

ELENA VĂCĂRESCU

"The Ambassador of the Romanian Soul and Reunification"

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Abstract

Romanian-French writer, Elena Văcărescu (1864 – 1947) descended from a long line of boyars of Wallachia. Her family included Ienăchiță Văcărescu, the author of the first Romanian grammar.

An episode of her life is her love for Ferdinand, the future King of Romania. Queen Elisabeta invited Elena to the palace in 1888. She loves young Ferdinand, but under the 1866 Constitution of Romania, the king is not allowed to marry a Romanian. Thus, Elena was banished to Paris for life.

An ambassador in France, she was the only woman member in the history of the League of Nations.

Elena Văcărescu translated into French the great Romanian poets: Vasile Alecsandri, Mihai Eminescu, Octavian Goga, Lucian Blaga, Adrian Maniu, George Topârceanu, Ion Minulescu, Ion Vinea. She was also a member of the Romanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference.

Elena Văcărescu studied the power of cinema in our world.

Keywords: Writer, Queen Elisabeth, King Ferdinand, French, ambassador, poets, cinema.

The Romanian Elite - a first eloquent plan

When we think of Elena Văcărescu, we must consider the Romanian elite committed in all its forms and conditions to the service of the country, activating from within or outside the borders, with the same devotion in the most difficult circumstances and without waiting for rewards. All the more relevant is the special case of this descendant of the boyar scholars of the Văcărești people - who gave the national theatre an impetus in the mother tongue of the Romanians and built remarkable linguistic edifices, among which the first grammar, care of her uncle, Ienăchiță Văcărescu- as she had to sacrifice everything. And everything meant her love for the future King Ferdinand, and also the painful feeling of accepting the condition of an exiled imposed upon her. She did it without complaining, without seclusion from his motherland, Romania, while at the same time attaching herself to her second homeland, France.



Ienăchiță Văcărescu

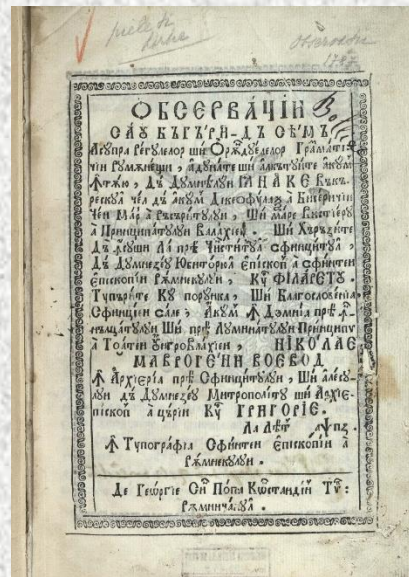
We have elected to paint a brief portrait of her for several reasons. They relate to the current moment in time, the Centennial of Romania's Greater Union of December 1, 2018. Let's not even overlook the fact that in 2017 it was her 70th death anniversary. As far as we are concerned, it is useful that her name is also related to the cinema.

Few female personalities in Romania and even elsewhere can boast of a biography so solidly cemented for superiority in political and cultural terms. Her figure traverses the ages to reach us as an emblem of the Romanian soul, an ambassador of national spirituality, as portrayed by Nicolae Iorga. Hers was not a happy destiny, but she would not complain; on the contrary, finding the chance to perform a mission that was as difficult as it was also honourable. She embraced her exile condition without demurring, accepting to stay away from the country, with the country in her heart, to obey the commandments that were hard to exhibit. The Constitution of 1866 did not allow the future king of Romania

to take a native, a Romanian, to be his wife, so she had had to step aside from the path of history without breaking the connection with the Romanian realm. Her love story with Prince Ferdinand did not last for more than eight months, being brutally interrupted by the fiancée being banished- that's true- along with Queen Elisabeta, her protector and poetic inspirational colleague under the well-known pseudonym Carmen Sylva. She went on a long European journey, always being very close to Queen Elisabeta, in her turn ostracised, not to say harshly punished, for her boldness of facing off her husband, Carol I.

She kept in constant contact with the future King, the Unifier, and this sacramental devotion defines her in a sublime way, as an eternally enamoured woman, betrothed to the one who was not meant to be hers, the embodiment of fidelity *in extremis*. Such an ungrateful condition was not easy to her. That is what she admits herself with the pride not of a deceived woman, of some spoiled ingénue, but of a lover in the absolute manner of the Shakespearean heroes: "To me, my oath means that no other man will ever come near me for so long as long as I live. And no one can untie me from this oath." Who else in Romania's history can execute such kind of a privilege taken up to infinity? She came to the country in 1895, almost surreptitiously, compelled to stay away from the royal court, travelling to the Dambovita places, living out her own painful confession as a gift: "If I was not in the country, the country was with me."

She was born in Bucharest on October 3, 1864, and died in Paris on February 17, 1947. She died at 83 of a seemingly trivial flu. In 1959, her body was brought to Romania, re-buried at the Bellu Cemetery in the crypt of her family of outstanding Romanian scholars. At eight, she moved with his parents to Văcărești, where she would get to know the countryside, people and customs, discovering the folkloric heritage of the places. In 1879 she started studying in Paris without wanting to get a diploma, but attending at Sorbonnethe classes of some illustrious teachers of the time. She became acquainted with first-class personalities of the French culture: Sully Prudhomme, Leconte de Lisle, José-Maria de Heredia. She enjoyed miraculous, epochal meetings. In the spring of 1885, Leconte de Lisle facilitated a visit by Victor Hugo, the patriarch of Romanticism. He asked her to recite a poem. Nervous and at the host's insistence, she recites *Song of War*, being commended for her acting performance, and especially her poetic one. A



Gramatica rumânească a lui Ienăchiță Văcărescu (1787)

niece of Rosetti, whom Hugo himself considered to be a "good Romanian patriot" was ecstatic. The coryphaeus of the French letters also remembered Bratianu, both 1848 revolutionaries, asking if they were still alive. She would meet France's great author only once after that, when Hugo was already "wandering away in immortality."

Returning to the country in 1887 and staying for three years, she was invited to the Palace as a maid of honour to Queen Elisabeta, known as a poet by her nom de plume Carmen Sylva. She would be often seen at Peles Castle, where Caragiale would perform short stage plays and Enescu would stage concerts. She would accompany the Queen on many long journeys, before and after the painful episode of her departure from Prince Ferdinand, a decision taken by Carol I. France would become her second homeland. She would meet some titanic personalities, including Marcel Proust, and also remarkable politicians. She would write and publish only in French, which, as Titu Maiorescu would say, ignited the wrath of Eminescu, who wondered: "Does she really not know Romanian?" "Tell them (her parents) that I will teach her Romanian." The great poet would expect that by doing so she would no longer "continue to despise us." He was not right. Elena Văcărescu translated into French poetry by the Romantic genius, as well as by other Romanian authors.

An undeniably Romanian woman

It is worth noticing how the big names of the universal culture would speak about poet Elena Văcărescu. In the preface to her "Lueurs et flammes" (Paris, 1903), Nicolae Iorga said: "In her cries of passion, her whispers of longingness, in her weeping over regrets, in the clenching of teeth of a defeated pride, the poet crowned by the Academy of Paris has our note, the note of our peasants, who, over the ages, have embedded this kind of feeling in the glorious verse of their songs." To emphasise the strength of Romanian feelings, Iorga would sense their emblematic value in Elena Văcărescu's poetry: "A Romanian woman alienated from her people, permanently displaced to another circle of human life, but, nonetheless an undeniably Romanian woman." The appreciation by the great Romanian historian and culture-minded author went on to try to respond to the suspicions that were still on related to the language in which she wrote: "I believe with all conviction that between those who sing mediocly in Romanian after a totally foreign inspiration and she who brings ... the mysterious melodies of our soul into one of the greatest literatures of the world, the latter would be admirably to be preferred."



There are also other memorable depictions of her in literary, political and diplomatic terms. Elena Văcărescu's vocation as a portraitist is remarkable: "smiling under a silver moustache, Alecsandri arrived, young-eyed, with a youthful spring to his feet ..."; "Caragiale - a frenzy of lyricism, comedy, witticism, sharp expressions, a fantasy of unexpected wisdom, a smart Pulcinella, a stunning storyteller, an unexpected elegist weaving together laughs and sighs, a creator who makes fun of his own delirium ..."; "Titulescu, our unusual, great Titus died! Titulica! has died Titu is no more! Thrown out of his life for quite some time, he would only belong with our regrets ... "

Sometimes the construction of her memories takes the form of a play, of a bizarre *mise-en-scène*, as when she reminisces about a meeting at Vallombrosa with the substitute of the hotel receptionist, none other than Nietzsche, with whom he spoke about *Thus Spoke*

Zarathustra. She also met Paul Valéry, Henri Bergson, Gabrielle D'Annunzio, Eleonora Duse, and Paul Bourget.

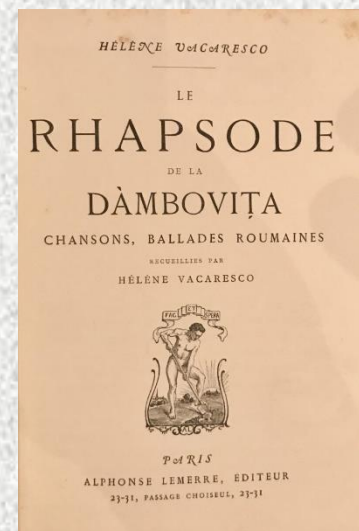
Quite often, in fact constantly, she would be carrying out high diplomatic and cultural missions, and she would practice this kind of labour for a long time, in various ways. I shall start with the last category and I shall focus on an initiative in the field of cinema and letters, the reason that attracted me in the first place, not only for the concerns of the person who writes these fleeting considerations but also because it is, in fact, the least known. She was a consummate admirer of capital I literature, a promoter of the perennial values of Renaissance and Classicism (Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Racine, Corneille), Romanticism (Keats, Shelley, Lamartine, Hugo), and Parnassism (Sully Prudhomme, Leconte de Lisle, Heredia). She undertook with the same responsibility to cultivate the Romanian literature, translating from the great romantic poet Eminescu from Ion Pillat, equally appreciating the patriotic militancy of Alecsandri and Octavian Goga. She knew how to build bridges between contemporaries Marcel Proust and Anna Brâncoveanu of Noailles. In 1937, she opened the Mihai Eminescu chair in Nice.

Culture diffusion through cinema

Receptive to the novelties of her time, she could not but be interested in the place and role of the cinema in the contemporary world. And there she imprinted an accent that was Romanian as it was personal, a unique initiative in the European space and beyond. She found a well-inspired cultural formula between cinema, art and literature. Thus, the International Committee for the Diffusion of Arts and Literature through the Cinema (CIDALC), established by a well-known Romanian film historian Ion I. Cantacuzino, himself involved in the project, was set up as a "European initiative of European dimension." Aspects related to this activity would deserve an ample chapter or even an autonomous coverage. But we will outline here only a few lines of the new Parisian body with continental spread. It was generated by a majority Romanian team, patronised with intelligence and assiduity, even if the results did not live up to the level of hopes. It was based on a world-wide concept and scientific perception according to which the cinema is one of the "factors called upon to decide the way of the modern soul," as Elena Văcărescu mentioned at the first session in 1933, also pointing out that CIDALC works in the spirit of the League of Nations, as outlined on page 17 of the International Committee Bulletin. It is not without interest to note that members of this committee were: Louis Lumière, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Mann, F.T. Marinetti, Fritz Lang, and Nicolae Titulescu. Romania's delegate to the League of Nations, Elena Văcărescu, was the chair of this committee, which included representatives of 49 countries - a true filmmaking league of nations. She had three other Romanians around her. Legal advisor was Nicolae Pillat. The lawyer and intermediary between the national juries was M. Riottman. And the financing was Romanian as well, through the consul of Romania in Paris, industrialist Leon Cotnareanu. A strong Romanian team left its imprint on this massive wide-ranging activity. CIDALC is interested in all aspects of cinema. It supports the organisation of national committees also wanting to "ease through all means the circulation of intellectual creations of the nations and to document the international circles of the picturesque and economic wealth of various countries." CIDALC also offered prizes for scripts proposed by various countries. The mission of the national juries was to make the choice. In Romania, that mission was entrusted to well-known names: Mihail Sadoveanu (president), Liviu Rebreanu, Ion Pillat, Adrian Maniu, Victor Eftimiu, Horia Furtună, Mircea Rădulescu, Corneliu Moldovanu (president of the Romanian Writers' Guild). Under the

"Danube" project, the seven riparian countries were invited to participate. Ion Cantacuzino submits a scenario for the Romanian Danube, but as Hungary postpones its draft, the project fails.

Another important chapter of this body's activity was conferences. Elena Văcărescu excelled in this chapter as well. She gave over 80, but much too little of them was published. When her speech would be announced in Geneva, for example, the hotels on the shores of Lake Lemman would empty in a jiff, and the conference rooms would fill up to capacity. She was unbeatable in this area, displaying not only a seductive rhetoric, a true science of addressing and communication, but also wit and, above all, a rare ability to capture the "goodwill" of the listeners. We have mentioned above the exceptional prerogatives of Elena Văcărescu as "ambassador of the Romanian soul." Our excellent Elencuța accepted this delicate, supreme imperative with the pledge of her own biography. When faced with the incomparable and hard-to-heal sorrow of a perpetual lover, she chose duty, sacrificing her passion. She had high-power French teachers in that area. Between Corneille and Racine, she decided to pursue her personal line, without strife, noises, or megaphonic sentimental surges. From time to time, something would emerge from, perhaps, the enormous inner struggle, but decency, elegance, discretion are always in their place. I find it difficult to find another personality of the same calibre who has the intelligence and the energy to infuse her personal destiny in the collective destiny, to get integrated as a committed personality with the realm of national consciousness *in actu*; in fact, to get accomplished that way. To try, as Nietzsche himself would have said, to do something with one's own life after others did what they wanted with it. Her diplomatic efforts as well as literary activity earned her a great deal of recognition, both in France and in Romania. There are many volumes of poetry and prose written in French: *Lueurset Flammes* (1903), *Le Jardin passionné* (1908), *La Dormeuse éveillée* (1914), *Amor vincit* (1908), *Le Sortilège* (1911). The Libretto of the *Le Cobzar* opera is performed at the Monte Carlo Opera in 1909, then in Paris in 1912. Edited in 1886, the *Chants d'Aurore* is crowned with the French Academy Award. Let's not forget the remarkable folk tale *Le Rhapsode de la Dambovita*, published in several languages (French, Italian, German, Danish, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese) but not in Romanian. In 1927 she became the recipient of the title of Knight of the Legion of Honour, and on June 11, 1925, she became an honorary member of the Romanian Academy, along with Anne Elisabeth of Brancoveanu, Countess of Mathieu Noailles (1876-1933). Many other honours are given to her. She is present in all sorts of organisms always at their helm, around illustrious people, every time with Romania on her mind. She created, for example, in 1934, the House of Romania, under the auspices of the President of France and of Romania's Foreign Ministry. She made her own apartment available, and each of her dwellings in Paris and Cannes (because she moved to Côte d'Azur during the German occupation) became headquarters of projects for her motherland. She would raise her voice often in defence of Romania. She represented Romania in the Paris Peace Delegation (29 July - 15 October 1946). During that international political event she was celebrated for fifty years in the service of France and Romania. A cultural adviser to the Romanian Legation in Paris, a mission entrusted on July 27, 1945, after the end of WWII, she wholeheartedly lends a helping hand to her country. She offers, as many times before, her Parisian salon as a perfect



matron to the Romanian delegation made up, of course, of the people of that time: Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, Ion Gheorghe Maurer, Ștefan Voitec, and Mihail Ralea. It is hard to find a personality that spanned so many moments and remained oneself, driven by onesupreme thought- the destiny of Romania.

Seen from home

Her contemporaries no doubt understood her purpose and appreciated her total devotion. She had pledged allegiance believed to her "hereditary cadences" and no one could turn her away from that difficult road. It was not just Iorga, mentioned at the beginning of these notes, to sing her praises. In the same noble, superior understanding of a remarkable biography, Constantin Mille notes under a title that needs no further comments (*A Romanian Pride*): "The Romanian soul is unveiled by Ms Văcărescu for the whole world to see, and for that we have to be grateful to her more than if she were writing in his mother tongue." In his turn, writing in "Cuvantul" of May 13, 1927, Cezar Petrescu drew attention to other essential aspects that defined her attitude of a matron and ambassador of Romanians. Another important Romanian writer, Camil Petrescu, dedicates her - under the generic name *The Ambassador* - an entire issue (10) of "Universul Literar" (March 4, 1928), calling her "a Romanian woman of the truest Romanian blood."

"I have served the Romanian idea"

There is a perfect osmosis between the personality dedicated to high politics, the diplomat in the service of her country, and the woman who conducts missions of such high patriotic relief. Elena Văcărescu was fully aware of her involvement, of renunciations, and also of the accomplishments derived from her total adherence to Romania's destiny. There are some relevant circumstances in this sense, difficult to circumvent.

There she is at a fundraiser for the building of the Sacre-Coeur Cathedral (Montmartre). While the French donors were saying "Lord, give us back Alsace and Lorraine," Elena would silently pray: "Transylvania, Transylvania ... You'll be ours!" We can follow her at many of her conferences, sometimes with the writers of the *Circle of the Annals*, which opened in Bucharest in 1913, but we find her name and poetic works in the pages of the "L'Université des Annales", where we find many tributes to her paid by French personalities, along with her famous texts, from *Le Cobzar*, to the emblematic poem *Mon pays* (My Country, a collection of patriotic poetry).

There are other significant moments sealing her decisions under the highest commandment. On February 2, 1934, when welcomed as an honorary member of the Romanian Academy, she said: "I myself have served an ideawith all my modesty. I have served the Romanian idea. If I take a look at my past, at the past of generations from which I descend, I encapsulate with each action the manifestation of this Romanian idea. My conscience respects the ancestral consensus, striving to co-operate to *boost the Romanian language and honourthe homeland*. I have tried to spread abroad the fame of the Romanian name and served in the world for the expansion of the Romanian soul." In spite of this well-censoredpathetic attitude, nothing indicates any exaggeration of a patriotic nature. With her enormous European and international expertise, Elena Văcărescu is proof of how being national can open up to universality.