

## WHY POPLAR AND NOT KAKI. PUZZLES, PLANTS, MEMORY AND STORYTELLING GARDENS

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### Abstract

*Throughout the history of mankind, vegetation played a crucial role in mythology, philosophy, natural science and gardening. In what concerns garden design, choosing a specific species of plants served different types of purposes and helped to create magnificent storytelling landscapes. Associated with virtues, gods and goddesses, feelings and emotions, etc. plants defined almost every story behind garden design since the ancient times to the present day. However, sometimes, a garden was built around existing plants and this is why such particular examples of species of trees, shrubs or flowers became so much more important in the history and philosophy of a garden than those that were planted afterwards, according to a specific and predetermined pattern. One such example is represented by Queen Marie of Romania's gardens at Balchik and their famous old bended white poplar (*Populus alba*), an ancient tree that had became one of the reasons for which Queen Marie decided to build her most renowned gardens at Balchik. Today however, the old poplar was replaced by a kaki tree (*Diospyros kaki*) and by this what may seem to be a minor modification, an entire part of the garden's meaning was profoundly altered. To this end, the following paper aims to emphasize the importance of plant species in what concerns the story and allegories of gardens, focusing on the examples offered by the Balchik gardens.*

**Key words:** plant species, garden history, Queen Marie of Romania, Balchik, memory, poplar, lily.

### INTRODUCTION

Queen Marie of Romania, an iconic personality of modern Romania was deeply in love with art, and one of the arts she treasured most was the art of gardens. Her love for plants and garden design is no secret to any historian or landscape architect interested in her life and achievements, as she personally expressed her feelings in numerous occasions throughout her entire life, but also in her written memories that were published (partially) after her death. However, her most renowned gardens were the ones she built by the sea side at Balchik, and one of the reasons she chose this place to build her garden-Paradise was an old bended white poplar she saw and fell in love with during one of her travels in 1924 (see Regina Maria a României, 2014). By this means, the white bended poplar became a symbolical pillar around which the gardens were built (Figure 1) and his presence in the overall image of the gardens became a crucial element that solely described an important part of the memory of the gardens. However, this memorial element and others alike were replaced by different

other types of vegetation (more or less alike) and although this may seem to be a minor modification, it is actually altering the general concept of the gardens that Queen Marie created by the seashore.



Figure 1. The old bended poplar and the Queen's castle, approx. 1930

(Source: ANIC, Fond Fototeca, Format 1, 306-1)

To this end, this research is focusing on the importance of plant species in what concerns allegorical and storytelling landscapes, emphasizing their role in the history and memory of a historical ensemble, offering detailed historical references about why some particular species of plants were specifically chosen by the garden's owners and/or the landscape architects to be used in the landscapes they designed.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to understand the meaning and the importance of plant species in the design of the gardens at Balchik one must first understand the history and the philosophy behind the design used by Queen Marie and her landscape architects for Her Majesty's gardens by the Black Sea. To this end, this chapter will focus on analyzing the history of the Balchik gardens by studying both written sources and archives and historical images, focusing on how and why some particular plants were preferred and used in some parts of the gardens in order to create symbolical and allegorical stories.

### Short history

Queen Marie of Romania dedicated a major part of her private time to her gardens and, in April 1930 she even published an article in a Romanian magazine, namely "*Boabe de grâu*", in which she described her most beloved "dream houses" (Maria, 1930). A large part of this article was dedicated to her house and gardens by the seashore at Balchik (nowadays on Bulgarian territory), and one of the details she mentioned repeatedly was an "*old tree that was hanging by the sea side like a gem from the pick of a ruined wall*" (Maria, 1930, pp. 70-71). This tree was a bended ancient white poplar (*Populus alba*) to which the Queen fell in love with.

The sovereign visited Jean Chrissoveloni's property in Balchik on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 1924, and when she saw "*an immense poplar, a giant perched right above the sea, blooming from a small terrace on the beach*" (Regina Maria a României, 2014, p. 416) she decided to buy this property and build herself a small mansion surrounded by terraced gardens similar to the ones she saw in Italy. Since she first saw Jean

Chrissoveloni's property and before she even contacted him to ask him to sell her this land, the queen envisioned how both her house and part of her gardens would look like, picturing a house similar to an old house from Buhari and a series of "spanish", "turkish", "italian" and "rustic" gardens covered with multiple species of flowers (Regina Maria a României, 2013).

In time, she will buy both Chrissoveloni's property and many more adjacent ones, creating a maze of gardens stretching along the coastline. Some of the gardens will be designed for and named after Queen Marie's children and her husband, thus transforming a large part of the complex into a memorial landscape in which her house, the *Tenha Yuhav*, will be enclosed in an allegorical line of special, family gardens. Besides these gardens, the sovereign will design a garden for her son in law, King Alexander I<sup>st</sup> of Yugoslavia, her nephew Tomislav of Yugoslavia, for Gaetan Denize (Queen Marie's personal secretary) etc.

The queen will also build two very interesting gardens that she will name the Garden of Gethsemane and Allah's garden. These gardens, but also the other ones mentioned before, were probably inspired not only by different classical sources, but also by the Baha'i faith (see Constantin, 2007), a religion Queen Marie became fond for in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Marcus, 2000). However, the relationship between the gardens at Balchik and their correspondences with the Baha'i faith believers is not part of this study, but it is aimed to become a future topic of research.

The gardens at Balchik will represent a crown jewel for the queen's creations because unlike other architectural and landscape ensembles that belonged to her, Balchik would have no imaginative boundaries and they "*will support the idea of evasion, of losing oneself in nature*" (Constantin, 2007, p. 166) and most of all because their design will bring together the Queen's childhood love for the sea, the love for plants and gardening, the love for her children, her knowledge and passion for arts and religious or profane symbols (such as Christian altars, statues of saints or mythological heroes etc.) etc. To this end, the landscape ensemble by the seashore will become something similar to an *imago mundi* for the Queen, a both physical and symbolical world that revolved

around the *Tenha Yuhav* (the Quiet Nest) and gathered all of Queen Marie's love, loves, passions and childhood desires. (after Mandache, 2014, p. 64).

In all this complex allegorical landscape, two plants stand out and they define one of the reasons for which the queen chose Balchik to build her personal "Paradise" and the way she chose to be remembered after her death. The two plants are represented by the old bended white poplar and by the lily path that she planted in order to lead to her sanctuary, namely to the Stella Maris chapel.

### Plants and historical references

Although every particular garden from the Balchik ensemble was planted with particular species of plants in order to underline a specific allegorical message that most of the time alluded to one of the queen's passions or family members (as we stated before), two plants defined 'the birth and the end of the garden': the ancient poplar and the white lilies.

#### *The white poplar.*

The queen was so fond of this tree she found during her 1924 visit that she repeatedly mentioned it in many of her notes, articles and daily records and moreover. She thus decided to place a white marble throne right under its shadow, transforming the tree into something similar to a royal emblem (Figure 2).

The tree was integrated in the garden that bore the name of the Queen's oldest daughter, Elisabeth. The poplar was also in close proximity to Carol's terrace (her firstborn child and the future King Carol II) and to the main residence, the *Tenha Yuhav*, representing the only large tree in their proximity.



Figure 2. The old bended poplar, the throne and Elisabeth's terraced garden in the background, approx. 1927-1930

(Source: ANIC, Fond Fototeca, Format 1, 565-3)

Although both European classical mythology (see Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1995) and the Romanian beliefs (see Simion-Florea, 2008) consider poplars to be part of a small category of plants regarded as negative symbols, it is most probably that the ancient white poplar from the terraced gardens at Balchik bore no specific symbolism, but rather it was regarded as one of the elements most representative for the landscaping complex. The poplar, in the case of the Balchik ensemble, thus became a symbol for the birth of the gardens.

#### *The lily road.*

If we can accept the fact that the secular poplar bore no symbolical meaning, we can not state the same thing for the lilies planted by Queen Marie on the alley that connected the Temple of the Waters or *Suleiman Lei*, to the Stella Maris chapel. They were specifically chosen by the Queen to be planted on the way to the place she wished her heart to be laid after her passing. As we shall see, if the poplar was an element that the sovereign desired to keep and integrate in her gardens, transforming it into a kind of symbol for the birth of her architectural and landscaping personal Paradise, the lilies were chosen for a number of reasons that dealt with symbolism, mythology and personal beliefs.

Queen Marie's love for flowers is widely known and even she stated in her daily notes that she had an even more increasing love for them as she grew older: "*Flowers play a crucial role in my life, more overwhelming as the years pass [...]*" (Regina Maria a României, 2014, p. 431), but one of the plants she was fond to more than for others was the white lily, also known as the Royal lily or Madonna's lily (*Lilium regale*).

The reason why the lily meant so much for the Queen as she decided to place it on the road that lead to her heart was that, when she first saw it in childhood while she was at the Swiss Cottage on the Isle of Wight, she was fascinated by its beauty and by its perfume: "*It is a whole world in Madonna lily's scent, something biblical, something legendary, almost beautifully ireal. More than that, it is so tall and graceful, so shiny, as it seems that its petals spring light*" (Mandache, 2014, p.14, quoting from Marie, Queen of Romania, 1936, vol. I). So, as we see, the lily was part of a



memory so pleasant and so deeply rooted in Queen Marie's memory that it is obvious why this particular plant would be chosen to lead the way from the Temple of the Waters to the Gethsemane garden and to the Queen's heart. However, not just memory played a crucial role in choosing the lily as the most representative flowering plant for this symbolical "assignment".

It is considered that the queen was no stranger to the significance of the symbols she chose for different purposes and reasons in all her artistic works. To this end, the lily might have been used both because it was regarded as an emblematic symbol of Virgin Mary, the Queen's patron (see Constantin, 2007) and because the lily is one of the most complex symbolical plants, representing innocence, purity, passionate love, glory, Christian belief, mystical grace etc. (see Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1995) - all traits that a Queen should possess.

All these characteristics and symbolical meanings of the lily along with the queen's childhood love for this particular flower represented more than enough reasons for choosing the *Lilium regale* as the flower to be planted on the road that lead to the queen's heart. They mark "the end of the road" for the Queen but also a new possible and hopefully bright future inspired by Marie of Edinburgh. (Figure 3)

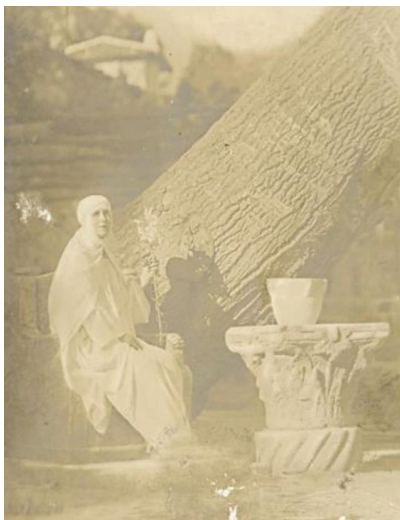


Figure 3. The Queen holding a lily and sitting under the ancient poplar's shadow (approx. 1935)  
(Source: ANIC, Fond Fototeca, Format 1, 218-2)

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 1938, Queen Marie died and was buried alongside her husband at Curtea de Argeş. However, according to her will, her heart was removed from her chest and was placed in a silver box within a golden box with precious gems and was sent to be laid at Balchik in the small Stella Maris chapel.

The lily road was welcoming her and all those who wanted to come to her heart and pay her an homage, the exact way she had planned: *"During an abundant lifetime, so many came to my heart, and so I wish that the even dead still feel them coming to it, along the path of lilies, that was my joy and pride"* (Mandache, 2014, quoting from archival sources - ANR) - (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. The Queen, Stella Maris chapel and the lily path (approx. 1930-35)(Source: MNP archives)



Figure 5. The Queen and Stella Maris chapel, approx. 1935 (note: the lily path is behind the photographer)  
(Source: ANIC, Fond Fototeca, Format 1, 226-5)

*From the private gardens to the public botanical park*

After the Queen's death, the entire ensemble became a topic of disputes between the Romanian and the Bulgarian governments and since the 1940s and up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century few details are known about how the gardens have changed over time, how, what and why did some particular terraces were redesigned etc. However, we will skip this historical period of political and economical debates between the two nations, and we will focus on the present image of the gardens.

Although we will not discuss political or economical matters, it is important to mention that after Queen Marie's death, the gardens started being slowly opened to the public, but most of the time, as historical documents and contemporary researches show, the visitors were often very aggressive and they didn't treated the gardens properly and with respect: *"These visits are becoming even more numerous and the people are wandering the entire park without being supervised by anyone, throwing food everywhere, picking flowers, climbing on everything and leaving*

*after getting bored."* (after Mandache, 2014 quoting from archival sources - AMAE).

In the late 1900s, the Balchik complex became a guest house ensemble and this might also be one of the reasons why the gardens became even more degraded.

Nowadays, Queen Marie's gardens at Balchik are considered to be botanical gardens due to their impressive plant collections. However, they were never designed as such and they were never intended to become botanical gardens. They do not even follow the prescriptions and the botanical rules that a botanical garden needs to follow, but because of their indigenous and exotic plant collections they are perceived and presented as such.

Regarding the historical vegetation, a series of *in situ* and archival researches have to be done in order to reveal which parts of today gardens still holds the historical plant species and which do not. However, regarding the old white poplar and the lily path we can observe that they were replaced by a kaki tree (Figures 6 and 7) and by groups of irises, and the reasons why such modifications were made are still uncertain and unclear.



Figure 6. The ancient bended poplar (approx. 1935-40)  
(Source: MNP archives)





Figure 7. The young kaki tree, 2015  
(Source: author)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Since 1924 and up until 1938, the gardens at Balchik were in a constant change and upgrading of both their plant collections and of their symbolism. Although many parts of the ensemble went through several changes, some parts remained unchanged and the Queen herself explained the reasons why she chose these particular parts of the gardens not to be modified. Thus, the old bended white poplar, due to the fact that it was one of the reasons why the queen chose these grounds to build her “paradise” gardens, it became an iconic vegetal component of the royal landscape ensemble by the seashore. In what concerns the lily path, this was one of the few plant compositions for which the queen explained the reasons why she decided to design it as such.

As we see, a series of elements or parts of the gardens were very meticulously thought through by the Queen and by her gardeners and landscape architects and these are the reasons why they became iconic for the history and symbolism of the Balchik landscaping complex. Each plant, each sculpture, each vase and each building had a purpose and a role in the garden’s iconography. They were part of what Diana Mandache is naming a “Fool’s

Paradise” or the “Illusory Paradise” because the gardens built by the Queen were nothing more for the sovereign than an ideal world created on the basis of a “happiness based on an imaginary blissful state, designed far from the unforgiving realities; a place of refuge and silence” (Mandache, 2014, p. 40). Due to the fact that every detail of the gardens was meticulously conceived in order to serve such purposes, it was important to keep, conserve or restore it/them in order to maintain a particular symbolism and allegorical story that defined the iconographical statement of the gardens.

Regarding the old bended white poplar and the lily path, as we have seen, their role in the history and iconography of the gardens was very important and, as he have already stated, they were physical and symbolical statements of the garden’s birth and “afterlife”. The two species were part of a complex landscaping microcosm defined as an “Illusory Paradise” and if we may compare the Balchik ensemble with a puzzle we can see that if we remove or change even a single piece, we cannot obtain the desired image. Thus, the new species of plants that took the place of the historical ones create a different image and distort Queen Marie’s vision.

Indeed, plants have a certain lifespan and we cannot have hoped that the ancient poplar would have lasted for eternity, but when it was time to cut it, a new similar species of tree should have taken its place and continue the story that the old poplar was telling, and not change it with a different species of tree that may or may not create a different storyline. The same arguments go for the lily path as well, only that when it comes to the lilies one may decide that since the queen's heart is no longer at Balchik, then it is probably no need to keep the symbolical lilies. However, this is an argument that must be very well sustained.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, even if we refer to the examples given by the Balchik gardens or to any other similar ones, we can conclude that eliminating or replacing certain elements from a garden, whether they are natural, mineral or manmade, is also modifying certain paradigms and concepts and it alters the iconographical puzzle and the allegorical messages that a certain garden was designed to create. If we refer only to the Balchik ensemble, we can see that, by replacing the ancient poplar with a young kaki tree and by replacing the lilies with irises, the beginning and the end of the story that Queen Marie decided to create by the seaside are altered. However, there are many more other similar examples of gardens where the original species of plants were replaced by others, but this is not necessarily a bad decision. Replacing certain species of plants in historical gardens had, throughout history, both benefic and destructive consequences. To this end, many more similar examples could be given, and only by remaining in the relatively same geopolitical area, we could give the Cișmigiu garden from Bucharest as an example where these types of actions had both good and bad consequences (Mexi and El-Shamali, 2015). To this end, we can state that, if possible and unless there are technical or environmental issues that are demanding this, the original pieces, whether they are natural or manmade, should be kept, conserved and restored in order to keep a continuous and coherent allegorical and symbolical storyline which a garden was meant and designed to reflect.

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