

ON THE ROADS OF THE COUNTRY. EXPERIENCES OF TRAVELLING IN GREATER ROMANIA IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract

After the Great War and the creation of Greater Romania through the incorporation of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bucovina, travel gained new significance within Romanian society. In the context of debates about the need for “spiritual unification” to complement the country’s political and administrative consolidation, travel began to be viewed as a means to build a cohesive national identity and promote unity among the diverse regions of the newly enlarged state. Consequently, Romanians were encouraged to explore their homeland and acquaint themselves with their fellow citizens.

The numerous travel notes, memoirs, and announcements of various trips and excursions organized by different associations and professional societies that filled up the contemporary newspapers and magazines reflect a great interest for travel, many travellers choosing to share their experiences. Drawing primarily from these travel notes and memoirs but also contemporary press articles, the study explores the experience of travel, its hypostasis and challenges, the social and cultural interactions that occurred in different travel contexts, and the habits and customs of the Romanian society in the early interwar years they reveal.

Keywords: *Greater Romania; unification; travel; memoirs; cultural interactions*

In 1924, Paula Petrea, an interwar writer, published a contemplative article on travel, beginning with a reflective tone:

“In the summer, travel seems obligatory, and new experiences become essential. Who does not feel compelled to leave their peaceful nest, where every corner holds a hidden tale of the soul, and spend a month on holiday, surrounded by unfamiliar, distant, and stifling walls?”¹

With a hint of irony, the article explores the challenges and discomforts of travel, portraying it as a constant, restless movement from one place to another, experiencing poor sleep and poor eating

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¹ Paula Petrea, “Impresii de călătorie”, in *Opinia*, an XX, nr. 5140, Iași, 22 iulie 1924, pp. 1-2.

habits, all while spending hard-earned savings only to “have the satisfaction of fulfilling your duty to yourself, because everyone goes somewhere in the summer.”² While the article subtly criticizes how people in their quest for happiness and “something different”, overemphasized travel and overlooked the importance of introspection and appreciating life’s simple, everyday aspects, it also highlights the fact that travel was of great interest in those time. This interest is reflected in the numerous travel notes, memoirs, and announcements of various trips and excursions organized by different associations and professional societies that filled up the contemporary newspapers and magazines.

The taste for travel among Romanians was not new, it goes back to the first half of the 19th century, with figures like Dinicu Golescu,³ Ion Codru Drăgușan and several other intellectuals from both sides of the Carpathians, such as Alexandru Dimitrie Xenopol, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Grigore Alexandrescu, Vasile Alecsandri, Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Radu Rosetti, George Barițiu, Costache Negruzzi, August Treboniu Laurian, Teodor Burada, Gheorghe Ghibănescu, travelling outside the Romanian space, as well as within it. Initially an individual pursuit driven by diverse motivations - adventure, leisure, study - travel grew in popularity across Romanian society, the end of the 19th century marking the establishment of the first travellers’ associations. A notable example in this regard is the “Society of Tourists of Romania” (*Societatea Turiștilor din România*), established in 1903 in Bucharest, with branches in many significant localities, aiming to “develop the sport of excursions, to facilitate the knowledge of the beauties of the Romanian country and thus to strengthen the love for our country and nation.”⁴ It was not only the society, but also the Romanian government who showed interest in travel, though its initiatives and actions were intermittent. However, the allocation of funds for study trips by the end of the 19th century, under the budget of the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, illustrates the recognition of travel’s pedagogical role, suggesting at the same time an understanding of travel not only as a leisure activity but also as an integral part of national education.⁵ Over time, alongside its role in exploring new places and acquiring knowledge, travel assumed a national dimension, becoming a significant tool for fostering love for the country and nation.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Dinică Golescu’s travel notes, published in Buda in 1826, are considered the first travel journal in Romanian literature.

⁴ Sorin Mitu (coord.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. III, *Imaginar istoric*, Iași, Polirom, 2020, p. 335.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

After the Great War and the creation of Greater Romania through the incorporation of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bucovina, travel assumed new significance within Romanian society in the context of debates focused on the need for “spiritual unification” to complement the country’s political and administrative consolidation. As the lack of familiarity among Romanians from different areas with each other’s habits and customs was considered a major obstacle in achieving the nation much desired unity was, travel was seen as a rapid and effective mean for Romanians throughout the “new country” to become acquainted, to better understand one another, and thus to establish strong and enduring emotional bonds:

“You cannot know and love a country more deeply than by exploring it, traversing it far and wide, making sacrifices and efforts to come into contact not only with its people, but also with its nature.”⁶

Thus, travel was elevated to a national imperative, seen as a way to build a cohesive national identity and foster unity among the diverse regions of the newly expanded country, Romanians being encouraged to travel and get to know their homeland and fellow citizens. This idea was well received at both individual and collective levels, leading to various initiatives, some of the travellers covering impressive distances, such as the teacher and artist Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu and her husband, who in the summer of 1924, travelled “in 60 days, over 2000 kilometres by train and about 300 by car and by carriage”, visiting “around 24 localities in this short period,”⁷ a journey issued, as Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu noted:

“Of my conviction that the best way to know your country is to explore it thoroughly, stopping in cities and villages and experiencing, even if only for a moment, their life. Maps and geography books are important, of course, but they are impersonal and fail to speak to the soul.”⁸

Many travellers shared their experiences in memoirs and articles, often published as serials in the periodicals of the time. Although these types of sources have only recently entered the attention of historians, they offer a unique perspective on the societal mindset of that period. In the context of the aftermath of the Great War and the integration of the culturally diverse regions of “new Romania”, these writings provide valuable insight into how communities on both sides of the Carpathians viewed and perceived

⁶ N. Batzaria, “Cunoașterea țării”, in *Adevărul*, an 38, nr. 12712, București, 23 mai 1925, pp. 1-2.

⁷ Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu, “Impresii din călătorie. Mănăstirile din județul Neamț”, in *Adevărul*, an XXXVII, nr. 12503, București, 15 octombrie 1924, pp. 1-2.

⁸ Eadem, “Impresii din călătorie. Tușnadul și împrejurimile”, in *Adevărul*, an XXXVII, nr. 12484, București, 26 septembrie 1924, pp. 1-2.

each other. They reveal not only the similarities and the differences discovered among each other but also the extent of cultural harmonization, contributing to a better understanding of the enduring local pride and perceptions of superiority that persist today in Romania's historical provinces. Part of a broader research on how travel experiences across different regions of Romania contributed to a greater integration of the nation's diverse cultural heritage and the development of Romanian identity, the present study focusses on the actual experience of travel, its hypostasis and challenges. Drawing primarily from travel notes, memoirs and contemporary press articles, the study explores the social and cultural interactions that occurred in different travel contexts, focusing on what they reveal about the habits and mentality of the Romanian society in the early interwar years.

The journey often began at bustling railway stations, as trains were the main means of transportation. Travel narratives frequently depict the stations as extremely busy and chaotic, resembling "anthills teeming with activity" with "all sorts of people - hurried ladies, soldiers, peasants, priests, suburbanites, loud groups, all amidst a commotion reminiscent of a busy fair."⁹ Each person trying to make their way through the crowd contributes to scenes characterized by noise, constant movement, and a palpable sense of urgency: "agitation, running, shouting, wailing, jostling, cursing,"¹⁰ consequently, the general portrayal of railway stations being that of "a frenetic melting pot of people, an intense flurry of bizarre figures that sometimes seem almost surreal in their appearance."¹¹

The crowd generated a wide variety of experiences for travellers, often characterized by a blend of chaos and comedy, many of which were captured in travel memoirs and articles with a slightly ironic tone. A vivid example of such an experience is detailed in a description of a boarding scene at Bucharest's North Station during the summer of 1921, involving a man frantically searching for his wife, Elena, amidst the crowded platform. His initial protective calls for her gradually turn into frustrated mutters about her absence: "Where the hell is the fool."¹² The situation humorously escalated when, just as the wife reappeared, the couple realized that the mother-in-law along with their offspring and "potential future caregiver" were now missing, with a high chance of being left behind in Bucharest. This sparked another frenetic search through the

⁹ Lazăr G. Şoimu, "Din vilegiatură. La Constanța", in *Dimineața*, an XVIII, nr. 5331, București, 11 iulie 1921, p. 8.

¹⁰ "Când călătorește un ministru. O poveste adevărată", in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an 83, nr. 203, Brașov, 25 septembrie 1920, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Lazăr G. Şoimu, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

crowd. Moments later, a respectable lady with gold-rimmed glasses and an old feather - seemingly a keepsake from her bridal day - appeared, dragging a small child who innocently asked: "Is it true Grandma, that I will play with a lot of sand in Constanța?" The subsequent quarrel of the son-in-law and mother-in-law on her whereabouts, exacerbated by the crowded setting and the heat, was pragmatically cut short by the wife's suggestion to quickly board the train, less they would find no seats available.¹³

For some travellers, the crowded stations combined with the relaxed attitude and lax professional standards of the station officials, could often result in a delayed journey. Such an experience is illustrated in a travel note of a young student planning to depart during the busy holiday season of the summer of 1922. As he confesses, he had always believed that luggage never allows one to fully enjoy the pleasures of a voyage, but this time, he needed to bring one. This decision led to immediate difficulties, as evidenced by the disdainful looks from the coach driver. Upon his arrival at the train station, a swarm of porters immediately rushed to grab his luggage, and before he could react, one had already hoisted it on his back. With the train already at the station, he followed his unchosen porter to the storekeeper, who was essential for registering the luggage but nowhere to be found. "He should come," someone remarked. Minutes passed and as the train's departure time approached, all inquiries about the storekeeper's whereabouts were met with vague assurances of his imminent arrival, leaving the traveller no choice but to wait anxiously near his luggage. When the station employee finally appeared, the porter suggested he "kindly ask to have your luggage taken." Although he quickly complied, it was too late. As the storekeeper began the weighing process, the train "following a distant signal, began to move its heavy limbs." Left stranded with his luggage, the traveller had no other choice but to follow the storekeeper instructions: "You will leave tonight with the 6 o'clock train. Take the receipt and go pay it at the ticket office,"¹⁴ and reflect on his friend's saying: "women and luggage makes travel twice as hard."¹⁵

The hustle and bustle of passengers in the crowded stations were further intensified by the struggle to secure a place, as "trains were few and travellers many."¹⁶ Moreover, it was a common practice that more tickets than available seats were sold, leading to situations where "not even half of the passengers bustling about in the station

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Un student, "Tribulațiile unui călător", in *Opinia*, an XVIII, nr. 4538, Iași, 13 iulie 1922, pp. 1-2.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ A.G., "Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.", in *Văitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

had the luck to become partakers in the misery so dearly paid for at the station's ticket office.”¹⁷ As one traveller succinctly put it, a common reality of travelling in those days was that “anyone can buy train tickets, but only the lucky few get to travel.”¹⁸ In this context, once the train pulled into the station the congestion of the platforms swiftly transferred to the carriages. Its arrival ignited “a fierce rush towards the doors” leading to scenes of “people crushing against each other, pushing with all their power.”¹⁹ Within mere minutes, trains resembled “hives bustling with bees”, the compartments and corridors overflowing, platforms crowded, roofs overrun with passengers, and stairs jam-packed.²⁰ For many of those succeeding in boarding the train, the travel conditions were far from comfortable, being forced to travel in the luggage compartment, on bales of empty sacks, or spend significant parts of the journey standing in the corridors. Some crowded into freight wagons, like animals, with “no benches and nothing to lean on but the shoulders of the fellow travellers.”²¹ While the general congestion of trains and the frantic struggle for a place were often attributed to poor administration and the failure of authorities to implement effective measures, travellers themselves had their own part. A common practice to avoid paying fares involved bringing various goods into the carriages as luggage, such as cheese-barrels, sacks of vegetables, birds cages, live animals, all these often occupying the seats meant for passengers, thus: “indirectly contributing to the well-known train overcrowding.”²²

In the discourse of the authorities, passengers avoiding train fares was identified as one of the main causes of a highly debated issue at the time: people travelling on the rooftops of carriages. This practice exposed them to accidents and even death, with numerous such incidents of people being found with their heads crushed being reported in the contemporary press. Despite warnings and punitive measures taken by the authorities,²³ this “Vlach habit of travelling atop wagons,”²⁴ as well as on the steps and buffers, remained quite

¹⁷ “Când călătorește un ministru. O poveste adevărată”, in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an 83, nr. 203, Brașov, 25 septembrie 1920, pp. 1-2.

¹⁸ A.G., “Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.”, in *Viitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

¹⁹ Lazăr G. Șoimu, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

²⁰ A.G., “Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.”, in *Viitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

²¹ Ful, “Cum se călătorește sub guvernul democrat”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 4924, București, 25 ianuarie 1920, p. 2

²² “Călătoria în trenuri”, in *Viitorul*, an 15, nr. 4620, București, 3 august 1923, p. 3.

²³ “Călătoria cu trenul”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 5109, București, 10 octombrie 1920, p. 3.

²⁴ Leca Morariu, “Hoinar”, in *Glasul Bucovinei*, an III, nr. 522, Cernăuți, 21 Septembrie 1920, p. 2.

common, especially in the early years of the interwar period. Despite the official narrative which placed the blame on those avoiding train fares, many resorted to this way of travel because of the lack of seats and space in carriages, as evidenced by the contemporary press who often reported on inspectors collecting tickets from these passengers.²⁵

It was not only those travelling on train rooftops that faced danger, accidents being also a constant risk for all train passengers, no matter where they found a place, as derailments and train wrecks were alarmingly frequent:

“Yes, we have green spruce forests and fields of silk, offering a fairy-tale view to the travellers sitting by the carriage windows, but we also have bridges that break, locomotives that derail on curves, wobbly rails, rotten sleepers, axles catching fire, capricious wagons jumping off the tracks, and even cavalry generals at the Ministry of Communications, among others.”²⁶

An episode reported by the newspaper “Universul” in 1924 vividly illustrates the general anxiety of society, generated by the frequency of such incidents. On a train travelling from Oradea to Cluj, after the Bihor Archbishop station, as it slow downed, a traveller looking out of the window mistakenly thought he saw another train coming from the opposite direction and started alarming the other passengers about an imminent collision. This led a Hungarian artist onboard panicking to the point that she jumped off, breaking her legs and suffering chest injuries.²⁷ However, despite this general state of mind of the society and despite the numerous incidents and railway disasters, some of which were quite catastrophic, people persisted with their usual travel habits:

“Not even three days have passed since the incident of Vintileanca²⁸ and Bucharest’s North Station still presents the same eternal crowd. The recent events had no apparent effect on the regular train travellers, whether driven by business, or other needs. The same scramble for space in the coaches, the same rush to occupy buffers and roofs continues unabated. This only confirms that, despite the risks, the buffers and rooftops still find their preferred passengers.”²⁹

²⁵ “Deraieri și de logică”, in *Patria*, Cluj, an V, nr. 167, Cluj, 5 august 1923, p. 2.

²⁶ “Asigurarea vieții”, in *Dimineața*, an XIX, nr. 5757, București, 12 noiembrie 1922, p. 1.

²⁷ “Gravul accident al unei artiste”, in *Universul*, an XLII, nr. 195, București, 23 august 1924, p. 1.

²⁸ The Vintileanca accident was one of the period’s greatest railway disasters causing the death of 66 persons and the injuring of over 100.

²⁹ Horia Verzeanu, “Impresii dintr-o călătorie”, in *Rampa*, an VII, nr. 1714, 16 iulie 1923, p. 4.

Securing a place in the train, did not necessarily guarantee better travel conditions, as the state of the carriages is often described as precarious, often lacking basic amenities like windows and electricity. “Never short on bedbugs”, as one traveller put it, the carriages appear to some travellers “as clean as a stable,”³⁰ with the repulsive filth leading others to declare a preference for traveling in the corridors or on the stairs, unable to bear the awful smell.³¹ In summer, the heat could become unbearable, exacerbated by overcrowding that made it almost impossible to breathe.³² In contrast, during winter, travellers had to endure the harsh cold in trains lacking any form of heating. Even those travelling under more favourable conditions did not escape the effects of the poor state of the trains. For instance, the members of the *Ateneul Popular Tătarăși* from Iași, a leading association organizing cultural trips Romania’s new provinces with the aim of creating lasting connections “among Romanian brothers”, often received government support in the form of special wagons, an aid that was crucial, as the costs of transportation hindered such initiatives. Reporting on the excursion organized in Transylvania in 1925, one of the participants, the lawyer Corneliu Meza from Vaslui, was deeply impressed by the carriages put at their service:

“Especially well-equipped for the long 14-day journey. The train’s restaurant was much improved from previous years. The carriages were decorated with garlands and tricolour flags, and the entire train was converted into wagon-lits. We were constantly accompanied by controllers or inspectors of motion and traction who made every effort to prevent even the smallest accident.”³³

However, the rainy conditions during the first days of the journey soon exposed the train’s shortcomings as “in some carriages it dripped quite a lot, hindering the tired bodies of the excursionist from their well-deserved rest”. Despite these challenges, the author of the travel impressions remained optimistic:

“Every lesson learned is beneficial. I believe that in the future, the train carriages provided to us will undergo more thorough inspections to prevent exposing the excursionists to illnesses.”³⁴

³⁰ Ion Umanitaru, “Aspecte basarabene”, in *Opinia*, an XX, nr. 5173, Iași, 31 august 1924, p. 1.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Lazăr G. Șoimu, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

³³ Corneliu Meza, “Moldovenii în Ardeal și Bucovina”, in *Cultura poporului*, an V, nr. 130-131, Cluj, 17 octombrie 1925, p. 3.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

By the middle of the first interwar decade, accounts began to highlight improvements in certain aspects of train travel, such as the growing adherence to the timetable:

“There was a time during the war, and even after the war when our trains left stations whenever they wanted and arrived whenever they could. Today, this is no longer the case. More or less, trains now depart according to their schedules and arrive with only minor delays. In terms of the punctuality of departures and arrivals, we are indeed moving towards normality.”³⁵

Train also started to become less crowded, and they gained in speed and comfort, “especially with the new carriages from abroad, featuring large one-piece windows and upholstered compartments.”³⁶ Thus, “you are no longer threatened to be crushed in the corridor, nor do you have to travel on the steps of the carriage or the buffers, as most passengers find today a seat in a compartment.”³⁷ However, these improvements were often attributed to the increased cost of train tickets, which made travel even more difficult for those with limited financial means: “The excessive increase in train fares has led to a decrease in train travel. Now, only those compelled by significant need still travel.”³⁸ Not only train tickets were not for everyone’s pockets, as the onboard services also involved high costs. Many travellers found the train restaurants to be particularly expensive. As one traveller noted:

“If you are not a war profiteer or don’t have a money maker machine, when the service boys ring the traditional bell, inviting you to tea or coffee with milk, it’s best to tell yourself: ‘And lead us not into temptation’ and be content with provisions from home, because converted into gold currency, the prices at the train restaurant may not seem exaggerated. The problem is that our earnings are not in American dollars or Swiss francs, and one needs many of our lei to even a snack, let alone a full meal there.”³⁹

People’s experiences of train travel varied widely. For some, the conditions of the coaches, the frequent delays, or the slow speeds in certain areas – “slow enough that one could walk alongside the train”

³⁵ A.G., “Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.”, in *Vitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

³⁶ Alex Cusin, “De la granița de vest... Note de călătorie”, in *Neamul Românesc*, an XX, nr. 152, București, 8 iulie 1925, pp. 1-2.

³⁷ N. Batzaria, “Călătorind prin România. Dela București la Tg.-Mureș”, in *Dimineața*, an XXIII, nr. 7362, 2 iunie 1927, p. 3.

³⁸ “Umbilă trenurile goale”, in *Lumina Satelor*, an V, nr. 40, Sibiu, 26 septembrie 1925, p. 5.

³⁹ N. Batzaria, “Călătorind prin România...”, p. 3.

– made it a challenging endeavour: “once you decide to travel, you should bring along a few bottles of nerve-calming pills, otherwise, you risk going mad with boredom.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, for others, the experience was much more agreeable, some finding a surprising contrast between their expectations and the conditions they encountered:

“The train seemed to swiftly devour kilometres, as if eager to refute all the negative articles written about it over the years. There was nothing to suggest that the bridges were fragile, the embankments weak, or that derailments were common at every curve. The elegance, comfort, electric lighting, and stations passing by without a second glance – all this reminded me of the Express train of the past.”⁴¹

Trains, gathering people of all sorts and social classes, acted as a microcosmos of the country, the interactions and unfolding stories among passengers, as captured in travel impressions, offering a glimpse into the dynamics of Romanian society at the time, and reflecting its prevalent mentalities and customs. One frequently highlighted aspect was the high discrepancy between “those in power” and the rest of the population. The former were often accused of abusing their status and misusing their authority, establishing “aristocratic privileges, unsuitable for our times of universal suffrage.”⁴² A particularly criticized practice, although legally instated, was the reservation of train carriages for parliamentarians. Although initially intended for use only during the opening and closing of parliamentary sessions, these reserved carriages became a common sight:

“In every train, there are at least two or three carriages reserved daily. These are often occupied by ministers or their associates, various officials from the railway administration, parliamentarians, high-ranking officers, and their guests.”⁴³

While most travellers were squeezed together in cramped conditions, these exclusive parliamentary carriages often ran empty, “with guards at the doors to prevent the common public from entering.”⁴⁴ Even when officials used them, it was usually only one or

⁴⁰ Ion Umanitaru, “Aspecte basarabene”, in *Opinia*, an XX, nr. 5173, Iași, 31 august 1924, p. 1.

⁴¹ “Impresii de călătorie. Pe căldură în tren”, in *Evenimentul*, an XXXI, nr. 727, Iași, 19 septembrie 1923, p. 1.

⁴² “Vagoanele speciale pentru parlamentari”, in *Viitorul*, an 13, nr. 3702, București, 23 iulie 1920, p. 3.

⁴³ A.G., “Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.”, in *Viitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Ful, “Cum se călătorește sub guvernul democrat”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 4924, București, 25 ianuarie 1920, p. 2.

two persons “luxuriating” in a compartment, while the rest of passengers squeezed into corridors, stairways, and any available space. An account from a journey on the crammed corridor of such a parliamentary carriage illustrates the plight of a young, exhausted woman, carrying a child, struggling to find a place in the compartment, while a parliamentarian was comfortably sleeping across two couches. When approached with the plead to allow the lady and her baby to enter, he rudely replied “Leave me alone. If the madam has a child, I am not the father.”⁴⁵ Such incidents are frequently highlighted in travel memoirs, revealing a general indifferent and ostentatious attitude of those benefiting from politically reserved carriages towards their fellow travellers struggling to find a place. It is not only memoirs that account such situations, as the press also highly debated the issue of reserved carriages for parliamentarians, illustrating such episodes as an argument for their cancellation. Such an article, published in 1920 in the “*Dimineața*” newspaper recounts the case of a senator travelling alone on the route Sibiu-București who harshly rebuffed an elderly and disabled traveller who dared to claim a seat within the reserved carriage. Despite the intervention of the train conductor and train controller, the senator could not be convinced. The incident is deemed particularly outrageous, because on the same train, a young mother with a baby, unable to find any available place, climbed onto the rooftop. While breastfeeding her child there, she fell asleep and tragically dropped her baby.⁴⁶

The disdainful attitude of those benefiting from their status was not directed solely at common passengers, it extended to those of lower ranks within the hierarchy of privileges. Consequently, even parliamentarians sometimes found themselves traveling under modest conditions if they were unfortunate enough to share a train with someone of a higher rank. Such an incident occurred in the fall of 1920 when two parliamentarians were traveling from Brașov to Bucharest. They ended up on the same train as a minister who had reserved a wagon-lit carriage, with the curtains drawn for himself and a separate one for his driver and entourage. Despite the pleading of the two parliamentarians along with other travellers to be allowed into the carriage reserved for the minister’s driver, they ended up in the freight carriage, which was transporting the minister’s car. “Parliamentary merchandise travelling in the freight wagon”, one of

⁴⁵ A.G., “Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.”, in *Viitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Dacian, “Desfințați vagoanele parlamentare”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 5083, București, 10 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

their fellow travellers ironically characterized the situation.⁴⁷ Often, these reserved carriages were used not just by “the nation’s representatives”, but also by their friends and family, serving no official purpose, other than “for holidays and excursions”⁴⁸: “an entire parliamentary carriage allocated for one woman travelling from Constanța to Bucharest, together with her three child and their nanny.”⁴⁹ Such episodes of “friends and relatives” of politicians leading a comfortable travel are always presented in sharp contrast with the hundreds of misfortunate travellers crushing against each other, as a way of emphasising the necessity of annulling this instated practice.

Using one’s social status to obtain favours or even to satisfy one’s whims was not something exclusive to politicians or high-ranking public servants. If one had enough wealth or social prestige, one could even delay a train at the station, only to indulge in a leisurely car ride. This was the case of a holiday resort owner travelling on the Cluj-Sibiu route in 1920, who wanted to take his car from the freight wagon, on a ride through one of the towns on the route, while the train and its passengers were left waiting for him at the station:

“The train remained stationary until the car had been unloaded, the resort owner completed his drive and reloaded his car. Meanwhile, we waited, bringing satanic hymns to the Romanian democracy.”⁵⁰

As each area had its own hight and mighty misusing their positions for their own benefit, travellers across the country could find themselves in the most unpleasant situations. An illustrative example is the experience of Dumitru Antal, a Transylvanian deacon while traveling across Moldova. Arriving in Botoșani, Antal couldn’t find a coach at the station being unaware of the local custom of a policeman distributing tickets for them. “Thus - as he confesses- my haste to be the first to disembark from the train was futile”. Antal was convinced that this practice, which he had not encountered in any other city, “must have been devised by the police chief after either he or a friend failed to find a coach at the station, being the last off the train.”⁵¹ It became evident that favours were being granted, when a fellow

⁴⁷ “Când călătorește un ministru. O poveste adevărată”, in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an 83, nr. 203, Brașov, 25 septembrie 1920, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁸ “Vagoanele speciale pentru parlamentari”, in *Viitorul*, an 13, nr. 3702, București, 23 iulie 1920, p. 3.

⁴⁹ “Cine călătorește cu vagoanele ministeriale?”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 5092, București, 20 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁰ “Ciocoism”, in *Biserica și școala*, an XLIV, nr. 9, Arad, 1/14 Martie 1920, p. 3.

⁵¹ Dumitru Antal, “Prin celelalte orașe ale Moldovii”, in *Foaia Poporului*, an 32, nr. 5, Sibiu, 3 februarie 1924, p. 3.

traveller from the area manage to secure two coaches, one for him and one for his maid and luggage. Resigned, Antal concluded, “What more to say, I, a single man, cannot change the custom of the land”, and covered the kilometres to the town on foot.⁵²

Travel memoirs captured contemptuous attitudes and a lack of empathy across various social strata, those who found themselves, only if for brief moments, in a higher position, often looking down with superiority on their fellow travellers. An illustrative example is that of a servant travelling in an elegant wagon-lit beside a lady adorned with precious stones. Just as her mistress who was looking through her lorgnette, with apparent delight, at the turmoil below, the maid also gazed majestically at the crowd. Elevated above the others by her mistress’s authority and wealth, “she defies the sea of desperate people scrambling along the train”, while an army major was pleading in vain with the train conductor for permission to at least seat next to the maid.⁵³

Alongside the reserved carriages, depictions of train travel further reveal other examples of instated practices that created discrepancies and inequalities among travellers. One such example was the regulation granting train fare reductions to a wide range of public figures and officials, including ministers and their families, parliamentarians, high clerks, army officers, public servants in ministries, as well as those of the royal and princely court.⁵⁴ For those who struggled to afford their journey, it was disheartening to sometimes see almost an entire carriage of passengers holding “a peculiar type of ticket endorsed by the Ministry, entitling them to either a free pass or at least a 75% discount”, especially when “these gentlemen travellers seem awfully rich”. As one traveller lamented: “This is why, with much bitterness I handed in 15 full-price tickets, totalling easily over 4.000 good lei.”⁵⁵ In addition to these formalized practices, there were other informal ones that added to the frustration of those spending their earnings to enjoy a comfortable trip. For instance, paying for a first-class ticket often did not guarantee the seat, as it was common for second-class ticket holders to occupy these spots, with the silent approval of train controllers, who during their

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ “Când călătorește un ministru. O poveste adevărată”, in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an 83, nr. 203, Brașov, 25 septembrie 1920, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁴ “Călătoriile gratuite pe căile ferate”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 5029, București, 19 iulie 1920, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Ion Colan, “Amintiri dintr-un turneu de propagandă culturală”, in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an LXXXVIII, nr. 98, Brașov, 30 septembrie 1925, p. 2.

rounds, collected enough tips, “from those who wanted to travel comfortably but pay little.”⁵⁶

At the same time, travel memoirs reflect various facets of life. For some, public transportation, especially trains, represented an opportunity to earn their living. Ambulant sellers, both male and female, roamed the carriages, selling items such as magazines, brochures, newspapers. However, their presence was frequently a source of annoyance for other travellers, who felt pressured into buying things they did not need or want: “publications of which you had no prior knowledge and if you do not have the strength to resist the assaults, you end up with a rather rich and especially varied - and not needed- collection.”⁵⁷ A greater inconvenience for travellers arose from those who profited from the inherent crowding of public transport to illicitly increase their income, such as pickpockets. Almost daily, passengers reported falling victim to such thieves who could be found on every railway line, with the main contributing factors being the congestion and poor conditions of the trains, including inadequate lighting.⁵⁸ This was the case of the teacher and artist Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu and her husband, at the outset of their three-week trip in Transylvania. While boarding the night train from Bucharest to Tușnad, they struggled to reach their compartment through a corridor crowded with an overwhelming number of suitcases blocking the way, only to discover that their wallet - containing approximately a thousand lei, the travel tickets, some receipts, and the husband’s identity card - had vanished into the night.⁵⁹ Although they quickly went to report the incident to the railway station police, there was no official personnel there, only “an old man who did not even know to write”. Left with no alternative, the couple was forced to buy new tickets to continue their journey, grateful that their lost wasn’t greater.⁶⁰ Besides pickpockets, travellers across the country were also exposed to other risks, as robbers and thieves frequently targeted public transportation, sometimes using quite creative methods to deceive passengers. This was the experience of three travellers – two men and a woman – on a trip from Sibiu to Mediaș who were approached by two elegantly dressed young men who boarded the train at a smaller station. During

⁵⁶ A.G., “Cum se călătorește pe C.F.R.”, in *Viitorul*, an 13 nr. 3742, București, 9 septembrie 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁷ N. Batzaria, “Călătorind prin România. Dela București la Tg.-Mureș”, in *Dimineața*, an XXIII, nr. 7362, 2 iunie 1927, p. 3.

⁵⁸ “Jefuirea călătorilor”, in *Dimineața*, an XVII, nr. 4986, București, 19 mai 1920, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu, “Impresii din călătorie. Tușnadul și împrejurimile”, in *Adevărul*, an XXXVII, nr. 12484, București, 26 septembrie 1924, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

their conversation, the young men offered the travellers cigarettes and the woman a handkerchief to smell a new perfume. All of these were imbued with narcotics which put the travellers to sleep and allowed the robbers to easily take all their money and luggage and leave the train at the first station. Later caught by the police, one of the robbers admitted to having stolen over a million lei on railways using this method.⁶¹

Despite the risks, the medley of people, the conversions that emerged in the context of travel offer glimpses into the daily concerns and preoccupations of various social strata, from soldiers on summer leave, cheerful, eager to see their homelands, to men and women discussing the state of the crops, injustices in land ownership, the burden of taxes, and the boundless expense of living.⁶² The story of a “an old widow - around forty years old” sharing in a carriage with a soldier her sorrows since her husband did not return from the war illustrates the financial hardships and societal inequalities exacerbated by the economic and political measures of the time:

“I received neither working animals like better-off, nor any help or land. And I have seven boys, my dear, she says with tears in her eyes, seven boys who need food and clothes and I have none.”⁶³

The conversation of several well-built men, barely fitting in their clothes lounged on sofas in a compartment reveal aspects of the business opportunities of those days: “With heads uncovered, collars and vests loosened, they discuss, passionately about a significant deal, anticipated to yield tens of millions in profit”. However, as their conversation revealed, the venture didn’t generate the expected financial returns. Some passengers were more concentrated in the political issues of the day, even contemplating the political system. An example is that of two men in a train carriage critically discussing the state of the parliament, which they deem irredeemable and advocate for its dissolution:

“What do we need a Parliament for, mon cher? Don’t you see, they quarrel like gypsies. As far as I’m concerned, I am against the parliamentary regime... Why spend so much money on Parliament, when the country can be very well governed by decree-laws? It’s less costly and far simpler, mon cher.”⁶⁴

Alongside the stories and conversations that take place among passengers, those that emerge between them and their drivers offer insights into the diverse local customs and mindsets. For example,

⁶¹ “Aveți grije pe tren”, in *Foaia poporului*, an 31, nr. 29, Sibiu, 22 iulie 1923, p. 6.

⁶² “Note de drum”, in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, an LXXXIV, nr. 168, 7 august 1921, p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

Luca the coachman who in the summer of 1914 transported passengers “with care and proficiency” from the train station to Olănești resort, also shared with them aspects of local beliefs:

“He tells them about the recent drought and how people, seeking relief, turned to the miracle-working powers of Saint Gregory housed in the Hurez Monastery. Luca himself had journeyed there, and as soon as he arrived with the saint in Olănești, rain began to fall, ensuring the peasants of Olănești their bread and strengthening their faith in God and Saint Gregory, endlessly glorifying and thanking him.”⁶⁵

These “drivers” were always well-informed about the issues and debates of the day and had no reserve in expressing their perspectives and opinions, often influenced by longstanding traditional beliefs. Such an example is that of the coachwoman driving the Șerbănescu-Șăineanu couple to Agapia Monastery. Throughout the journey, she engaged in conversations about various topics, often paying more attention to the discussion than the road ahead. She was particularly disturbed by the change in the calendar, which she perceived as a “devil’s trick”, asserting that “only Lord Jesus Christ, if he were to return to Earth, could alter the Law, not the priests.”⁶⁶ She passionately argued that her view was widespread among peasants, who she believed would reject the new calendar, potentially leading to the burning of Gospels in churches and strong opposition to this change:

“There will be deception for two years, and then things will return to how it was before”. Her conviction stemmed from the words of a hermit whom “one can put his faith in, rather than in the archbishop, who is deceiving.”⁶⁷

Despite attempts to challenge her views, she maintained her stance until the journey’s end, concluding with: “Listen to what I say; you will soon be convinced I am right.”⁶⁸

Traveling during the early years of the interwar period – as depicted in travel memoirs and articles – was a challenging endeavour. Among the factors that hindered the journey, some stand as more prominent, such as the poor material state of most trains, evident in old carriages and lack of basic amenities, as well as the risks posed by the deteriorated railway infrastructure and frequent delays. The financial aspects, such as the high costs of tickets and services, along with the threat of pickpockets and thieves, added to the traveller’s

⁶⁵ Dorin, “Impresii de călătorie. Olănești – R. Vâlcea”, in *Opinia*, an XX, nr. 5142, Iași, 24 iulie 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Stella Șerbănescu-Șăineanu, “Impresii din călătorie. Mănăstirile din județul Neamț”, in *Adevărul*, an XXXVII, nr. 12503, București, 15 octombrie 1924, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

woes. Although, many of these shortcomings of travelling across the country were attributed to institutional inefficiencies and inadequate political and administrative measures, they also need to be considered within the context of the time. On the one hand, the infrastructures required reconstruction after the war, on the other hand, regulations needed to be readapted to a new and larger country. At the same time, the vivid contrasts among travellers observed in travel memoirs, alongside the prevalent excesses, abuses of power and inequalities, reflect the challenges and dilemmas of a society in the process of settling and finding new values and benchmarks, as the war had disrupted established ways of life, dissolved existing hierarchies, and imposed new ones.