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**HISTORY AND MEMORY. THE GREAT UNION IN VICTOR ȘUIAGA'S MEMORIES***Gherghina BODA**Muzeul Civilizației Dacice și Romane din Deva (România)*

Victor Șuiaga, an outstanding personality of Hunedoara County and a perfect patriot, was one of the few to record his memories bearing important historical connotations, thus contributing to the enrichment of the local historical background. In particular, his memoirs contain information about the period of school years that overlapped with the First World War, but also with the effervescent period of the Great Union. As an active participant and an eyewitness to the national events of the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he gives us valuable information about how they unfolded locally, about the reaction of the population to the atmosphere of the time, the involvement of the local population, and the people who can be considered local heroes but who have been unjustly forgotten, his memories constituting a true chronicle of those times. The Great Union, however, stands out with its special importance for all Romanians, and therefore he dedicates much of his writings to describing this event.

**Keywords:** *Victor Șuiaga, personality, memories, Great Union, patriotism.*

**ISTORIE ȘI MEMORIE. MAREA UNIRE ÎN AMINTIRILE HUNEDOREANULUI VICTOR ȘUIAGA**

Victor Șuiaga, personalitate hunedoreană de seamă și un patriot desăvârșit, a fost unul dintre pușinii care și-au consemnat amintirile cu conotații istorice importante, contribuind astfel la îmbogățirea fondului istoric local. Memoriile sale cuprind informații în special despre perioada anilor de școală care s-au suprapus cu anii Primului Război Mondial, dar și cu perioada efervescentă a Marii Uniri. Ca participant activ și martor ocular la evenimentele naționale din primele două decenii ale sec.XX, el ne oferă informații prețioase despre desfășurarea acestora în plan local, despre reacția populației la atmosfera vremii, despre implicarea populației locale, despre oamenii care pot fi considerați eroi locali și care pe nedrept au fost uitați, amintirile sale constituindu-se într-o adevărată cronică a acelor timpuri. Însă, Marea Unire se detașează net prin importanța sa deosebită pentru toți românii, descrierii acestui eveniment Victor Șuiaga acordându-i un spațiu larg în scrierile sale.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Victor Șuiaga, personalitate, memorii, Marea Unire, patriotism.*

**Introduction**

Hunedoara, a county with a deep historical significance, where ancient monuments stand next to medieval ones, forming a collection of historical testimonies registered in the national and world heritage, is among the most important areas of Romania in terms of cultural heritage. The traveler who passes through this area encounters material proofs of human habitation since the oldest times, constructions that testify to the technical-engineering knowledge of reputed Dacian and medieval craftsmen, wooden and stone churches whose walls still preserve the artistic craftsmanship of the old painters, castles and mansions in which it seems that the spirit of the former owners is still walking through the buildings dusted by the passing of time, artifacts that talk about ancestral civilizations or about national historical events that have kept the local personality of those who have contributed to the writing of history on these lands.

The contribution of the people of Hunedoara County to the countless events of the troubled history of the Romanians is indisputable today. Evidence of their solidarity and their participation in the political and social struggles and movements related to social or national injustices, such as Michael the Brave's Union, the Romanian peasants' revolt led by Horea, Cloșca and Crișan of 1784, the Revolution of 1848-1849, the Union of the Romanian Principalities of 1859, the War of Independence from the years 1877-1878, the memorandum movement from 1892-1894, etc. can be found in some documents kept in the archives, as well as in the pages of newspapers and magazines. It is also worth remembering the special contribution of the people of Hunedoara county to the development of the national culture, of whom we can mention: Aron Densușianu, Dr. Iosif Hodoș, Nicolae Densușianu, Silviu Dragomir and many others.

The event with the strongest significance nationwide, through which the age-old dream of all Romanians came true, was the Great Union, which was held on 1 December, 1918 in Alba Iulia. Once more, the people of Hunedoara County participated in large numbers, their presence in Alba Iulia confirming their unconditional adherence to this political act, their solidarity and their desire for unity with all Romanians, with their brethren of the same nation, living on both sides of the Carpathians.

### **Victor Șuiaga – biography**

Among the thousands of people from Hunedoara County participating in this historical act is Victor Șuiaga from Deva, a complex personality who, over the years, through manuscripts and prints, made a special contribution to the local history, to the recording of events in which he participated directly or to which he was an eyewitness, bringing to public attention facts and people that are usually covered in the dust of history, forgotten by future generations. He was born on October 25, 1899 in the village of Teiu, the commune of Lăpugiu, Hunedoara County, as the second son of the eight children of priest Ioan Șuiaga and his wife Minerva, née Olariu. He died on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1996 in Deva [1, p.14]. He graduated from the Faculty of Law, University of Cluj in 1922, where he obtained his PhD in legal and administrative sciences in 1928. Then, he settled down in Deva, where he practiced law until 1948, when the Bar was abolished. A second attempt to be admitted to the College of Lawyers failed, and thus he had to work in the Accounts Department of the Cottage Cooperative and Pharmaceutical Center of Deva until his retirement in 1961 [2, p.544-545].

Also worth mentioning is his rich political, cultural and publishing activity that unfolded over the years [3, p.545]: he worked in the Students' Society at the Law School, in the "Petru Maior" Student Circle, in the Hunedoara Students Society in Cluj, being among the first founders and vice president; he was chairman and vice president of Deva County Central District of Astra (1943-1947), director of the National Casina Deva (1936-1942), member and secretary general of the Romanian Anti-Revisionist League (1930-1940), vice president of the Union of Former Fighters in Transylvanian National Guards (1935-1944), president of the Romanian Orthodox Brotherhood from Deva and a member of the Assembly of the Archdiocese of Sibiu (1932-1948); he also supported the Association of Romanian Craftsmen and the Craftsmen's Association for Burial Aid of Deva; he took part, together with a delegation of students from Cluj, in the crowning of King Ferdinand and Queen Mary in Alba Iulia; he was the director of the newspapers "Voința" (1930-1931) and "Astra hunedoreană" (1943-1945) from Deva; he published a series of historical works containing a wealth of invaluable information that are still quoted today in the specialized literature. Owing to all his community-driven activity and scientific contributions, Victor Șuiaga occupies a place of honour among the most famous personalities from Hunedoara County.

### **Victor Șuiaga's connection with the Great Union**

His connection to the Great Union started in 1917, since high school, when he was drafted and joined the Austrian-Hungarian Army where he served in the Romanian Regiment 64 Infantry from Orăștie which, from the very beginning of the war, was moved to Vienna and held there by the Austrian-Hungarian authorities until the end of the world conflagration "because it was composed almost entirely of Romanians from Hunedoara County, who could no longer be trusted as they had started to cross the mountains into Romania, while in Orăștie Regiment 82 Infantry from Odorhei was brought, composed only of the Székelys" [4, p.9]. Șuiaga tells about this regiment of Orăștie that during the troubled period before the Great Union, it occupied the barracks and set up the Central Senate of the Romanian Officers and Soldiers from Transylvania, Banat and Bucovina; it was recognized by the Austrian Ministry of War, making a special contribution to the concentration of over 50,000 Romanian officers and soldiers in Vienna "who all swore allegiance to the Central Romanian National Council and then came, well-organized and armed, to Transylvania through Yugoslavia, placing themselves at the disposal of the Romanian revolutionary power" [5, p.11].

In his memoirs in the form of a manuscript, donated to the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilization in Deva on December 10, 1981, Victor Șuiaga tells both about the events preceding the Union act and the event itself in which he actively took part, together with other tens of thousands of people from Hunedoara County.

His recollections also refer to the year of the First World War when, as a student at the Romanian Gymnasium in Brad and graduate from the third grade, at the school year-end ceremony of June 28, 1914, news broke out of the murder of the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, and the imminence of the outbreak of a war. "I saw in that summer how general mobilization was made in my native village and in neighboring villages, how the Romanian peasants went to war without any enthusiasm, but with feelings of bitterness, because they had nothing to fight for and die under the "foreign arms", and they all thought the war would be short and they would soon return to their homes. Who would have imagined at the time that it would become a world war, it would last for over four years and that even the children of that time would be brought into it" [6, p.2]. In 1917, Victor Șuiaga was drafted, then trained in several units, and finally sent to the Italian front where, on 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1918, he was injured in his head, right eye and left hand after a fall from 18

m due to the breaking of a funicular carrying soldiers. Afterward, he was taken to a hospital in Innsbruck, from where he was repatriated at the beginning of November and went to a hospital in Timișoara [7, p.21-22]. On the Italian front, Șuiaga says: "I saw and felt the shortcomings, the misery and the demoralization of the army, I heard the pains and injustices the people were suffering from, and the curses against an unjust authority. All proved how morale and military discipline were falling, how the people's wrath was growing and boiling in Austria-Hungary [8, p.4]. He returned to his native village, wounded and convalescent, but this did not prevent him from actively participating in all the events of the time. He initiated the formation of the Romanian National Guard in his native village, Teiu, and he then roamed the villages of Valea Lăpugiului mobilizing the inhabitants to secure the road and the railway to the border with Banat, then occupied by the French and Serbian troops. Its defense was necessary due to the attacks by the Austrian-Hungarian gendarmerie, such as that of November 6, 1918, on the village of Lăpugiu de Jos, when 10 innocent peasants were shot dead [9, p.221]. Victor Șuiaga remembers that during those troubled days he met Dr. Petru Groza, who had an intense activity in the Romanian National Council at county level. At that time, the so-called „Spanish flu” was raging, and all those involved in these activities and who were forced to cover much ground to counteract the disease that already had countless victims protected themselves with plum brandy and garlic, because drugs were not available [10, p.224].

As for the enthusiasm of the population of those historical days, words cannot encompass the entire emotional load, the extremely wide palette of the feelings that people were experiencing. The fact is that above all there were the feelings of patriotism and nationalism learned both in school and in the family. Victor Șuiaga's memories always make reference to this state of mind of the Transylvanian Romanians. In his memoirs, he tells a story from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade (today, the 8<sup>th</sup>) when the teacher Traian Suciuc entered the classroom dressed in an officer's uniform, because he had been drafted and was about to leave for the front, but before going, he wanted to make his farewells from his students. "He spoke lovingly and warmly, he told us everything that was in his heart, saying, „I'm not sure what this war will bring and when I will return home from it, but I feel and believe it will shake the world, that countries and unjust kingdoms will perish and the peoples that have been subjugated will be set free. You must never forget that you are the sons of a people who is in bondage, who must free themselves and unite with their brethren in Romania. You, therefore, have the holy duty to study, work, and fight for our ancestral ideal: national freedom and social justice". The teacher wept and so did the whole class. This was the national education received in the Gymnasium in Brad and this was the soul of the Transylvanian Romanians [11, p.3-4]. Another memory dates back to the autumn of the year 1925, when Victor Șuiaga was attending the Romanian high school in Blaj, where he received the same education of love for his nation, for freedom and for national unity. He nostalgically recalled that the high school „had many students, and the photograph of Blaj Cathedral with the Romanian flag raised on it on 10 May 1914 circulated among them, and they had written on it, "Your last hour is nearing, the Carpathians are shaking", and on the back they wrote this Memento: Carve again into the unvanquished rock / The old glory shamelessly wiped out / The faith that has remained forever unquenched / One God, one soul and one country, which I have kept to this day. The flag had been placed there by three students of the local pedagogical school: Ovidiu Vodă, Vasile Fodor and Ioan Pasăre, who later fled over the Carpathians in order not to be thrown into the Hungarian prisons. There they joined the Romanian army and fought in the war for the nation's union, in which Ovidiu Vodă fell heroically as a lieutenant in the battles of Jiu in 1916" [12, p.3]. Another memory of the same period is related to the poem by Radu Cosmin from Bucharest, titled *We Want Transylvania*, which spread astonishingly fast among the Romanians, from which he remembered only a few verse: "The whole country is struggling in terrible unrest, / Alba Iulia is shaking, trembling with impatience / To open its wide gate to the kingly retinue, / To welcome the successor of Voivode Michael". This poem was found by the Austro-Hungarian authorities in the pack of a former student from Blaj who was fighting on the Russian front in 1915, and an investigation was started. As a result, many high school students were expelled, many arrests were made, trials and harsh convictions followed, and all this culminated with the suicide in prison of a young lady from Blaj, Maria Puia, who had multiplied the poem by typing it [p.17-18].

#### **Involvement and participation of the Romanian population from Hunedoara County to the Great Union**

The Romanian population in Transylvania experienced an acute sense of joy and hope when Romania entered the war in August 1916, but also bitterness for the suffering caused by this war and for the loss

of irreplaceable lives. Șuiaga says that since the third year of the war, Transylvanian Romanians had foreseen the dramatic end of Austria-Hungary and the liberation of the peoples from the domination of this anachronistic empire. The same joy and enthusiasm enveloped the entire population in all electoral constituencies when the representatives of Hunedoara County were elected to the Great National Assembly of Alba Iulia on 1 December 1918 or when, in the Orthodox church of Deva on November 7, 1918, it was decided unanimously to set up the Romanian National Council and to organize the National Guard in the city. The adhesions to the Union signed by the inhabitants of Hunedoara County in the days before the Great Union show movingly that "this decision of ours expresses everything that our forefathers have ever wanted, everything that warms the souls of everybody present and everything that will forever uplift the souls of our children and grandchildren". Victor Șuiaga, who was among the signatories, said that "I signed this memorable decision of my native village of Teiu, commune of Lăpugiu, on 28 November 1918, and then I took it to all the houses and everybody, 68 people in all, signed it with great joy, and then I collected the signatures and decisions of the neighboring villages of Lasău and Grind, 137 in all" [14, p.13].

Several studies have been written about Hunedoara County's participation in this historic act. Victor Șuiaga, who was among the participants, also offered interesting information. He was 19 at the time and a student in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at the Romanian high school in Blaj. Freshly back from the Italian front where he had been hurt, he could not stay away from this historical event for his people because he would not have had peace of mind all his life if he had missed "the greatest feast of his generation", "In the huge crowd of Romanians gathered there, in the forest of tricolor flags, I stood too feeling the strongest emotion, dressed in the military uniform with the Romanian tricolor on, and ratified plebiscitarianly, in an indescribable, enthusiastic frenzy of applause the Union - the decision for the Union. Born and raised in a Romanian family and educated in Romanian schools where I learned to love my nation deeply and honor my forefathers' faith, then forced into a foreign war that was alien to the Romanian soul, I felt with all the fibers of my young life the great happiness of participating in the realization of my nation's age-old dream, the union of all Romanian" [15, p.15]. He remembers nostalgically the harsh winter and the heavy snow that had covered Transylvania at that end of November 1918, but which, in the early morning of December, had given in to the generous sun that seemed to reflect the joy of the participants. The trip to Alba Iulia was epic, the road being traveled by young and old people alike, by train, by horse-drawn carriage, on horseback or on foot, all feeling their souls uplifted and animated by pride, patriotism and nationalism.

In attendance were many Romanians from Deva, Hărăului Valley, from Ilia, from the old district of Dobra to the border with Banat, Orăștie "with its entire land from Câmpul Pâinii to the mountains of Dacian fortresses and the entire Valley of Geoagiu, all these places gave the majority of the peasants, dressed in beautiful ancient costumes, with the groups of "călușari" dancers, as well as the majority of scholars and craftsmen, because they were closer to Alba Iulia. All of them felt pride that they had given one of the scholars of the Transylvanian School (Școala Ardeleană), the great scholar and writer Ioan Budai-Deleanu (1770-1820) from Cigmău, and hero aviator Aurel Vlaicu (1882-1913) from the village of Bințiți", large groups of woodlanders "with their archaic language, carrying long sticks and bludgeons", a huge crowd from Streiului Valley and Hațeg Country, highland shepherds and mountain dwellers "with long hair and large shepherd's hats and having on their shoulders thin blankets to protect themselves against rain or snow, figures of genuine Dacians from both rivers Jiu", miners dressed "in black clothes, holding their miner's lamps lit, and carrying a red flag" with the tricolor atop, inhabitants from Crișului Alb Valley and from the Zarand Mountains, military formations of the National Romanian Guards from Orăștie, Deva and Brad", and among the delegations of the Transylvanian Volunteers Corps, based in Iași, were also Dr. Toma Vasinca, a lawyer from Pui, and Vasile Osvada, accountant from the town of Hunedoara, both from Hunedoara County" [16, p.15-17].

Victor Șuiaga tells [17, p.50] about his departure to Alba Iulia on November 30<sup>th</sup>, together with a small group of men from the village of Teiu who, like many other participants, carried with them the tricolor flag. They traveled by train, where they saw the delegation of the Romanian Social Democrats from Budapest headed by Iosif Jumanca, as well as a lot of people from Arad and Banat. In the Simeria railway station, more wagons were added to the train for a huge number of people to get on. On the platforms of the railway stations, young people were singing and dancing, enlivening even more the already enthusiastic atmosphere; the national flag was everywhere, and fanfare music encouraged the people to sing the national anthem and other patriotic songs.

No propaganda or organization was needed to encourage the people to go to Alba Iulia because all the Romanians would have wanted to get there. Victor Șuiaga says that so great was the desire to participate that the people no longer greeted each other by saying "hello", but with the greeting "To Alba Iulia" [18, p.48]. The people from Deva, "headed by almost all the members of the local Romanian National Council, many of whom were accompanied by their wives, led by lawyers Francisc Hossu Longin, Dr. Petru Groza, Dr. Virgil Olariu and others ... took with them the old Romanian tricolor flag of the Romanian Orthodox church from the town, "which, upon the delegation's return from Alba Iulia, was replaced in the church, where it was kept for many years next to the pew and was raised at the national celebrations", but after the restoration of the church in the years 1927-1930, it disappeared [19, p.48-49].

Victor Șuiaga vividly recalls the organization and the festive atmosphere that had enveloped Alba Iulia: "the train station and the town were decorated for a Romanian festivity, and a heavily armed national guard was keeping the order and was guarding the train station, the town and the fortress. There was no accommodation available for such huge crowds, so that I slept in a hay shed, but it was not hard because I was young and hardened by war. In the morning, it stopped snowing and the weather was nice. By midday, the crowds had gathered in the field at the back of the fortress, the place where Horea and Cloșca had been broken on the wheel. There were a lot of enthusiastic Romanians, a forest of flags, with a strong determination to make the union. All the souls of Transylvania, who had been enslaved and humiliated by a heinous rule, strongly demanded national freedom and social justice" [20, p.225]. The assembly of the 1228 delegates from Transylvania was held in the big hall of the Officers' Casino from the Fortress, where they unanimously voted for the unification of Transylvania with Romania, also establishing some basic principles regarding the future organization of the Romanian state. The decision for the union was announced from the windows of the hall, the crowd expressing their agreement through strong cheers; then, several stands were installed in the field from which the speakers read the act of union to those present, after which they all went home, the journey back revealing to them "the first Romanian aspect – the Hungarian names of the railway stations had been replaced with Romanian names" [21, p.227].

The delegation of the County of Hunedoara to the National Assembly of Alba Iulia consisted of 155 elected delegates (with the following composition: 62 peasants, 18 craftsmen, 14 primary school teachers, 12 protopopes, 10 lawyers, 9 priests, 8 housewives, 5 teachers, 5 miners, 3 bankers, 2 traders, 2 doctors, 2 clerks, 1 accountant, 1 owner and 1 midwife), i.e. 12.62% of all Transylvanian delegates and about 20.000 peasants, craftsmen, workers, intellectuals, representing one fifth of the over 100,000 Romanians gathered there to ratify by plebiscite, with great pride and enormous enthusiasm, the historic decision to unite all Romanians in one single national state [22, p.222-223].

An unmistakable proof of the appreciation enjoyed by the participants from Hunedoara County is the election of Prof. Dr. Silviu Dragomir and the leader of the miners from Jiu Valley, Iosif Ciser, as Secretaries of the Office of the Grand National Assembly, the designation of Dr. Petru Groza and Dr. Aurel Vlad as orators entrusted with the task of communicating the decision for the union to the people, as well as the election of 15 participants from Hunedoara County to the Grand National Council of Transylvania [23, p.222].

During the period of January-May 1919, Victor Șuiaga attended the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and passed his baccalaureate examination, belonging to the first class of the High School of Blaj as part of Greater Romania, so so-called "Promotion of the Union" [24, p.25]. Shortly afterward, in the summer of 1919, he was drafted and assigned to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment of Orăștie and sent to the Tisza and Hungarian campaigns, where he took part in the battles for defending Greater Romania. For his deeds of arms, he was decorated with the "Ferdinand Medal" (1918-1919), "the Great War for Civilization Victory Medal" (1916-1921) and the „Commemorative Cross of War" (1916-1921) [25, p.544].

### Conclusion

The memoirs of this great local patriot, written on the basis of his own memories, the information obtained in the course long talks with other participants in the events or their descendants, but also based on research in the archives of the native towns of the participants, appear to us today as true chronicles of that tumultuous beginning of the twentieth century. His historically priceless information, even if somewhat subjective, as it is indeed natural, has proven its historic validity through confirmation from other historical sources. He portrayed with great realism the life of the Transylvanian Romanians, their feelings about the Austrian-Hungarian rule, the national and patriotic education of the younger generations received both in school and in the family, the

national impetus that often led to the ultimate sacrifice, the motivation to engage in most of the events of the time, all of which managed to draw the portrait of a tumultuous epoch in Romanian contemporary history.

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