

## *Written on the Walls: The Hungarian-Romanian Transfer of the National Theatre Building from Kolozsvár/Cluj*

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**Abstract:** The 1918 Great Union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania had direct consequences on the theatrical landscape of the province. The present paper reconstructs the controversial transfer of the building that at the time hosted the Hungarian National Theatre from Kolozsvár/Cluj (currently Cluj-Napoca<sup>2</sup>) to the newly formed Romanian state, as recounted by its manager, Hungarian theatre and film director Jenő Janovics, and by Ștefan Mărcuș, Romanian opera singer and arts historian.

**Keywords:** theatre, national identity, Transylvania, Jenő Janovics, Ștefan Mărcuș, Cluj, Kolozsvár, Cluj-Napoca.

On 24 December 1918, Romanian troops entered Kolozsvár/Cluj. Eighteen months of political negotiations and individual uncertainties passed until the Treaty of Trianon, signed on 4 June 1920 in Versailles, recognized what the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia had declared on 1 December 1918. The peace treaty between the Allied powers and Hungary as a successor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire established the province of Transylvania as part of the Kingdom of Romania. Overnight, an approximate half of the three million Hungarians that the collapse of the Dual Monarchy has positioned outside the borders of their country of origin (Steiner 96) became a minority. The impact on the Transylvanian cultural landscape was profound, aiming among others at its Hungarian national theatre of great tradition.

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<sup>2</sup> The current name of Cluj-Napoca was established through a decree signed by Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1974.

In the history of the city, the Hungarian theatre emerged in 1792, as an initiative of the local aristocracy to support the first permanent company. By 1821 it had the first stone building in the country destined to host a theatre, located on the Wolf Street<sup>3</sup>. Under the management of Jenő Janovics, a prolific artist in both fields of theatre and silent cinema, a new theatre was inaugurated in 1906, in the Hunyadi Square. The elegant edifice designed by the Austrian office Fellner & Helmer was to become the subject of conflict in the transition of Transylvania from Hungarian to Romanian authority.

### **“We stay here!”**

On the pages dedicated to the day of 21 December 1918 of his journal, Janovics recounted the feeling of overwhelming expectancy dominating the Hungarian locals from Kolozsvár/Cluj, torn between the decision to remain in their barricaded homes or to join the tens of thousands of ragged refugees transiting the city. This tension had also permeated the theatre, with its halls emptied and its performances cancelled. Those employees of the institution, especially the ones with relatives in Budapest, were more vulnerable to the exaggerated rumors, weighing on the possibility to take refuge themselves in the border city of Nagyvárad/Oradea, before heading to the Hungarian capital.

In the shadow of this state of mind, Janovics decided to gather all of them on stage, in the early hours of the morning. In few but wisely chosen words, he informed them of his own decision to stay put in front of the uncertain immediate future. “As long as I breathe, I will defend this theatre that I was assigned to manage.

No matter what happens, I keep my post of watchman”<sup>4</sup> ({1918}[1942] 2001, 328). Not knowing what the next day would bring, he emphasized the distinction between his own resolution and the influence it might have on them. To those ready to leave, he accompanied his best wishes with the offer of financial support. To those taking into consideration to remain, he could only reassure them of his complete moral support. The question lingering was who wanted to remain by his side.

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<sup>3</sup> Today Mihail Kogălniceanu Street.

<sup>4</sup> If not specified otherwise, all translations belong to the author of this text. In original Hungarian: “Ezt a színházat, amelyet gondozásomra bízta, védeni fogom, amíg lélegzem. Bármi történik is, strázsahelyemen maradok.”

On the dimly lighted stage, the silence of about two hundred and fifty Hungarians was broken by the voice of a woman, his wife, actress Lili Poór: “We stay here!”<sup>5</sup> ([1918][1942] 2001, 328). Aware that all of her relatives had already moved to Budapest, all others present echoed her words. Famous actor István Szentgyörgyi, immediately joined by fellow actors, dancers, musicians, and technicians approached Janovics and uttered the same sentence, shaking Janovics’ hands and asking for guidance from the one who over the years had become their master. Meanwhile most of their relatives had taken refuge and the Romanian troops were about twenty kilometers away from the city.

**“Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!”**

The solidarity of the Hungarian theatre company facing the sombre premonition of the days and months to come could not stop the countdown of what was to become its last year on that stage. Consequently, Janovics tried to convert the atmosphere similar to a capital sentence inevitably surrounding the last performance into an ostentatious celebration of the era it closed. Scheduled on 30 September 1919, it was promoted throughout the city by means of lavishly decorated posters, reminiscent of the countless glamorous evenings hosted by the theatre in the past. Under the title *Hamlet* stood the names of Jenő Janovics in the lead role, Lili Poór as Ofelia and those of István Szentgyörgyi and Aranka Laczkó as the royal couple.

The Romanian authorities, with the designated role of temporary political, economical, and symbolical administration of the new territories were facing a delicate situation. Fully aware that a ban could have had more serious consequences than the actual performance, they could not ignore the influence Janovics was having on both artists and audience. The censors speculated on the decision of choosing Shakespeare’s text to justify its altering. Lines were cut out and the final scene disappeared altogether.

To the spectators these details mattered too little. Hours before the performance crowds invaded the hall filling every inch of available space, from the entrance to the orchestra pit. It was an impressive sight that Janovics could not forget easily twenty years later. “Never in that theatre, before or after, were so many people crammed together. Everyboby wanted to witness the grand farewell” (1937, 76).

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<sup>5</sup> In original Hungarian: “Itt maradunk!”

<sup>6</sup> In original Hungarian: “Abban a színházban soha, sem azelőtt, sem azután annyi ember nem szorongott. Mindenki jelen akart lenni a nagy bucsun.”



Fig. 1 Young Jenő Janovics as Hamlet

Once the evening started, the tension that suffocated their awaiting was exteriorized. "Every actor is greeted with applause when walking onto the stage and is accompanied with applause when exiting"<sup>7</sup> (Janovics 1937, 76). At the moment of Hamlet's monologue that the censorship had reduced to the famous interrogation, Janovics daringly addressed it to the audience: "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (Shakespeare 309). After a second of deathly silence, a woman shouted "We want to live!"<sup>8</sup> and immediately two thousand voices started shouting "We want to live!", although Janovics recollected the fact that the words could barely be distinguished in the ensuing frenzy. It was a reaction that scared him, but fortunately it diminished within minutes with spectators calming each other (*Însemnările...* 77-78).

<sup>7</sup> In original Hungarian: "Minden színészt tapsorkán fogad, amikor a színpadra lép és tapsorkán kísér, amikor kimegy."

<sup>8</sup> In original Romanian: "Vrem să trăim!"

But Romanian security forces mobilized on sight to prevent any kind of nationalistic manifestation were eager to close the evening. The irony made that the censorship transformed the last words uttered in Hungarian on that stage to be Hamlet's testamentary line: "O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,/Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!" (Shakespeare 331). Fearing supplementary outbursts, immediately after the curtain fell soldiers intervened and "violently" (Janovics 1941, 314) scattered the exhilarated crowd. To the Hungarian Theatre from Kolozsvár/ Cluj, the most important stage in its management under Janovics had abruptly ended. Regarding the events sealing this fate, the two sides involved would confront before and after the famous evening.

### **A Matter of National Pride**

Through the decree establishing the union of Transylvania with the Kingdom of Romania, issued by King Ferdinand I, on 24 December 1918, the public services of the province were under the authority of a Governing Council<sup>9</sup>. From the early separation into departments and thus the organizing of one in charge with Cults, Public Instruction, and Arts, soon reorganized as Department of Health, Arts, and Social Security, a major interest was taken into "the artistic-cultural offensive in Transylvania (...) through theatre"<sup>10</sup> (Mărcuș 469). Despite the fact the composer Tiberiu Brediceanu, assisted by the local poet Emil Isac, were in charge of the cultural politics in the region, the first initiative belonged to Ion Peretz, the head of the Governing Council of Nagyszeben/Sibiu. It consisted in an official tour of the Bucharest National Theatre company, planned to reach thirteen cities, between 27 April and 31 May. Kolozsvár/Cluj was one of them.

Witness of the reorganization of the cultural life in Transylvania under Romanian political authority was the tenor, and later on in life music and theatre historian, Ștefan Mărcuș. In his notes, one finds that behind endless departments, programs, and names there was a significant amount of disorganization and amateurishness, compensated with the enthusiasm of the political moment. "Mister Brediceanu complained to me that he had no tasks, no office and persons he could not get rid of were imposed on him"<sup>11</sup> (467).

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<sup>9</sup> In Romanian "Consiliu Dirigent", government of Transylvania that functioned between 2 December 1918 and 4 April 1920.

<sup>10</sup> In original Romanian: "Paralel cu acțiunea ofensivă a armatei, începe și ofensiva artistică-culturală în Ardeal și Banat, prin teatru."

<sup>11</sup> In original Romanian: "D-l Brediceanu mi se plângea că n-are atribuțiuni, n-are birou și i se impun persoane, de care nu se poate scăpa".

The situation of Janovics' consolidated theatrical institution had been permanently in the attention of the Romanian authorities, but its uninterrupted activity during the First World War and the firm stance of its director after the Great Union were all signals of a situation difficult to grasp. In the tour program<sup>12</sup> the plays *Răzvan and Vidra* (*Răzvan și Vidra*) by B.P. Hașdeu and *The Fountain of Blanduzia* (*Fântâna Blanduziei*) by Vasile Alecsandri were scheduled to be played in Kolozsvár/Cluj on 14 May, and "on this date it was a matter of national pride that the company would play in the Romanian theatre"<sup>13</sup> (Mărcuș 478). The stakes were high given the context generated by the Apponyi laws, passed in 1907, destined to accelerate the process of Magyarization in the Eastern partner of the Dual Monarchy. Despite two thirds of the population in Transylvania being represented by Romanians, education in their native language had been eliminated. Consequently, theatre was gradually invested not only with the role of cultivating a correct spoken language, but also of cultivating a national conscience.

As a direct response, all Romanian efforts to permeate the cultural scene of the province had been discouraged by the Hungarian authorities. Although the local Romanian press constantly informed its readers on the theatrical events from the Bucharest stage, official tours had been made practically impossible by the legislation. Non-Hungarian actors wishing to perform in the province were required to obtain special approvals from the government. While German or Italian theatre companies had been performing throughout Transylvania, the last Romanian theatrical tours dated back to 1870 and 1871, and it is a significant detail that the ones organized with great difficulty between 1906-1913 seem<sup>14</sup> to have not reached Kolozsvár/Cluj.

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<sup>12</sup> The repertoire of the tour was composed by a combination of classic and mediocre texts, a compromise generated by the lack of quality Romanian dramaturgy and the aim to select the existing plays instilling a sense of national identity to the audience. Besides the two already mentioned, it included *The Poem of the Union* (*Poemul Unirei*) by Zaharia Bârsan, *Sunset* (*Apus de soare*) by Barbu Ștefănescu-Delavrancea, *Bimbașa Sava* by Ion Peretz and *The Red Roses* (*Trandafirii roșii*) by Zaharia Bârsan (Mărcuș 469).

<sup>13</sup> In original Romanian: "pe această dată era o chestiune de mândrie națională, ca trupa să joace în teatrul românesc."

<sup>14</sup> Precise information regarding the itineraries of the tours is hard to be established as some performances were cancelled while others were programmed spontaneously.

However, the presence in the city of Onisifor Ghibu<sup>15</sup> in 1919 as general secretary of the Department of Cults, and Arts, had nothing to do with the theatre, but with the taking over of the university. During the conversation in which he communicated the above mentioned task to his superior, publicist and politician Valeriu Braniște<sup>16</sup>, near to the latter stood Brediceanu:

who was preoccupied not only in taking over the theatre, but was searching all possibilities for the new Romanian state, as successor of the old Romanian state, to also install its rights regarding the organizing of the arts, especially the building where the old Hungarian State supported a Hungarian National Theatre.

The moment was decisive for the fate of the Hungarian theatre of Cluj. For on the solicitation of dr. T. Brediceanu, dr. V. Braniște, head of department, ordered by phone dr. Onisifor Ghibu from Cluj to also take over the theatre in which mister Ianovici's (sic!) company performed.<sup>17</sup> (Mărcuș 479)

In the morning of the next day, on 14 May, Ghibu, accompanied by the mayor of the city, Iulian Pop, the head of the local administration Vasile Hossu/Vazul Hosszu and the opera singer Constantin Pavel/László Pap were present at the theatre, where they encountered the deputy manager Lajos Parlăgi. In his 1945 account, Mărcuș cites later writings belonging to Janovics according to which Ghibu threatened with "armed force" (480) Parlăgi's refuse to cooperate<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Onisifor Ghibu (1883-1972) was a teacher of pedagogy, correspondent member of the Romanian Academy and one of the politicians directly involved in the Great Union of 1918. After the coming to power of the Communist regime, his nationalist and anti-Soviet activity would determine his forced retirement from the university, the banning of his books and ultimately three years of detention.

<sup>16</sup> Valeriu Braniște (1869-1928) was a Romanian publicist and politician, honorary member of the Romanian Academy, involved in organizing the Great National Gathering of Alba-Iulia, on 1 December 1918. As head of the Department for Cults and Public Instruction in the Governing Council of Transylvania, he manifested great interest in the education of the minorities.

<sup>17</sup> In original Romanian: "pe care îl preocupa nu numai ideea preluării teatrului, dar căuta toate posibilitățile, cum Statul nou român în calitate de succesor al vechiului Stat maghiar, ar putea să intre cât mai curând în drepturile sale, și în ceea ce privește organizarea artelor, și în special clădirea unde vechiul Stat maghiar a susținut un Teatru Național Maghiar. Momentul a fost hotărâtor pentru soarta teatrului unguresc din Cluj. Căci, la insistența d-lui Dr. T. Brediceanu, Dr. V. Braniște, șef de Resort, a dat ordin telefonic d-lui Dr. Onisifor Ghibu la Cluj, să preia și teatrul în care juca trupa d-lui Ianovici."

<sup>18</sup> Although we have been unable to identify the source, this detail stands as testimony to the note on which the Romanian side started the negotiations. At that time, Romanian troupes were stationed on the Tisza/Tisa River, preparing the offensive on Budapest.

In the text we use as reference<sup>19</sup>, Janovics recalled the events from the afternoon of the same day, when he received Ghibu and Hossu in his office. The message delivered by the two was as clear as possible, Janovics was summoned to evacuate the building and move the company in the building of the summer theatre (Színkör/Cercul teatral). As proven by a transcript written in everybody's presence, Janovics protested, invoking a contract dated 11 March 1913, signed with count Colomán Esterházy as president of a Theatre Committee, according to which the former was only renting the theatre, and thus did not own the right to cede it to a third party. He also underlined the fact that the building was not property of the Hungarian state, all expenses of constructions being loaned from the Commercial Bank of Budapest, annually paid back by means of a subvention guaranteed by the same contract. As the document would not expire until 1921, Janovics officially declared that he kept the rights to use the theatre and all catalogued belongings for the continued management of the theatrical activity. He asked for reassurances that his rights would be respected given the three hundred employees he had valid contracts with and their families whose survival depended on them (Janovics 1937, 71-76).

To the Romanian delegates, those details were no more than "subtle arguments of judicial formal order<sup>20</sup>" and consequently "the taking over the National Theatre of Cluj was made immediately<sup>21</sup>" (Mărcuș 482).

### Some Honest Words

As late as 7 May 1920, Janovics published a reponse in the form of an article titled *Honest Words* (*Őszinte szavak/Cuvinte sincere*), in both Hungarian and Romanian newspapers *Ellenzék* and *Adeverul*. The text revolved around the ownership rights regarding the theatre building. A fund was brought into discussion which had resulted from donations made by elite members from the Hungarian society and had been used to erect, in 1821, the old theatre from Wolf Street. After it had gravely degraded eight decades into its functioning, it had been sold. To the resulted amount of money were added various donations which partially represented the costs of the theatre from the Hunyadi Square. Janovics cited a document from the state archives

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<sup>19</sup> "The Theatre Life." ("A színjátszás.") *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae (Országrészonk átalakulása 1918-1936)*. Edited by Györi Illés István. Cluj: Az új Transzylvánia Kiadása, 1937. 69-93.

<sup>20</sup> In original Romanian: "argumentări subtile de ordin formal juridic".

<sup>21</sup> In original Romanian: "preluarea Teatrului Național din Cluj s-a făcut imediat".

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according to which the building, as well as the land beneath it, belonged to a society for the Hungarian Theatre of Kolozsvár. In response to this information, Mărcuș noted that further investigations proved this society to be a mere camouflage for the Hungarian Ministry of Cults and Instruction (480).



Fig. 2 The Old Theatre from Wolf Street

In the mentioned article, Janovics also described various tactics that sabotaged the remaining performances of the Hungarian theatre company on the disputed stage. They ranged from the offering of free tickets that affected its budget to spontaneous shutting down of the theatre. The hardest to endure had been the censorship that cancelled a cycle dedicated to Shakespeare, as well as various stage adaptations from the repertoire of Hungarian or French classic playwrights, with Sardou's *Fedora* for example being catalogued as nihilist propaganda.

The Romanian readers had already heard on 14 May 1919 the first words uttered in their language on the stage to be the symbolically chosen “The storm has calmed down...<sup>22</sup>” (Mărcuş 475) in a frenzy equalling that of the *Hamlet* performance. At least to them, the disclosure continued. On 16 September 1919, a decree-letter informed Janovics that the theatre would be managed by the Romanian state, offering him the role of artistic manager in return to his oath of fidelity. Aware that it was an unheard of condition and moreover that two days earlier playwright Zaharia Bârsan had been appointed to the task, Janovics cited the dialogue with the delegate sent to hand him the letter, Vasile Poruțiu: “the Governing Council would find itself in a very embarrassing situation if I were to take the oath, to which he responded smiling, we are fully aware that you can not take the oath<sup>23</sup>”.



Fig. 3 The National Theatre built in 1906

<sup>22</sup> In original Romanian: “S-a potolit furtuna...”, line from *The Poem of the Union (Poemul Unirei)*.

<sup>23</sup> In original Romanian: “Consiliul Dirigent ar ajunge într-o situație foarte penibilă dacă eu acum aş depune de fapt jurământul, mi-a răspuns surâzând, bine știm noi că D-ta nu poți depune jurământul.”

To theatre historians, Zaharia Bârsan is fairly considered the architect of interwar Romanian theatre in Transylvania, having previously proved his determination and resilience pursuing his goal. The tours he organized in the province between 1906 and 1913 were the result of significant efforts. Confronting the authorities, he was sometimes forced to declare his fellow actors as amateurs in order to get the permit to play (Ceuca 62-63) or employ theatre students. In front of the audience, he composed a repertoire capable of serving both the uneducated crowds and the pretentious young elite, an impossible task equally attracting praise and criticism. In addition, delays and lack of settings or costumes represented constant circumstances. While on 1 October 1919, at ten o'clock in the morning following the *Hamlet* performance, the Hungarian Theatre ceased to exist in the Kolozsvár/Cluj building, the previously persecuted Romanian one was rising under his guidance.

But the details surrounding the shifting moment have remained controversial mainly because Janovics was reassured that he could take his personal belongings out of the theatre building.

Contrary to this disposition, the appointed governmental commissary stopped me from taking out from the theatre one single peg, furthermore when I ordered my personal carpentry workshop to be removed from the basement he threatened to transport me and the workshop with police escort had I not return everything within an hour.<sup>24</sup>

There are numerous formal requests archived addressed by Janovics to various people capable to address the situation, unanswered or rejected on procedural basis. In return, he was granted the possibility to loan whatever he needed, including his own personal library. But the biggest inconvenient became the moving of the Hungarian theatre company in the summer theatre in the middle of the 1919-1920 winter. The building that had been inaugurated<sup>25</sup> in 1910 with a "lighter" repertoire was lacking a heating system and had already been altered to accommodate a cinema. Janovics had unsuccessfully searched for solutions, when he inquired on buying or renting the building of the old theatre from Wolf Street.

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<sup>24</sup> In original Romanian: "Contrar acestei dispozițiuni comisarul guvernial denumit m-a împedecat să scot din teatru măcar un cui, ba când am dispus să scoată atelierul meu propriu de dulgerie din souterain m-a amenințat că dacă în decurs de o oră nu voi aduce totul înapoi, mă va transporta și pe mine și atelierul cu jandarmi."

<sup>25</sup> The brick building in Secessionist style replaced an old wooden theatre dating back to 1874, on the current location of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj.



Fig. 4 The Summer Theatre on the place of the current Hungarian Theatre of Cluj



Fig. 5 The Summer Theatre on the place of the current Hungarian Theatre of Cluj

The final section of the mentioned article approached the special condition of the summer theatre building in the context of the nationalizing of the cultural institutions in Transylvania. After significant efforts from all involved in honoring the programmed activities, Janovics started the plans to repair it. The ownership rights became an issue of debate, as the land beneath had been offered by the town council, but the erection of the building had been paid by Janovics personally. While he did not get any answer from the Town Council or the Department of Social Justice, Mărcuș insisted in his version of events that :

We must underline the fact that, on the occasion of taking over the theatre building, the existence of the Hungarian theatre company was fully insured and the renovations needed to be made to the summer theatre were made on the expenses and subsidies granted by the Romanian State and the public Romanian institutions. This was the way in which the Romanian State considered from the very start to protect the cultural progress of all minorities<sup>26</sup> (...). (484-485)

At the time, a written response from Janovics published in the local Hungarian papers regarding the crisis of his theatre prompted an immediate visit of a committee of experts at the end of March. The conclusions were the same, the building needed significant renovations but the proposed solution came as more than unexpected. He was assured that he could conceive a plan and proceed with applying it all while renting the building for twenty five years a period through which he could redeem the loan. Under the pressure of time, Janovics conceived a plan regarding only the absolutely needed immediate renovations and addressed it to the Department of Social Justice. He received no response and the local authorities dismissed the matter as not being under their jurisdiction.

Janovics ended his 1920 manifesto in a desperate note, reminding the fact that he represented one of the most important tax payers and demanded to know what had happened to the significant amount of money that the Governing Council had offered the Romanian Theatre. But regardless of his bitter remarks, he condemned the violation of a private contract and the confiscation of his personal belongings. He spoke of a memorandum written

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<sup>26</sup> In original Romanian: "Trebuie să accentuăm că, cu ocazia preluării clădirii Teatrului, existența trupei de teatru maghiar a fost pe deplin asigurată și reparațiile necesare la clădirea Teatrului de vară s-au făcut pe cheltueala și din subvențiile acordate de Statul Român și de instituțiile publice românești. Așa a înțeles Statul Român dela Început, să protejeze înaintarea culturală a tuturor minorităților (...)."

on 10 august 1919 in which he had anticipated the fate of the Hungarian theatre in Transylvania, this precise first instance of uncertainty regarding its future. However, it was an uncertainty equaling that of the Romanian theatre developing in Kolozsvár/Cluj. The fact that political factors ultimately failed to alter the mutual respect developed between the two cultural institutions of the city was proven by the warm words addressed by Jenő Janovics to Zaharia Bârsan<sup>27</sup> in 1925, “as brothers and colleagues, as professionals and devotees to Thalia<sup>28</sup>” (qtd. in Ceuca 74).

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<sup>27</sup> On the occasion of the Zaharia Bârsan’s celebration of twenty five years of theatrical activity.

<sup>28</sup> In original Romanian: “frați și colegi, ca profesioniști și devotați Thaliei”.