The Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași and the Union of the Romanian Principalities

Dana Baran

"Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iasi, Romania

Abstract

The Union of the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia has been an ideal of the nation for centuries, expressed by its intellectuals and policy makers. Its fulfillment was rendered possible in the enlightened era of the nineteenth century, following the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Peace of Paris. The Peace Treaty of 1856, involving Russia, the Ottoman Empire, France, Great Britain and the Kingdom of Sardinia, and then the Paris convention of 1858, enabled the Union of the Principalities in 1859. In this context, the progressive Romanian intellectuals played an essential role in awakening the national consciousness of the masses called upon to vote, as well as in the elaboration of the strategy to be implemented, both internally and internationally. The Society of Physicians and Naturalists of the Principality of Moldavia (SPN), the first scientific society not only in the Romanian Principalities but also in Southeast Europe (1830), got involved in this national unification process, seen as a condition of emancipation, stability and European integration of their country. SPN was therefore not only the seat where Colonel Alexandru Ioan Cuza was appointed as the sole candidate for the Reign of Moldavia on January 3rd, 1859, but also a nucleus of struggle for the Union. It is plausible that, due to the participation of some of the leading SPN members, ideological confrontations took place within this scientific forum and tactics were envisaged meant to achieve the Union of the Principalities through the victory of the Unionist Party. Ever since SPN remained linked to the memory of Cuza's election in Moldavia, and this constituted another fundamental contribution of this academic institution to the overall establishment of modern Romania. Immediately after the Union, in 1860 the Society of Physicians and Naturalists of the Principality of Moldavia became the Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași and kept on integrating both national and international personalities from the entire world.

Keywords: Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași, Al. I. Cuza, Union of Principalities

The first Scientific Society in the Romanian Lands. In 2021 the Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași (SPN) celebrated its 191st anniversary. During its existence it experienced moments of glory, but also of lesser activity or "languor", then of regeneration, momentum and remarkable achievements. Created on January 11th, 1830 as the "Circle of Medical Reading of Iași" at the initiative of doctors Mihail Zotta, protomedicus of Moldavia, and Iacob Czihac, surgeon and chief physician of the Moldavian Army, this scientific association included doctors, pharmacists, naturalists, lawyers, economists, representatives of the clergy and of the great nobility of the Principality. (1) The purpose of the two principal founders, who had as close advisor Gheorghe Asachi, a famous engineer, writer,

man of culture and SPN founding member, was to establish an academic society comparable to those existing in the West, an "institute" intended to contribute to the advancement of knowledge especially in the medical-pharmaceutical field, to set up a coherent and efficient health care system, to promote agriculture and industry, to clear the fog of ignorance and integrate the Principality in

Corresponding author: Dana Baran „ Grigore T Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi, Romania, email:

dana_baran@yahoo.com

Received January 27, 2021; **Accepted** February 04, 2021;

Published Mars 28, 2021

Citation: Baran Dana. The Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași and the Union of the Romania Principalities. Journal of Surgery [Jurnalul de chirurgie]. 2021; 17(1): 63 - 69 DOI: [10.22551/JSURG.2021.01.09](https://doi.org/10.22551/JSURG.2021.01.09)

Copyright: © 2021 Baran Dana. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

the advanced European world.

Education in Romanian language, exploration and valorization of the local fauna, flora and hydro-mineral resources were also targeted. SPN elaborated a consistent country project, succeeding to achieve at least twelve national priorities. (2) On March 18th, 1833, the "Iași Medical Reading Circle" was officially acknowledged as the "Medical-Natural History Society of the Principality of Moldavia" that soon changed its name to the "Society of Physicians and Naturalists of the Principality of Moldavia". After the Union of the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia was accomplished, it was called the "Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași" and continued to be a scientific academy open to all valuable Romanian and foreign scholars. (Fig.1)

The ideal of the Union in the SPN Statutes. In order to fulfill the aspirations of the *Medical Reading Circle of Iași*, already from June 29th to December 27th, 1832, the statutes of a "Moldo-Romanik Medical Society" were formulated. From the very beginning, the Statute of this Society assured development promotion "in both Principalities" and granted membership to those deserving this quality in Moldavia and in Wallachia, as well. Concurrently, in order to give European scope, corresponding and honorary members could also be invited from truly foreign, more distant countries. However, the Moldavian Government imposed changes to the first

Statute, so that in the final version there was no reference to "the two principalities", but exclusively to the Principality of Moldavia. At the same time, in the confirmation letter sent to the Medical Commission, the Government specified that no deviation from the main purpose of the Society, such as formulated in its Statute, would be tolerated. Indeed, officials suspected that, in parallel with the teachings and modernizing projects aimed at restructuring the community, such a progressive association could also encourage activities contrary to the current state order. The fact that not only professionals, but equally representatives of the political aristocracy joined the Society of Physicians and Naturalists favored such a hypothesis and motivated the cautious attitude of the Moldavian leadership that was under Russian protectorate at that time.

However, Count Pavel Kiseleff, the plenipotentiary president of the Country Divan, was an effective supporter of this institution - SPN -, whose first honorary member and donor he became on February 4th, 1834, when the Museum of Natural History, the first of its kind in the Principalities, was inaugurated. (1) (Fig.2) It is easy understandable that, in a scientific society where social reforms and enlightenment of the masses were desired and put in practice, the prospect of bold action was open, even though the association included a more conservative minority, too.

Fig. 1. Iași. SPN Headquarters

Fig.2. Iași. SPN Museum. Elephant GABA

Therefore, only after a series of restrictive amendments to the Statute, the Government approved the founding of the Society on March 18th, 1833. Thus, the oldest scientific society in the Romanian Lands and Southeast Europe was born: the Society of Physicians and Naturalists of the Principality of Moldavia, today known as the Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași (SPN). The news about its foundation aroused enthusiasm not only among Romanians in all the Provinces where they formed the majority population, but also among the elites of the European intelligentsia, from St. Petersburg, to Bonn, from Berlin, to Paris, Vienna and Geneva. In the Late Enlightenment of Moldavia, amplified by the application of the Organic Laws (Organic Regulation, 1831), freedom of conscience made its way, while the progress of thinking and scholarly institutions led, as *a sine qua non* condition, to science popularization, increased education of the whole society, common people emancipation and cultivation of the Romanian ethno-linguistic identity.

SPN and the unionist approach. In the bright years of the beginning, SPN comprised leaders of the movement for the Union of the Principalities, like Costache Sturza, Ion Ionescu de la Brad, Ludovic Steege, and Victor Place, the French consul in Iași. Some of the unionists took part in ideological debates at the Society's headquarters and later found themselves in the Unionist Committee of Iași (1857), or among the members of the Ad-hoc Divan of Moldavia held on October 7th, 1857. SPN members of the Unionist Committee were Dimitrie Ralet, Costache Negri (Negrea), Mihail Kogălniceanu, Dimitrie A. Sturdza. In the Ad-hoc Divan participated Dimitrie Ralet - a notable figure in the struggle for the Union, Ad-hoc Divan secretary, and SPN president in office; Vasile Alecsandri, Mihail Kogălniceanu and Costache Negri, towering writers, patriots and politicians, but equally SPN members by then; Alecu Balș, former SPN president. Among SPN doctors of the Ad-hoc Divan of Moldavia there were Costache Vârnăv, the first Romanian born medical doctor in Moldavia with a university degree (Pesta, 1836), one of the Principality's protomedici, editor of the first Romanian periodicals of the SPN, future custodian of the SPN Museum, but also vice-president of the Society, along with Anastasie Fătu, the father of the first Botanical Garden in the Principalities (1856), professor at the Gregorian Institute (Institute of Obstetrical Art / School of

Midwifery), SPN first secretary and cashier, and future president of the Society (1872-1886). As a significant detail, until his death on October 25th / November 7th, 1858, Dimitrie Ralet lived for a while (Oct. 26th, 1856 - Oct. 26th, 1858) for rent in the upstairs apartment inside the Society headquarters, where no doubt comrades of ideas and ideals often met, irrespective of other strictly scientific or administrative activities of the institution.

Victor Place, Consul of the Union. In order to emphasize SPN involvement in the unionist efforts of Moldavia, but also of Wallachia, the role of Victor Place (1818-1875) should be emphasized. Place, the French consul in Iași from 1856 to 1863, hence the representative of Emperor Napoleon III – an “architect” of the Romanian Union –, was a SPN member as most of the French community members in Iași and Moldavia. Jurist and specialist in the history of Sumer, holder of the Legion of Honor, Victor Place was friend and adviser of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, and of the progressive “enlightened” nobility of the Principality. From September 1856 on, Place assisted in the formation of the Electoral Committee of the Union (1857), participated in the meetings of the Divan of Moldavia, as well as in other preparatory gatherings anticipating the Union.(3,4) In fact, after the Crimean War (1853-1856), both the Treaty of Peace (March 30th, 1856) and the Convention of Paris (August 19th, 1858) envisaged and recommended the efficient cohabitation if not the real union of the two Romanian Principalities.(5) If the “great powers” aimed for supremacy at the Danube mouths, the Romanians wanted a stronger - hence united – state. By the Paris Convention the European guarantor powers – France, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, Prussia, the Kingdom of Sardinia and Austria – advised and surveyed the creation of the “United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia”. Consequently, the French diplomat was only fulfilling his duty, he had assumed with great devotion, enthusiasm and conviction. He actually served Romanians along with his own country. Thanks to his efforts too, the counterfeit elections for the Divan of Moldavia, initially won by anti-unionists, were canceled.

Fig. 3.a. Victor Place; b. Iași. "Eternitatea" Cemetery. Tomb of Victor Place, "participant in the accomplishment of the Union"; c. Iași. France consulate in Place's time: Nicu Gane's House.

Precise information and proofs regarding the scandalous betrayal of the anti-unionist camp had come to him from Cuza himself or/and from Dimitrie Ralet and Costache Negri. Place conveyed these data and documents to officials in Paris and the first Divan was invalidated. Once the vote resumed, victory, as it is well known now, reverted to the unionists.

Consul Place was in constant correspondence not only with his Bucharest counterpart, Consul Léon Bécлар, but also with Baron Charles de Talleyrand, the French commissioner in the European Commission for overseeing the elections in the Ad-hoc Divans. At the same time, encouraging Romanians' determination for the Union, Place worked closely with the French Foreign Minister, Count Alexandre de Walewski, and with the French Ambassador to the High Gate in Constantinople, Édouard Thouvenel. He warmly supported the election of Cuza as Ruling Prince of Moldavia and then equally of Wallachia, seeing in him, as the Iași historian N. A. Bogdan outlined, the most suitable candidate for "fulfilling the Romanian national ideal".⁽³⁾ Testimony of his attachment to the Romanian spirit is Place's very return to Iași in 1873, on the earth where, from 1875 onwards, he would stay and rest for eternity. These details undoubtedly highlight the complex social and political role the SPN played in those historical events. (Fig.3)

SPN and Cuza's "preliminary election". It is no coincidence, therefore, that on the evening of January 3rd, 1859, the members of the Unionist parties gathered in the meeting hall of the Society, a room next to the Elephant Gaba Hall of the SPN Museum of Natural History. (Fig.2)

After heated debates, using the SPN "pro" and "con" ballot boxes and its ballot balls, they made the "preliminary" designation of Colonel Alexandru Ioan Cuza as unique candidate for the throne of Moldavia. Cuza, the ardent revolutionary of 1848, considered a good patriot, an honest and firm character, was declared the full winner, marking the unionists' triumph. The participants in the event swore "on honor" to elect him as Prince of Moldavia also officially "in the Assembly by open vote", a fact that happened on January 5th, 1859, at the Princely Palace in Iași. Thus, the first step on the path towards the Union of Principalities was taken.

Prince Cuza's supporters continued to join the SPN, striving to fulfill the country's development program. Among them was Dr. Neculai (Nicolae) Negura, a graduate from the University of Berlin in 1856, and founder of the first School of Surgery and Pharmacy in Iași, in the fall of 1859. Indeed, on December 3rd, 1859, Cuza-Vodă consecrated the existence of the School of Surgery, opened at the Michaelian Academy. Along with Negură, one should remember the name of Dr. Alexandru Diamandescu, appointed professor of Anatomy at the much dreamed about Faculty of Medicine of the University of Iași. With studies in Munich completed in 1859, he immediately returned to the country, and in 1860 was co-opted, together with doctors Negura, Fătu, Bendella and Greceanu, on the Commission set up by Cuza for the establishment of the Faculty of Medicine in the former capital of Moldavia (2). Although the unconditional support of the Ruling Prince existed, the fulfillment of their aspirations still had a long way to go.

The Society of Physicians and Naturalists of Iași and the Union

The first "Museum" of the Union. Testifying over time the importance of that historical moment, at the SPN Museum of Natural History, the first small "Museum of the Union" was created, which later became the "Al. I. Cuza Hall". The Prince himself made donations, including money, and Princess Elena Cuza offered three uniforms of the Prince, the Society giving her the status of honorary member. A uniform of spearmen came from Colonel Constantin Langa. Cuza's chair as president of the Galați Court (1855) was added, since the Prince of the Union was chief magistrate of Covurlui (Galați). In his monograph dedicated to the SPN, N.A. Bogdan also mentioned "a precious sword presented to him by the Sultan, when he was in Constantinople for confirmation as Ruling Prince". (1) A seal of Moldavia was also recovered, still in force from 1859 to 1862, when Cuza continued to live in Iași. After his election as Ruling Prince of both Moldavia, on January 5th, 1859, and Wallachia, on January 24th, 1859,

Cuza continued to lead the Principalities from Iași, signing there several important acts. He wanted to alleviate the pain of the citizens of Iași for the sacrifice they made for the Union, when they accepted to turn into "provincials", since the Capital of the United Principalities moved to Bucharest in 1862.

Next to these exhibits sat the portrait of the Prince, made by Constantin D. Stahi, and a memorial plaque. (Fig.4-5)

An example from the past for contemporary times. In the Society of Physicians and Naturalists' headquarters the battle for the Union was decided, and this was equally due to the fact that the

SPN itself got involved and supported this desire of the nation and its visionary leaders.

Fig.4.Iași. SPN. Natural History Museum: a.Constantin Stahi. The Portrait of Prince Cuza; b. the commemorative inscription underneath: "In this meeting hall of the Society of Physicians and Naturalists in 1859 on January 3rd the preliminary election of Al. I. Cuza as Ruler of Moldavia was achieved"; c.the showcase with the Cuza's uniform as colonel and as Prince; Cuza's steward chair brought from Galați (right) and other artifacts; above the showcase, on the right hand side, the two ballot boxes of the SPN, used for voting on January 3rd, 1859; d. SPN. Natural History Museum: "Al. I. Cuza" Hal.

Fig. 5.a. The "Pro" and "Con" ballot boxes and SPN balls, used in the election of Colonel Alexandru Ioan Cuza as a candidate for the throne of Moldavia; c. Cuza's uniform; d. the Princely seal of Moldavia Cuza used after his election as Ruling Prince of Moldavia and Wallachia, until the capital moved to Bucharest. These exhibits are to be found in the "Al. I. Cuza" Hall of the SPN Museum of Natural History.

The memory of this crucial event in the destiny of modern Romania has always remained in the history and collective memory of the SPN members a landmark of nobility, proudly mentioned whenever the opportunity arose. On January 24th, 1959, on the celebration of the centenary of the Union of the Romanian Principalities, on the façade of the SPN headquarters a plaque

commemorating this anniversary was placed, meant to keep forever alive in the minds and souls of the Romanians, of all the passers-by in the former Hagioaiei street – today's Independence Boulevard -, the history that was written there once. (Fig.6)

Fig.6. "In this house, on January 3rd, 1859, it was decided to nominate Al. I. Cuza as Ruling Prince of Moldavia."

"The plaque was placed on the occasion of the celebration of the centenary of the Union - January 1959".

Now, 191 years after the laying of the SPN foundation stone and 162 years after the Union of the Romanian Principalities, we probably better understand the greatness of a past that obliges present and future generations to carry on the dream of full accomplishment and cooperation, progress and national and international affirmation of the authentic national values.

Lately, in order not to forget these founding events of the national identity, the Society of Physicians

and Naturalists of Iași, with the support of the "Queen Maria" Municipal Museum and the City Hall, as well as the "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Iași, periodically organizes anniversary exhibitions and conferences aiming at further promoting and enriching this precious inherited tradition: *Viva, crescat, floreat!*

Selected References

1. Bogdan N. A. *Societatea medico-naturalistă și muzeul istorico-natural din Iași. 1830-1919*, Iași: Tipografia Națională, 1919, pp: 40-44, 108, 119.

2. Baran D. *Societatea de Medici și Naturaliști – Iași 1833. Prima academie europeană a spiritului national*, Ediția a II-a, Iași: Editura „Gr. T. Popa”-UMF Iași, 2019: 73-116; 110-111.
3. Bogdan N. A. *Orașul Iași. Monografie istorică și socială ilustrată* (ed. a II-a, 1913-1915), Iași: Editura Tehnopress, 2004, pp: 483-484.
4. Dumas F, Dumas O., *La France et Iași. 600 ans d'une histoire d'amour*. Casa Editorială Demiurg, Iași, 2009, pp: 172-288.

Gourdon E. *Histoire du Congrès de Paris*, Paris: