

CONSTANȚA'S HARBOUR LIFE AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract: *The harbour and sea life were inextricably linked components of Constanța in modern times, which is why the history of the town would be incomplete without these issues. The harbour with its animation, with its mixing, with the swarm of back and forth, was the most dynamic city area and would enter numbness, like the city itself, only on very cold winter days. If the harbour's activity was affected due to political and military events or diplomatic conflicts, the whole city life suffered; if its activity was up, everyone had reason to rejoice. The harbour's city dwellers were related to the Levant with the help of the Eastern Line RMS vessels, with Central and Western Europe as well as America, using the Western lines and also other foreign, shipping agencies; finally with Russia, especially using military ones, and the Bulgarian neighbours.*

Keywords: *harbour, ships, economy, festivities, travels*

Harbour world and life at sea represented inextricably mixed up components to Constanța, and for this reason a history of the city without these aspects would be incomplete. If regarding the harbour, its economic strength was the main reason for it to be a city, life at sea connected, by mariners and its travellers, the city to everyone everywhere, and for this reason it seemed more often related to the events of Levant than those across the Danube.

The harbour has been one of the most animated areas in the city. Here business did not cease, but was scarce over the winter.

A list of the sugar requirements for the families of those in the "Exploiting and sea ports business", II Division Constanța, recalls of 80 employees, including: managers, engineers; drawers; heads of team; conductors; supervisors; a large number of mariners: masters, mariners and sailors; divers oilmen; mechanics; donkey men; store-keepers; people of the service and guards¹, without counting the workers, which do not appear in statistics.

They represented a permanent presence on piers, people with a preparation and of the most diverse social classes, hence the mixture of the world within the harbour. A piece of work in 1927 referring to the workers from ports, noted that the Black Sea port of Constanta has "created a huge clientele of workers of all categories, brute force for cereals, for goods, coal and timber (dockers), coachers for transport, rowers for cleaning wagons and barges, in competition with floating lifts or barns with cereals on ships"². We believe this enumeration only is sufficient to evoke the bustle of a day's work on the bays of Constanța.

The animation was higher in the harbour in autumn in September and November, when export of cereals grew substantially. Of foreign vessels, the most well represented there have been – according to statistics of the year 1903 – the Italian and Austrian, but the best deals they have been made by English ships, which always left full. In respect of men travel, along with the Romanian sea-going service (S.M.R.) the largest number of passengers had been transported by the Austrian Loyd company vessels and the General Society of Italian Navigation (Florio-Rubantino)³.

The departure and arrival of ships has been a permanent reason for animation in the port. Only in 1900, 26.700 passengers transited the bays, passengers and seamen, speeding toward all the corners of the world⁴.

Especially trips on the Oriental line, which were made for pleasure, have generated a real bustle on loading bays intended for passenger ships. If boarding was in full season, as a result of offers coming from the S.M.R., as result of successful holidays, as were the soirees and then the celebration on Navy day, which drew people from all over the

country, then the agitation was maximum. The bays would be filled by people, by boats on which people would sail pending the signal of departure, by porters, ladies and gentlemen, who took their baggage mingling with the customs services employees and by coachers, but especially by those people who came to farewell and, of course, the crowds of onlookers.

In 1896 when S.M.R. decides to take a trip to Constantinople with favourable discounts: "A large mass waiting for its departure. On board there were 223 persons, of whom the greater part were travellers. [...] All the passengers were on board until Constanța could no longer be seen"⁵. In 1901 students taken to Greece by prof. Tocilescu are waiting for a lot of people who had come to say good bye while the 34 Infantry regiment's orchestra was playing. A sheet of "Adevărul" newspaper circulated with a translation of a poem from Byron, made by Toma Moscovici, dedicated to Romanian travellers. At the end of his journey the bay was filled with electric illumination, and the people shouted and waved handkerchiefs⁶.

Usually on the headed down slope in the port there was a knot of happy curious people attracted by the ship's departure at night. Among them, stranded holidaymakers, possibly carriages panting with baggage, anxious to catch up with it at the end of the first vessel siren which gave the signal of departure. Up on the quayside, the road that crossed the railway rails required travellers to dodge wagons stationed here in the dark, which was not so pleasant. Once they was by customs buildings, the pier appeared in daylight, which caused relief for passers by. There was a swarm of passengers, porters and the crowds of onlookers, along those already boarded. Ships were also electrically illuminated and decorated with flags. After the second siren last wishes were exchanged, and those who did not sail had to get out of the coverta (upper deck of the vessel) on the mobile bridge, while they said the last words, happy while traveling. Moving the machinery and propellers, then pulling the chain of the sea anchor heightened the effect of these moments. Finally the ship: "a huge monster, as long as the bay" was put into motion while the rest on the shore waved their handkerchiefs: "The curious, strewn along the pier, looking across the horizon, and not eager to leave. Some running after the shadows of the vessel, to the end structure of the pier, up the last headlight"⁷. On the quayside there was an animated atmosphere, the departure of the ship accompanied by public cheers, among which there were the parents or the relatives of travellers⁸. This was the atmosphere on the departure across the Oriental line, the atmosphere in which lived and were formed the young people and children of Constanța.

Commuters have represented one of the most attractive parts of the port. Coming from all sides or leaving to everywhere, they have increased the hubbub on piers, all the more since

¹ Direcția Județeană a Arhivelor Naționale Constanța, Fond Primăria Constanța (infra FPC), file 16/1916, p.15-17.

² P. Demetriad (Inginer), *Autonomia zonelor libere ale porturilor din străinătate față de regimul porturilor noastre*, Institutul de arte grafice „Dunărea”, Brăila, 1927, p.XLVI.

³ G. Christodorescu, *Portul Constanța. Mișcare comercială și maritimă în anul 1903*, Tipografia „Ovidius” H. Vurlis, 1905, p.139-141.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.141.

⁵ „Epoca”, București, seria II, anul II, nr. 238, 27 August 1896, p.1.

⁶ Dem. D. STOENESCU, *Excursiune în Grecia făcută de studenții universitari sub direcția d-lui Gr. G. Tocilescu în 1901*, Tipo-Litografia Națională Ralian și Ignat Șamitca, Craiova, 1901, p.13.

⁷ „Sirena”, Constanța, an I, nr. 68, 28 Iulie 1916, p.1.

⁸ P. Macri, *Excursiune în Grecia*, Institutul de Arte Grafice „Eminescu”, București, 1901, p.5.

the press had its eyes on these events. The harbour enjoyed such interest especially after 1909, when the new installations and piers were put into service; its fame grew exponentially. In particular the departure and arrival of passenger vessels could give rise to real corteges, especially if they had counted important people. For instance, in August 4, 1910, in the port of Constanta with "Emperor Trajan vessel, a large number of holiday Turk excursionists, composed of senior officials, under the leadership of Cadry bey, governor Brussa city, arrived". The delegation, of which there were several Ottoman personalities, was received by the wharf prefect Ghica, constable Palade, county council secretary, Hafuz Raifat, county mufti, the Muslim colony from the city and a numerous public. The berthing of the vessel, the 34 Infantry Regiment, sang the Turkish imperial anthem.

Officials have been welcomed and have responded to row, and the prefect welcomed them in French, after which, with music, commuters and the crowd of curious permeate port streets, Independence Square and the street Carol I up to the railway station, where "our people have taken place in a train on the 7.35 a.m. with which went to Bucharest. Incidentally they visited the new mosque built by the government in the city"⁹. It is not difficult to imagine the animation on port bays and the atmosphere of a holiday preceding such comings, in so far as a large part of the population was Muslim. As a matter of fact there was the receipt of distinguished Ottoman figures reaching the city. In fact Constanța sought to maintain at all times and to reconcile the oriental charm with the most refined Western morals. It was one of the reasons of attraction for all who have left us writings about it. The festivities that loading bays have generated must not give the impression that here life was always full of fun and good humor. Port bays were the meeting point of the most colourful people and the interests of the most diverse. Seamen in this case shouting sometimes disagreements and their national beliefs could create conflicts across the country's borders, in which case the fight could move from the port in the street and in public places in the city.

One of the cases reported, occurred in March 1904, at 9.00 at night, where there has been a fight between two Japanese sailors from a stationed, commercial vessel and two seamen on a Russian vessel. The conflict was clearly linked to the Russo-Japanese War in the Orient.

Viewers would not only be pleased with such events but even have encouraged one or other of the parties: "the fight would have taken big, a large number of curious gathered around fighters on Independence Square, some took part with Japanese, others to the Russians". The police intervening has put an end to the fight"¹⁰ ruining viewers' fun.

The event which raised spirits by its political international notoriety, has been fruit of some reflections and jokes, locally: „how are they going to understand themselves (Russian mariners and Japanese), what language will have broken diplomatic relations and will have reached a state of conflict, we don't know, as we don't know either if the Japanese knew anything about or not that Constanța was a Russian territory, which they wanted to conquer".

And the author continues in the same note ending with: „O! If things would go as easily in the Far East. Would our cop's intervention have been enough not to hear of port Arthur, Seul and other cities such as Vladivostok"¹¹. Probably at coffee shops, tea-rooms and other types of premises frequented in the port there was eternal politics, especially that seamen came with such news. Maybe that's why port world risks becoming sometimes turbulent.

Public holidays, the visits of public figures, special events related to sea world, they were helping the port to become a meeting point of all its inhabitants and commuters, especially if the royal family or officials of high rank participated in the events. In fact, the baptism of S.M.R. vessels was made by

the royal family, and the monarch was the one who pounded a bottle of champagne to the sound of 21 cannon rounds and of the national anthem"¹².

Descriptions in the era are highly suggestive. Here's the one regarding the animation including the baptism of "Carol I" and "Princess Mary" vessels: "It was a solemn and impressive moment when « Princess Mary » has been set in motion and pointing at high seas. The crowd on the shore bursts into cheers vibrating air; men take off their hats, and dames shake handkerchiefs. The king, who was on board, also takes off his hat and welcomes its departure on different occasions; on board the « Elisabeth » cruiser cannon rounds are drawn, which trouble the sky, and the crew of various ships in port, « Dobrogea », « Medeea », « Rahova » and « Cocatrice », climbed to the deck honouring the new vessel, who shall submit mightily, breasting seas with its beautiful waves. Military music played national hymns and various songs. On the right-hand and left-hand more lifeboats and pushers can be seen, nicely decorated, which all farewell on « Princess Mary »". The Baptism of the new S.M.R vessel causes patriotic reflections to the journalist at "Universul" newspaper, who related: "There were sublime times, moments of emotion and inexpressible joy when the vessel soon christened began to cut first waves. All on board were joyful and good willing, on their faces one could see joy and contentment of mind, and there is no other way, when all may, having the same mind and the same feeling, thought on how Romania used to be 40 or 50 years ago [...] During the trip a maid on the vessel shall submit austere to the princess a damsel taking in her arms a baby of a few days who had been born on board « Princess Mary ». The Princess returned, took the child and pampered him. The trip took three-quarters of an hour"¹³.

Moments of joy, celebration, when the royal family lies in the middle of citizens, and has an opportunity to socialize, to make an impression. In fact, despite Princess Maria's contention that King Carol I did not like Constanta, in fact everything that was related to the harbour, the city and the mariners interested directly the monarch, just because he was watching this modernization as a personal creation. With respect to the harbour, in addition to the presence of different festive occasions, the king had granted "a beautiful amount" for raising in Constanta an edifice of all mariners, as there were in all major ports of the world"¹⁴.

Between the sea-going service, that is the main Romanian shipping company, port, and the inhabitants of Constanța a special relationship was created. Romanian vessels to the Orient, adventures, events through which they had been passing away from the country's borders were pursued with a similar fervor to horse races. Just by this facet turned more to the sea, from where its main resources came through, Constanța braided its life somewhat differently from that of the other cities of the country. A feeling of escaping to other parts of the world, more gentle, more hospitable, the mirage of exquisite beauties within a few steps, in Bosphorus, news broadcast immediately of the numerous crowds which waited for their ships from trips overseas, contact with commuters have drafted a special profile to the inhabitant and the city, giving it the fragrance of a colony.

Seamen in particular fueled the collective imagination with all sorts of stories, adventures and oddities. The master of "Cocatrice" stationary, whose trips to the Black Sea port of Constanta have turned him into the laughing stock, carried after him all sorts of weird tribal instruments, the captain being a collector of folk and ethnographic details from tribes with which he had come in contact. At night on the deck of the stationary he spoke highly of the places he had visited and delighted listeners with strange sounds from the various instruments brought by him, sounds which later on Ion Marin Sadoveanu would recognize in jazz rhythms. Such a character

⁹ „Adevărul”, București, an XXIII, nr. 7510, 5 August 1910, p.3.

¹⁰ „Adevărul de dimineața”, București, an I, nr. 51, 23 Martie 1904, p.3.

¹¹ „Farul”, Constanța, an I, nr. 20, 28 Martie 1904, p.3.

¹² „Dobrogea jună”, Constanța, an I, nr. 23, 15 Maiu 1905, p. 2.

¹³ „Universul”, București, an XVI, nr. 173, 5(17) Iulie 1898, p. 1.

¹⁴ „Universul”, București, an XXXIII, nr. 89, 27 Martie 1915, p. 4.

had an impact on young people, willing to stay awhile with the goliathous whisky drinker¹⁵.

The harbour became very animated and on the occasion of rescue missions to save vessels at risk in city radius, when public interest for those who are in distress was very large, especially because many families had men at sea, which caused a vivid solidarity with those who were in danger to fail¹⁶.

Here in the port, lay the true strength of Constanța. Ioan Adam describes in plastic colours too the bustle and hustle of the hundreds of workers that drudged to off-load ships, the crossing porters, some with the sacks loaded others in the opposite direction, with their naked hands: "decks diggers between shore and ships, are more than busy and bend crunched under the string of these hungry ones, whom come and go in the same crossing work and due diligence".

Then its summons and the screams in all the languages, the fuss from the anchors' chains, of trains which come and go, which shriek on the twisted rails, the cranes lifting goods from ships, here, where „all shall be taken and shall be given, is loaded and unloaded in the same hasty and fuss, under the same screams and rattling decks, to refresh the swarm that works and sweats”¹⁷.

Finally the pier which is also „a spreading of kernels trampled underfoot and mixed, over which flights of sparrows and hungry crows are flying”¹⁸. The presence of those who worked on the quayside and ships docked for disembarkment is also mentioned by the students who go to Greece with Professor Tocilescu in 1901¹⁹.

Boatmen have had their own contribution to increasing animation in the port, rather to extend it on the water, in the pools and in the roads.

Boatmen owned a service establishment previous to S.M.R., if there were not any in the time of the British, but that did not always rise to the level of their requirements.

In The Council meeting of 6 March 1882, a few city fathers have noticed that the “boatmen perceived high taxes from the passengers on boats and for goods” and the service was considered deplorable. That's why they requested the village Controller” to require the port's headquarters to display in all establishments from port and even 'in ships' fares for boatmen “to be known by passengers”²⁰. Normally the fares were of maximum 1 leu for each passenger and his baggage, 2 lei for vessels pulled into port and for the people on the roads, if the sea was rough.

More than that, for Muslim immigrants and poor persons “transport was done, and is done for free”, and in the case in which in a boat were more passengers, it was not perceived more than 50 bani (pence) by the person, or at least this is what provides the master port, Nicolae Macri, a well-known figure in local community: „But there are passengers who have two or three boats and they don't want to pay one franc for each transport although the boatman is liable for the loss or damage; here's the reason for complaints”. The master of the harbour assured the authorities that he had punished all boatmen who had outrageous prices, but sometimes this was out of the question because due to the competition “they perceived less than the fee imposed by us”. “In the case of marine disaster, the boatmen are bound to risk their lives to offer help”, which makes us think that the head did not want to fall out with them. In fact N. Macri showed that in times of need it would be able to apply reductions of fees, but from the report

handed in to the prefecture it is clear that it did not recommend that²¹.

In the port of Constanța more rudimentary boats came as well, for instance Turkish caïques, although the favourite place for docking them was Mangalia²². “The first caïque appeared in the harbour loaded with various oriental items such as: oil, lemons, cognac, olives, soap, etc. Before Great War, many Greek, Turkish and especially Armenian fishmongers, also brought on caïques in our ports, considerable quantities of oriental items, whose lack was so noticeable on our markets. The merchants hesitated momentarily to resume their trade as described before, for fear of having their goods taken upon arrival in Constanța”, the “Morning” newspaper wrote in 1919 with regard to resuming port work after the war²³.

The hubbub in the harbour was increased by the waves of immigrants, many from Bulgaria, who said goodbye to Romanian soil for a better life. Most of them were muslims, departing by hundreds. The main reasons were: lack of arable land and the obligation to wear a cap in the army, which is shut off by Islamic religion²⁴.

Not only Muslims emigrated. In 1900, 42 Jews from Constanța emigrate to America. Jewish migration does not occur in the latter case by sea, directly via the port but from Vienna, via Cernavoda, being helped by nationals, and from Vienna by others of the same minority²⁵. Migration is one of the least bright aspects in the city's history.

The military navy in Constanța has had its own contribution to increasing animation of this important part of the town, both by military activity itself as well as by public holiday and festivities. Although Constanța has become the Division's headquarters as of 1900, it still was an important harbour for navy along with Galați and Sulina; this fact was obvious. In 1894 for instance the war minister ordered that for the summer campaign “arm all vessels which make up our fleet. Arming will be made in Galați, Sulina and Constanța”²⁶, which proves that there were already facilities necessary for the preparation of application vessels. But obviously only after they started dredging operations and expansion of the port, Constanța was able to accommodate navy sea. In 1897 an article in “Marina” newspaper, took over by the “Universul” newspaper, it merely drew attention to the strategic importance of Constanța, of the fact that an attack from Russia against Romania could occur especially by sea, that the Russians had already done exercises of landing in a redoubt in the Black Sea similar to Constanța and that, therefore, it was not beyond possibility to have such a military operation²⁷.

The port was the place of parties for many events, especially those incurred through the visit of personalities, but also on the day military navy celebrated its anniversary.

In July 1901 the Russian squadron of the “Black Sea” visited Constanța. Three battle ships “Sinope”, “Gheorghe Pedenosetz”, “Dvientat Apostoloff”; vessel “Donetz”; cruisers “Captain Szaken” and “Duna” as well as a division of torpilers²⁸, with approximately 4,000 Russian soldiers, against, admiral Rezobrasoff, arrived in the city which let's not forget, counted around 11-12 thousand people at that time²⁹.

How could this have gone unnoticed? The first reaction was that the Russian escuadron's arrival created problems for city supply: “the arrival in the port of Constanta of 4,000 people, has lead to the lack of meat and bread, because necessary precautions for this had not been taken”.

The sea and the port had an extraordinary impact on the contemporaries. A nation of peasants, for the Romanian people the impact with the sea was from another realm! It is not the way things stood for Constanța, where, let's not forget,

¹⁵ Ion Marin S. *Constanța, emisune susținută 9 iulie 1933, ora 20,40*, „Universitatea Radio”. Text dactilo., cu corecturi, 7 p. Arhiva SRR, dosar 12/1933, în *Microfonul Vagabond. Publicistică literară radiofonică din Arhiva Societății Române de Radiodifuziune (reportaje, însemnări de călătorie, eseuri)*, vol. I, 1923-1935, Societatea Română de Radiodifuziune, departamentul Secretariat General, Direcția Patrimoniu, București, 1998, p.148.

¹⁶ “Universul”, București, an XIX, nr. 268, 2 Octombrie 1901, p.2.

¹⁷ Ion Adam, *Constanța pitorească cu împrejurimile ei*, Editura Minerva, București, 1908, p.82-86.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.89-90.

¹⁹ D. D. Stoenescu, *op. cit.*, p.13.

²⁰ F.P.C., file 20/1882, p.1.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p.3.

²² Octav Văleanu, Ioan N. Ionescu, *Dobrogea: economică, politică, socială*, Tipografia Comercială „Lucrătorii asociați”, Constanța, 1925, p.XXII(22).

²³ „Dimineața”, București, an XVI, nr. 45614, 14 Februarie 1919, p.1.

²⁴ „Universul”, București, an XIX, nr. 271, 5 Octombrie 1901, p.2.

²⁵ *Idem*, an XVIII, nr. 183, 6 Iulie 1900, p.2.

²⁶ „Dreptatea”, Timișoara, an I, nr. 42, 22 Februarie (6 Martie) 1894, p.1.

²⁷ „Universul”, București, an XV, nr. 254, 31 Octombrie(12 Noiembrie) 1897, p.1.

²⁸ „Adevărul”, București, an XIV, nr. 4299, 19 Iulie 1901, p.2.

²⁹ *Idem*, nr. 4306, 25 Iulie 1901, p.3.

most of the population has been formed in 1998 of Greeks, an excellent people of merchant shippers.

For this reason, for mariners and their families, danger represented by the sea was and still is here well disallowed. If during the summer period, when such storms are rare, the sea had the indescribable extra magic charm that won all those who have visited Constanța, in winter it has caused, and continues to do so, that stunning appearance of hybernation, of waste, of an empty of ruin especially during the days with storm: „That storm has been blowing like out of hell's mouth for three days and nights. The sea was empty of ships. Through the wind and from foam mixture into the air, hungry seagulls were near the shore, chasing waves to catch fish. Far away, at the edge of the horizon, the crashing waves, stretching with foggy wet arms and clunching heavy clouds, as if they were a huge blanket. There was no man along the frozen, empty coasts”, described the atmosphere on the sea shore in rough weather Ion Adam. It can be concluded that despite its force of attraction, life was not always cheerful and animated in the harbour.

After World War broke out, events which prevented carrying out of normal commercial maritime activities in the Black Sea have occurred with great swiftness, especially because of Turkey's closure to Germany, which affected a lot life in Constanța. Some of the Romanian commanders living on S.M.R. vessels have played an important role in terms of informing Romanian secret services vis-a-vis Turkey's intentions after the outbreak of the conflict worldwide. The master of vessel “Carol I”, Stoianovici, informed on 22 September 1914 on German pressures made to the Ottomans'

skills to enter into the war, as well as contradictory talks at the top level of Turkish administration in connection with maintaining neutrality. Therefore, Constanța became one of the main informational gates of the country.

After the world war broke out, port-related activity has received a heavy blow, and animated life entered sleepiness: “in the port a few ships, which no longer have the courage to face danger at sea, have been resting for a long time [...]. A boat, whose engine always arrayed, three-four sails, to this is reduced the activity of the Constanta harbour”, finds sadly a reporter with “Universul” in 1915. After the end of the war in the port the hustle and bustle gradually came back and its importance in the restoration of the country has been noted.

The harbour with its animation, with its patchwork, set up the greatest dynamism of the town and would enter numbness in winter's cold days. As for the rest, here was the largest fuss.

If port-related activity had been adversely affected because of political - military events or diplomatic conflicts the harbour' life would have to suffer; if port-related activity went well, everyone had reasons for joy; if the harbour was celebrating everybody was happy.

With the harbour's help, city people were in connection with the Levant, through the Oriental line of S.M.R. vessels, with Central Europe and the West, as well as with America by the Western line, but also by other foreign ship agencies; finally with Russia, especially by the military, but also with Bulgarian neighbours.

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