

## SERICICULTURE IN ROMANIA BETWEEN TRADITION AND AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE (II) ROMANIAN SERICULTURAL TRADITION UNTIL LATE 19TH CENTURY

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### Abstract

*The Romanian territory has benefited from a favourable ground for sericultural industry, mulberry tree cultivation, silkworm rearing and the use of sericultural products having a tradition of centuries. Between the interest in obtaining the miraculous silk thread that gave rise to support measures for sericulture and the decline caused by pebrine or the emergence of new types of threads (artificial and synthetic), the Romanian sericultural industry was marked by periods of boom and indifference.*

**Key words:** sericulture, silkworm, mulberry tree

### INTRODUCTION

In the historical matrix of sericultural development and spread on China-France axis, silkworm rearing in Romania had its temporal and spatial coordinates defined. The Romanian sericultural corridor, an integral part of the European context of the emergence and development of this industry in tandem with the boom of textile crafts of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, has always been a connection link between the East and the West; between East China – the greatest discoverer of the worm-weaver secret – and the West in which France and Spain defined themselves as kingdoms where the greatest share of wealth was due to mulberry culture and to the trade with natural silk thread, especially in the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### THE BEGINNINGS OF SERICULTURE ON THE ROMANIAN TERRITORY

It seems that the first concerns for mulberry culture were first certified in Transylvania in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and only four centuries later it became known in Moldavia and Wallachia, being introduced by the Turks (Ifrim, 1998). Paul of Aleppo, the archdeacon of Antioch, in his first journey

together with the Patriarch Macarie, when crossing Moldavia in his way to Moscow, saw mulberry trees in the royal Vasilian garden in the fortress of Iasi (\*\*Călători, 1968-1983).

Other authors date earlier the knowledge of mulberry culture and the concern for obtaining silk thread in Moldavia and Wallachia. *Mătășari*, a settlement located in the western part of the Getic Plateau, was specialized in mulberry tree cultivation and silkworm rearing, the occupation being attributed especially to women and children and certified in home production until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Silk fabrics and belts had been produced within *Mătășari* guild since the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Bucur, 2004).

### **SERICULTURE, A MASS INDUSTRY**

In 1787, an order issued by Transylvanian *Gubernium* recommended “purchasing silkworms from Kalarati’s manufactory”, and on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1788, the same *guberniya*, under a decree given by Joseph II, issued the order that the silk cocoons in Sibiu, Alba Iulia, Cluj, Mediaș, Sighișoara, Brașov to be purchased by the state, and in July the same year the officials in charge with these acquisitions were appointed. Emanuel Hofmann’s work was published in Vienna in 1833 by the order of Transylvanian Aulic Chancellery under the title “*Îndreptare întru creșterea bombacilor sau a viermilor de mătasă, lucrată pentru români*”. (Răduțiu, Gyémánt, 1981)

In the slums of Bucharest, they worked on raw silk at Cărmidarii de Jos and headscarves and home-spun wall carpets in Filaret. “Each lady had a maid, a seamstress and two or three gipsy girls, helpers with the embroidery frames and silkworm rearing.” The women living in Cărmidari had dealt with silkworm rearing even before Grigore Ghica’s rule, while “much silk fabric is created by women” in Văcărești slums. Grigore Ghica encouraged sericulture, thus the forests of mulberry trees took a large area which subsequently “became food for worms” and in Cărmidarilor slum there were about sixty wheels for spinning silk thread. Silkworm cocoons were produced in Cărmidari, Slobozia and the near Popești.” (Tătărâm, 1983)

When the painter Chladek took on lease a yard with mulberry trees in 1848 he became the painter Nicolae Grigorescu’s mother’s neighbour who was just a child at that time. Chladek set up a silkworm factory there. The ten-year-old children of Grigorescu widow were hired by Chladek, who used them to harvest the mulberry leaves for the silkworms (Brezeanu, 1959).

According to some sources, a Milanese silkworm race was brought to Wallachia in the 19th century, during the reign of Știrbei-vodă. The Italian Villarezi was charged by the ruler with setting up a nursery and replacing the races. Thus the nursery in Pantelimon was established, and the

products made in Wallachia were noticed at the exhibitions in London and Paris. However, the nursery development was compromised by the outburst of the war in the East and by Villarezi's departure. Worm production and its quality thus have moments of evolution and involution in a period in which Europe was facing pebrine. (Duseigneur-Kléber, 1862). Following the disaster produced by pebrine, The Romanian Principalities began to export silkworm cocoons. Thus, by the Decree 237 issued in 1861 the tariff of export merchandise and the corresponding customs duties are regulated both for cocoons and for cocoon seeds. Meanwhile, on domestic level, special measures for tax exemptions were meant to encourage the development of sericulture. A tax for taxpayers' duties, sanctioned by the Decree 121 of 1862 excluded from taxes "silk cockroaches and the mulberry leaves during their growth in order not to disrupt their breeding". (Brezoianu, 1864).

The strong effects of pebrine in Western Europe gave the chance to Balkan and Western Ottoman Empire countries to develop this industry, thus opening silk export opportunities for the West. (Rothstein, 1990). In 1864, Pantelimon school purchased a small quantity of Japanese worms of a quality unknown up to that time in Romania which could replace the Milanese quality touched by disease. At the end of 1864, the Ministers of Domestic Affairs, Agriculture and Public Works formed a committee in charge with the implementation of relatively urgent measures in sericulture in Romania. Japanese silkworms were brought from France to the proposal of this committee. Grown simultaneously, the two qualities of silkworms reached maturity without the least manifestation of disease that ruled a Europe hungry for the miraculous thread. The cocoons of these worms seem to have been of a very good quality, even rare one, by their white colour and texture density. However, the subsequent generations manifested the decrease in cocoon quality and thus, in the silk thread. "The Romanian government aims to develop this advantageous industry for all classes of society, especially for agricultural class women who indulged in it with pleasure and intelligence"(Odobesco, 1866)

#### ***THE BEGINNING OF THE DECLINE***

Sericulture, that had been thriving 50 years before, was in decline in 1873 due to the disease of silkworm. The mulberry trees were poorly taken care of and those who had died were not replaced. The production covered local needs only. In Moldavia silk production industry was more developed, especially in the area of Huși where women wove their veils as part of their

costume. A part of the cocoons was exported through the harbours of Brăila and Galați (Clugnet, 2008).

Jean – Alexandre Vaillant mentioned in the statistics he had made that silkworm culture was more developed in Wallachia than in Moldavia, yet without being as cultivated as it could be. Under the claim of spreading worm growth in the countryside, the culture of mulberry tree was prohibited in the capital city by the government; this measure was thought of by Vaillant as showing “more selfishness than desire for the public good”(Vaillant, 1844), because the artisans’ wives, widows, poor classes in towns might have found an easy means of subsistence in silkworm rearing.

In the presentation made at the Universal Exhibition of Paris in 1867, they specified the lengths of silkworm rearing in Romania where century-old mulberry trees plantations could be found. Silkworm rearing was interpreted as a necessity for the popular costumes worn during holidays, consisting of blouses and headscarves, woven and embroidered by the wearers themselves using the silk thread they had obtained. The thrown silk was retail sold and used for the ornamental embroidery of popular costumes. Without being practised as a commercial industry, silkworm rearing – a common indigenous species – was intended only to cover their own needs. The importance of sericulture in the economy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was obvious also by the interest shown in the publication of books and studies on silkworm rearing and by the presentation of sericulture as an industry branch with multiple benefits. Ioan Tomici and Petrache Poenaru published books on sericulture initiation as a gesture of supporting this economic branch. The publication *Învățătorul satului (The Village Teacher)* was providing information on mulberry trees culture and silkworm rearing in 1846. In 1849, the book *Învățătură pentru prăsirea duzilor și creșterea gândacilor de mătase, adunate și întocmite pe clima țării românești de la clucerul și cavalerul Petru Poenaru (A teaching on mulberry trees breeding and silkworm rearing, collected and drafted depending on the Romanian climate from the provider and knight Petru Poenaru)* was published in Bucharest (Cetățeanu et al, 1988). Such books, mostly published in France, were presented at the International Conference of 1867. Silkworm cocoons from the farms in Vaslui, Craiova, Prahova, Bucharest, Iași as well as samples of silk fabrics dyed in various colours and tools for preparing silk were shown at the same exhibition, in the catalogue of products, in the category “Garments (including fabrics) and other items worn by man” (Commission Princièrè, 1868).

## CONCLUSIONS

Sericultural industry, in line with the productive and commercial European area, had a mass development in Romania. Constituting itself as an industry easy to approach, Romanian sericulture won by tradition, by the market requirement of its product, i.e. the silk. Between 14<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries it developed, being associated with the world interest in obtaining the silk thread and being recognised worldwide from a quality standpoint.

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