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The Museum as a Hobby An Uncommon Hobby – The Museum

Carmen Mihalache

The village of **Peșteana** has the advantage of being situated in Hațeg Depression, an enchanting area bordered by mountains (Retezat, Țarcului, Poiana Ruscă, Șureanu and Sebeșului) and rich in monuments: old churches, fortresses, natural reserves, geological and archaeological sites. A border village during the Austro-Hungarian domination, **Peșteana** offers a wide range of tourist attractions: a 13th-14th century Orthodox church made of stone brought from Ulpia Traiana Sarmisegetusa has an uncanny appearance and preserves fragments of the original painting, a 16th-century Reformed church declared a historical monument, a protected botanical reserve (the Peșteana marsh called ‘the Bottomless Lake’ by the locals) and ‘Măgureaua’ (the hillock of Peșteana), a pre-Roman archaeological site.

Everybody who takes a short cut from Ulpia Traiana Sarmisegetusa fortress to Sf. Nicolae Church of Densuș (Hunedoara County), a mediaeval architectural jewel and also a famous historical monument, passes by the **Hațeg Village Museum of Peșteana**. The old wooden house whose veranda is hidden by the green vine was bought by **Anton Socaciu** who came back to his native village after he retired and aimed at saving those cultural values which he deemed to be representative of the entire area. Fond of

history, museums and ethnography, but also of any aspect of local culture, the former photo technician has turned countryside life into a new *modus vivendi* and way of living whereas the restoration of the old house and the search for old valuable and symbolic objects has become a hobby that keeps him busy all the time. It was not so easy to turn a hobby into a museum, though this happened to a great extent.

He bought the house ten years ago, but it was in 2002-2003 that he opened the museum to the public. He had to redecorate the house both on his own and with the help of his family, doing his best to restore its original appearance. The house has an attic, a cellar and three rooms, all meant to become museum halls: an exhibition, a documentation room and a functional traditional kitchen. However, in **Anton Socaciu’s** dream, the museum is a lively household of Hațeg, where, after having learnt as much as he could about local culture, the visitor can rest in the shade, pick fruit, taste honey from the host’s beehives and drink a glass of cold water from the well dug in the yard. The owner has high ambitions: a new shed built according to the model of the old ones will add to the museum and will exhibit agricultural tools and equipment, another shed will be used as a warehouse for unexposed objects as well as a restoration workshop and a

few extensions will be used for sheltering the pets and poultry that already animate the yard. Even a small water mill will have to be put to use one day on the Breazova rivulet that flows behind the garden.

In order for his project to materialise the collector endeavoured in 2000 to set up the Socaciu Cultural and Humanitarian Association, hoping that he would thus get funds more easily both for the museum he had been dreaming about and for the cultural development of the village. Apart from the museum, Anton Socaciu's major goal was to design in the generous space of his parents' house a local youth club equipped with a library, an audio, photography and film studio, a painting, graphics and sculpture workshop and an internet connection. This goal is far from becoming a reality, though in the meantime the collector has brought a major contribution to the life of the children and teenagers of the village: with the help of small sponsorship he organised different cultural and recreational activities (evening parties, cultural contests with rather symbolic prizes, etc.), he managed to co-opt the most enthusiastic ones onto a local centre ('Zimbru' [the Aurochs]) of the Romanian Scouts National Organisation. Helped by the youth and the locals, he managed to discover and retrieve old and traditionally valuable documents and objects. Unfortunately, the association failed to get substantial funds needed for such massive projects.

Until his dream comes true, **Anton Socaciu** pursues his hobby in a typically Transylvanian manner and is sure that it is his duty to discover, collect, repair and exhibit objects that a foreigner can find representative of the cultural values of the village and to recuperate, by means of documents for the time being, the local traditions and crafts practiced in the area (iron extraction and processing, wood processing, pottery, weaving). He is happy when people visit him, but he does not lay great value on that since only one of the three planned museum rooms is completely arranged, though it contains

just a few pieces. Nevertheless, he collected various samples of an almost extinct local craft – the precious ore was extracted for a long time in the forge (situated in Valea Fierului [the Iron Valley], in the vicinity of the village, where a few foundries were in operation between 1850 and 1875). Ceramics and fabric, furniture and costumes, books and old documents, coins and notes that circulated in the area as well as 'princely' objects, some of Austro-Hungarian origin, make his collection complete. He adorned the yard with mill stones, rocks and fossils and a beautiful Roman sarcophagus, all of them being a customary presence in Țara Hațegului, an area abounding in historical vestiges.

The villagers treat him kindly, but they are not too much involved. *'Good for him. [...] Otherwise, the entire Romanian tradition will fade away. What he does is exceptionally good. [...] We are of a different opinion.'* (Macra Ernoy's nephew) Some people give him worthless objects instead of throwing them away, on the one hand because they think that they are more suitable for his museum, and, on the other, because the owner of the museum rewards them with 'a little something' (money or products). *'Those who knew me brought me various objects because I had started to build a museum. Some did it in order to get a little something in exchange, others did it for their pleasure... Now pleasure is gone because they sell the objects at a higher profit to other customers, be they foreigners or from Banat. Money is more important than the museum. Today money is more important than anything. If an object I got for free is now worth 200 or 300 euro, they sell it for 50.000-100.000 euro...'* The elderly are more helpful and more nostalgic. The locals recommend tourists to visit the museum whenever they arrive in the village. Children alone visit the museum now and then.

Anton Socaciu would be happier if he could integrate himself in a tourism circuit and entertains high hopes of cooperation with Țara Hațegului Dinosaur Geopark, a dynamic structure in the area that develops every year. But

there is no cooperation at present: *'I was particularly interested in this because I became a member of an association together with Prof. Grigorescu from Bucharest, [...] a kind of large association with tourist routes in the whole area of Hațeg, but in the meantime there was no solution to this issue, [...] it failed to materialise.'*

There is another collector of Roman stones in the surrounding villages, but no collector of ethnographic objects, says Anton Socaciu proudly. *'The post-1989 period disturbed me very much. When I saw that Sarmisegetusa was being destroyed, I mean horses and carts made their way through the amphitheatres, the museum was vandalised, broken into, the objects were stolen, a great collection of money and objects was stolen. I also went to the other side, in the Orăștie Mountains, where most gold was extrac-*

ted, I saw kilometres of huge holes in the area. When I realised that the objects were systematically stolen by Gypsy collectors who brought them in the area of Banat and took them abroad, I decided to collect them too. I was familiar with the way in which foreign objects were collected, as was the case of other collectors, but I focused on [...] household objects, not on heritage objects like gold and stuff like that... Practically, these objects may be more precious than gold.'

After only five years of existence, the modest Hațeg Village Museum endeavours to show us the current lifestyle of the inhabitants of Hațeg who are surrounded by traces of a history of 2000 years of multiethnic (Romanians, Hungarians and Roma) and multi-confessional cohabitation.







