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The Wealth of an Ethnic Group

Carmen Mihalache

The little town of **Techirghiol** in Constanța County (south-eastern Romania) lies on the bank of Lake Techirghiol and is known as a spa reputed for the mud and salt water of the lake that bears the same name. Before it became famous for its mild climate, hot salt water baths and healing sapropelic mud wraps, the locality was successively inhabited by Greeks, Romans, Tartars, Turks and Romanians.

Today the Muslim community in Techirghiol preserves its traditions and cultural identity with great care. Cohabitation made the locals show mutual respect for their customs and values and even to borrow them from one another. **Seriha Menseit** from **Techirghiol** is well-known among the Turks, Tartars and Romanians. As proven in various circumstances, she is determined to do a lot of things in order to preserve the values of the Turkish ethnic group she is part of and to acquaint people with Turkish and Tartar culture in Dobrudja.

The love for the culture of her ethnic group has so far spurred **Seriha Menseit** to do a few major things like the establishment of the Sureya Turkish and Tartar traditional dance ensemble made up of children of different ages who hand down their repertoire from one generation to another and her ethnographic collection she always refers to as 'my exhibition.' This

is because, since 2001 to the present, she has participated in many local, regional and national cultural events (festivals and exhibitions, but also contests, festivities and symposia) either with the Sureya ensemble ('the little stars of the Great Bear') or with her collection of Turkish objects and traditional food, or with both. More often than not, she has attended such events on behalf of the local branch of the Turkish Democratic Union of Romania (UDTR) or of UDTTMR (the Democratic Union of Turkish-Muslim Tartars of Romania). Sometimes she was on her own, firmly believing that any participation could contribute to the promotion of the customs and traditions of the Turks in Dobrudja and that the ethnic and cultural values of the community could be revived by handing them down to its youngest members.

Apart from the objects inherited from her family (parents and parents-in-law), her collection has grown in size due to the number of pieces she received from different members of the community. **Seriha Menseit** collected copper vessels, specific ceramics, towels made of silk and golden threads, old and new costumes, a wide range of coins like *kusak*, *cevre*, *chese* (the most beautiful ones are woven on a velvet background), *cember* or *grep* (many *grep* models of wedding dresses with lace-woven edges), a lot of

fine fabric, a 'cobweb' woven in vegetal colours and silver objects woven in the finest filigree with the help of a chisel and a hammer. Apart from objects, she has also retrieved what is left of stories, traditions, histories – in other words, the entire cultural heritage of an ethnic group – that have lived in the elder people's memory. If something is missing, she knows that the owners can lend her an object to be exhibited, for the open-minded ethnic Turks fully trust her and approve all that the passionate **Seriha Menseit** does for their community. *'All objects belong to the ethnics from Techirghiol, they belong only to the Turkish dwellers of Techirghiol who gave them to me and, who knows, God will help me find the right place for them... because they must find their right place. And [...] I want a beautiful place because my very native town, as its name suggests, is an old town where the Turks have lived ever since the world began and I want people who will pass through the town to remember us [...] because there will be just a few of us left here.'*

With few exceptions, **Seriha Menseit's** collection mainly consists of donations. Seriha missed the opportunity to preserve many priceless objects in her collection because she was unable to pay for them when the youth preferred selling them for substantial sums of money rather than preserve them. But, shortly after 1990, long before she took the decision to collect them, many family memories of the ethnic Turks reached abroad via the Bulgarians who used to go from door to door and buy dirt-cheap the finest fabric as well as copper and silver objects. People, the ethnics from Techirghiol included, got rid of them for very small sums of money. Seriha understands that, but she cannot forgive them. *'I simply couldn't give them to anyone! I couldn't give them to anyone even if I had to eat bread and onion for three days on end. They no longer come back and, if you rid of them... Nobody would have come to my place if I hadn't had such objects in my house. I have what everyone has, it's the same. Yet not every-*

one has such exhibits! And then, when you mount an exhibition and say, 'look, these objects have been made by my ethnic fellows,' you already have things to show! I think any ethnic wants that, so, being a Turk, I do want to show everybody what my fellows have done in this land.'

It all started in 1991, when the town of Techirghiol established a close friendship with Tekirdağ, a Turkish town with a similar name (a port town on the Marmara Sea shore). Knowing that Seriha was an extremely active and responsible Turkish woman devoted to her ethnic group, the then Mayor of the town asked her to be his translator and to conceive an artistic programme for his Turkish guests. Seriha accepted the challenge, though she and the children she had taught Turkish and Tartar dance styles performed in public only on the occasion of school festivities. Asking her relatives, acquaintances and friends to lend her traditional objects meant to give authenticity to the dancers' simple costumes designed by the City Hall on this occasion, she was surprised to discover that she was able to do one more thing for the culture of her ethnic group: *'I felt that we all shared the same thing, I said, 'look, this is solid proof of our existence, we have preserved and still have these objects' [...]. Then people started to give them to me. They gave me every little thing they had, from peasant skirts to towels and shirts. Now I have a large number of objects... [...] There are hundreds of objects, I can't tell you exactly because I've never counted them. [...] If I were to arrange them [...], they would fit perfectly in a typically Turkish household. [...] When they gave them to me they simply said: 'preserve them the same way as we did.' That was more than enough because I know how they preserved them and I want to do the same.'*

In time, for the sake of these objects Seriha has learnt a lot about the history, art and traditional culture of her ethnic group and got a clear idea of the worth of her collection and her gesture of retrieving it. She realised that many spe-

cialised museums would like to have her objects due to their beauty and oldness. She also knows that her house is not the right place for such a cultural wealth. She has hopes and dreams and does her best to encourage 'her ethnic fellows' to build one day a functional museum-house meant to preserve all their memories and to welcome everyone.

The Turks in Techirghiol are extremely united. UDTR purchased a fully-equipped house for the whole community, which the ethnics use for various events, festivities, commemorations of the dead or wedding ceremonies: *'we have a get-together there, so we are a sort of nucleus which got us closer to each other. We do everything with all our heart and soul for other passionate souls. So there is no imposition. Everyone brings his or her contribution and thus we created a pleasant atmosphere. Very pleasant and animated.'* However, not even this space designed for so many events seems to be the ideal place.

Though the ensemble, the collection and her diverse cultural activities keep her busy all the time, **Seriha Menseit** never stops dreaming and

making her dreams come true with great efforts, but also with the support of the community and, as much as possible, of the local authorities.

'I would have liked to build a functional museum-house and gather there all the memories of my ethnic fellows. Maybe we'll manage to do that with the help of the City Hall, though the City Hall is not supposed to do this for the ethnic group I am part of: I would like my ethnic fellows to build it! I would like my nephew to come here over the years and say, when he grows old, that 'both my father and grandfather laid the foundation stone here'. So that's my idea... A space designed for everyone, not my own house. I want the house to belong to this town because these tiny things have their own story. I strongly refused another location in a different area or locality. I said, 'you see, you offered me a place here... it's a beautiful museum [...]. But the living story of these objects is preserved in Techirghiol, not there. It's not because I don't want to give them... I would say with great pride that 'these objects are exhibited there. But do those people know who Fatma is?' (Seriha Menseit)







