

## DEPICTING CHILDHOOD. THE INNOCENCE OF THE AGE AS CAPTURED IN PHOTOGRAPHS AND POSTCARDS FROM BUKOVINA (1880-1920)

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**Rezumat:** *Imaginea copiilor în fotografii și cărți poștale de epocă este o formidabilă provocare epistemologică ce poate înlesni sincronizarea poveștilor de viață individuale sau colective, cu aspectele de istorie socială. În timp ce în istoriografia occidentală, istoria copiilor are deja o tradiție îndelungată, în istoriografia română aceasta nu astarni prea mult interes; oricum, în ultimul deceniu au fost publicate câteva articole, studii și cărți specifice domeniului. În cazul Bucovinei, o astfel de cercetare „alunecă printre degete”, studiul ilustrării copilăriei găsimu-se încă într-o etapă de început. Setul de imagini analizat în articolul următor indică o serie de trăsături ale epocii, constante și canonice, clișee preluate în Bucovina din spațiul central și vest-european. Cu ajutorul lor sunt descrise tipuri de portrete (de familie, individuale, specifice unor momente solemne), ipostaze și modele convenționale, mai mult sau mai puțin expresive, dar care răspund atât comandamentelor publice ale vremii cât și așteptărilor ce vin din mediul privat. Cu alte cuvinte, valoarea de document a acestor resurse vizuale în care apar copiii este neîndoielnică. Ea favorizează explorarea secvențelor de viață cotidiană și a comportamentelor sociale care încă se expun întrebărilor.*

**Abstract:** *The children's image in photographs and postcards is a formidable epistemological challenge that can facilitate the synchronization of individual or collective life stories, with certain aspects of social history. While in the Western historiography, the "history of children" has already a long tradition, in the Romanian historiography it never really received much interest; however, only in the last decade there appeared a few articles, studies and books on this domain. In Bukovina's case, such a research "slips through fingers", and the study of depicting childhood is still in its early stages. The set of images analyzed in the following article indicates a series of epoch features, constant and canonical, clichés borrowed from Central and Western Europe. They help to describe types of portraits (family, individual, specific solemn moments), poses and conventional models, more or less expressive, but which meet both public and private commands and expectations of the time. In other words, the documentary value of these visual resources in which the children appear is obvious. It favors the exploration of daily life and social customs that are still exposed to many questions.*

**Résumé:** *L'image des enfants en photographies et cartes postales d'époque représente une formidable provocation épistémologique qui peut faciliter la synchronisation des contes de vie individuelles ou collectives, avec les aspects d'histoire sociale. Pendant que dans l'historiographie occidentale, l'histoire des enfants a déjà une longue tradition, dans l'historiographie roumaine, celle-ci n'a pas suscité trop d'intérêt ; en tout cas, la dernière*

décennie, on a publié quelques articles, études et livres spécifiques au domaine. Dans le cas de la Bucovine, une telle démarche scientifique “glisse entre les doigts”, l'étude de l'illustration de l'enfance se trouvant encore dans une étape de début. Le set d'images analysé dans l'article ci-joint indique une série de traits de l'époque, constants et canoniques, des clichés pris en Bucovine de l'espace central et ouest-européen. A l'aide de celles-ci, on y a décrit des types de portraits (de famille, individuelles, spécifiques à des moments solennels), des hypostases et des modèles conventionnels, plus ou moins expressifs, mais qui répondent aux commandements publics de l'époque, ainsi qu'aux attentes qui viennent du milieu privé. En d'autres mots, la valeur de document de ces ressources visuelles dans lesquelles apparaissent des enfants est indubitable. Elle favorise l'exploration des séquences de vie quotidienne et des comportements sociaux qui s'exposent encore aux demandes.

**Keywords:** *childhood, children, photographs, postcards, popular culture, documentary source.*

Though many people see them as subjective representations of fragments of reality, photographs and postcards are instruments that – most like documents – might encode information, convey messages or manipulate. It is not a coincidence that the famous Russian novelist Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev wrote in his 1862 novel, *Fathers and sons*: “The drawing shows me at one glance what would be spread over ten pages in a book”<sup>1</sup> (an idea that was subsequently changed to a “photograph is worth a thousand words”). Any attempt to interpret images will reveal their nature as means of communication. If organized in a coherent way, they become an informal essay that indicates the specificity of the family universe or the social characteristics of a historical epoch.

In Western historiography, the researches that aim at exploiting the theme, while focusing on the private significances and on the relation between the image and the cultural or social environment, are increasingly numerous. This is how certain scraps of quotidian family life, as well as social or religious, acquire contours and consistency or evoke the ambiance of a town, a national context, a historical period, etc. Obviously, one of the key principles of the research is the perception of the parent, photographer or editor on a particular event or on life in general, as well as their capability, talent and purpose in seizing the moment. In fact, Patricia Holland wrote in her book on *Picturing childhood* that “imagery of children/childhood is part of an elaborate drama in which children perform well-known roles”<sup>2</sup>.

Unfortunately, from the viewpoint of Romanian historiography<sup>3</sup>, the research on how childhood is documented by images is nothing more but a mere exercise. The fact that it is still ignored, marginalized or trivialized might have to do with the way

<sup>1</sup> Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev, *Părinți și copii [Fathers and Sons]*, translated by Mircea Lutic, București, Ed. Litera, 2010, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Holland, *Picturing childhood: the myth of the child in popular imagery*, London, I.B.Tauris, 2006, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Until 2010, there were only a few materials published on the history of children/childhood in Romania; most approaches came from different fields such as literature (memoirs), ethnology and sociology. Regarding Bukovina, the subject was avoided and ignored.

this age is perceived as *a-temporal* or *universal*. Anyway, the documentary value of the illustrations representing children is obvious, regardless of the numerous stereotypes that exploit childhood innocence in view of consumerism, kitsch and visual gratification.

In Bukovina's case, the analysis of the children/childhood images is hampered by a sort of veil of reticence. Scholars' reliance on official documents led them to recognise and write on the main historical, political and social events. But beyond these common documentary sources, other historical evidences (such as photographs and postcards) can inspire more attention to construction of childhood as a part of bukovinian society. For instance, during the last decades of the 19th century, postcards become in Bukovina a new and powerful vehicle for the development of the commercial popular culture, i.e. of the "mass culture". For the first time in the history of the province, the image of children can be captured on film and disseminated in a relatively accessible way.

Among the best known photo studios that functioned in the Duchy of Bukovina are those of photographers Teodozy Bahrynowicz, H. Ehrlich, Johann Krzanowski, Leo Rosenbach, Rosalie Rosenhek, or Jacob Brüll. Their success is due to the fact that photography marks the end of the era when only the rich and famous afforded to hire a painter that would "immortalize" their image on canvas. The visual bricolage is representative for the photographs made in the towns of Bukovina; it includes the personal marks of the photographers (designs and lithographic artwork that are original or "borrowed" from the studios of their colleagues) and the preferences of the customers.

We have analyzed a few images from 1880-1920<sup>4</sup> that share a series of recurrent features, or should we say canonical in those times: most of them are clichés borrowed from Central and Western Europe. Photographic portrait is among the most practical multidisciplinary documentary sources, for it represents childhood visually both by its symbolic function and specific technical elements. The image of the child is more than a passive portrait, it is a dynamic set of issues that can be analyzed and questioned: Who has the means to be the producer or the beneficiary of these images? Who or what constructs the signification of a photograph or a postcard?

In many of the photographs, the children are accompanied by their families: both parents, one of the parents, siblings and, sometimes, one of their grandparents or other relatives. Generally speaking, they are simple nuclear middle-class families that



<sup>4</sup> The photographs and postcards were provided courtesy of Mrs. Aura Brădăţan from "Simion Florea Marian" Memorial House and Mr. Tiberiu Polocoşeriu.

attempt to immortalize a special moment. Most like a “family story”, the photograph expresses the relations between its members. The parents choose and the photographer agrees or suggests a different approach<sup>5</sup> that would contribute to the construction of identity and would reflect both harmony and authority. The closer together the family is positioned in the picture, the stronger the impression of “cohesion”<sup>6</sup>, “understanding” and “communication”.



Children are naturally subservient to their father. The typical patriarchal image (**photo. 1**) is that of a father – head of the family and provider – whose posture stands out: whether he stands in the center or is the tallest (or both), he occupies the “command line” and imposes the distribution of the other members according to status within the family and age. But there is also a message conveyed by the pictures of a child or children accompanied only by the mother: the absence of the father is due to the fact that he is the author of the special moment or the recipient of the photograph.

As for the maternal bond, primeval and natural, powerful and pleasing, it reflects in the positioning of the child by the side or in the lap of its mother (**photo. 2**). If there is more than one child in the photograph, the young age and the anxiety induced by the photo studio are factors that determine the positioning of the youngest of the children in the close proximity of his or her mother.

Besides the specific solemnness of the ceremony, caused both by the long (but inevitable) time of exposure and the formal conduct inherent to the occasion<sup>7</sup>, the family portrait conveys the image of a “caring mother” and that of a “protective father”. Both hypostases reveal a clear message about the vulnerability and the helplessness of children in their first years of life. Childhood acquires the symbolic charge of an idyllic stage in life – of the comfort based on the security and intimacy of a home – or that of a phase of transition between a state of innocence and dependence and one of knowledge and responsibility. The child in the photograph is a catalyst, an element that marks the confluence of the individual or collective life stories with the broader aspects of social history.



<sup>5</sup>Charles Williams, *The Meaning of Family Photographs. Studying the Home Mode: An exploration of Family Photography and Visual Communication*, “Studies in Visual Communication”, Philadelphia, 1980, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 23-42.

<sup>6</sup>Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: photography, narrative and postmemory*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Williams, *op. cit.*

Another type of photographic portrait is that of a child by him- or herself. The photograph of an adult by him- or herself indicates a certain social position (political, social, cultural personality, “master/mistress of the house or domain”, etc.); that of a child conveys emotions and intentions of the adults or ideals they build up for the little one. Even if it carries in itself some of the “identity” mark of the family, this type of picture is meant for the archive of the parents or relatives in general<sup>8</sup>.

The special events that justify a trip to the studio or a home appointment with the photographer are usually the baptism, confirmation or first communion (**photo. 3**) and the birthdays or other anniversaries. In the first case, the image of the child is quite distinctive: the baby (weeks or months old), wears a special baptism dress, long and light-colored (white in most of the cases), adorned with ruffles, lace or *broderie anglaise*, inspired in the Victorian fashion but originated in Central-Eastern Europe<sup>9</sup>, and which symbolizes purity and innocence.



This feeling of innocence, along with the one of family bond, longing and spiritual rejuvenation / regeneration, is due to the image of the baby. Such a wide palette of meanings, partially accepted by society, which is particular to the photography of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shares a tradition that was inherited from Renaissance art, where nude bodies signify a return to what is only natural and symbolize abstract philosophical and aesthetic ideals<sup>10</sup>. Most certainly, portraying babies in the nude (**photo. 4**) was, much like today, a mere option of the parents.



Likewise, the anniversary of the child is a good opportunity to evaluate the growth and progresses of the little one. For the urban families with less financial resources, celebrating birthdays with photographs constitutes a unique event that can eventually be delayed and synchronized with another significant moment in the life of the family. On the contrary, for the well-to-do the festivity of the anniversary is the

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Majuru, *Copilăria la români. Schițe și tablouri cu prunci, școlari și adolescenți* [*Childhood in Romanians. Sketches and images with infants, pupils and teenagers*], București, Ed. Compania, 2006, p. 96:8.

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Amoroso Leslie, *Needlework through History: An Encyclopedia (Handicrafts through World History)*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2007, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup> George Dimock, *Photographs of Children*, in *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, <http://www.faqs.org/childhood/Pa-Re/Photographs-of-Children.html>

perfect opportunity to show off some elaborated fashionable outfits, jewelry or toys, received as special gifts from the loved ones. Besides, the photographs mark the transition from the androgynous “infantile robe” (proper to the first one or two years of life and common during interbellum period) to the trousers – in boys – and dresses – in girls.

The taste for elegance and the assimilation of the German style are visible in children’s clothing that need to be seen and analyzed in the general context of fashion. Merchants from all over Bukovina deal with goods produced in France, Germany and Austria – from footwear to fashionable items such as embroideries, stockings, ribbons – as they test and then stimulate the taste and habits of the grown-ups. In Chernivtsy, for instance, the stores owned by the Tiring brothers or by the Kohn family advertise their special offers in campaigns in the local media<sup>11</sup>.



Well into the world trends of the epoch, boys would wear the so-called *Fauntleroy* and *Matrosenanzug* or *Matrosenkleid* (photos 5, 6). The elegant *Fauntleroy* suit – rooted in the Victorian and Edwardian fashion – is made of velvet and adorned with silk and lace collars and cuffs<sup>12</sup>; slightly effeminate, such fabrics were initially controversial amongst the bourgeois customers, especially in the male population. As time went by, those knee pants and jacket become more and more simplified, fitted to the size and comfort of the children.

Not even the *Matrosenanzug* was an Austrian “invention”<sup>13</sup>, but it would become very popular among the locals in Bukovina. Even though fabric, cut and color may vary, the suit displayed the main features of the original style. Moreover, its versatility and the fame it reached at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would set the “sailor suit” as a school uniform in some institutions all over the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

As for the girls’ clothes, they mimic in minute details those of the women. It was only at the end of the century that the distinction between adult and children’s clothing became visible. Girls would wear dresses with a yoke or low waistline that covered their knees and as accessories they put on stockings, ribbons or bonnets. Underskirts are replaced by pleated skirts and lacy high collars by “sailor” style ones<sup>14</sup>.



<sup>11</sup> See, as an exemple, the collection of „Deșteptarea” (*The Awakening*), Chernivtsy, 1893.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn McKelvey, *Fashion source book*, Wiley- Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 57, 191.

<sup>13</sup> Clare Rose, *The meanings of the late Victorian sailor suit*, “Journal for Maritime Research”, vol. 11, no. 1, 2009, p. 24-50; Karl-Otto Albrecht, *Politik und Mode*, Kassel Edition Palation, 2001, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Mary L. Wagener, *Fashion and Feminism in "Fin de Siècle" Vienna*, “Woman's Art Journal”, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 29-33.

Photographs of children wearing traditional costumes are fewer. Significantly, such images are reproduced on postcards (**picture 7**) that circulate in quite a broad area, for they are meant to depict that harmony in ethnic and national diversity that was established within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Usually, in these group photographs there is a rule about formal, almost stereotyped clothing, but there are exceptions when certain members of the family would wear something different. Actually, the upswing that is characteristic to the passage from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century has the acceptance of the “German clothes” in children of a certain age from the rural areas as one of its symptoms.

Although the traditional folk costume bear the ethnic identity marks and contains a certain symbolic capital, of pride and honor (sometimes of emancipation from the Imperial policies), the influence of the urban environment – first at a superficial level – would reach the depths of the social and cultural issues. This orientation towards a new clothing style has a hidden, but apparently harmless, political intention that was cherished and promoted by the Imperial authorities: clothing changes, people play the piano and dance the mazurka, they speak and read in German, and children are sent to study abroad. The *mélange* of traditional and “absorbed” elements is not dissonant in the photo studio; on the contrary, it appears to be highly regarded by the family. It was not only through the wearing of appropriate clothes that the notion of identity was embraced but also in a very personal appearance of individual.

Most like the photographic portraits of children, that inspirits a more or less subjective historical reality, postcards participate in the creation of a number of “narratives about childhood”, in which different cultural forms and elements are combined<sup>15</sup>. Obviously, as with any commercial product, their content is dual: both ephemeral and persistent. The perishable nature of photographic cardboard or paper is compensated by the influence of an image has upon those who come into contact with it. Postcards are meant to be collected, offered as a gift or mailed, while the similarities between the characters of the postcards and a certain family event would dynamize and charge with emotions an image that is otherwise inert.

Accessible in price and available on an increasingly large scale, postcards from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. cover a wide variety of themes



<sup>15</sup> Patricia Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

and techniques, and they document social aspects of childhood. As a public form of communication, they are meant to initiate people of various age categories in the folkloric culture of that epoch. Likewise, through symbols, languages and imagery, relatives can share messages with the children, so that they become more responsible or acquire a certain “self esteem”, thus getting involved in the process of growing up. It is clear that, when operating with images, it is easier for the children to assimilate and interpret significations.



From the viewpoint of the historian, a postcard may possibly be one of the most interesting documents in visual culture. Most like family photographs, postcards convey information on fashion, on designers and merchants, as well as on the “taste of the public”. At the turn of the century, most of these postcards from Bukovina are actually of a German or Austrian origin. In their typical clothes, confident and accustomed with photo shootings, children in postcards are (or should be) the emblem of a happy age. They represent either the Romantic ideal of an innocent and vulnerable child, or an outstanding elegance, almost some kind of sensuality that tends to neutralize certain formal social constraints that were specific to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In postcards we can identify a certain “prefabricated” image of children (**pictures 8, 9**) especially when the

adults try to squeeze them in certain molds, as they project onto them their own expectations, dreams or frustrations.

The result of such a maneuver is a dual one, as it implies “power” and “pleasure”: the power comes from a superior knowledge of the adults, and the pleasure is due to the beauty and seduction of childhood<sup>16</sup>. Dominated by the scenarios, demands and scrutiny of the adults, children submit to “power” and offer “pleasure” in an authentic game of dissimulation. The nature of the image gone public creates conceptual significations and bears a strong emotional charge.

In our corpus of postcards, we noticed that the most numerous ones belong to publishing houses and companies such as *Rotophot* and *E. A. Schwerdtfeger* from Berlin, *Regel & Krug* from Leipzig or *Photobrom* from Vienna<sup>17</sup>. This type of images allows us to identify at



<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.tpa-project.info/html/body\\_rp\\_trademarks\\_2.html](http://www.tpa-project.info/html/body_rp_trademarks_2.html).

least three categories of hypostases children are presented in: nostalgic (**picture 10**), curious (**picture 11**) and playful (**picture 12**).



The first one – the nostalgic child – connects to the idea of “home-sickness” or to the feeling of losing something from someone’s past. It is no coincidence that these particular postcards were mailed to Suceava by a young man who was a student in Vienna, and the receiver was also a child. The other two aspects we mentioned – curiosity and playfulness – are put to account in suggestive images that reflect the authentic values and abilities of childhood.

As they intuitively sense the importance of the semantic exchange between the two constitutive elements – image and text – some editors choose connotative images that establish indirect relations with the text, for purely argumentative purposes: for instance, the image of the little “gentleman” published by E. A. Schwerdtfeger from Berlin, that reads: Ich weiß nicht was soll es bedeuten, / daß ich so traurig bin? (**picture 13**).

Sometimes, postcards contain clumsy or naïve rhymes excerpted from children’s folklore (such as Max u. Moritz. / *Und sie lachen alle beide / tanzen Ringelreihn vor Freude. / Und der Moritz sagt: "Gieb acht, / Jetzt wird's noch einmal gemacht"*), or even inevitably conventional holiday greetings.



All the observations we have mentioned above lead us to the conclusion that depicting childhood by means of old photographs and postcards dating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. Bukovina, is so diverse and extensive. It was shaped by two models: a) a conventional, artificial, cold and neutral model, produced by a photographic studio and b) a natural and unconventional model that exalted the value of childhood. If the children’s image its correct understanding, it

could have an active role in rediscovering and reevaluating the aspects that concern the peculiarities of the youngest members of society, i.e. habits, beliefs, behavior, mentality and even duties and obligations imposed by family, community or society in general. It creates a wide range of possibilities for research: details of the costumes and of the décor (in correlation with the social background of the young protagonists in the studio), emotional implications, etc. In other words, this is a formidable epistemological challenge that can facilitate the synchronization of individual or collective life stories with certain aspects of social history.

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1. "The typical patriarchal image". Around 1900. Source: Tiberiu Polocoseriu Private Photographs Collection;
2. *Maternal bond*. Unknown date. Source: "Simion Florea Marian" Memorial House Photographs Collection;
3. *First communion*. Pre-1910. Source: Tiberiu Polocoseriu Private Photographs Collection;
4. *Portraying baby in the nude*. Pre-1910. Tiberiu Polocoseriu Private Photographs Collection ;
5. *Fauntleroy suit*. Unknown date. Source: "Simion Florea Marian" Memorial House Photographs Collection;
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12. German postcard. *Regel & Krug, Leipzig*. Source: "Simion Florea Marian" Memorial House Photographs Collection;
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