

Builders and Martyrs of the Unification of Bessarabia with Romania



Alexei Mateevici (1888-1917)

military priest, unionist convinced,
Bessarabian poet and a true Romanian

Alexei Mateevich was born on March 28, 1888 in the village of Cainari, Tighina, in a family of priests with ancient Romanian traditions. His father, priest Mihai, was a subscriber to the magazine *Albina* from which his son, Alexe, learned the Romanian language written in prose and poetry. The poet's mother, Nadejda, descended from the old family of Moldovan priests, Neaga. Alexei Mateevich attended primary school in the village of Zaim, where his parents had settled, living in an environment where old Romanian legends and traditions were still circulating – a form of resistance to the pressures of the Tsarist Empire. In 1897, he enrolled at the Theological School in Kishinev, which he graduated in 1902 cum laude. He then attended the Theological Seminary in Kishinev, which he graduated in 1910. Here he became friends with the future sculptor Alexandru Plămădeală.

He made his debut as a writer in 1906 in the newspaper *Basarabia*, with a correspondence entitled “*Chestia preoțească*” (The Priestly Issue) – an article in which he criticised certain categories of ministers of the cult. The text drew the attention of the editorial staff who asked him to become a permanent contributor. The following articles he published, though less critical and more tolerant, pondered over certain behaviours unworthy of the identity and status of a priest, stating in brief the main obligations of clergymen.

In other articles, he dealt with socio-political issues. The most representative materials he published about this matter in the years 1906 and 1907 are “The Moldovans’ Struggle for Rights”, “What Do We Need?”, “Elections”. Another painful theme for the future poet was the problem of the Bessarabian spiritual culture at the intersection of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his article “Cultural Union” (1906), he argued that a cause of the social-economic crisis could be the lack of culture. Alexei Mateevich saw the solution of these problems by the implementation of a wide range of cultural reforms, enumerated in the articles “Towards the Light” (1906), “The Cultural Companionships” (1907), etc.

In 1907, he published the poems “The Peasants”, “I Sing”, “The Country”, and the articles “Saint Basil - New Year in the Customs of the Bessarabian Moldovans” and “From the Folk Songs of Bessarabia” (*Basarabia* no.1 and no.11). In 1910 he received a scholarship and became a student at the Theological Academy in Kiev, which he graduated in 1912. In those years, according to the recollections of a colleague, Mateevici lived like in a drunkenness of reading. He translated a lot from the classical Russian literature: M. Lermontov, A. Pushkin, A. Fet, F. Briusov, G. Derzhavin, A. Chekhov, C. Batiushkov - and managed to support from the money he received for his translations his mother now a widow (1906). He was studying the historical and cultural past of his people, and he would write and preach about

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patriotism. However, the refuge in reading did not prevent him from on the contrary it rather urged him to participate in the national movement of Moldovan students *Deșteptarea* (the Awakening). Here he became friends with Simion Murafa, the journalists Gr. M. Ionescu, Daniel Ciugureanu, Ștefan Berechet, Ștefan Ciobanu. He was living the national ideas with great intensity and emotion, as bears witness one of the poetic texts he wrote at that time, “Curse-Invective to Emperor Alexander I at the Centennial of the Seizure of Bessarabia, 1812-1912”: “Împărate-ncornorate,/ Spune-mi unde ești tu, unde,/ La tine să pot pătrunde,/ Ca să te întreb, fârtate,/ Țarul țării de nebuni,/ Spune-mi unde ești tu azi,/ Să te-ntreb eu în răgaz/ Pentru ce-mi furași, pirate,/ Scump pământul din străbuni?!.../ Spune-mi unde ești tu azi,/ Ca să te stropesc cu gaz,/ Să-ți dau foc din temelie,/ Ca să arzi ca o făclie/ Pe străzile capitalei,/ La serbarea centenarei/ Basarabiei răpită/ Din Moldova cotropită?!“ (You crowned cuckold, / Tell me where you are, where, / So that I come to you, / So that I ask you, brother mine, / The tsar of the country’s crazy, / Tell me where you are today, / Let me ask you leisurely / Why have you stolen from me, you pirate, / The dear land of my ancestors? ... / Tell me where you are today, / So I spray you with gas, / Burn you to the ground / So that you burn like a torch / On the streets of the capital, / At the centennial festival / Of Bessarabia abducted / Of Moldovan land invaded ?!

Drawing increasingly more attention to the traditions of the Romanian people - which he had known “at first hand” in the village of Zaim, but which he wanted to highlight scientifically - he decided to defend his thesis on the topic: “Religious Elements of Moldovan Folklore”. Here is what he wrote to the famous Romanian Professor Ion Bianu:

“I am in the third year, on the eve of the bachelor thesis (in Russian, “candidacy”). Ever since my childhood I have felt a great love for my parents’ people, ignored by their today’s masters and their official science even to the denial of their ethnic existence and their confusion either with the Tartars, or with the Gypsies. I have always been attracted with a great power to our Romanian folklore, customs, ancestral stories, beautiful legends and folk songs ... I have also written about these things in Romanian and Russian newspapers from Bessarabia (the journal *Basarabia* of 1906-1907). But my biggest need was that I did not have any books to guide me. I was totally isolated from the folk literature of the Kingdom, from the rich collections of Father Marian, from the deep researches of Mr. A. Șăineanu, O. Densusianu and others, many of which I now know only by name. I remember the astonishment that overwhelmed me when I happened to see in Bessarabia, in the house of some good Romanians, the voluminous collections of Father Marian. I was petrified. It is no wonder when you remember that even the popular Eminescu is a *rara avis* in Bessarabia. The famine of books in our mother tongue books is indescribable. ... As to ethnography and folklore, we have almost nothing. This has always reinforced my urge to work precisely in this sphere more than in the field of popularising our national history, which I actually also deal with.

That is what makes me now, at the moment of the choice of the topic, to dwell on the “Religious Elements of Moldovan Folklore” and to appeal to your kindness with the warm request to offer me free of charge any editions of the Romanian Academy on folklore so that

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I might carry on properly this scientific work... After the completion of the work, all the books, which I now kindly ask you to send to me as soon as possible, will be transferred by me to the Library of our Academy, which is very poor in Romanian editions, although the Romanians from the Kingdom and Bessarabia have always been among the scholars of this Academy.”

In 1914, he defended his thesis in theology. He married Teodora Borisovna Novitschi and returned to Kishinev. On September 22, he was appointed substitute teacher of Greek at the seminary where he had studied. In the years 1914-1915 he was ordained as a priest.

Between 1910 and 1915 he published in the newspapers Basarabia and Luminătorul (Bessarabia and the Enlightener) original works: lyrical and religious poems, the short story “The Autumn”, but also a series of scientific studies in various fields: linguistics (“Monuments of Church Influence on the Origin and Historical Development of the Moldovan Language”), ethnography (“Religious Motives in the Beliefs and Customs of Moldovans in Bessarabia”), dogmatic exegesis (“LN Tolstoy’s Ideas about Religion and Their Appreciation”), the history of the Church (“When and How Were the Moldovans Christianized”, “Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni”), aesthetics and philosophy (burial texts, texts dealing with the influence of the Church on the formation of the Romanian language, Fechner’s aesthetic conception, etc).

In his researches on folklore, he focused on the study of the broader horizons of the parameters of oral folk creation as well as the existential conditions of humanity in general. For A. Mateevich, the aesthetic appreciation of oral folk creation counted less than the criteria of originality, veracity and individuality. Without being stuck in his own religious beliefs, as some might have expected, the author explicitly expressed his view in these studies on the correlations between Paganism and Christianity.

But the life of researcher, priest and teacher was disturbed by the outbreak of World War I. At that time in Bessarabia there were troubled times. The Tsarist government destroyed the families of Moldovan natives, recruited tens of thousands of young peasants, including Moldovan intellectuals, sending them to war as “cannon fodder”. A. Mateevich was sent to Galicia as a military priest in the Russian Army, Division 34 and 71. When Romania entered the war he was transferred to the Romanian Front where he witnessed the battles of Mărășești, supplying the spiritual support so necessary for the combatants. In the battles of Mărășești, he served in the Fourth Russian Army, Division 11, which, together with the Romanian Military Units of the First Army, opposed a heroic resistance to the German armies, led by Field Marshal von Mackensen.

Then he had the opportunity to meet the Romanian soldiers and officers. He fulfilled with devotion his Christian duty to those fallen into battle, wounded and tortured by the sufferings of war, cold and sickness, standing at the bedside of the wounded and dying, regardless of their nationality and political beliefs, in long conversations by which he helped them overcome the difficulties they were confronted with.

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His contemporaries were telling about the military priest Alexe Mateevich that he was gentle, human and full of courage and manhood. Some younger soldiers were frightened by the war, the bumps of the shells, the explosion lighting, the gunshots, the terrible cry of the wounded, the dead soldiers who, after the battle, were gathered from the battlefields like military objects or equipment. And at those moments the priest Alexe was helping them escape the fear of death by strengthening their spirit through education and love for God. He was helping the soldiers to become stronger and more courageous in battle. He was called “the priest and poet of the soldiers” for the way he knew how to stand by them in the hardest moments.

Military Priest Alexe Mateevici was also a great patriot, a great connoisseur of Romanian customs and folklore, in love with poetry, being considered the soldiers’ poet. The Moldavian soldiers said that hundreds of soldiers were gathering around the military poet in the barracks on Sundays, after the ceasefire, in the dusk of the evening, to listen to his sermons, or to his woks and poems. Here, at these soldierly reunions, the poet and priest Mateevich inspired the Moldovan soldiers the love for their country, the historical past of the Romanians, talking to them about the language of the old homilies.

The Military Alexe Mateevici was a courageous fighter for the national cause of Moldovans, instilled the soldiers, sons of peasants, the desire for freedom and emancipation, urging Bessarabian soldiers to be closer to the Moldavian Soldierly Committees.

Writer Nichifor Crainic makes a vivid characterisation of Alexei Mateevich: “I met Father Mateevich in Iasi in the summer of 1917. I see him clearly even now: a strong, broad-shouldered ruddy man, in a Russian gray gown, with an apostolic, blonde beard, ...he had in his words and smiles an impressive gentleness that made you become his friend on the spot.”

I shall relate below a very special story from the front, told by Munteanu Vasile, a member of the Soldierly Committee of Iasi, about the authority and courage shown by Priest Alexei Mateevich in front of the Russian Army: “...After a fierce struggle on Varnita-Adjud position, after an unsuccessful attack of the Germans, between the frontier lines there were many corpses of German soldiers which dispersed an unbearable odour. One day, after the proposal of the military priest Mateevici and the approval of the regimental commander, the priest dressed in a clerical coat and a cross in his hand, bravely climbs the parapet of the trench. He makes signs to the enemy, drawing the attention of the Germans that he wants to come to them. He then sneaks through the barbed wire grids and approaches the corpses of the German soldiers, kneeling beside them. He reads for a short while at the heads of the dead, and again through signs he invites the Germans to take their dead. Then four Germans with two stretchers go out of their trenches, and arriving near the priest, salute him soldierly, take their dead and go back to the defence lines, and the priest Mateevici returns quietly to the trenches of the Russian army...”

Priest Alexei Mateevici asked the Commander of the Russian Division 71 to allow him interrupt for two weeks the shepherding of souls on this land of horror which was the war to participate in the Teachers’ Congress between May 25 and 26, 1917 in Kishinev. The

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congress was attended by Bessarabian teachers invited from the villages of Bessarabia, including from Moldovan localities across the Dniester.

One of the most important points on the agenda of the congress was the nationalisation of education, but imperial envoys and provocateurs were trying to find pretexts, arguing that the Romanian was a poor language, comparable to the languages composed only of a few hundred words spoken by the Eskimos, a population of Northern Siberia. The shock of these emissaries was beyond words when Mateevich, in the opening of the congress, read the text of the poem “Our Language”, one of the most beautiful lyrics ever written in our literature:

“... Limba noastră-i limbă sfântă, / Our language is a holy one,
Limba vechilor cazanii, / The language of old homilies,
Care-o plâng și care-o cântă / Wept and sung
Pe la vatra lor țărani. / By peasants by their hearths.
Limba noastră-i o comoară / Our language is a treasure
În adâncuri înfundată, / Rooted in the most profound depths,
Un șirag de piatră rară / A necklace of precious stones
Pe moșie revărsată.” / Poured over the motherland.

The poet Ion Buzdugan, an eyewitness of that event, states in his memoirs: “The poetry fell like a spark in a TNT reservoir! After each stanza, all the participants in the congress – and they were over 1,200! – in standing ovations, unleashed, were frantically shouting: “Bravo, Mateevici!”, “Long live our Eminescu of Bessarabia!”, “Long live the Romanian language!” Everybody hugged everybody, no matter if they had already met or not before. The seats were deserted and we were all so united in that moment as brothers, so identical in our great hopes, so known to each other, as nations are only at the most important crossroads of their existence... I wish I did not exaggerate – for one can hardly believe me – but the ovations lasted for at least two hours... But ovations are an understatement. I would rather call them communion, I would call them sublime, I would call them a miracle a nation witnesses once a thousand years...”

But perhaps as important as the poetry itself were also the exhortations uttered by the priest and poet Alexei Mateevich in his speech, presented with the gentle authority given by both his qualities, but also with the force springing from his profound convictions: “I have also I come to welcome this holy day ... As one who comes with all my love in your midst, I think I can allow myself to give you some brotherly advice... Without union we shall acquire nothing. Therefore let us have only one thought, one heart, one ideal!

The second advice is this: the right work can only flourish if it is based on righteous ideas. With sorrow I have seen today that not all of you are united by the same right ideas. Some of you consider yourselves Moldovans, others – the fewest – Romanians. Well, if you took upon you the task of enlightening the people, then you have to give the people real ideas, otherwise the whole education is useless. Yes, we are Moldovans, sons of old Moldavia, but

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we are part of the great body of the Romanian spirit, be it in Romania, Bucovina and Transylvania. (Applauses.) Our brothers in Bucovina, Transylvania and Macedonia do not call themselves by the places where they live, but they call themselves Romanians. That is what we have to do too! (Applauses.)

This does not mean separatism, for those in Transylvania, those in Bucovina and those in America are all called Romanians.

We need to know where we come from otherwise we shall err as misguided flock. We need to know that we are Romanians, grandchildren of the Romans, and brothers with the Italians, the French, the Spanish and the Portuguese.

This is what we have to say to our children and to all those who live in the darkness. Let us enlighten them all with the right light.

The third piece of advice I give you is this: to stand powerfully to guard national interests. To live in peace with the strangers, but not to betray our interests, otherwise we shall fall forever.

If we are weak in the struggle for life, we shall be swallowed by the strongest. Let us not join foreign parties that do not fight for our nation and let us not fight for class interests, but for the community, for our national interests.

And finally, my last advice is this: let us not forget the people, the peasants that have suffered so much! Let us enlighten them, let us go hand in hand with them, for without us they can do nothing, just as we cannot do anything without them. Let us guide them on the path of truth, with deeds, not with words. The salvation of the peasantry lays in us, and ours, in them.

I pray the good Lord, and I am convinced that He will send us His almighty help for the victory of the civil work. He will send us the happiness of our nation and as well as yours.”

None of the Bessarabian writers before the Union knew as well as Alexe Mateevici the language of the people and the “language of the old homilies”. The enriched the language of his childhood by reading church books, and later he refined it in the editorial boards of the newspapers Basarabia, Viața Basarabiei, Luminatorul and Cuvântul moldovenesc... The Bessarabian officer, Dm. Bogos, who knew the military priest Alexe Mateevici, wrote: “...on the front, he used to celebrate the Mass in churches, but when this was not possible he would minister the religious service on the battlefield or in improvised altars, in forests...”

“When he could escape from the front, he participated in the movement of the Bessarabian intellectuals for the Romanization of Bessarabia and for the preparation of the Union with Romania...”

Alexei Mateevici left us a number of poems, of which “The Romanian Language” depicts all the turmoil of the Romanian people, the entire struggle for emancipation and preservation of the Romanian spirit which he wished to see in its deserved glory. Although he wrote but a few poems, he is the poet who belongs more than any other poet not only to Bessarabian Romanians, because he sung mostly Bessarabia, but to all the Romanians. Just as his poetry

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was becoming more vigorous than ever, death put an end to his creative impetus. He died on 13 August 1917 as a soldier, as a hero, on the battlefield of the Romanian front, defeated by a terrible illness of those days, abdominal typhus. However, in the history of literature Alexei Mateevich will be remembered as the fighter of Romanian writing and as a great patriot.

None of our poets has as yet glorified in so beautiful words and images the Romanian language.

At his grave in the Armenian Cemetery in Chisinau, his old friend and colleague, Alexandru Plămădeală, has raised a bust – but besides this formal sign Mateevici will never die in the souls of the Romanians who have ever heard the lyrics of “Our Language” and have felt the emotion of the profound spirituality it transmits.

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