

# Looking through the curtain of history

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**Abstract:** The Banat region, situated at the geographic crossroads between Eastern and Western Europe, with a special history and a destiny often broken by the vicissitudes of time, is known for many primordialities, all certified without denial. One of them is the first railway track on the present territory of Romania. The present paper, without pretending to be very documented, is an attempt to call to mind certain achievements of the Banat inhabitants related to their creativity, wish of development and entrepreneurial spirit. It briefly presents the railway Oravița-Baziaș, inaugurated by 1854 (to carry cargo) and, later, used also to carry passengers, celebrates its 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. The paper also points out the sad fate of other initial routes of Romanian railways, in retrospect and prospect.

**Key words:** *Baziaș, Oravița, railroad, primordialities, Banat*

## 1. Introduction

Most Romanians have heard of the town from the Banat, the place called Baziaș, where the Danube enters the country. Moreover, at least the Banat inhabitants know that this is from where the first railway on the present territory of Romania departed, connecting Baziaș to Oravița.

The locality is important also for Serbians, because it houses an old convent, founded following the tradition by St. Sava himself. Many elements, thus, gather in order to give great importance to that place. Considering this, it seems hard to believe that Baziaș is about to disappear, maintaining only the memories of its former glory [1].

## 2. The sad story of the first railways crossing the Romanian territory

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Banat entered into the European rail routes network, which expanded eastward until reaching also our region. According to a very well documented work, written by Șerban Lacrițeanu and Ilie Popescu, *Istoricul tracțiunii feroviare din România* [6] [The history of railway traction in Romania – own translation], vol. I (which deals with the period from 1854 to 1918), Bucharest, 2003, the Banat holds the priority among the Romanian regions having a railway (1854), followed by Transylvania (1858), Dobrogea (1860), Bucovina (1866), the Old Kingdom (1869-1875) and Bessarabia (1871).

The Hungarian State Railways (M.Á.V. – Magyar Államvasutak) were founded only in 1868. Until then, since 1846, a number of private railways had operated on its territory. The same happened also in Austria, where St.E.G. (*Österreichisch-Ungarische Staatseisenbahngesellschaft*) owned the railways until June 1, 1891.

### 2.1 Railway Oravița – Anina

The most interesting railway track in Romania and in South-East Europe is thus in the Banat region. Built in a mountain region and surrounded by landscapes of rare beauty, the track is entirely an architectural monument, standing as a testimony for the human creativity and technical potential of the time.

The first railway line in Banat was opened at 20.08.1854 between the Danubian port Baziaș and the mountain location Oravița. The line length of 62.5 km served to transport coal from the coal region Steierdorf - Anina to the Danube and from there to Austria. The line route was Oravița - Răcăjdia - Iam - Iassenova – Biserica Albă - Baziaș. This line was named the "line coal" (Kohlenbahn).

For transportation of coal between Oravița (Figure 1) and Anina (Figure 2), different technical solutions were adopted that ultimately were not effective technically and economically. Such, at the very beginning, animals were used for the transport

in the galleries, after that horse transportation of coal through galleries or on slopes was used.



**Figure 1.** Oravita station



**Figure 2.** Anina station

Due to increasing quantities of coal to be transported on the Danube, one imposed the construction of a railway line linking Anina directly to the Danube harbor Baziaș. Track construction began in the spring of 1861 and the opening for freight and passenger traffic was opened on December 15, 1863 (fig 3).

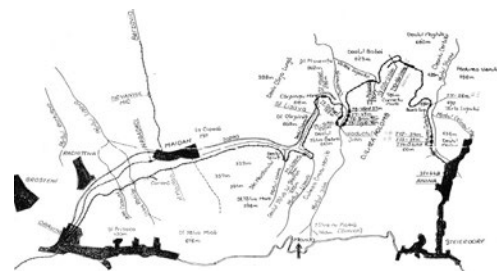


**Figure 3.** Mixed transport on Oravita-Anina [2]

Presently the line Oravița – Anina represents a special and unique engineering achievement. Called also the coal track, the railway Oravița-

Anina was made by St.E.G. having as model another European monument, the Semmering track in Austria. That had been built only a few years earlier, between 1845-1854 (compared to 1856-1863), between the mountain towns Gloggnitz and Mürzzuschlag in Styria, passing through the Semmering pass. It had 40 km (compared to 33.4) and a level difference of 388 m (compared to our 339 m). The number of tunnels and viaducts of the two tracks is almost identical, fact which made the railway Oravița-Anina to be often referred to as the Banat Semmering. Locals and stone specialists brought from the Friuli region of northern Italy participated to its construction. The works were led by engineers Anton Rappos and Karl Dülbig and architects Karl Maniel and Johann Ludwig Dollhoff-Dier. The construction, which according to Georg Hromadka, cost a total of 5 million guilders, was put into operation on December 15, 1863 for freight and on April 4, 1869, for passengers [3, 11, 12].

The line has 33,45 km (Figure 4) with 160 curves within 129 with radius less than 200 m, 14 tunnels from which the greatest is Garliste with total length of 660 m, 10 viaducts the highest has 35 m, Jitin viaduc (Figure 5).



**Figure 4.** Oravita-Anina 33,45 km railway



**Figure 5.** Jitin viaduct

Built under the leadership of engineer Bach and using, from 1851, rail laminated at Reșița plants, the track Oravița-Baziaș was completed in 1854, with a length of 62.5 km. On August 20, 1854, the circulation of freight trains began and on November 1, 1856, that of passenger trains. The coal coming from the surroundings of Anina were loaded in the Baziaș port on board of the ships belonging to the large Danube companies navigation, the most famous being D.D.S.G., founded in 1829.

In parallel with the construction of the Oravița-Baziaș track, in 1847, a project belonging to engineer Anton Rappos was launched, providing for its extension by a normal steam traction track till Lișava. In this case, the coal would have been brought from Anina through a very long underground gallery, called King Ștefan, by horse driven wagons. But after 1852, with the increasing performances of steam traction, the Rappos project was radically altered, permanently abandoning the idea of underground galleries. By 1854, several funiculars were completed for the steeper section between Lișava and Anina. Then, the works to the track itself began. The track covers a distance of 33.4 km, with a level difference of 339 m. It has a total of 143 curves, of a length of 22.027 m, representing 65.9% of the entire route. It must be mentioned that at that time dynamite had not yet been discovered, this being invented only in 1866, three years after the works completion [9, 10].

After the closure of the mining operations on the route, the track was abandoned, as a strategy of C.F.R. (Romanian Railways) on November 1, 2010, being despoiled by scrape iron thieves. This is how another episode from the Banat railway history ended!

Considering its antiquity, the railway Oravița-Anina is the fourth track on the present territory of Romania, but, considering its technical and architectural achievements, it is still unrivalled. Due to the track difficulty, the big level difference and the numerous curves crossed, it had always required special locomotives and wagons (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Anina-Oravita train [4]

Even from its foundation, it had used a locomotive designed for it at St.E.G.'s factory in Vienna by engineer Pius Fink. Called Steyerdorf, it was made in 1861, followed by three others in 1867, namely Karaszova, Gerliste and Lisava. Used until 1891, these first locomotives between Oravița and Anina reached a maximum speed of 30 km/h. Their names are worth noting as they belong to the localities situated nearby the route travelled. Finally, the railway ended up having a total of seven halts and stations.

## 2.2 Railway Oravita-Bazias

In the early years, only one pair of mixed trains circulated per day between Oravița and Baziaș, as pointed out in The Mixed Railway Timetable on Oravița-Baziaș route, valid since November 15, 1857, published on April 18, 1858, in the newspaper *Temesvarer Zeitung*. The train used to leave Oravița at 7:00 a.m. and arrive in Baziaș at 10:02 a.m. From Baziaș, it used to leave back at 1:30 p.m., arriving in Oravița at 4:38 p.m. Its average speed was of 20.6 km/h. The traction was carried out from the beginning by locomotives built in 1852 by the company Günther from Wiener Neustadt, followed in 1855 by locomotive produced at St.E.G. Factory from Vienna, operating since 1840. The first locomotive distributed to the Oravița depot was no. 125 RESICZA and no. 126 ORAVICZA, taken over by St.E.G. in 1858 [15].

Over time, this railway was deeply marked by the political events happening in this side of Europe. After World War I, when the Banat was divided between Romania and Serbia, a 28 km segment of the total of 62.5 remained on Serbian territory. The train circulation was resumed on July 15, 1922, but only on the Romanian sector Oravița-



Iam (26.9 km). Baziaş could be reached, until 1950, only on the track Timișoara-Jebel-Voiteg-Stamora Moravița-Vârșeț-Iasenova-Biserica Albă-Vračev Gaj. In 1950, due to the conflict between Stalin and Tito, the train circulation on the territory of Yugoslavia was suspended, the section Baziaș-Socol-(Vračev Gaj) and the Bridge Nera-(Iasenova)-Iam being closed.

The first train coming from Oravița arrived, thus, in the Baziaș station in 1854. After two years, the new rail connection to Vienna by Timisoara turned this place into the *terminus* of European railways. Travelers arriving from Vienna or Paris embarked in Baziaș on the vessels of the Danube companies, on which they continued to travel eastward, having as final destinations Constanța, Odessa, Istanbul and Alexandria. Baziaș had this important role only until 1879, when the newly built track Timișoara-Caransebeș-Orșova made the connection with the Old Kingdom railways at Vârciorova, the rail route being thus much extended. However, until 1919, Baziaș continued to remain connected to Timișoara, facilitating the access of the Banat's capital to the trade on the Danube.

Due to the establishment of the border in its close proximity, Baziaș could no longer use neither the rail connection (completely closed in 1950), nor the port, dating from 1795 (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Timișoara-Baziaș track [5]

### 2.3 Railway Seghedin-Timisoara-Bazias

The first railway in present Romania, the one between Oravița and Baziaș, was followed shortly by another railway, much more important for the economic development of the Banat, the railway Seghedin-Timișoara-Baziaș, opened in the

years 1857-1858. Its builder, as for the majority of the railways in the Banat was St.E.G.

On November 15, 1857, 113.9 km belonging to the section of Seghedin – Jimbolia - Timișoara were inaugurated, out of which only 39 km were in the Romania of today. The first locomotives used on this railway were brought to Timișoara by boats on the Bega channel. They were called KOMÁROM, AUSTRIA, HONT and PESTH, being constructed in the years 1845-1846 at the Belgian factory John Cockerill in Seraing after the American model [6]. In July 1858, the Timișoara depot received the locomotives WARTBERG and LUGOS for passenger trains. It is interesting to highlight the way in which the newspaper *Temesvarer Zeitung* described the arrival of the first train to Timișoara: “When we hear the distant noise of the steam carriage, when we see the high train's chimney full of black smoke, it is as if we were charmed. And when it passes before us, we are almost astonished that we ourselves stand still in one place”. This is how the history of the railway in the capital of the Banat began [13].

The historical data were excellently presented by Șerban Lacrițeanu and Ilie Popescu in their work, *Istoricul tracțiunii feroviare din România* [The history of railway traction in Romania – own translation], vol. I, published in Bucharest, in 2003, and will be presented in the following section.

The works started also for the other section, of 94 km, between Timișoara-Jebel-Voiteg-Stamora Moravița-Vârșeț-Iasenova, where it connected to the track Oravița-Baziaș. They were led by engineer Ludwig Meyer and began on December 10, 1856, in Vârșeț and on December 27, 1856, in Iasenova and Șag. In order to build the numerous bridges on the route, cement produced from the burning of the limestone extracted from Oravița was used, as well as 7.5 million bricks produced in the seven brickyards placed along the route [13].

The first passenger train on the Timișoara-Iasenova-Baziaș route (Figure 8) circulated on July 20, 1858, driven by the locomotive no. 111 WARTBERG, being composed by 11 passenger wagons and 1 luggage wagon.

The railway Seghedin-Timișoara-Baziaș connected the Banat region to major European rail routes, as it is here where, for a period of time, the connection between them and the river transport on the Danube was made. The *terminus* point of the

railway, Baziaş represented also the beginning of a fluvial journey and then, a maritime journey of great interest to the people of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially those thirsty for new. According to the Train timetable of May 6, 1861, of the St.E.G.'s southeast network between Vienna and Baziaş, a pair of high-speed trains circulated twice a week, which rode the entire distance of 86 Austrian miles in 28 hours and 18 minutes.



**Figure 8:** Viaduct, Baziaş area [6]

The distance Pesta-Baziaş was covered in 11 hours and 18 minutes, and Timișoara-Baziaş in 3 hours and 6 minutes. The trains from Vienna used to arrive to Baziaş on Tuesdays and Fridays, the journey being continued from there using the boats of the D.D.S.G. [7] Company towards Orșova, Giurgiu, Cernavoda, Odessa and Constantinople. The timetable of these boats was connected to that of the trains belonging to the St.E.G. Company. The fast boats used to leave Baziaş on Tuesdays and Fridays at 8:30 a.m., while those for passengers on Thursdays at 11.30 a.m. The importance of the Timișoara-Iasenova-Baziaş track within the circuit of major international transport relations was maintained for two decades, until the inauguration on June 10, 1879, of the railway Timișoara-Caransebeș-Orșova-Vârciorova. This new railway, linked to those in the Romania of that time, offered the possibility to continue arailway journey to the Orient [8, 15].

During its peak, Baziaş was connected through Vienna, even with Paris and other major European centres. It was situated on the major route Paris-Constantinople, the journey between these cities lasting six days (via Strasbourg, Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, Munich, with the variants Cologne, Hanover, Leipzig, Dresden, Prague, then Vienna, Baziaş, Cernavoda, Constanța). The boats travelled

the distance Baziaş-Cernavoda in 36 hours and 30 minutes, and back in 54 hours. The route Vienna-Baziaş was justly called, for these reasons, the way to Orient. The years 1858-1879 represented Baziaş most flourishing period, when it was one of the most important points of connection between Eastern and Western Europe [9].

Not used since 1950, the monumental building of the Baziaş station was demolished after 1960, when it was thought that the place would be flooded by the raise of the Danube level once the Iron Gates dam was built. But, the place of the old station is now right on the shore, being occupied by the cottage *Apus de soare* (*Sunrise, own translation*). Nevertheless, most of the embankment of the former track between Baziaş and the border with Serbia was flooded by the river. This is how an episode from the Banat history on railway transport ended [15].

### 3. Conclusions

The sad story of the first railway that crossed also the present Romanian territory ends, although it has existed for almost a century (1854-1950). At present, the circulation is done only on certain sections. Nonetheless, its appearance and existence in this space of the Banat region are milestones in the history of railways and the human potential of the area. No annals on Romanian railways can omit this.

Other lines also had followed the same fate. Now, the only thing we can do is to write about and remember them! The viaducts and tunnels of these historic railways must become models, tailored to modern technology, models of power and perseverance. The constructions that have conquered so many hearts should not be forgotten and the railway Oravița-Anina must be kept and introduced in the tourist routes of the Banat region, with care and good local management.

We have no right to forget nor neglect what history has left us, all the more to show indifference towards the current situation, characterized by the lack of maintenance, publicity and visibility or by destruction (moral and material).

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