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Once upon a time ... Ada Kaleh



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ROMEN KÜLTÜR MERKEZİ
İSTANBUL

When islanders

affectionately

touch their photos

– everything they have left, except memories –

as if they would pass beyond the paper

to a lost

paradise...

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*“Photographs represent more than simple patches
of paperboard for us. They are our life, the way there
used to be.”*

(Gheorghe Bob, Bucharest)

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The National Museum of Romanian Peasant from Bucharest, Romania is a prestigious cultural institute devoted to the peasantry art and civilization. The Museum exhibits the valuable collections (a heritage over 100.000 objects, 3000 glass cliché with old ethnographic photos and an important archive of documents and audio) in an impressive building, built in neo-Romanian style.

In the museum there are several departments which deal with hoarding, maintenance of the heritage, with ethnological and ethnomusicological research, with visual anthropology but also with cultural activities. For what it represents and for its activities the Romanian Peasant Museum has received many awards.

The most important award is the European Museum of the Year (EMYA) handed by a committee that operates under aegis of Europe Council. The National Museum of Romanian Peasant has won this award in competition with 64 museums in 21 countries, being the first museum in Central and Eastern Europe that came into its possession after only six years of existence.

Once upon a time... Ada Kaleh

Romanian Cultural Institute in partnership with the **National Museum of Romanian Peasant of Bucharest** organize during 14th and 23rd of June, 2011, within the frame of the *Intercultural Art Dialogue Days Festival*, a document- exhibition about **Ada Kaleh**, a Danube island covered by the waters of the barrier lake of hydropower dam “Iron Gates” in 1971. Along with the island, hundreds of years of stormy history, fulfilled destinies and stories lived on the edge of the empires (Ottoman, Hapsburg), myths and legends were born among waters.

Ada Kaleh was a paradisiacal realm not only for their islanders but also for those who ever visited.

Entitled **“Once upon a time... Ada Kaleh”**, the exhibition tells the story of the sunken island, inviting the audience to a journey in time to discover a unique place with a tragic destiny. It also symbolically retraces the destiny after the islanders’ evacuation. They are witnesses of the dramatic social effects of some political decisions at that time. In 1968, as the result of the expropriation ordered by the communist regime in order to build Iron Gates Hydropower dam, the island’s population, mostly of Turkish ethnic, chose to move to Turnu Severin or to other places in the country and was forced to hand over the documents of their holdings to the authorities. The absence of a Muslim worship place in the area brought most of the former islanders about to walk to Turkey or to Dobrogea, since there was an ethnic population and Muslim worship places.

The exhibition makes a survey of ordinary, small things, all these being seen from inside, getting started from evidence of oral history

and recollections retained within the collective memories which is still active. Though scattered islanders are fewer, they are keeping the island alive in their heart. Souls born amongst waters.

The interviews with the displaced ones, the photos from their personal archives, the few objects preserved from their old households recompose a lost paradise and, at the same time, create a space of remembrance of a unique life experience.

Personal stories, family destinies, survival strategies, models of craft and local culture are gathered in a “soul” exhibition. An exhibition that likes to be a chance of reasserting a specific identity of the former islanders (most of them immigrated into Turkey), but, at the same time, an historical restitution in the way of reasserting of the dramatic destiny of the island and their inhabitants. Our intercession has rather a nostalgic nature than a pure scientific character and it is all the more necessary so as, along with the last islander disappearance, there will be no witnesses of Ada Kaleh phenomenon.

An island of 1750 metres long and 400 meters width was sometime raising somewhere in the middle of the Danube...

The first attested mentions of this place are vague and have a mythological character rather than a real description, coming from some figures of Antiquity who allotted different names to the island.

The first of these is Eratosthenes who reminds it in the poem dedicated to the Argonauts under the name *Yernis*.

We also learn from mythology that Hercules might have dropped by the island to conquer the Geyron Giant's land. This stripe of land emerged from the Danube's waters is called *Erythia* from a bas relief of Cyprus.

(Herodot), NOUA ORSOVA, (1696), PORIZZA (1713), CAROLINA (1716), ADA KALE (from XVIII Century), ADA - Kebir (1800).

It became famous and died with the name she carried under Turkish rule. Ada Kaleh.

Difficult to access, with lush vegetation (cypress, fig tree, olive trees), the Mediterranean climate, bathed in sunlight all the time, the island seen from the mountains that guarded both banks of the river appeared like a huge basket of flowers on the crystal of the Danube.

In the sixties, before it was sunk, giving way to a realization of communism regime in Romania- the dam from “Iron Gates”- on the island were about 150 families, a star-shaped ancient stronghold abounding in history, two important factories (one ready-made clothing manufactory and one tobacco factory), one electric power company, a cinema, two churches (Muslim and Orthodox), several coffee houses and restaurants. During the week-ends and the high season, the island was full of countless tourists attracted by its exoticism, by the incomparable taste of the comfiture of figs, of the Turkish delight of roses or by the aromatic cigarettes.

Displacement of the inhabitants, forced to move miles away from their birthplace, generated dramas that cannot be expressed. Losing everything, some of them lost their life too. Deep sadness made victims but those who remained didn't lose their memories. The island keeps living in their souls and we imagine this exhibition from the memories of the former islanders to whom we dedicated to.

1964

The works at Hydropower Iron Gates are officially inaugurated. It is built by Romania with Former Yugoslavia.

1967-1970

All the buildings of the island are demolished and the stronghold is partially rebuilt on the Simian Island not far from Turnu Severin. The inhabitants leave the island which begins to be flooded by the Danube and move to the other cities of the country (Orsova, Turnu-Severin, Bucharest, Constanta), but a great part of it chooses to immigrate to Turkey.

1971

With the building of hydropower dam, the river level rises with 40 meters, covering the old Ada Kaleh that disappears swallowed up by waters and with it hundreds of years of history.

On the edge of the road which links the city of Drobeta Turnu Severin by Orsova, a blue boundary stone reminds us of a little island which covers a territory of 2 km. with a rich history, buried today in the Danube. The island is still there. It has been sleeping since 1971 but the community that enlivened it, crumbled for ever...

Emerged from under the waters, it is not known when, at 20 km. away from Drobeta Turnu - Severin and 4 km away from the current hydro dam from "Iron Gates", the island covered, at the moment of discharge, a territory of 890.000 mp. and had a population of over 500 inhabitants, majority of Turkish origin.

Over the time, the island had several names due to the ancient bookmen who mentioned about it or to the temporal rulers like Habsburg or Ottoman Empire: YERNIS (Eratostene) or CERNE (Cornelius Nepos), ERYTHIA, CONTINUSA (Arien, Plinius), CYRAUNIS

Pindar also affiliates the name of the island to that of Hercules's, the hero reaches this place to gather the sacred olive which was to be offered to temple of Zeus from Olympia.

A poet like Arieu as well as historians like Pliniu, Dionisiu Perieget and Prinscian mentions the island under the name *Continusa*.

Herodotus describes the island Cyraunis is full of the olives and wild grape wines.

Corneliu Nepos approximates (quite realistic otherwise) the island's dimension to 2958 metres and called it *Cerne*.

The medieval mentions of the island are more frequent and precise because it becomes strategically very important as given the confused context of the war time. The little island became the subject of dispute between the Ottoman Empire and Occidental countries which grew into rule one by one by the kingdoms and warring empires. Thus, the Danube river in the region called today "Portile de Fier" (Iron Gates), becomes a gate between Christians and Muslims.

1390

The island is occupied by the Turks led by Bayazid's Emir, Firuz Bei.

1402

Serbian Despot, Stepan Lazarovici, occupies the island after the defeat of Bayazid in the battle from Ankara.

1417

The Turks comes back to the Island, but for a short time, because the king of Hungary, Sigismund, will occupy the island a year later.

1430

The first official document where the island is mentioned under the name Saan with 216 inhabitants; it is the report made by the Teuton Knights brought by Sigismund of Hungary at the Danube.

1452

By the Treaty of Adrianopole, Mahomed the II acknowledged Hungary among others the ruler upon the island as well. But the Turks' raids will continue (in 1455 is mentioned a short Turkish rule of Saan island).

1526

The island is conquered again by the Turks, this time for a long period, after the battle of Mohacs which marks the peak of Ottoman power in Europe.

1696

After new conflicts, the island named *Noua Orșova* comes temporarily back to the Habsburg power.

1713

The island is mentioned with the name *Porizza* in a letter of Eugene of Savoia.

1716

The name of the island appears as Carolina on a Austrian map. It also appears under the names of *Atak*, *Adak* or *Ada-I-Kebir* (*Great Island*) in Turkish chronicles in the XVIII th century.

1717

The principle Eugene of Savoya occupies the island and the Habsburg rule over the territory (the border of the Habsburg Empire) will be received by the Peace of Passarovitz (1718). The forts are built at the ends of the island and are linked by underground roads, a storehouse of food and munition deposits. The next 20 years they will take the shape of a starred stronghold with 6 gates and 20 towers.

1739

After having bombarded in 1733, the island was temporarily occupied by Turks and the Ottoman rule over the island would be attested by the Treaty of Belgrade.

1788

The island is already mentioned with the name Ada-Kaleh (the island-citadel).

1790

For a short time the island *Noua Orșova* is again under the Austrian rule after a bombardment and a blockade which lasted a long winter.

1810

A battalion of *panduri* (soldiers) led by Tudor Vladimirescu occupies the island to prevent the attacks of Turkish rebels led by famous Pazvanoglu. They plundered at their will, terrorizing the population from the Northern parts of the Danube for decades.

1848

The leaders of The Revolution of Romanian Principalities (N. Balcescu, C.A Rosetti) are arrested by Turks and sent them on Ada-Kaleh Island. The Hungarian revolutionist Lajos Kossuth has the same fate in 1949.

1878

After the defeating the Ottoman Empire by Tsarist Empire, strengthened by the Peace Congress of Berlin, the Austrian takes into possession the Danube island again without being provided by the Treaty.

1885

The island is declared open garrison and is officially named Ada-Kaleh.

1923

In the frame of the reconfiguration of Europe after The First World War, the population of Ada-Kaleh island requests the annexation to Romania after the referendum. A simple change of administration because the Turkish life continues as before.

Two memorable visits of the leaders from Bucharest (King Carol the II in 1931 and Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej in 1949) led to the development and modernization of the island, emphasizing the touristic feature of this exotic place. The king confirmed again a tax free regime for a number of products sold by the islanders which favoured the foundation of a factory of cigarettes and Dej's decision to set up here a ready-made clothing manufactory strengthened the economic importance of the island.