

# Martha Bibescu's *Diary* and the Backstage of European History

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**Abstract:** *The Diary of Martha Bibescu, one of the few Romanian writers renowned in Europe, covers the 1939-1941 time span, a time of great turmoil in European history and politics. Our paper tackles a series of issues suggested by the very content of the diary, such as the origin of some political scenarios, Romania's position in a critical moment of its existence, the connections between culture and politics, etc. Ultimately, the diary abovementioned, as the work of a cultured person, allows for an insight into the backstage of European politics.*

**Keywords:** *political diary, backstage schemes, public figure, European historical context, World War Two.*

Few Romanians remember Martha Bibescu nowadays. Therefore, an excerpt from her diary may represent a genuine surprise to contemporary readers.

I feel a little dizzy when I think of the fact that I know Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Mussolini, Ribbentrop and Goering – to mention only a few – , that I talked to them, I listened to them, I shook hands with them, we ate together, we replied to each other, we even exchanged memories and ideas. When I think that the right hand of each of them had, since then, the power of signing the decisions that they are signing now, I have the feeling that I descended in the Inferno, where I saw some demons planning all evils.<sup>1</sup>

The diary entry quoted above was written on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1940, when the war was at its height. As noticeable, Princess Bibescu, a member of the Romanian high society as well as a successful writer of her time, had access to the backstage of world politics and she was one of the very few Romanians to have enjoyed such a privileged position. *The Diary* is, first and foremost, a venture into a world that the general public has no access to. The daily entries include political information and allusions to military, social and cultural events, as

well as the author's opinions on such information, comments, jokes, wordplay, and quotes from various politicians, military leaders, intellectuals, etc.

This panorama allows for the identification of a definite political component concerning temporal and spatial aspects, public figures, conflicts and political events. The *Diary* covers an extremely troubled time in the history of Europe, namely, the years 1939-1941, representing, in fact, the time before the outbreak of the worldwide war and the first act of this huge conflict that shall continue until 1943<sup>2</sup>. Mention should be made, as well, of the fact that Martha Bibescu is constantly trying to introduce her readers to aspects that are related to foreign as well as home policy. The author's concerns with the consequences of the backstage political schemes on the fate of the peaceful Romanian nation are always present and conspicuously noticeable. The places where the *Diary* entries have been written are also of interest to readers; the most noteworthy of them are the European capitals that were of extreme importance to world politics, such as Paris, London, and Rome. It is only natural to ask ourselves why Berlin is not included in the aforementioned list. The answer may lie in the author's attitude towards the German politicians of her time, as we shall discover in a subsequent part of our paper. Balkan capitals, such as Athens and Belgrade have also received the visit of Princess Bibescu during a critical period of European history. Besides the social activities, the diary author also became fully involved in secret political activities. Today, Martha Bibescu's ease in penetrating the ruling circles of various countries is surprising, but let us remember that she belonged to the high aristocracy that knew no boundaries<sup>3</sup>. A series of *Diary* entries include references to Romanian towns, such as Mogoșoia, Posada, București. The former two, where the author owned significant estates bear a specific marking: they are places that Princess Bibescu used to retire to, as well as places where she would reflect on the political events that she had witnessed. Bucharest bears a different connotation altogether; in the capital, Martha Bibescu used to perform numerous politically marked activities, such as attending hearings with King Carol, meeting ambassadors or cultured people. Bucharest is far from the peaceful retreat provided by the Mogoșoia Palace.

Of particular interest are the names of the public figures that the *Diary* author met during her lifetime. Here, we refer both to political figures who would decide the fate of the world, such as Roosevelt,

Churchill, Mussolini, Fabricius, Goering, etc., and to other politicians that were more or less important to their time<sup>4</sup>. Out of all Romanian public figures, the one that clearly stands out is King Carol, often referred to by the name of Rex, who, as noticeable, has commissioned the author to perform various tasks oftentimes and in particular during crises. It seems that Martha Bibescu has performed a series of political tasks that were of extreme importance to the royal family, not exactly because of her attachment to King Carol, but in order to protect Romania's interests from fascist Germany's interference in our home affairs.

Sometimes, Martha Bibescu provides the reader with a short description of the political figure that she introduces or she quotes a series of memorable lines or witty remarks uttered by a particular political figure, so as to individualize that political figure, to render it memorable to her audience.

*The Diary* may also allow for the re-enactment of the greatest conflicts of the time that have led to the outbreak of World War Two; we may trace back the origin of some altercations, as well as their spectacular escalation from mere frictions to military battles. The author, who possessed a significant experience in the field, was entitled to make some forecasts that oftentimes turned into facts<sup>5</sup>, showing that Martha Bibescu possessed a remarkable understanding of the political developments of events, as well as a remarkable intuition.

The part played by Princess Bibescu on the European political stage remains a mystery to this day. Nevertheless, her ease in penetrating the most elitist circles of European politics, as well as the eagerness displayed by the residents of the Royal Palace of Bucharest upon her arrival suggest a possible answer: "the author has frequently played the part of an unofficial roving ambassador of Romania"<sup>6</sup>.

*The Diary* also includes a significant cultural component; let us not forget that the author was also a renowned writer of her time, particularly acclaimed for her works in French. As a matter of fact, the diary entries are full of information regarding cultural events organized in the capital of France, the true cultural centre of the world. Let us make note of the fact that the pages of *The Diary* provide constant interference between political, social and cultural events. The cultural component is rendered through frequent cultural allusions and references, such as titles of literary or musical works, names of literary characters, widespread cultural symbols, etc. Although less

frequent, mythological allusions are skilfully inserted at the right time. It is also worth mentioning that the *Diary* also introduces some folklore-related aspects, such as urban legends. As a culture-lover, Princess Bibescu uses shows not only as aesthetically pleasing events, but also as opportunities to enter the backstage of European history and politics.

The world of journalism is also a dramatic presence in the *Diary*; the author mainly dwells upon two prominent figures in this field, namely, Stelian Popescu and Pamfil Șeicaru, whom she abhors.

*The Diary* of Martha Bibescu also displays an interesting emotional component, perhaps because it is the work of a woman. The agony and death of her husband, aviator George Bibescu, had made a profound impact on the *Diary*'s author: "my life ends with yours, George"<sup>7</sup>. Many entries found in the second half of the *Diary* show, despite the author's reserve, deep personal suffering. But it is not only these aspects that render the emotional component visible; let us remember the author's pain upon mentioning the German bombing of the places where she had spent her childhood, as well as many other places that were familiar to her. Numerous exclamations and rhetorical questions accompany such diary entries. Noble and reserved, Martha Bibescu experiences a rare outbreak and curses the legionary movement, whose exit from the political stage she had forecast as far back as November, 1940. Let us remember that, at the mentioned date, the legionaries had reached the highest in their evolution. What remarkable intuition!

The writer's attitude towards legionaries and German politicians included both criticism, as well as rejection. Nevertheless, Martha Bibescu knew how to wear a much-needed mask and to tolerate them, so as to fulfil her missions in the service of her country: "my lightness in accepting their (her political opponents' – editor's note) arguments doesn't arise any suspicion. This is the way I choose to pay them back."<sup>8</sup>

Martha Bibescu's *Diary* falls in line with the inter-war political memoirs literature, a field in which Carol the Second, his brother Prince Nicolae, Armand Călinescu, Grigore Gafencu, Constantin Argatoianu, and others have ventured, as well. *The Diary* brings a series of innovations to the literary genre previously mentioned. Perhaps the most significant innovation is connected to the high intellectual standing displayed by the author: Princess Bibescu addresses an audience that has already been initiated into politics,

namely, the Romanian elites. Although at first sight, the writer “collects faces and facts”<sup>9</sup>, behind such things, backstage schemes that only the expert reader may ferret out unfold almost imperceptibly.

## References

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bibescu, Martha, *Jurnal politic*, Ed. Politică, București, 1979, p. 224.
- <sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 1939 – 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1941.
- <sup>3</sup> Bibescu, Martha, *Op. cit.*, pp. 8-10, *Studiu introductiv*.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Please check the forecasts regarding the legionaries' fate.
- <sup>6</sup> Bibescu, Martha, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 238.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.
- <sup>9</sup> Zăciu, Mircea, Papahagi, Marian, Sasu, Aurel, *Dicționarul scriitorilor români*, volume I, Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1995, p. 277.