

**The Festival of the Book:
Romanian Society's Perception of Books and Readings
between the Two World Wars**

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Abstract: Romanian culture in the 1930s witnessed an authentic cultural spectacle centred on books. The Day of the Book, which was later to become the Week of the Book, and during the royal dictatorship (10 February 1938 – 6 September 1940) the Month of the Book, was a nation-wide event, creating a favourable social context for readings and books to find their place in the centre of public discussion. The event that channelled all these discussions is presented chronologically in the first part of the paper: its origin and evolution from a simple book exhibition to a veritable national festival, encompassing large cities such as Bucharest, Cluj, or Oradea, and minor ones as well, like Baia Mare or Satu Mare. The second part of the research presents the position of the state in the festival of the book. It identifies and exposes the official discourse and message that state representatives transmitted on this occasion. It was a policy which had more to do with ideological propaganda, and aimed at creating a certain type of citizen. Next I will expose the economic-commercial discourse of publishers and booksellers, and of all those who profit from book trade. The article will try to establish how far the various printing house policies are interrelated with the cultural directives of the political sphere. The relationship of publishers and authors, publishers and book distributors will also be followed, as well as their marketing strategies. Finally, the discourse of the civil society involved in raising the cultural standard of the population will also be analyzed, including the discourse of intellectuals, literary critics, authors, as well as interviews with individuals, found in the press of the age.

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Writing about the situation of the Romanian book market and society in general in a 1933 article, writer Camil Petrescu considered that “there is no doubt for us that *the spirit of time* is marked in all its aspects and manifestations by the *motif of stabilization*. Inflation and stabilization are the two aspects of the problem”.¹

¹ Camil Petrescu, “Spiritul timpului” (The spirit of time), *România literară* 80 (1933): 3.

In addition to the political and economical problems provoked by the great crisis, Romanian culture also witnessed in the 1930s an authentic cultural spectacle centred on the book. The Day of the Book, which later was to become the Week of the Book, and during the royal dictatorship the Month of the Book, was a nationwide event, creating a favourable social context for readings and books to find their place in the centre of public discussion. This opportunity was used by publishers to sell their merchandise, booksellers to attract buyers into their bookshops, authors to deplore their fate, and politicians to support their cause. Various members from the field of culture or politics publicly exposed their opinion on the role and situation of the book in Romanian society via the radio or in the press.

Consequently, the Week of the Book concentrated a series of discourses directed towards the formation of a book policy, although in different perspectives. All cultural policies, from that of the state to that of the publishers, tried to impose a specific orientation or attitude on the practice of everyday reading.

1. The Romanian world after the First World War. From cultural renovation to the “crisis of the book”

In order to understand the festival of the book, one must regard this event from the perspective of the age that created it. The idea to establish an annual book exhibition accompanied by all the means of propaganda and publicity is without doubt the result of cultural, political, social, and economic needs.

Romanian society suffered a series of major changes after the First World War. On a cultural and ideological level, all efforts previously concentrated on the cause of the union¹ were reoriented to the modernization of the country and the construction of a new national self. On the one hand intellectuals like Ștefan Zeletin and Eugen Lovinescu supported the modernization of the country following the Western pattern, reclining upon the urban industrial classes.² On the other hand there was the traditionalist trend which insisted on the predominantly agrarian character of the country, and the search for the “authentic values” of the rural world.

On a political level this dispute was carried on between the National Peasant Party and the Liberal Party. The liberals, who ran most governments in the inter-war period, termed their programme of national unification a “cultural offensive”. This meant the establishment of schools, the extension of the network of education and the creation of new educational programmes that would comprise the four systems that Romania inherited from the provinces newly attached.³ The Peasant Party, on the other hand, saw the actions of the Liberals to increase the number of educational institutions only as an inconsiderate reaction caused by the general optimism following the Great Union. In their opinion the exuberance of these measures led to the creation of an artificially bourgeois state that could not resist long precisely because it ignored the reality and the structure of the population.⁴

¹ The union of the Romanian states on 1 December 1918.

² Keith Hitchins, *România: 1866–1947* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 295.

³ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism în România mare: 1918–1930* (Culture and nationalism in Great Romania) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 41–46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

Regardless of the chosen way, the particularities of the Romanian society's modernization process can be summed up in certain elements such as: the late appearance of capitalism and the concentration of its stages of development, predominance of traditional agrarian economy and professions, the low degree of urbanization, and the low social weight of the middle class, characterized as it is by social, cultural, and ethnic heterogeneity.¹

This research intends to reveal how the orientations in Romanian thinking affect the culture of the masses and implicitly the use of books. The degree of dissemination and use of publications greatly depends on the number of those able to read, and thus, implicitly, on the degree of literacy and education.

The 1910 statistics commissioned by the minister of education of the time, Spiru Haret, showed that "out of 5,047,342 individuals questioned, 1,986,982 or 39 % were literate, and 3,060,360 or 60 % were illiterate. As regards rural areas, the image obtained showed that 65 % were illiterate and only 17 % knew how to read and write. In urban areas the percentage of the illiterate was only 36 % and of those who could read and write was 26 %."²

Two decades after the publication of these data, in 1930, there was another general census commissioned, which remains to this day the only one complete enough to provide exact data on the inter-war period. As a result, 12 years after the Great Union, 48 % of the rural population of Romania's enlarged territory was still illiterate, although primary education was compulsory and free for all children between seven and fourteen years of age.³ The overall picture shows that out of the 14,485,914 inhabitants of over seven years of age 57 % knew how to read and write.

When interpreting the percentage of those able or not to read, one must take into account the explosive demographic growth due to the union of the three historical provinces with the Kingdom of Romania. Thus Bessarabia, with its high percentage of illiteracy, 38.1 % of its population, clearly distinguished itself from Transylvania where only 31.7% of the population was illiterate or the Banat region where the percentage was roughly a quarter of the population (28%).⁴

The question to be asked next is what and how much those Romanians were reading who appear in the statistics as literate. One must not forget that the education and culturalization policy imposed after the war was giving results sometimes even beyond expectations. While the population of Romania grew more than twice in size between 1914 and 1930, the number of students during the same period grew more than four times, and that of schoolchildren more than five times.⁵ Certain theoreticians think that the interest in reading is a form of psychological

¹ Livia Popescu, *Structura socială* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1998), 113.

² *Statistica știutorilor de carte din România: întocmită pe baza rezultatelor definitive ale recensământului general al populațiunii din 19 decembrie 1912* (The statistics of literacy in Romania: drawn up on the basis of the general census of the population from 19 December 1912) (Bucharest: Albert Baer, 1915), XLV.

³ Hitchins, *România: 1866–1947...*, 341.

⁴ Ioan Scurtu, *Viața cotidiană a românilor în perioada interbelică* (The everyday life of Romanians in the inter-war period) (Bucharest: RAO, 2001), 216.

⁵ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism...*, 285.

manifestation of an objective need for knowledge, information, or entertainment, regardless of whether the person is or is not aware of this.¹ “The world is a text”, says another researcher of the history of reading, and the duty of the text is thus to introduce events into collective memory.²

At the beginning of the 20th century Romanian printing had already had a history of four hundred years. The first printings of Macarie, commissioned by the Voivode of Walachia, Radu the Great, were religious writings in Slavonic. Long afterwards all printings issued in the Romanian countries were made in the proximity of churches or monasteries, and sponsored by princes or clerics. The situation did not change until the 18th century, when the names of private, independent persons, burghers, appeared as leaders of the printing presses, employees paid for their job. Also beginning with the late 18th century the technical equipment of the printing presses also started to improve. Towards the end of the 18th century, and even more so at the beginning of the next, a definitive process of secularization started in the production of Romanian books, in parallel with the gradual elimination of ecclesiastical monopoly.

Therefore we think it is important to outline a history of works published in the vernacular (Romanian) prior to the early 20th century, especially the most successful ones, in order to follow up the process of the formation of a reading public and their literary preferences.

The Enlightenment and the ensuing ideological movements transformed the perception on the role of books in society. The book became a means of education and social development. The change was most visible in Transylvania, where 40.07 % of the books published in this period had a secular subject, as compared to 6.23 % in Walachia and 3.08 % in Moldavia.³ Those who could read – and their number was much lower in this age than the average of other Western countries (a census in 1870 showed that 78.67 % of the population of Transylvania were illiterate⁴) – preferred to read calendars and almanacs.⁵ The success of such books is explained by one of the outstanding names in the history of reading: Peter Burke. He claims that at the crossing point of elite culture as a prerogative of a minority of intellectuals and the popular culture of the masses a new kind of common culture was formed, which equally belonged to the elite and the masses. Such an example is the printing press of Gáspár Heltai in Cluj, functioning since 1550, which started to print cheap books, attractive for the reading public, first constrained by political

¹ Tudor Nedelcea, *Civilizația cărții: incursiune în istoria cărții, presei și a tiparului* (The civilization of the book: an insight into the history of books and printing) (Bucharest: Scrisul Românesc, 1996), 150.

² Ion Vlad, *Lectura – un eveniment al cunoașterii* (Reading – an event of knowledge) (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1977), 29.

³ Mircea Tomescu, *Istoria cărții Românești de la începuturi până la 1918* (The history of Romanian books before 1918) (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1968), 110.

⁴ István György Tóth, *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Central Europe*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2000), 199.

⁵ Mircea Tomescu, *Istoria cărții...*, 114.

circumstances, but later for the profit they brought, as an evidence of the audience's interest in this kind of literature.¹

This theory was later transposed to the Romanian case by Alexandru Duțu. He argues that the dominant Romanian culture of the 17th–18th century was the common culture, because the traditional Romanian culture was homogeneous, and the communication between the levels was more intense.² The trade registers of various merchants or subscription lists also stand as evidence for this situation. All these prove that at the beginning of the 19th century the books that had a wide circulation here could be divided into three categories. First, there were the religious books, such as books of hours, Oktoikhs, and Gospel books, many of these being commissioned also for didactic purposes; second, there were pedagogical books, such as dictionaries, lexicons, and schoolbooks, as well as manuals of geography and history; and third, there were secular writings, many of which were translated from Ancient Greek literature, like Aesop's fables, or Western medieval literature, like the Alexander novel, or the *Flowers of Virtue*.³

Another decisive feature of the Romanian reading public was their interest in foreign literature. French culture had an early impact in Moldavia and Walachia, while in Transylvania and the Banat region German and Hungarian writings were preferred. The analysis of 19th century private libraries easily demonstrates the predominance of foreign works.

It can be readily observed therefore that towards the end of the 19th century the Romanian reading public for the most part limited itself to the reading of fables, almanacs, and calendars.

From the point of view of literary criticism, Romanian literature reached its peak between the years 1880 and 1900, with the assertion of writers like Eminescu, Caragiale, Delavrancea, Alexandru Vlahuță or Ion Creangă. Garabet Ibrăileanu, analyzing the Romanian literature before the First World War, wrote in 1920 that this period of the end of the 19th century “followed a literature of struggle, a literature of thesis and propaganda, and preceded another literature, from 1900 on, serving again the ideals of the present”.⁴ His entire discourse on what had happened in Romanian literary production prior to the Great Union and the opportunities rising afterwards is impregnated by the optimism characteristic for the period. The social conditions created by the Union yielded the hope that Romanian literature would reach its maturity, when the sad tone of previous writings would be replaced “by the tone set by the rhythm of a normal life of work, and the hope in the result of our

¹ Emese G. Czintos and Judit Kolumbán, “Popular literature in decline. 17th century popular books in the collections of the Lucian Blaga Central University Library”, *Philobiblon* XIV (2009): 711–712.

² Cf. Alexandru Ofrim, *Cheia și psaltirea, imaginarul cărții în cultura tradițională românească*, (The key and the psalm book, the imaginary book in traditional Romanian culture) (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2001), 25–30.

³ Constantin A. Stoide, *Comerțul cu cărți între Transilvania, Moldova și Țara Românească între 1730 și 1830*, (Book trade between Transilvania, Moldavia and Walachia between 1730 and 1830) (Iași: Demiurg, 2005), 70.

⁴ Garabet, Ibrăileanu, *Cultură și literatură* (Culture and literature) (Bucharest: Editura Librăriei "Universala" Alcalay & Co, [s.a.]), 55.

efforts”. The stage of complete development was to be proved by the appearance of the Balzac-type social novel.¹

In other words there was a certain discrepancy between the pre-war and post-war literatures, and also between the reasons for writings, and the reading public.

If we take into consideration that the habit of reading is closely connected to the sensibility of a society at a certain time then we understand why the insecurity that dominated politics and economy also impregnated the literary world, influencing the discussions on the notion of crisis and stability. Camil Petrescu's reflections on the spirit of the time may help in understanding how the society of the 1930s perceived reading. “The books we liked more in the 1920s became unreadable. The frost of stabilization aborted the entire lyrical-liberational blooming of the 1919 revolution. The call for order resounds from all sides... there is no doubt for us that “the spirit of time” is marked in all its aspects and manifestations by the *motif of stabilization*. Inflation and stabilization are the two aspects of the problem”.² The stabilization that Camil Petrescu talked about can also be expressed by the need of balance. This balance however was difficult to be obtained in a society which was still confronting the economic effects of the great crisis of 1929, and internal political struggles for power.

On the other hand, on a cultural level the year 1933 brought “a true overproduction in literature which lacked the fatal effects of the same phenomenon [the crisis] as they appeared in economy”.³ The need for stability appeared on other levels as well. On the one hand there was the need to find a balance between the literary production in the country, and the translations which were still much demanded, and on the other hand the need to regulate the relation between production costs and selling price of books. “Books are expensive because paper is expensive. And paper is expensive because Romania was happy with its paper cartel monopoly. The paper from abroad ... can be imported for 10 lei/kg, while in the country it costs 25 lei/kg.”⁴

This new type of crisis is identified and perceived more acutely by those involved in the production or distribution of books, namely the authors, the publishers, and the booksellers. In addition, the majority of cultural or literary publications at the beginning of the 1930s wrote about and debated the “crisis of reading”. This crisis however is not a local phenomenon, which only affected Romanian literary production. In several Western countries the inter-war period was perceived as a time period in which books met several obstacles in reaching the large public, and this public showed little or sometimes no interest in the literary work of the contemporaries. This happens, for instance, in Italy in the third decade of the 20th century. The rapid growth of the price of materials used by publishers, as

¹ Ibid.

² Camil Petrescu, “Spiritul timpului” (The spirit of time), *România literară* 80 (1933): 3.

³ Octavian Suluțiu, “Literatura în 1933” (Literature in 1933), *România literară* 118 (1934): 4.

⁴ Camil Baltazar, “Problema cărții românești” (The problem of the book in Romania), *România literară* 65 (6 mai 1933): 2.

well as the raising costs of labour force offered the opportunity for the state to intervene in the field of literary production. Italian publishers pointed out that the reason of the crisis of book trade in Italy was due to the small sale market they had at their disposal. The small size of the market was a projection of the high degree of illiteracy or semi-illiteracy characterizing the majority of the Italians, the lack of the habit of book reading, as well as the inefficiency of the book distribution and sale networks.¹

The subject of the crisis of books is also debated in German society between the two world wars. The book as the foundation of national culture and education was perceived as in decline with respect to its trade. It was impossible for the disorder in politics and economy following the First World War not to influence the book market. Therefore those who foresaw the effects of this crisis always compared the situation of pre-war Germany with the contemporary situation in which the decline of books was associated with the moral decline of society.²

The crisis of books and the book market was therefore a phenomenon which could be interpreted on several levels. First, one can speak about an economical issue. The great financial crisis of 1929 had its influences in all fields, also that of book printing and publication. Moreover, these problems rose against the background of the raising costs of trained labour force becoming drastically scarce because of the war.

Another level of interpretation of the book crisis reveals the essential roles that the book played in the culture of the time. Although the 20th century was marked by the appearance of cinematography and the dynamics of the press and the radio, the book still remains one of the most frequently used means for the dissemination of ideas. In the states where social mutations and economic unbalance favoured the formation of totalitarian regimes, the book was soon taken over and integrated as one of the means of propaganda. A daily paper of the age informed that in Italy “Benitto Mussolini took a rifle in one hand and a book in the other, and showed it to the crowd saying that these are the weapons for fighting and success today”.³

Here as well there was an ongoing debate among authors, publishers, and literary critics about the above issue in the press and on public forums.

Writing about the crisis, poet Camil Baltazar points out its origins in the years following the Great Union: “it can be stated without any exaggeration, on the basis of documents and data, that during these fifteen years since the war more books were printed than in the years before the war, in the time of little Romania. This was in fact also one of the reasons why the first crisis of the book was felt in the years 1921–22: they printed a lot, they printed with ardour and desperation in

¹ David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle, *Mass culture and Italian society from fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 204.

² Gideon Reuveni, *Reading Germany: literature and consumer culture in Germany before 1933* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 18–20.

³ Ion Georgescu, “Săptămâna cărții” (The Week of the Book), *Patria* 16 (1934): 3.

'18-'19-'20, and during the following years the attics of book publishers were found full of books."¹

A further example is the literary critic George Călinescu, who established point-by-point a series of causes at the basis of this crisis. First of all, "the Romanian family has no respect for the career of an intellectual. The young are brought up in a spirit hostile to culture." The argument moves on then gradually to the parents, who "not reading themselves, consider reading a useless expense and trouble", then to the "professors (not all but very many)" who "read nothing under various pretexts". Influenced by the indifference of his parents and teachers, the young man is not encouraged to practice reading by school manuals either, which "as they are created, they propagate aversion towards contemporary writing". In fact, continued the literary critic, the entire crisis is generated and fuelled by "persons and publications" which "systematically ridicule all contemporaneous writers, deploring the decadence of letters, although we live in a flourishing age". Even the writers themselves take part in creating the illusion of literary crisis by "boycotting one another in reviews, gossiping without critical reason".

In what follows, Călinescu enumerates other factors which played a role in the birth of the crisis of reading, one of which is the literary critic who "confuses the reader since when a critic claims that a book is weak, the others declare is outstanding. The reader lost all his faith in criticism". The exposition on the nature of the crisis of reading transforms towards the end of the article into a discourse on the degrading profession of the literary critic. The critic's flaw comes from the flaw of the time, since "although reputable, they haven't got enough social terrain as compared to those who had the same profession in the past". Since they lack social recognition, they are ignored by the publishers who "advertising themselves, without consulting the critics, accustomed the reading public with the idea that a book is an afternoon amusement". The fact that the literary critic was absent from the field of literary production allowed the publishers to launch "a plethora of books without value which collapsed all confidence in Romanian literature". The crisis of the book is in fact the crisis of the society of that time, which lost any reference point to Romanian literature. Those who were still reading were doing it only out of fashion, "the snobbery of the Romanian bourgeoisie today is also a reason for the decrease in the number of readers. The high society boasts of not knowing Romanian literature and wonders whether there is any interest to be found in the writings of a Romanian author. The number of French books and magazines distributed here is scandalously disproportionate. *Les Nouvelles Littératures* and *Marie Claire* are there on the table of all those people who had never bought a Romanian magazine".²

The fact that in a period of social instability and economic difficulties the Romanian book market also experienced a crisis is absolutely natural. While some sought to understand the causes of the crisis of reading, others formulated a series of solutions and proposals to improve the situation. These solutions came from various perspectives (cultural, economic, etc.). In order for the Romanian book production

¹ Camil Baltazar, "Problema cărții românești" (The problem of the book in Romania), *România literară* 80 (1933): 3.

² Horia Stanca, "Criza cititului" (The crisis of reading), *Tribuna* 38 (1939): 3.

to be valued as it is valued in the West, and the book to take its well-deserved place in the internal world of each individual, all segments of the literary market had to be reformed.

First it should start from the raw materials, such as paper, which must be made cheaper and relieved from the monopoly of the paper cartel. This measure could raise the number of copies printed and reduce the price of books. The numbers offered by the *România Literară* magazine showed that the publishing houses printing fifteen-twenty thousand copies per edition sold the book for fifteen to twenty lei, while those which only printed four or five thousand copies were constrained to establish a price of seventy-eighty lei per copy. The Minister of Education himself, when asked about the causes which led to the collapse of the Romanian book market, admitted that “the first cause is the high price of paper, twice as expensive as abroad, representing around 40 - 50 % of the printing cost of a book.”¹

Another solution is the improvement of the condition of publishing houses and their reorganization. In the opinion of the writers of the age Romanian publishers had two main defects: there are too few of them, and they are “improvised”.² What’s more, adds Camil Baltazar, “there is no cultural programme, no professional responsibility, no interest in value. Everything is still shapeless and confusing...”³ The publishers, aware of the problems of their guild, came up with a series of proposals which could have improved the situation of books and implicitly their own, as well. Asked in a radio interview how he thought books could be distributed in the villages, the director of the Cultura Națională Publishing House, Alexandru Rosetti, said that there was a need to group and organize Romanian publishers into a unique association which “could efficiently accomplish centralization and the sale of books in the villages”.⁴ Moreover, this association would also have the role of establishing a cultural and investment programme for book selection and recommendations for the villagers’ readings.

The lack of interest for reading was, according to some intellectuals of the age, the fault of the poor book distribution network, that is, the booksellers. Many public voices criticize the fact that there were no real bookshops in the country, in the true sense of the word. Especially in rural areas these were in fact some mixed shops that Arghezi categorized as *bazaar type bookshops*, “with books in one window and tennis shoes in the other, alternating with phonographs and automobile parts.”⁵

¹ “De ce e scumpă cartea?” (Why are books expensive?), *Universul* 131 (1935): 1.

² Liviu Malița, *Eu, scriitorul* (I, writer) (Cluj-Napoca: Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 1997), 89.

³ Camil Baltazar, “O asociație de editură a scriitorilor” (A publishing association for writers), *România literară* 76 (1933): 2.

⁴ “Radio-interviu cu d. Alex Rosetti, directorul editurii Cultura Națională despre problema cărții literare” (Radio-interview with Mr. Alex Rosetti, director of Cultura Națională Publishing House, on the problem of the literary book), *România literară* 76 (1933): 4.

⁵ Ioana Pârvulescu, “Editorii și librării” (Publishers and booksellers), *România literară* 31 (1998): 7.

The bookseller was therefore still a simple merchant in the Romanian society, who treated the book as any merchandise. As he was not familiar with cultural life, he was incapable of guiding his clients to reading. Some time before the beginning of the crisis of books, the press of the age commented on the results of a meeting of booksellers, who failed to establish a national association, and presented the benefits that such a society would have brought both to the reading public and the book trade. It would have facilitated the relation between booksellers and publishers, would have created a centralized distribution system for publications which thus would have circulated much more easily, and it would have helped the generalization of allowances that only the large bookshops in cities benefited from.¹ Similarly, the writers of the inter-war period also considered that the situation of the book distribution system urgently required the creation of a school for bookshop owners and then the institution of a national network of book stands.²

While some saw the answer to the book crisis in a better organization of publishers and book shops, that is, in the commercial aspect of books, others emphasized the need for the establishment and organization of a network of popular libraries equipped for the needs of all social categories. The inter-war period is precisely that moment in which Romanian libraries were unified and restructured on the basis of a new law for libraries and the establishment of the Association of Romanian Librarians. Speaking about the problem of the cultural and moral crisis of the country, poet and journalist Ion Pillat considered the book to be the “means of culture which most rapidly and easily pervades the deep strata of the people”. Therefore one of the solutions offered to solve this vital problem for national prestige and unity was, in the writer’s opinion, “the creation of public libraries and their continuous and rich equipment with selected books adequate for the purpose. A library which is not refreshed every year in the fight against illiteracy and foreign propaganda is like a gun without ammunition. However, these popular libraries must not mean: closed shelves, even if richly packed with good, yet uncut volumes, but an active organism of live circulation of books, useful, and indeed used...”.³ The writer’s other proposals included the foundation of a national publishing house by the state, which would primarily publish the classics of Romanian literature in critical and popular editions. Ultimately, the solution offered by Ion Pillat shows that the problem of books and reading are in fact components of the issue of the country’s cultural unity. The next step after the national union was to prove and gain cultural unity. This meant the homogenization of the cultural level of the masses by eliminating the differences imposed by the conditions specific for each region. In this process the book played an essential role of cultural propaganda, together with arts, the press, and cinematography.

Speaking strictly of cultural propaganda by books, this had to be done in all possible ways and through all available channels, from official ones such as schools

¹ “Pentru răspândirea cărții” (For the spreading of books), *Societatea de mâine* 32 (1924): 465.

² Camil Baltazar, “O asociație de editură a scriitorilor,” 2.

³ Ion Pillat, “Un program cultural” (A cultural programme), *Generația Unirii* 14 (1930): 24–25 .

to those involving spare time and entertainment. Especially towards the end of the 1920s, many programmes of book and culture distribution formulated by the intellectuals of the age emphasized the role of the book in cultural unification and insistently demanded the involvement of the state. Most often they also stressed the idea that private cultural institutions and associations could not fulfil a general plan of mass culturalization and that success could only be guaranteed for the measures taken in the name of the state. Writer Liviu Rebreanu presented in a 1933 article the roles that every constituent part of book industry should play in the establishment of a book festival so that their product may reach to all corners of the country and to all social categories. All this was supposed to be based on “live, intelligent, persistent propaganda in the favour of books”. The initiative was to belong to the Society of Writers, which “the publishers, booksellers, typographies, the entire press and all cultural societies would surely join. Even the state wouldn’t dare to stay away...”.¹

The crisis of books is therefore not a crisis of book production, but rather that of book consumption and of the desirable impact of reading on the population, which actually did not exist. The demand is in fact the education of the reading public and the orientation of their preferences to national literature. The reported crisis of the book gave way to a series of discussions on the deficient system of book distribution. In the absence of bookshops and libraries the Romanian book could not reach all regions of the country and especially the newly attached provinces, where twenty years after the union the population was still dependent on foreign publications. The core of the problem was the need of organization and centralization of book distribution.

There was of course an economic side of the crisis of books, caused by the financial instability resulting from the great economic depression of 1929, which raised the prices and materials and impeded the development of the Romanian book market.

The crisis of reading launched a real debate in Romanian society about the need for books to become goods of wide consumption, and reading a habitual practice for all social categories. While in Germany the crisis of books was perceived by many as the sign of a society going through a cultural decline, in Romania it revealed the degree of cultural backwardness still affecting a considerable part of the population. The lack of interest in reading threw the situation of the book and the Romanian writer into a vicious circle. The publisher, who thought that book printing would become a profitable business after the Union, proved to be wrong. To protect himself, he only printed and distributed popular literature or classics, which guaranteed him some profit.² Moreover, the lack of capital seriously affects the promotion of Romanian books and writers. Consequently, in order to raise the reading public’s appetite for books and transform it into an object of wide consumption, there was a need for a mobilizing action involving the main forces in the industry of typography and the field of culture.

¹ Liviu Rebreanu, “Ziua cărții” (The day of the book), *România literară* 65 (1933): 1–2.

² Liviu Malița, *Eu, scriitorul...*, 84–85.

2. From the Day of the book to the Month of the book. Chronological evolution and cultural policy

The First World War marked a brutal halt in the cultural and literary life of the Romanians. For a few years, during the time of warfare, many writers who used to dominate the literary market ceased to write. No more literature was printed, and the magazines which previously had a major role (such as the *Semănătorul* or the *Viața românească*) ceased to appear any longer.¹ As things were going back to normal, Romanian culture also gradually recovered and tended towards new levels of assertion.

A retrospective look at the literature of the inter-war period may reveal an ascending course dominating the Romanian literary market during the whole period. The new generation rising after the war is represented by names like Ion Barbu, Camil Petrescu, Lucian Blaga, Mihai Ralea, and George Călinescu. Together with them, “the great young generation, the remarkable generation represented by Octavian Goga, Liviu Rebreanu, Arghezi asserted itself in full maturity. The third generation rose then with representative names such as Mircea Eliade or George Bacovia, who would continue their activity after this period also. It happened thus that in the period during the two world wars three great generations of writers emerged in full and glorious maturity, lending by their simultaneity and emulation the unique impression of the period.”² The social and political modifications, the efforts for the modernization of the society, and the external influences becoming increasingly stronger marked the forms of literary expression. This resulted in the development of a whole range of writings from those representative for trends such as traditionalism or nativism to others tending towards the avant-garde.

Many of these literary movements are inscribed in fact in the ampler circle of the artistic movements of the period. As to these cultural trends, it is important to note that although they are an integral part of ampler movements originating outside the country, they come to reach beyond imitation, and become individualized. However, in order to reach a stage of original culture specific to the unified Romania there was need of a series of conscious and sustained efforts of the entire intellectual elite.

It was the first born son of King Ferdinand and Queen Marie, later to become King of Romania under the name of Carol II, who played an essential role in supporting Romanian culture during this period.

Carol was born in Sinaia in 1893. He studied with some of the most outstanding professors of the time, among whom Nicolae Iorga and Gheorghe Murgoci. He was a graduate of the School of Military Sons in Iași and the School of Officers in Bucharest. He proved to be interested in everything connected to art and culture from his school years. He was later described as an attentive reader of Romanian literature, a spectator of theatre performances, visitor of all fine art

¹ Ovid Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura românească între cele două războaie mondiale* (Romanian literature between the two world wars), vol. 1, (Bucharest: Minerva, 1972), 15.

² Dan Zamfirecu, “Tradiția ca durată a istoriei și culturii naționale” (Tradition as duration of national history and culture), *Contemporanul*, 10 Nov. 1967. In: Dan Zamfirescu, *Via Magna* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1979), 71–72.

exhibitions, listener of concerts, never absent from the music performances offered by Carmen Sylva at the royal palace, and an ardent participant in literary meetings.¹

The implication of a royal family member in actions of supporting culture had already become a practice. However, Carol II's achievement surpassed the previous actions of the Romanian royalty. In an attempt to rebuild his prestige damaged by his abdication in 1925, he turned to culture, turning it into an ideological instrument of manipulating public perception.² This became apparent after his re-enthronement in 1930 and amplified in the years of royal dictatorship. Already in the first year of his reign, in a speech given at Nicolae Iorga's summer courses organized at Vălenii de Munte, the king presented himself as a supporter of the Romanians' prosperity, and promised that "following the example of the Romanian voivodes as patrons of the culture of the Romanian nation, I pledge to be also a Voivode of Romanian Culture".³ As of 1938, Carol II had already outlined his image as a patron of culture, a sovereign always preoccupied with raising the intellectual standard of his people.

One of the main ways he managed to attain his objective was by the means of cultural associations and the Royal Cultural Foundations.

There were many societies and associations in Romania between the two world wars, attended by a public mostly coming from the educated strata. A statistics from the mid-1920s indicates a number of 125 charitable societies with 383 branches over the country.⁴

Perceiving this direction of development, representing an opportunity of involvement in the problems of civil society, King Carol II founded the *Prince Carol Cultural Foundation* in 1921, with the purpose to penetrate "as deep as possible in the midst of people, beginning a true work of guidance, day by day, hour by hour".⁵ The purpose of the programmes proposed by the foundation was the reorganization of the village and rural communities in view of a better life.⁶

In 1935 the Foundation started its measures to achieve the "total cultural programme" and set Cultural Houses in the villages. Their role was, as sociologist Dimitrie Gusti suggests, complementary to the actions of the state. The House had the role of uniting the efforts of society members, and to draw the individual into actions with collective purposes. The activities of the Cultural Houses were

¹ Lucian Predescu, *Enciclopedia Cugetarea* (The *Cugetarea* Encyclopaedia), (Bucharest: Cugetarea – Georgescu-Delafras, 1940), 174.

² Gabriel Badea-Paun, *Mecenat și comanditar. Arta și mesaj politic* (Patronage and financial support. Art and political message), (Bucharest: Noi Media Print, 2010), 183.

³ King Carol II, *Discursuri culturale, 1930–1940* (Cultural Discourses, 1930–1940), (Bucharest: Universal Dalsi, 2000), 5.

⁴ Livia Popescu, *Structura socială...*, 116.

⁵ Festivitatea de la Fundația regală Principele Carol (The festivity at the Prince Carol Royal Foundation), *Curentul VII* (1934): 21.

⁶ Ion I. Cheșcă and N. I. Dragomir, *Măria să Regele Carol al II-lea și ridicarea poporului român* (His Majesty King Carol II and the elevation of the Romanian people) (Tulcea: Tipografia Curierul Tulcei, 1937), 19.

concentrated on four levels: public health, work organization (technical and cooperative), moral culture, and intellectual culture.¹

As far as the latter, the cultural level, is concerned, the Houses became in time agents of distribution for books in the rural areas. They functioned as frameworks for the publication and distribution of periodicals such as the magazine *Albina*, the *Magazine of the Cultural House*, and entire collections of writings considered to be “useful for the villagers”, comprised in collections of the type *Cartea Satului* (Book of the Village) or *Cartea Căminului Cultural* (Book of the Cultural House). Gradually, depending on the needs of the rural world, the works printed became increasingly specialized, such as the series *Biblioteca Echipelor Regale Studentești* (Library of the Royal Student Teams), addressed mainly to people in rural administration, comprising “programmes, guidance for lively, productive, practical, and useful work ... for the Cultural Houses.”²

The ideal village that Carol II pictures and to which all rural areas had to tend to, represented, in the King’s view, “a work of condensing all needs of everyday life”. Moreover, in his discourses on this subject he never failed to emphasize that “by the culturalization of villages I see the spreading of books, the spreading of everything that is beautiful”.³

The entire program of cultural elevation is presented to the contemporaries as a real fight against the lack of culture, a work “endlessly huge to accomplish ... a work of deep love and deep talent” to be applied by the leaders of the villages, following the guidance of the Cultural Houses.

The cultural purpose that Carol wished to accomplish not only implied the instruction of the masses of villagers, but of the Romanian population as a whole, therefore of the middle class as well, then in full process of formation in the urban centres. The accomplishment of this purpose implied thus the involvement and support of the local elites who had to be attracted into the projects of social activity. For this reason the King founded, among others, the *King Carol II Royal Foundation for Literature and Arts*. The intellectuals were promoted in the magazine *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* (The Royal Foundations Magazine) and the *Energia* (Energy) library, whose purpose was to “support and make known the cultural work of Romanian and foreign intellectuals”. Another foundation was made in Cluj for scientists, the *King Carol II Foundation for Science*, with its main task “to cultivate Romanian science, scientific discoveries, putting them in the service of the nation”.⁴

Carol II’s cultural policy was not limited however to the establishment of foundations and research institutions. The cultural actions made in the name of the new ideal gradually penetrated all fields of activity and all social categories. As the *Gazeta ilustrată* (The Illustrated Gazette) appreciated on the third anniversary of the King’s accession to the throne, “His Majesty brought in all fields of national life a breeze of youth and optimism, a wave of trust and noble competition to do good in

¹ Irina Livezeanu, *Cultură și naționalism...*, 121.

² Ion I. Cheșcă and N. I. Dragomir, *Măria să Regele Carol al II-lea...*, 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

order to provoke progress... There was no cultural, social, ecclesiastical or national institution, there was no celebration or recognition of a charitable action for the country to which the King wouldn't participate with words or with actions".¹

The propaganda undertaken by Carol after his return to the country had its echoes in the foreign press as well, especially French, in which Carol II appeared as a dynamic king for whom the historical and cultural tradition had the role of "founding the present" and "devise the future", "the sovereign of the young and the peasants".²

It stands as evidence for the success of the King's programme of cultural elevation that many of the intellectuals and outstanding personalities of the age joined it. Historians, writers, artists, and scientists all rallied around Carol II, profiting of his patronage. The purpose of the King's campaign, lasting all throughout the decade of his reign, was to create the image of a sovereign attached to Romanian values, as he himself confessed in his coronation speech: "driven by My great love for the Country ... I came with My heart filled with love for all Romanians and with one single thought, to gather round the Throne all the sons of the Homeland, eager for work and truth".³

The patronage of arts, which created Carol's image of a Maecenas of Romanian culture, proved useful also on a political level. Many of the intellectuals and artistic elites whose projects the King supported were also parts of political life, as members or decisive figures of various political parties. By the activity of the Royal Cultural Foundations, Carol managed to attract them on his side, or at least to obtain their political consent in certain matters.

One member of the intellectual elites involved in the cultural transformation of the Romanian society was the sociologist Dimitrie Gusti.

A scientist of great erudition, Dimitrie Gusti laid the foundations of the Romanian Social Institute in 1918. During the entire inter-war period his efforts aimed at joining research with education and field work. He was the initiator and organizer of a series of research campaigns of Romanian social realities. Groups of students and specialists conducted under his supervision monographs and sociological studies on the Romanian village, creating thus a sort of radiography of the Romanian social realities of the age. All these studies led then to Gusti's pedagogical and cultural projects aiming at the restructuring of the process of education and speeding up the modernization of the Romanian society.⁴

As regards the concept of culture, in Dimitrie Gusti's opinion it is the binding matter which "forms community spirit, the consciousness of national values,

¹ "8 iunie 1930 – 8 iunie 1933" (8 June 1930 – 8 June 1933), *Gazeta ilustrată* 6–7 (1933): 107–108.

² Laurențiu Vlad, *Ecouri românești în presa franceză: L'illustration, 1843–1944* (Romanian echoes in the French press: *L'illustration, 1843–1944*), (Bucharest: Editura Universității din Bucharest, 2004), 40.

³ Ion I. Cheșcă and N. I. Dragomir, *Măria să Regele Carol al II-lea...*, 14.

⁴ Marius Claudiu Langa, *Contribuția lui Dimitrie Gusti la dezvoltarea pedagogiei sociale românești* (Dimitrie Gusti's contribution to the development of Romanian social pedagogy) (Chișinău: Universitatea Pedagogică de Stat "Ion Creangă", 2008), 9–22.

the consciousness of national solidarity”.¹ Following this system of thought, the sociologist formulates a series of rules connected to stages that must be followed in a culturalization activity. The first rule is to know the people, an operation that he initiated soon after 1918 by founding the Romanian Social Institute. The second rule is the development of national creativity, essential for the formation of national consciousness. This is in fact the responsibility of the state, which is nothing else than “the political and legal organization and personification of the nation”.² Consequently the state and its representatives have the obligation to protect and defend the cultural values of the nation, discover and wake them, and “raise them to the highest peaks when they are already present”.

It is no wonder therefore that the Romanian state wished to make use of professor and scientist Dimitrie Gusti’s knowledge on national identity, and offered him the leadership of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Arts in 1932.

His work report at the end of his mandate comprised over 1000 pages, which demonstrated a year of intense efforts to achieve his pedagogical and cultural ideas.

Following the same concept as Carol II, Gusti also considered that the role of the school in the society must be completed with other educational activities that would combine spare time with the spreading of culture and norms of civilization. He applied these convictions by creating a series of manifestations not only for schools, but for all social categories having a role in developing the level of general culture. One of these manifestations, lasting throughout the entire reign of Carol II, was the Day of the Book.

Taking over a model of the age, accustoming the population with modern celebrations such as the Milk Day, Dimitrie Gusti’s initiative happened against the background of an ardent discussion of intellectuals on the lack of interest in national literature. This may also be the reason for the fact that the authorities sustained the organization of the Day of the Book, which became a spring tradition in Romania during the inter-war period. This event, as a time of celebration dedicated to books, was the perfect opportunity for the state to become a partner of writers, publishers, booksellers, and librarians in their job to promote reading and educate the public.

The official decision of the Ministry to initiate the Day of the Book was published in the *Monitorul Oficial* (Official Gazette) on 28 April 1933. The most important dispositions included the organization of book exhibitions with sale in villages and cities alike, congresses on the problem of books and readings, and meetings with the readers. The librarians, publishers, and booksellers were invited to promote their books and services on conferences and sessions. The public had the chance of being involved in book collection activities for libraries and cultural institutions with poor finances.³

¹ Dimitrie Gusti, “Politica culturii și statul cultural” (The politics of culture and the culture state), In: *Politica culturii* (The politics of culture) (Bucharest: Tipografia Concesionară Alexandru Terek, 1928): 484.

² *Ibid.*, 485.

³ *Decizia ministerială pentru instituirea unei zile a cărții* (Ministry decision for the instatement of a Day of the Book) In: Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate la Ministerul*

All these measures also represented Romania's attempt to join a cultural practice customary in the Western countries: book fairs. Besides the popular book fairs of Frankfurt and Leipzig, there was a *Fiesta del Libro Español* in Spain, similar to our Day of the Book, established in 1926 on the initiative of writer Vincent Clavel Andrés, on the anniversary of Cervantes' death.¹ In Italy as well the Fascist propaganda monopolized the book fairs of Milano and Torino and establishes the *Fiera del Libro*.

Before Carol II's accession to the throne, Romania had already had the experience of world exhibitions, to which it had been participating since 1867. As a result, there were a series of well defined methods of identity strategies serving foreign affairs by outlining a public perception of Romania.

Although at the beginning these exhibitions were conceived as competitions where every participant could obtain a profit by selling their merchandise, they later became stages for the presentation of various ideologies, political constructions, and ways of life. Ever since the 19th century and until after the First World War they were the perfect framework for the newly formed states and ascending nations, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, or Romania, to prove their national particularities, legitimating their existence in front of the other nations.²

It should be noted that ever since the first appearance of the Romanian Principalities at the exhibition, in 1867, and all throughout the 20th century, the book, whether printed or manuscript, was always present as an exhibit. In completion of all the other defining elements of a civilization, such as architecture, painting, or popular art, the book is an indicator of progress and cultural standard, indispensable for the creation of a propagandistic image.

The message that the Romanian pavilion transmitted at the world exhibitions of the 1930s was that of prosperity, a balance of economic and intellectual forces, and ascending evolution. The person entrusted with the organization and conception of these exhibitions was Dimitrie Gusti, who managed to obtain the clearest and most comprehensive picture of Romanian realities due to his institute of sociological research. The institute attracted the attention of Carol II, who followed the activity of the Romanian Social Institute with great interest, supporting it by the *Prince Carol Foundation*³ and opting for its founder on the political stage.

It was also Dimitrie Gusti who took part in the development of an internal, royal propaganda on a cultural background. This was the context in which the Day of the Book opened on 20 May 1933, with the patronage of His Majesty.

The first event took place in the Aula of the *Carol I University Foundation*, where, as noted in the press of the age, "never has a festival of the book gathered

instrucției, cultelor și artei (A year of activity at the Ministry of education, cults, and arts) (Bucharest: Tipografia Bucovina, 1934), 1341.

¹ Un cajon revuelto, Día de libro, <http://uncajonrevuelto.arte-redes.com/?p=166>.

² Laurentiu Vlad, *Imagini ale identității naționale: România și expozițiile universale de la Paris, 1867–1937* (Images of national identity: Romania and the world exhibitions in Paris, 1867–1937) (Iași: Institutul European, 2007), 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 112.

together so many notable people”. All the authorities of the time participated in the event: His Majesty King Carol II, the Prime Minister, members of the government, members of the Romanian Academy, writers, publishers, booksellers, and “a surprised public eager for such an unexpected event”.¹

The extensive interest was also due to the intense and well organized advertising of the event, conceived by the Romanian Writers’ Association and the Ministry of Education, together with other cultural societies. Weeks before the Day of the Book began, the poster created by Mac Constantinescu, representing an open book over the country’s coat of arms in the background, announced in bold letters THE DAY OF THE BOOK, 1933, 20 May, *Under the High Patronage of His Majesty King Carol II*. The important publishing houses also launched a series of advertisements and posters decorating the windows of bookshops or published in the press, promising great discounts or book presentations. The radio also brought its contribution: the broadcasts about the coming events of the Day of the Book awakened public interest in this new celebration.

Gazettes and newspapers from all over the country launched a campaign for raising public awareness of the importance of books in social development. There was much discussion about the necessity to promote book printing in the villages, by any means and in all circumstances, since “in the village the situation couldn’t be more painful. The book is a rare object: it is almost inexistent, and if you find it, then it is certainly not the kind of book that a villager’s soul might want and can understand, that he would passionately fall in love with.”² The more efficient application of, and a more realistic approach to book policy could be an answer to this problem. The idea of a book exhibition was especially encouraged and appreciated.



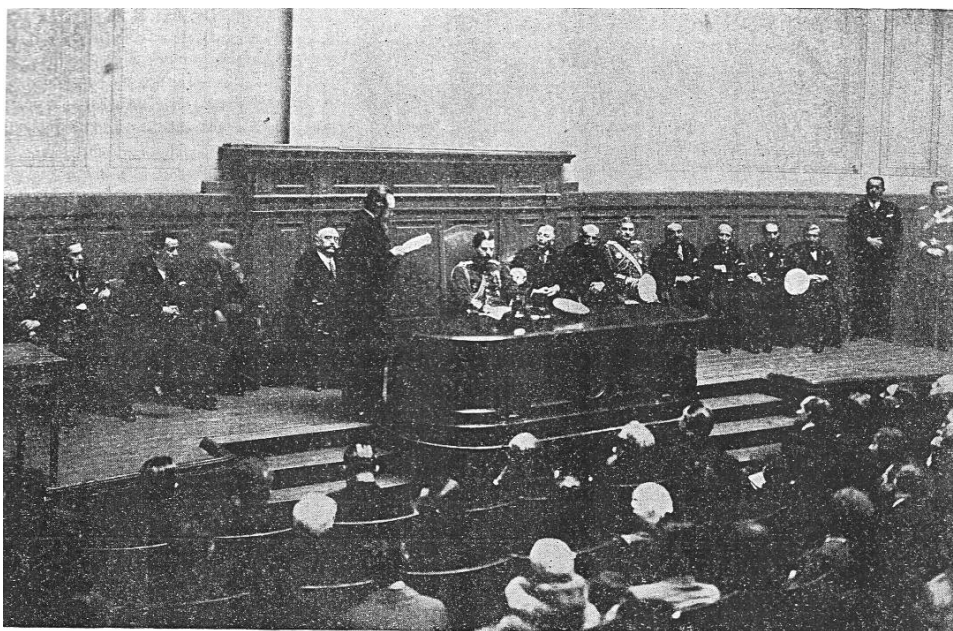
The official poster from 1933³

¹ “Cărți, conferințe, congrese, expoziții” (Books, conferences, congresses, exhibitions), *Boabe de grâu* III (1933): 375.

² D. I. Ionescu-Demion, “În legătură cu sărbătoarea cărții” (About the celebration of books), *Curentul* VII (1934): 3.

³ Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate la Ministerul instrucției, cultelor și artei*, 1343.

Books should be exhibited and presented at every kind of public manifestation and on all occasions: “at a cattle exhibition, for instance, one can see the finest animals, raised in special conditions. But next to them, there is a small mobile bookstand, which offers almost for free books about how to obtain such fine cattle as presented in the exhibition. The villager, unable to purchase the animal that he particularly liked, buys the book which says how to raise such an animal. He reads it, applies its content in practice, and then, as he harvests the crop of his work, he profoundly understands the benefits of the book. This way, first out of interest, then for the sake of its words, instead of hating the book, the villager befriends it, loves it, and thirstily seeks it.”¹



Congresul Cărții: cuvântarea pâr. I. Agârbiceanu
Opening of the Congress of the Book²

The celebration commenced with a solemn ceremony, marked by the speeches of the participating officials. The first speech was given by the creator of the Day of the Book himself, Dimitrie Gusti. In his quality as a Minister of Education he felt obliged to emphasize once again the importance and role in Romanian society of the book and Romanian publishing which is, in the professor's opinion, “a live part of the country's cultural problems”.³ He indirectly attributed the idea of establishing a day of celebration for the book to His Majesty who, by the example of his Foundations, “stood with all his understanding and will of encouragement before the writer of literature and the artist.” After reviewing the

¹ Ibid.

² *Boabe de grâu* III (1933): 377.

³ Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate la Ministerul instrucției, cultelor și artei*, 1350.

coming events, Minister Gusti announced the establishment of an award for literature King Carol II, in an amount of 25,000 lei, to be awarded on the Day of the Book to the year's best literary work. Also, as a hallmark of this period, the Ministry would publish two collections, one of the definitive editions of Romanian classics, and the other of international classics in translation; for this it addressed the publishing houses that had the best technical equipment for the creation of a fine appearance. As an evidence of completing the cultural political measures for participation in the book fair, the Ministry would buy the works of modern Romanian writers for the sum of 100,000 lei, and distribute it by cultural societies to the most active public libraries of their region.¹

The speakers following in the line were the representatives of the main participating institutions. They expressed their homage to the King for the establishment of this prestigious event of Romanian culture, then they formulated their hopes for the future evolution of this day of celebration. The discourses had, however, a much more emphatic aspect as to their message. The listeners could follow how the speakers, representative persons of Romanian culture, outlined the image of Carol II as the supreme cultural authority of the country, "the voivode of Romanian culture". Ultimately, the discourses held at the Day of the Book reflected how the transformations in art often anticipated social tendencies;² in this case the instatement of Carol's authoritarian regime is preceded by the imposition of royal domination over Romanian art and culture. For example, professor I. Simionescu in the name of the Romanian Academy considered that "the presence of Your Majesty at this apotheosis of the book must mean for the whole world a summoning to a single battlefield in the common fight against the thick fog that makes the crowd walk in a continuous darkness."³

In the name of the Romanian Writers' Society, Corneliu Moldovan, after speaking about general poverty diminishing the number of readers ("so that for 18 million souls the number of copies only reaches 5000, and only for the novel"), and also about issues related to paper, concluded that the problems of book industry can only be solved with the help of the state.

Mister Ioanițiu, the representative of Romanian publishers, made a public promise to reward the King's attention paid to his guild by "spreading the printed word among our people, as well as the relation of patronage long established between Your Majesty and the book- and country-loving Voivodes of our national history".⁴

The ceremony ended with the speech of the King. He outlined the great stages in the development of Romanian book printing. The past was presented as poor in printings, "when there were only one or two small collections ... and when these were the only books spread among the people"; the present which is now "under the auspices of the Day of the Book", means the foundation of a new stage, that of the cooperation between writers, publishers, and booksellers, in order to

¹ *Cărți, conferințe, congrese...*, 378.

² Ernst Fischer, *Necesitatea artei* (The necessity of art) (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1968), 58.

³ Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate la Ministerul instrucției, cultelor și artei*, 1351.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1356.

spread Romanian culture; the future of the book is anticipated by the King's promise to become himself the guardian and guarantee of national culture. With the help of the Royal Cultural Foundations, where "all the creators of Romanian culture ... will always find their generous assistance", the King stated that "I myself shall watch over the development of our culture".¹

With this promise kept in mind, the officials went on to attend the events of the Day of the Book. The main attraction for the public at large was the *Bookshop*, organized at the National Theatre. Visitors came here mainly because of the advertisements in the newspapers or the radio, or out of mere curiosity, and were received by a completely changed atmosphere. For a couple of days the usual set of the theatre was removed and replaced by the stands of bookshops and publishing houses. Decorators and painters like Lilly Vereea transformed the atmosphere of the corridors and parts of the halls to resemble bookshops. The exhibitors, great names of Romanian journalism, such as *Cultura Națională*, *Adevărul*, *Cartea Românească*, *Ciornei*, *Socec*, *Eminescu*, *Universul*, *Ramuri*, *Cugetarea* or *Vremea*, as well as smaller manufacturers or even authors representing themselves, personalized their own stands to transmit their message and introduce their "brand".² Lively coloured book covers, with illustrations or monograms, exhibited against the background of discount announcements, inevitably attracted the visitors' eyes. Intriguing or shocking titles of the newest publications, some ennobled by prizes and fame, served as visiting cards of the exhibitors, meant to convince the public to buy the books.

Once entering the theatre, the visitor was received by "actors and actresses improvised into booksellers, ready to recommend a novel, a volume of poetry, or a study".³ Most of these actresses or film starlets were engaged by publishers to attract the public to one stand or the other, and stimulate the sales. For those who did not let themselves be convinced by the colourful advertisements or the kindness of the presenters, the exhibitors also invited authors to give autographs and answer the readers' questions. "... the lovers of autographs are in fever. They impatiently wait the end of the solemnities at the Foundation and the coming of the "idols". The few writers present can hardly cope. Nicu Cocea, juvenile, satisfied, smiling, prepares his pen, refusing no request... Peltz explains to Mr. Romulus Voinescu the mystery of the *Amorul încuiat* [Locked love], Damian regrets to have left his stamp at home...".⁴

The services offered by the participants and organizers were followed and discussed by critics and journalists. The Adevărul Publishing House managed to obtain positive remarks because: "although it has only recently appeared on the palette of activities in Bucharest, it succeeded in presenting a [book] production just as rich as it is substantial."⁵ The Adevărul exhibited on its stands works by outstanding names of the literary stage, such as Mihail Sadoveanu's *Locul unde nu s-a întâmplat nimic* (The place where nothing happened), Gala Galaction's *Papucii*

¹ King Carol II, *Discursuri culturale...*, 48.

² Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate...*, 1361.

³ "Săptămâna cărții – Aspecte" (The Week of the Book – Aspects), *Facla* XII (1933): 2.

⁴ "Săptămâna cărții" (The Week of the Book), *Dimineața* 29 (1933): 5.

⁵ C. Panaitescu, "Editori și scriitori" (Publishers and writers), *Facla* XII (1933): 3.

lui Mahmud (Mahmud's slippers), Liviu Rebreanu's *Răscoala* (The uprising) in two volumes, Jean Bart's *Europolis*, Ion Minulescu's *3 și cu Rezeda 4* (3 and with Rezeda 4), or Constantin Stere's four-volume novel *În preajma revoluției* (Around the revolution).

The press also appreciated the efforts of Georgescu Delafras, founder of Cugetarea Publishing House, who understood the importance and value of national literature, and published works such as Gala Galaction's *Scrisori către Simforoza* (Letters to Simforoza), Anton Holban's *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic* (A death that proves nothing), Eugen Lovinescu's *Memoirs*, Cezar Petrescu's *Oraș Patriarhal* (Patriarchal city), or Sergiu Dan's *Dragoste și moarte în provincie* (Love and death in the countryside). Also the Cugetarea published translations of foreign writers like Jules Verne and Pitigrilli, making some conclude that "the Cugetarea Publishing House succeeded to rank itself among the first houses of spreading the Romanian writing".¹

In competition with the *Adevărul* or the *Cugetarea*, the *Cultura Națională* Publishing House brought to the book fair celebrated works of the literary year, as for example *Fecior de slugă* (Servant's son) by N. D. Cocea, *Maitreyi* by Mircea Eliade, or the works of Mihail Sebastian.

While some of the publishers decided to rely on modern and contemporary literature, others wished to convince the public that it is worth investing in the writings of classics. This is what the *Cartea Românească* Publishing House counted on with the publication of editions of Creangă, Caragiale, Slavici, Nicolae Filimon, Vlahuță, and Ispirescu, in graphic versions accessible for all tastes and purses, from luxury products intended for collectors to low-cost editions for the public at large. For those uninterested in literature, the *Cartea Românească* also published medical and legal works, manuals, the *Marele Dicționar Enciclopedic* (Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary) of A. Candrea, and other specialized writings that the Publishing House grouped into two collections entitled *Pagini alese* (Selected pages) and *Cunoștințe folositoare* (Useful knowledge).²

The *Ciornei* Publishing House also used the opportunity and framework offered by the National Theatre to promote its "American style" publications, as the press of the age commented. The star of the Publishing House is the novel *Patul lui Procrust* (Procrustes' bed) by Camil Petrescu, published in a record-number of copies, noted and referenced in the press, advertised by interviews and deferential pages, exhibited in central places in bookshop windows, etc., that is, "everything a publishing house could do for launching a book".³

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ C. Panaitescu, "Edituri și cărți" (Publishing houses and books), *Facla* XII (1933): 2.



La o mică librărie în Ziua Cărții

Bookshop at the Festival of the Book¹

From the National Theatre, the public was invited to go to the Library of the *Carol I University Foundation*. This institution housed the old and rare books exhibition, addressed mainly to bibliophiles and those interested in Romanian historiography.

For book industry specialists and men of letters there was a congress of the book organized at the *Carol I Foundation*, debating the problems of Romanian book printing. Speeches were given by personalities like, among others, Dimitrie Gusti, Corneliu Moldovan, Romulus Dianu, Perpessicius, and Emanoil Bucuță. They spoke about the low number of readers, which in the opinion of Professor Kirițescu, was due either to the price of books or to illiteracy, and about the problem of book distribution.²

The results of the week when the book was the main character of the celebrations all over the country were published by the Ministry of Education. The organizers of the Festive Bookshop, the Romanian Writers' Society, declared the celebrations a success, proved also by the public's massive presence at the events: "the public, despite the rainy weather, assaulted the Festive Bookshop until the last minute before it closed".³ The exhibitors, especially in the capital city, were also satisfied with the results. The highest profit was naturally made by the great publishing houses, such as the *Adevărul*, *Cartea Românească*, and *Socec*. The

¹ *Boabe de grâu* III (1933): 377.

² Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate...*, 1361.

³ *Ibid.*, 1391.

Cultura Națională, Editura Ciornei, and Cugetarea followed in the line in a descending order.

The most sought-for writers were those who otherwise also influenced the Romanian literature of the age, like Liviu Rebreanu, Constantin Stere, D. Cocea, Camil Petrescu, Mihail Sadoveanu, Cezar Petrescu, Jean Bart, Gala Galaction. This was also the time when the new generation of writers, such as Mircea Eliade, or G. M. Zamfirescu, asserted themselves, and gained public recognition as well.

The overall conclusion was that, with all the mistakes and shortcomings of an event at its beginnings, the Festival of the Book must be repeated. It did happen indeed the next year, when – despite the changes that occurred at the Ministry of Education, the Day of the Book continued to raise the interest of the authorities.



The King's visit at the official opening of the Festival of the Book – 1935

The programme of year 1934 was established in time by the Royal Foundations in a public discussion ran by Al. Rosetti, the director of the Foundation. The organizers tried this time to involve state authorities in the event to a greater extent. The Foundations approached the Ministry of Home Affairs in an attempt to have all book stand owners, especially those in the newly attached provinces, exhibit and promote Romanian books during the celebrations. In fact, it was now that the festival of the book began to gain shape more as a nationalist manifestation, propagating Romanian books and culture. The advertisements and posters particularly designed for the Day of the Book were distributed in the country by the offices of the county prefects. Each important urban centre had to delegate writers to participate in the festivities and give autographs. In order to facilitate the access of an increasing number of visitors to the urban centres where the exhibitions took

place, the Union of the Royal Cultural Foundations obtained special discounts from the Romanian Railways for the travelling public before and after the celebrations.¹

The most important universities and cultural associations of the country, as well as the radio and cinemas were also mobilized for a greater success of the celebrations. So was also the press, magazines and newspapers like the *Vremea*, *Reporter*, and the *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români*, which reserved in time special issues for presenting and commenting the Day of the Book.

The 1934 celebrations started in Bucharest at the Military Circle, where “in the tropical heat of the morning ministers and presidents of associations gave occasional speeches...”² The long-awaited moment was the sovereign’s speech. Distinctly from the first edition of the Day of the Book, when the King emphasized the importance and necessity of this festival, this time the speech focused on the role of the book in the society. Carol presented the direction that Romanian book policy should follow. He suggested that there should be a method for the state to have a better control over literary production. The so-called “good book”, that is, the book that follows and develops the moral precepts which define the cultural rebirth desired by Carol must be encouraged to the detriment of the bad and immoral book. “We should find a system – perhaps fiscal – which would maximally encourage it, by which we could relieve the good book, and on the other side we should raise barriers to the bad book, overloading it with taxes”.³

The King considers the Week of the Book, once again, as an expression of the struggle for the spreading of Romanian culture which must be supported by the joint efforts of three primary factors: the writer, the publisher, and the bookseller.

While the King spoke in his speech about good books and bad books, the authorities, more precisely the Ministry of Education, found the method to explain to the public the significance and differences between the two. Circular letters were sent all around, with initiatives to be taken by the schools all over the country as a celebration of the Day of the Book. These letters stipulated that school directors and teachers should organize sessions for pupils and their parents alike. On these occasions they should debate and demonstrate to the participants “all the usefulness of the great friend, the good book, and all the danger of the powerful enemy, the bad book.”⁴ The school libraries were also in the centre of attention. They had to organize reports about the books they contained, and public lectures in order to stimulate those present to read books. The final point of the letter stipulated the organization of exhibitions of books from the pupil’s personal libraries, “in order to raise emulation for the formation of many more such libraries, and to study the ways our pupils – and perhaps also the village farmers – feel and are able to satisfy their need to enlighten their minds and warm up their souls.” The teachers had to report

¹ “Reduceri pe C.F.R. și Săptămâna cărții” (Discounts on the Romanian Railways and the Week of the Book), *Vremea* VII (1934): 8.

² “Săptămâna cărții” (The Week of the Book), *Reporter* I (1933): 2.

³ Adrian Scărlătescu, *Luna cărții* (The month of the book), (Bucharest: [s.n.], 1937), 12–13.

⁴ “Circulara Ministerului Instrucției către directori de școli cu prilejul Săptămânii cărții” (Circular letter of the Ministry of Education to school directors on the occasion of the Festival of the Book), *Reporter* II (1934): 6.

all the manifestations and observations on the relationship of pupils and books to the directions of education.

At the end of the second edition of the Festival of the Book the conclusion was drawn again. The general impression was that “from a commercial point of view the distribution of Romanian books wasn’t as intense as last year...; the authors of the most recent books, published within the last two or three months, sold the most and gave the most autographs.”¹ Thus the celebration of the book eventually found its place in the landscape of inter-war social life. Due to the decorations used at book exhibitions and fairs, the public learnt to distinguish the design of each publishing house, to have certain expectations and pretensions from authors and publishers; in other words, the Romanian public began to form its taste for reading.

Although conceived as a national event, the zeal and spirit of celebration accompanying the Day of the Book in the capital city was received and rendered differently in the other cities.

In Cluj an exhibition was organized at the festivity hall of the University Library, with the participation of local publishing houses and bookshops. Outstanding personalities such as University Professor Nicolae Drăgan and C. Marinescu held conferences on the history of Romanian books and their function in the present. The local press supported and promoted the Day of the Book because it considered that “... although Romanian publishing has progressed after the war because the number of readers grew considerably, Romanian books still do not enjoy their due prestige in their country...”² Despite the propaganda, the public seems less enthusiastic than in Bucharest or other large cities. At the 1934 Day of the Book the events were located at the National Theatre in Cluj. Intellectuals of the city, like Vladimir Gridonescu, Ion Th. Ilea, and artists like Neamu Otonel, Nicolae Dimitru, or V. Potorosc participated in the dissemination of books.



The Day of the Book in Oradea – 1933³

¹ Petru Comărnescu, “Aspecte și învățăminte pentru viitor dela Ziua Cărții” (Aspects and lessons for the future from the Day of the Book), *Vremea* VII (1934): 4.

² “Reflecții la săptămâna cărții” (Reflections on the week of the book), *Societatea de mâine* II (1933): 95.

³ Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate...*, 1385.

In Oradea, the magazine *Reporter* announced in 1934 that “the Week of the Book became an authentic festival of spiritual work”.¹ The centre of the celebrations was the festive hall of the Mayor’s Office where the authorities organized “a session dedicated to books”. Local professors and personalities, among whom Eugen Speranția, Octavian Suluțiu, or Sabin Anca held lectures and gave speeches about books and reading. The appeal of the *King Carol Foundation for Literature and Arts* was presented, as also the address of the Syndicate of Transylvanian Press. The programme also included a series of public lectures from works by I. L. Caragiale, Eminescu, Bacovia, and Ionel Teodoreanu’s *Ulița copilăriei* (The street of childhood).

The most active institution in Romanian book propaganda seems to have been the Socec bookshop, which “already on the eve of 12 May dressed its large windows with Romanian books”. The results of the campaign are detailed by the local leadership of the bookshop, saying in an interview in the *Reporter* that “We sold twice as much as last year. On the last day only, we exceeded sales in value of 20 thousand lei. We sold a lot to the notaries and teachers in the county who bought thousands of books of the *Biblioteca pentru Toți* [Library for all] series on the request of peasants who can read”.²

The reviews of the *Gazeta de Vest* magazine followed up the celebration of the book in Oradea in 1935. The way how it presented the festivities seems to suggest, however, that more emphasis was laid on the propaganda of books and reading within educational institutions. The events were repeated and the decorations of the Socec bookshop renewed in order to “attract the public inside and burden it with books”. In all the schools of the city “Sunday morning the pupils were gathered in the festive halls ... where book exhibitions were arranged. The professors gave speeches and advised the pupils about the books they should buy.” In some schools the professors opted for a more practical method for the encounter of the pupils with the books. For instance, at the Alexandru Roman Gymnasium for Boys “Mr. Gheorghe Vornicul, the director of the gymnasium, after having spoken to the pupils about the significance of books, went off with them to the Socec bookshop and the municipal public library, and the Cele Trei Crișuri library that they visited”. The message of the festival of the book for the little ones was that “they shouldn’t read just any kind of books, but only those that have an immeasurable value”, and for the parents “to make possible for the pupils to buy books this week when the prices are reduced so that they might feel the taste of reading from a young age”.³

More towards the north, in Baia Mare, the newspaper *Granița* presented the Festival of the Book as a pretext to denounce the indifference of the authorities towards the Romanian culture of these border-areas. Here as well, the celebration of the book seems to have been organized mainly in schools and gymnasia. At the Gheorghe Șincai secondary school, following the usual conference on “the book and

¹ Lascăr Tuduciuc, “Săptămâna cărții la Oradea” (The Week of the Book in Oradea), *Reporter* II 74 (1934): 4.

² Ibid.

³ “Săptămâna cărții la Oradea” (The week of the book in Oradea), *Gazeta de Vest* IV (1935): 3.

its significance in ennobling the soul”, a visit was made to “the book exhibition at the school library, where several book collections of the pupils were also exhibited, gathered on an individual basis in order to control their private readings.” Besides school authorities, the celebrations were only observed at the Dacia bookshop, which “has a specially dressed window with books by Romanian authors. The other three bookshops of the city ... didn’t even bother”.¹

This article does more, however, than simply present a cultural event. It discusses the 2 % tax imposed on each parcel of books sent by the publishing houses, as a measure that hinders the distribution and spreading of Romanian books. “We regret this unreasonable measure taken against Romanian books, while the minority book stands and windows are full of pornographic books and subversive magazines, and we hope that the honourable temporary committee in a special meeting will propose to take Romanian books off this tax. This would be the finest example that it could give to the only Romanian bookshop, the Dacia.”²

The March 1936 issue of the *Afirmarea* newspaper presents the impact of the Week of the Book in the northernmost region of the country. The author of the article presents quite a sombre situation in the Satu Mare area. Apparently “for the majority of the inhabitants of Satu Mare the Week of the Book is a *fait divers*. It goes almost unnoticed”.³ The article does not really speak about the events taking place on this occasion, but especially about the attitude and interest that people display for books and reading. The fact that there is no Romanian library in the town was an excuse for those who are too busy to read anyway. Those who decided not to care for the high price of books and can afford the luxury to buy them, only chose superficial and sensational novels for 5 or 15 lei. There was in fact a certain degree of snobbery even among the well-read inhabitants of Satu Mare, for whom the reading of a book merely means to leaf through it.

Regardless of the negative criticisms that it occasionally received, or the meanings attributed to it in various regions of the country, the Festival of the Book continued year after year, evolving from a simple book exhibition to a veritable national celebration. The event that existed in Western countries for a long time in various forms of book exhibitions and book fairs in Romania only appeared in the inter-war period and developed as a public exercise in shaping the taste for reading.

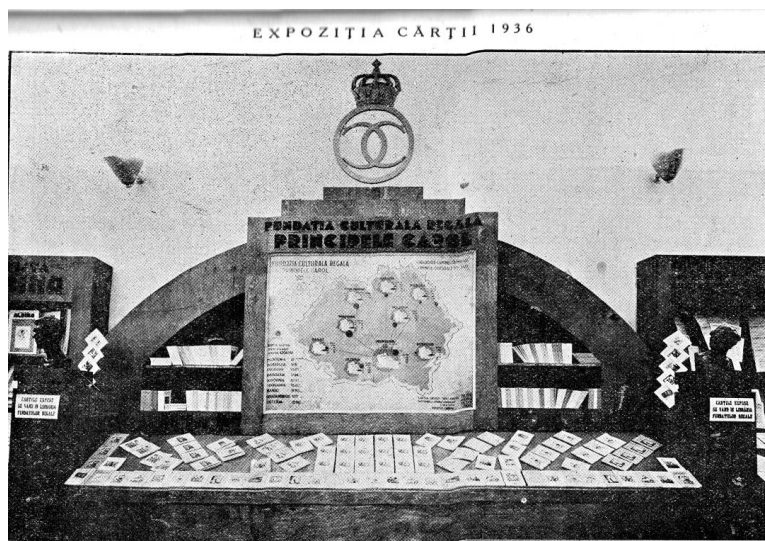
The third year of the event was celebrated in Bucharest at the Dalles Hall, a modern building erected in 1932, and soon becoming one of the most important cultural spaces in the capital. The Week of the Book was moved thus in 1935 to an environment which combined the products of Romanian painting and fine art with those of literature. Nevertheless, the change of the scenery was not considered appropriate, as some of its critics thought it was too small for such a prestigious event. Here is the description of a Bucharest daily newspaper on the event: “sheltered among the warm paintings of Mr. Tonitza and the wonderful canvases of the great master Şirato, the stands of Romanian books could be nothing else than

¹ “Săptămâna cărţii Baia Mare” (The week of the book in Baia Mare), *Graniţa I* (1934): 2.

² Ibid.

³ Constantin Gheorghe Popescu, “Sătmărenii şi Săptămâna cărţii” (The people of Satu Mare and the Week of the Book), *Afirmarea I* 1(1936): 42.

modest little stalls that confused the space required for Mr. O. Han's vigorous sculptures. Crouched upon each other, the books failed to appear in all their beauty, but [looked] similar to poor children, crowded before the gates of an asylum..."¹



Standul și Graficele Editurii „Principele Carol”.

Book exhibition in the Royal Foundations Pavilion – 1936²

Supported mainly by the Royal Cultural Foundations, the festival even extended, its name itself demonstrating the change. At the beginning the celebrations were called Day of the Book, which shortly after turned into Week of the Book, while in 1936 it was finally called Month of the Book. The extension was mainly due to the implication and support, albeit not disinterested, of the royalty. In the background of the event lay the ideological interest of Carol II to construct a personality cult based on his image as patron of culture, of *voivode of Romanian culture*, as he auto-termed himself. This effort is apparent both in the festivals dedicated to books and in Romanian books proper.

The events of the Month of the Book in 1936 and 1937 were moved to the Royal Foundations Pavilion. The size of its premises permitted the organizers to use a whole range of symbols and exhibits joining the past and the present, literature with the activities of the Cultural Foundations, in an endeavour of forming the public at large.

The visitors' itinerary started in the festive hall, from the entrance, where he could gaze at the frieze in vivid colours telling the story of Ion Creangă and his characters, and the stand with the exhibited works of the classic author. Next to the idyllic time of the *Amintiri din copilărie* (Memories from childhood) there was an illustration of His Majesty's gifts for schools, libraries, hospitals, cultural houses,

¹ Ion Anestin, "Sărbătoarea scriitorilor" (The celebration of writers), *Vremea VIII* (1935): 2.

² Adrian Scărlătescu, *Luna cărții*, 15.

and other establishments. From childhood to young age, from the panels with the Royal teams to the Philharmonic orchestra, and from the monastic printing press to technological and scientific progress, the stands and panels presented the successive stages of cultural development of the Romanian society.



O. E. T. R.

Book exhibition in the Royal Foundations Pavilion¹

Next in line was the hall dedicated to the *Prince Carol Cultural Foundation*, dominated by the stand in the centre decorated with several copies of Cezar Petrescu's volume, *Cei trei regi* (The three kings). The other stands exhibited other publications of the Foundation, such as the books of the *Biblioteca satului* (Village library) series, the magazines *Albina* and *Căminul Cultural*.

The cultural activities patronized by Carol II were the subject which dominated the hall of the Carol II Royal Foundation for Literature and Arts. Graphs and panels presented the activity of the Foundation's own publishing house and the Magazine of the Royal Foundations. The hall was decorated all around with Carol II's official portraits, multiplied and transformed into postal cards, photographs and lithographs, together with images of picturesque Romania, landscapes and portraits of peasants in folk costumes. The literary work placed on the central stand was N.

¹ Adrian Scărlătescu, *Luna cărții*, 17.

M. Condicescu's *Peste mări și țări* (All over the world), describing His Highness' journey around the world in 1922, presented in the exhibition brochure as a book that "will be read with devotion in the future as well, as a historical capital of great interest".¹

The book fair also moved in the Foundation Pavilion, together with the exhibition rooms. The publishing houses from around the country exposed their products and offers on twenty-two stands.

As every year, discounts and prizes were prepared to attract the public. For instance, the visitors could participate in a raffle, in which anyone could win a 500-lei package of books for only 20 lei.² The organizers also prepared special prizes for the exhibitors. Awards for writers were established ever since the first editions of the fair, as also for the most nicely decorated bookshop window. The festival of the book became thus a spring tradition between the two world wars, expected by the publishers and booksellers for profit and publicity, and by the public for the social and at the same time cultural character of the event.



Official poster – 1937³

The festival of the book was conceived against the crisis of reading, resulting, as many voices of the time, especially authors, argued, from a general lack of interest in literature. The statistics on the number of writers and the data presented by various personalities of cultural life displayed an alarming situation both in the field of publishing industry and book distribution. The society felt the need of systematic, coordinated actions with national coverage and impact for all social categories. The decisive step originated from sociologist and man of culture Dimitrie Gusti. Prior to becoming Minister of Education and Cults, he spent part of his years

¹ Adrian Scărlătescu, *Luna cărții...*, 27.

² *Ibid.*, 50–51.

³ *Ibid.*, brochure.

of research and studies abroad. From there, he took over a commercial practice customary in the Western countries: the book fair with sale. There had only been some timid attempts to organize book fairs here, until Gusti introduced them as methods of mass education and culturalization. This event created the perfect framework for mobilizing the four essential factors for the production of a book or any kind of print. The inauguration of the Day of the Book by the Ministry of Education brought about the implication of the leading publishing houses and booksellers who benefited thus from an official market for their products. By attracting the publishers, the writers were also implicitly drawn into the events, as their obvious interest was to become popular, their works known, and therefore sold. And last but not least, the festival dedicated to the book implies the public itself. All resources of book marketing available at the time were mobilized for the public, from newspaper and radio advertisements to street posters or fliers distributed by airplanes,¹ prizes, raffles, and meetings with writers and stars. In schools and public or cultural institutions the manifestations organized at the Day of the Book instructed the Romanian public that printings and books in particular are goods worth being invested in, and that Romanian literature is just as valuable as the imported one.

Gradually, however, the commercial and educational-literary function of this event was taken over by the political sphere, and the messages of publicity replaced with those of propaganda. The national coverage of the event as well as its impact on the public transformed the Day of the Book from a simple celebration of literature into an efficient system of promoting the personal cult of Carol II.

3. Opinions, comments, and echoes of the Festival of the Book

Publishers made the most of those few days to sell their merchandise, booksellers to attract the readers into their establishments, authors to deplore their fate and gain fame, politicians to support their cause. Various characters of cultural life exposed their points of view about the role and situation of the book in Romanian society at the radio, in public, or in the press. The day of the book gradually received several meanings for those involved, and for the public at large.

3.1. Writers

In the decades preceding the First World War most Romanian writers were involved in supporting the cause of the union of all Romanians. Consequently, their works represented their natural contribution to the accomplishment of the national ideal. On a practical level this meant that the Romanian man of letters did not write for money, but as a civil duty.

After the union a new stage was supposed to follow, a new world of possibilities. For Romanian writers the new context meant the reassessment of their social and professional status. However, the inter-war period actually became a period of paradoxes. While literary production was indeed thriving, the profession of the writer was neglected in the new classification of professions.² As a result, the

¹ Dimitrie Gusti, *Un an de activitate...*, 1346.

² Liviu Malița, *Eu, scriitorul...*, 131.

social position of the man of letters became even more uncertain than before. The old image of the inspired poet, the magus and lawgiver, the tribune of the nation and civil consciousness of the City degraded into a new status, a professional of the word, which however failed to be accepted yet as a member of the elite.¹

Artistic creation was most often subordinated to some other profession that offered a secure source of income for the writer. Writing represented the main source of earning a living for only a very small number of writers of the inter-war period, now considered outstanding figures of Romanian literature. Speaking about his colleagues, Camil Baltazar revealed that “if Ionel Teodoreanu didn’t practice the salvaging profession of a lawyer, he wouldn’t be able to live merely by literature”.² Other authors, important names of Romanian literature, were also in the same situation, like Gala Galaction, who was professor at the Faculty of Theology.

Confronted with the hardships of day-by-day living, the public’s indifference for reading, and the so-called crisis of books, the writer had but two choices: to adapt to the new social conditions, or to entirely give up his vocation. The Romanian Writers’ Society, created already in 1909 in order to protect the writers’ moral and material rights and interests,³ chose the first way: adaptation. This meant, in contemporary terms, to make writing a profitable profession.⁴

In order for the writer to ultimately receive his well-deserved place in the hierarchy of modern Romanian society, he needed to abandon his lofty spheres, his ivory tower, and become more visible for the public, to intensify his relations with the public, and to use all available resources to advertise and promote their art.⁵

The Festival of the Book was established thus at a crucial time for the development and social acceptance of the literary artist. The Romanian Writers’ Society understood the possibilities offered by this event, and engaged in the organization of the Day of the Book without hesitation. All Romanian writers were thus mobilized, some out of passion and conviction, others out of necessity or mere conformism. Either way, they were present at autograph sessions, literary events, and congresses discussing the problem of books. Some of them were even involved in the promotion of the idea of a festival dedicated to books. One example was Liviu Rebreanu, who, by the magazine *România Literară* that he edited, initiated a campaign for persuading public opinion that “in other, more civilized countries the day of the book may be an event like any other. In our country the Day of the Book could be the beginning of a real cultural age. This beginning must happen at all costs”.⁶

It was also Rebreanu who attributed to this festival a significance that was later taken over by many other writers, namely that “the Day of the Book means

¹ Ibid., 62.

² Camil Baltazar, *Din romanul existenței mele literare* (From the novel of my literary existence) (Bucharest: Hasefer, 2004), 336.

³ Ion Muntean, *Istoricul societății scriitorilor români* (The history of the Romanian Writers’ Society), (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1998), 3.

⁴ Liviu Malița, *Eu, scriitorul...*, 133.

⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁶ Liviu Rebreanu, “Ziua cărții” (The Day of the Book), *România Literară* II (1933): 1–2.

above all the celebration of the writers”. This day would come as a reward, a well-deserved and much awaited recognition of the talent of all men of letters in the country. The fact that the initiative was taken by the authorities was an addition that could be understood as a validation of the writer’s importance by the state. Authors or more precisely their works had been used and manipulated, in Rebreanu’s view, as a form of “public utility, without themselves [the authors] being taken into consideration”¹; but by the initiation of the Day of the Book, the homage goes in fact to its creator, the writer. There were even some voices in the press, such as that of graphic artist and man of letters Ion Anestin’s, vigorously opposing that other factors of book production should also be included into the significance of the celebration, emphasizing that “this week dedicated to books is the homage paid to the person who made the book, who wrote the text line by line. But it was unfortunately widely understood to comprise the author together with the typesetter, the page setter, the page setter’s apprentice, the mechanic, the typography owner, the publisher’s cashier, the editor, the head of the dispatch office, the driver of the transporting car, Mr. Bookseller (who takes only 30 percent of the price of the book, while the writer has 15 %), and of course all relatives of these gentlemen to the 7th degree...”²

The fate of the writer began to gain the interest of public opinion, as was proved by the establishment of an event that placed the writer and his problems in the spotlight. Their mission and efforts are understood only to the extent that their writings are sought after and bought. For Tudor Arghezi the celebration of the book meant the spreading of Romanian literary works in a just and impartial way for all parties involved: “If on this so-called day of the book every person who can read bought a book, the publishers’ and writers’ year-long efforts would be repaid and a million literary writings could sneak into people’s houses...”³

The declarations, taken over and transcribed by periodicals all over the country, demonstrate that the writers’ opinions on the Day of the Book were divided as well. They varied from optimism to pessimism, from acid remarks to poetic reflections.

By far the most pragmatic approach belonged to Romanian essayist and philosopher Ion Petrovici, who stressed in but a few sentences the importance of the organization of such an event: “the stimulation for reading and the purchase of books can be accelerated by the pressure of the community. On an exhibition you may be stimulated even by the aesthetics of the bookshop windows or the other visitors, as well as the petty vanity raised by an environment where writing is glorified.”⁴

Writer Isac Peltz also exposed in one of his notes a possible utility of the festival of the book. In the sarcastic presentation he wrote for a central daily paper he pleaded for a new significance through which “the Week of the Book must be a

¹ Liviu Rebreanu, “Ce cred scriitorii despre săptămâna cărții” (What writers think about the week of the book), *România Literară* II 6 (1933): 1.

² Ion Anestin, “Sărbătoarea scriitorilor,” 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ “Scriitorii despre ziua cărții” (Writers on the day of the book), *Facla* XII (1933): 2.

week of financial sacrifice for the most authentic aristocrats of the community: the writers”, followed by a whole list of various social and professional categories like ministers, prefects, mayors, county and village councillors, students and university professors who should “take out of their purses ten thousand leis each on the week of the book ... for buying a certain number of Romanian books”.¹

For many of the interviewed writers the festival was extra evidence that the general culture and education of the modern Romanian society had serious flaws and deficiencies, and was in need of impulses of any kind. This was also the opinion of literary critic Eugen Lovinescu, expressing his favourable opinion on such an event: “Since the art is only valued here by its social aspect ... the organization of a week for books, with all the assistance of high patronage, massive publicity, solemnity and spectacle is very much welcome for a cultural stage that still needs such stimulation.”² Art in general and literature in particular have become for many secondary preoccupations only, or most often completely ignored in favour of sports or cinema. “The young are only and exclusively concerned with sports, and the adults with the cinema. Both of them refuse to exhaust their brain by understanding reading.”³ Nicolae Cocea, whose novel *Fecior de slugă* (Servant’s son) was considered one of the substantial works of the literary year, touches with subtle irony on the problem of the lack of culture, which is unfortunately present in all social strata, from peasants “for whom nothing has been done and nothing will be done for a long time from now on...” to “ministers, deputies, high dignitaries who would need themselves a bit of education, but who, alas! once again will gain nothing of this festive and transient day”.⁴

The declarations of the writers on the events of the Day of the Book generally betray a touch of pessimism or mistrust reaching in some cases even to indignation. As a representative of the new generation of writers, Mihail Sebastian comments the event in a malicious, but at the same time painfully realistic tone: “I hope the Day of the Book is not also the day of the writer. Because otherwise it would be exasperating to know that “on their birthday” there are writers who have no money for their meals”.⁵ This is in fact a subtle response to Liviu Rebreanu, who launched the idea that the festival of the book actually means a festival of the writer.

The Day of the Book was also an occasion to reveal the rivalries between the authors of the age. Zaharia Stancu, for instance, in an interview given for the newspaper *Facla*, accused the initiator of the event, Dimitrie Gusti, of falsity and hypocrisy, and brought up once more the conflict that Gusti had with the Romanian Writers’ Society. Those same colleagues who not long before voted for his exclusion from the Society applauded him now for his initiative. Indignant and sad at the “pleased attitude of our colleagues, fascinated by the decorations of polished

¹ “Autorii” (The authors), *Vremea* VII (1934): 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Scriitori despre ziua cărții”, *Facla* XII (1933): 2.

⁵ Ibid.

cardboard”, Zaharia Stancu considered that “the Day of the Book understates the great and serious problem of the book.”¹

Other voices of the literary world also deemed it right to support the negative opinion on the event. Ion Pas, translator and novel writer, attacked the problem frontally by stating, in one harsh expression, that “the modesty of the book has been violated, as they say, in its own interest”. Behind the “large billboards competing with cinema advertisements”, the event itself really solves none of the essential problems, such as, for instance, the control stamp on books, or book supplies for popular libraries. In fact the Day of the Book was about a parade used by the officials to mime their interest in the fate of books and writers: “they edited and printed the billboards. They persuaded the publishers to offer 20 percent discount ... although many of these books had been offered with much higher discount before”.² Literary critic and essayist Perpessicius was also reluctant not only about the event but also to make any declarations about it; interviewed by the newspaper *Vremea*, he refused to make any comments, considering that “everything I have to say would be disagreeable in what regards the Week of the Book, and it would displease me first...”.³

While some of the writers thought the situation was revolting, and the promises were only made for the show, others chose to come to terms with it and participate, without too many expectations though: “good manners”, says George Mihail Zamfirescu, “will force us to listen quietly and pretend we have no reason not to believe the promises. Anyway, after the celebration we should obediently go home and wait not some decades as Mr. Corneliu Moldovan suggests, but some years nonetheless. Let us not forget our refrain: we live in times of crisis.”⁴

At the opposite end were those members of literary life who regarded the festival of the book with less cynicism, sarcasm, or disillusionment. However, they wished that this event, or at least the positive attitudes to books and writers resulting from such an event, would not last for only a week in a year, but become permanent. Such is the case of poet and philosopher Eugen Relgis, who considered that in a world where “culture is mechanized, standardized, and mechanically distributed”, an event like the Week of the Book is highly demanded “even in countries with old cultural traditions. But in a country whose culture is only a century old, and half of its population is illiterate ... a country where politics is sovereign, and the man of letters is the slave of petty politics, such a country needs not only a single week of books a year – but 52 weeks a year for the endless efforts of enlightening the masses – and to give all the craftsmen of writing the dignity of their mission, the ability to complete their work...”.⁵ The same idea is taken over by dramatic author Mihail Sorbul as well, who believes in the usefulness of a fifty-two-weeks-long week of the book, that is, a “real offensive of books, precisely what we are missing today”.⁶

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ “Aurorii”, *Vremea*, VII (1934): 5.

⁴ “Scriitori despre ziua cărții”, *Facla* XII (1933): 2.

⁵ “Aurorii”, *Vremea*, VII (1934): 5.

⁶ Ibid.

Prose writer and essayist Felix Anderca formulates a similar opinion, and hopes “to get, like all nations of culture, to the year of the book”.¹

Playwright Victor Eftimiu had a wider view over the Festival of the Book, placing the event into the atmosphere of the age. In the period tormented by “crimes, conspiracies, and anarchical stupidities”, the society needs revival, a break to recollect in front of the perennial and harmonious element which is the book; “this revival is absolutely necessary for the souls returning to the true water from the spring: the Book”.² A year before, asked about the same subject of the Festival of the Book, the playwright gave a much more pessimistic answer, deriving not from the mistrust in such an event, but from the general attitude of the society towards the book: “I compliment most enthusiastically the initiators of the day of the book. However, I think that nobody will come, and especially nobody will buy anything.”³ This change of perception, albeit only superficial, and mostly affecting the tone of the discourse, denotes a change of perspective about the event. Actually, the Day of the Book, by bringing together various social spheres, writers, and politicians, managed to become a point of convergence. Many of the writers, who previously had not done it, were now attracted into the field of politics, which offered a pragmatic value to their work and a privileged status to their person.

3.2. Publishers

The cultural movement of the second half of the 19th century, in parallel with the national movement, determined the development of book production and implicitly that of Romanian book printing. Just like the authors they published, the pioneers of modern printing like Heliade-Rădulescu, George Barițiu, and Gheorghe Asachi, were not concerned about their material profit, but the people’s cultural and spiritual progress.⁴

Gradually however, especially after 1877, book production started its ascending route, and book printing began shaping its commercial aspect. At the end of the century great names of Romanian literature, like Eminescu, Caragiale, Creangă, Slavici, Coșbuc, or Vlahuță, were published with all editorial rigours of the time. The number of copies for literary works was established at that time at an average of 3000 copies. Publishers gradually realized the limits of their distribution market, and in general adopted a policy of precaution. A new manuscript or a new author was first published in a low number of copies, with the possibility of re-publication in case of audience success.⁵

A new type of publisher was taking shape now, usually a bookseller evolved into a publisher, who was mainly concerned with book sale and personal profit, and not the benefit of some cultural or ideological movement. The most telling example in this respect is the case of Leon Alcaly, famous for taking over the publication of the *Biblioteca pentru toți* (Library for all) series, proving himself a remarkable

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Liviu Rebreanu, “Ce cred scriitorii...” 2.

⁴ Mircea Tomescu, *Istoria cărții Românești...*, 141.

⁵ Ibid., 154.

publisher and tradesman, although he could not read or write.¹ The idea to start this collection belonged however to Carol Müller, also a bookseller himself, who perceived the demand of his customers for a great diversity of books from various fields. The declared purpose of the collection to “hand to the young and to all readers good books, well chosen, nice, interesting, well translated, taken from all the productions of human spirit ... and sell them as cheaply as I can”² marked the appearance of a well-defined editorial programme, perhaps one of the firsts in the country. By its example other collections were also created with purposes of education and culturalization. The programmes of editorial activity fluctuated for a long time afterwards, with those on the one side who pursued easy profit, marketing light and sellable literature, and on the other side, with an activity of moralization, instruction, and refinement of public taste.

In the climate of social change following the Great Union, the publisher, just like all other social categories, saw himself forced to reconsider his activity and role in society. It was only in the inter-war period that the publisher’s profession was individualized and effectively separated from that of a bookseller. In the inter-war period publishers became more dynamic in their enthusiasm about the new possibilities offered by Romania’s territorial expansion, undertaking once again the mission to distribute Romanian books in the newly attached provinces: “on the very next day after the war, when the country was profoundly disorganized ... we sent our legions of books by which we could compensate the lack of organized education, and by which national culture spread into Transylvania and the other regions, helping the assertion and strengthening of the Romanian order”.³ Being aware that the cultural needs of the united Romania were much more extensive and varied, the great names of printing industry drew up ample editorial programmes. These reflected on repeated occasions the concept of the intellectual elites of the age that the book is “a guide, a direction of norms, and a promoter of moral and ethical meanings”.⁴

The war had caused some publishing houses to disappear, while others were established in the unified Romania; the great names of printing industry, such as Alcaly and Socec, came back on the market restructured and adapted to the new conditions. The new publishing houses – Scrisul Românesc, Vreimea, Naționala Ciornei, or Cultura Română – also tried to assert themselves as competition of the acknowledged houses. These newly appeared names in the industry of typography, mostly coming from personal initiatives, are an indication of the fact that this branch was still becoming a profitable business.

In parallel with private entrepreneurs, the state also supported and financed its own publishing houses, like the Casa Școalelor or the Cultura Poporului. The most powerful competition appeared on the market in 1933 on the initiative of Carol

¹ Tudor Nedelcea, *Civilizația cărții...*, 62.

² Mircea Tomescu, *Istoria cărții Românești...*, 156.

³ Emanuel Tătăărăscu, “Criza editurii românești” (The crisis of Romanian publishing), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 2 (1931): 4.

⁴ Stelian Popescu, “Rostul cărții în cultura națională” (The role of books in national culture), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 3, (1931): 1.

II, the publishing house of the Royal Foundation for literature and arts, Editura Fundației Regale pentru Literatură și Artă.

Seen from outside, the overall image was that of an ascending tendency. At a closer look, however, those who managed to establish and support their business in book printing were almost always in a difficult financial situation. On the one hand, there was foreign competition, which in certain regions exceeded the underdeveloped and limited Romanian book distribution, encouraged also by regional preferences for French, Hungarian, or German literature. Then at the end of the third decade the economical difficulties caused by the global crisis also added up.

On an internal level, the most striking problem for the publishers was the state monopoly for schoolbooks, via the Monitorul Oficial publishing house. Next in line were the problems created by the high prices of paper production, which in the inter-war period was monopolized by a paper cartel, and excessive taxation policy. The most telling image is offered by the director of the Scrisul Românesc Publishing House, who stated in 1933, referring to the state of publishing houses and the Romanian state's book policy that "the publishing house had to suffer from lack of funding, then passing through a lack of legislation concerning the interests of our trade, maximizing the prices of schoolbooks, burdening them with a 5 % tax in the favour of the Casa de credit a corpului didactic (Credit House of the Didactic Body), monopolizing printing in the typography by transforming the Monitorul Oficial into a state publishing house, and forcing all authorities not to work any more with private manufactures, feeling the fierce pressure of a paper trust with colonial mentality, and now, at the end, pushing the state system all the way to the idea of the monopoly of schoolbooks, not to mention the request of the Romanian Writers' Society to create a new state publishing house for literary books. If you add it to the fierce taxation system that burdens so cruelly our poor finances, the picture is even more eloquent."¹ Last but not least, the publisher of the age had to concern himself with gaining the largest number of readers possible, in a country where books were sold depending on the season, and where there was a "schoolbook season" which "takes on the proportions of a saving event"² for the publishers and booksellers alike. Therefore the decision of the state to monopolize schoolbooks brought about a vehement protest of publishers and booksellers, because "by this monopoly, if it is achieved, publishers and booksellers will simply be cancelled as publishers of school manuals, and the latter will only sell literary books, because schoolbooks, as well as school supplies, will be sent directly to school committees."³

Evidently, the situation could only be tempered by the state. There was need to create an efficient means to make Romanian book printing independent from the school calendar. It is no wonder then that Dimitrie Gusti's initiative to create a

¹ Emanuel Tătarăscu, "Statul și politica cărții" (The state and book policy), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 1 (1933): 6–7.

² Silviu Ciornei, "Pentru sezonul de sărbători" (For the feasting season), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 3 (1933): 3.

³ P. Georgescu-Delafraș, "Monopolul cărților școlare" (The monopoly of schoolbooks), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 3 (1933): 11.

festival of the book was seen as an encouraging sign on the part of the state directed towards those involved in book production and trade. The director of the Naționala Ciornei Publishing House stated in an article written about the Week of the Book that the event has an assessment value and at the same time it is stimulating for the Romanian publishers. “The festival of the book becomes thus an opportunity for others to judge our work and for us an equally valuable opportunity to map our activity and ... revise our results and receive stimulation for our future diligent work”.¹ First of all, it was the endorsement of King Carol II by his patronage of the event that entitled the publishers to hope for the public recognition of the true value of various cultural factors.

Professor Alexandru Rosetti of the *Carol II Foundation for Literature and Arts*, responsible for the foundation’s editorial programme, spoke enthusiastically about the “bustle of the crowd” and the “excellent jostling of the public around the books stands” as the reward of publishers for their efforts, and “the sure sign of tomorrow’s success”.²

By his activity as the person in charge with book production and distribution, the publisher influences the way in which a literary work is received by the public. In matters regarding book format and graphic style and all the way to the division into collections, the publisher imagines the possible readers he addresses with this aesthetic and ideological concept. It is all natural thus that on the Day of the Book some publishers wished to present and explain their editorial strategies. The Cultura Națională Publishing House was one of the institutions that organized such a presentation, as a rethinking of the course of its activity: “The Week of the Book is for the publisher an opportunity for meditation and assessment of the work done. The work plan of the Cultura Națională Publishing House, set at its foundation (1929), was accurately fulfilled: the publication and encouragement of Romanian writers, especially young talents, and the reprinting of our classic writers in critical editions ... after five years of strenuous work in the service of Romanian culture, may we be permitted today, when a new dawn opens up ahead of us, to conclude with satisfaction the moral balance of an age of fruitful and decisive preparation”.³

In addition to its festive character, the moment of reflection and assessment of Romanian culture and books, the Festival of the Book, is first and foremost a commercial event of publicity and promotion of printed materials. The publishers, as an essential link in the chain of trade, are not in the position to disregard this aspect, and they all take advantage of the occasion to promote their business and impose their names. The representative of the Cultura Românească Publishing House, I. Steinberg, emphasized the contribution of this institution to Romanian education, stressing the many schoolbooks as well as popularizing editions of science books published in collections like *Biblioteca Populară* (Popular library) and *Biblioteca Căminul* (Home library): “... in these days of celebration of the book, during this

¹ S. Ciornei, “Semnificația sărbătoarei de azi” (The significance of today’s festival), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români*, I, 9 (1933): 13.

² Alexandru Rosetti, “Săptămâna cărții” (The Week of the Book), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români*, I, 9 (1933): 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

week dedicated to it, it is befitting that we take a look at our activity... there have been almost three quarters of a century since the foundation of this publishing house, and during this while, year after year, it has accomplished in the field of new schoolbooks such perfect works that are meant to prove its permanent care for school life.”¹

While the Cultura Românească Publishing House presents at the Day of the Book its contribution to the field of books of education, the Adevărul boasts about novels such as *Jar* (Embers), *Aventurile șahului* (Adventures of the shah), *Clopotele din Mănăstirea Neamțului* (Bells of the Neamț monastery) by famous writers such as Mihail Sadoveanu, Gala Galaction, and Liviu Rebreanu, published in excellent graphic conditions. And, since the festival of the book also meant the right for those in book industry to express their opinion, Emanuel Pauker, director of the Adevărul Publishing House, seized the opportunity to answer to those who accused Romanian book printing of publishing exclusively novels to the detriment of other genres like poetry or essays, monographs or scientific works. The evidence presented by Emanuel Pauker was the volume of poetry by Demostene Botez, *În căutarea mea* (In search of myself), and an anthology of Ion Pillat’s poetry, *Pasărea de lut* (The clay bird).²

Once established, the festival of the book transformed the editorial year and programmes. Strategically placed at the end of the literary season, when the school season was still at a distance, the event was a real chance for the publisher to assert himself as a factor of culture distribution: “this offensive will have incontestable practical results for Romanian books. If only for the fact that now in early summer, which used to be a dead season for publishers, there is a lively season for stimulating book sale, and what’s more, it is quite considerable”.³

3.3. Booksellers

At the outset of the Festival of the Book the first stop for many readers or those who were just curious was the bookshop window. Here large and colourful advertisements announced special discounts, book presentations, or meetings with authors. In many cities the bookshop was the last stop of the book before it reached the reader. Or at least it was supposed to be. Actually, the bookseller usually was a simple merchant, who packed his store with objects of the most varied type, from pencils to gramophones and sport shoes. Professor Ion Simionescu offers an eloquent example on the state of a small town bookseller: “The bookshop trade, as it happens here in most cases, seems simple and comfortable. It doesn’t need much capital, or special efforts... One day a haberdasher in a small country town thought of becoming a bookseller as well. In a short while he found a publishing house

¹ I. Steinberg, “Pe marginea cărții literare și a manualului didactic” (On the subject of literary books and didactic manuals), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 9 (1933): 21.

² Emanuel Pauker, “La o sărbătoare a cărții” (At a festival of the book), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 9 (1933): 10–11.

³ “Săptămâna cărții” (The week of the book), *Reporter*, I, 20 (1933): 2.

which filled his shelves with books ... the bookshop was founded, without however being a bookshop.”¹

In the discussion on the crisis of the book the bookshop-owner is often accused of lack of culture, and held responsible for the deficient circulation of books in the society. The high spheres of book trade, publishers, intellectuals, and booksellers periodically offer advice and guidance on how a model-bookseller should be like.

The book merchant or bookseller covers, in the most literal and encompassing sense, the notion of a seller of culture. Therefore he must have two fundamental qualities. He must be a good merchant, and must love the merchandise he sells: “the true bookseller must be a cultural factor since he is the one who recommends the book. He is a missionary of culture, and promoter of the written word, and not least the seller of the bookshop”.² But how could a half-illiterate person play the role of a missionary of culture? This was the main and most ardent problem of the guild, debated on numerous congresses and meetings. The ultimate desideratum was the creation of professional education that would instruct them in various problems from the technology of book production (how paper is made and how many types it has, graphic procedures, binding techniques), to the relationship between authors, publishers, and booksellers, and last but not least the commercial problems regarding book sale (the installation, the departments, the assortment). And when this happens, says Bogdan Varvara, who conceived the guidelines for a bookseller’s education, then the bookseller by the corporation he is part of, will have the right to say that his profession is not only about the narrow duty of a blind seller of books”.³

The need for booksellers’ instruction was also a subject discussed on the Week of the Book. Referring to the significance of the festival, the director of the Naționala Ciornei Publishing House, who also had his apprenticeship as a bookseller, highlighted the importance of this profession in the distribution of books, and considered that “in these festive moments it is not useless to remind ourselves again of the necessity to establish a school for booksellers, which would instruct people who understand good books, love them and recommend them”.⁴

But until becoming just as educated as a French bookseller for instance, the Romanian book merchant eager for information could only browse, if interested, the catalogues of publications of the big publishing houses or magazines such as the *Informațiile literare* (Literary information), edited by the director of the Alcalay bookshop in cooperation with poet Camil Baltazar.

¹ Ion Simionescu, “Importanța librarilor” (The importance of booksellers), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 7–8 (1934):1.

² S. Ciornei, “S’a sfârșit sezonul școlar, începe sezonul literar” (The school season is over, the literary season begins), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* II, 11–12 (1934): 2.

³ Bogdan Varvara, “Pentru un învățământ profesional al librarului” (For a professional education of the bookseller), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 2 (1933): 13–14.

⁴ S. Ciornei, “Semnificația sărbătoarei de azi” (The significance of today’s festival), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 9 (1934): 13.

Once the Asociația Editorilor Români (Romanian Publishers' Association) was established at the beginning of the 1930s, the need for booksellers to have their representatives fight for common booksellers' interests was increasingly discussed in cultural environments. The two professions of the publisher and the bookseller were interchangeable and completed each other, and many publishers, such as S. Ciornei too, started their carrier as booksellers. Nevertheless, the modernization imposed by the age also brought about the evolution of the bookseller's profession. As N. Ionnițiu explained in the first issue of the Bulletin of the Romanian Publishers' Association (*Buletinul Asociației Editorilor Români*), the two professions had to be separated because "each of these guilds has its own small professional problems which can best be solved within the strict specialization than within both categories together".¹

However, both categories are inextricably linked by the object of their job, which is the book, and the complex of interests formed around it. Publishers and booksellers of the inter-war period equally sold their books by seasons, most importantly by the school season when "the bookshop almost forgotten around the year, like an eye of light in the semi-darkness of the provincial town, lights up like on days of national celebration. Then, the economic and financial pressures that burden the bookseller's shoulders for a whole year gain some hope of being solved".² But although this season is profitable, it also brings about many difficulties deriving mainly from the bookseller's relations with school authorities, distributors, and the public. For example, the list with the compulsory school manuals was posted with delay, and several times it was rethought after the beginning of the school year, so that the booksellers had no time to supply the necessary books. In addition, one of the most acute problems that the guild of booksellers had to face was the very way book trade was made. The description of the contemporaries presented book trade as a tough, even aggressive business. In small towns especially, competition often became so harsh that the competitor applied any means to surpass his rivals, even with the risk of destroying himself. There were cases when the bookseller's posters were loaded with enticing, or sometimes outright shocking, promises. Such was the case of a Moldavian bookseller, who spread out fliers announcing that he discounted the clients' travel costs to the bookshop: "for teachers, discounts from 15 % to 40 % for school books ... credits for 6 to 12 months, no bills of exchange, no interest. To your own interest don't buy anything until you visit our bookshop. You come yourself to our town, on our own expense, because we pay your personal travel costs..."³

The most frequently used weapons of the majority of book merchants remained the discounts and credits. For an inexperienced or greedy bookseller these often proved to be two-edged weapons. On occasions they went so far that "in

¹ N. Ionnițiu, "Noi și librării" (We and the booksellers), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 1 (1933): 2.

² S. Ciornei, "Activitatea sezonieră" (Seasonal activity), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 1 (1933): 4.

³ G. Dobrovici, "Cum s'ar putea îndrepta comerțul de librărie" (How can the book trade be improved), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 7–8 (1934): 5.

certain centres the discounts offered by the booksellers to clients ... sometimes exceed the discounts that the bookseller obtained with great difficulties from the publisher...”¹ Tempted by the profits obtained from the discounts, he fails to take into consideration that he also has to cover the costs of advertising himself or the presents he made in order to attract their clients and “thinking that the income is all his [...] and to further harm his neighbour, he starts indeed to plant some American vine, or to open a cinema”.² Also in the name of discount, the booksellers were accused of “not hesitating to push all didactic waste of utterly obscure writers to primary schools [...] and even boycott the didactic books written by recognized authors”.³

In an attempt to solve some of the ardent problems of their profession, congresses were organized for booksellers on a periodic basis. Unfortunately not all booksellers of the country participated to these congresses, and most times they ended with no practical decisions.

The initiation of a yearly celebration of the book meant therefore a reason of hope for the book trade and the bookseller, who was considered, if only for a couple of days, a factor in the distribution of culture along with authors and publishers. At least this was how the Bucharest bookseller, Pavel Suru, one of the outstanding members of book trade, considered, saying that “it is not the sale made on the day or week of the book that pleases me and should please us booksellers. The great use for us all is the fact that thanks to this celebration, the officials and some cultural societies handle book trade at least for this single day with the importance it deserves.”⁴

On the part of the Cultura Națională bookshop, Virgil Montăneanu enjoyed the hospitality of the *România Literară* magazine to express his opinion on the situation of the book and the week of the book. First of all, he denied the crisis of Romanian books by saying that “the legend of the tragic situation of Romanian books in permanent need of state support should be debunked”,⁵ although, he admits, “the average price of a book is 80 lei, which exceeds the usual possibilities of purchase”.

Iulius Fichman, department head of one of the largest bookshops in the country, the Socec, when interviewed by the same magazine, estimated that the festival of the book would impel the sale of national literature which tended to lose ground in favour of foreign literature, and furthermore, that “this event [...] will attract public attention to the fact that together with physical entertainment, man also

¹ I. Florian, “De actualitate” (Actualities), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* II, 10, (1934): 4.

² G. Dobrovici, “Cum s’ar putea îndrepta...”, *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* II, 11–12 (1934): 5.

³ Em. Tatarescu, “Un cuvânt pentru librari” (A word for booksellers), In: *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* II, 11–12 (1934): 3.

⁴ Pavel Surdu, “O zi de nădejde” (A day of hope), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 9 (1934): 19.

⁵ Liviu Rebreanu, “Ce cred librarii despre săptămâna cărții” (What booksellers think of the week of the book), *România Literară* II (1933) : 2.

needs spiritual entertainment. And a good book provides entertainment for the soul.”¹

Also now, on the week of the book, M. Toneghin reminded his colleagues that it was time for them to prove and emphasize their role as a cultural factor. The establishment of the essential role of this profession in Romanian culture depended in this period on the services of each bookseller. Therefore “each of them, with means at their disposal, should dress their book windows in national carpets, pictures of writers, ornaments of pine tree branches, and in the midst of this festive decoration exhibit the books of all publishers, without any preference given to one publisher or the other. It must be kept in mind that it is not a festival of publishing houses, but a day dedicated to books, so all attention must be given to these.”²

For the booksellers, therefore, the week of the book meant a perfect opportunity to assert themselves as a distinct category of profession. Emphasis was laid on the cultural dimensions of their profession which had to evolve in public mentality from a simple merchant who, among other things, also sells books, to an experimented bookseller with a passion for books.

3.4. Readers

The festival of the book sets forth the printed work and all the instances that had a role to play in its creation and dissemination, from authors to publishers and booksellers, all profiting from it to present and debate their situation and cultural contribution. But the ultimate instance that gave the final verdict was the reader. For if it hadn't been for the reader, the very concept of the book and even more the festival of the book would have been meaningless.

The ample notion of readers was in that period ardently debated by anyone who considered himself part of the intellectual or cultural elite. There were discussions about the crisis of the books and inevitably also about the small number of readers, which was quite true in fact, if one takes into account the statistics on literacy in the inter-war period. Those few who could read were accused of doubtful taste, or of preferring frivolous literature, or foreign literature in the detriment of national one. The entire cultural campaign of the 1920s and 1930s aimed at the education of the masses, the formation of the taste for reading, and the refinement of the existing readers. Therefore the initiation of the Festival of the Book was seen as “an opportunity of direct verification of the connecting points between the reading public at large, and those with the vocation to hold high the torch of Romanian writing...”³

The concepts about mass culture were presented and disseminated by all available means of the media at the time, and it was obvious that there were a series of preconceptions and stereotypes about the reader-book relationship. The commoner was rarely offered the right to be heard, and most often his voice was indeed low. The festival of the book however is also an opportunity for the men of

¹ Ibid.

² M. Toneghin, “Doua zile însemnate pentru librari” (Two significant days for booksellers), *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I, 7–8 (1934): 5.

³ “Răsfățul pornografiei” (The spoiling of pornography), *Universul* 131 (1935): 12.

letters to find out the opinion of simple people. For example, the newspaper *Vremea* made a survey which presented the opinion of commoners about books.

We find out that book production is a both literally and figuratively tough and frustrating work from typographic worker Vasile Ionescu, who declared that “the damned lead that undermines the lungs or my co-workers entitles me to take an [...] attitude against books. For the simple reason that anyway the material sacrifices that you make for a book devours in arithmetic progression the author’s moral benefits...”¹ The difficult state of the writer is just as notorious, and all citizens seem to be aware of it, although it eventually fades out in front of their own difficulties. Due to the economic crisis, the book became too expensive a product for many people, only accessible for certain social categories. This is what a waiter in Bucharest spoke about, half jokingly, half seriously: “nowadays the book is a luxury you can only very rarely afford. This idea of a week of the book came right on time; but again only for those who have a bit more. Plus, so I heard, there are also discounts; I still wonder what is in there still for the writer when mister publisher peels him first, then mister buyer also has his pretensions, I would propose, as a benefit, to be indeed a benefit, to organize a month of tips before, so we can buy a book on the week of the book”.²

A civil servant employed at the National Railways exposed a concise and pertinent evaluation of the situation of the book and the Romanian literary world. Similarly to the typographic worker, for him also the basis of the problem is the high price of books. “Yes, it’s time we said it out bluntly; the books are extremely expensive here for the public, if taken into account that the majority of readers are a category of people – functionaries, students, and workers – with living standards below the needs of everyday existence...”³ Moreover, says the state official, the contemporary Romanian writer fails to seize in his writings the essence of the times, “the agitation of post-war life”, and therefore the reader, who cannot identify with the “outdated romanticism” of Romanian novels, gives up reading any more literature. Consequently, the festival of the book has the role to act as a barometer for writers who must adapt their subject to social realities, and for publishers who must adjust the price of books “to the present economical circumstances”.⁴

Passing on to more of an academic environment, assistant professor and chemist Barbu M. Angelescu salutes this initiative to celebrate the book especially because “lately young people seem to have left behind their earlier extra-curricular activity: good literature.”⁵ And he was right indeed to a certain extent, as proved by the newspaper *Vremea* with two examples amongst the young people of the age. The 7th grade pupil, Jean Șerbănescu, declared very emphatically to the reporter: “Come on, leave me alone, man. What? You think I care about the week of the book now? Now I have the week of school tests, and a bit later the week of exams...”⁶ Students

¹ “Cititorii” (The readers), *Vremea* VII (1934): 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

are nothing more passionate about reading, since, as a first-year technical student girl in Bucharest remarked, “when you’ve got nothing to fill your bowels and no perspective of a next day somewhat rounder, the world is about zero money, zero centimes. So what do we do then with the week of the book?”¹ For another student girl at the National Institute of Physical Education the event has “the interest of an aquarium” where you can fulfil your worldly curiosity. “I’d like to see Ionel Teodoreanu again. What do you think? Does he still have his peachy cheeks?”²

The contemporary press also contained spicy episodes from the autograph sessions held on the Week of the Book. In the Alcaly bookshop the meeting between a reader and the writers present happened like this: “the missy, after fearfully looking at Sergiu Dan, excitedly at Mircea Eliade, and shyly at Anton Holban, determinedly addressed the bookseller: - I’d like an autograph on *The Story of San Michele*. – From whom, miss? Asked the addressed, waiting in terror for the answer. – From Axel Munthe...”. The same bookshop was invaded then by “crowds of primary and secondary school pupils” who gathered around some writer, “presented [...] for signing [...] minute notebooks bought for 2 leis each”³

Coming from various social and professional spheres, the participant of the Day of the Book was mostly attracted by the fashionable aura of the festival. Those who took part in the manifestations were not only Romanian readers, but Romanian spectators, who were there in order to watch the representation offered by the intellectual elite. The inter-war reader was in fact, like any other reader, an elusive figure that could not be forced within the strict limits of a certain taxonomy.

Conclusion

Leaving behind the First World War, the post-1918 Romanian society experienced the euphoria of the union. Social and economic changes inevitably happened against a background of optimism prevalent in all fields of the society.

New trends of thought were born, each of them offering multiple ways of action that must be followed for the development of new state reality. The possibility of upcoming new, better times in literature as well is tempting for most writers; Rebreanu himself considered that “we live the beginning of a new century. Yes, we are at the beginning of a new age, like the Renaissance was in contrast to the Middle Ages...”⁴ Most hopes for the beginning age soon proved to be merely shapes without foundations. In the case of literature and book production this came down as books without readers.

The low number of readers as compared to the number of inhabitants of the unified Romania and its ambition of being a modern European country was first talked about as early as the mid-1920s. The economic crisis beginning in 1929 deepened the problem and brought about a “crisis of the book” in the Romanian literary life. This situation also known as “the crisis of reading” shortly made its way through to the main subjects of debate of the intellectual elite. There were attempts

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., 19 May 1935.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Camil Baltazar, *Din romanul existenței...*, 358.

to establish the causes of the situation that in a country with 16 million inhabitants the average number of copies for a volume did not exceed 3000 copies,¹ because the publishers could not afford the risk of not selling their stock. Thus the crisis of the book brings to the fore the issue of illiteracy of a significant percentage of the population. The state was accused of not maintaining a sufficiently coherent cultural policy, ignoring the problems of the rural areas, and encouraging the paper monopoly of certain enterprises. The booksellers were accused of lack of culture and therefore the incapacity to disseminate books in the society, and the publishers were blamed for encouraging the spreading of foreign writings in the detriment of national literature. Furthermore, those few educated people who could read did not buy books because they were expensive, or because they had not developed a taste for reading. Literary critic George Călinescu pointed out a series of reasons which explain the crisis of books. His conclusion is that this issue was in fact the crisis of contemporary society which had lost all its reference points for Romanian literature, a society with an inevitably affected value system.

A series of projects appeared as possible solutions of the situation, trying to change the society's perception of books, which, out of a luxury asset reserved only for certain social categories, must become a common asset.

First, the paper needed to be made cheaper, which in turn would have enabled the publishers to raise the number of copies per volume. The next step should have been the creation of an efficient system of book distribution: increasing the number of popular libraries, establishing a national network of bookstands and bookshops employing a staff qualified to promote books and readings. The reorganization of a publishing policy should have been coordinated with the state-supported endeavours of culturalization. And last but not least, the necessity to create certain events for the promotion of books, exhibitions and book fairs that would combine culture with spectacle, and capture the attention of the public this way. Against the background of such debates in literary life on the crisis of reading, Dimitrie Gusti, Minister of Education and Cults, an educated man himself, created the Day of the Book. As a festival day dedicated to books, this event was the perfect occasion for the state to become a partner for writers, publishers, booksellers, and librarians in their endeavour to promote reading and educate the public. The events taking place in the whole country involved exhibitions and book fairs, meetings with the writers, conferences explaining the importance of reading to the audience, meetings and sessions for local personalities to display their support of national literature. Special emphasis was put on schools, for which special ministerial directives specified the obligation of involving pupils in activities that developed their interest in reading. All essential factors of the world of book production were involved in the organization and development of the events: the Romanian Writers' Society, the Publishers' Association, booksellers, the Royal Cultural Foundation, libraries and universities of all the urban centres, and even private associations and foundations.

¹ Emil Ocneanu, "Problema cărții" (The problem of the book) *Buletinul Asociației editorilor români* I. 7–8 (1934): 6.

The satisfactory conclusion at the end of the 1933 celebrations determined the continuation of the Day of the Book and its transformation into an annual tradition. From one edition to the next, the event broadened, as also proved by its name. In the first year of its organization it was a simple Day of the Book, later it became the Week of the Book, and finally the Month of the Book. The same happened with political interference, which also increased from one edition to the next. As the political situation in the country sharpened, Carol II's intentions to instate his personal regime became increasingly evident. His control over culture also surfaced in the exhibitions organized for the celebration of the book, with the promotion of his image as a voivode and patron of the Romanians' spiritual and material needs.

The opinions and reactions on the event were divided. Although actively involved in its organization and development, writers seemed to be most sceptical. Especially in the first year of the celebration, many voices of the world of literature considered that the Day of the Book would bring no improvement as to the public's appetite for readings, or to the social assessment of a writer's profession. However, a considerable part of the great names of inter-war Romanian literature guaranteed the success of the event with their presence.

Of all participants, the publishers and booksellers thought highest of the event, and enthusiastically embraced all manifestations. The influence that politics had on their profession was also perceivable. As the extreme rightists became increasingly stronger, the policy of publishing houses centred on the works of Romanian authors. While at first the translations of foreign writers were more popular, towards the end of the 1930s the exhibitions mostly promoted the works of writers who had access to the circles of state power. The publishing house of the King Carol II Foundations for Literature and Arts gained a special status, being privileged in all its public actions, and having as a subsidiary editorial programme the promotion of Carol II's personal cult.

As to the public taking part in these events, it was too heterogeneous to have its opinions appreciated as eloquent. Especially in the capital, on the first editions of the celebrations, the public participated in large numbers attracted mainly by the high society-aura of the events. In the rest of the country, however, fewer personalities attracted less the public. But although for some the book was only a pretext to gain their place in high society, or to increase the profit of their business, the fact that at least a couple of days were dedicated each year to this important vehicle of culture is one of the cultural successes of the inter-war Romanian society.

Translated by Emese G. Czintos