

## SERICULTURE IN ROMANIA, BETWEEN TRADITION AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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### **Abstract**

*Silkworm farming became known to Europe as a result of the introduction of this occupation from ancient China. The industry developed along the centuries, going through rise and fall periods, depending on the economical, social and political context of the time. Romania's current territory had its own reference points on the "Silk Road" in the sericulture matrix. The multiple benefits of this industry including not only those referring to the quality of the final product, but especially the concept of lasting development should be a reference concern for the decisional factors in order to revive this industry that proved to be profitable not only for the producers but also for the consumers.*

**Key words:** sericulture, silkworms

### **INTRODUCTION**

Much has been and still is talked about "the Silk Road". The generic name, referring to a network of commercial roads between Asia and Europe – a 7.000 km long road -, was assigned by Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German geographer, in 1877 although, history recorded that the Chinese borders were crossed over since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. From that moment on, silk became the exchange currency between the Emperor and his neighbours and it reached Europe a few years later.

My approach tackles with stages of silkworm farming development and its spreading from the east to the west of our planet, focussing on the situation of rising and disappearance of this branch in the Romanian economy.

### **SERICULTURE BETWEEN CENTURIES AND MERIDIANS**

Édouard Perris, the secretary of the Society of Agriculture, Commerce, Arts and Manufactures within the department des Landes, manager of Central Silk Spinning Mill, member of the Sericultural Society of Paris, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, analyses, in his paper, the possibilities to promote the industry in different regions of France, mentioning the advantages that silkworm farming may bring. At the moment of the analysis made by the author (mid-19th century) in France, planting mulberries became more and more widespread and the belief in the success of this

business “became deeply-rooted and its progress was irresistible” (Perris, 1846). According to Perris, a historical-geographical route of the silkworm education started in China about 4600 years ago. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC China women were knitting, spinning, weaving and breeding silkworms. (Drimba, 1985). Breeding silkworm had been kept secret by the Chinese for centuries (China – a Complete Guide, 1993) until 140 BC when a Chinese princess married the king of Khotan and took mulberry seeds and silkworms to this kingdom. In this way the great global adventure of this small textile industrialist, *Bombix Mori*, began. Ceylon, India, the neighbouring countries of the Caspian Sea, were favourable grounds to him until he reached Constantinople sometime around the year 527. Here, King Justinian gave him his well-deserved place: the industry was established in Constantinople and the King even organized a manufacture and thus, the silk fabrics that were worth their weight in gold started to spread. Greece, Minor Asia, Persia and Syria would soon find out about sericulture; in Spain sericulture was at its full development in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century; towards the year 1146, Roger, the first king of the two Sicilies after defeating Greece, alongside the significant plunder he also brought a great number of workers that helped him build silk factories in Palermo. It seems that silk was produced in Italy in 1204 and the craftsmen were members of the syndicate in Florence (Perrin, 1846). Portugal becomes acquainted with the silk production due to the Moors in 1472, and the production reached its peak in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Levison, 2008). Nonetheless, France was the country in which the breeding of the silkworm, as well as the manufacture of the precious thread was developed according to the quality of the finite product. Louis XI brought workers from Italy to Tours and mulberries were planted in the entire park; this also brought about a demographic explosion in Tours. Under Henry II the industry was even more encouraged as he issued a decree by which he ordered mulberries to be planted. Henry IV wanted to spread the plantations to the north and, in 1599, he asked Olivier of Serres to write a speech about the methods of silk dissemination in France. The book published by this agronomist made a stir, just like the booklet written by Laffémas, the King’s tailor. Shortly after this, breeding silkworms was a common occupation at the outskirts of Paris. At the beginning of 1601 there were about 15-20,000 mulberries planted in different areas of Paris, in Tuilleries gardens. Manufactures were also opened in the south and centre of the kingdom. Colbert gave a stronger impetus to the sericulture industry: he created seed beds in Berry, Angoumois, Orléans, Poitou, Maine, Franche-Comté, Bourgogne and Lyon. The trees were donated for free, were planted on the expense of the state on private domains without the consent of the owners. The coercion means led to unwanted results that is the mulberries died because of carelessness

(Gasparin, 1841). In 1472 it seemed that the wealth of Grenade kingdom came from mulberry growing and silk manufacture just like many regions owed their prosperity to sericulture throughout the history.

#### **ROMANIA ON THE “SILK ROAD”**

The current territory of Romania is part of this historical-geographical matrix of spreading the silkworm breeding and the manufacture of the precious thread. This technique was introduced here either from the west, or by the Turks, depending on the area, contacts and interests.

“The raw silk had been spun - says Barnea – in the Romanian Countries since the early 11<sup>th</sup> century without knowing if the raw material was local or not; this is the time when the first floss silk handkerchiefs were made” (Barnea, 1961).

Alexianu refers to using the silk as a fabric without mentioning the silkworm breeding. “Since the last decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, on the unsteady sea routes, through the Eastern fortresses the first expensive cloths and the first delicate, thin and pellucid like the cobweb appeared on our territories” (Alexianu, 1987). Alexianu talks about the fine silk fabrics manufactured in the Eastern countries on their route from the East to the West. Dwelling on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, Iorga stated that “Silk is sheer luxury, as it is not spread” (Iorga, 1968). Iorga spoke about the silk luxury, materiality in the garment that asserted the bearer’s social status.

Sericulture was introduced in Transylvania and Banat from the West and especially from Italy where this occupation had already been well-known and developed. The sericulture development in Banat was helped by the climate suitable for mulberry breeding in this part of the Romanian Countries and additionally supported by the “laws” issued by Maria Teresa, (1740-1780), the Empress of Roman-German Empire. These laws issued during 1764-1765 led to the plantation of mulberry trees on both sides of many roads. In 1716 Banat is freed from the Turkish rule and Count Claudius Florimund de Mercy was named the high commander. It is interesting to notice the intense concern of the Habsburgic Empire to colonize Banat with western-European populations. In 1732, the abbot Clemente Rossi from Mantua arrived in Timișoara and became the spiritual leader of the Italians living in Banat. He would promote mulberry breeding and sericulture and he would be the administrator of silk manufacture. The village called Carani was founded in 1735 – initially called Mercydorf (Mercy’s village) - , by the Italian colonists who were silkworm breeders especially brought to introduce silkworm production in Banat. Count Mercy

encouraged silkworm breeding in this region and the mulberries on the sides of the roads were especially protected. Chopping these trees would bring about death penalty issued by Mercy (Leşcu).

In 1748 German colonists were brought to Dudeştii Noi and forced to plant mulberries in order to breed silkworms. Details about this activity that was closely observed in Banat in the 18th century were offered by Johann Kaspar Steube who pointed out the fact that neither the Romanians nor the Serbians bred silkworms, but the Italian, German and French colonists. Silk cocoons obtained in Banat were taken to the manufacture in Vârşeţ where they were turned into merchandise. The silk spinning mill in Vârşeţ was taken over in 1779 by Carlos baron Diez de Aux et Torellas, manager of the Office for Breeding Silkworms in the counties of Caraş, Timiş and Torontal.

In 1837 Valahia was exporting grains, leather, wood, wax, honey, a little wine, salt, wool and silk; the silk industry starts making steady progress (Démidoff, 1854).

According to certain authors, silk production before 1850 was of very low quality and it was used by country women to obtain raw silk. There are different opinions on this matter: “The peasants have adopted this industry for some time and the silk they produce is of high quality” (Mircesco, 1863). From 1852 on and with the government’s intervention, high quality seeds from Milan were brought to Romania. The first Sericultural Company for Silk Processing and a spinning mill were established in Damaroia in 1859. By 1863, sericultural production in Romania continually increased that even the renowned centre of European silk, Lyon, placed orders to them. Pebrine affected the mulberry cultures in Europe and especially France and it led to the increase in the request of silkworm eggs from Romania while the massive egg export led to the sudden decrease in silk manufacture (Oros, 1998). In 1863 more than 15,272 kg of worm seeds and 53,906 kg of silk cocoons were exported. In 1859 Mehedinti produced more than 11,287 kg of silkworm cocoons which gave more than 2,078 kg of raw silk (Iordache, 1986). The decline of western sericulture is linked to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the emergence of the artificial silk in 1889.

In 1904 Her Majesty Queen Mary founded the Sericulture and Weaving School in Bucharest, one of its main goals being that of silkworm breeding and spinning raw silk. In 1905, Queen Elizabeth founded the “Weaver” society and later on the “Weaver” school in 1907 in which silk fabrics were made using from 2 to 28 threads.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sericulture in Romania was developing according to its acquired tradition. Romania was offering favourable grounds for breeding silkworms. “There are six special State-owned mulberry tree nurseries- the production of which is sold to cultivators

at a very low price. Only silkworms of the annual species are bred in Romania being mostly from yellow cocoons of Italian, French and Hungarian origin. White cocoons are also imported from China, Turkey, Iraq and France. There are 26 silkworm breeding centres in the country, which comprise 659 communal and 11667 privately-owned farms. A law passed in 1924 ensured the development and protection of sericulture, restricting imports by means of high tariffs and protecting the industry generally (Forster, Rostovsky, 1971)

The experiments made at the stations of Orşova, Băneasa and Cislau managed to increase the production of silk cocoons from 500 tons in 1944 to 1300 tons in 1963. The main cocoon producer during this period was the individual breeder, but the silkworm breeding started to spread to agricultural cooperatives and schools. As a result, in 1976 the worldwide raw silk production quantity was of 47,800 tons: Japan took the first position with 17,884 tons and then Romania with 10 tons. In the 60s, Romania was tackling with the problem of the sericulture development as it was seen as the main raw high quality material for clothing. (Barca, 1968)

#### **FOR A SERICULTURAL INDUSTRY**

We must underline the fact that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many publications (books or articles) were letting people know about the necessity of developing sericulture and about its numerous advantages: it is an inexhaustible source of wealth, and implicitly of civilization. Everything is profit, nothing is lost, nothing loses its value. Breeding the silkworm is probably the most essential step in order to obtain silk products, when dealing with either the fabrics or products used in the cosmetic industry or medicine as the last years of technical acquisitions have proved. The wastes represent an excellent source of food for animals.

It is an industry that has the privilege to be accessible to anyone without a special qualification; an industry that can bring benefits with no risks; it can be subdivided, promoted with little production efforts, without the danger of competition (Perris, 1846). This industry does not have as many advantages as the silk industry; there is no agricultural exploitation which can offer so many chances and guaranties. The proof is represented by the favour that was given to it along the time, its conservation and dissemination despite the political and commercial crises it went through, the state of wealth it gave to the countries which accepted it (Gasparin, 1841).

Not much has been done in our country to save sericulture. There were some measures taken by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Water and Environment in compliance with the European Union Regulation nr. 845 and 922/1972, at the level of the year 2004, but these measures did not have the results expected. The commercial societies ceased their activity one at a time so that we can not speak about sericulture today on a territory that was so favourable to this industry at some time in the past. In Romania's Official Monitor, part I, Nr. 516, bis/17.VII.2005, Annexe Nr. 5 regarding "the Programme for the Silkworm Improvement in Romania" it is mentioned that "When passing to the market economy, both the organising structure of the sericulture and its production went through serious changes...Besides eliminating the capital of the commercial sericultural societies, other factors brought their contribution to the decline of sericulture such as: closing the Spinning Mill in Lugoj and three natural silk weaving mills in Bucharest". A tradition that put a mark on the handcraft activity in the textile field in the Carpathian area from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on was to be extinct. Unfortunately this tradition has become history.

In the context of the durability of the environment, OCDE recommends a model of lasting development – the model known as JOBS – a model of neoclassical general balance which was initially intended for the evaluation of the economical incidence of globalization on different regions of the world. The model was built to analyse dynamic scenarios which were treated as snapshots of a static balance. Romania is included in the simulation of the model, and one of the sectors used in the model refer to the silkworm cocoons.

When thinking in the perspective of a lasting development, in an imaginary road of silk, as a pleading for freedom and for breaking dogmas imposed by historical realities, we need the statement written at the end of René Berger's book "Continuous Mutation". The image created by Berger by this end is that of a perpetuum mobile, which the imaginary Silk Road is subjected to. With reference to the materiality that my present study deals with, there are new valences: we become citizens on the "silk road" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, unconscious or voluntary ecologists whose gestures are meant to protect the planet. As Focillon said, "The moment we tackle the problem of the life of forms in matter, we do not separate the two notions...one can consider that matter imposes its own form on the form...They (the matters-n.a.) are chosen not only depending on the ease required for their transformation or depending on the manner in which art serves life, on their utilitarian pertinence, but also because they favour a certain technique and produce specific effects" (Focillon, 1977). But the effects produced by silk in the garment can only be perceived as positive. Because silk is a fibre "friendly" to the environment, wearer and worker. Thus, the circle opened a

few millenniums ago at the end of the legendary “silk road” should be closed by a message-manifesto for the revival of sericulture.

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