

## THE PRISONER CAMPS FROM THE OCCUPIED BUCHAREST AND THE NATIONAL ORTHODOX SOCIETY OF THE ROMANIAN WOMEN

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As for the description of the German literature man Arthur Kellerman, published in a German newspaper, at the return from the capital of Romania, in June 1917: "Seen in a hurry, Bucharest makes the impression of a beautiful widow, to whom an easy sadness and a smile of resignation suit. The violins play as before, there is noise in front of the cinemas, the ladies with beautiful eyes flirt, dressed in elegant silk dresses, the dinner is taken in restaurants, there are theatres, opera, variétés, open parks"<sup>1</sup>. It is certain that, only a fugitive and superficial look could offer someone the above image and that the German literature man visited, during his stay in Bucharest, only the center of the town, where the majority of the buildings of the most important institutions were occupied by the German authorities, even on the scene of the National Theatre from Bucharest, there were only German plays and the actors of the National Theatre from Bucharest had to play on the scene of the recent-founded "Comoedia Theatre" ("Comedia Majestic Theatre"-n.n). Nevertheless, Arthur Kellerman, even if he does not observed by his proper eyes the reality, informed himself and mentioned: "The noise and the false lack of worries of the Bucharest can not trick the people who look deeper", concluding that the town "endures the hard faith determined and with dignity"<sup>2</sup>.

Indeed, the people, who had not left Bucharest on the same time with the govern and the royal family, tried to resolve their strong problems, enduring all with dignity: the hard winters, through which they passed or they had to pass, without the needed oil, food (and the food that still existed was in a continuous raise), the continuous occupations of the Germans, the abuses of the Bulgarian allies, and taking care of the Romanian officers and soldiers who were wounded or taken prisoners in the camps special founded in capital. In all these activities, many women involved, with courage and generosity, from all the social categories, but, especially the women "educated and conscious had a patriotic behavior. Some of them did not fear to face the dangers and encouraged the wounded in hospitals and in prisoner camps, paying this behavior by being condemned to live in prisons or in monasteries"<sup>3</sup>.

The members of the National Orthodox Society of the Romanian Women were, always, a part of these women. The ones who had not left in Moldavia, to take

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<sup>1</sup> Serban-Radulescu Zoner, Beatrice Marinescu, *Bucharest during the years of the First World War. 1914-1918*, Bucharest, 1993, p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Constantin Kiritescu, *The history of the war for the union of Romania. 1916-1919*, vol. II, Bucharest, 1989, p. 285. It refers at Pia Alimanisteanu (born Bratianu) and at her sister-in-law Lia Bratianu.

care of the wounded or of the people who were sick of typhus or fever or in Muntenia and Oltenia to take care of the refugees, were a part of the Hospital no. 113, founded by themselves, during the neutral period, at the Institute of Ladies of the S.O.N.F.R from Bucharest, "Principatele Unite" street, no. 63. Moreover, a period of two-months time, after the occupation of Bucharest, first alone, and then with the help of the National Society of Red Cross, which was led by Alexandru Marghiloman, S.O.N.F.R, organized and supplied the prisoner camps from the capital, "a duty which they take by proper initiative, in the first moments of the Romanian prisoners arrival in Bucharest"<sup>4</sup>. To well carry on this useful and important activity, at the beginning of 1917, it was founded by the members of the Central Committee of S.O.N.F.R, a Ladies Committee, which was a part of the Central Committee. Alexandrina Gr. Cantacuzino<sup>5</sup>, Zoe Gr Romniceanu, Liseta P. Greceanu, Elena D. Nenitescu took part of the Ladies Committee, which collaborated with the Prisoner Camp Committee from the Capital, which was led by the Red Cross Society, under the management of L. Mavroiani, general inspector for taking care of the prisoner camps. From the rich correspondence (letters, reports, addresses, minutes) between the President of the Red Cross and the members of the Committee, we can find out the main directions of their efforts.

Starting their activity in the middle of the winter, the main problem, regarding the difficult life conditions of the Romanian officers and soldiers from the prisoner camps from Bucharest, was to find woods and coals for heat and food. Still from 28 December 1916, as the leader of the Hospital no. 113, Alexandrina Cantacuzino asked the mayor of Bucharest, the colon Victor Verzea<sup>6</sup> to give them nine tons of coal and 6.000 kilo of wood to "assure the food and the heat of the 3000 prisoners"<sup>7</sup> from the St. Frères and Tonola-Seidmann Factory camps. At the beginning of January 1917 she contacted, regarding the same problem, the "Commission for the distribution of the woods founded at the fugitive people from Bucharest of Yellow Colour"<sup>8</sup>, saying that at the Children Hospital, there is a big quantity of woods, from which it can be taken 6.000 kilo for the prisoners of forenamed camps. At 12 February 1917, Alexandrina Cantacuzino contacted the President of Red Cross, Alexandru Marghiloman, saying that, at the St. Frères camp, the Romanian soldiers, which were wounded, with crutches, hungry and undressed, were obliged to work and were "ill-treated, beaded by the Turkish and Bulgarian officers who had to supervise them at work"<sup>9</sup>. After a visit at the prisoner camp from Cotroceni – Aviatiei Park, having the unfortunate experience of terrible winter 1916-1917,

<sup>4</sup> The Central Historical National Archives (A.N.I.C), S.O.N.F.R Fond, A/ I, file 19, page 46.

<sup>5</sup> Alexandrina Gr Cantacuzino, the wife of the politician Grigore Gh Cantacuzino, the son of Gheorghe Gr Cantacuzino-Nababul, became the leader of S.O.N.F.R, after the death of Anastasia Filipescu, the first leader of the Society, in 1917.

<sup>6</sup> Ionel Ionita, *From district to mayor*, published in "Historical Magazine", special edition with the occasion of the "Month of Bucharest" (9 May-9 June 1999), p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> A.N.I.C, S.O.F.N.R Fond, A/ I, file 20/ 1916-1918, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

Alexandrina Cantacuzino warns the President of the Red Cross, in an address dated 23 September 1917, that, the prisoners complained that they could not face another winter in that houses. She makes the proposal to move the prisoners “in the houses near the camp, built by the Cheap Buildings”, where “they could have better conditions”<sup>10</sup>.

Another problem which the Red Cross and the Committee of the ladies from S.O.N.F.R had to face was the one of assuring a satisfying quantity of food, clothes, shoes for prisoners. The main sources for having all these needed things were the donations of different people and the collections in money or in products. In January 1917, The Committee announced the Red Cross that they succeeded in gathering 7.548,40 lei for the prisoners from St. Frères and Tonola-Seidmann camps. They used this sum for buying “vegetables, woods, grease”. On Christmas 1916, they succeeded in gathering in favour of the officers from the same camps 6.000 cookies and 6.000 sausages together with other presents from the Red Cross, such as 1.500 lei, handkerchiefs and tobacco<sup>11</sup>. From a list with the persons who donated all these things in that time, we found the names of these persons: I. Zamfirescu donated 3.000 sponge cakes and 6.000 sausages, Irina Spandonide- 200 boxes of candies, Madam Dalles- sponge cakes, salami, biscuits, matches, soap, clothes, Mister Urian from the House of Trades donated macaroni, biscuits, sugar, Misses Obedenaru- socks, and the confectioner N. Draghiceanu- socks and pull-overs. From all these people, Mister Delateisani made the most important donation, due to which, 2.400 prisoners from Colentina, Masina de Paine, Tonola-Seidmann, St. Frères, Aviatiei Park, Cotroceni, Jandarmi, Clementa, Cuza Voda, Cazarma de Rosiori received each one, on the Saturday before Easter from 1917, 2 eggs, a white bread and tobacco<sup>12</sup>. The same good donator together with the women from S.O.N.F.R gave goods (maize flour, cheese, cucumbers, water melons, maize, bottles of wine and beer, cookies, clothes, shoes and also money)<sup>13</sup> to the prisoners also with other occasions such as: St. Constantine and Helene, The Ascension, The Whitsunday, 10 May, St Peter and Paul, St Mary. For all the help, the donators received letters of thanks from the President of Red Cross. With some days before Easter, in a report from 13 March 1917 addressed to the President of The Red Cross, Misses Alexandrina Cantacuzino and Zoe Romniceanu drew attention about the need of creating a supply of potatoes and beans for the prisoners, which, otherwise, will remain without food, besides the “condensed milk and the meat brought by the Germans”<sup>14</sup>. In 31 March 1917, Alexandrina Cantacuzino asks for a special ticket of 2.500 kg of white flour from the President of the Red Cross and from the President of The Administrative Commission of the Bucharest town “in

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

order to make 5.000 breads, which will be distributed, together with other presents, to the Romanian prisoners on the Saturday before Easter”<sup>15</sup>. For the 400 prisoners from the Tonola-Seidmann camp, also on the New Year’s 1918 celebration, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, together with other ladies and young ladies from S.O.N.F.R. such as Aristia Pompei, E. Radulescu-Pogoneanu, Natalia Leonida, Zoe Romniceanu prepared many little presents. After a religious celebration, these women shared to the prisoners bread, warm corn mush, food, onion and tobacco<sup>16</sup>. As for a short calculation made at the end of 1917, the taking care and the supply of the prisoner camps from Bucharest costed S.O.N.F.R. between 29 November 1916 and 1 January 1918, almost 48.232 lei<sup>17</sup>, especially because of the fact that, for almost 2 months after the occupation of Bucharest, all the responsibility of taking care of the prisoners was totally of S.O.N.F.R., because The Red Cross started to lead this activity after a period of time.

Concerning Alexandrina Cantacuzino, as well as in other circumstances, she sent the prisoners from her own reserves, potatoes, oil, beans, milk, wine, tobacco, cookies, macaroni, wine, beer, onion and also clothes and lingerie. Due to the fact that, during all this time, she helped the Romanian prisoners and she was the wife of the politician Grigore Gh. Cantacuzino, who was a part of the govern of Alexandru Marghiloman, she was close to be arrested in 3 May by the German Headquarters because of many Easter’s eggs from her estate Ciocănești, but, at the end, she was only fined with 100 lei, because she took all the blame on her own, in order to save her administrator<sup>18</sup>.

The most important problem of the ladies from S.O.N.F.R. and the Red Cross was the assurance of the health and hygiene of the prisoners from the camps, but the appearance of the typhus epidemic worsened things. Alexandrina Cantacuzino, who was terrified by the life conditions of the prisoners, who were officers, asked the President of the Red Cross to talk to the German authorities to explain them the situation. Moreover, a German officer drew the attention on the “inappropriate life conditions of the Romanian officers”<sup>19</sup>. It was her, together with Zoe Romniceanu, on 12 February 2007 who observed that the Romanian soldiers out of the camp Tonola-Seidmann, which were wounded, with crutches, hungry and undressed, were obliged to work and were ill-treated, beaded by the Turkish and Bulgarian officers who had to supervise them at work. Because of the fact that she found that the Romanian officers had the same clothes during 2 months, she talked to the President of the Red Cross and asked him to dispose that all the men to “ receive cleaned cloths and also the necessary things [...] and to ease their sad

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, file 19, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, file 20/ 1916-1918, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

life, protecting the ill and the old men”<sup>20</sup>. After two days, Alexandrina Cantacuzino claimed to Alexandru Marghiloman the gesture of the people from Colentina Hospital to send five dieing people, on 21 January, at the St. Frères camp and to be “let in the cellar of the camp”, from where, she, together with Lizeta Greceanu and Didi Manu were obliged to “transport alone [...] at the sick room of the camp, where they had to leave them in a terrible situation”<sup>21</sup>. The situation became more desperate, when, in the same year, in 19 February, at the same camp, 300 Romanian soldiers were brought, “real skeletons”, from the Slatina camp, where a “huge mortality registered” because of the typhus epidemic, without being taken any measure to isolate them and a terrible epidemic could have started. She tried to isolate them, using the room of the soldiers on short-term, took the temperature to the 90 soldiers which seemed to be in the most difficult situation, gave them hot tea and recommended to receive frections with vinegar. “I abandoned them, with my hart bleeding, letting them with two assistants and a guard at the door, in order nobody to contact them [...], because I am convinced that they have typhus”<sup>22</sup> and the camp gathered 3.000 prisoners who could have been fallen ill. One of the cause of this situation was the fact that there were not any specialised doctors to assure the health in the prisoner camps. The doctors were to young or without any experience, how it is the case of the German doctor Blank, from the St. Frères camp, but a “sensitive, full of energy and willing man”<sup>23</sup> or they did not their job, how it is the case of the doctor Wolf, “which was liberate from the camp on his word that he will take care of the patients which could come to him”<sup>24</sup> and he did not his duty. The consequence was the death of a ill man at the Tonola-Seidmann camp and the fallen ill out of typhus epidemic of many prisoners from the camp. In the lack of some permanent doctors in the prisoner camps, “the ill people remained with a sanitary soldier who had no medical knowledge” or with an medical assistant, like sister Antoniu from the Cotroceni camp, who “did not take care of the ill people and had a terrible behaviour”, and “the ill prisoners died like dogs, and it is our responsibility and we can not blame the Red Cross”<sup>25</sup>, as a report addressed to the president of the “Red Cross” says. Well informed about the ways through which this illness could be treated or prevented, the signers of the report, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, Zoe Romniceanu, Lizeta Greceanu, recommends to be studied the possibility of using the injections with “Salvarsan” and “a serum which it s said to have good results” with the epidemic from Serbia, which started a year before.

During her visits at the Cotroceni camp, on 1 August and 23 September 1917, Alexandrina Cantacuzino observed the increasing discontent of the officers

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

prisoners here because of the living conditions: in huts, without air or light, full of insects, with broken beds, bad food. In the same time, the officers-prisoners protested that, in front of their “houses”, there are “the toilets of the troops (soldiers), which offers terrible smells, and which are the causes of regrettable scandals”<sup>26</sup>. Being very impressed by all these conditions, Alexandrina Cantacuzino addressed in November 1917 a letter of protest to the President of the Red Cross, in which, besides informing him about the terrible living conditions from the camp, she says that “the soldiers are treated worse than in Germany where, in the last time, they received packets from Berna (Switzerland)” and “the officers were treated better in the German and Austrian camps, where they were well cared”<sup>27</sup>. In the same time, six prisoners from the camp Cotroceni-Regiment no.4 from Rosiori, suffering a lot because of all these conditions, asked Alexandra Cantacuzino, on 15 March 1917<sup>28</sup>, to send them at her estate from Cazanesti, Ialomita district, in order to work in agriculture, like other owners of estates did, especially because they were born and had their families there.

Of course, there were worse conditions, if we refer at the case of the 44 wounded Romanian prisoners, hospitalized in the Bulgarian hospitals from Bucharest – the hospital from Negru Voda street, Principesa Ileana Hospital, Jandarmeriei Hospital, who Alexandrina Cantacuzino found, in January 1917, in a terrible situation, in a terrible misery and with no taking care. She implored the president of the Red Cross to contact the German authorities in order to dispose “the evacuation of these unhappy people in a hospital of the Red Cross, because they die, with no use to anybody”<sup>29</sup>. Also in a bad situation were the 150 ill prisoners, arrived from Macedonia, being held at the Slatina camp, in November 1917, when Alexandrina Cantacuzino and Lizeta Greceanu made a visit. Their terrible situation made the two ladies to write the president of the Red Cross, on 9/27 November 1917, to “contact the Imperial govern to search for the torture of the Romanian soldiers from Macedonia”<sup>30</sup>.

Because of their care for the Romanian soldiers, the ladies from the S.O.N.F.R did not neglect their spiritual assistance and the obey of the orthodox traditions of Romanian people. Since January 1917, the Committee of the ladies from Orthodox Society founded libraries at the St. Frères and Tonola-Seidmann camps, gathering over 150 books<sup>31</sup>, and in July 1917, it was about to be founded a library also at the Cotroceni camp, with almost 100 books<sup>32</sup>. In the same time, in a report from 22 February/ 7 March 1917, the ladies asked the president of the Red Cross to allow a priest to take care of the religious acts for the ill people and an

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

arrangement of a mortuary room, knowing that “our people care these holly acts and a lot of sadness there is in the soul, seeing that, at the end of life, they do not have the needed things”<sup>33</sup>.

The Easter, the Christmas and all the religious holidays were celebrated, even if the times were very hard because of the German occupation. In a report from 8/21 April<sup>34</sup>, the Committee of the ladies from S.O.N.F.R informed Mister Alexandru Marghiloman about the way the prisoners from the camps and also from the hospitals Filantropia, Coltea, Filaret spent the Easter, how they received presents. On the Palm Sunday, there were kept religious celebrations held by the priest Negulescu, from the Batistei church, at the camps: Colentina, Cuza Voda, Masina de Paine, Tonola, St. Frères, Clementa, at Jandarmi. Tobacco and branches of willow were shared with the prisoners. On the Friday before Easter, gifts and candles were given to the prisoners by the archbishop Iulius Scriban and the priest Petru Grigoriu from the Tei church. A day after, eggs, tobacco and bread were divided to the prisoners. The president of the Red Cross is asked to thank the priest Petru Grigoriu who worked “for free in the camps for four months”. In a report that the priest made for Alexandru Marghiloman and for the bishop Primat, on 9 May 1917, there were presented the activities he made during this time in the prisoner camps: “I organized a chorus in the Colentina camp (Weaving mill), which, by my intervention, sang at Floreasca church at Easter”<sup>35</sup>. He was congratulated and received a receipt from General L. Mavroiani, General Inspector of Red Cross, to prove the importance of his work.

The priest Petru Grigoriu was the only one who made his duty, unlike the military priests Gh. Serban, N. Marinescu, who were noticed by Alexandrina Cantacuzino. Even if, in a report from 13/ 26 December 1917, P. C. Protoiereu of Plasei de Sus from Capital, Ioan Georgescu, tried to demonstrated the opposite saying that Alexandrina Cantacuzino and Zoe Romniceanu had not seen the two priests, Alexandrina Cantacuzino sustained her opinion, saying that “this event is not true because the priests have not come in the camps for one year and half from the day in which Bucharest was occupied”<sup>36</sup>.

Also during the Christmas of 1917, religious celebrations were held after a well-determined program made by the Committee of ladies from S.O.N.F.R. in collaboration with L. Mavroiani and presented to the president of Red Cross on 24 November 1917 in order to be presented also to the German authorities. On 23 December, there were held celebrations (“Vicleimul”) and shared presents to the prisoners from Colentina, Masina de Paine, Tonola, St. Frères and on 24 December, the same things were done at the Cotroceni camp. The presents were: tobacco, fish,

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

matches, cakes in favour of soldiers and tea, sugar, sponge cakes, wine, chocolate, pencils and calendars<sup>37</sup> in favour of officers. In the same time, they asked the permission of entrance in the prisoner camps for religious program, the priests Negulescu and Grigorescu, the ladies Ana Savescu, Eliza Greceanu, Alexandrina Cantacuzino, L. Mavroiani<sup>38</sup> and six singers with the Star.

Through their activity, in spite of all the difficulties, paying with their liberty, health and life, the ladies from S.O.N.F.R. showed the world their love for people, writing one of the most wonderful page of the war history for the country union.

### **THE PRISONER CAMPS FROM THE OCCUPIED BUCHAREST AND THE NATIONAL ORTHODOX SOCIETY OF THE ROMANIAN WOMEN**

- Abstract -

The author describe us the tragic situation of the people from the occupied Bucharest by German soldiers in 1916-1918.

Indeed, the people, who had not left Bucharest on the same time with the govern and the royal family, tried to resolve their strong problems, enduring all with dignity: the hard winters, without the needed oil and food, the continuous abuses of the German and their Bulgarian allies, taking care of the Romanian officers and soldiers who were wounded or taken prisoners in the camps special founded in Capital. In all these activities, many women involved, with courage and generosity, from all the social categories.

The members of the National Orthodox Society of the Romanian Women, the ones who had not left in Moldavia, to take care of the wounded or of the people who were sick of typhus or fever or in Muntenia and Oltenia to take care of the refugees, were part of the Hospital no. 113, founded by themselves, during the neutral period, at the Institute of Ladies of S.O.N.F.R. from Bucharest, "Principatele Unite" street, no. 63. Moreover, a period of two-months time, after the occupation of Bucharest, first alone, and then with the help of the National Society of Red Cross, which was leaded by Alexandru Marghiloman, S.O.N.F.R. organized and supplied the prisoner camps from the Capital. Through their activity, in spite of all the difficulties, paying with their liberty, health and life, the ladies from S.O.N.F.R. showed the world their love for people, writing one of the most wonderful page of the war history for the country union.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.