

Food and Dining in Sacheverell Sitwell's *Roumanian Journey*

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Abstract:

The paper aims at identifying, through *topoi* like food and dining, cultural and identity codes in 1930s Romania, as reflected in a famous travelogue. The British poet and art critic Sacheverell Sitwell produced this very interesting book on Romania one year after his four-week travel in 1937. Some episodes and aspects will be approached in relation to the writings of another British traveller in the 1930s, Patrick Leigh Fermor, with whom Sacheverell Sitwell shared a deep intellectual friendship.

Keywords: 1930s, Romania, British travellers, food, dining

1. Introduction or Getting there

I feel I must have met Sachie and Georgia at last in the house of Princess Anne Marie Callimachi and Costa Achillopoulos, in 1936. I had just returned from more than three years of travel, much of it on foot, ending up for one year in a charming and tumbledown country house in High Moldavia – in the North of Rumania, that is – not far from the Russian frontier. It belonged to cousins of Anne Marie's, Balașa and Hélène Cantacuzène. (Fermor, *NS*)

This is how Patrick Leigh Fermor – or Paddy, as friends used to call him –, began his second paragraph from *NOTES ON SACHIE*¹, notes meant to help Sarah Bradford on her monograph of Sacheverell Sitwell. The book was published by Sinclair-Stevenson in 1993², when *Sachie* had been dead for five years already. Nevertheless, Paddy's exceptional talent turned the text into a very vivid account and portrayal, both of the remote period before WWII and of his lost friend. By the time Fermor first met Sacheverell Sitwell, the latter had come to be known as one of the finest poets and art critics of his age, having written reference books on music – Mozart and Liszt – and architecture, particularly the baroque. With his older siblings, Edith and Osbert Sitwell, he had managed to gather, starting with the WWI years, a

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¹ I could read the *NOTES* in Leigh Fermor's archive at the National Library of Scotland, in the summer of 2016.

² *Sacheverell Sitwell. Splendours and Miseries.*

cultural clique often perceived as rivaling the famous Bloomsbury circle.³

As for Paddy, he had taken, at the end of his three-year travel on foot across Europe, a prolonged vacation at a Moldavian estate, where he was living with his first great love, the princess Balasha Cantacuzène. He had met her in Greece, having just returned from Mount Athos, and he had been persuaded by her, after several months spent in rural Greece, to leave for the Romanian rural estate, run at the time by her sister Héléne and her brother-in-law, Constantin Donici. Times were merciful, it was during Europe's Golden Age, and their days were "rich in small decisions"⁴, such as going hunting, which book to read, riding, or enjoying meals prepared by faithful servants. From Moldavia, Paddy and Balasha would travel to England several times and meet, on such occasions, some splendidly eccentric people. Sachie was one of them.

It must have been the Coronation Year, because I remember Sachie saying he'd just finished writing an article about the tradition behind coronations, and it had nearly killed him. We got on well because he was fascinated by my impressions of Rumania. He was beginning to plan a journey there for a book, arranged by Anne Marie, taking Costa and Dick Wyndham. (Fermor, *NS*)

The third major character in the picture, Anne Marie, was a Romanian princess married into the Callimachi family and a descendant of the even more famous family of Vacaresco. Sitwell had gladly accepted the princess' invitation to visit Romania, and therefore *Roumanian Journey*, the book based on his four week travel in 1937 and published in 1938, is dedicated to her.⁵ Patrick Leigh Fermor remembers that he was still in Britain when "their party went to Rumania", a party including the already mentioned Costa Achilopoulos, who was going to take pictures; a party "most efficiently bear-led by Anne Marie" (*Ibidem*).

2. What's a nice chap like you doing in a place like this?

2.1. The Inquisitive Traveller

In his picturesque & complex, yet confusing, classification of travellers in the preface to *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, Laurence Sterne begins by asserting that the reasons people go abroad "may be derived from one of these general causes: Infirmity of body, Imbecility of mind, or Inevitable necessity" (Sterne, 2004: 8). The

³ They were famous, among other things, for bringing to England Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*.

⁴ A catchy phrase from a book of short stories by a contemporary British author, with no connection to our topic. It is employed here only for the sake of style.

⁵ He would also write a foreword to her 1949 memoir *Yesterday Was Mine*.

oddity of this triad is amplified by his elaborating: “The first two include all those who travel by land or by water”, whereas “The third class includes the whole army of peregrine martyrs” – and here he is getting more logical –, “or young gentlemen transported by the cruelty of parents and guardians” (*Ibidem*). There is a fourth category, whose “reasons for travelling are the least complex of any other species of emigrants”, whom Sterne labels, in the same non-convincing register, as Simple Travellers.

And he goes on by (re)enumerating other categories: more or less logical – Idle Travellers, Inquisitive Travellers, The Travellers of Necessity; or bizarre – Lying Travellers, Proud Travellers, Vain Travellers, Splenetic Travellers, The Delinquent and Felonious Traveller, The Unfortunate and Innocent Traveller, The Simple Traveller. The category where he himself seems to have enrolled, is the one of the Sentimental Traveller, who travels – and here again confusion increases –, “as much out of *Necessity*, and the *besoin de Voyager*, as any one in the class” (*Ibidem*). If we were to scroll down Sterne’s proposal, a good question might be where exactly we could locate Sacheverell Sitwell with regard to his Romanian expedition. And in order to find the appropriate answer, one may start by considering Sitwell’s reasons for anybody not going to Romania in the first place, as stated in the Introduction:

It is far away. If you embarked on the train, determined, for some obscure reason, to continue in it upon the longest journey possible in Europe, the probability is that you would step out, four days later, upon the platform of Constanta on the Black Sea, finding yourself, though you might not know it, at Ovid’s Tomis. That is, of course, unless you include Russia and Siberia as being in Europe. It is a matter of principle. Most persons are satisfied that Europe ends at the Dniester and the Black Sea. So that Roumania is at the far end of Europe. (Sitwell, GB⁶)

And he continues by telling his readers how delighted he was at the prospect of visiting Romania. And how he made up his mind not to read anything about the country “before going there, in order to let it come as a surprise” (*Ibidem*). Does this make him a less Inquisitive Traveller? Or a more Innocent one? Not at all, because after his return, he read “all the available books upon the subject” and became aware of the fact that “English literature is nearly silent where that country is concerned” (*Ibidem*). Actually, he pointed to the scarcity of information about Romania from the very first paragraph, in which he mentioned the extremely few items foreigners had a pre-knowledge of: Bucarest⁷ and

⁶ GB stands for Google Books, and in this particular text no page number is marked.

⁷ That was the spelling for the Romanian capital’s name in the 1930s

Sinaia, oil wells, and “beautiful costumes worn by the peasants” (*Ibidem*). Few, but definitely fundamental: the capital, a mountain resort indicating an attractive landscape, the oil wells pointing to the natural resources, and the costumes underlying the power of tradition.



2.2. *Detecting the Matrix*

With the spirit of the Inquisitive Traveller making its way to the front, Sitwell found, among the available books upon the subject, a 17th century travelogue, *The Travels of Macarius, Patriarch of Antioch*, published in English translation in 1836. Its author, Paul of Aleppo, was the secretary (presumably the son) of the Syrian Archbishop of Antioch, Macarius, who traveled to Moscow in the interval between 1652–1660. And “on his way there, but more especially upon his journey back, the Archbishop passed through Moldavia and Wallachia, being entertained in the monasteries along his route”⁸ (*Ibidem*). One of the monasteries happened to be Cozia, which Sitwell himself visited, when travelling from Sibiu down south. He had entered Romania a little bit further north, after a twelve-hour travel by train, got off at Sighișoara and continued to Sibiu by car. While at Cozia, he remembered Paul of Aleppo’s words about the curative powers of the landscape:

A man, seriously ill, is relieved here by the cheerful sound of the waters; not only of the foaming river current, but of the fountain streams falling from the cliffs, and the liver is most particularly revived by the sight of these mountains, by the surrounding verdure, and by the delicate eating of those beautiful fish called Bastrobus.⁹ (*Ibidem*)

Apart from the *milieu* – the lush green vegetation and the monastery –, the 17th century traveller records here the *ceremonial* dimension of the “delicate eating”, something which reminded us that culinary joys may stand for “recipes, ritualization of gestures, a way of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Certeau, 1998: 154). Through permanently pursuing pleasure, eating could be another facet (extension or deepening) of travel, bringing up novelty, displaying refinement or exposing hedonism (Danciu & Radu, 2014). As for the Bastrobus:

⁸ Interestingly enough, in 1929 the Romanian writer Mihail Sadoveanu published a novel, *Zodia Cancerului/Under the Sign of the Crab*, in which the events from the second half of the 17th century Moldavia involve the perspective of a French Abbey, Paul de Marenne. The abbey, pretending to be a missionary, is in fact a secret messenger of Louis XIV to the imperial court of Istanbul, to which he is travelling. While in Moldavia, he gets involved in historical feuds, while noticing the mores of the people from various social groups, including those regarding food.

⁹ The Romanian word is “păstrăv”, and, according to linguists, it came from the Bulgarian “păstărva”.

It resembles the fish Soltan Ibrahim, at Tetrapolis¹⁰, and it is prettily marked with red spots. Its taste is fine, and superior in flavor to roast fowl; nothing, indeed, can surpass it as a delicious morsel. It is much famed throughout this country; and, when salted, is carried as presents to the Beg and the Agas. (Sitwell, GB)

One can detect a matrix in the episode recollected by Sitwell. To the already mentioned *milieu* and *ceremonial eating*, we can add *description* – “it resembles the fish... and it is prettily marked” –, *reputation* – “it is much famed throughout” –, *political & cultural iconicity* – fish are “carried as presents”, but we may read corruption here –, and a slice of *Orientalism* – “to the Beg and the Agas”, the Turkish administrative officers of the Ottoman empire who usually were the first recipients of such rare gifts, meant to ensure the safety of the ruling clans in the two Romanian principalities under Ottoman sovereignty.

3. Ceremonial eating inside convents and square towers

When describing his journey of 1937, Sacheverell Sitwell takes over the 17th century matrix, surprisingly accomplished in most instances within the space of just one or two paragraphs. Soon after Cozia, the members of the travelling party come to realize that they are in a “land of convents”, with plenty of “monasteries and nunneries in so many of the mountain valleys” (*Ibidem*). There will also be the fortified Manors of Oltenia – the so-called *kule*, the Turkish word for *tower* –, which attract the attention of the British expedition.

In the author’s account on Dintr’un Lemn, a nunnery with a legend attached to it – of a “miraculous icon... embedded into the trunk of a tree” –, we identify the *milieu* – “the magnificent trees” and “the apartment of the abbess or prioress” –, *description & ceremonial & Orientalism* – “divans on which to rest while helping yourself to the glass of water and spoonful of jam” –, items that have a *reputation* and a *cultural iconicity* as well, as they speak forth of “the traditional hospitality of the nuns” (*Ibidem*).

At Hurez, once again we check for the *milieu* – “the most typical and the most agreeable of the Roumanian monasteries” and “the clear Alpine light of the fir woods” –, the *ceremonial* – “in one corner of the courtyard, trestle tables were set up” –, the *description* of the gargantuesque items – “Great cauldrons of soup were carried up, huge hunks of bread and bunches of white grapes” –, the *cultural iconicity* – “It was a scene of a thousand years ago” –, and *Orientalism* – “(they)

¹⁰ A name for the ancient Greco-Roman city of Antioch on the Orontes, also known as Syrian Antioch, a famous center of Hellenistic Judaism and of early Christianity.

lived in this manner in any great Byzantine convent of the tenth century” (*Ibidem*).

In between the two convents, there is a stop at Govora, a spa resort in Wallachia, where the *milieu* changes, turning urban – a “watering place” with “a surprisingly good hotel” –, incorporating *Orientalism* – “little trellised shops like a Turkish bazaar”. Then we notice the *reputation* accompanying the plum brandy – “tuica ... the national drink of Roumania” –, the *ceremonial* and its *description* – “served in little long-necked glass bottles” –, and we come to understand its *cultural iconicity* – “after a day or two is the indispensable prelude to every meal” (*Ibidem*).

Later, they visit an estate belonging to the widow of the former prime-minister Ion G. Duca, who had been assassinated by the members of the Iron Guard in 1933. “This was the first occasion to see an old country house in Roumania”, writes Sitwell; however, the syntagm *country house* does not exactly cover the reality of the place, the first house – “small and compact, built like a square tower, and with thick walls and no windows upon the lower floors” (*Ibidem*). Inside the second house, the *milieu* has as its main attraction the dining room – boasting “the finest Oltenian carpet yet seen, with wonderful blue colors in its design” –; then a *ceremonial* is performed with the already famous Paul de Aleppo’s Bastrobus – “eaten as an hors – d’oeuvre” –, a *ceremonial* further enhanced by the *description* of another famous Romanian dish – “chicken breasts, minced, and served in breadcrumbs with a sauce of sour cream” (*Ibidem*).

When reaching Sinaia, the famous mountain resort where the royal castle of Peleş is located, we find out about another urban yet exquisite *milieu* – “at least one excellent hotel” and “a valley among the pinewoods” –, its *reputation* all over the continent – “on a par with the finest hotels in Europe” –, and the presumed *ceremonial* eating in a place assigned to *haute cuisine* – “restaurant in which hors d’oeuvre, the white caviar and the crayfish are in a class by themselves” (*Ibidem*).

Roman Jakobson has taught us the great lesson of looking for the dominant, and in the five matrices previously detailed, what comes to the front seems to be something that most readers comprehend. A contemporary British novelist must have been right when claiming that “readers understand food”. (Harris, website) Primarily, what she had in mind was the fictional discourse; nevertheless, it is much easier to grasp this particular item of food from a non-fictional account, where the author is much more present in order to make sure readers will not miss the essential.

In this respect, it is after having been offered “an unsurpassable luncheon” inside a family home, Mme Duca’s *kule*, that Sitwell addresses his readers on what he thought it made the country he was

visiting unique – “This was our introduction to the Roumanian cuisine, a style of national cooking which is as distinct as the Russian and offering the same contrast of half-barbaric with sybaritic pleasures” (Sitwell, GB). Again, we consider *reputation* – “as distinct as” –, and the hints at East *Oriental* matrices – “Russian”, with the “barbaric” dimension apparently opposed to the (refined & decadent?) “sybaritic” one.

4. Food – the Ultima Thule

4.1. A taste of *Orientalism*

In order to detect what was typically Romanian in the feasts they took part along the journey, Sitwell feels the urge to track culinary influences, among which *Oriental* ones are marked through some very specific products – “There are the primary or superficial traces of the Orient, the glass of water, perhaps, and the sherbet of roses that you find at three or four o’clock of the morning in your bedroom” (*Ibidem*). He states that the two items are a legacy “from a not distant age when pure water was a luxury”, adding that people from Turkey and Greece of his time were still affected by the issue.

The way he describes the sherbet of roses is evocative, and we can slightly feel the *gourmet* taking the stage: “this is a spoonful of sticky paste, of the colour of pink roses, lying upon a glass saucer. Its taste is delicious, like the scented airs of Kazanlik, the valley of roses under distant Rhodope, where the air is distilled” (*Ibidem*). If we were to give credit to Joan Harris, “tastes and smells are particularly evocative to us because as newborns we first experience the world through those two senses. (...) It’s also a very useful indicator of personality” (Harris, website).

Sitwell’s evocative *gourmet* tone is maintained as he insists on the singularity of the home-made sweet and takes delight in providing a legendary aura: “I have been told, too, that in some old Roumanian families paste used to be made from lotus petals, but this water lily sherbet seems to have vanished into the past” (Sitwell, GB). To the same remote *Oriental*-like past belonged – intriguing for an English aristocrat in the years before WWII, but not for the Romanian aristocracy in the 1930s –, “the pair of Albanians attached to the house in which we stayed”¹¹ (*Ibidem*).

“Sometimes the sherbet is changed for a conserve of cherries or blackberries” (*Ibidem*). Or for the already mentioned jam, to be served while resting on a divan. Both sherbet and jam are, or used to be at the time of Sitwell’s journey, *ceremonial* sweets in Romanian culture and a true sign of hospitality. Their consumption followed, more or less, a

¹¹ Romanian aristocrats used to employ Albanian mercenaries, renowned for being fierce warriors.

ritual borrowed from other ethnic communities, foregrounding “an identity space, a lifestyle, the realization of a daydream of the good life” (Friedman, 1994: 50) as it was the case, for instance, with Patrick Leigh Fermor when experiencing such a ritual as guest of the Turkish community on the island of Ada-Kaleh¹²:

Seeing my quandary, a neighbor told me how to begin: first, to drink the small glass of raki; then eat the mouthful of delicious rose-petal jam lying ready spooned on a glass saucer; followed by half a tumbler of water; finally to sip at a dense and scalding thimbleful of coffee slotted in a filigree holder. The ritual should be completed by emptying the tumbler and accepting tobacco, in this case, an aromatic cigarette made by hand on the island. (Fermor, 1988: 229)

The former Romanian principalities were, geographically at least, in between the Russian empire and the Ottoman one, therefore, apart from Oriental influences on Romanian culture and civilization, Russian ones could be noticed as well by the pack of British travellers. When meeting people belonging to a Russian speaking community, actually to “the Russian sect of Skapetz, or the Skoptzi, a sect who made their practice to mutilate themselves” – the ancestors of which had been self exiled because of religious persecutions¹³ –, Sitwell and his companions joined them in a ritual of taking turns in being *inquisitive*:

All are prosperous, living on the rents of their stables, and, in a few moments, we were drinking Russian tea with them and eating honey underneath a pergola of vine in someone’s garden. There were eight or nine of these metamorphosed beings, all with the intense inquisitiveness of their kind. (Sitwell, GB)

Because a society, a community, or an ethnic group is “what it remembers; we are what we remember; I am what I remember; the self is a trick of memory” (Albert Wendt, in Friedman, 1994: 142). The Skapetz, as members of a linguistic, religious and sexual minority, needed constant remembering, and the Russian tea *ceremonial* must definitely have been part of the triggering process. Such ceremonials “enable(s) dislocated and contingent identities to establish social alliances and links of solidarity and must be regarded as a foodscape” (Ferrero, in Belasco & Scranton, 2001: 214).

¹² An island on the Danube, under Romanian jurisdiction, populated mostly by Turks, submerged during the construction of the Iron Gates power plant. Patrick Leigh Fermor’s awareness of the cultural iconicity of the island is reflected in the comment he made in the very last page of his Hungarian-Romanian travelogue, *Between the Woods and the Water*: “Let us hope that the power generated by the dam has spread well-being on either bank and lit up Rumanian and Yugoslavian towns brighter than ever before because, in everything, but economics, the damage is irreparable” (Fermor, 1988: 242).

¹³ During the reign of Czar Alexis, in the second half of 17th century.

The identity of the foodscape can change along the travelogue, but the dominant is constant. When describing their last day at the residence of Princess Callimachi, Sitwell places the emphasis on the milieu and on food, pointing to Russian influences, but only to a certain extent: “Perhaps the house, too, is Russian in its atmosphere and, like other things in Roumania, has a suggestion of the Crimean Riviera, of Yalta, or of Alupka¹⁴” (Sitwell, GB). For the conclusion takes us, beyond doubt, to a culinary identity that is supported by Sitwell’s further detailing and comments – “Roumanian, it is certain, was the excellence and profusion of the luncheon with which we were served” (*Ibidem*).

4.2. Romanian excellence

A preamble to the moment in the travelogue in which the excellence of the Romanian cuisine is asserted had been addressed during the first visit to a family home, when being offered an “unsurpassable luncheon” by Mme Duca. Later, in Rucăr, they are confronted with a similar event, in “the house belonging to the family of Madam Dimancesco”. We recognize the same fortified *milieu* – “built up on solid stone foundations... a stronghold with a heavy door that would require a battering ram to break it”, whereas the inside is covered “with the white or black rugs of sheepskin that are a speciality of Rucar” (*Ibidem*).

The latter is paired, not surprisingly, with another speciality of the place – “a goat’s cheese of indescribable delicacy”, a *ceremonial description* is given here, “that makes its appearance in round boxes of fine bark” –, and is complemented with the reference to the effects on the palate – “A smoky, acrid, resinous, pinewood taste is the result of this” (*Ibidem*). Little by little, Sitwell and his companions become familiar with Romanian brands, as taste is also “the propensity and capacity to materially and symbolically appropriate a given class of classified and classifying objects and practices; it is the generative formula of lifetsyle” (Bourdieu, 1989: 173).

They had found out, as attested in the Govora episode, that *țuica* is the national drink of Romania. At Rucăr, Sitwell feels compelled to record, due to its *reputation*, one of the Romanian national dishes – “Neither must we omit to mention the chickens roasted upon charcoal embers”.(Sitwell, GB) Foreign influences are yet to be detected within the frame of Romanian eating reference when tasting and writing about the moussaka – “an *oriental* invention founded upon aubergine, and of Greek, more probably Turkish, origin” (*Ibidem*).

¹⁴ The Gothic & Mughal palace from Odessa, built between 1828 and 1848, following the plans of the English architect Edward Blore (1787–1879), for Prince Mikhail Semyonovich Woronzoff (1782–1956).

Also Greek was Kalinzachis, the “excellent confiseur opposite the hotel” in Sinaia, with the *reputation* of being “one of the best of its kind... in Europe”. He worked at international standards comparable to “Gerbaud in Budapest... Zauner in Ischl... Hanselman in St. Moritz”, manufacturing a “conserve of fresh wood raspberries which can only be described as a poem” (*Ibidem*). Taste is again the battle-ground for such ravishing experiences, to which unexpected customers may subscribe – “The bears of the Carpathians are said to be willing to risk their lives for these” (*Ibidem*).

All in all, these little revelations piled up to the epiphany Sacheverell Sitwell eventually had with regard to the Roumanian cuisine. “This, to gourmets”, he writes while exploring the culinary wonders of the restaurants in Bucharest, “was the surprise of the Paris exhibition. The Roumanian pavilion was thronged, night after night, for this reason” (*Ibidem*). His reference must be to the Universal Exhibition, held in Paris in 1937, and when checking for illustrious customers, we came across the name of Coco Chanel and of the renowned German-American fashion photographer of the time, Horst P. Horst – “Her chance to sit for him came in the summer of 1937 when Horst joined Bettina Wilson ... American *Vogue*’s editor fashion, for dinner at an elegant restaurant in the Romanian pavilion of the Paris International Exposition” (Simon, 2011, GB).

Both Coco Chanel and Horst P. Horst were there for a reason. Sacheverell Sitwell uncovered that reason in his 1938 Romanian travelogue: “It is probable that, after pre-Revolutionary Russian, the Roumanian is the best native cuisine in Europe” (Sitwell, GB). And he continued by enumerating the delights people, natives and foreigners as well, could share at a Romanian dinner, although he was puzzled by the very late hour dinner started in Bucharest, near midnight, “with a glass or two of tuica” and it

will consist of *ciorbă*, a fish or chicken soup made with sour cream; and will be followed by carp, perch or sturgeon. Other dishes are *mititei*, a compound grilled sausages; *tocană*, veal with tomato sauce; *sărmala*, rice balls with chopped meat, wrapped in winter in a cabbage leaf and in summer in a vine leaf, similar, in fact, to the Greek *dolma*; a tender saddle of lamb; or *mușchiu de vacă*, *fillet de boeuf*, always excellent. There are, as well, *fleica*, beef roasted on a spit; or *ardei umpluți*, paprika pods filled with rice and minced meat. Poussins roasted on a spit are a specialty of Roumania.” (*Ibidem*)

5. Conclusion *or* Cornucopia and everyday life in Bucharest of the 1930s

What Coco Chanel and Horst P. Horst had experienced at the restaurant in the Romanian pavilion of the Paris International Exposition was the epitome of a way of life, as the Romanian architect who designed the pavilion tried to demonstrate – “the impressive arcade, which was almost entirely free of decoration... rested on three smaller arches...”, and the general feeling was that “the pavilion was somber in character” (Machedon, 199: 303). Even the restaurant benefited from “a single composition generated by the asymmetry of its capacity, while the interior decoration included coats of arms from Romanian provinces and cities, painted on a red background” (*Ibidem*: 304).

Nevertheless, unlike the pavilion, although placed very close to it, the restaurant in Paris “forsakes monumentality for an atmosphere of comfort and cosiness” (*Ibidem*), which was in fact very typical for Romanian restaurants a traveller could notice when crossing the country, as Sitwell did in 1937. The Romanian restaurant in Paris was located on “slightly sloping ground between the Chaillot terraces and the riverside gardens of the Seine,” and here comes an almost brand image for Romanian restaurants, “in a picturesque setting of trees and flowers” (*Ibidem*). Sacheverell Sitwell recorded such images when joining people at what he calls “the pleasure gardens of (a) fair” on his way to Bucharest – “open-air restaurants with an improvised roof of leaves and branches” with room for hundreds of people “sitting at tables in the shade” (Sitwell, GB). What one may think could have been a singular experience, the extenuating circumstances of a fair, turns into a generalized life-style, as

The road, for instance, between Predeal and Sinaia, a distance of twelve miles, appears to be lined on both sides with open-air restaurants, over the greater part of its extent. In Bucarest they are to be found in all quarters of the town. The name for these garden restaurants is grădină. (*Ibidem*)

In another section of his book, Sitwell wrote about people who, after having spent a prolonged holiday in Bucarest, something like eight to nine weeks, had told him that, on leaving, they had realized “there remained twenty or thirty of these small restaurants or grădină, to which there was no time to go” (*Ibidem*). The explanation for such abundance of locales could be accounted for, in those pre-WWII years, by the abundance of food. Sitwell stated that Romania had “a cheaper rate of living than any country in Europe. Bulgaria, or Jugoslavia, may approach to it in these matters, but the greater fertility of Roumania produces crops to which those colder countries cannot aspire” (*Ibidem*).

And he continued by enumerating the resources and their sources – “Chickens are the equivalent of ten pence each”, or “excellent fish, fresh water from the Danube and salt water from the Black Sea”, or “a variety of fruits, from the apples of the colder north to watermelons” –, and underlined their being typical “of the extreme south of Europe”. So, based on what he witnessed first-hand, Sitwell’s conclusion was that “life in the poorer quarters of Bucarest must be far from unpleasant” (*Ibidem*).

The practice of going to restaurants, pubs, or *grădină*s could be included in the larger frame of neighbourhood convention, accessible to all dwellers “through the codes of language and behaviour” (Certeau, 1998: 16). Opposites attract, and the truth lies in the eyes of the beholding traveller, as “acts of consumption represent ways of fulfilling desires that are identified with highly valued lifestyles” (Friedman, 1994: 150). From the famous Capșa, a branch of which Sitwell had visited while in Sinaia, and which “has a confiserie and sweet shop attached to it that has perhaps, no equal in Europe”, to “smaller places of less international repute”, the author traveller covers a “bewildering choice of food” (Sitwell, GB).

That might have helped him to get to both ends of the social spectrum, as “the art of eating and drinking remains one of the few areas in which the working classes explicitly challenge the legitimate art of living, in a ‘convivial indulgence’” (Bourdieu, 1989: 179). On the other hand, it was an endeavour covering equally bewildering choices of eating places, therefore he was able to capture and assess the true spirit of the country and its capital. Whether that is a model to look up to is another, challenging at least, discussion, but let us conclude with Sitwell’s final remarks on Bucharest, the true character of which is to be found much more in the fact that

A summer day, which is divided into two by the siesta, a device, incidentally, that gives the illusion of prolonging human life, could find no more pleasant ending than dinner to the accompaniment of music. This, indeed, is the culminating pleasure of Bucarest. (Sitwell, GB)

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