

THE ROLE OF ITALIAN MINORITY IN THE ECONOMIC MODERNIZATION OF ROMANIA

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Abstract

Even if, numerically not very representative in the population of Romania, along the history, the Italian minority has brought an extremely important contribution to the economic modernization of our country. Italian immigrants are present in the economy of the Romanian provinces as early as the XIIth century, their role being essential in the formation of modern Romania towards the end of the XIXth century.

In the XXth century, the historical convulsions caused by the two world wars imposed to the Italian community of Romania a specific behaviour – to be analyzed in the following. Equally, several members of this community distinguished themselves as important personalities in Romanian art, science and culture.

Keywords: *Italian community, Italians of Craiova, economic modernization of Romania, Romanian Principalities*

Presence of Italians in the economy of the Romanian Principalities in the XIIth and XVIIth centuries

Scarce information is available on Italian emigration prior to 1800, however, along the years, mention has been made about their presence (as travellers, missionaries, physicians, soldiers of fortune, civil and military architects, engineers, painters, house designers, musicians, fencing masters, brick layers, carpenters, stone cutters, etc.), at the princely courts of Moldova, Valahia and Transylvania. Along the centuries, the history of Romanians registered the important contribution brought by Italians to the socio-cultural development and building up of modern Romania. Tens of thousands of Italians came, either invited by the princes, kings and governments of the country, or on their own, in search of a better life¹.

Historical records attest the presence of Italians on the actual territory of Romania as early as the XIIth century. Some of the first settlers mentioned in Transylvania during the

reign of the Hungarian king Geza the IInd (1142-1162) were, apart from Walloons, the Italians from Varadino (present Oradea), where they had built up their residential district, earlier than 1241, the year of the Tartar-Mongolian invasion. In the XIIIth and XIVth centuries, the ancient Greek walled towns built up on the Black Sea coast have been colonized by the maritime cities of Genova and Venice, first with the agreement of the Byzantine, then of the Ottoman authorities – namely the cities of Lycostomo, Maurocastro or Moncastro, and the Danubian fortress of Vicina (in the vicinity of the present Isaccea), Sfântu Gheorghe – facing one of the river mouths of Danube in the Black Sea, and San Giorgio (today, Giurgiu). The Genovese lighthouse of Constanța has been erected around the year 1300 by the Genovese merchants developing their trade in this harbour.

Later on, Italian architects and foremen have been brought here to build up walled towns and fortresses. Accordingly, between 1307 and 1315, a castle was raised in Timișoara for the new king of Hungary, Carol Robert of Anjou. Iancu de Hunedoara, governor of the Timiș Comitatus and voievode of Transylvania since 1441, then king of Hungary between 1446 and 1453, settled his headquarters in Timișoara and hired Italian, possibly Milanese, architects, to erect a larger and more modern one on the place of the old castle – destroyed by an early earthquake.

Other Italian architects mentioned in historical records are those who came in 1541, to build up walled fortresses against the Turkish attacks. As early as the time of Matei Corvin and Gheorghe Zăpolya, continuing with Báthory, Rackozy and Gabriel Bethlen, numerous Italian architects, military and civil engineers were present at the

princely courts of Transilvania. For example, the entrenchments of the walled city of Oradea have been fortified, during the reign of Bethlen (1613-1629), by Giovanni Landi of Mantua and Agostino Serena of Venice, while Giacomo Resti, an architect of Verona, built up, inside these fortifications, a pentagonal palace with an – obviously – Italian styled *chiostro*. Oradea remains the central European city having most faithfully preserved the style of the Italian Renaissance. The same Agostino Serena erected the Banffy Castle at Bonțida (Cluj county).

XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries documents make mention of several Italians hired at the Vallachian and Moldavian courts: physicians, counselors, translators, personal secretaries, fancing masters, revenue officers, wig makers, etc.

THE PRESENCE OF ITALIANS IN THE ROMANIAN ECONOMY OF THE XIXTH AND XXTH CENTURIES

Starting with the XVIIIth century, especially in the first half of the XIXth one, Italians came in large numbers, even in compact groups, in Transilvania, Bucovina, Banat and Basarabia. The main reason of their migration in the provinces inhabited by Romanians was definitely the economic one. They settled where their profession and their training were needed; consequently, in certain regions, their number was indeed high: for example, in Țara Hațegului, the Clopotiva, Râu de Mori and Sântămăria-Orlea villages had preponderantly an Italian population, due to the Italians established here around 1850 to work in the forest domain. In the communa of Greci, district of Tulcea, and in some other neighbouring villages, stone cutters came, the same who, later on, contributed to the realization of the Danube bridges.

The most significant Italian migration in Romania was recorded in the modern epoch, starting mainly in the second half of the XIXth century. It is the epoch in which the considerable subsoil richness of the Romanian territory (coal, iron, silver, gold, led) is rediscovered, so that the Austrians interested in their exploitation colonized part of Transilvania with Italian people: mine workers, builders of railways,

viaducts or mine galleries, stone cutters, forest rangers, etc. In parallels with ore extraction, the siderurgical and metallurgical industries – requiring once again qualified labourers – were developing. When finishing the works for which they had been hired, the Italians remained in the region, their descendants living today in the district of Caraș-Severin, at Oravița, Bocșa, Oțelu Roșu, Caransebeș, Zăvoi, Glimboca, Reșița, etc.

The ever-increasing demand for agricultural products on the European market explains the extension of the arable terrains and the introduction of farming machineries so that, beginning with the year 1830, new trades were required (agronomists, geometers, veterinary surgeons, mechanics, etc.). On the other hand, the Romanian territory, for example, Oltenia, had several desert lands, so that foreign, external man power had to be brought. Consequently, beginning with 1830 or, according to other sources, after 1860, Italians from the Venice-Friuli region came to till these surfaces. The emigrants, mainly poor peasants, almost all of them illiterate, settled around Craiova. A few descendants of theirs may still be identified in the region. Other farmers came from different provinces of Italy and established themselves in Moldova, on the banks of Danube or Olt, at Târgoviște or Ploiești.

In the end of the XIXth century, about 10-15% of the immigrants having left Veneto came to Romania, many of these poor persons, accompanied by numerous families, lacking any material support, arriving in Oltenia, in search of a better life and work, on the large estates from the southern part of Romania. When the landowners were interested in hiring them for more than 6 months, these farmers were colonized on the estates together with their whole families, thus establishing new settlements. At that time, Romania was experiencing a flourishing economic progress, its currency being almost equal to that of the French franc. Mainly after 1886, the rapid rhythm of Romania's modernization was manifested prioritarily in construction and industrial domains, in parallels with a higher grain export.

Over the last three decades of the XIXth century, most of the specialized foreign workers came to Romania for a longer time, not only for

short periods, being usually accompanied by their families.

The historical-diplomatic Archive of the Italian Foreign Ministry offers information on the creation, in 1878, of a Committee for the Italian colonization of Romania, mainly in the climatically healthy regions of Dobrogea. The committee was formed exclusively of Italians, yet it should be supported by the Romanian Government, as declared by the ambassador of Italia in București at that time, Giuseppe Tornielli. Transilvania, Piatra Neamț, Bicz, Sinaia, Cornești (Iași), Cataloi (Dobrogea), Greci, are the main zones in which, first temporarily, then permanently, a large part of the Italian population from the North-Eastern part of Italy was settled.

It has been estimated that, between 1860-1920, around 60,000 Italians, of which 80% came from Friuli, migrated to Romania. The others were from Emilia-Romagna, Lombardia, Puglia, Piemonte, Tuscany and other regions of Italy. In the year 1910, a handbook is issued in the Kingdom of Italy, entitled "Instructions for the Italian immigrants in Balkanic countries and in Romania", elaborated by the Royal Commissariat of Emigration. The handbook specifies, among others, the routes to be followed, namely the railway line: Venice - Budapest, Fiume - Ancona - Budapest and Udine - Cormons - Budapest, up to the border stations Vârciorova or Predeal, being recommended².

A large community of Italians was mentioned at Târgoviște, in the year 1937, which explains the creation, at some moment of time, of an Italian consulate agency. The community was mainly formed of the numerous families of constructors, established here during the reign of Carol I of Hohenzollern, between 1887-1897. According to a census elaborated by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself, at that time, the number of Italian immigrants in Romania recorded a tenfold increase, in only three decades, namely from 830 in 1871 to more than 8,000 in 1901.

The number of Italians settled in Romania continued to increase between the two world wars, so that, according to some estimations, present in Romania in 1935 were about 60,000 Italians. However, the emigration phenomenon drastically decreased after the year 1940. In the large Romanian cities, the Italians worked as

contractors, participating to the realization of imposing edifices in Brașov, București, Câmpulung-Muscel, Craiova, Galați, Iași, Pitești, Ploiești, Sibiu, Sinaia, Târgoviște, Timișoara and other localities. They also worked as constructors of bridges and roads, railways, feed pipes, viaducts, wells, churches, funerary monuments, banks, schools. Mention should be made, in this respect, of the following emblematic structures: the Colțea hospital, several mosaics in the Cotroceni Palace, The Loan Bank and the Military Circle of București, the monumental bridge of Cernavodă, the Brașov-București railway, the "Dinicu Golescu" Lyceum and the Flemish church of Câmpulung Muscel, the cathedrals of Craiova and Galați.

In 1940, when România became an ally of Germany, numerous of the Italians who had made their fortune returned to their country. Many of those having remained in București died during the American air raids of 1944, others were arrested, when the Soviets conquered Romania, and, beginning with the year 1951, 40,000 Italians were forced to return to Italy in convoys of 100 persons, each 15 days. Each person had the right to only one luggage, not to exceed 35 kg. Gold was confiscated.

A special category within the Italian minority of Romania was represented by tradesmen, for whom Romania was a good market in all historical times. They settled mainly in the port towns of Danube and the Black Sea. In Constanța, Galați and Brăila (where one of the most important cereal exchanges of Europe was operating) they formed communities still active today. A proof of the size and importance of these communities are the Italian consulates established at Brăila, Constanța and Galați, as well as the imposing edifices - known as The House of Italy - where their members used to meet.

In the country, the Italians settled in the lowlands or in the mountains worked as farmers, forest workers, miners or stone cutters. As reputed stone dressers, they knew the secrets of stone and marble veins. Nowadays, the descendants of the cutters from the stone quarries of Iacobdeal and Turcoaia, or Câmpulung Muscel, Nușoara and Albești, may be still met at Greci, district of Tulcea.

Here is a beautiful fragment taken out from the book entitled "Tales from the life of the Italians of Romania", written by Modesto Gino Ferrarini, describing the Italians settled in Valea Jiului: "There exists in Valea Jiului an Italian nucleus - of the same quality as the others - 24-carat gold - , followers of builders, specialists in tunnels, viaducts and even stone cutters, established here from Belluno". Equally, one should not forget the Italians hired in the mines of Tg. Ocna, district of Bacău, or in those of Valea Jiului. Italian specialists in wood exploitation and processing could be found at Oțelul Roșu, in Caraș Severin, Zărnești - Brașov, Salva - Bistrița, etc., where they worked as wood cutters, carpenters or joiners. Industrious farmers, gardeners and wine growers may be still met in Dobrogea and Banat. An old and important Italian colony of Dobrogea was that at Cataloi, formed of diligent Friuli people who, around 1888, held on lease from the Romanian Government more than 8,000 ha of woods, then fallowed and cultivated the soil with vine and cereals. They established one of the most united and stable communities of the region. In Banat and Craiova, Italians created the largest rice plantations of the whole country, being recognized as the best rice cultivators of Romania.

The rapid integration in the social life of Romania was also facilitated by the fact that they brought with them a type of values for long needed in Romania. They were renown builders and artisans. A good example in this respect is that of Osvaldo Zuliani who, together with his wife, Anna Crovato, and their twelve children, were constructors. They opened a small cement factory and a private enterprise in the town of Focșani. The achievements of these Italians in towns and outskirts are numerous and very important. Wherever they lived and worked, Italians were recognized as skilled workers, brick layers, pottery craftsmen, inlay workers, decorators. They were also gifted artists, painters, sculptors, architects, teachers, physicians, their active presence in the public life of Romania representing an outstanding contribution to shaping the destiny of the modern Romanian state.

THE ITALIANS OF CRAIOVA - A CASE STUDY

The city of Craiova and its neighbouring zone still has an Italian community formed of the descendants of these immigrants, for which an enthusiastic researcher elaborated a three-four generation genealogical tree³. The Italians from Oltenia came to Romania in small groups, formed of several members of the same family - usually a father accompanied by children of age, capable of work. They used to enter Romania at Vârciorova, Calafat and Cetate. Italians came as farmers on the large estates of Oltenia starting with 1883, the year registered as the moment of the temporary settlement of the Italians immigrated from Udine (Friuli) and Friuli Venezia Giulia, extreme east regions of Italy, in the vicinity of the present border with Slovenia. In the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries, this territory had been divided between Austria and the Republic of Venice, its actual status being obtained only in 1918, in the end of the First World War, when it was given to Italy. This explains why the Italian immigrants coming from this zone are registered as Austro-Hungarians, even if their nationality is Italian.

The pioneers of this phenomenon were the poor ones, victims of the agrarian crisis, forced by poverty to leave their homes. In its first stage, emigration had mainly a seasonal character, so that the immigrants were called "swallows" (in the Friulan dialect: "las golandrinas"). The Italians settled to Oltenia may be divided into three categories: a) the ones having come starting with 1883; b) the Italians established in Oltenia until 1940 - the so-called colonists; c) the Italians having remained in Oltenia after 1950.

In the year 1883, driven away by the agrarian crisis manifested in Italia, an impressive number of Italian families come to Oltenia, through Vârciorova, as agricultural workers. As the places they left are the same for Craiova and Târgu Jiu, it is assumed that, from the Romanian border, some families went towards Craiova, others towards Târgu Jiu. Unlike these groups, the Italians settled at Pitești, Râmnicu Vâlcea and Brezoi immigrated from the same Friuli region, but from other localities, and in smaller groups;

they were hired mainly as qualified workers, assuring the man power for the forest exploitations opened in the region. They set up the first mechanical sawmills in the region.

The Italians established on the large estates near Craiova, models for agriculture in the end of the XIXth century, used to come alone, in the beginning, later on bringing their older children, capable of work, and finally, their whole families. The Italian workers spread in the vicinity of Craiova, wherever they could be hired: at Atârnați, Balta Verde, Breasta, Bucovăț, Cernele, Italieni, Ișalnița, Șimnic, Terpezița. The descendants of the farmers having immigrated from Friuli are still living in Craiova and in neighbouring places. In the region of Dolj, respectively Craiova and its vicinity, a quite interesting chronological development of professions may be observed: (1) between 1884-1892, dominant are the farmers and the professions related to the rural areas (*carpentarius* - carter, *molinarius* - miller, stove fitter, swineherd, *murarius* - brick layer, *sutar* - shoemaker, *sartor* - tailor, *faber serarius* - carpenter, *panificius* - baker, *operarius* - day-labourer); (2) between 1892-1900, the professions get diversified, new ones, characteristic to the urban medium (*arcularium* - furniture constructor, *macelarius* - butcher, upholsterer, *mercator* - merchant, *molitor* - enterprisers) appearing, whereas, (3) between 1901-1924, specialized persons immigrate: litographer, flute player (*cornifex*), vulcanization worker, accountant (*scriba contabilis*), druggist, gardener (*hortulans*), dentist. The high-education specialists who settled in Craiova and in other towns of Oltenia became enterprisers, organizing teams of Italian workers.

With the outburst of the First World War, all seasonal workers hired in Central and Oriental Europe were obliged to return to their country for their military service. The one having remained citizens of the Kingdom of Italy, the so-called passport-holders, were immediately called to arms in Italy, while those already naturalized in Romania, the so-called farmers, had to join the Romanian army.

In the end of the Great War, the Italian immigration in Romania continues, yet, after the Second World War, the afflux of workers came

to its end. According to an Italian statistical study, established in Romania were about 8,000 Italians⁴. Law 162 of 1947 recognized as Romanian citizens all persons dwelling in Romania prior to September 26, 1920, so that many of those obliged to yield passports had to go away.

ITALIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CENTURY AND MILLENIUM

Italians are relatively uniformly dispersed over the Romanian territory, the most representatives communities being mentioned (in alphabetical order) in: Arad, Bacău, Bistrița, București, Calafat, Caracal, Câmpulung-Muscel, Cluj-Napoca, Fălticeni, Iași, Piatra Neamț, Pitești, Ploiești, Roman, Satu Mare, Suceava, Sulina, Timișoara, Tulcea, Turnu Severin, etc.

Mircea Groșaru, former president of the Association of Italians of Romania considered that, in 2005, present in our country were more than 40,000 Italians, even if, according to the 2002 official census, within a total population of Romania, of 21,680 974 persons, the Italians - namely 3,288 persons - occupied the seventeenth place in a possible numerical classification of the national minorities settled in Romania; less numerous than Italians are: Armenians (1,780 persons), Csángós - Hungarians living in the Bacău district, Moldavia (1,266 persons), Macedonians (695 persons), Albanians (477 persons), Ruthenians (277 persons), carasovenians (206 persons) and Slovenians (202 persons). According to the last census, 3,203 citizens of Italian origin have been registered in October 2011.

In Romania, Italians are organized in two associations, namely: The Community of Italians of Romania, with its center in Iași, and the Association of Italians of Romania (RO.AS.IT.), operating in București and Suceava.

RO.AS.IT. is an ethnic association of private right, having a statute of public utility, whose main objective is preservation of the ancient traditions and customs, as well as promotion of the Italian language, culture, history and civilization within the Romanian space, while also developing a permanent, stimulating dialogue

both with the population of majority and with the other ethnic minorities, and with the mother-country. RO.AS.IT. was created in 1993, at Suceava, by a group of descendants of the Italian immigrants established in Bucovina, in an enthusiastic attempt at recreating the unity of the Italian communities of Romania, after the misfortunes and historical hostility suffered prior to the year 1989. The main activity of RO.AS.IT. is of presenting documentary films, of organizing photographic, graphic and painting exhibitions, courses of Italian language, culture and civilization, etc. Along a very short period of time, numerous persons entered this project, constantly extended from one year to another. Nowadays, RO.AS.IT. involves a large number of members in various activities aimed at maintaining and promoting national identity, the traditions and customs specific to the Italian language and culture. An important aspect of its main objectives refers to the collection of data, documents and other material proofs attesting the existence, continuity and involvement of Italians in the Romanian life.

The six representatives of the Italian minority in the Parliament of Romania were: 1. Iuliano Valentin (between 1992-1996), Marilena Tomov (1996-2000), Ileana Stana Ionescu (mandatul 2000-2004), Mircea Groșaru (2004-2008, 2008-2012 and 2012-2014).

According to the data provided by the Trade Register of Romania, in the first 5 months of the year 2014 there have been listed 2,579 new companies with foreign participation, of which 1,045 with Italian capital, which means 40.5% of the whole value⁵; out of the total number of companies with foreign capital, -38,074 - almost 20% - are Italian while, out of the total capital subscribed by the foreign enterprises, namely 38,68 billion euros, the Italian firms brought about 1.72 billion euros, namely 4.7% of the whole capital. It goes without saying that the above data need a minute comparative analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

The Italian-Romanian congeniality of language and customs facilitated integration of Italian immigrants in the Romanian world to a considerable extent. The Italians having migrated

to Romania from the Italian territories of the Habsburgic Empire or from the Adriatic Sea regions responded to the need of specialized man power in various domains: wood cutting and moulding, cutting of stone, marble, sculpture, mining⁶.

Even if numerically less representative among the other minorities settled in Romania, the Italians had a remarkable contribution to the economic modernization of Romania. Wherever they lived and worked, especially in the XIXth and XXth centuries, they built up beautiful edifices and offered good human examples for the Romanians.

ITALIAN PERSONALITIES IN ROMANIA

The Italians established in Romania took up quite various activities and trades, as early as the Middle Age: musicians, actors, doctors, journalists, painters, men of letters, teachers. Some of these personalities are mentioned in the following, in alphabetical order:

- Clemansa (Mansi) Barberis, composer, viola player, vocal music university professor
- Livio Bellegante, composer and musician
- Florin Bogardo, composer and musician
- Sorana Coroamă-Stanca, artist, stage director
- Mișu Fotino, artist, theater manager
- Adrian Marino, Romanian literary, Herder Prize laureate
- Horia Moculescu, composer and musician
- Ivanca Olivotto, mathematics teacher, co-author of a well-known collection of mathematics questions
- Alexandru Pesamosca, reputed paediatrician
- Theodor Rosetti, jurist and politician, Prime-minister of Romania between 1888-1889, honorific member of the Romanian Academy
- Ileana Stana-Ionescu, artist, theater manager
- Cristian Țopescu, sportsman, reputed TV commentator
- Cristina Țopescu, his daughter, TV broadcaster.

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