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Romanians and Cultural Associationism in the Bistrița-Năsăud Area During the Dualist Period

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Introduction

CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONISM is a topic that has been previously approached by Romanian historians.¹ During the dualist period (1867–1918), it was almost a survival strategy for Romanians, in terms of their national identity. In those decades, given the difficulties posed by political representativity, Romanians resorted to associations in order to educate the next generation. This was a means of passing on values and a form of preserving the spiritual and literary heritage. The same held true for other nations that were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which also had such cultural associations. Given the relevance of cultural associationism for the Romanians living in Transylvania, we intend to bring attention to a particular aspect. Based both on historiographical approaches already published, and on documents found in the archives, such as those of Bistrița-Năsăud County, we will discuss

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how cultural associationism was understood, its principles, its role, and how it helped the Romanian people become more aware of their responsibility in relation to their national identity.

Cultural Associationism and Its Forms of Manifestation in Bistrița-Năsăud County

AS OTHER studies have already emphasized,² cultural associationism emerged under various forms in that northern part of Transylvania that we focus on, namely, the territory of the current Bistrița-Năsăud County. Since the majority of the Romanian population in the area was concentrated in Năsăud rather than in Bistrița, where the German population was dominant, most of the activities of the four most important associations in the field (ASTRA, the Mariana musical association, the teachers' association, and the reading association) took place in Năsăud. ASTRA (The Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and Culture) was founded in 1861, the musical association in 1881,³ the reading one in 1857 (with a multinational content),⁴ and the teachers' association in 1861–1862.⁵ We see that, with one exception, all of them were founded before 1867, the moment when dualism began. Most probably, they were originally designed as institutions with a cultural relevance, meant to promote the Romanian heritage and to bring together intellectuals in an effort to stimulate the dialogue between them and the transmission of values. After 1867, they also became a form of survival for the Romanians living in Transylvania, who were almost completely deprived of political rights. Some of these associations also edited journals, which can be considered a consequence of cultural associationism.

ASTRA—The Năsăud Department

CLEARLY, THE most influential cultural institution in the area, active continuously until 1948 (and revived after 1989), was ASTRA. With a department founded in 1881,⁶ the institution had members from the city and its neighboring villages since its founding in 1861.⁷ The Greek Catholic dean of Rodna, together with some intellectuals and priests,⁸ took part in its meetings and encouraged young people in particular to join it. In 1870, before the official recognition of the Department, ASTRA held its general assembly in the

city.⁹ Another general assembly followed in 1870,¹⁰ while the one from 1914 was cancelled because of the beginning of the Great War. Although ASTRA did not publish a journal in the Năsăud area, its general publication, *Transilvania*, which was printed in Sibiu, often provided information about the members of the institution, the conferences it organized, and other elements related to the institution.

On closer inspection, the activities organized in Năsăud included conferences held by various scholars, libraries, or meetings. The conferences took place mostly in churches, given that, at the time, they were the only venues which could provide the space for the approximately four or five hundred people attending such events. In rare situations, the meetings of the Department took place in restaurants or clubs. As to the topics approached, they included especially aspects related to the Romanian culture or to religion and agriculture. The purpose of the institution was therefore to contribute to the dissemination of practical knowledge among the people, while also aiming to enhance the feeling of accountability in relation to their ethnical belonging. Moreover, works like that of Octavian Goga, entitled “Țăranul în literatura noastră poetică” (The peasant in our poetic literature) (Bistrița, 1907), or that of Archpriest Grigore Pletosu, entitled “Creșterea națională” (The national growth),¹¹ published the same year, encouraged the production of literary creations meant to stimulate or promote the peasant.

Considering its origins, ASTRA also encouraged people to study and supported them. Together with Fondurile Grănicerești năsăudene (The Năsăud border funds)¹² and the Gojdu Foundation, ASTRA contributed consistently with funds for young people who wanted to study. While the two aforementioned institutions focused more on the university level, ASTRA also helped young people to study agriculture or in practical fields (arts and crafts). Moreover, it was Pletosu's concern, as president of the youth section (1901–1911), to work on a project dedicated to young people who finished their studies in agriculture, so that they would stay in touch with culture.¹³

The Mariana Musical Association

ALTHOUGH IT was not one of the most relevant institutions from the point of view of its representativeness, the Mariana musical association had an important say in the development of the Romanian imprint in the Năsăud area. It was founded in 1888 and its aim was to stir the passion for music, in particular the Christian-inspired one.¹⁴ It did not neglect cultural and

literary life, either. Unfortunately, in the Archives of Bistrița-Năsăud County, there is a real scarcity of documents about this institution, which complicates the task of any historian trying to piece together its activity.

Compared with ASTRA, which had honorary, ordinary, associated, and collective members, the Mariana musical association had active, supporting, founding, and honorary members¹⁵ and received most of its funds from membership fees and donations. As stipulated in its statutes, the association had a yearly general assembly. During the 19th century, the presidency was mostly held by Alexandru Larionessi, who had a PhD in law,¹⁶ was a lawyer in Năsăud, and was supported by the Romanian intellectuals in the city. At the same time, the Border Gymnasium of Năsăud had a consistent contribution to the activity of the institution. Thus, associations were mostly hosted in the big hall of the school,¹⁷ with professors and their families almost always attending them.¹⁸ Since the headquarters of the Second Border Regiment also had representatives in the Rodna village, soon after the founding of the singing association, a section was also opened in Rodna.

The activity of the institution was rich, with a particular focus on culture. If we look at different schedules kept until nowadays, we find lists of carols, piano compositions, poems belonging to various Romanian authors, such as Dimitrie Bolintineanu, and theatre activities, among others. As expected, the association also had a choir,¹⁹ which prepared performances for each event. On some occasions, like in 1889, religious events were accompanied by performances of the Mariana musical association. The consecration of the new school of Rodna was followed by such a representation.²⁰ At the time, the president of the association was Gherasim Domide, and its secretary was the teacher and writer Ion Pop Reteganul. These moments were also an occasion for the institution to collect funds that were later invested in purchasing books for school libraries, or in scholarships offered to students. Therefore, for each event the participants paid between 50 and 80 *crăițari*.²¹

Later, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the association was sometimes a real bridge between the Romanians in Transylvania and the ones beyond the Carpathian Mountains. The first soloist of the Romanian Opera in Bucharest, Irena de Vladaia,²² performed at one of its events. Quite notably, the students enjoyed discounts.²³

Another particularity of the institution was that it promoted feminism before this aspect became important for society. Upon looking closer at the membership list, one can notice that the majority of the leading committee consisted of women.²⁴ Although the president was a man, and there were also some other men on the list, the fact is that a majority of at least 75% of all members were

women. This can be partially explained by the activities carried out by the association and by the existence of a choir.

The Reading Association (Casina)

TOGETHER WITH ASTRA, it was one of the most important cultural associations in the Năsăud area. It was also founded before the dualist period. Moreover, from its beginning, it was a multiethnic institution. Based on the Romanian Reading Society in Sibiu,²⁵ founded three years earlier, in 1854, the Reading Association, also called the Casina²⁶ due to its location, received money from membership fees and brought together an important number of journals, both in Romanian and German. The role of the association was to update people on news of the world,²⁷ and to discuss important decisions regarding the community. Just like the musical association, for a few years the reading one also had a Department in Rodna (founded in 1862), with eight journals published.²⁸ Later, the association was integrated into ASTRA. The Năsăud section remained functional until 1948, when the communists closed it down. Both in Rodna and Năsăud, the association held monthly events with an average of 30 participants. This was important because they were dedicated only to intellectuals.²⁹ The list of journals that the institution published covered pedagogical, cultural, literary, and social topics. The journals published in Transylvania and in Bucharest³⁰ were part of the collections we studied.³¹

In 1861, the Năsăud Romanian autonomous district was founded, which meant that some of the foreign officers left the area and the number of Romanians increased, which led to the association becoming a Romanian one. Unfortunately, there are no documents from between 1871 and 1878, which prevents us from reconstructing its full history.³² Nonetheless, the association is supposed to have had a constant, uninterrupted activity.

Beyond cultural topics, the Reading Association also touched upon social and religious aspects. Therefore, the 1910 meeting discussed the issue of appointing the dean of Rodna. The 41 members of that time discussed the three candidates, namely, the priest Ioan Dologa from Tiha Bârgăului, and Ioan Nășcuțiu and Alexandru Haliță from Năsăud,³³ suggesting the appointment of the latter. At the same time, a suggestion was also made to the Gherla bishop, who took it into consideration. In 1912, the project of a National House in Năsăud was discussed. This was meant to host all cultural and economic institutions in the area.³⁴ The association received 1,000 lei from the Mercur Bank. It also requested money from the Năsăud Border Funds and a venue at Hotel Rahova. Unfortu-

nately, their efforts were not successful, because the National Border school was later built on that same location.³⁵

The Mariana Teachers' Association of Năsăud

THIS ASSOCIATION stems from the one founded on 17 September 1862, in Sibiu, which was intended for all the schools of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Church of Transylvania. Starting from 1862–1863, conferences were hosted every year.³⁶ Given that Romanian schools were mostly confessional in this part of Northern Transylvania and the majority of the population was Greek Catholic, in 1869, the dean of Rodna, Maxim Pop, asked for an association of the deanery and an association of the teachers.³⁷ In the same period, circles were also founded in Caransebeș (447 members, in 14 circles), Arad (238 members, 14 circles), the diocese of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș (108 members).³⁸ Năsăud had 152 members, grouped in 4 school circles. The number of members was even higher than in the case of ASTRA and it remained constant. Professors and institutors took part in all activities. Since the founding of the association, each member was asked to write a short monograph of the place where they were working.³⁹ The requests for both associations to be founded were sent to the Ministry in 1872, but they were only approved in 1876.⁴⁰ Between 1878 and 1901, there were 23 assemblies and the headquarters remained in Năsăud.⁴¹

The activities carried out by the association included some related to the Romanians outside Transylvania, which is proof of the solidarity with them. For example, on the occasion of a prize received by Vasile Alecsandri at Montpellier in France, Vasile Petri and the members of the committee sent him a telegram, to congratulate him.⁴²

A particularity of the association is that it had a publication, called *Vatra Căldărușului pedagogic* (The hearth of the pedagogical calendar), which was founded in 1885 and was meant to be an almanac.⁴³ Unfortunately, it was discontinued. Moreover, on 3 December 1884, there was also a conflict between the members of the association, because the editor, who was at that time Vasile Petri, decided to print 500 copies without consulting them.⁴⁴ As expected, the dean of Rodna was also the president of the association and some of its activity caught the interest of the Austro-Hungarian authorities. Consequently, the association was suspended at the end of the last decade of the 19th century, given the change of statutes. At the insistence of dean Grigore Moisil and of other intellectuals, it was soon reopened.⁴⁵

Conclusions

As we have tried to show in this paper, during the second half of the 19th century, cultural associationism was an important form of expression and action for the Romanians living in the Năsăud area. The four important associations we presented spoke both about existing cultural concerns and about the needs of the people. As a general consideration, we noticed that the good cooperation between the school and the Rodna deanery⁴⁶ contributed to the unity and the visibility of certain actions. Another observation is that the process unfolded from the top to the bottom. The intellectuals were the ones who coagulated and exported certain principles. At the same time, while some institutions, such as ASTRA, dedicated their work to all the people and provided access to their events to everybody, there were also professional associations, like the one of the teachers, or elitist associations, like the reading association. Another relevant aspect is that, in some cases, the work of associations was discontinued and the help of Romanian publications like *Telegraful Român* (The Romanian telegraph) or *Transilvania* of Sibiu contributed to the dissemination of the results of their activities. The fact that teachers issued their own journal, although with interruptions, is also important. In conclusion, cultural associationism represented an important pillar in the development of the Romanian identity in Transylvania and in the dissemination of literary, ethnographic, linguistic, or religious values.



Notes

1. See, for example, Liviu Maior, Ioan Aurel Pop, and Ioan Bolovan, “Cuvânt înainte,” in *Asociaționism și naționalism cultural în secolele XIX–XX*, ed. Liviu Maior, Ioan Aurel Pop, and Ioan Bolovan (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2011), 7; Maxim Morariu, *Asociaționismul cultural din zona Bistriței și a Năsăudului (1850–1918)* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2017); Liviu Maior, “Despre asociaționism și autonomizare în Transilvania secolelor al XIX-lea și al XX-lea,” in *Asociaționism și naționalism cultural*, ed. Maior, Pop, and Bolovan, 20–23; Josef Wolf and Marionela Wolf, “Asociațiile germanilor din Banat,” in *Asociaționism și naționalism cultural*, ed. Maior, Pop, and Bolovan, 33–78; Teodor Tanco, *Academicienii năsăudeni și bistrițeni* (Cluj-Napoca: Virtus Romana Rediviva, 1996); Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Presa din zona Năsăudului în cea de-a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea și prima parte a secolului al XX-lea: Tranziția de la presa specializată la ‘publicistica de loisir’,” in *Noi teme pe agenda de cercetare: Lucrările Conferinței Naționale “Historia magistra vitae: Noi teme pe agenda de cercetare”*, Cluj-Napoca, 8–9 aprilie 2016,

- ed. Mihai-Octavian Groza et al. (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2017), 189–200; Liviu Maior, *Habsburgii și românii: De la loialitatea dinastică la identitate națională* (București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2006); Nicolae Bocșan, “Astra și Academia Română,” in *Asociaționism și naționalism cultural*, ed. Maior, Pop, and Bolovan, 91–94.
2. Ioan Bolovan, “The Romanians’ Ideals of Liberalism and Nationality in 1918,” *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Series Historia* 63, 2 (2018): 1–15; Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Reuniunea română de lectură din Năsăud (Casina) și aportul ei în emanciparea culturală a românilor năsăudeni în perioada 1860–1918,” in *Administrație românească anideană: Studii și comunicări din Banat-Crișana*, ed. Doru Sinaci and Emil Arbonie (Arad: Vasile Goldiș University Press, 2016), 362–369; Maxim Morariu, *Preoții năsăudeni și Astra (1861–1918)* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut; Bistrița: Charmides, 2016).
 3. ANJSBN (National Archives, Bistrița-Năsăud County Service), *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 6/1888–1889, fol. 1r.
 4. Traian Pavelea, *Societăți culturale năsăudene* (Bistrița: Arcade, 2005), 10.
 5. Maxim Pop, “Iarăși despre reuniuni și congrese,” *Magazinu Pedagogicu* 3 (1869): 3. Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Istoria Astei năsăudene în viziunea lui Iuliu Moșil (1859–1947),” in *Tinerii istorici și cercetările lor*, ed. Nicolae Dumbrăvescu and Gheorghe Dumbrăvescu, vol. 4 (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2016), 127–133.
 6. Nicolae Trifoiu, “Năsăudenii și începuturile Astei,” *Almanah cultural-științific Virtus Romana Rediviva* 3 (1998): 52.
 7. ANJSBN, *Fond Protopopiatul Ortodox Român Bistrița*, file 345/1861, fol. 3; ANJSBN, *Fond Vicariatul Rodnei*, file 170/1861, fol. 30. Ioan Seni, “Interferențe șaguniste în spații năsăudene și bistrițene,” in *Bicentenarul nașterii Mitropolitului Andrei Șaguna: Lucrările celei de-a 103-a Adunări Generale a Asociațiunii Astra, Sibiu, 14–16 noiembrie 2008*, ed. Dumitru Acu, Elena Macavei, and Cătălina Gruian (Sibiu: ASTRA, 2010), 170.
 8. See Morariu, *Preoții năsăudeni și Astra*.
 9. Ioan T. Echim, “Un mare eveniment cultural la Năsăud în 1870,” *Plaiuri năsăudene* 2, 11–12 (1944): 14; Iosif Naghiu, “Adunările generale ale Astei la Năsăud,” *Arhiva Someșană* 20 (1937): 526.
 10. Pamfil Matei, *Asociațiunea în lumina documentelor (1861–1950): Noi contribuții* (Sibiu: Editura Universității Lucian Blaga, 2005), 82; Elena Macavei, *Asociațiunea Astra și adunările generale (1861–2011)* (Sibiu: ASTRA, 2001), 44.
 11. Matei, *Asociațiunea în lumina documentelor*, 84. Cf. Iuliu-Marius Morariu, “Activitatea protoiereului și profesorului Grigore Pletosu ca președinte al Secțiunii școlare a Astei (1902–1911),” in *Consemnări despre trecut: Societate și imagine de-a lungul timpului*, ed. Anamaria Macavei and Roxana Dorina Pop (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015), 187–198.
 12. For more information about it and its activity, see also: Lazăr Ureche, *Fondurile grănicerești năsăudene (1851–1918)* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2021).
 13. Morariu, “Activitatea protoiereului și profesorului Grigore Pletosu,” 187–188.
 14. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 6/1888–1889, fol. 1r.
 15. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 6/1888–1889, fol. 1.

16. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 7/1897, fol. 1r.
17. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 1r.
18. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 3r.
19. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 7r.
20. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 16.
21. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 6.
22. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 21.
23. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 27.
24. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 1r.
25. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de cântări Năsăud*, file 10/1897–1910, fol. 9.
26. Traian Pavelea, *Societăți culturale năsăudene*, vol. 1: *Varia* (Bistrița: Arcade, 2005), 10.
27. Adrian Onofreiu, “Evoluția Năsăudului în perioada 1851–1876,” in *Monografia Orașului Năsăud (1245–2008)*, ed. Ironim Marțian, vol. 1 (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Napoca Star, 2009), 223–224.
28. Adrian Onofreiu, “Cadrul intelectual al asocierii între idei și realizări în Districtul Năsăud (1861–1876),” *Revista Bistriței* 23 (2009): 202.
29. Cf. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de lectură din Năsăud (Casina)*, file 1/1868–1903, fol. 1r.
30. Pavelea, *Societăți culturale năsăudene*, 12.
31. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de lectură din Năsăud (Casina)*, file 1/1868–1903, fol. 2v.
32. *Ibid.*, fol. 12r.
33. ANJSBN, *Fond Reuniunea Română de lectură din Năsăud (Casina)*, file 4/1910–1938, fol. 1v.
34. Pavelea, *Societăți culturale năsăudene*, 13.
35. *Ibid.*, 14.
36. *Ibid.*, 83.
37. Maxim Pop, “Iarăși despre reuniuni și congrese,” 3.
38. Pavelea, *Societăți culturale năsăudene*, 84.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 84–87.
41. *Ibid.*, 89.
42. For more information, see Vasile Alecsandri, *Călătorii*, ed. Ion Pillat (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1936); Vasile Alecsandri, *Călătorii—misiuni diplomatice*, ed. Alexandru Marcu (Craiova: Scrisul Românesc, 1945).
43. *Calendaru Pedagogicu pre anulu ordinariu 1885, urmatu de almanachulu Reuniunei Mariane* (Gherla: Aurora, 1884), 1.
44. Pavelea, *Societăți culturale năsăudene*, 94–95.
45. *Ibid.*, 96.
46. About its role and history, see also Mirela Andrei, *La granița Imperiului: Vicariatul Greco-Catolic al Rodnei în a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea* (Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut, 2006).

Abstract

Romanians and Cultural Associationism in the Bistrița-Năsăud Area During the Dualist Period

Being an important tool and form of expression for the Romanians in Transylvania, cultural associationism underwent a complex development during the dualist period (1867–1918). In the Năsăud area, on which we focus in the present research, there are four associations that stand out. Based on existing documents and historiography, we will try to highlight their role and to show how they contributed to and sustained the development of Romanian identity during dualism. We will show how the cooperation between the Rodna Greek Catholic deanery and school contributed to the development of said institutions and we will also touch upon aspects such as women's representation.

Keywords

ASTRA, Transylvania, dualism, Casina, Rodna Deanery