

“THE END OF INNOCENCE”.
THE CHILDREN OF BUKOVINA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Rezumat: *„Sfârșitul inocenței”. Copiii Bucovinei în timpul Primului Război Mondial.*

Interesul pentru experiențele trăite de copii în anii Primului Război Mondial a crescut substantial în ultimele decade. Autobiografiile și memoriile private, documente și tot felul de povestiri prezintă dimensiunea războiului și modul în care l-au perceput copiii. Afectați de întreruperea vieții de acasă și a școlii, de părinții care lipseau și de moarte, acești inocenți au încercat să înțeleagă motivele din spatele evenimentelor care le bulversaseră comunitatea, restructurându-le atitudinile față de familie, frică, joacă și viață. Această lucrare își propune să arate cum au experimentat Marele Război copiii din cea mai estică provincie a monarhiei austriece, cum s-a manifestat omniprezența războiului în viața lor de zi cu zi și cum au fost văzuți combatanții – ruși, austrieci, germani și unguri – de către cei mai tineri locuitori ai Bucovinei

Abstract: *Interest in the children’s experiences in World War One has grown substantially in the last decades. Autobiographies and private memories, documents and all kind of stories present the dimension of warfare and how the children perceived it. Affected by disruption to home life and to schooling, by absent parents, and death, these innocents tried to understand the reasons behind the events that stunned their community, restructuring attitudes towards family, fear, play, and life. This paper aims to expose how the children of the most eastern province of the Austrian Monarchy experienced the Great War, how was manifested the pervasiveness of the war to their everyday lives, and how the combatants – Russians, Austrians, Germans, and Hungarians – were seen by the youngest inhabitants of Bukovina.*

Résumé: *“La fin de l’innocence”. Les enfants de la Bucovine pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*

L’intérêt pour les expériences vécues par les enfants les années de la Première Guerre Mondiale augmenta substantiellement les dernières décennies. Les autobiographies et les mémoires privés, les documents et toutes sortes de récits présentent la dimension de la guerre et la manière dans laquelle les enfants l’aperçurent. Affectés par l’interruption de la vie de chez soi et de l’école, du manque des parents et de la mort, ces innocents essayèrent à

comprendre les motifs derrière les événements qui bouleversèrent leur communauté, en restructurant leurs attitudes envers la famille, la peur, le jeu et la vie. L'ouvrage ci-joint se proposa à montrer comment les enfants de la plus orientale province de la monarchie autrichienne expérimentèrent la Grande Guerre, comment se manifesta l'omniprésence de la guerre dans leur vie quotidienne et comment les plus jeunes habitants de la Bucovine aperçurent les combattants – Russes, Autrichiens, Allemands et Hongrois.

Keywords: Bukovina, children, childhood, WWI, drama, witness, memoir.

Introduction

As a quite prolific theme, the *First World War* has inspired the Romanian historians in their attempt to reconstruct dramatic experiences as faithfully as possible. As it happens, a certain reserve in the approach of a vulnerable segment of society would have confusing effects upon the research. Such is the case of the “children of war”, the main subject of a domain which is frequently viewed as being subordinated to the history of family in general¹. While in Western historiography these types of preoccupations are no longer a novelty, it was only in the last decade that we can speak, within the Romanian area, about the premises of a synthetic and academic re-evaluation of the way our forefathers have spent their childhood².

The history of children in Bukovina still “slips through fingers”, and caution remains a must. As statistic data and official information are often disarming, the solution to overcoming the impasse is to associate the “instruments” of the historian with those of the philologist, especially when the necessary “raw material” is extracted from the media, diaries and autobiographies. First of all, those who write about the children in Bukovina during WWI are all adult. Second, we never deal with descriptions of the child during the war, *stricto sensu*, but with fragments or parts of wider reconstitutions of life. The memory of childhood appears as an autobiography most of the time, so it is bound to variable doses of subjectivity. It is hard to establish the frequency or the amount of fictional elements in such documents, but they are definitely not scarce. In other words, a more or less overt reluctance on behalf of some researchers is to be expected.

¹ Steven Mintz, *Why the History of Children Matters*, “Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth”, No. 5, 2012, p. 17.

² Luminița Dumănescu, *Introducere în istoria copilăriei. Trecutul unei discipline de la Aries la SHCY* [Introduction to the History of Childhood. The Antecedents of a Discipline from Aries to SHCY], in E. Mihalache, A. Cioflâncă (eds.), *In Medias Res. Studii de istorie culturală* [In Medias Res. Studies of Cultural History], Iași, 2007, pp. 24-42.

There is still the urge to investigate such resources, too, as the combination of actual history and subjective essay will often lead to the discovery of historical realities.

Raised and schooled in adversity

A first kind of trauma is represented by the absence of the father, who has become "a soldier in God knows what front where the Austrian empire needs cannon fodder in the war"³. In the *Memoirs* of the poet and novelist Teodor C. Grosu (better known under his pseudonym, Iulian Vesper), the idyllic life in the village of Horodnicul de Sus is suddenly interrupted in August 1914, when the 6-year old child finds out that his parent, "along with numerous other villagers of his age, was conscripted. I would remain alone with my mother, who gave me, the same month, a little brother called Ionică. We received help from my father's older brother, uncle Ion, until him, too, would be drafted"⁴. At the age of 7, Carol-Ludovic Lemne, son of Rudolf – an imperial clerk at the Lisaura town hall, conscripted in the Austrian army and taken prisoner by Mestecăniş – tries to help his family "in all and every chore"⁵. Nicolae C. Popescu writes in his *Notes of Autobiographical Journal* about himself, coming into the world on December 16, 1916, saying that the event was clouded by the troubles caused by the war, as his "dad is away from home"⁶. Some children, regardless of age, do not hesitate to take chances facing their fears, defying everything, striving to prove that they can respond to the harsh realities of life. The young boy Ioachim Popescu from Cireş Opaiţeni – who later became the author of *Story of My Life* – understands the significance of the rumours "of terror that appeared from everywhere, until one day when the church bells announced the outbreak of World War One. A few days later, every young and healthy man, including my dad, went to war and left only sorrow and tears behind. From that day on, us boys, young as we were, would help mom around the house. We had no news from dad"⁷. Such writings reveal the precocious process of growing up of these children, as they assume early in life the role of the "provider" and "helper" of their mothers and, sometimes, that of the "head" of the family.

³ Nicolae C. Popescu, *Note de jurnal autobiografic* [Notes of Autobiographical Journal], in Ilie Dugan-Opaiţ (ed.), *Familia Dugan din Cireş-Opaiţeni* [Dugan Family from Cireş-Opaiţeni], Rădăuţi, 2009, p. 283.

⁴ Iulian Vesper, *Memorii* [Memoirs], Bucureşti, 1999, p. 12.

⁵ ***, *Când amintirea începe să vorbească. Colegiul Naţional "Ştefan cel Mare" din Suceava la 150 de ani* [When Memory Begins to Speak. "Stefan cel Mare" National College of Suceava at 150 Years], Suceava, 2010, p. 53.

⁶ Nicolae C. Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁷ Ioachim Popescu, *Povestea vieţii mele* [Story of My Life], in Ilie Dugan-Opaiţ (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 301.

Obviously, school is left aside as children fail to attend their classes, especially in the rural areas where working and providing for the bare necessities are a priority. The deterioration of the school buildings, the drafting of the teachers and the everyday insecurity lead to a situation in which in the school year of 1917-1918, from 560 students in the village of Straja, only 36 would attend the classes⁸. In Chernovitz, Aspazia Balășescu refuses to register her son in school and motivates: "I will not let my boy out in the street in times of war"⁹. Reprehended by her husband, who is concerned that "no one knows when the war will be over; Ler's years are passing by, and what he learns here and there does not coincide with the school curriculum", Aspazia decides that the boy would study at home on the manuals they had in the attic: reading manuals, a *comput* (arithmetic) book, the *Small Catechism* and the *Romanian Grammar*¹⁰.

Another cause of trauma is constituted by refuge. Scarred by suffering and violence, children try to understand the anguish, the hopelessness and the panic of the grown-ups. Anița Nandriș-Cudla writes about the summer of 1914, and recounts that on a Sunday morning she saw, at the gate, "two carts, fully loaded with sacks and clothes, and with women and children on top of them", ready to flee, from the path of the Muscovites, along with the retreating Austrian army¹¹. In an essay called *Ecumenical Christmas 1916*, Stefanie Riedl-Ruczkowski also recalls the moment when the well-to-do people of the upper classes left the town of Gura Humorului. But not the others; they were "sacrificed, brought back, while the bridges were blown up and the barns were set on fire". Her family was among the unfortunate that were trapped in a town that was already abandoned by the imperial authorities: "We didn't have enough time to fully understand our situation. We could already hear the grumble of the cannons and the hissing of shrapnel flying in the air. We sought shelter in a basement". For three days, intoxicated with alcohol, the "foreign hordes" had unleashed with no restraint whatsoever, turning into "hyenas" The idyllic and peaceful space of the Bukovinian town is declared as "hostile, and treated accordingly: people got tortured and buildings got burnt. [...] Imagine all the wooden houses covered with dry wooden shingles! They flew around us like fireworks. After wrapping my brother in a blanket, dad put him in a blackcurrant bush and he put a stick with a piece of cloth in my hand so that I could protect myself from the burning

⁸ Vasile Pasailă, *Straja. Vatră de istorie bucovineană din Valea Sucevei* [Straja. Hearth of Bukovinian History of Suceava Valley], București, 2009, p.114.

⁹ Dragoș Vitencu, *Scrisori de la Dumnezeu* [Letters from God], Suceava, 2012, p. 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹¹ Anița Nandriș-Cudla, *20 de ani în Siberia. Amintiri din viață* [20 Years in Siberia. Memories of Life], București, 2010, p. 27.

fragments. The shingles were flying and carried along the flames. Everything looked hopeless. A woman from the neighbourhood gathered all the children around her and evoked, under the open skies, the litany of the Virgin Mary. The words *Holy Mary, pray for us* resounded in a terrifying manner in the night air"¹².

The changes of positions and troops are doubled by terror; it is a continuous succession of peoples, vices and fears: "One day in late fall we came upon a Russian patrol in the village, then more of them came along. We were really scared at first, then we found out they were harmless"¹³. Russian soldiers are replaced by Austrian ones, and then, "one morning", "several shots" were heard and then "lots of Cossacks" entered the village. They make a big impression on the children due to "their huge hats", "their long spears and their small and fast horses". After only three months, the Austrians occupy once again their old positions and astonish the local population: "We didn't even realize when and where the Cossacks retreated"¹⁴. The fading of the effects of such actions, rather hard actually, can be explained by the nostalgia that appears as we recall the past, as Vesper, as a child, notices one morning, "full of regrets, the disappearance of some of the closest soldiers" whom he never thought possible to ever be separated from. Except that "other came" in their place, and, oddly enough, they were "equally friendly. Our house had seen the passage of all kind of soldiers: Siberians, Kalmyks, Tatars, Hungarians, Austrians and Romanians, both from Transylvania and Banat"¹⁵.

Intertwining of "normality" and "abnormality".

As the war is turning into a state of facts and poverty and misery fail to surprise anyone anymore, children start to see the soldiers as "their own kin", according to their disposition to empathize with the community. During the four years "of the war – writes Ioachim Popescu – the Russians had occupied us three times, but they never harmed anybody, on the contrary, they helped those in need, they shared their ration of bread, sugar, matches or tobacco with the elderly and the smokers. Many of them would trade their flannels, blankets, shirts or tarpaulins for a dozen of eggs and a chunk of butter. The Germans and Hungarians, on the other hand, were mean, they did not befriend anyone, they saw us as enemies despite them being our soldiers (or so we used to say)"¹⁶.

¹² Stefanie Riedl-Ruczkowski, *Ecumenical Christmas 1916*, "Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia", tome 12, no. 4, 1989, pp. 18-19.

¹³ Ioachim Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Iulian Vesper, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁶ Ioachim Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

As for the Christmas of the year 1916, it was celebrated by the Riedl-Ruczkwoskis together with a Russian officer and a couple of his soldiers. Upon request from the commanding officer, with the permission of the father (who was terrorized by the idea that a potential refusal would lead to deportation in Siberia) and with the efforts made by the mother, the grandparents and the cook (native to Russian Poland), they prepared a special meal, adorned the tree, sang carols and recited prayers. The family would receive some gifts (a wooden horse for the boy, a nice doll and some chocolate, cigarettes for the men, combs and soap for the women). On the way to church where the Christmas mess was to be held, the officer allows the women and children who had been asked to clean out the snow to go home, and he offered them bread, cans, sugar, tea and a rouble each. This is the image of the soldiers of the Great Russian nation, who “know how to be generous”¹⁷. The same generosity of the “Muscovite” is shared by the accounts of Domnica Bizovi, who evokes the moment of her family being evacuated from Noua Sulița. In the turmoil caused by the soldiers who entered the yard of the Vaipans and by the eviction note, Veroanca, the lady of the house, “forgot her youngest son Ionică in the crib behind the stove. On her way to the gate it hit her and she started to cry. The Russians allowed her to go back for her child”¹⁸.

The memory of the Petrescu brothers cherishes the image of yet another soldier, a combination of childish innocence and military discipline. While the mother is away in the fields with her oldest son (aged 12 and considered to be a “full-grown lad”, who “drives his horse and carriage wherever is needed”, as he is the “trusted man” of the family)¹⁹, the two youngest are in charge of the house and the animals in the household. The hot weather urges them to the river, for a bath, but only after locking the “door to the house”, after taking their weapons: “rifles and swords made out from wooden shingles”, after taking the dog by the chain. Ioachim writes: “After we cooled nicely, I gave the order for our departure, then *ab marș, țu haus*²⁰ and, in a few minutes, we got home. We were in for a big surprise: a Russian soldier sat on the porch, his shotgun by the wall and his cap aside, as it was a hot day. When we saw him we froze: no, we were not scared, we just needed to decide how to attack him. What were we to do: take him prisoner or let him go? When the soldier saw us armed as we were with the swords, and especially with the dog on the chain, he started to laugh and called us over, and then he petted us on the head and asked us about our names, about our siblings, and so on. First we thought that he wanted to call a truce. We spoke in Romanian,

¹⁷ Stefanie Riedl-Ruczkowski, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ http://www.mareleboian.com/istorie_austr_1918.html.

¹⁹ Ioachim Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

²⁰ Incorrect German: *ab Marsch zuhaus*, “marching home”.

but it was all Greek to us. Then he asked us for some *yayitsi* (eggs), we ran to the barn and brought him some, he put them in his pocket saying *spassiba* (thank you), and he left. If he asked, we would have even given him the eggs under the hen just to get rid of him”²¹. Such a text, in its naivety, remains a relevant example of the paradox we call the “normality of war”: children would manufacture guns (albeit toy guns), they try to become familiar to their usage and they even see them as indispensable accessories in their journeys. Even the marching order is given in German, which indicates the appurtenance to a certain party; that is the reason for the perplexity they experience when they come face to face with the Russian soldier sitting “on the porch of the house”, and also for the dilemma that his presence determines: “Should we take him prisoner or let him go?”

A strange kind of adaptability turns “the bombarding and the bayonet fighting in the orchards of the village”²² or “the quartering of Russian or German soldiers [...], according to the succession of battles on the immense front lines” into “common sights” for the children. They see “the fruited fields” being “entangled in a web of barbed wire”, they see trenches being dug, they see “the streets crowded with green military cars and horseback riders”, they see “the complicated network of cannons” as they assist “every day to air fights. When smoke balls appeared, one of the airplanes would definitely roll down from the sky. On hidden paths, my mother and I would reach our field and dug the potatoes all day long, as a brown observation balloon kept its watch from the sky, up above the village of Marginea towards the bright blue ridges of the mountains far away”²³. Children get used to “shooting practice taking place on the Osoi, to the unceasing rumble of the cannons, to the alarms at night time, to the refugees from Arbore, Burla, Milișăuți or Iaslovăț who crowded the houses”²⁴. Also “the steadfast beams of the spotlights watching invisible airplanes and the rattling of the machine-guns, followed by the intense silence of the night”²⁵ become part of normality, while “troops in military gear” march on the streets and the “cobweb of telephone wires, woven in trees and stakes and along the fences” leads to “some neighbouring houses”²⁶.

Childhood in the years of the war has some particular features: children herd their cows or gather grass along the road that links Rădăuți to Marginea, and in the meadows of the Sucevița, alongside abandoned ditches and burrows, alongside water-filled trenches and deep stitches claimed by hares. Even their

²¹ Ioachim Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

²² Iulian Vesper, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

food bags would be filled with shells, unexploded shrapnel, and telephone wire. As they take “a long look to the vehicles, cannons, carts and troops that march towards the mountains while singing their nostalgic songs”²⁷, children would mingle between the quartered soldiers in the yard, between caissons, cars and horses; they know the way to the trenches in front of the village”; with their friends, they creep through the barbed wire; they learn Russian, German or Hungarian words, they learn songs and “mumble them like they were something funny” – like Ionuț in Dragoș Vitencu’s novel, who doesn’t stop repeating *Marusia otravilasia/ V’bolnetsiu i vezut*²⁸.

At the same time, children receive the sympathy of soldiers like *honved*²⁹ Mișka, who shares his slice of bread and plum jam; they receive attention from some of the officers, like the Siberian lieutenant Ivanov, who takes them for a horse ride down and puts cookies in their pockets, or like *Feldwebel*³⁰ Gheorghe Cojocaru from Banat, who takes them in his lap at night and tells them the most beautiful stories³¹. And since Ionuț cannot forget the story of Ivan Turbincă³², he thinks that “among so many Russians, there must be at list one to know about Ivan. If he finds him, he would ask him to send lots of people into his backpack, people whose meanness he had plenty of time to hear about so far”. Nevertheless, the meeting with a “tall soldier, wearing a hat about the size of four human heads, whose chest was crisscrossed by cartridge belts”, who had a “huge bag at his hip”, does not follow the child’s scenario, since “the spook ran to him and raised him in the air with huge hands, like Ionuț had never seen before”. Unaware that such an attitude reflected the “giant’s” nostalgia for the “child he left home in the Caucasus”, Ionuț is frightened as he thinks the Russian wants to “bag him in the haversack, or worse, to throw him in the cauldron where he cooked his meal”. Besides, the Russian’s gesture reminds him of a story old Toader used to tell about “ogres who eat children”. The screeching and scratching the little “wild thing” puts against the supposed Ivan Haversack makes him forget about tenderness, as he mumbles “through his teeth: *Ciort!*”³³

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁸ Incorrect Russian: *Marusia got poisoned/Aand they took her to the hospital*, according to Dragoș Vitencu, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

²⁹ A soldier in the Hungarian infantry.

³⁰ A master sergeant in the Austrian army.

³¹ Iulian Vesper, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³² Lit. *Ivan Haversack*, short humorous story written in the year 1880 by the Romanian writer Ion Creangă, about the adventures of a Russian soldier in heaven and in hell.

* Russ. *чѣрт*, “devil, demon”.

³³ Dragoș Vitencu, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

Under threat of death

In some cases, the childish innocence mellows the perception on the magnitude of the war, i. e. some children do not apprehend its meaning other than by the stories told by the parent who returns from the front: “By the spring of 1915, father came home for three days and told us about the troubles and dangers he had faced. That is when I finally understood what the war was all about”³⁴); for other children, instead, the military conflict is a personal experience with painful memories. Ioachim Popescu finds a yellow metal tube, three or four centimetres long, sealed at one end and filled with a yellowish solidified powder; he then tries to make a pencil holder out of it. When he places the little tube (actually a shell) on the stove it explodes in his face, causing a serious haemorrhage which will lead to the loss of the eye, due to the negligence and indolence of doctor Keschman from the hospital in Storozhynets’³⁵.

The pauper life conditions between 1916-1918 generated widespread epidemics. Only seven out of the seventeen children in the Bodnărescu household survive the First World War³⁶. Parents try to protect their children by preventing any contact with potential contamination sources. For instance, professor Alexandru Baloşescu from Chernovitz refuses to take his son to town, as “among the disgust towards everything around him, he feared the boy would get some disease from the filth in the streets”³⁷. Nevertheless, little sickly Ler (who “would spend days in bed each year, several times”), succumbs to one of the deadliest epidemics. The new disease, “unknown to the people and called the *Spanish flu*”, puts half of the inhabitants of Chernovitz to bed; it puzzles and frightens everyone with its “nose and mouth bleeding, which doctors cannot stop or at least explain”. But while the majority of the diseased cannot find “any effective cure”, others – with Ler among them – get well “unexpectedly”³⁸. The end is completely different for the children that are considered to be “snitches for the enemy” – no matter which one – or “traitors”. In two monographs about the First World War in Bukovina, Teodor Bălan mentions several cases of torture and even execution of children, such as Sofronia Onciulencu, a 15 year old girl who gets “kicked in the head”³⁹, and Odochia Leiba from Torachi, a 14 year old peasant girl who gets so

³⁴ Ioachim Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

³⁵ Ilie Dugan-Opaiţ, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁷ Dragoş Vitencu, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

³⁹ Teodor Bălan, *Suprimarea mişcărilor naţionale din Bucovina pe timpul războiului*

badly clubbed by Saul Linder (a ZGS Führer⁴⁰ from the rangers in Storozhynets'-Putila)", that when "he beat her, she involuntarily wet herself"⁴¹.

From a historical viewpoint, the case of Constantin Storoșciuc from Cuciurul Mare is by far the most relevant. The 15 year old boy is entrusted with the household in September 1914, after his mother and siblings take refuge from the Russians in Iordănești; he is left home alone, living alternatively "at home or in an aunt's house, rarely going out in the street"⁴². In October 1914, when accused by an absurd justice officer of "betraying to the Russians the positions of the Austrian army" in exchange of "three roubles and some sugar lumps"⁴³, the child is arrested, "beaten senseless" and imprisoned in the rangers' garrison. The main witnesses to the incident are also children, namely Pentelei and Vasile Ciornohuz, a 9 year old and an 11 year old. Intimidated and terrorized by ranger Ioan Drescher, flogged with a whip (Vasile Ciornohuz receives three strikes, one of them on the hand), they confirm the act of treason⁴⁴, which causes Constantin to be sentenced to death by hanging. This episode would be included by Mircea Streinul in one of his novels where he speaks about the paths of childhood in an "absurd time" when paradise crumbles, wounds never heal and people became "quixotic"⁴⁵.

Once again, in the episode of the massacre of Boian, Vitencu associates sugar with the image of the cruelty and nonsense of the war. Besides, Traian Roșu believes that generally speaking, "the four-year blockade made the scantiness of sugar impossible for the people [...] to resist its mirage"⁴⁶. While such a temptation is hard on an adult, it will certainly transform a child into an instrument, and, consequently, into a victim of the confrontation between the Austrian and the Russian armies. On the first Sunday after Easter, grocer Roll speculates on an orthodox tradition when painted eggshells are thrown in the water to reach the souls of the dead; he persuades some children to throw in the small creek of Hucău

mondial, 1914-1918 [The Suppression of the National Movements in Bukovina during the World War, 1914-1918], Cernăuți, 1923, p. 118.

⁴⁰ ZGS, short for Germ. *Zollgrenzschutz*, "Customs Border Guards".

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Mircea Diaconu, *Mircea Streinul. Viața și opera* [Mircea Streinul. Life and Work], Rădăuți, 1998, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Traian Roșu, *Amintiri în legătură cu unirea Bucovinei și intrarea armatei române* [Memories about the Union of Bukovina and the Romanian Army Entry], in Ion I. Nistor (ed.), *Amintiri răzlețe din timpul Unirii* [Scattered Memories during Union], Cernăuți, 1938, p. 361.

some bottles containing “messages about the manpower and munitions of the enemy that has reached Boian”. The Austrians were supposed to collect the information from the river Prut, in the point of confluence. The price he pays the children is “a handful of candy each, with the promise for more candy after the exploit”. Unfortunately, the plan is discovered by a Russian soldier, which brings terrible consequences to the whole community. As the three “ten year old” children who throw message bottles in the creek cannot be identified, dozens of other children from the village are gathered and “intimidated”: “They aligned the children in one row and shot one in ten children. They arrested the others and threaten that the next day they would shoot one in five children, unless they found out who were the ones who had sent the bottles”. The Austrian counter-attack prevented the carnage, while it could not impede the population to be punished: they were forced to walk to Noua Suliță, where they were put in freight cars and sent to “a place called Astrakhan”. The return of the Austrian troops to Boian lead to a macabre discovery: “more than three hundred dead young peasants, left unburied”⁴⁷. On the other hand, those who were guilty – according to Count Meran – of the “defeat and dismay of the Austrian army in Bukovina”, are sent to “the prisons of Hungary”. Closing the convoy that crosses the town, “a barefoot child, about twelve years old, drained by exhaustion and cold, with his hands chocked by the cold irons, was dragged along, as he couldn’t walk by himself any more”⁴⁸.

Conclusions

Most like the rest of Europe, Bukovina offers a heterogeneous and polymorphic image of childhood in the turmoil of war, an image that is still dispersed within sources contained in archives, older or newer publications, memoirs, etc. Once organized and analysed through a specific filter, such a material can find its rightful place in the history of the children of Bukovina, adding to the inevitable similitude a specific and distinctive nuance.

There are some characteristics that are general in the relationship between children and war; independently of their ethnicity, religion, birthplace or place of residence, children, as witnesses and actors of conflict have emotion, fear and uncertainty in common. The perception of the child who lives the events is doubled by the retrospective perception of the adult who reflects upon the event, and this is also a universal situation. But there are also some specific situations. While in some sources war becomes a time of adventure and

⁴⁷ Dragoș Vitencu, *op. cit.*, pp.125-127.

⁴⁸ George Rotică, *Mucenicii noștri* [Our Martyrs], in Ion I. Nistor (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 348.

enthusiasm for some children, the majority of testimonies associates was with economic difficulties, with separation (whether permanent or temporary) from the loved ones, with grief, etc. In the memoirs of Bukovina there appears a recurrent image of the child who is confronted with the brutal imposition of a new way of life; the child is directly affected by the separation from, or the loss of the parents and siblings, by refuge, uprooting, poverty, famine, by the destruction of the mere bases of life, family and community, by death and physical injuries caused by weapons and torture, etc.

This portrait of childhood is obviously very different from the optimistic one depicted by some, such as the Swedish writer Ellen Key, at the beginning of the 20th century.⁴⁹ The background that was supposed to inaugurate “the century of the child” by respecting childhood and its laws under the slogan *long live the children*, had changed into suffering, persecution and misery.

⁴⁹ Ellen Keyn, *Secolul copilului* [The Century of the Child], București, 1978.