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The Romanians in Vršac

Abstract: The paper gives a review of the socio-economic, demographic, confessional, educational and cultural position of the Romanians in Vršac from the 18th to the 20th century. The Romanians have from the beginning been a part of the Vršac citizenry, although they were a minority compared to other ethnicities living in *The Town under the Tower* (Vršac), such as Serbs, Germans and Hungarians. After the ecclesiastic division in 1864, Vršac remains the headquarters of a Romanian Orthodox Archpresbytery. When the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was dissolved and the Yugoslav state was created, it became and has stayed until the present day the main educational, cultural, political and economic centre of the Romanians in the former Yugoslavia, that is, the present Republic of Serbia. Because of the vastness of the topic, the paper will only deal with the period from the 18th century until the year 1941. The presentation of the position and role of the Romanians in Vršac from 1941 until today is left for another paper.

Key words: Vrsac, Romanians, education, citizenry, church

Vrsac – one of the most important economic, administrative, cultural, education and religion centres in Banat, has long ago been a setting where the influences of various cultures, confessions and languages have intersected. It has remained such until the very present day, thus not significantly differing from other towns or smaller settlements in Banat, since one of the most important features of Banat as a whole is its ethnical, religious and cultural diversity. This is a great richness and people living in Banat can be only proud of it.

The Romanians are present among the nations who used to participate and who have nowadays been participating in creation of what could be called the Banat civilization, the nation for a long time been inhabited in the region. In Vrsac itself, which is the topic of the paper, the Romanian citizens have been living since the ancient times and they made the component of the mosaic of nations creating its history. They were closest to the Serbs who belonged to one religion, the people that was in its number superior in the town under the tower, sharing good and evil, getting intermarried and nurturing friendly and neighbouring relations.

The first official data on the number of the Romanians in Vrsac date from 1985, when it was recorded that their total number is 432. The number of Romanians according to the census

of citizens in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century can be seen according to the next table¹.

Andrei Vasici, the first monographer in Vrsac, claimed in its work dating from 1859 that the Serbs and the Romanians used to be citizens of Vrsac and its surroundings even before Ottoman empire (Vasic 1993: 16). The historian Nicolae Tincu Velia gives us information, to be honest based on the oral tradition, on the presence of Romanians in Vrsac from the times immemorial in his work “Church national-political history of Romanians...”. He mentions the colonization of nearly 13000 Romanians from Oltenia who were inhabited in Banat from 1641 to 1646, with some of them coming to live to Vrsac (Velia 1865: 143). The same author in one of his former works (Velia 1946: 361-363) publishes an interesting legend on how Vrsac was founded, but we will not include it in serious sources showing the presence of the Romanians in the town.

It is not easy to determine the number of Romanians in Vrsac until the first half of the 19th century (when in 1954 the first census was made according to which the ethnic belonging of its citizens can be seen), but it is beyond dispute that the Romanians have long ago been living in the town, which is confirmed by both oral tradition and written sources. Even in the *katastih* of Pec Romanian names are mentioned among the citizens of Vrsac – those who have their contribution to the Patriarchy. Thus Neagoe is mentioned in 1660 and 1666 (supporting previously stated data on the settling of the Romanians from Oltenia, since this is the name characteristic for that region), as well as a Fiat (the name that used to be rather frequent among the Romanians in Banat). In his work “Banat” J. J. Erler states that in 1774 (when the paper was published) Germans, Romanians and Serbs lived in Vrsac. Getting back to written sources, we will mention the list of the Orthodox parish in Vrsac dating from 1796, published by D. J. Popovic, according to which it can be clearly seen that the significant number of those living in the parish had Romanian last names, among which we can find the name Neagoe, the same name found in the *katastih* of Pec. We have identified more than eighty families that undoubtedly are Romanian, even though it seems possible that some of them had at the time been made Serbian (Popovic 1955: 284-290).

¹ The table is given in the appendix

Some of the acknowledged Romanian citizens in Vrsac are known to us according to the lists of those subscribed to Romanian books and publications issued during the first decades of the 19th century. So, among the subscribers to the “Anthropology” of Pavel Vasici (the brother of the Mayer of Vrsac, Andrei Vasici), the book published in 1830, we can find the following citizens of Vrsac: Axente Iancovici, a painter, Dimitrie Baloi, a “speculator”, as well as the traders Nicolae Megherovici, Constantin Cuișor, Sterija Popović (the father of Jovan Sterija Popović) and Simeon Iorgovici (Suciu, 1945: 53). When we are talking about the family Cuișor, it was a Tzintzar family that was made Romanian that came to Vrsac in 1722 (Popovic 2008: 34) and was one of the most famous Romanian families in the town until the second half of the 19th century (Tincu Velia 1865: 143). Among other respected families there was a family Baloi, extremely wealthy, considered to be the head of the Romanian families from Transylvania, when they were settling to Vrsac, in the 18th century. This family gave its contribution when the Orthodox church in Vrsac was built; such a move was made by other Romanians, as well, among them the “prince Emanuel and Arsenie, who came from Valahie” (Tincu Velia 1865: 163). The same author, Nicilae Tincu Velia, mentions other old Romanian families (1865) and majority of them is in the list of the Orthodox parish dating from 1796. These are, apart from the mentioned families Cuișor and Baloi, the families Barbu, Șerban, Văcărescu, Bogdan, Ciocoi, Moldovan, Bardușan and others. It is beyond dispute that these families used to live in Vrsac during 18th and the first half of the 19th century and it is a proof of continuity of the Romanians in the town in the mentioned period; oh the other hand, in the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century these families disappear and are not mentioned in the list made in 1909. Namely, this is the year when the Romanian Orthodox parish in Vrsac was established, which had not existed before, even though the centre of one of the Romanian Orthodox *protoprezviterat* used to exist in the town under the tower since the division of the church (1865). Due to the small number of Romanians in Vrsac in the last decades of the 19th century, the foundation of the Orthodox parish did not succeed, so that the Orthodox Romanians from Vrsac were a part of the Romanian Orthodox parish in Malo Srediste. The priest from that village used to come every other Sunday to Vrsac in order to give religion classes to the pupils of Vrsac schools. Apart from the Orthodox Romanians, a significant number of Romanian Uniates (their total number was 149, out of 253 Romanians registered according to the census made in 1881)(Mileker 2005:

265). The mentioned list of the Romanian Orthodox families that became a part of the newly established parish (Milovan 1953: 161) contains 97 families in total, out of which two are mentioned by Tincu Velia as old families (Barbu and Bogdan and the former is in the list dating from 1796. Of course, it is difficult to prove that these are the same families, since the last names Barbu and Bogdan are rather frequent in the Romanians in Banat). Some of the families moved from the nearby places during previous decades, before all the settlements in the valley of the Nera river (Nemoianu 1925: 115). There were people of various professions among them, mostly wage labourers, but also traders, craftsmen, clerks and intellectuals.

Vrsac was an important centre of struggle for church independence of the Romanians, involving significant persons of the national movement of the Romanians in Banat in 19th century, among whom there were Ignatie Vuia, Nicolae Tincu Velia, Dimitrie Petrovici Stoichescu and others. Even before the foundation of the parish, in 1907 an appeal had been sent to all the believers in Vrsac, as well as all the Romanians in dualistic monarchy, to collect material means necessary for building of one Orthodox church for the Romanian people in Vrsac. The Romanian Orthodox church in Vrsac was built in the period between 1910 and 1912, with the temple of Vaznesenija Gospodnjeg, consecrated by the Caransebes episcopo Miron Cristea. The interior of the church was painted by Virgil Simionescu from Lugoj. The greatest merits for the foundation of the parish and building of the church belong to the village priest Traian Oprea, respectful intellectual and the national leader of the Romanians in the first decades of the 20th century. As the most respected representatives of Romanian citizenry in Vrsac in the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century we would refer to the following: dr Octavian Proștean (a physician), dr Vladimir Spătariu (a lawyer), dr Nicolae Popovici (a lawyer), dr Petru Zepeniag (a lawyer), dr Savu Butoarcă (a professor), Gavrilă Mihailov (a colonel in Austro-Hungarian army).

During the first decades of the 19th century, the service in the both Orthodox churches (the assembly and the “small” one) was carried out alternately in church-Slavonic and Romanian language, until the beginning of the 1930eis, when the Romanian language disappears. After the church separation in 1865, the first Romanian priest in Vrsac was Nicolaje Tincu Velia, followed by Ioan Popovici, David Tărfăloagă, Ioan Murgu Liuba, Ioan Beceneaga, Adam Barbu and,

finally, Traian Oprea (1906-1937), who was the first Romanian parson in Vrsac. Along with him, in certain periods the curates Adam Fiştea, Cornel Petrovici, Traian Petrică used to work, and finally, Gruia Roşu, who became a parson after Oprea's death.

Vrsac has for a long time been exceptionally important educational centre of the Romanians from the whole region. The episcopo Josif Jovanovic Sakabenta established a Grammar school (incomplete general secondary school) in 1790, with teaching in Romanian language (apart from teaching in the Serbian, German and Latin language). A well known Romanian education Paul Jorgovici used to work in the school (in the period 1802-1808) as a professor. Another educational institution of great importance for the whole historical Banat is Serbian-Romanian clerical school in Vrsac, that used to educate the clergy for the need of the Orthodox parishes at the territory of the whole Banat. After the split between the two churches, the Romanian departments were moved to Caransebeş in 1865. The well-known workers in the field of culture, intellectuals and national leaders of the Romanians in the Habsburg monarchy worked there as professors: Sofronie Ivackovici, Nicolae Tincu Velia, Ignatie Vuia, Andrei Şaguna (Gavrilović, 1983). Even before the foundation of the clerical school, during the last centuries of the 19th century, the courses for the preparation of the clergy had been organized in both Serbian and Romanian language. Ioan Tomici was one of the professors in the period between 1798 and 1804, who became Caransebes priest and an acknowledged educator and writer.

The very existence of the Romanian educational and religion institutions provided the conditions desirable for the development of both local intelligence and the representatives of the citizenry in Vrsac, that became a town with rich cultural life. First of all, significant pages of the beginnings of the Romanian Enlightenment literature and publications were written in Vrsac. The deeds made by great names of Banat culture in the first half of the 19th century were created here, starting from the pioneer of the Romanian Enlightenment in the region, Paul Jorgovici, who was followed by Nikolaje Tinku Velja, Andrej Vasic and others. Near Vrsac, in Veliko Srediste, iconographic school of the deacon Vasilie was working during 18th century, who came from Tismana in Oltenia, in 1736, heading 50 Romanian families. The most important representative of the school was Gheorghe Diaconovici, Vasile's son; one of the members of his iconographic

troupe was Stancu Raicu from Vrsac, who participated in the painting of churches in the whole Banat together with his colleagues (Negru 2002: 43). He is mentioned in the registry of the Vrsac Orthodox parish dating from 1976 as *Rajko the painter* (Popovic 1955: 290).

Apart from the mentioned respected representatives of the Romanian citizenry, other well-known personalities, also lived for a longer or shorter period of time in Vrsac with Trajan Vuia among them, who used to work in 1898/99 as an apprentice lawyer in the office of dr Vladimir Spataruiua (Vuia 2010: VII). Furthermore, Vuia later became famous around the world as a plane constructor (in spite of the fact that he had studied law) and he managed to realize the first mechanical flight by plan in Paris in 1906. Another Romanian pioneer of aviation, Aurel Vlaicu, held an aero meeting gathering a large number of citizens living in Vrsac and nearby places in Vrsac in 1912. This event was experienced by the local Romanian citizenry as a great national day. A whole range of cultural manifestations was organized on that occasion. The local press in the German language in Vrsac published detailed articles covering the event (*Werschetzer Gebirgsbote*) (Măran, 2007: 56-57).

Cultural-amateur life developed through the activity of the Romanian choirs. The decrease of the number of citizens during the last decades of the 19th century did not mean that cultural activities of the Romanians living in Vrsac would be extinguished. Before the First World War, four Romanian choirs used to work in the town (the choir of boys, students, male and female choir); together they made a *Mixed Choir of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, established in 1912 (Cinci 2003: 117-118).

The first national institutions of the Romanians in the town had economic character: the loan offices “Tezaurul” (1890) and “Lucaefărul” (1894); the former was short-lived, but the latter represented a powerful shareholding association of Romanians in the Serbian part of Banat until the end of the Second World War. In 1913 “Lucaefărul” owned social capital of 600 000 crowns, divided into 6000 shares whose value was 100 crowns. Petru Zepeneag was the executive director of the bank (Maran 2005: 46).

During war all cultural activity of the Romanians of Vrsac ceased to exist, while in the period immediately after the war (1918-1922), the parish in Vrsac went through an agony, due to the migration of the great number of the Romanians from Vrsac to the neighbouring Romania, after Banat had been divided between the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians and Romania. Namely, around 40 Romanian families left Vrsac and they were replaced by only 18 new families from the nearby villages. In 1923, the Romanian church choir in the form of the mixed choir was renewed, due to the efforts made by the rest of Vrsac intellectuals. The choir had its first official appearance on Djurdjevdan (a holiday day) in 1924 in the village of Vlakovac, where its concert was held². On another holiday day – Spirits, the same choir (32 members) was the guest of the Romanian Singing society in Bela Crkva.³ The Romanian choir of Vrsac was one of the organizers of the great ceremony organized in Vrsac on the occasion of consecration of the church bells of the Romanian Orthodox church on November 2nd 1924. The diplomatic representative of Romania in Belgrade was present at the ceremony – T. Emandy with his wife, as well as the manager of the Belgrade magazine *Pravda* – M. Sokic, the MP I. Jian, the colonel Vukovic, the mayor of Vrsac – dr Kosirovic, Serbian priest in Vrsac – Bozidar Popovic, Romanian priest in Vrsac – the host of the manifestation – Traian Oprean, and many others. The manifestation was closed with a concert.⁴

Cultural association of Romanians in the Kingdom of SCS was also founded in Vrsac in 1923; unfortunately it did not start its activities, since the authorities did not accept its rules. Another association, “Astra” was established in 1936, whose headquarters was also in Vrsac, created to gather all the Romanian cultural associations from the Yugoslav part of Banat in the period between the two world wars.

The town of Vrsac had in the period between the two world wars a vivid publicist activity in the Romanian language. We will mention the following publications: “Opinca“ (1918-1919), “Nădejdea” (1927-1944), “Dimineața” (1929), “Foaia poporului român” (1936-1938), ”Graiul strămoșesc” (1938), “Biruința” (1938-1939), as well as Calendarul “Nădejdea” (1929-1944).

² *Graiul românesc*, Pančevo, No 21 issued on 1st June 1924, 1.

³ the same, No 25, issued on 29th June 1924, 3.

⁴ the same, No 44 issued on November 9th 1924, 1-2.

The fact should be born in mind that Vrsac was also a political centre of the Romanians in Banat in the period between the two world wars. The centre of the Romanian party in the Kingdom of SCS was located in the town (1923-1929), as well as the Romanian central board (1935-1941).

In regard to education, there is no teaching in the Romanian teaching language in Vrsac during the 1920ies and 1930ies, with an exception of the religion classes. After the school convention had been signed in 1933, the Romanian department within the Gimnasium (1934) and The Teacher Trainign School (1935) was opened; these were two institutions of great significance, where in the decades to come, the new Romanian autochthonous intelligence in Banat would be created, decimated after Banat had been divided in 1919, due to the fact that local Romanian intellectuals had moved to Romanian. The consolidation of education in the Romanian teaching language in Vrsac is important for the Romanian citizens as a whole; this event was followed by the establishment of the Romanian boarding school (1935), and the opening of the higher classes within the Gimnasium (1941-1942) and the primary school in the Romanian language (1942-1943).

Notable persons

Paul Iorgovici (1764-1808), born in the village Vărădia, studies in Pozunj, Pest, Vienna and Rome. In 1790 he comes to Paris where he gets into a direct contact with revolutionary ideas. He spends a period of time in London and Vienna, where he tries to initiate a publication in the Romanian language, which is, however, forbidden by the authorities. He gets back to Vrsac, where he is employed as a consortium lawyer and an interpreter for the Romanian language in the service of the episcopo Sakabenta. During this period he published his paper "Views on the Romanian language", but the authorities soon accused him of spreading revolutionary ideas, so that he was removed from his working place. After that he worked as a private lawyer as well as a professor of Latin language in The Grammar school in Vrsac. He died in 1808. Iorgovici is the first great educator of Banat, who was under the influence of the ideas of the French revolution and he has remained until the very present day, one of the brilliant minds in the history of the Romanians who used to live in Vrsac.

Nikolae Tincu Velia (1814-1867), was born in the place Ticvanul Mare. He is educated in the general secondary school in Segedin and in the Serbian-Romanian clergy schools in Vrsac. In 1837 he becomes a deacon in Secașu. Two years later (1839) he is a professor in the Romanian classes in the Clerical School. He soon becomes an archdeacon and a secretary in the eparchy consortium in Vrsac. During this period he deals with the distribution of the publications in the Romanian language from Transylvania and Romanian principalities in the Southern Banat. He participated in the Assembly in Lugoj on 4/16 May 1848, where he was elected into a delegation whose task was to “work in cooperation with other Romanians for the religious needs of the Romanians in Austro-Hungary”. (Suciu, Constantinescu II, 1980: 691-692). After the Romanian church was separated, he was positioned as a priest in Vrsac, actively participating in the distribution of the Romanians in the multicultural places of the Vrsac eparchy. He dies in Vrsac in 1867. He is an author of the “Church political-national history of the Romanians” published in Sibiu in 1865, in which he tries to provide arguments in favour of the need for church independence of the Romanian people. Talking about his literary works, we would like to mention the collection and publishing of ten folk ballads from Banat and his work “A short history of the beginnings of Vrsac and its Romanians” (1846) is rather interesting.

Andrei Vasici (1796-1864) is the older brother of the well-known Romanian national strugglers Pavel Vasici Ungureanu, one of the first physicians Romanians in the Monarchy. He was born in Timisoara and attends Romanian primary school in his native town; after that he goes to secondary school and studies law in Pest and Segedin. he is mentioned in Vrsac as soon as 1829, where he works as a notary and as a lawyer; in revolutionary years, between 1848 and 1849 he is in the function of the president of Vrsac. He gave his contribution to the development of the Romanian publicist activity, as an associate of George Bariția in *Gazeta de Transilvania* from Brașov. Later, in 1859, he publishes the first monograph book of Vrsac in the German language, under the title “Contributions to the monograph of the town of Vrsac”, a work translated into Serbian language.

Alexandru Butoarcă (1898-1980) was born in Vrsac. He studies law at the University in Cluj, where he defends his doctoral dissertation in the field of political sciences. He works as a lawyer in Vrsac, where he is, before all, known as one of the most important political leaders of

the Romanians in the Yugoslav part of Banat in the period between the two world wars. He becomes a manager of the magazine “Nădejdea”, with an ambition to become the only leader of the Romanian people in the Yugoslav kingdom, which brought him into a conflict with a part of Romanian intelligence, before all with the clergy. Nevertheless, Butoarcă founded the Romanian central board in 1935, a successor of the Romanian party, and managed to get the mandate of the senator in the Yugoslav Assembly in the same year. In 1942 he moves to Romania, where he remains until 1950, when the Romanian communistic authorities send him back to Yugoslavia. He is accused for cooperation with the occupying forces there and sentenced to 6 years of prison. Having served his sentence, he works either as an independent lawyer or as a lawyer in some companies in Vrsac.

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