The institutionalization of asylum and forensic psychiatry in Bucharest, 19th century.
A historical outline

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Abstract: This historical note focuses on the development of psychiatry and forensic expertise in Bucharest between c. 1840 and 1910 under the influence of the European Schools of Medicine of the time. During the 19th century, psychiatry became part of a larger medical agenda, which included the establishment of public and private hospitals and asylums, public health reforms and social legislation for the protection of mentally ill, family planning and ultimately law regulations regarding forensic psychiatry. To date, the history of Romanian psychiatry and forensic medicine in Romania has been neglected, although it proves very resourceful for the understanding the complex relationship between science, political ideals and national contexts, both at a regional and international level. This note provides an insight into the inception of modern psychiatry institutions and scientific advances in Romania, and to the medically trained personalities in Bucharest and Eastern European medicine.

Key Words: Mental Institution, Eastern Europe, Forensic Psychiatry, 19th century.

Starting with 1820, Moldavia and Wallachia experienced profound political, social, and economic upheavals, including the 1848 Liberal and Nationalist uprising in Bucharest and Jassy, the 1859 Unification of the two Danubian Principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia), their independence from the Ottoman Empire (1878), the creation of the kingdom of Romania (1881), the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), and the territorial enlargement following the First World War, in 1918. The history of Romanian medicine mirrored these
historical changes, given its significant engagement with the nation-building process.

In Romania, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the “health of the nation” was conterminous with the creation of a modern healthcare system. Together with other medical professionals, psychiatrists and forensic doctors contributed to the creation of a network of hospitals, asylums, institutes of research, and university chairs, sharing the hope of providing remedies for the social and medical illnesses prevalent in the country.

The process of institutionalisation of psychiatry as scientific discipline also played a fundamental role in changing its social status, from a peripheral discipline of uncertain scientific status to a socially sanctioned profession able to provide the state with a standardized language to address medical and social concerns.

Most of the Romanian physicians received their medical education in France, and were heavily influenced, by French medical practices and ideas. The history of modern psychiatry on Romanian territories started in 1838, when an important law on mental health was issued. This law established that assistance for the mentally ill was the responsibility of ‘Eforia Spitalelor Civile’ (Association of Civilian Hospitals), an institution that coordinated all hospitals in the city of Bucharest in the beginning of the 19th century [1,2]. The French Law for the Mentally Ill from 30 June 1838 provided the background for the development of legal protection for the rights of mentally ill in France [3]. In November 1838, five months after the French Law was enacted, Marcutza Asylum, the first modern insane asylum on Romanian territories, was created near Bucharest [4,5].

The asylum was founded upon the existing premises of the Orthodox monastery of Marcutza, and was specifically designed to host insane/mentally ill patients. Based on the 1838 Romanian law, the so-called “smintit” patients were admitted in this new institution, housed in a building which was donated by Marcutza Monastery, without any further financial contribution from the monastery itself.

The Romanian notion of the insane at that time was the word ‘smintit’, a term derived from the Latin ‘ex mente’ (out-of-mind). Official documents of the time underlined that Marcutza Monastery was not linked with the nearby lunatic asylum. In this respect, the officials used the denomination “Spitalul sau Institutul smintiților de la Mărcuța” (Hospital or Marcutza Asylum for Insane). Other civilian hospitals, like the Colțea Hospital, founded in 1704 by the Phanariot boyar Mihai Cantacuzino (Cantacuzenos) or the Pantelimon Hospital were still directly linked to monastical structures [5,6].

A local ordinance issued August 12, 1839 by the Wallachian Prince Alexandru Ghica, relocated all the ‘smintit’ patients from the Malamuci Monastery to the Marcutza Asylum, an episode which symbolically marks the “medicalization” of insanity, by transferring it from byzantine monastic establishments to modern hospitals.

The medical expenses for this institutionalization were paid by a central medical care provider (the so-called “Casa Centrală”), a structure under government regulation, whose administration was regulated by Imperial Russian authorities under the “Regulamentul Organic” (Main Constitution) regime (1831). The 1839 financial report of the “Casa Centrală”, listing all the expenses made with regard to the mentally ill patients including their displacement from the Malamuci monastery to the new asylum, and the maintenance of the Marcutza Asylum included transactions for 14 and a half months, as follows: (1) from August 27, 1838 until August 12, 1839, when patients were accomodated in Malamuci and (2), between August 12, 1839, when they were moved to Marcutza, and December 31, 1839. A total amount of 16,216 lei (an equivalent of 540 Dutch Guilders) was provided for 25 ‘smintit’ patients [4,7].

The first director of the Marcutza Asylum, Nicolae Gănescu (1799-1875) was trained at the medical faculty of Moscow Imperial University. He was the director of the Marcutza Asylum from 1840 until the Wallachian Revolution of 1848, when Gănescu took part in the revolutionary events. Gănescu managed to improve the standards of personal hygiene, food and clothing of his inpatients, and enhanced the mechanical restraints for agitated mentally ill: instead of using a straitjacket for contention, he suggested using wide straps, lined with soft leather “in which there is wool filling”. As he was interested in new medical developments of his time, Gănescu noted that the Pantelimon Hospital installed in 1846 a sort of “electromagnetic machine”. Accordingly, he sent some of his psychiatric patients form Marcutza to benefit from the new therapeutic device [6,8].

Since 1849, the Marcutza Asylum was led for brief periods by I. Bren (1849-1851), Gheorghe Polizu (1851-1852) – who later became Professor and Dean of the Bucharest Faculty of Medicine, founded 1857, and Constantin Minis (1852-1854), a graduate from Leipzig Medical University, with a dissertation on catalepsia [9].

Since 1854, the post of director was awarded to Petre Protici (1822-1881), who led the Marcutza Institute until 1867. Protici, coming from a Bulgarian family was born in Tîrnovo (or Şistov) and came to Wallachia in 1822. He did his medical studies in Paris, where in 1850 he defended his dissertation “Des phlegmons de la fosse iliaque interne”. In 1857, Protici was appointed Chair of Surgical Pathology at the newly founded Romanian School of Medicine [10].

Protici was involved in creating conditions to improve and modernize the specialized psychiatric treatment. In an address sent in 1860 to Carol Davila - General Inspector of Health Services, Protici asked...
for modern methods of treatment: “I shall require new means to treat the patients... in a way consistent with the principles of humanity and hygiene and also to apply a medical Regulation especially fitting their needs”.

Protici introduced drug treatment methods for psychiatric conditions and improved methods of occupational therapy by organizing special workstations for the inpatients. He also introduced ergotherapy for mentally ill patients, which was a rather revolutionary method at the time. Marcutza Asylum gradually developed into a well-organized hospital, with procedures of medical admission, confinement and discharge of patients, adequate living conditions and treatment, proper hygiene, and different therapies.

The tasks of the medical staff, and primary medical care attributions were rigorously expressed in the “Regulamentul serviciului Institutului Mărcuța” (The Medical Regulation Service of Marcutza Institute), published in 1861 under the signature of Carol Davila and reissued, with minor amendments, in 1864, in “Monitorul Medical” (the Medical Monitor) of Bucharest [11].

The clinical nosography used at the Marcutza Asylum around 1860 is shown by the statistics published by Protici in 1863, giving an overview of the patients confined in Marcutza Asylum. At the end of 1861, the Asylum had 67 male and 33 female inpatients and received 62 males and 28 females during 1862. In 1862, Marcutza discharged 28 male and 13 female patients, and 23 male and 15 female patients died. By the end of 1862, 78 male and 33 female inpatients remained confined. About 200 persons were treated each year at that time. The same statistics showed the psychiatric pathology [12] for the 1862 patients, as follows: Mania delirans (32 cases), furiosa (28), periodica (11), epileptica (21), alcoholica (4), cum hallucinationibus (5), praesumpta (3); Monomania (37); Amentia (19); Paralysia generalis (9); Simplicitas (1); Stupiditas (7), Stupiditas cum epilepsia (3); Idiotia (9), Idiotia cum epilepsia (1).

Protici left Marcutza in 1867, and in 1880 he went to Bulgaria to undertake a high position in the Bulgarian Sanitary Council [10]. He died in Sofia in tragic circumstances in 1881.

A modernizing approach in psychiatry was brought by Alexandru Sutzu (1837-1919), twice director of the Marcutza Asylum between 1867-1878 and 1880-1909. Sutzu, or Soutzos, came from a Greek aristocratic family, which played an influential role in modern history of the country; three of his family members were Rulers during the Phanariot period of the country. Sutzu began his medical career in 1856 in Athens, and defended his dissertation, entitled ‘Considérations sur la dyspepsie essentielle’ at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, on May 16, 1865.

The examination commission was chaired by Augustin Grisolle and Louis Felix Jules Behier, both Professors of Clinical Medicine at the Hôtel Dieu Hospital in Paris. Sutzu attended the seminars of the Société Médico-Psychologique being influenced by the writings of Jean-Étienne Esquirol and Jean-Pierre Falret and especially by Benedict-Augustin Morel’s theory of degeneration. Thus, Sutzu carried Morel’s theories to Romania and became directly involved with the so-called ‘médicine aliéniste’, since 1866. Morel’s theory of degeneration flourished in the 1860s in Romania, encouraging the view that environment can influence certain diseases and giving new tools of interpretation of the relationship between the social and biological background [13].

Psychiatrists accepted Lamarckian views, that mental diseases were often a biological reaction to specific environmental conditions. In Bucharest, Sutzu started to teach ‘alienist medicine’ at Marcutza from the academic year 1867-68. His course was designed for fifth-year medical students at the National Medical School of Bucharest. Sutzu was appointed professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest (1879), where he taught courses on psychiatry and on mental pathology and legal medicine [14].

Like Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) in Italy, Turin, Alexandru Sutzu was, simultaneously, psychiatrist and a forensic pathologist, both, Professor
of Psychiatry and of Legal Medicine at the Bucharest Faculty of Medicine for nearly 20 years. It was not until 1897 that the Chair of Psychiatry and of Legal Medicine was divided into two separate, autonomous medical disciplines: psychiatry and legal medicine. Sutzu was appointed as Chair of the Psychiatry Department, while Mina Minovici (1858-1933) was eventually appointed as Head of the Legal Medicine Department.

Sutzu also served as expert-witness in forensic investigations psychiatric and medical forensic investigations He published a number of articles and monographs on various themes of forensic interest. His treatise, “Alienatul în fața societății și a științei” (The Mental Alienation under the Scrutiny of Society and Science) was the first Romanian textbook of both clinical psychiatry and forensic psychiatry [15].

His clinical activity was intimately linked with the Marcutza Asylum, where he worked for more than 40 years (1866-1909). Sutzu carried out comprehensive analyses of the three major models of hospitalization for patients suffering from different forms of mental illness: asylums, the family system and settlements of the mentally ill. Sutzu was influenced by both the French and the English system of mental health institutions, and by the principles of moral hygiene proposed by several psychiatrists: Phillipe Pinel, Jean Esquirol, Jules Baillarger, Jean-Pierre Falret, and John Conolly.

Similar to other European and North-American psychiatrists of the time, one can discover in Sutzu’s works a scientific reasoning on the connection between psychopathological and treatment principles, on the one hand, and the institutional philosophy, on the other. Sutzu advocated for Darwinism, and the non-restraint methods of psychiatric therapy introduced in United Kingdom by John Conolly in Middlesex County Asylum at Hanwell, since 1839 [16]. During Sutzu’s directorship, Nicolae Chernbach experimented with psychiatric photography, and published in 1870 a photographic atlas of the main types of mental alienation, a collection of twelve plates depicting mentally ill patients from the Marcutza Asylum in Bucharest. These photographs were not only the first taken in Eastern Europe, but among the first photographs of the mentally ill [17, 18].

In regard to the Marcutza Asylum (which had 950 beds by the end of the First World War), Sutzu claimed in the 1880s, that it represented only a transitional solution and that a more systematic construction of new hospitals was required [19,20]. He actively supported the adoption of a Law for the construction of two new Bucharest hospitals, including a new psychiatric one (1892), established modern forensic psychiatry (1877) and created 1905 together with Charcot’s pupil and Salpêtrière trained neurologist Georges Marinesco (1868-1938), the first Romanian scientific Society of Psychiatry and Neurology [21].

After Sutzu, by the end of 19th century, a new wave of modern psychopathology inspired by
Kraepelinian Psychiatry, was brought to Bucharest by Alexandru Obregia (1860-1937). Obregia obtained his medical diploma from the Medical Faculty in Bucharest (1888), with a thesis on experimental studies of motor and visual cerebral-cortical centres [22].

Obregia spent four years (1888-1892) in several prestigious neurological and psychiatric clinics and laboratories throughout Germany and France (at Rudolf Virchow, Siegmund Munk, Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal in Berlin, Germany, and at Jean-Martin Charcot, Valentin Magnan, Gilbert Ballet, and Benjamin Ball in Paris, France). Back in Bucharest, Obregia became senior psychiatrist at the Marcuta Institute, and in 1909 was appointed professor of psychiatry at the Medical Faculty in Bucharest [23].

Inspired by the Kraepelinian systematic nosology, he introduced a similar system in approaching mental illness in Romanian psychiatry. Obregia was one of the first European clinicians to define, for example, caphrenia as a clinical entity, and introduced improved methods of psychiatric diagnosis and treatment.

Obregia’s clinical philosophy was standing against the pessimistic and finalistic perspectives prompted by the degeneration theory, by supporting the idea of possibility of healing some forms of mental illness. In 1908, keen to experiment new biological exploration methods in neurology and psychiatry, Obregia started to use the suboccipital puncture of the cerebrospinal fluid as a diagnostic and therapeutic procedure to draw cerebrospinal fluid.

Concluding Remarks
This short presentation of Marcuta Asylum’s institutional developments sets up the background upon which a substantive analysis of the emergence of the psychiatric and forensic profession in Romania during the 19th century can be built. In order to understand the profound medical and social transformations Romanian society experienced between 1840 and 1918, a closer examination of how psychiatrists like Gânescu, Protici, Sutzu or Obregia envisioned the modernization of the Romanian society and of their role in establishing institutions for health and welfare has to be carried further.

Through professional organisations and specialised journals, Romanian psychiatrists pleaded for the improvement and sanitation of the nation. By the end of the 19th century, both medical professionals and state bureaucrats hold the idea that only a strong, centralised state could infuse the medical career with a new morality and assign doctors a socially responsible role. Referring to French, British and German medical sciences, Romanian psychiatrists and forensic doctors argued for a transformation of the national health system, forensic medicine and law enforcement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research, CNDD-UEFISCDI, project number 215/2012.

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