

## CAPTAIN ILIE BIRT FROM BRASOV: IDEAS AND WAYS OF ACTION TO PRESERVE ROMANIAN IDENTITY IN 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TRANSYLVANIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Romanians in Transylvania used the connection to the Austrian Empire during the 18th century to promote their national identity through the Greek-Catholic Church. The Greek-Catholic Romanian intellectuals of the Enlightenment come to mind when it comes to the preservation of the Romanian national identity in Transylvania, but other means were taken into considerations by the Romanians who maintained the Greek-Orthodox confessions. In the following article we will analyze the methods employed by the Greek-Orthodox Romanians of Braşov in order to preserve their national identity when confronted by the Saxon authorities of the city.*

**Keywords:** Braşov, Romanian national identity, Captain Ilie Birt, Transylvania.

Captain Ilie Birt left us the cross in the Unirii Square in Brasov, across the street from St. Nicholas Church and the cross installed in front of his house. Thirty years ago, the County Museum of History also exhibited the captain's weapons: a sword, a pair of pistols and a rifle, most probably confiscated by the Saxon authorities. Unfortunately, a complete biography of him is missing, but a review of published documents and accounts of Ilie Birt allows us to reconstruct the ways in which this picturesque historical figure took action to preserve the national identity of the Romanians of Braşov.

### SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL EXCURSION

Born in 1698 or 1706, as the son of a cattle herder, Ilie Birt enjoyed a full life until 29 December 1786. He was married to Neacşa, daughter of the merchant Vasile Găurincă, with whom he had 8 children, 6 boys and 2 girls. He could write in Romanian and knew at least German, Hungarian, Turkish and Greek in addition

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to Romanian. For half a century he was a serious nuisance to the Saxon authorities of Brasov, who called him “the head of all the naughty Vlachs in the district”<sup>118</sup>.

Ilie Birt entered the historical accounts through an investigation in 1733 when he was accused of smuggling mercury (a substance used at the time for illegal gold mining). He was acquitted of all charges, and in the documents from this investigation he appears as a merchant with connections to the Greek Company from Braşov. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century Ilie Birt appears in almost all documents referring to the Romanians of Brasov, from 1735 he was a juror of the Church of Saint Nicholas in Brasov until the end of his life.

### ABILITY TO USE VIOLENCE

One of the things that frightened the Saxons of Braşov was the request of the Romanians to be enlisted in the army. The idea had been circulating for some time in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>119</sup>, but Ilie Birt managed to put it into practice. It is not clear how he persuaded the Austrian Colonel Springer to enlist him as a hussar and how he obtained the rank of Rottmeister of cavalry (as it appears in official documents, the equivalent of a platoon or squadron commander, Ilie Birt permanently called himself a captain, but the rank itself is not important). What is certain is that the Austrian military authorities permanently recognized his rank and his participation in combat, issuing several documents confirming his claims and conferring a number of privileges: these diplomas were issued by Count Francisc Vallis in 1737, Prince Lobkowitz in 1738, Count Platz in 1747 and Count Traum in 1748<sup>120</sup>. On the other hand, the Saxons constantly tried to deny his military rank and to deny him the exercise of the privileges he had obtained.

Beyond his military career, Ilie Birt was a man ready to use violence in extreme situations. In 1736, during the confessional conflict within the Romanian community of Brasov, Ilie Birt was the one who settled the dispute. The Saxon authorities of Brasov had been trying for some time to get the Romanians of the city out of submission to the Orthodox Diocese of Râmnic in Wallachia, and for this purpose they used the priest Teodor Băran, who was appointed protopope by the authorities of Brasov (the Magistrate<sup>121</sup>). In 1738, after the priest Radu Tempea read in the church of Saint Nicholas the letter of bannishment of Teodor Băran issued by the Orthodox Archbishop of Belgrade, it was Ilie Birt who forcibly

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<sup>118</sup> Sterie Stinghe, *Contribuţiuni la cunoaşterea trecutului românilor din Şcheii Braşovului* [*Contributions to the Knowledge of the Past of the Romanians from Braşov*], Bucharest, 1945, pp. 19–21.

<sup>119</sup> Aurel Mureşianu, “Un împiedecător al avântului naţional al românilor braşoveni de acum 200 de ani: popa Teodor Baran”, [*A hindrance in the path of national progress of Romanians in Braşov 200 years ago: the priest Teodor Baran*] in *Ţara Bârsei*, nr. 3, May–June 1930, pp. 204–217.

<sup>120</sup> Sterie Stinghe, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>121</sup> The name Magistrate of Brasov refers to the city's leadership exercised by a senate made up of 18 members presided over by the mayor during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

removed Teodor Băran from the church<sup>122</sup>. Another testimony to Ilie Birt's capacity for violence comes from the year 1751, when the Magistrate tried to demolish the cross erected by Ilie Birt in front of his house – at that time he hit the representatives of the Magistrate and threatened to shoot them “like dogs” if they dared to touch that cross<sup>123</sup>. It should be stressed that Ilie Birt's documented violent actions are not of a criminal nature, but are related to restoring order (driving out of the church the banished priest Teodor Băran) or defending a right (protecting the cross erected in front of his house). Even so, the Saxon authorities of Brasov used these episodes to portray Captain Ilie Birt as a man of irrational violence, dangerous and disturbing the peace.

The Saxon priest Thomas Tartler gave in his diary a very unflattering account of the company commanded by Captain Ilie Birt:

“1737 October 24–2 o'clock noon the Hussars of the company commanded by Captain Ilie Birt brought 2 flags and 30 Turkish prisoners. They must have been trapped for a long time in Câmpulung and because the imperial hussars had to retreat, they were brought to Braşov. They also brought a Pasha. The Hussars in this company are all sorts of poor people and look so ragged that a Democrite would have had plenty to laugh at, some had rifles without a flint and a cock, others swords without a hilt and a few dusty horses. These Hussars also brought a few heads of Turks which they placed over the gate. On the first night died a Turkish prisoner with a head wound. The Turks brought here were imprisoned in the bastion of the Monastery Gate. These Hussars can rightly be called a band of robbers, they robbed in Câmpulung horses, pepper, spices and other things which they sold cheaply here in Blumăna”<sup>124</sup>.

This unflattering description contradicts the letters attesting to Ilie Birt's military exploits issued by the Austrian army generals mentioned above.

In 1748 the Magistrate of Brasov tried to investigate the military background of Captain Ilie Birt. A total of three witnesses were heard: two who only knew Ilie Birt, without having been part of the company he commanded, the third a real veteran. The first two gave answers to the magistrate's liking, confirming from hearsay the accusations that Ilie Birt was not in fact part of the Austrian army and that he was just a bandit. The third witness (Şerban Făgărăşanul), however, confirmed that Ilie Birt was in charge of arming Romanian volunteers, served under General Gylanyi and participated in the battle of Pitesti in 1737, where he received a head wound<sup>125</sup>. Eventually, this investigation was abandoned and

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<sup>122</sup> George Michael Gottlieb von Hermann, *Das Alte und Neue Kronstadt [The Old and New Kronstadt]*, Hermannstadt, 1883, p. 196.

<sup>123</sup> Johannes Teutsch, *Nachlese [Gleanings]*, Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Kronstadt IV [Sources on the History of the City of Kronstadt], p. 455.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Tartler, *Diarium [Journal]*, in Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Kronstadt VII [Sources on the History of the City of Kronstadt], p. 198.

<sup>125</sup> Sterie Stinghe, *op. cit.*, doc. 7.

remained at an incipient stage, without the Magistrate of Braşov ever invoking it in the subsequent conflicts with Captain Ilie Birt.

### **PUBLIC PRESENCE – MONUMENTS AS POLITICAL ACTION**

The Braşov Saxons did their best to remove from the public space the monuments that attested the Romanian presence. For example, after the battle of Brasov in 1611 with Szekely Moses, the prince Radu Şerban erected a cross in front of the fortress with a prayer inscribed on it, in memory of the soldiers who had fallen in battle. Contemporary to the events, Paul Sutoris described the cross erected in 1611 as follows:

“Şerban erected a beautiful wooden cross adorned in beautiful colours on which beautiful words were written in Wallachian about those buried”<sup>126</sup>.

The cross was removed by the Saxon authorities after several decades. The reason is clearly stated in one of the documents opposing the erection of Captain Ilie Birt’s trophies: the Romanians regard the crosses as boundary markers and must be removed before the Romanians can make territorial claims.

In 1714, Austrian Catholic soldiers erected a cross on Mount Tâmpa overlooking Brasov, then inhabited mainly by Lutheran Saxons. Following the anti-Austrian rebellion of 1688, Brasov was under an Austrian military governor (some of these generals indulged in real abuses against the Saxons, for example in 1717 General Schramm banned the traditional announcement of the time by a trumpet on the grounds that his parrot was bothered by the sounds of the trumpet) so no complaints were registered against the cross erected by the Austrians. But the story of the crosses erected by Romanians in Braşov was different, especially those erected by Captain Ilie Birt.

From the year 1738 a complaint of Ilie Birt to the Governor of Transylvania has been preserved, in which he accused the Magistrate of Brasov of having demolished an Orthodox cross erected by the Romanians on Mount Tâmpa at an unspecified earlier date and of having demolished an Orthodox cross erected near the church of Bod<sup>127</sup>. Most probably, before 1738 the Romanians followed the example of the Austrian soldiers and installed a cross on Mount Tâmpa, and the demolition of this cross did not calmed Captain Ilie Birt who continued to erect crosses in the town of Braşov.

In the same year that he announced the destruction of the cross on Tâmpa, Ilie Birt erected a stone cross in front of the Church of Saint Nicholas in Brasov,

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<sup>126</sup> Chronik des Paul, *Sutoris [Chronicle of Paul Sutoris]*, Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Kronstadt IV [Sources on the History of the City of Kronstadt], p. 20.

<sup>127</sup> Candid Muşlea, *Biserica Sfântul Nicolae din Şcheii Braşovului [The Church of Saint Nicholas of Braşov]*, vol. II, Braşov, 1946, p. 25.

protected by four brick pillars and with a vaulted roof, painted on the inside – which exists to this day. In 1780 Captain Ilie Birt took care of the renovation of this small Orthodox chapel before his death. Strangely enough the Magistrate did not object to this cross.

In 1748, Captain Ilie Birt continued his work and erected a new cross at the corner of his house in the Șchei district. A flood caused by the rains led to the collapse of this cross and when he rebuilt it in 1751 Captain Ilie Birt faced opposition from the Magistrate who tried to demolish it. After a long legal battle that lasted until 1761, the cross near Captain Ilie Birt's house received the approval of the Magistrate of Brasov.

In 1754, a large wooden Orthodox cross was mysteriously installed during the night in front of the Catherine Gate, which secured the entrance to the city from the Romanian quarter. The Saxon chronicler Johannes Teutsch notes in October 1754 what happened to this cross:

“About this time the Vlachs erected a large wooden cross in front of the Upper Gate without the knowledge of the Magistrate. The next night one of its arms was broken, so that from a distance it looked like gallows”<sup>128</sup>.

Although this cross was not officially attributed to him, Ilie Birt accused several Saxons of desecrating a religious symbol, but the Magistrate did not open an investigation into the case, preferring to let it pass into oblivion. The remains of this cross were removed in 1761.

In 1755, the Magistrate accused Ilie Birt of inciting the gypsies to erect a large wooden cross in the cemetery they used at the foot of Mount Tâmpa, which was not authorized either and was eventually demolished.

The Saxon chronicler George M.G. von Hermann gives us the Magistrate's view of Ilie Birt's actions of erecting Orthodox crosses in Brasov:

“He did this not out of faith, because he could show his faith in the nearby Vallachian church, but to show that he was demonstrating his propriety rights over the land near his house”<sup>129</sup>.

The same argument is repeated in the official documents in this dispute, the Magistrate expressing the fear that the Romanian crosses could be interpreted in the unspecified future as boundary markers and used for possible territorial claims. It should also be pointed out that von Hermann considered the Romanians (along with other Saxon chroniclers) as foreigners, tolerated on the lands of Brasov, although the presence of Romanians is archaeologically attested before the arrival of the Saxons.

Ilie Birt's insistence on keeping to build Orthodox crosses in Brașov for almost half a century, between 1738 and 1780, indicates a programmatic approach,

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<sup>128</sup> Johannes Teutsch, *Nachlese [Gleanings]*, Quellen IV zur Geschichte der Stadt Kronstadt [Sources on the History of the City of Kronstadt], p. 452.

<sup>129</sup> George Michael Gottlieb von Hermann, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

an intention to affirm Romanian Orthodox spirituality in the public space. The places chosen for the installation of the crosses (on Mount Tâmpa, in front of the city gate), the incitement of the gypsies to erect their own crosses, the use of violence when the crosses were endangered – all these indicate an assumed project of Ilie Birt to embellish the city of Braşov with elements of public architecture of Romanian inspiration.

### THE ROMANIAN SCHOOL

Another project in which we find Captain Ilie Birt is the construction of the Romanian school in the courtyard of St. Nicholas Church. In the spring of 1760, the Magistrate complained to the Transylvanian Government that the Romanians had demolished the old wooden school building in the courtyard of the Church of St. Nicholas and had begun the construction of a stone building<sup>130</sup>. The magistrate complains that the new building is much bigger than the previous one and will have two floors, and that the Romanians did not ask for approval for it. The reply came from Captain Ilie Birt who stated in a memorandum that the new building is erected on royal land, which rightfully belongs to Empress Maria Theresia, therefore the Magistrate of Braşov has no right to object.

On 11 August 1760 Empress Maria Theresia asked the Transylvanian governor Gabriel Bethlen to check the situation of the construction of the Romanian school in Braşov. The Magistrate of Braşov replied on 14 September 1760 stating that the building of the Romanian school was unsafe and that the land on which it was built belonged to the city and was not part of the royal land. In April 1761 the Saxons returned to the matter, claiming that the neighbors were opposed to the building of a school with two floors, the Romanian community reacted with a sworn testimony from the neighbors stating that they were not opposed to the new school. Captain Ilie Birt intervened with the commander of the Austrian troops in Transylvania, General Buccow, who was asked to intervene in support of the Romanians. On 13 April 1761 Empress Maria Theresia issued a decree asking the Magistrate of Braşov not to disturb or prevent the building of a school for the Romanians.

Throughout these administrative confrontations through complaints, memorandums and counter-memorandums, work on the erection of the new school building continued apace. The representatives of the Romanians from Braşov kept a strict record of the expenses: materials and labor cost 1290 florins, and the expenses for interventions on the powerful of the day amounted to 695 florins. Ilie Birt appears in the documents as having intervened personally in Sibiu twice to

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<sup>130</sup> Andrei Bârseanu, *Istoria şcoalelor centrale române greco-ortodoxe din Braşov [History of the Romanian Greek-Orthodox Central Schools in Braşov]*, Ciurcu&Comp., 1902, pp. 6–10.

obtain the governor's support for the Romanian school. The school building was ready, complete with roof, by the end of 1760, proof of the speed with which it was built; the main danger was the threat of the Magistrate of Braşov who did not want to accept the new building.

On 16 January 1781, Captain Ilie Birt ordered that a funeral service for Maria Theresia (who died on 29 November 1780) be held at St. Nicholas Church. Seven priests attended the service and a portrait of the Empress was displayed in the church, considered by the chronicler who remembers the event as "a merciful mother of ours"<sup>131</sup>, with good reason in regard to the Empress support for the Romanian school.

### **THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE SAXONS AND THE AUSTRIANS**

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century Ilie Birt practiced a risky balancing act between the Transylvanian Saxon authorities and the representatives of the Austrian Empire in order to maintain and promote the Romanian national identity. This was the general strategic line followed by the Romanians in Transylvania after the province became part of the Austrian Empire, the first to take this step were the representatives of the Orthodox clergy who accepted the union with the Catholic Church. The mechanism envisaged was to accept a compromise in favor of the Empire in exchange for economic, social and political freedoms. Such deals did not always work as they should have because of opposition from the Transylvanian political class, which was trying to preserve its previous privileges (the Hungarian nobility, the Saxon bourgeoisie and the Szekelys).

In the case of Ilie Birt, he managed to keep his Orthodox confession (along with the entire Romanian community in Brasov) because he chose another way to serve the Empire: military service. In all conflicts with the local authorities on matters of national identity, Captain Ilie Birt's final appeal is to the Austrian military authorities in Transylvania, who each time recognize his veteran status and support him in achieving his goals, whether it was the erection of Orthodox crosses in public spaces or the building of a school. Most of Ilie Birt's interventions with the imperial authorities concerned matters of community interest: apart from the crosses and the school, he also intervened in matters relating to the preservation of the Orthodox confession, the commercial and industrial rights of the Romanians of Braşov; from a personal point of view, he constantly strove to have the privileges conferred by his veteran status respected. In this case, too, he received the support of the Austrian military authorities: when the Braşov Saxons refused him the privilege of bringing wine from his vineyards in Wallachia, the Austrian army provided him with a guard of soldiers who accompanied Captain Ilie Birt's barrels of wine from the border to the gate of his house in Braşov.

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<sup>131</sup> Candid Muşlea, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

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