

# Elena and Ion Popescu- Voitești's trip to Holy Levant

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Abstract. The article brings to the attention of those interested in the life and work of geologist Ion Popescu-Voitești a writing by his wife Elena (called 'Luna'), about the trip they made before attending the First International Congress of Geography in Cairo, Egypt. That participation was an excellent opportunity to visit the biblical Holy places in the Levant. Elena's reflections on this trip have been collected in a short booklet printed in 1925, intended to raise funds for the maintenance of the Holy Sepulcher. In fact, the text was the one of a conference designed also to raise money for the erection of the building of the Orthodox Cathedral in Cluj. The author's impressions of her experiences of visiting those places are highlighted. From this writing the Christian faith of the two husbands, who took advantage of the Egyptian congress to visit the Holy Places of the Levant, is apparent.

Key words: Elena Voitești, trip, Holy places, Levant.

## Introduction

One of the purposes that characterizes the work of a researcher or university teacher is the participation in professional meetings such as congresses or symposia. The purpose of these participations is found in the professional gain of each specialist, through the exchange of ideas or even through polemic discussions on a specific topic. Often, a good acquaintance with colleagues is achieved not necessarily in the dialogue offered by the few minutes allocated to a presentation -

be it oral or poster - but by the one that follows during the breaks of these scientific events, and in certain professions where fieldwork is an essential element, during field trips. This is why substituting physical for virtual attendance, which has taken place under various constraints in the years preceding this writing is not a beneficial solution in the long term, which is why many meetings have abandoned the idea of virtual attendance.

At the end of their careers, many representatives of scientific life have an enviable record of such participation. But this was not always the case: a century ago, getting to some congresses was a real challenge if the venues were far away. This was also the case for the man who was a landmark in Romanian geology, and even more so in Cluj, Prof. Dr. Ion Popescu-Voitești. Through his profession as a geologist, doubled by a genetic dowry coming from the generations of his parents, the professor was a very active man, walking an impressive part of the Romanian territory. It is well known that for a geologist every step taken in the field is a personal professional gain. Thanks to the wealth of knowledge, he accumulated on those occasions he acquired a solid and in no way small knowledge that consecrated him as a researcher and teacher. The results of that work he shared with his colleagues abroad on the occasion of a number of important meetings he attended: the International Congress in Brussels (1922), the International Congress of Petroleum Geology in London (1923), the First International Geographical Congress in Cairo (1924), the Congress of the Association of Carpathian Geologists in Lwów (now, Lviv; 1925), Bucharest (1927) and Prague (1931), the International Congress of Mining, Metallurgy and Applied Geology in Liège (1930), the International Congress in Paris (1935) (Mocioi & Huică, 2015, with related references). Of these, I will stop here strictly at the First International Geographical Congress in Cairo, Egypt, an excellent opportunity for this Paleogene successions connoisseur to get in touch with emblematic terrains for this geological age.

#### On the way to Egypt, the Holy Levant

But I did not intend in this writing to dwell on his participation in that scientific event, but on a writing that goes back to his wife, Elena 'Luna' I. Popescu-Voitești who accompanied him on that journey. If about Ion Popescu-Voitești relatively much has been written and often on the basis of extensive data (*e.g.*, Mocioi & Huică, 2015; Codrea & Popescu, 2017, Codrea & Fărcaș, 2023 and related references), about his wife the accounts are by far, much poorer. I will therefore sketch a few biographical landmarks that relate to her life and work.

She was born in Craiova, on March 2, 1886, to Ion I. and Alexandrina I. Tomescu. Her father died when she was only five years old, which is why the family

remained in an extremely precarious material state, the mother being forced to enter as school teacher deprived of any wealth. In spite of this situation, she followed studies, including at university level, as follows: primary studies in Caracal (1892-1894), as a scholarship holder at the 'Elena Doamna' Asylum in Bucharest (1897-1902), then as a scholarship holder at various private institutes, so that in the autumn of 1906 she left for Geneva to study in the commercial field, graduating from the Higher Commercial School in 1908, relying on a financial aid offered by the School House (Casa Școalelor) and a modest contribution from her mother. After several years, in 1931 she obtained a degree in Commercial Sciences also in Geneva, after two more years of studies at the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences.

She taught as a teacher in Celei (former Romanai County), and then as a teacher of commercial studies and shorthand in schools for girls in Botoșani, Cluj and Bucharest. She retired in 1941, and as 'thanks' for her work, the communist regime installed after the Second World War tried to suspend her pension rights. Consequently, in an autobiography (Voitești, 1950) dated September 25, 1950, which I had at my disposal, she indicates as persons who can tell about her life and activity some names of established personalities such as Prof. Nicolae Bărbulescu, Gheorghe Murgeanu (University of Bucharest), Prof. Victor Stanciu (University of Cluj), Geol. Dimitru Ștefănescu, Acad. Grigore Moisil. The unfortunate challenge he had to face reflects nothing but the abject behavior of the decision makers of the Romanian society at that time. As we have shown in a previous article (Codrea & Popescu, 2017), it is quite possible that her husband would have shared a similar fate - although, as she specified, he '*never did any kind of politics, but only honest work (...)*' - if he had not died out towards the end of the WW II.

In Cluj, she was in the first half of the third decade of the last century, president of the National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women founded in 1921. In 1928 (Voitești, 1928) she wrote an account of the activities for the year 1927, of the Committee of the National Orthodox Women's Society, Cluj Branch, underlining the efforts to raise funds for the new Orthodox Cathedral in Cluj. With this target in mind, a delegation including Elena went in audience to Queen Elena of Romania (where it was present also the young M. His King Mihai), but also to Her Majesty the Queen Marry, Queen Elisabeth and Princess Ileana. Queen Marry suggested to women's delegation from Cluj (Popescu-Voitești, Bogdan-Duică, Bohățiel born Lemeny) that rather than melting precious metal coins, it would be better to sell the rare pieces to collectors: but Elena Voitești noted they had none of the rare ones in their possession.... On this occasion, the Queen Marry donated for the cathedral in Cluj two Oltenian carpets. After lunch they went to High Regency, Patriarch Miron and the Princess Alexandrina Cantacuzino. As I pointed out, they made these high visits to request support and help for the embellishment of the cathedral in Cluj, with things of handicrafts and art objects. They were promised beautiful things among

which some things for the holy mass, which will be worked by former Queen of Greece and Princess Ileana. Minister Lapedatu, very kindly to facilitate the visits made them available at all times, a car. At the call of St. Patriarch Miron of Romania, a fundraising appeal was drafted and circulated throughout the country, and as a result 70 226 lei were raised (Renașterea, 1928).

The Society also initiated the sale of small icons on March, 1 (as spring symbols; Renașterea, 1927 a), the printing of the Bible for the blind by allocating the money resulting from a performance of the Romanian Opera in Cluj (21 000 lei), a ball for children, a concert at the Conservatory in Cluj by Ana Voileanu (4 830 lei), a bazaar with auditions, religious services for school children, conferences for the intellectual youth, seminars for the working class, printing of conferences (three of them in 1000 and 500 copies, respectively: a financial fiasco, in two bookshops only 3 pieces were sold, and after the intervention of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the School House Administration, 1000 pieces were bought at 10 lei each). The Society gave prizes to primary and secondary schools, aid for the church in the Hill, various other aids, commemorations and festivities (Voitești, 1928). To the church she made donations such as ‘A curtain for the royal doors, embroidered by hand, placed on a background of maple velvet, with a silk lining’ (Renașterea, 1932). In order to organize a charity bazaar by the Society, she got involved in the collection of objects donated by good Christians, putting his house at 12, Elisabeta Street in Cluj as a storage space (Renașterea, 1927 b). She retired from the leadership of the Society in 1931, handing over to Mrs. Zina Moroianu (Renașterea, 1931).

It is well known that she followed her husband in the places where he worked as a worthy wife, according to the custom of those times. She accompanied him to the congress in Egypt, but this journey was not barren in terms of her writing contributions: on their journey to Egypt, the two husbands made a stopover in the old Canaan Holy Lands. On that occasion, Elena Voitești (as she signs herself on the published cover) wrote a brief booklet entitled ‘Holy Places Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jordan Travel impressions’ issued in Sibiu in 1925 at the Archdiocesan Printing House (Voitești, 1925; Fig. 1). The booklet was sold for 20 lei each (Renașterea, 1925, 1926 a).

The area of the Levant in which the two husbands landed is, as we know, extremely illustrative for those who want to discover a number of the treasures of biblical history. And Elena Voitești has proved that she has not shied away from that desire for knowledge.

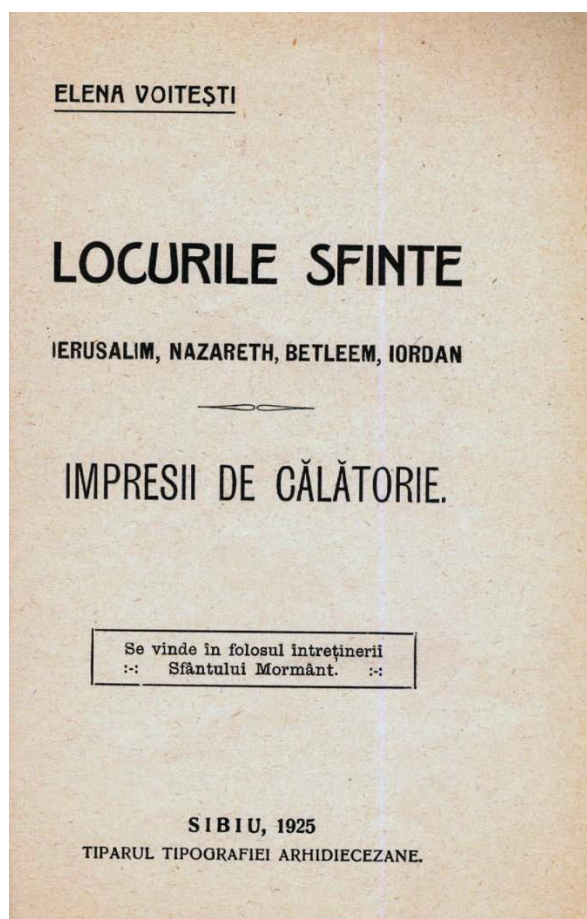


Fig. 1. Title page of the booklet published by Elena Voitești in 1925.

Both on the cover and on the title page it is specified that the booklet is ‘Sold for the benefit of the maintenance of the Holy Sepulchre’, so the author did not benefit from any material reward resulting from such a sale. The text in question was the subject of a conference ‘...with projections, held in Cluj, on 24 May for the increase of the fund for the building of the Orthodox Cathedral’ (footnote, p. 1). We saw that the wife of the famous geologist was the author of some charitable actions for the Romanian Orthodox Church. In this case, we don't know what was the amount of money resulting from that conference - probably a drop in the ocean of financial stringency of that diocese -, but beyond the money itself, the importance of this woman's involvement for a cause that was at that time urgent in Cluj, the erection of a cathedral for Orthodox believers. At that time, a few years after the end of the WW I and the annihilation of Béla Kun's communist revolution by the Romanian army in 1919 (Kirițescu, 1922), the city of Cluj was still lacking an important building for the Orthodox Church in the province of Transylvania (Ardeal), the cathedral of the Diocese of Vad, Feleac and Cluj being at that time the Holy Trinity Church, functioning as such until 1932. An essential role in the construction of that church

was played by the merchants Ioan Constantin and Ienache Mavrodin, and the support of other Greek and Macedo-Romanian merchants, for which reason the street on which it is located was also called in Hungarian *Görögtemplom Utca* (translated: Greek church alley, today Bisericii Ortodoxe Street; Stanca, ?1929; Mureșanu, 1942; Wikipedia, accessed February 1, 2023). The church that still exists today was, however, much too small for the needs of a community that was growing in Cluj after hundreds of years in which the access of the Romanians to the city had been limited to *extra muros*. Therefore, the new cathedral to be completed in 1933 was an extremely necessary construction and every financial support was important (among the university geologists of Cluj, only Prof. Victor Stanciu has his name inscribed today on the plaque at the entrance, on the right side with the list of the main donors).

Mrs. Voitești's booklet begins with a motivation for writing the text in question, referring to the biblical Holy places: 'This thirst for joy, a felt emotion that some people have, especially us women, expansive and eager to see everyone around us rejoicing, has compelled me to come before you today to present in words and pictures the places I have seen.' While maintaining, however, the fear related to words that 'profane the sanctity of feelings' (p. 1).

The voyage began on March 25, 1924, when the ship Romania ('a medium-sized ship, nice, very elegant, with all the modern comforts', but on which '...however, you are in her like a mouse in a race; you keep going round and round, you arrive again at the starting point' p. 9-10) left the Constanța Harbor, heading for Jaffa. But for the couple from Cluj, the journey started even two nights earlier, the first in the train to Bucharest, the second one in the train to Constanța, amidst rainy weather the raindrops, according to the author 'keeping the season of our tears of separation from our country, from our home, from our loved ones' (p.2). The travelers on the ship were of two categories: Jews from various countries of Eastern and Central Europe (ca. 700) emigrating to their bast country, and intellectuals going to attend the opening of the University of Jerusalem.

After sailing along the Bulgarian coast, which she considers 'monotonous, arid, even desolate.' (p. 6), the ship crossed the Bosphorus, 'Deep, with banks sometimes steep, sometimes flat, the Bosphorus has so many currents in all directions that it seems an enormous river.' (p. 6), hosting on its banks Constantinople (or Istanbul, on western bank and Scutari, on the opposite bank), the crossing point between Europe and the East Asia. Although it made a stopover, the ship's passengers were unable to disembark there 'because of the quarantine' (p. 7), causing the author to regret having seen only from a distance the buildings of the Serai, the minarets of St. Sophia and the Mohammed Mosque (the Blue Mosque), but the experience of seeing them was so intense that 'the four hours we spent in front of it were not too long' (p. 7). She sees the city as on the verge of decay, which

‘In a few years will seem to us like a ghost of a city that once was, ceding supremacy to the city of Angora in the heart of Asia Minor [...], in a region of little hospitality.’ (p.7). A hundred years later, Istanbul today remains as fascinating with its historical heritage that needs to be seen and understood.

The voyage continued with the crossing of the Dardanelles where Captain Emil Paraschivescu sailed ‘with great care’, by personal control on the bridge. Further on, in the Aegean Sea, ‘everything is characteristically Mediterranean: the color of the water and the light, and there is something mysterious about the profile of the islands rising from the water’ (p. 9). Those islands which, according to a legend invoked by the author, would have formed from what remained on the Creator's fingers after He fashioned from clay, Europe and Asia.

On March 29, the ship docked off the coast of Syria, where the ridges of the rocky barrier linking Asia Minor with Egypt were revealed, and beyond which lies ‘a deep pit in which several streams meander, including the Jordan, which ends in the Dead Sea.’ (p. 10). Syria and Palestine of those times are places where, as the author correctly notes, there is ‘a complication’ in terms of ‘races and religions (...)’ where ‘almost all the races coming from Asia overlapped. Most of the population are Muslims; in the north the Turks predominate, and in the center and south the Arabs. Christians are also very numerous and belong to all rites and confessions. Some belong to the Catholic Church, most are Orthodox: Greeks, Armenians and Syrians, and they each have their own Patriarch. There are also the Jews, who always come from Europe, protected in their settlement by the English government, and the nomadic Arabs or Bedouins, who come from the desert interior, generally attracted by the prey.’ (p. 11). The author notes the contradiction of the promises made by the British at the end of the WW I, when they defeated the German-Turkish allied troops: on the one hand, in 1915, England promised the Arabs ‘the establishment of an independent state’ which was to include Palestine and its capital Jerusalem; on the other hand, only two years later in 1917, the same England, through its politicians (Lord Balfour) was considering the establishment of a ‘home for the Jewish people’, hence the antagonism between Arabs and Jews (perfidious Albion !). It is noted that a city as charged with religious spirit as Jerusalem cannot be given ‘in preponderance’ to one religion or another, but the state of affairs already proved the major influence of the Jews, noting that ‘the Israelite finance will always be ready to make sacrifices for their national home’ (p. 13), a point that has been amply proven in the century that has elapsed since the writing of the booklet to the present day.

From the Haifa Harbor, the Voitești family drove in a car to Nazareth, on a road ‘white, beautiful and very well maintained like all the roads in Palestine.’ (p. 16). They were in fact in the midst of a landscape charged with biblical heritage: the land of Galilee, Mount Tabor, Nazareth, a city set ‘in an amphitheater at the foot of

a circle of high hills (...) Nazareth offers a picture that fills the soul of the worshipping Christian with awe and piety' (p. 17-18). What we can notice from the photograph illustrating the settlement - modest, with only 9510 inhabitants, mostly Christians - at the end of the first quarter of the last century is the open, uncrowded appearance of the dwellings (Fig. 2). Doubtlessly, at that time, the place retained more of the charm of biblical times. The Romanian couple visited the Church of the Annunciation with devotion '...and we walk so that our footsteps will not be heard to profane the sanctity of the place.' (p. 19). They never reached Mount Tabor and the Tiberian Sea, returning to Haifa, because time was too short.



Fig. 2. View of Nazareth in 1924 (Voitești, 1925).

The next stop in the Holy lands was in Jaffa, a 'terraced' city, drowned in vegetation, and from there to Jerusalem, by car (Fig. 3). The sightseeing experience is worth remembering: 'You are blinded by the grandeur of the spectacle; you stand back and look back centuries and seem to hear the distant echo of the enthusiastic shouts of the Crusader armies, sure of victory (...)' (p. 23). The citadel with its seven gates held the attention of the two visitors, with streets that were sometimes wider, sometimes narrower, with cisterns that collected rainwater, rain that fell sparingly. As their stay in the city was strictly limited to two days, they visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which they rightly described as 'a mixture of walls from all times and tastes', with an entrance like a 'dark tunnel', so a heteroclite building often destroyed and rebuilt. However, at least the facade returns to the Crusaders, in Roman style 'with some borrowings from Arab art' (p. 28; Fig. 4). They also visited Golgotha, the Church of the Holy Virgin, Via Dolorosa, but did not have access to Omar's Mosque where Muslims, starting from their aversion to the English, had developed a real xenophobia, forbidding access to any foreigner. Next came Bethlehem, a town over which 'a kind of serene, warm cheerfulness seems to hover' (p. 33). On the hilltop they visited the Church of the Nativity of the Lord, housing details of the birth of the Savior, and then, passing Lazarus' tomb, they headed for the Jordan Valley, with its Jericho Camp (Fig. 5). Jericho had become nothing more than 'a cluster of houses inhabited by mixed and degenerate races' (p. 36) a few

decades before, but at the time of their visit it had still developed, but ‘lacked the drainage and irrigation to return it to its former prosperity’, i.e., the former fertility of the soil. There, she admires a 2.3 m circumference vineyard that produced 1500 kg of grapes annually!

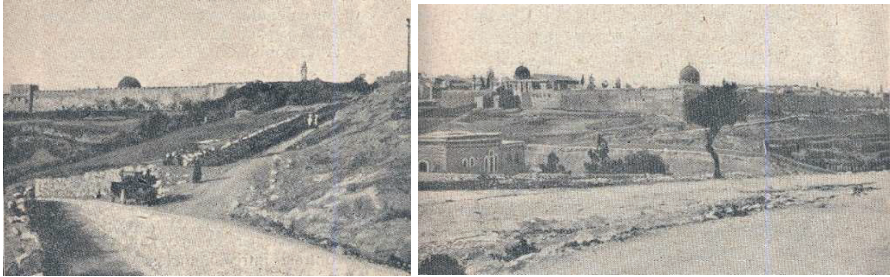


Fig. 3. Views of Jerusalem (Voitești, 1925).

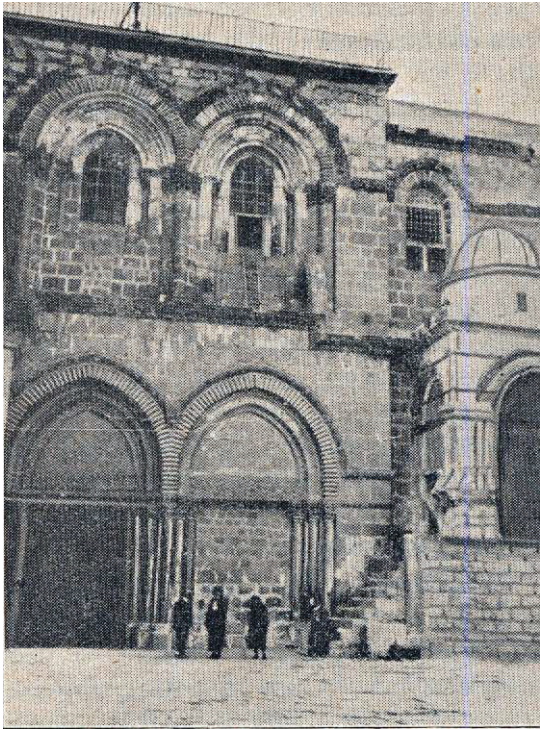


Fig. 4. Facade of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Voitești, 1925).



Fig. 5. Jericho by car: Prof. I. P.-Voitești is third from the left, standing leaning against the car (Voitești, 1925).

Passing towards the Jordan they also pass by the John the Baptist Monastery, close to the place where the one who bathes according to the religious canons that is after 40 days of repentance through prayers, fasting and religious services, can only then become a ‘hagiu’ (meaning a Christian who went to worship at the Holy places) (Fig. 6). Then, walking along the Jordan, they reached the Dead Sea, ‘this crystal-clear body of water, sparkling under a blue mirror’ (p. 38), apparently devoid of any form of life, not because of its saltiness, but because of the causticity caused by magnesium chloride: ‘it is sticky and greasy to the touch because of the calcium chloride it contains’.



Fig. 6. Worshippers ready to receive the baptism of the *hagiu* in the water of the Jordan; Prof. I. P.-Voitești first from the left, first row, standing (Voitești, 1925).

After a meeting with His Holiness the Patriarch of Jerusalem Damianos, the Voitești's stay in the Holy lands ended with regret, their final destination being the First International Congress of Geography in Cairo. But, the meeting with the Patriarch had also another result. Elena, who was at that time president of the Society of Orthodox Women of Cluj, obtained 'on behalf of our Orthodox diocese of Cluj from His Eminence Patriarch Damianos an epitaph of rare beauty and richness, handmade in silver and gold thread with very beautiful paintings.', which was brought to Cluj by Princess Alexandra Cantacuzino, president of the same Society in Bucharest. The epitaph was 'exhibited for public view in the window of the "Albina" bank in the Unirii square' (Renașterea, 1926 b). Moreover, the Voitești's trip was a source of inspiration for the Princess, who intended to organize under the aegis of the Society, pilgrimages 'for pupils and teachers to the Holy Sepulchre'. She emphasized once again the beauty of the epitaph, saying that the Patriarch also promised one for the 'Church of the Nation' in Mărășești (Foaia Diecezană, 1926).

On their return, they could not re-visit those places, as they had planned. Elena confesses towards the end that '...we women, who live an intensive soul life; who are soulfully attached to the most insignificant thing, to which we have made a place in our souls; who find it very difficult to part with what we hold dear, after we have tasted the pleasures of a journey - and I have proved to you that we have tasted them intensively - we feel longing, in the true sense of longing.' (p. 42). She returned home, to Cluj, 'hermetically sealing in a hidden little box of the heart all the poetic memories and impressions of travel, to feed with them the soul sometimes impoverished by the monotonous and arid prose of life.' (p. 43). The end of the text is of great sensitivity: 'From the journey you have made you do not know what to admire more: the Earth that the Savior has sanctified with his passion and the glory of the Resurrection, the grandiose monuments erected by men to glorify God, or nature with all its splendors and treasures: the sea, the wilderness, the vegetation, life!' (p. 43-44).

### **Instead of conclusions**

The booklet I have written about is undoubtedly, a rarity. It is not known how many copies were printed, but it is very likely that there were not too many. We do not know how large the audience was at Elena Voitești's conference, just as we do not know how generous the auditorium was in directing money for the construction of the Orthodox Cathedral in Cluj, a work then in the process of completion. What we do know for sure is that this writing has not been mentioned in any of the books dedicated to Ion Popescu-Voitești, which is why we thought it was worth bringing it back to the attention of those interested in the history of science after a century. We learn in it details of the days preceding the First International Congress of Geography

in Cairo, but above all, we discover a sensitivity of life that has perhaps been too little highlighted until now about Elena Popescu-Voitești. She did not stand out through a personal scientific work, but we know that she was always in the shadow of her husband, whom she supported and encouraged when, according to the sinful Romanian habit, others tried to hinder him, to minimize his work and results, to disregard him, consumed by bitter envy (Codrea & Fărcaș, 2023).

The pre-congress visit to the Holy Places leads us to appreciate that the two husbands were persons of faith in God. Otherwise, their short stay in those places would be difficult to explain.

For the geologist with roots in Gorj County, the congress in Egypt was undoubtedly useful, because he saw terrains otherwise more difficult to observe by an Eastern European professional. On the other hand, I am convinced that everything he saw in the places he visited before the meeting was also useful if we think that there is extremely illustrative tectonics, which invites any geologist to meditation and interpretations.

Between the two husbands there was until the end a sincere love illustrated perhaps most emblematically by the bouquet of autumn wild flowers that Prof. Popescu-Voitești prepared to offer to his wife, very shortly before he suddenly died struck down by heart attack, just a few dozen meters from the villa ‘Luna’ named in honor of his wife (where, after the scientist's death, a local cultural hostel and a medical dispensary serving five communes functioned), at Voiteștii din Deal.

The widow being, in order to support herself, Elena was typing with pay per page various texts. Starting from one of these, she was dragged into the ‘Noica-Pillat’ trial, as reported by Nicolae Steinhardt (1991; it worth to point out that he named her the ‘geographer's widow’, although Ion Popescu-Voitești always considered himself a geologist, not a geographer, as it appears from the documents we have published (Codrea & Popescu, 2017) (Wikipedia, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/tertium-non-datur/>).

Perhaps in those difficult moments of old age, burdened once again by material needs, she opened the ‘little box of the heart’ with memories of visiting Holy places, the personal refuge that no oppression can destroy!

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