

MAGIC LANTERN PROJECTIONS

A DIALOGUE WITH OCTOGENARIAN ACTRESS DINA COCEA, HONORARY CITIZEN OF BUCHAREST

You mentioned people whose names are now names of theaters and streets and cultural institutions of the city; doesn't this give you a feeling of loneliness among today's people?

No, why should it? I see, for instance, the former Sărindar St., now Constantin Miile, which is my grandfather: not far from the corner of Calea Victoriei used to be „Our Theater“, the theater company I founded in 1941, when the war was raging. I didn't give it much thought. This is how it was then. Anyway, „Our Theater“ was a successful experience, with young actors and a modern repertory, quite audacious in those days: it was the first Romanian theater that staged O'Neill's plays. I was 29 when I started it. When „Our Theater“ was nationalized and closed down, I was almost 37.

How would you describe the average Bucharester?

Aman of appetizer politics. If only you knew how many plâns and dis-putes heated the atmosphere at Capsa cafe, or Corso, or Corsoletto, or Drago mir's tavern... Well, this was before people began to look around care-fully and hold their tongues. For a few decades!

ALEX. LEO SERBAN

„EVERYTHING MUST GO“, or 5 reasons why I stayed in Bucharest instead of moving to Paris, Florence or New York

3. Ivy-clad houses. Most often it's ivy indeed, but other creeping plants take possession of the facades as well, such as honeysuckle and wisteria. Surely, they hide the facades themselves; but very few are worthy of a close scrutiny, so there's no harm done. Ivy-clad houses (generally situated in the center - Grădina Icoanei, Floreasca, Aviatorilor -, but also in Cotroceni) bear little resemblance to architecture and seem to be crossbreeds between dwelling and vegetation. If one tries really hard, one can find poetic equivalents in „Sleeping Beauty“ - stretching the comparison beyond all ridicule and striving to discover one slumbering lady in all such houses... It's safer to assume, though, that the remaining dwellers, prying each morning outside the ivy (honeysuckle, wisteria) curtain, or silently swaying away at sunset, are „beauties“ immemorally forgotten by their „Princes-Charming“, bereft of hope, besieged with atrophy and arthritis, sordid and solitary like some home-happy homeless... Their houses slowly crumble under their insignificant weight, pulled down by ever-reviving vegetation rather than by sheer age; one more glance, and it's just ivy (honeysuckle, wisteria) and creeping Charlies the only living soul around.

GEORGE POTRA 1907-1990

THE BUCHAREST INNS

excerpts

The first Bucharest inn mentioned in documents was built by Manole and his wife Măria, close to the St. George Church garden. A document says Manole built houses and inns for himself and „kept them in good peace, until the days of Prince Antonie,“ who began to rule in the early months of 1669, so the mentioned houses and inns are older. (...)

The purpose and function of the great Bucharest inns were complex enough. Unlike small, marginal inns, in slums, or those grouped in the Outer City, which played host to out-of-Bucharest producers and their wagons full of goods for immediate sale, the great downtown inns, erected around the three Bucharest fairs, offered shops, cellars, and even accommodation to foreign and domestic merchants. The large yard in the middle of the inn allowed the great wagons with imported goods to come in and stay, to be unloaded, so the goods were arranged in shops to be sold, or in cellars to be kept. The shops and cellars of those inns, built out of thick, brick vaults, offered unmatched conditions of security against thieves and fire,⁷ and they were rightly considered fortresses of trade.⁸

In difficult times, when the city was robbed by Tartars or Turks, when foreign armies stopped here, and even when plague haunted the city, many people took refuge inside the great inns. In such circumstances, their strong walls served as a hard to conquer citadel. So, in September 1716, when Prince Nicolae Mavrocordat ran away from Bucharest, many

of the city's inhabitants left their houses, fearing the Turks, and they sought refuge in the Șerban Vodă Inn, in the St. George Inn, and in the Cotroceni Monastery.⁹ And, in 1806, when the Russians entered Bucharest, 300 Dalmatians of Cattaro locked themselves in the Radu Vodă Inn, planning to put up a resistance against the Turks,¹⁰ with the three cannons they had.

In the plague epidemics of 1795, when city dwellers looked for salvation inside inn walls, a custom was developed to hire doorkeepers of the Gypsies who had been ill and did not die, and they were ordered not to let anybody in. But they were easy to win over with money and gifts, and they opened the doors. To halt this, Prince Alexandru Moruzi ordered on 15 May 1795 the Gypsies chased out and replaced with incorruptible people, who would protect the inn entrances very thoroughly, until the disease went away.¹¹

In the early 18th century, when Italian del Chiaro was the Secretary of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, the two princely inns that existed in 1710 had shops downstairs with all kinds of goods, while upstairs, there were rooms.¹² The Italian writer tells us nothing about any cellars, but they exist—no doubt, for goods storage. (...)

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Șerban Cantacuzino's greatest foundation, begun in 1679, was undoubtedly the Monastery of Cotroceni, situated on a hill forming part of the south cornice of the River Dâmbovița, some three kilometers west of the city center in what were at the end of the seventeenth century still forests covering most of the right bank of the river. Today it is called the Palace of Cotroceni, having become, since the Union, the summer residence, and in more recent times the permanent residence of the heads of state. From the very beginning the monastery incorporated a princely residence whither the reigning princes and their retinue would halt for rest or refuge, or because the princely courts in the city center were no longer habitable. Both Alexandru Cuza (1859-66), the first prince since Michael the Brave to reign over the United Principalities, and Carol I of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, (1866-1914) until the completion in 1880 of Peleş Castle at Sinaia, used Cotroceni as a summer palace. After 1888 the monastery became the permanent home of Crown Prince Ferdinand, and it is for him and his wife, the future Queen Măria of România, that the old princely residence was demolished and replaced with a grander building, designed in a Venetian Classical style by the French architect Paul Gottereau. A few years later the Romanian architect Grigore Cerchez remodeled the north wing in the National Romantic style, adding a large hall with a terrace on top and two delightful colonnaded belvederes one of which was a replica of the famous belvedere at Hurez Monastery, Brâncoveanu's great foundation in the County of Vâlcea.

Until 1984, in the second courtyard of Cotroceni Monastery, stood the church which, together with some of the surrounding buildings incorporating the old kitchen and a range of vaulted cells, was all that was left of the old monastery. The plan of the church combined a trefoiled nave surmounted by a central domed tower with a spacious rectangular pronaos, within which twelve ornately carved stone columns supported a second lower tower. An arcaded porch extending the full width of the pronaos formed the entrance to the church. Orders went out for the demolition of the church on 25 April 1984. No explanation was given but it was known that Ceaușescu's palaces and that he disliked churches. Fortunately there was an architect in charge who dismantled the church with the greatest care, numbering and storing all the stonework, so that it could be rebuilt and still retain a fair degree of authenticity.

In 1683, the year of the Siege of Vienna, Șerban Cantacuzino's wife, Măria, founded the Princess's Church (Biserica Doamnei) which survives to this day in Strada Doamnei, near the site of the Prince's palace and opposite the National-Romantic pile of the Marmorosch-Blank Bank (1915-23, architect Petre Antonescu), today the Investment Bank. The beautiful columns of the porch and the two larger columns which separate the pronaos from the nave are very much like the columns of the demolished Cotroceni church. With the exception of the bell-tower over the pronaos which has long since disappeared, and the interior frescoes of which only fragments survive, the church is well preserved and, with its remarkable porch and well-proportioned interior, highly characteristic of its time.

Of the churches built outside the city's limits, three deserve to be mentioned: Old St. Eleutheria (Sf. Elefterie Vechi), half-way to Cotroceni on the right bank of the Dâmbovița, built between 1741 and 1744 by the Metropolitan Neofit with money left for this purpose by the merchant Maxim Lupetu; Mavrogheni Church in Monetăriei Street off Kiseleff Avenue, built together with a princely residence and a beautiful garden of which nothing remains by the reigning prince Niculae Mavrogheni in 1789, the year in which Austrian troops, under Prince Frederick of Saxe-Coburg, occupied Bucharest; and the Church of St. Nicholas at Băneasa, which is all that survives of the poet boyar Enăchiță Văcărescu's illustrious court, begun in 1755, twice delayed by Russo- and Austro-Turkish wars, and eventually completed in 1792 as the private chapel of the court.

The best loved and the most ornate of the eighteenth-century churches was and is Stavropoleos Church in the street of the same name. Built to a simple rectangular plan in

Public gardens, parks, cemeteries were all an essential element in what in the middle of the nineteenth century was perceived as a modern city. In addition to the Kiseleff Avenue and Cișmigiu Gardens there was the Carol I Park in the southern part of the city, designed in 1903 by the French landscape architect Redont and created to accommodate the exhibition commemorating forty years of the King's reign; the Botanic Gardens at Cotroceni, laid out in the 1890s and made into a public garden by the architect Octav Doicescu. between the wars; and the Carol II Park on the banks of the Herăstrău Lake, laid