

THE MANAKIA BROTHERS AND BITOLA ARE BACK IN THE NEWS

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Abstract

A hundred years ago, on August 26, 1921, brothers Ienache (1878–1954) and Miltiade (1882–1964) Manakia opened their cinema in Bitola. In 1939 the cinema was destroyed by fire. It was rebuilt exactly 100 years later according to the original plans in the same location. It is an occasion for a remembrance of the two brothers' activity and for a celebration of Bitola, an effective cultural capital of the Balkans and a Vlach metropolis.¹

Keywords: Balkans, Vlachs, history of photography, official photographer, photo studio, ethnography, cinema theatre, paternity over a film.

The Manaki Cinema Theatre was inaugurated on August 26 in Bitola, in Northern Macedonia. More than 10 years ago, the filmmakers found out that the land on which the Vlach² brothers Ienache and Miltiade Manakia opened their cinema exactly 100 years ago was free. They persuaded the government of North Macedonia to rebuild the cinema theatre destroyed by a fire in 1939 according to the original plans on the same location.

The inauguration was made by Bitola Mayor Natasha Petrovska. After that, the documentary *Manaki, a Story in Pictures* (*Manaki, prikazna vo sliki*) (2018, Robert Jankulovski) was screened. The film has indisputable artistic qualities, including a rigorous research of the photographic work of the Manakia brothers. The film features Dimitar Dimitrovski-Takets, an old journalist from Bitola who had known Miltiade, Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, art critic expert in the history of photography, and the undersigned, who wrote a book (2004)³ about the activity of the two brothers. I was lucky enough to be on holidays in Ohrid, only 70 kilometers from Bitola, and Robert Jankulovski found out and invited me to this special event.

Who were the Manakia brothers? They were Vlachs born in Avdella (currently in Greece), a Vlach village in the Pindus Mountains: the same village where the monk Averchie

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¹ A shorter variant of the article in Romanian was published in *Observator Cultural* under the title “Un alt centenar pentru cinematograful balcanic” [Another Centenary for the Balkan Cinema].

² Vlachs is the name of an old population in the Balkans speaking a Latin idiom closely related to Romanian. They are also called Aromanians or Tsintars (Cincars).

³ *Frații Manakia sau Balcanii mișcători*, Arhiva Națională de Filme, București, 2004. Second edition, *Frații Manakia și imaginea Balcanilor*, București: Noi Media Print, 2009.

and Apostol Mărgărit, the two men who founded the Romanian schools in the Ottoman Empire, came from. Ienache (1878, Avdella – 1954, Thessalonika) was a teacher of calligraphy and drawing at the Romanian Gymnasium in Ioannina, where he also opened an “Art and Photography Studio”. In 1905, after being accused by the Greeks of Romanian propaganda for immortalizing in his photographs religious services and schools in Vlach and Romanian, and his birthplace in Avdella was burned by Greek antartes,⁴ he was forced to leave the city. A year later he settled in Bitola, where he reopened the studio together with his brother Miltiade (Milton) (1882, Avdella – 1964, Bitola), and continued to teach at the Romanian high school where they had both been students.

In 1906 the two brothers were part of a Vlach delegation led by Constantin Belimace⁵ who participated in the Romanian General Exhibition organized on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the reign of Carol I⁶ and 1800 years since the colonization of Dacia by the Romans. The two brothers could see moving images for the first time in Petre Ganciu's Bioscope from the Pavilion of Cinema, won two gold and one silver medal for photographic art, became official photographers of the Romanian Royal Court, while Ienache also obtained a travel scholarship from the Romanian king, so he could buy from Paris or London the Bioscope 300 camera from Charles Urban & Co. On the same occasion, Ienache donated to the Romanian Academy five albums with photos from the life of the Vlachs, while Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcasă bought dozens of photos on glass for the newly-established “Museum of Ethnography and National Art”, today the Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

In the spring of the following year, returning from his trip through Europe, Ienache and his brother Miltiade filmed Despina, their centenarian grandmother, in Avdella, along with several other women in the family spinning wool. At one point Despina looks dignified in the camera as if she knew she would be watched in amazement after 115 years! For filmmakers like Theodoros Angelopoulos⁷ and Milcho Manchevski,⁸ as well as for others, she and her grandchildren became symbols of Balkan cinema. The National Film Archive of Romania preserves two films of the two brothers, with titles and inserts in Romanian: *Scenes from the Life of the Vlachs in the Pindus*⁹ and *A Trip to Turkish Macedonia*.¹⁰ The first is, in fact, an edited mute material that reproduces the contents of five original reels filmed between 1907 and 1911; they became episodes in this film, while the Cinematheque of North Macedonia considers each reel a distinct film with its own title, which in addition does not coincide with those given by the authors. The episodes are: *A Feast Scene at a Vlach Fair in the Pindus*, *The National Circle Dance of the Vlachs in the Pindus*, *The Epiphany Celebration with the Vlachs in Veria*, *A Scene from Vlach Primary Education. Abella Village. Epirus and Household Life with the Vlach Women in the Pindus*.¹¹ We can ascertain that the two brothers had been working together even

⁴ Irregular troops in the 19th and early 20th century. See Nicholas C. J. Pappas, “Brigands and Brigadiers: The Problem of Banditry and the Military in Nineteenth Century Greece”, *Athens Journal of History*, Volume 4, Issue 3.

⁵ Constantin Belimace (1848–1932) was a Vlach poet, author of the anthem of the Vlachs.

⁶ Carol I of Romania (1839–1914), born Prince Karl of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, was the sovereign of Romania from 1866 to his death in 1914, ruling as Prince from 1866 to 1881, and as King from 1881 to 1914.

⁷ Theodoros Angelopoulos in his film *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995) pays homage to the pioneers of Balkan cinema, imagining a Greek filmmaker who crosses the Balkans in search of one of their films, even studying in Sarajevo during the Bosnian war.

⁸ Milcho Manchevski in *Dust* (2001) also pays homage to the two brothers by imagining Wild West bandits who after watching a film by Manakia brothers decide to move to Macedonia at the beginning of the 20th century.

⁹ *Scene din viața aromânilor din Pind*.

¹⁰ *Excursie în Macedonia turcească*.

¹¹ In Romanian: *O scenă de petrecere la un bâlcu aromânesc din Pind*, *Hora națională la români din Pind*, *Boboteaza la aromâni din Veria*, *O scenă din învățământul primar aromânesc. Comuna Abella. Epir, Viața casnică la aromâncele din Pind*.

from a sequence from the first episode where we can see Miltiade instructing his brother to film a fiddler playing the violin. At the bottom of each frame we can read in Romanian: “Manakia Bros. Pindo-Balkan Film”.¹² The other film, *A Trip to Turkish Macedonia*, has also six episodes with explanatory inserts in Romanian but without any mention of the authors, so for a while it has been suspected that it was filmed by Ion Voinescu.¹³ After watching in 1994 the copy preserved in Northern Macedonia, I managed to prove the paternity of the Manakia brothers on this film. It is about the visit of a delegation of Romanian academics and lawyers led by the academician and former minister Constantin I. Istrati,¹⁴ whom the two brothers had met in Bucharest as general commissioner of the exhibition. The Romanian delegation had come to observe on the spot the situation of the Vlachs after they were given rights in the Ottoman Empire following the iradèh¹⁵ signed by Sultan Abdul Hamid II¹⁶ in 1905. On this occasion they visited Bitola and Resna (nowadays Resen), where Ahmed Niyazi Bey,¹⁷ one of the leaders of the Young Turks Revolution,¹⁸ met them.

It is no coincidence that the titles and inserts of the films are in literary Romanian language with some Latinizing tendencies of the period because the two brothers considered themselves Romanian and were aware of the ethnographic research of the time. In the following years, the two brothers reached certain notoriety in Romania because their photographs illustrated ethnographic and linguistic works, such as those of Gustav Weigand¹⁹ or Tache Papahagi.²⁰

In 1911 they filmed also the films *Sultan Mehmed Reshad II's Visit to Thessalonika*²¹ and *Sultan Reshad II's Visit to Bitola*. On this occasion they became official photographers of the Ottoman Court. In 1929 they became official photographers of King Aleksandar Karadjordjević of Yugoslavia.²² They also made a film with Greek inserts, *The Burial of the Greek Bishop Emilianos* (1911). It seems that they stopped making films after the Balkan wars (1912).

After the Second Balkan War, North Macedonia and Bitola were ceded to Serbia but were occupied by Bulgaria during WW1. Ienache was considered a suspect, so he had forced residence in Plovdiv for a while, while their studio in Bitola had to be rebuilt after a bomb almost completely destroyed it.

¹² In Romanian “F-ții Manachia. Pindo-Balkan Film Bitolia”.

¹³ Silvia Borcan, B.T. Ripeanu, *Catalogul filmelor documentare românești 1897–1948* [Catalogue of Romanian Documentaries 1897–1948], Arhiva Națională de Filme, 1981, p. 12.

¹⁴ Constantin I. Istrati (1850–1919) was a Romanian chemist and physician. He was president of the Romanian Academy between 1913 and 1916, as well as Minister of Public (1899–1900) and Minister of Agriculture, Industry, Trade and Domains (1907).

¹⁵ Ordinance or decree signed by the sultan.

¹⁶ Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842–1918) was the last Sultan to exert effective control over the decaying state.

¹⁷ Ahmed Niyazi Bey (1873–1913), an ethnic Albanian, was an Ottoman revolutionary, who was the bey of the Resen area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and one of the heroes of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and of suppressing the 1909 Ottoman coup.

¹⁸ The Young Turk Revolution (1908) was a constitutionalist revolution in the Ottoman Empire. The Committee of Union and Progress, an organization of the Young Turks movement, forced Sultan Abdulhamid II to restore the Ottoman Constitution and recall the parliament.

¹⁹ “Rumänen und Aromunen in Bulgarien”, *Dreizehnter Jahresbericht des Instituts für Rumänische Sprache*, Leipzig, 1908.

²⁰ *Images d'ethnographie Roumaine Images d'ethnographie roumaine, daco-roumaine et aroumaine*, Societatea Cultural-Națională, Apostol Margarit, 1928–1936.

²¹ Sultan Mehmed Reshad II (1844–1918) was the penultimate Ottoman Sultan (r. 1909–1918).

²² King Aleksandar Karadjordjević (1888–1934) was a prince regent of the Kingdom of Serbia from 1914 and later a king of Yugoslavia from 1921 to 1934 (prior to 1929 the state was known as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes).



1. Robert Jankulovski, Stefan Hadji-Antonovski, Marian Tuțui and Christo Cholakovski in front of Cinema Theatre Manaki.

2. Mayor Natasha Petrovska and cultural adviser Sandra Kotevska at the festive opening of the cinema theatre.



3. Adrian-Silvan Ionescu in the documentary *Manaki, a Story in Pictures* (2018, Robert Jankulovski).



**For Janaki, this was the opportunity
to meet the king at the exhibition,**

4. Marian Tuțui in the documentary *Manaki, a Story in Pictures*
(2018, Robert Jankulovski).



5. Monument of Miltiade Manakia in the center of Bitola.



6. The house of Manakia brothers on Marshall Tito Street (Shirok Sokak).



7. The grave of Constantin Belimace. The lyrics of the Vlach anthem he wrote are carved on the black marble plaque.



8. The funeral monument of Apostol Mărgărit.



9. The grave of Miltiade Manakia.



10. The Vlach church in Bitola.



11. The building of the former Romanian High School in Bitola.



12. With Christo Cholakovski, leader of the local Vlachs, in front of the former Romanian Consulate.



13. The cafe with Vlach name, “La ficiarlu di la munti” (At the Mountain Lad) in Avdella, the birthplace of the Manakia brothers.



14. The busts of Ienache and Miltiade Manakia, a wooden bear and a wooden statue of one of the brothers filming in the center of Avdella.

After WW1 the foreign schools in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were closed. Ienache and his brother had to think of another source of livelihood. Therefore, the two borrowed money (the King of Yugoslavia was of help too), and built in 1921 an open-air cinema not far from the house and workshop, also on Shirok Sokak (Broad Street), currently Marshal Tito Street. Two years later, they built a 200-seat cinema on the same site. In 1936 Anastase Hâciu records about Bitola: “The great photographers of the town were Leonte, Kermeli, the Manakia brothers, still in existence and with their own great cinema theatre.”²³ It

²³ In his book *Aromâni. Comerț, industrie, arte, expansiune, civilizație* [Vlachs. Trade, Industry, Arts, Expansion, Civilization], Focșani: Cartea Putnei, p. 198–199.

was the last time the Manakia brothers were mentioned in Romania, after which they were ignored for almost half a century. After 46 years, their photographic activity was mentioned again. Constantin Săvulescu mentions that their photographs sent to the newspaper *Universul* are the first photographs in Romania printed using zincography.²⁴ Then in 1989 their cinematic work is mentioned,²⁵ having as sources Serbian articles and Robert Boussinot's film encyclopedia, but there was no connection between the two activities and almost nothing about the biography of the two brothers.

The fact that during communism the emigrated Romanians, the citizens of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic,²⁶ the Romanians from Vojvodina²⁷ and especially the Vlachs have been rarely mentioned in Romanian press or books contributed to this situation. In 1987 the Manakia brothers were reconsidered by the Greeks, as in 1905 the newspaper *Foti ti Ipirou* (Voice of Epirus) considered Ienache an "instigator" or a "monkey", *Pirrhos* called him "the photographer of Avdella" and *O Agonas* (The Struggle), "photographer and propagandist".²⁸

In 1939 the cinema theatre was destroyed by fire and the two brothers went bankrupt. Ienache went with his son to Thessalonika in order to teach again at the Romanian Commercial High School and his son to benefit from a scholarship. He left the photo studio to Miltiade, who had just got married. WW2 and the Greek Civil War, as well as the rupture between communist Yugoslavia and Greece, made the two brothers never see each other again. Miltiade sold the photographs and films to the Bitola State Archives and enjoyed a certain well-being and late recognition as he was awarded and a documentary was made about him (*Kamera 300*, 1958, Branko Ranitović). However, Ienache died in grief because Romanian schools were closed in Greece in 1945, he became a suspect, while his son died early.

Today, the two brothers are claimed by Turkey, Greece, North Macedonia, Romania, and even Albania. They are not the first natives who filmed in the Balkans, but due to their long activity and valuable work, they are rightly considered the first filmmakers in the Balkans.

On the occasion of this centenary, Bitola became the cultural capital of the Balkans and of the Vlachs for at least one day. I had the opportunity to visit the Vlach Cemetery in Bitola and see the tombs of Miltiade Manakia, Apostol Mărgărit (1832–1903), Romanian academician, one of the founders of Romanian education in the Ottoman Empire, and Constantin Belimace, author of the Vlach anthem "Părinteasca dimândari" ["Parental Demand"].

I met here the Vlach leader, Christo Cholakovski, who accompanied me to the Vlach Church of St. Constantine and Elena, at the building of the former Romanian High School (currently a Turkish school) and to the former Romanian Consulate (currently an empty and degrading building with an inscription indicating that it belongs to the Ministry of Finance of Northern Macedonia). If the claim of schools, churches and other buildings that belonged to the Romanian state, by the local Vlachs who in the vast majority do not consider themselves Romanians anymore is a problem, I do not understand why the building of the former consulate is not claimed.

²⁴ See Constantin Săvulescu, *Cronologia ilustrată a fotografiei în România. Perioada 1834-1916* [An Illustrated Chronology of Photography in Romania. Period 1834–1916], Bucharest, 1985.

²⁵ Cristina Corciovescu, Bujor T. Ripeanu (editors), *Secolul cinematografului* [The Century of Cinema], Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989, p. 10–11.

²⁶ Nowadays Republic of Moldova.

²⁷ An autonomous and multi-ethnic province of Serbia which was part of Hungary and of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the end of WW1.

²⁸ *The Manaki Brothers. The Greek Pioneers of the Balkanic Cinema*, Organization for the Cultural Capital of Europe, Thessalonika, 1997, p. 66.

Continuing my journey in Greece, I arrived in the Pindus Mountains. In Avdella, the native village of the Manakia brothers, inhabited only during summer because it is located at 1400 meters altitude, I could see again the cafe with an inscription in Vlach with Greek letters “La feciorlu di la munti” [“At the Mountain Lad”], then other names in Vlach, even in Latin letters.

In the center of the village, besides the busts of the Manakia brothers, a naive wooden statue appeared representing one of the brothers filming, but between them is now a wooden bear, sculpted by the same author. The intention of the authorities was probably good, namely to signal the reservation of bears nearby, but the mixture of the sculptures has a terrible effect. However, I was glad that the Manakia brothers are appreciated in their birthplace and that the Vlachs in the Pindus have resumed using their idiom in writing.