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Aurel Flutur and His Museum of Chișcău

(In memoriam Petre Popovăț)

Vlad Manoliu

'The Museum is made by collections, just as honey is made by the beehive'.

Aurel Flutur

Between 2008-2009 researchers Petre Popovăț, Dr. Vintilă Mihăilescu and Vlad Manoliu undertook fieldwork as part of the project ‘Heritage and Local Identity. Identifying and Promoting a Few Village Collections from Romania’. The results of our research on „Horea and Aurel Flutur“ authorised museum, as well as the personality of the collector Aurel Flutur are summarised in the following pages.

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Attested in 1551, the village of Chișcău lies in the Beiuș-Vașcău depression, between the Bihor, Pădurea Craiului and Codru Moma Mountains. Spectacular karst phenomena are a feature of the low chalky mountains near the village. Here lies Peștera Urșilor (The Bears’ Cave), one of the most beautiful caves in Europe. The name of the village comes from the inhabitants’ old occupation. ‘There was a foundry in the village that lent its name to the village of Chișcău. In Hungarian „chișco“ means a small foundry’. (Aurel Flutur)

The village was full of households managed by poor people. ‘They dealt more with woodcutting and food transportation. They delivered potatoes and apples cultivated here and brought wheat and corn instead’. (A.F.) Apart from their regular occupations, the villagers began to work in other parts of the country as well, especially at Sohodol, in Banat County. ‘I harvest wheat in Ponor/ My swain works in Sohodol’, says a local folk song. Many inhabitants have been working abroad for 20 years (around 15-20 per cent).

The Flutur family has lived like any villager from Chișcău. At the beginning, they only did seasonal work; during the communist regime all boys learnt a trade, just like Aurel Flutur who became a driver after having completed seven grades and military service. Taking advantage of the post-1989 job opportunities, Aurel Flutur’s children went to work in Spain.

Aurel Flutur’s biography is typical of a peasant from Bihor whose intelligence and ingenuity helped him overcome the frequent hardships of a miserable life. Born in 1940, he was left an orphan at an early age and adopted by an aunt and her husband who raised him like his real parents. ‘My father wanted me to become a woodman or a teacher.’ (A.F.) But, as the collector says, ‘I’ve never liked to stay in one place. No! I did neither of them. I’ve always liked travelling.’
After completing the military service and attending a 6-month driving school, he first became a truck driver and then a taxi driver. A tireless curiosity brought him professional satisfaction. ‘It was much better because I could talk to people’. (A.F.) The jobs he chose as a driver mirror his never-ending curiosity: a driver on geological expeditions, the only taxi driver in the town of Ştei.

He started collecting things at the age of 18 and, little by little, this passion has turned from an ordinary hobby into the *raison d’être* of his existence. Chişcău is quite an isolated village. ‘Before I became a collector I hadn’t seen any museum because there were no transportation means and there was nowhere else to go. My first trip was 6 kilometres from home, dressed in white peasant trousers. The waistband tore off and I fastened the trousers with a tendril until I got home. That was the first time when I saw a light bulb. I was a first-grade student’. (A.F.)

At the age of 21 he got married to Lucreţia (Cheiţa) who was 17 (born in 1946). They have three children and have always felt a rare passion – that of collectors and museum owners.

When Aurel Flutur got married, he was already a passionate collector who spent his last penny and leisure time, on the one hand, and worked hard, on the other, to gather various objects. ‘I definitely paid for them! I spent thriftily to make sure I had enough money to pay for them. Sometimes I had to work in order to have them. I’ve never worn a suit, not even at my wedding ceremony’. (A.F.) At first he used to store all the objects in his house from Chişcău. His wife got fed up with the old rubbish, especially with those full of dirt and parasites. ‘My wife used to tell me: <Hey, man, stop gathering these foolish things ‘cause my house if full of bugs.’> (A.F.) ‘When I brought different objects home, Cheiţa often threw them over the fence’ in a ‘barren garden’ (A.F.). Fed up with bugs and old rubbish and always penniless, Cheiţa left her husband after eight years of marriage and took one of their children with her. ‘She got sick of living with me because of this old rubbish (A.F.), and also because, instead of staying with his family at home on Sundays after a whole week of hard work, Aurel used to search for ‘old rubbish’ and buy it. When he learnt that his wife had left him, Aurel rushed to bring her back. He explained to her that he would never give up ‘gathering old rubbish but he would find some methods to clean them up and to avoid storing them in the house’.

This event reflected the fact that the collector had to face the serious problem of cleaning and storing the objects. He used different methods. ‘I took them (i.e., the objects) to the river down the valley. I dammed up the river with stones until it reached one meter in depth. I kept them immersed and covered them with stones lest the water should sweep them away. Whether I gathered wood, fabric or anything, I kept them all immersed and left them there for three days. In doing so the bugs, the worms and all that... disappeared. I dried them in the shade because otherwise they all got out of shape if dried in the sunshine. I experienced that too. Some of them deteriorated.’ (A.F.)

People like Ioan Godea, Nicolae Brânda and Aurel Chiriac gradually taught him how to store and disinfect the objects. His wife was little by little contaminated with her husband’s passion. She took part in finding, purchasing and arranging the collection pieces; she was extremely concerned, like her husband, with the fate of the collection, so both are now collectors who make a perfect team.

The collection has grown in time, overcoming both financial problems and the lack of specialised knowledge. However, Aurel Flutur’s great intelligence is backed up by a great curiosity, patience and deftness. He gradually and cleverly got closer to those who could teach him how to develop and channel his passion: the teacher of Romanian and headmaster of the school of Beiuş – Darabanu; Prof. Nicolae Brânda, PhD (director of the Municipal Museum of Beiuş); Ioan Godea (for a while head of the
Ethnography Department of the Țara Crișurilor Museum of Oradea); Barbu Ștefănescu and Sever Dumitrașcu (former directors of the Țara Crișurilor Museum of Oradea), Nicolae Brânda and his wife Georgeta as well as other employees of the museum of Beiuș have been his friends for a long time. ‘We met 30-40 years ago, both of us were young. I am 67 and I have travelled a lot with Flutur. I taught him a lot and he taught me a lot about these places’. (N.B.)

He has had a special relationship with Prof. Aurel Chiriac, PhD, the current director of the Țara Crișurilor Museum of Oradea. Aurel Flutur was an employee of this museum for a while and his collection was for a short time considered ‘to be part of our museum complex. A part of its exhibits have been transferred to our museum inventory.’ (Aurel Chiriac) He taught Aurel Flutur the meaning of museography and took him on a professional trip to Italy where Flutur had the opportunity to visit great museums. It is Aurel Chiriac who has also been in charge of arranging and rearranging the objects collected by Aurel Flutur, turning them into an authorised museum. ‘I am directly responsible for introducing explanations and photos which build up the present image of the museum. I have made a selection of the most interesting and valuable pieces. I have also built up a museum circuit...I have grouped the objects according to various themes and written explanatory texts... Flutur had the chance to develop his collection under the protection of our museum and of some of its employees... I am in charge of the whole reshuffling (i.e., of the museum).’ (A.C.)

We (the National Romanian Peasant Museum of Bucharest) contacted Aurel Flutur in 2008. We tried to offer him the opportunity to get in touch with other private ethnographic collectors within a project called ‘Heritage and Local Identity. Identifying and Promoting a Few Village Collections from Romania.’ As part of the same 2008 project, the National Romanian Peasant Museum organised a specific training workshop attended by the Flutur family and seven collectors from all over Romania. Both the museum and these eight collectors mounted an ample exhibition called „Robii frumosului” (Slaves to the Beautiful) where they displayed pieces belonging to the eight collections. Aurel Flutur proved a remarkable ability to rapidly befriend the visiting researchers of our Museum. Personally, I can say that my relationship with Aurel Flutur is now more than a strictly professional one. Aurel Flutur has earned my respect and deep sympathy.

Aurel Flutur is a talented person. As a member of „Miron Pompiliu Association of Folklorists of Bihor” he gathered a large amount of folk literature in his travels. He published a part of it in „Anthology of the Folk Culture of Bihor”, vol. I – Ballads, vol. II – Legends. ¹ He also culled much lyrical verse which, to his disappointment, was lost by a well-known folk singer from Bihor.

In 1974 he exhibited for a few years a part of his collection at the House of Culture in the town of Ștei. He had already brought the whole collection to his home in Chișcău in 1981. Later on he bought an old house and built a 300-sqm hall in order to protect and exhibit his collection. He also uses the household’s inner yard, a street-front shed and the back yard. In the summer of 2009 he built there ‘a shepherd’s hut’ – <băceag> – where the shepherd makes cheese’. (A.F.) This hut hosts the ordinary tool inventory of sheepfold and its fireplace. In the yard Aurel Flutur also built an oven for burning ceramics. He bought an old 17-meter-long shed he wants to design and use with the typical inventory of a household. This cannot happen yet because of financial difficulties.

The household’s yard shelters some large barns the collector uses as warehouses for his objects (double copies, deteriorated or still unconditioned pieces). The lack of money is Aurel Flutur’s greatest grief. He sells some of the objects and buys other objects instead in order to get by, organises exhibition halls, covers the expenses for cleaning services and electricity. The Culture Department with the County Council of
Oradea is apparently ready to offer him financial support. He tried to elaborate a project in order to get funds from the European Union, but ‘to no avail.’ (A.F.)

He tries to sell objects in famous museums, guided by the desire to preserve and offer his achievements to all people. Many objects he has collected are exhibited today in the Țara Crișurilor Museum of Oradea, the Agriculture Museum of Slobozia and the Village Museum of Bucharest. ‘When I have two or three objects of the same kind, I would give now and then only to a reputed museum. Nobody buys them. I don’t sell them to foreigners. God forbid! I donated <Focul viu> (the Living Fire) to you (the National Romanian Peasant Museum).’ Last year I sold a Gypsy cart to Răzvan Ciucă (the director of the Agriculture Museum of Slobozia). All that I earned from Mr. Ciucă was invested in cleaning services, treatment of objects and redecoration of the museum. I am very pleased with that because otherwise I couldn’t do anything.’ (A.F.)

I spent some time with Aurel Flutur, being careful to the way in which he sought and found various objects. He uses a real network of informants. Tourists from all over the country visit Chișcău because Peștera Urșilor (The Bears’ cave) lies here. Mr. Flutur is very skilful at talking to them and ‘untying their tongues’, thus learning of old things. It is in this way that he found out about an old ‘die’ (door lock) and a tobacco shredding machine owned by a Hungarian from Satu Nou, Arad County. I accompanied him to the place where, to my surprise, the owner donated him the two objects. Aurel Flutur was deeply impressed and invited the owner to pay him a visit. He hardly ever gets donations. During the time spent with him he also received two splendid big jugs and two old flax combs from the village of Magura. I also witnessed the purchase of an old stone grinder from the village of Dud, Arad County. Aurel Flutur buys things like a well-versed merchant who, unfortunately, has...little money.

He is deeply engaged in all the significant matters related to the life of the village. He has earned everybody’s respect as an industrious man, which helps him get closer to the objects that cause him a lot of trouble, forcing him to increase their price when purchased.

Like his and his wife’s personality, his museum is well-known in the area. He often participates in folk fairs: three years ago he attended the ‘bread fair’ organised by the Bucharest District 2 City Hall, where he baked bread; he also took part in the ‘Palinka-makers’ Fair’ in Oradea and in the fair from Cetatea Oradiei. He won the first prize at a bread fair in Hungary where he baked ‘balmuş’ (shepherd food made of sweet sheep cheese and corn flour) (A.F.).

He has rooms to rent, so this year he has organised (and partially sponsored) a working camp for children willing to learn how to paint eggs, an action supported by the Culture Inspectorate of Oradea. Twenty students together with their teacher spent ten days in the camp to learn about traditional customs like ‘needlework, the making of bead strings, pottery and weaving’ (A.F.). He also organised a ten-day sculpture and glass painting camp. In August 2009 the students of the Fine Arts Faculty of Timișoara spent around ten days in the camp. Cheișa and Aurel Flutur wished them a warm welcome. ‘They ask me to support them because they have no money, but ‘they beg for money from the beggar’, as the saying goes.’ (A.F.) These camps were organised by the ‘Gata oricând’ (Ready Anytime) Foundation of Oradea in association with the Flutur family.

When you reach Chișcău and ask about the Flutur Museum, people show you the way and tell you that this is the only museum in the area, ‘Domnocu’s Museum.’ (‘People have nicknamed me „Domnocu” for long’ – A.F.) The museum welcomes you with a street-front shed and pieces exhibited in the open. Large industrial objects tempt you to get closer to them: two mowers pulled by horses brought from Switzerland, threshers and tractors and a waste fire hose. The
most interesting piece is a still functional 1907 locomobile manufactured in Budapest.

A large placard invites you to visit Horea and Aurel Flutur Museum and says that admission is free. Near the placard lies an old well Mr. Flutur would like to move in the middle of the inner yard. The entrance is flanked by two large wooden sculptures naively representing Aurel and Cheiţa Flutur. From the spring of 2008 (when I visited him for the first time together with my regretted colleague Petre Popovă) until this summer the owners rearranged the museum objects, reconditioned some of them, spacing them out, introduced comments and photos here and there. Prof. Aurel Chiriac, PhD was responsible for rearranging the entire museum. ‘I organised it thematically in order to make it more accessible to the public (mining, wood processing, school, household appliances inventory, textiles and costumes, pottery, etc.). I somehow managed to build up a museum circuit. The lighting system still has to be improved, to say nothing of the surveillance system, which is the most serious problem. We still keep in touch.’ (A.C.)

The museum has no custodians, admission is free and common-sense itself protects the exhibits. ‘Our villagers are not thieves. Though some pieces are stolen by tourists on and off, they are most welcome because there are very many visitors and only few thieves.’ (A.F.) When home, Aurel Flutur is delighted to explain to visitors the history and usefulness of each object. You get in, have a look and, if you like, you write a few impressions in a notebook lying on a stone altar table which dates from 1807. Many impressions have been put down in more than one notebook since the collection was open to visitors. You find there names from Romania, but also from Poland, the Czech Republic, France, the Low Countries, from the neighbouring Hungary and Germany... Ceauşescu’s brother and sister, village fellows and museographers from reputed museums, school teachers going on a trip with their students, His Royal Highness Princess Margareta and Prince Radu have all written down their impressions in this notebook along the time. There is an impressive range of visitors whose common denominator is the respect and amazement aroused by the devotion of a man who did his best to create not just a simple collection, but a great museum. ‘He managed to overcome two systems at once, since nobody has ever given him anything. I hardly know anybody with such a steady passion. It’s different when you have money. Not the same happens when you have to make strict calculations in case you want to buy an object... He started from scratch and has achieved what we can see today.’ (Nicolaie Brânda)

When you enter the museum, you immediately find yourself in a large inner yard with objects displayed all around. Flanked by stone grinders, wooden benches typical of the area lie in the middle. On the right-hand side of the entrance there are a few panels whose texts written by Dr. Ioan Godea and Prof. Aurel Chiriac, PhD are also translated into English, French and Hungarian. One of them (written by Ioan Godea) explains the characteristics of the area and its traditional objects. The other text (written by Aurel Chiriac) is called ‘Man sanctifies the place’. The text highlights the fact that the visitor enters a museum that was officially recognised in 2005 and is the result of ‘the effort of a family who has shown for over 40 years a special interest in collecting the traditional heritage of the Romanian villages belonging to the ethno-graphic area of Beiuş and its neighbourhood, with a particular focus on the Apuseni Mountains.’ (A.C.) Opposite the museum lies a bench surrounded by beds of flowers, which actually grow in any propitious place. The little bench is propped up by two large cart wheels and leans against a porch adorned with folk pots and plates typical of a peasant house. The left-hand side of the yard is represented by the outer wall of this house protected by a wooden balcony; a superb collection of ceramics hangs on this wall and nearby: a potter’s wheel from Sălişte de Vaslui,
19th- and 20th-century Hungarian and Austrian places, Romanian bowls and pots from the well-known ceramic centres of the area – Cârpinet, Criștior, Leheceni, Sâliște de Vaslui, Valea Neagră and Leleşti –; the current ceramics style is represented by pots and bowls of Leheceni entrusted by their artisan to the Flutur family in order to be sold. Between stands with large pots, there are photos showing their manufacturing process which is also a visual clue to the traditional ceramics fairs in the area.

The traditional crafts of the peasants from Bihor – mining, smith’s work, wheelwright’s work, leather dressing, boot-making, shingling, coopering – are put on display on the right-hand side in a covered gallery and in a room open to the yard. Hundreds of pieces, which are both interesting in themselves and due to their association and ingenuous exhibition, are highly suggestive of the main crafts specific to the villages in this area.

An exterior staircase leads to the upper floor of the room open downstairs to the yard. There are five small rooms here. The first one shelters several pieces of furniture, papers and photos that once belonged to ‘the last outlaw from Bihor whom the elderly nicknamed Oneaţă’ (A.F.). The outlaw Oneaţa (whose real name was Gábor Ioan), dead in 1913, was a grand-grandfather of Cheiţa Flutur. His picturesque story is told with pleasure by Aurel Flutur who also found in a secret drawer of a ‘podişor’ a few letters that Oneaţa sent from prison to his wife who had reported him to the authorities.

The next room reconstructs an early 20th-century classroom with desks and a shaky master’s desk and with its typical maps and stationery. One can also find here the first object of the Flutur collection – a wooden schoolbag that his father made of board. ‘My schoolbag was the first object I preserved. I was not a frolicsome boy... every winter I used to play with snow together with the other children. It so happened that I needed another slate every two or three weeks because I broke it all the time. My father used board to make the schoolbag. When ready, I put it on my back and I started running through the village. It made a lot of noise because my father put nuts in it.’ (A.F.)

Another room is a faithful reconstruction of a peasant indoor typical of the area; the next room dedicated to textiles exhibits distaffs, reels, swingles, a linen-smoothing winding board, winders and peasant fabric on the walls.

Peasant kitchen objects are displayed on the floor: an 1811 wooden cupboard, a flour chest, a churn and many other things.

Coming back to the inner yard, we enter a corridor where death is the prevailing theme: wooden tomb crosses, bells for oxen pulling the hearse, the bench for the dead, a cenotaph, etc. Death-causing objects are exhibited in two glass cases on the left wall. A few objects (lances, halberds) were discovered in the village of Chişcău between the 12th and 19th centuries.

A small room with musical instruments and old radio sets is situated on the left side of the corridor. A part of the room shelters various household appliances like gas lanterns, grinders, irons, etc.

The corridor leads the visitor to a large hall with an area of about 250-300 sqm. Many big objects are grouped here: ‘I focused on means of transport which are displayed here because the objects are big and it’s easy to see them.’ (A.F.) We find here an impressive collection of Schwab trunks and especially the big Gypsy cart from Banat (‘made by a German, though ordered by a Gypsy’ – A.F.), decorated with 52 metal snakes, as many as the weeks of the year. There are also Romanian carts, sleighs, small carts and a mobile bread oven. On the left we come across many objects used for yielding and preserving the fruit of the earth: ploughs, harrows, barns and baskets, cereal boxes, small agricultural tools. The hall is made of concrete, with walls made of brick and a sheet iron skylighted roof. An impressive collection of bells and cattle bells, padlocks, locks, hobbles, stirrups and saddles – hundreds of objects which fascinate by their
diversity, quantity and picturesque aspect – hangs on horizontal bars, above the pieces exhibited at ground level. The hall centre is an empty passage skirted by peasant porches, whose role is to isolate the pieces and to protect them from the visitors’ ‘too active’ curiosity. An old wooden sewing-machine, telephones and old typewriters lie next to a corner of the hall that contains objects brought from Spain.

A shed typical of Beiuș that lies in the yard shelters a cart, a wagon, oxen yokes, a harrow, beehives made of clay-glued rods, barrels, nut drying hurdle work.

Aurel Flutur’s museum contains approximately 2500 objects, being more than just an ordinary collection. Thus, the owner defines the way in which the collection turns into a museum: ‘The Museum is made by collections, just as honey is made by the beehive’. (A.F.)

It is worth mentioning that Aurel Flutur is familiar with each object of the collection, he can describe it, providing details about its usefulness and exact origin. ‘Wherever I travelled I used to talk to the person who gave me the object. I was fond of asking them a lot of questions.’ (A.F.)

Aurel Flutur has a personal opinion of what a collector means, but he shows at the same time more than just a professional interest. ‘I cannot leave (i.e., the past) to go to ruin under my eyes. I don’t need it, I’ve got an object or two objects of the same kind, I am aware that I cannot wear four hats of the same kind at once; I have one, let’s say two, spare objects; but I can’t stand seeing people throwing it (i.e., the old object) away, I can’t stand seeing it destroyed and this is why I make it mine’. (A.F.)

Aurel Flutur is an innate collector. He is also a very good merchant and negotiator, which definitely adds to his passion for collecting things. He started from scratch and, without any support, he built up a museum on his own. The respect for his passion and its outcome made him befriend some educated people who helped him learn in his turn and cultivate his passion systematically. Aurel Flutur is a singular man. The nickname „Domnocu” made the villagers consider him for a long time a weird man who gathered useless objects he even paid for. ‘People in the village used to say: ‘Goodness me, this man has gone mad! Domnocu is mad and so are his woman and babies!’ (Cheița Flutur)

After the Bears’ Cave opened to the public, tourists coming from all over the world started to visit Aurel Flutur’s collection and to admire it, expressing their respect for it. The foreigners taught the villagers to respect their fellow. Nobody is a prophet in his own country. Aurel Flutur distinguished himself as a museum owner with the help of people who came from abroad. The villagers from Chișcău ‘admit it today, they are even amazed and they themselves come here with their relatives and friends. They cannot help visiting the museum. They are pleased to have such a museum in their village. If I go somewhere, people recognise me and tell me: <This lady comes from the village where the museum lies>. All people in the depression of Beiuș and even in the entire county know us.’ (C.F.)

The neighbour of the Flutur family, Manea Floarea (she is 71, born in Măgura, married and lives in Chișcău) says: ‘When he set out to build the museum, many people thought that he was mad and that he collected rubbish in his home. Now some people praise him, others are envious’. Many villagers share the same opinion (Manea Traian, Gabor Augustin, Ungur Ioan, Toma Aurel). Stelian Gruie (he is not from Chișcău) drives a minibus between Oradea and Pietroasa commune, to which the village of Chișcău is affiliated. He told us that he had been familiar with the collection for 14 years and that he has visited the museum many times. In fact, when I got on the minibus, I told the driver where we wanted to go. He started laughing and told us that Flutur is well-known throughout the county. He phoned him and agreed with him on a place where Flutur was to wait for us.

Though admired by his village fellows and well-known throughout the entire county, Aurel
Flutur is not fully appreciated by the mayor of the commune. Aurel Flutur is a righteous man, he cannot put up with any kind of abuse, which makes him disagreeable. Instead, vice-mayor Cornel Pîlea has a very good opinion about his museum and views it as a support for the village of Chişcău.

Teacher Nicolae Brânda from Beiuş summarised the whole situation: the nickname „Domnocu” clearly differentiates him from all the others. They first made fun of his madness and now they are envious. They have a very good reason for being envious because the today’s collection has not only a great ethnographic value, but also an economic one... His collection might be the greatest private ethnographic collection in Romania.

The way in which the collector Aurel Flutur sees himself is very interesting. He is obsessed with the desire to protect the traditional heritage by collecting its objects. Both he and his wife love their great collection; they are proud of it and honoured to be respected by all people around them. They are often burdened with the responsibility for their museum. He hopes that his children will take it over, but this fading hope makes him very sad. He would like to insure the objects; some fellows’ envy puzzles them. Both have a sharp sense of humour and continue tenaciously to preserve and love each object they collect.

The fact that you first have to go through the museum in order to enter the Flutur family’s household is not devoid of significance. Thus, you draw near a wooden house with a large verandah, which lies very close to another fairy-tale-like wooden house. Both houses (the dwelling and the summer kitchen) proudly boast their harmonious oldness. However, the interiors ... are equipped with all that modern man needs: heaters, bathrooms with showers and hot water, a refrigerator and a stove, even a microwave oven! The household is a mirror of their souls and occupations. Though tied to the traditions of the past, they whole-heartedly use today’s innovations. Their museum is also interesting due to its permanent and animating dynamicity: the Flutur couple is always looking for the best exhibition methods and learn all the time. In a nutshell, they refuse to stay stuck in contemplation.

Notes:


2 ‘Focul viu’ (the ‘living fire’) – a wooden archaic device used to make fire by rubbing two sticks together.

3 Horea Flutur is the youngest son of the collectors, currently working in Spain; his parents hope that he will come back to Chişcău, where he will carry on their activity.

4 podişor = wooden cupboard

5 According to tradition, in the villages of Bihor the dead were brought to the tomb only in oxen-pulled hearse.