little concrete information.<sup>15</sup> The visit of King Michael and Queen Elena in 1942 was immortalized by the well-known German journalist and photographer Willy Pragher (1908-1992).<sup>16</sup>

Another Bessarabian religious establishment visited by the Romanian monarch during the Second World War was the Curchi monastery. Founded in 1773 by the mazil (small boyar exempt from paying certain taxes) Iordache Curchi, the hermitage received numerous and substantial donations between 1800-1816 from another great ktetor, captain Theodor Sabău (born in Transylvania, known as Filaret during his time as a monk). Before taking his vows, Theodor Sabău was in charge of guarding the eastern borders of Moldavia. Over time, many locals made donations to the monastery. In the interwar period, the Curchi monastery came into prominence because of the splendor and the good maintenance of the buildings, the beautiful household, the intense spiritual life, the existence of a large monastic community.<sup>17</sup> The establishment was closed during the first year of Soviet occupation (1940-1941).

The damage sustained by the monastery during the years of Soviet occupation and the destructions inflicted in the initial start-up phase of the Soviet-German war were remedied with the support of the Romanian authorities returned in the summer of 1941. At the same time, King Michael and Miron Cristea, the Patriarch of Romania were painted on each side of the “Nativity of Mary” church’s front door. Above the church’s front entrance a stone was installed, with the following text: “This holy church dedicated to the Nativity of Mary was built in 1864, on the site of the old church, built by the monk Ioan Curchi, the founder of the monastery. In 1940, the Bolshevik heathens, having invaded Bessarabia, devastated the monastery and burned the church, but by God’s mercy, the Romanian armies, with the help of the holy cross, chased the heathen horde away and the church was renovated and fully painted in the days of the great King Michael I, marshal Ion Antonescu being head of the state, High Priest Efreim Tighineanul being the

<sup>15</sup> At 2 pm I was present at the site of the Manumission Tower, a huge block of stone set in a beautiful landscape. It was so evocative and majestic! We stood near the officials. I could look and admire the King, see the whole program, and I was deeply impressed by the patriotic speech delivered by Prof. Mihai Antonescu, the prime minister of the country (sic!). Oh, the verve, the expressive power, the oratorical skills! The culminating moment, when the King appears on the pinnacle of the Tower, the crowd greets him with an ovation, the Choir of Bessarabia of 450 people, under the leadership of Mihail Stegaru, Professor at the Singing School, sings the Royal Hymn, and the rays of the sun descend as an aura illuminating the figure of the King. Among the pillars and the columns of stone, the shadows of the sunlight kissed the names of the units and regiments of heroes that had set Bessarabia free.” Paul Mihail, *Jurnal...*, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> *Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, Abt. Staatsarchiv Freiburg*: [https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild\\_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304729&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728](https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304729&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728); [https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild\\_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304730&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728](https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304730&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728); [https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild\\_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304707&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728](https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304707&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728); [https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild\\_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304712&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728](https://www2.landesarchiv-bw.de/ofs21/bild_zoom/zoom.php?bestand=20946&id=1304712&screenbreite=1366&screenhoehe=728), accessed on 03.02.2017.

<sup>17</sup> Valentin Golub, *Mănăstirea Curchi*, Orhei Printing Press, Orhei, 2000.

Archiereus of Chişinău, governor of the Central Basarabia being Olimp Stavrat, and the abbot of the Curchi Monastery being protosyngellos Teofilact, 1943, September 8<sup>th</sup>.<sup>18</sup> The rebuilt church was consecrated on September 8th, 1943, on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The monastery owns objects donated by King Michael I, purchased in France from the sovereign's personal financial resources.

Communist persecutions, reconstruction works and royal visits to the monastery, all remained in the memory of the locals. "On June 28th, 1940, the Soviet troops surrounded the monastery and kept us imprisoned for three months, remembers priest Teodor Gudima, then a monk at Curchi Monastery. In September, the young monks were banished from the church. The elders were left inside, doomed to die. I do not know if anybody lived to tell the story".<sup>19</sup> Ilie Butnaru, a craftsman who participated in the rebuilding of the roof of the "Nativity of Mary" church in 1942 said that, while working at the monastery, he saw the king twice and that the monarch donated money for the building.<sup>20</sup> "The story goes that upon the coming of His Majesty, the peasants from the surrounding settlements laid carpets all the way from Orhei to Curchi".<sup>21</sup>

Under the communist regime, the buildings of the Curchi Monastery were used as a psychiatric hospital, and the church's murals were painted over. The plaque was still in good shape, but the coating and the fresco deteriorated, yet the painting was still visible and could have been restored if it were not for the intentional destruction of both the plaque and the painting that occurred between 2006-2008, when the church was restored under the reconstruction efforts backed by the leaders of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>22</sup>

King Michael visited Bessarabia again on June 1st, 2006, for the inauguration of the Heroes' Cemetery of Țiganca. Prince Radu of Romania and Princess Margareta made an official visit to Moldova in 2013. In 2015 Prince Radu visited Bessarabia for the second time (28-29 September), when he received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Moldova. It was also then that the prince announced he was taking the Academic Lyceum of Fine Arts "Igor Vieru" under his patronage.<sup>23</sup> Princess Maria, the youngest daughter of King Michael, visited Bessarabia in the spring of 2016.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Svetlana Coropceanu, "Vandalii", in *Jurnal de Chişinău*, no. 34 (948), 18.05.2010, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolae Roibu, "Călugărul trădat de ai săi și osândit de străini", in *Flux. Cotidian național*, no. 15 (605), 08.02.2000, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ion Stici, "Curchi", in Tudor Țopa, Vasile Trofăilă (editors-in-chief), Antonina Sirbu, Victor Ladaniuc (compilers), *Mănăstiri basarabene*, "Universul", Chişinău, 1995, p. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Svetlana Coropceanu, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> Rodica Mahu, "Ce s-a întâmplat, cu adevărat, la Mănăstirea Curchi?", in *Jurnal de Chişinău*, no. 366, 25.03.2005, pp. 12-13; Svetlana Coropceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 1; 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ioan-Luca Vlad, "Basarabia, jurnal de călătorie, prima zi", <http://www.romaniaregala.ro/jurnal/basarabia-jurnal-de-calatorie-prima-zi/>; "Principele Radu al României a primit titlul de Doctor Honoris Causa, acordat de Universitatea Academiei de Științe a Moldovei", <http://www.timpul.md/articol/principele-radu-a-primit-titulul-de-doctor-honoris-causa-acordat-de-universitatea-am-79928.html>, accessed on 06.02.2017.

<sup>24</sup> "Istoria inedită a unei fotografii a Regelui Mihai I la Chişinău", <http://radiochisinau.md/istoria-inedita-a-unei-fotografii-a-regelui-mihai-i-la-chisinau-foto-33806.html>, accessed on 04.02.2017.

*“The Holy Day of May 10<sup>th</sup>”*

Some texts include impressions and information about the festivities organized on May 10<sup>th</sup>. Ludmila Vnorovschi (1914-2005), a former student of the Eparchial School of Girls in Chişinău tells the story of the “Romanian Youth” annual competitions held in Bucharest, usually after the Easter holiday, which were attended by Bessarabian pupils too. In 1931, the contest coincided with the May 10<sup>th</sup> feast, so the participants, students and teachers had the opportunity to become involved in the solemn ceremonies: “We were lucky to attend that great celebration. On Calea Victoriei, in national costumes, headed by our director Elena Alistar<sup>25</sup> (she was wearing decorations and a national costume too) we were carrying the school banner in front. King Carol, on a majestic horse, along with the Heir Prince Mihai on a pony, passing by, greeted us by raising their hand. He cried: “Long live Bessarabia”! We felt happy. I was impressed with the pomposity of that parade. It was a lot of luxury and grandeur. The king’s guard’s headgear was adorned with blue feathers, that of Mother Queen Marie’s guard was adorned with pink ones. The officers marching at the parade (for only the officers were parading) were exquisite. I now had my share of stories to tell my colleagues and parents upon returning”.<sup>26</sup>

Ludmila Vnorovschi came from a family with Tatar, Polish, Russian and German roots. She and her sister, Cleopatra Vnorovschi (1911-2005), studied in Romanian-language secondary institutions in interwar Chişinău, then continued their studies at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of Iaşi University (Cleopatra) and the Faculty of Sciences (Ludmila). Cleopatra Vnorovschi, a university professor in the capital of Soviet Moldavia in 1946, noted in her autobiographical work “A life dedicated to education”, that it was due to the patriotic education received in interwar Bessarabia that “the youth felt Romanian”: “If the primary school taught us Romanian, the Eparchial School made us good citizens, with love for the nation and the country”.<sup>27</sup> The idea was shared without a shadow of doubt by her sister Ludmila, too. Following this idea, one should note the convergent statement of another narrator, that the youngsters were the most dissatisfied with the installation of the Soviet authorities in Bessarabia in the summer of 1940. It was especially the case of those who “[...] were born in Romania, had studied in Romanian schools, and were raised in the Romanian culture”.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Elena Alistar (born Bălan) (1873-1955) was a physician, professor, political activist; the president of the Bessarabian Women League, an organization founded in 1917, which she led for three decades. Chosen from the League in the Sfatul Ţării, she was the only female deputy in the Bessarabian Parliament. On 27 March 1918, she voted for the Union of Bessarabia with Romania. She headed the Eparchial School of Girls in Chişinău, an educational institution founded in 1864, maintained by the local priesthood, initially meant to educate daughters of clergymen. Between the two world wars, the school cultivated patriotic and religious sentiments, paid special attention to the study of Romanian language, literature, geography and national history; trained the students to acquire useful skills for social and family life: О. Ю. Щипакина, “Страницы былого”, in *Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei*, I, Chişinău, 1991, pp. 220-225.

<sup>26</sup> Ludmila Vnorovschi, *Amintirile unei basarabence*, Cartdidact, Chişinău, 2003, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Cleopatra Vnorovschi, *O viață închinată învățământului*, Museum, Chişinău, 1999, p. 24. Also: pp. 33-44.

<sup>28</sup> Gherasim Păduraru, “Taina porților zăvorâte”, in *Columna*, no. 8-9, 1992, p. 67. This autobiographical text, written in secret during the Soviet period and kept hidden, came out in print after the death of the author and after the fall of the communist regime.



During the May 10 Parade in 1932, which took place in Bălți, while the Jewish part of the column was passing by the tribunes where some of the leaders of the city garrison and the civil administration of the city stood, a person came out of the crowd trying to pluck the white-blue flag from the hands of the Jewish column's standard bearer. This attempt failed; however, the panic generated by the incident hindered the continuation of the parade.<sup>29</sup>

According to the testimonies of Sozont Sorbală, a soldier in the royal guard, a tribune for thousands of people was installed on the Cotroceni plain for the May 10 Parade in, 1938. The soldiers trained for two weeks for the parade. On the day of the parade, King Carol, with a helmet on his head, appeared on a bay stallion, holding the marshal's mace. The prince followed, his head uncovered and wearing sunglasses. "The following year, the parade was no longer as beautiful, the soldiers were dressed in war clothes", the narrator concludes.<sup>30</sup>

Comparing the Romanian parades and the Soviet ones, eyewitnesses do not speak highly about the latter, generally characterizing them as devoid of charm and joy, being the expression of a devastating, bellicose spirit that inspired fear. Ludmila Vnorovschi writes that "(...) in Chișinău (in the early days of July 1940 – n. A.F.) a military parade with tanks, cannons and planes, flying over the city, coming in groups of three and nine, took place. It was an impressive demonstration of force. The pavement on the Alexandru cel Bun Street was destroyed by the Soviet tanks. I unintentionally compared this parade with that on May 10th in Bucharest, during which there was so much luxury, grandeur and joy".<sup>31</sup>

In the interwar years, brass bands and choirs were always present at official, religious, and school holidays. A photo taken on May 10th, 1943 immortalized the members of the Soroca Technical High School brass band. One of the former instrumentalists, who later identified himself in the picture and reconstituted the moment and the group of participants, remembered that the students' brass band animated urban cultural events (celebrations, exhibitions, etc.) and that they sang the Royal Hymn on that day.<sup>32</sup>

There are some accounts stating that even the humblest inhabitants of the villages were preparing to celebrate this "national holiday" with due loftiness.<sup>33</sup> We can surmise that there occurred a translation of public ceremonial practices into a certain state of mind within the population that might also lead to celebrations in the private sphere.

### *Memories of Bessarabians enrolled in the Romanian army*

Other memoirs belong to Bessarabians who came into contact with members of the royal family during their service in the Romanian army. Sozont Sorbală,

<sup>29</sup> Абрам Пустыльник, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Ioana Moldoveanu, "«Viata mea e un roman». Omul care l-a salvat pe Regele Mihai", <http://jurnalul.ro/campaniile-jurnalul/viata-mea-e-un-roman/omul-care-l-a-salvat-pe-regele-mihai-56616.html>, accessed on 03.02.2017.

<sup>31</sup> Ludmila Vnorovschi, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>32</sup> Aurel Marinciu, "Fanfara liceenilor din Soroca", in *Literatura și arta*, no. 6 (2530), 03.02.1994, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Gherasim Păduraru, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

born in 1916, in the village of Plopi, Soroca County, being very sturdy at the time of recruitment, was chosen for the royal guard. This is what he thought of the future king: “He was a healthy and well-groomed young man with a bright face, blue eyes, a gorgeous nose always in the air, and blond, curly hair showing from under his ranger cap.” Sozont Sorbală had his military training along with the future king of Romania. The former soldier asserts that during the exam which was carried out with live bullets in the Bucegi Mountains, he saved the prince’s life. Due to an on-field error, Mihai and the soldier got into the fire area. The bullets “[...] came hissing and swishing about a meter above Prince Michael. And then I rushed from my place, and, grabbing him by both boots, I cried out: “Your Majesty, stick to the bottom of the trench, I call for retreat!” And leaning against the shore, I pulled him with all my strength towards me”, Sorbala wrote. “It seemed to me then that I was dealing with a naive kid who did not know the danger he was in”.<sup>34</sup>

The testimony of another Bessarabian recruited in the Romanian Army, who had served in the Royal Guard Regiment, reconstructs the atmosphere at the palace and presents the portrait of Michael I: “The Romanian Army knew its soldiers in advance, like they were its children. Back then, when he was to be recruited, a young man would have to pass various tests. Only the tall, broad-backed, staid lads got to be selected in the royal guard regiment. They took me from Ustia to Orhei, then from Orhei to Chişinău, and from there I went straight to Bucharest. I was assigned to the royal guard. First, I did three months of training, and then I was sent to the palace on Victoria Street. [...] Even though the palace was in reconstruction at the moment, it surely made an impression on us, sons of unsophisticated peasants. They housed us right in the palace. We had our own bedrooms and a separate kitchen. [...] I was to stand guard for three hours, and after that I was free. Never at the king’s door, though. There would be only officers equipped with mail coats and helmets. And in front of the palace stood officers with captain rank or higher, dressed in mail, armed with short, curved swords. The officer on guard did not sit still. He marched constantly in cadence. At the main gate there was an arched veranda. The marching guard was portly wearing his sword. As he reached the end of the veranda, he would stop, stand at attention, then he would spin around and continue marching. It was something of a rare beauty. I was also able to me to see the Kremlin guard, but the latter could not even be compared with that at the royal palace in Bucharest. We, the guard soldiers, were doing our duty around the palace. A guard soldier and a street sergeant were on duty. [...] The king was not married. His father, Carol, had separated from his wife. When we dined at the palace and the King came, we did not rise up, because His Majesty, who would often visit, asked us not to. And he was not a stiff neck, he spoke plainly and with respect. [...] He was a lieutenant then. His Majesty began his military career as a sergeant. When he was in training, his father asked him, like he would ask any subordinate: “Who takes the milk skin from the cauldron?” Michael did not have an immediate

<sup>34</sup> Ioana Moldoveanu, *op. cit.*

answer. Then Carol replied, “The sergeant eats it”. Although he was ranking up fast, he still had to go all the way through the military hierarchy. He was good by nature and was pleasing to look at. He was about 20 years old. [...] (he cared for the soldiers – n. A.F.) as if they were children”.<sup>35</sup>

The young Bessarabian Anatolie Bezvan from the village of Vatici, located in the Orhei area, was recruited into the Romanian Army in 1943. After half a century, he would return his mind to the time he spent in training as an aircraft mechanic, when he was sent to Vărădia de Munte, in Arad County, where “King Michael had his personal, royal airport.” “Why he would choose an airport location right at the edge of the country, I do not know. Because it’s closer to Europe, I suppose. But there was also a royal palace/castle where he lounged and planned his hunting trips... We took care of his airplanes, he had more – German ones, American ones, even one donated by Stalin himself... This one was here, at Vărădia, too. Michael was flying it by himself, he was an aviator. Once he took Dr. Petru Groza on a flight. Petru Groza always smiled as Ion Iliescu does nowadays. [...] After the departure of the king (from the country – n. AF) we were called again to Vărădia, the airport was no longer functioning, no one was landing on it, the tracks were full of weeds, and the whole area of the airport was taken over by goats, cows and geese from the village...”.<sup>36</sup>

*Material evidence of the presence  
of royalty in interwar Bessarabia*

Several people have kept photographs of Romanian monarchs during the communist regime, thereby consciously exposing themselves to the danger of being punished by the authorities. In Romania, an album with historical photos of the voivode Mihai was kept by Radion Chiaburu, one of the classmates of the sovereign. His parents were peasants from Bessarabia. The king himself provided some explanatory information in 1991 on the composition of that class: “My father, King Carol, rightly thought that my future education as an heir of the throne of Romania must be organized amongst our compatriots to allow me to know them better and that they, in their turn, will know better the one who would once ascend to the throne. Thus, a group of 12 boys from all the social and ethnic strata from all parts of the country, all serious and industrious, was formed. All of our teachers were the most distinguished in their fields, and taught us courses of high intellectual and moral standing. [...] I remember Radion Chiaburu very well. Later, he became an aviation officer, a pilot of fighter aircrafts. Now he lives in Bucharest”.<sup>37</sup> Radion Chiaburu said in 2013, in an interview, that at the end of the war, the king saved his family: “When the front began to get closer in

<sup>35</sup> Ion Borș, “Un nistean în garda regelui Mihai. De vorbă cu octogenarul Ion Chirilă, locuitor al satului Ustia, Dubăsari, care în august ’39 a fost chemat să-și satisfacă serviciul militar la palatul regal de pe strada Victoria din București”, in *Libertatea*, no. 17 (120), 06.05.1998, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Anatol Ciocanu, “Om între oameni”, in *Glasul Națiunii*, no. 34 (306), 11.09.1996, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Iulius Popa, “Regele Mihai: «Cunosc prea bine drama Basarabiei»”, in *Literatura și arta*, no. 26 (2394), 27.06.1991, p. 8.

‘44, I went to the king and said, Majesty, I don’t want my parents to stay there (in Bessarabia – n. A. F.). In Sagarcea, on the domains of the Crown Estate, I received a dwelling, owing to the assistance of the king. What more could have been done? When one knows that all their life is entwined with the relationship with the king, what could one say when they see the king gone?’<sup>38</sup>

During the renovation of their parental home, in 1980, the family of Elena Bâtca-Oțel from Ialoveni discovered in the attic of the house, among other objects, a photograph of King Michael. Those things must have belonged to the spouses Ion and Sofia Bâtca, the parents of Elena. Ion Bâtca, a painter and municipal councilor during the interwar period, met King Carol II and Prince Mihai in 1935 in front of the Chișinău City Hall. After the establishment of the Soviet regime, in the summer of 1940, the former municipal councilor was arrested and sent to the Gulag, where he soon died. The existence of this photograph, which is most likely to have been hidden in the roof by Sofia Bâtca, was kept secret until the fall of the communist regime. A descendant of this Bessarabian leader exterminated by the Soviets showed the photograph to King Michael, who arrived in Bessarabia for the inauguration of the Heroes’ Cemetery in Țiganca village. Princess Maria met Elena Bâtca-Oțel in Ialoveni during the visit she had made in May 2016; it is then that the woman told the princess about the history of her family and the photograph in question.<sup>39</sup>

One can notice a constant preoccupation of the researchers of the past to identify monuments built in the public spaces before the Soviet occupation, as well as to uncover projects of monuments that, for various reasons, have not been carried out. The statue of Ferdinand I (sculptor: Oscar Han), installed in the civic center of Chișinău and officially unveiled on the 5th of February 1939, was evacuated in 1940 to Iași.<sup>40</sup> At that time there was an attempt to erect in the main town of Bessarabia (Chișinău) a monument dedicated to Queen Marie, which was to be created by the sculptor Oscar Spaethe.<sup>41</sup>

A grassroots civic action to restore the royal monuments erected in Bessarabia in the interwar period recently initiated by the young lawyer Iulian Rusanovschi, revealed several busts dedicated to King Ferdinand I. The settlements of: Nisporeni, Ialoveni, Țepilova (in the Soroca district), Rezina, Varnița, Ismail and the French Swiss colony of Șaba in southern Bessarabia were each given a bust of the sovereign of the unified country (Greater Romania). The population then donated money to cover the costs of erecting these monuments. The busts from Nisporeni and Ialoveni (unveiled on June 29, 1939) were created by the famous sculptor Alexandru Plămădeală (1888-1940). The Soviet occupation authorities tended to destroy any trace of positive aspects in the life of the Bessarabians in the interwar period. The monuments raised at that time have had the same fate. With the help of the

<sup>38</sup> “Regele Mihai urmărit de spioni – Operațiunea «Străinul»”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewl3zGTKWC8>, accessed on 17.03.2017.

<sup>39</sup> “Istoria inedită a unei fotografii a regelui Mihai I la Chișinău”, <http://radiochisinau.md/istoria-inedita-a-unei-fotografii-a-regelui-mihai-i-la-chisinau-foto-33806.html>, accessed on 04.02.2017.

<sup>40</sup> Virgiliu Teodorescu, “Monumente ridicate în orașul Chișinău în anii 1918-1940”, in *Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei*, I, 1991, p. 218.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

local administration of Nisporeni, which vigorously supported Iulian Rusanovschi's initiative, the bronze bust of King Ferdinand I standing on Cosăuți stone (a specific type of stone obtained in Cosăuți village) pedestal was reconstructed after the sketches stored in the archives. The monument was inaugurated on the 22nd of July 2016 in the square named "King Ferdinand I".<sup>42</sup> "The bust from Țepilova, says Iulian Rusanovschi, had eight pillars of stone with some chains and we want to rebuild them. A villager had a photograph of the bust, a picture from 1938, signed by Ilie Volcenco, the person who was in charge of collecting funds and erecting the monument. The bust of King Ferdinand I from Țepilova was hidden in 1940 in the flooring of the house by the grandfather of priest Vasile Ciobanu, deported for this deed to Siberia, from where he did not return".<sup>43</sup> A photographic image that has been preserved by a villager from Țepilova is now useful for those who have planned to restore the monument.<sup>44</sup>

### *Names of streets, settlements, institutions and honours granted in the name of Romania's monarchs*

The memory of the people has preserved the trace of contemporary streets, settlements and institutions that in 1918-1940 and 1941-1944 bore the names of Romanian sovereigns.

In Chișinău there were several streets named: "King Carol I", "King Ferdinand I" and "Queen Marie", "Grand Voivode Mihai" and "King Michael I", "Carol II" Boulevard; in Bălți there were the streets "King Ferdinand I" and "King Carol II".

Several high schools for girls were named "Regina Maria" (Chișinău, Bolgrad), a lyceum for girls from Orhei was called "Regina Maria", and another one, from Bălți, "Domnița Ileana".<sup>45</sup> One of the memorialists attended Primary School no. 4 "Prince Mihai" in Chișinău.<sup>46</sup> In the interwar period, a Military High School was established in Chișinău under the Royal Decree of August 24, 1919. It was attended by children from all over the country. The high school was named "King Ferdinand I".

### *Conclusions*

We have not yet found writings of memorialists in which the authors refer extensively to the figures of the sovereigns. As a rule, evocations are very brief

<sup>42</sup> "Regele Ferdinand I s-a întors în Basarabia, fotoreportaj", <http://www.jc.md/regele-ferdinand-i-s-a-intors-in-basarabia-fotoreportaj/>; Ioan Popescu, "În Basarabia, istoria românilor se rescrie: regele Ferdinand Întregitorul a revenit la Nisporeni", [http://www.rgnpress.ro/rgn\\_14/categorii/cultura-culte/22458-ioan-popescu-in-basarabia-istoria-romanilor-se-rescrie-regele-ferdinand-intregitorul-a-revenit-la-nisporeni.html](http://www.rgnpress.ro/rgn_14/categorii/cultura-culte/22458-ioan-popescu-in-basarabia-istoria-romanilor-se-rescrie-regele-ferdinand-intregitorul-a-revenit-la-nisporeni.html); accessed on 06.02.2016.

<sup>43</sup> Ilie Gulca, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>45</sup> Aurelia Cornetchi, "Liceul de fete Regina Maria din Bolgrad (Pagini de istorie)", in *Tyragetia. Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei*, vol. VIII, 1999, p. 227; *Eadem*, "Contribuții la istoria Liceului de fete Maria Doamnă din Orhei (1907-1944)", in *Tyragetia. Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei*, vol. X, 2001, p. 199; *Eadem*, "Considerații privind istoria Liceului de fete Domnița Ileana din Bălți", in *Tyragetia. Anuarul Muzeului Național de Istorie a Moldovei*, vol. XI, 2002, p. 313.

<sup>46</sup> Teodor Panighianț, "Prin Chișinăul de altădată...", in *Columna*, no. 2, 1992, p. 52.

and simple, integrated, as if in passing, in narratives that follow the life story of the narrator. Thus, more worthy of attention is the fact that, almost always, the narratives are permeated by great admiration, warmth, respect and, most often, compassion for the sovereigns. Testimonies were left not only by preservers of a first-generation memory, but also by descendants who, in the absence of direct contact with royalty, displayed favorable attitudes towards it, continuing their family tradition. Queen Marie, the prince and later King Michael, and even Carol II, who had the reputation of an infatuated “playboy king” among his contemporaries and within the political elite of the country, an image which persisted in later historical writings, are all described by memorialists in very positive terms. All of them were allegedly beautiful; Carol II was described as good-humored, smart, peaceful, Michael – as modest, respectful towards ordinary people, friendly to his classmates, Queen Marie – as sensitive, kind-hearted, devoted to the country. Such perceptions must be associated with a premodern political culture shared by a population that had lived for a long time in states with a monarchical regime (Bessarabia in the Tsarist Empire, Bukovina in the Habsburg/Austro-Hungarian Empire) and has felt the ideological influence exerted by the idea of divinely sanctioned and confirmed power exercised in the name of God. Moreover, the memoirs lead to the conclusion that the appreciation and respect shown to the kings and queens of Romania by ordinary citizens was related to the personal qualities of the monarchs and their public behavior. Apparently, the conscience of the people retained most vividly the ability of royalty to be popular, accessible and close to people, their solidarity with the many and the suffering. They were perceived as righteous, full of respect for the citizens of their own country, thus appearing as genuine models of “ideal sovereigns” and, at the same time, models for ordinary people.

On January 1, 2007, Gheorghe Tudos(e), born in 1934, in the village of Hreatca, Herța district, (self-)exiled under the pressure of communist persecutions, first to Russia, then to Kazakhstan and settled, finally and for good, in Kyrgyzstan, phoned the Embassy of Romania in Kazakhstan to present his congratulations to the people of Romania on the occasion of its joining the European Union. Almost at the same time, according to the Ambassador of Romania to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Vasile Soare, Gheorghe Tudos confessed “a special sympathy and respect for King Michael”, to whom he conveyed “greetings, and may he live many years to come”.<sup>47</sup> The two interventions were not connected, however, we can see the existence of a certain ideational link. The inhabitants of the eastern regions of Romania occupied by the Soviets, who were persecuted by the Communist regime, deprived of the achievements of their national culture and/or deported from their native places, closely associate and mix together European values, Romanian-ness and Romanian royalty as central elements of the intellectual constructions that constitute and define their identity reference system.

<sup>47</sup> Vasile Soare, “Românii din Kârgâzstan”, in *Memoria*, no. 3, 2007, p. 56.

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