

## A MEMOIRIST FROM BANAT. ON THE BALKAN FRONTS OF THE GREAT WAR. “LAE FROM BANAT”\*

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The disturbing experience of those who experienced the Great War, the global conflict that lasted from 1914 to 1918, left a strong impression both on the direct participants who fought on the front line and on the civilian world, which was equally marked by the horrors they were subjected to. The years of the great conflagration raised interrogations, curiosities and fascinated European historiography, this sustained interest materializing in numerous editorial products from the immediate aftermath of the war and being continued in the subsequent decades.<sup>1</sup>

A province of Austro-Hungarian Empire, Banat aligned itself with the imperial territories in the recruitment process that started at the beginning

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<sup>1</sup> European literature records the appearance of numerous works, especially in recent years, about the memoirs of the Great War: Louis Barthas, *Poilu. The World War I notebooks of Louis Barthas, barrelmarker, 1914–1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 426 p.; Auguste Heiligenstein, *Mémoires d'un observateur-pilote, 1912–1919: Auguste Heiligenstein*, Gérard Heiligenstein ed. (Paris: Les Éditions de l'Officine, 2009), 227 p.; Nicolas Mignon, *Les grandes guerres de Robert Vivier (1894–1989). Mémoires et écritures du premier conflit mondial en Belgique* (Paris: Harmattan, 2008), 308 p.; *Literature of the First World War*, Helen Cross ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 200 p.; *Recovered Memories and False Memories*, Martin A. Conway ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 301 p.; Maurice Delmotte, *Vie quotidienne en France occupée. Journaux de Maurice Delmotte, 1914–1918* (Paris: Harmattan, 2007), 285 p.; Adrian Neculau, *Memoria pierdută. Eseuri de psihosociologia schimbării* (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 193 p.

of global conflict. The youth enrolled in the Banatian province were scattered on all of the war fronts, many of them making the ultimate sacrifice for the imperial cause.

Historiography has addressed in detail the topic of World War I, exploring the historical event from multiple angles and areas of interest. In the space of historical writing on the subject, a particular place is occupied by the volumes of memoirs, which represent a valuable source of information.

Having the value of a historical source, memoirs are remarkable documentary testimonies that happily combine historical science and literature, in an inspired symbiosis leading to the aesthetic form that the document adopts. Recourse to memoirs facilitates access to the collective mentality of an era, to the human destiny of an individual or a group. The stories of past times are thus certified through the direct testimony, of the characters directly involved, and this grants the event the appearance of being genuine and real. The genre of memoirs is based on the personal testimony of the protagonists, who relive the past, sharing it to the new generation. Historical facts are linked with the emotional depths they activate, the research interest being shifted towards the sphere of the human.

In the Banat area, there were many former combatants who wrote their memoirs and participated in the battles that took place on the fronts of the Great War. The central character of the present study is one who signed his works as “Lae from Banat,” the pseudonym under which Nicolae Boldureanu<sup>2</sup> from Lugoj published his memories. Very little known to the general public, he was born at Lugoj in 1897. He was a member of the “Progresul” male choir in Lugoj, of the “Progresul” Reading, Choral and Sports Society of the apprentices in Lugoj. He tried his talent in the literary field, too; he wrote plays and published a booklet about the tour undertaken by the Vidu choir in Romania (1941).<sup>3</sup>

His memoirs from World War I were published in Lugoj in 1932, under the title *La Regimentul 43 nimic nou!? (Nothing New in the 43rd Regiment!?)*.<sup>4</sup> The entire story of the author is a brief description of the events he went through, as they were perceived by the subject. This research focuses only on the first part of

<sup>2</sup> The identification of Lae from Banat with Nicolae Boldureanu is owed to Dumitru Jompan, whom we thank for this information.

<sup>3</sup> Lae din Banat, *Săptămâna bănăţeană. Cu corul “Ion Vidu” prin ţară* (Lugoj: Tipografia Marinov, 1943).

<sup>4</sup> Lae din Banat, *La regimentul 43 nimic nou!? (Lugoj: Tip. Union, 1932)*, 48 p. The text was published in *Marele Război în memoria bănăţeană (1914–1919)*, vol. III, anthology, edition, studies and notes by Valeriu Leu, Nicolae Bocşan, Mihaela Bedecan (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană; Centrul de Studii Transilvane, 2015), 313–362.

the memorial text, describing the movement across the territory of the Balkan Peninsula.

The text displays the pattern adopted by other authors too<sup>5</sup>, evincing several distinct stages in the memorial discourse. The description starts on an optimistic note, presenting the lifestyle and the positive perception of reality from the period before the war, when daily existence was peaceful, with no major concerns. Politically disengaged, the text is utterly disinterested in this environment, noting down a single item of information it considered important in this regard, namely the existence of a “sweet Romania” across the Carpathians. Although the author appreciates the “excellent life before the war,” referring especially to the administrative and social organization, he criticizes the lack of national freedom and the deprivation to which the nations comprised in the great dualist empire were subjected. This observation made him conclude that the freedom of a nation is the only way to total happiness: “Before the war it was good, there was happiness, but also sorrow, for we were in bondage. We lacked freedom, the dear freedom we have today, and with all the internal troubles, we are still happy”.<sup>6</sup>

After the Sarajevo assassination, all European states entered, one by one, the war carousel<sup>7</sup>, the immediate consequence being the decreeing of mobilization in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, following which all the men were called to arms, starting with the very young, like the author himself. The military unit to which he was mobilized and around which the entire story is narrated was the 43rd Caransebeș Infantry Regiment, where 90% of the officers’ corps were Romanians, which is why Romanian was the language of communication.

The introductory section of the text undertakes a brief foray into the places back home, Lugoj, his hometown, and the city of Caransebeș, the place of his enrolment, as well as his contemporaries’ reflections on the war. The reader has the perception of a general exultation, of the enthusiasm that the entire society was animated by: “the quiet town was in great turmoil. The reservists gathering there were as many as the blades of grass. The workers were throwing their tools away, the peasants were discarding their ploughs and scythes, the officials were closing their offices. Everyone was shouting: Long live the war!”<sup>8</sup> This was the first psychological stage in conducting the conflict, revealed through the feelings of the combatants and of the civilian world, a stage that was coeval with the onset of the event and during which the entire society considered war as a

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Pactul autobiografic* (București: Univers, 2000), 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> *Marele Război*, 313.

<sup>7</sup> After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of June 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia on 28 July 1914 and against Russia on 4 August 1914.

<sup>8</sup> *Marele Război*, 314.

trifling fact, as a short-term adventure.<sup>9</sup> The enthusiasm of mobilization, present in all the warring armies, was mainly predicated on two beliefs concerning: the positive consequences and the insignificant temporal duration of the conflict. At this moment, no one could perceive the disastrous side of the conflagration, the essential changes that it would bring forth. Only as the events began to unfold did the perception change radically, ending in the total rejection of the war and of the horrors it had caused.<sup>10</sup>

Having left for Szeged on 15 July 1915, together with several other soldiers from Lugoj, the hero – aged 18 years – set off on the long armed periplum he was to partake of. After six weeks of barracks, the author recorded the first privileges: the right to attend religious service, officiated for each denomination, and the permission to move freely in the city for two hours per day.

One of the first impressions he shared was the plight of the Romanian soldiers, greeted with insults and mockery by the Hungarian soldiers and commanders, a situation obviously caused by the interest they manifested in Transylvania and the future historical evolution of the province.

Following a Sunday escapade in one of Szeged's breweries, transformed into a genuine national assembly, with Romanian *doinas* and songs, the young soldier was arrested, together with his comrades and accused of "subversive action against the Austro-Hungarian state," being imprisoned for 15 days. The feeling of constant persecution and suspicion led him to seek enrolment as a volunteer and to be sent in the line of battle. At this moment of the narrative, one can easily notice the mood of the soldiers, already modified compared to the previous stage. Their initial courage, enthusiasm and liveliness had vanished and the first signs of unrest generated by the imminence of the battles appeared: "many cried when we left, knowing that we were heading toward the great carnage."<sup>11</sup> This was proof that a correct perception of reality had set in, that there was an awareness of the real situation on the front line and of the dangers they would expose themselves to. The spectrum of the unknown increased their anguish.<sup>12</sup> Only after leaving Sarajevo did the commander inform the troop that they were to march towards Montenegro.

With this, there started the stage of the "Balkan front" in the young soldier's life. He was enrolled in the division of a Honvéd colonel, as a *sapeur*, a trench digger, a position much needed on the front. On his route, he crossed much

<sup>9</sup> Germaine de Montmollin, "Influența și schimbările de atitudine. Schimbarea de atitudine," in Serge Moscovici, ed., *Psihologia socială* (București: Ideea Europeană, 2010), 101–105.

<sup>10</sup> Serge Moscovici, *Cronica anilor risipiți. Povestire autobiografică* (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 113.

<sup>11</sup> *Marele Război*, 316.

<sup>12</sup> Stéphane Audoin Rozeau, Annette Becker, *La violenza, la crociata, il lutto: la Grande Guerra e la storia de Novecento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), 24–45.

of the Balkans, configuring the line of the front and of the battles waged in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Dalmatia. Any change of scenery or moving into a new province was preceded by a brief historical-geographical and demographic presentation. A significant part of the text focuses on the description of the new places explored and on the people encountered, achieved in a very expressive style. We are shown a picturesque landscape, “beautiful cities”<sup>13</sup>, “large, freshwater rivers”<sup>14</sup>, “romantic, resplendent settings.” Besides the aesthetic impression created by the natural beauty of the places and experienced by the hero-narrator, the prevailing idea that appears immediately concerns the destruction caused by the war, which will change this enchanting scenery into ruins. It is a chain of cause and effect, observed with dismay by the narrator. As such, the initial expressive formula used in the description merely enhances the dissonance outlined between the pre- and the post-conflict periods.

The description of the landscape is punctuated with milestones of national history, laying emphasis on the political status, on the position of independence or autonomy of the territories described and on their rapports with the Dual Monarchy.<sup>15</sup> The political issues presented in the text harmoniously intertwine the past with the present history of the provinces traversed.

A character on whom the author insisted was King Nikita<sup>16</sup> of Montenegro, whom he painted in a negative light, influenced by contamination with the views of the local people, in whose eyes he was a traitor, a coward who had abandoned his people. The population judged him harshly for his attitude. Without leadership, food and weapons, the Montenegrins were forced to surrender.<sup>17</sup> The diarist made a laudatory description of the Montenegrins’ courage, whom he described as very brave, disciplined soldiers, who were willing to fight to the ultimate sacrifice.

<sup>13</sup> “Scutari is a beautiful city and it is the capital of Albania,” in *Marele Război*, 324.

<sup>14</sup> “The Sava is a big and beautiful river with fresh water, flowing between Slavonia and Bosnia, getting out of Illyria and flowing into the Danube at Belgrade,” in *Marele Război*, 317.

<sup>15</sup> “Herzegovina ... was, like Bosnia, taken by Austria in 1878,” in *Marele Război*, 317. “Montenegro or Cernagora, as the inhabitants of this plateau and small principality call it, was declared independent under the Treaty of Berlin in 1878,” in *Marele Război*, 318. “Albania is a country ... declared autonomous in December 1912,” in *Marele Război*, 324; on 28 November 1912, the National Albanian Congress proclaimed the independence of Albania, recognized internationally at the London Conference in 1913. “Dalmatia was occupied by Austro-Hungary at the same time as Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1878,” in *Marele Război*, 324.

<sup>16</sup> Nikita, King of Montenegro under the name Nikola I Mirkov Petrović Njegoš (17 October 1841–1 March 1921). He was crowned king on 28 August 1910.

<sup>17</sup> Montenegro declared war against Austria-Hungary on 4 August 1914 and surrendered on 15 January 1916.

The historical presentation of the Balkan territories is complemented by the human factor, as the national qualities and virtues of the peoples he came to know are outlined<sup>18</sup>: courage, boldness, wit, the beauty of the women. Information is also offered about the customs, costumes<sup>19</sup> and occupations of the place.<sup>20</sup>

As an additional note, in the paragraphs about Albania there are included references to the town of Ianina, stating that there existed a Romanian gymnasium.<sup>21</sup>

When the company was stationed at Vilu, a small and destitute village, located near the border with Bosnia, the young soldier had the opportunity to acquire a better understanding of ordinary people. There are brought into light human features and compatibilities converging towards compassion, which the author manifested for the occupied people. The account encapsulates the life of two women, an old villager and her niece, in whose house the soldier, together with Adam, his comrade, was put up. Received with distrust, suspicion and fear, the protagonists eventually shared deep ties, based on respect and admiration, surmounting thus language-related, national difficulties, and especially their belonging to opposed warring camps. One of the criteria for the rapprochement was confessional, as they all belonged to the common matrix of Orthodox Christians, while another was that the son of their host was also a soldier: since those at home knew nothing of his fate, this facilitated the acceptance of the newly arrived.

The central character of this part of the memoirs is young Aneta Koprovitza, who impressed the storyteller deeply through her courage and power of sacrifice. The girl stood out in the battles from the Kozmaci waterfall, where the Montenegrins organized their reinforcement before the enemy troops. The legend that circulated around it spoke about the slaying of hundreds of Austro-Hungarian soldiers, demonstrating, besides boldness, also bravery and exceptional military skills.

The last memory about the young Montenegrin evokes an episode of the good relations established between the protagonists. The Romanians informed Aneta about the arrival of a shipment of food for the Austro-Hungarian army, from which they had agreed to provide a part to the Montenegrins. In order to carry out the plan, the two requested to be assigned to sentry service at night, when they allowed the Montenegrins access into the camp. The guard on the

<sup>18</sup> "Bosnians are bold people, daring in battle, obedient and smart," in *Marele Război*, 317.

<sup>19</sup> "Albanians are short people; their traditional costume consists of pants and baize padded coats. Some also wear leather coats," in *Marele Război*, 324.

<sup>20</sup> Albanians "deal with the cultivation of olives, oils and with fishing," in *Marele Război*, 324.

<sup>21</sup> *Marele Război*, 324.

morning shift reported the theft, triggering a search of the culprits. Denounced by a Hungarian comrade, both the Romanians and the Montenegrin group led by Aneta were arrested. The outcome was tragic. Aneta's death is described on a heroic note: she died in a battle between the Montenegrins and the Austro-Hungarian company that the narrator was enrolled in, slain by the enemy bullets. A final proof of their emotional affinity resides in the Romanians' reaction of great sadness and in the request they submitted to the captain to be allowed to dig an individual grave and to carve a separate cross for the young woman they considered to have been their true friend, this request being granted to them.

The last stage of the Balkan front in the young soldier's memoirs was Dalmatia, which he describes as a familiar place, very well-known known to the Banatian soldiers, since it was here that many of them had done military service. The only image retained is that of nature unleashed. Although warned by the locals about worsening weather, at the command of the Austrian captain, who appeared sceptical of popular superstition, the troop continued its passageway and was surprised by a "hurricane" on the sea shore. The dark, threatening clouds, the lightning and the deafening thunder, torrential rain and the horrendous winds are reminiscent of the biblical description of the Flood, which those who experienced them attributed to the human sins that had been revealed in the context of the war.

In a schematic treatment, the text captures two major areas, both in intrinsic relations of reciprocity with the conflagration: the space of the civil society and the world of the soldiers, of the front itself.

For the first circle of interest, unlike other war memories, this text highlights the soldiers' relations with the population of the conquered regions and proves that some of the latter – the case of the memoirist and his friend – cultivated cordial relations with the civilians; their relations with the Montenegrin group are also relevant. The memoirist offers details about the situation of the civilian population, severely afflicted by the vicissitudes of the conflagration. Some of the adverse consequences are captured in verisimilar colours by the author during the narrative: the suffering experienced, the work carried out by those left behind – women, children, the elderly – for the needs of the front, the general lack of food, the epidemics triggered, the black market that flourished in the favourable conditions of so many deprivations and created a new social class, those enriched by the war. The situation of the population in Montenegro is illustrative in this regard. Arrested and physically abused, the Montenegrins were forced to requisitions, road building, and deforestations. To suppress any form of resistance, the officers of the Montenegrin army were sent to labour camps in Germany and Hungary, any opposition being punishable by death. The terror they experienced caused extreme reactions, so the text speaks of



many suicides among the civilians, unable to endure the daily oppression, deprivation, poverty and scorn.

One aspect that greatly impressed the author was general dehumanization. He outlined the sketch of a society in which fundamental moral values had disappeared and given way to primitive, cruel, inhumane instincts. Society had abandoned civilization, becoming brutalized, and the result was the generalized cultural and psychic regression.<sup>22</sup> He witnessed ruthless, savage scenes involving the Austro-Hungarian and German armies, which, in their advancement, had shown signs of barbarism, shooting, hanging, devastating and terrifying the population. He presented the destruction, the ruin and the desolation left behind the front, in places that had once been picturesque and rich. He talked about the extensive looting in the occupied territories, about the trains specially formed for the transport of all available goods, from valuable things to small household objects, the civilian population being thus deprived of those necessary for their daily living.

As regards the world of the front, there can be outlined several points of interest in the text. One aspect that concerned the author and that was repeatedly reflected upon was the cohesion versus the division of the troop. In this context, the memoirist found that solidarity had functioned full throttle under conditions of major threat. The homogeneity of the troop was welded in moments of respite in “comradely meetings,” as the author called them, during nightly parties, attended by soldiers and officers alike<sup>23</sup>, but especially before the great battles and the tough tests that the soldiers overcame together.<sup>24</sup> There was forged a solidarity among the comrades on the front, who fought together and experienced the drama of the conflict in common.<sup>25</sup> The idea of imminent death created a common prototype, depicting a community of soldiers that surpassed all barriers – of language, nationality, political beliefs, positions in civilian life – cutting out a common matrix in which individual identity was diluted into the unity of the group.<sup>26</sup> This is an attitudinal pattern present in the memoirs of the Great War, adopted by those who were in the imminent

<sup>22</sup> Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 117.

<sup>23</sup> “His comrades had become brothers and hatred had vanished from the barracks. Officers mingled with the soldiers, telling stories and giving them cigarettes,” in *Marele Război*, 317.

<sup>24</sup> “When the Montenegrins made a move, we were solidary,” in *Marele Război*, 322.

<sup>25</sup> J.C. Deschamps, C. Volpato, “Identita sociale e identita individuale nelle relazioni tra gruppi,” *Giornale Italiano di Psicologia* XI (1984): 275–301; Serge Moscovici, *Epoca maselor* (Iași: Institutul European, 2001), 109.

<sup>26</sup> Augusto Palmonari, Bruna Zani, “Dimensiunea psihologică: sentimentul apartenenței la comunitate,” in Serge Moscovici, Fabrice Buschini, eds., *Metodologia științelor socioumane* (Iași: Polirom, 2007), 42–43; Serge Moscovici, *Psihologia socială sau mașina de fabricat zei* (Iași:



proximity of death and whose sole final target was survival, regarded as personal destiny.

Over this ideal image, there overlapped the dissensions, the natural, subjective frictions triggered primarily by national affiliation. The troop in which the author fought included 12 soldiers of different nations. The inter-human relationships between them were based especially on national solidarity, fervently defended: "We Romanians stuck together in those times".<sup>27</sup> He had far from amiable relations with some of his comrades, as it can easily be seen from the portrayal he made of the Hungarian soldiers, whom he considered to be tyrants, murderers, conceited fellows, followed, on the list of undesirables, by the Bosnians. The disputes that were often started among the members of the troop were based on nationalist themes, which involved the soldiers in heated, contradictory discussions, leading to outspoken hostilities. The Romanian soldier is portrayed as a victim of the dualist political system, humiliated, treated with contempt and placed in an inferior position to other nations, despite his long proven loyalty to the imperial house. The text speaks of beating and humiliation, commonly encountered in the Austro-Hungarian army, but also about trials by court-martial for treason, with the well-aimed target of deterring such gestures.<sup>28</sup> The direct consequence of this treatment was that, especially after Romania entered the war, thousands of Romanians deserted to the Italian armies, forming battalions that fought against Austria-Hungary "for holy liberty" and the Union of Transylvania and Banat with the Motherland. The phenomenon was general among the nations in the dualist empire: Czechs, Serbs, Poles, those voluntarily enrolled in legions created for this purpose. Leaving the field of interhuman relations, the author recounts the harsh world of the front. However, unlike other memories of war that focus on the battles, the centre of interest is shifted here to a range of issues from the world surrounding the battlefield.

Nutrition appears to have been the most serious problem. Frequently invoked, the lack of food returns obsessively in the text in the form of relevant descriptions, as does the constant sensation of dizziness caused by hunger. The leitmotif of the text highlights the idea of hunger, which became the soldiers' greatest enemy, enhancing the demoralization and the daunting mental state of the troops. The author revealed the opinion of many of his comrades according

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Polirom, 1997), 67; Gilles Ferréol, "Raportarea la altul și cetățenia," in Adrian Neculau, Gilles Ferréol, eds., *Minoritari, marginali, excluși* (Iași: Polirom, 1996), 182.

<sup>27</sup> *Marele Război*, 354.

<sup>28</sup> He mentions the case of a battalion of Czech legionnaires captured by the 51st Hungarian Division and taken to Conegliano, betrayed by a German soldier among them; they were eventually executed publicly and hanged in everyone's plain sight.

to whom the winner of the war would be the one that had enough food for the troops; thus, he was aware of the disastrous outcome for the Central Powers. A loaf of bread, "crumbling and filled with sand," was divided between 12 soldiers, improvised scales being resorted to for a very accurate and exact distribution.<sup>29</sup> The principle of equality had to be respected and any infringement thereof was punished by physical correction, immediately applied to the unruly soldiers. Reference is made to periods when two or three days passed without the soldiers receiving any food; as such, the fear of starvation became a frightening reality, as strong as the horror of the fighting in the front line. Even some episodes about desertion or reckless attacks on enemy lines were attributed to extensive hunger and the desperate search for food. There is a relevant scene in this regard, which occurred on the front in Albania, where all the soldiers ate the supplies received as reserve and ended up by discarding some of the heavy ordnance, abandoned because of their overall weakness, the fatigue accumulated on the road and starvation. While at the onset of the war, there were sufficient and diverse quantities of food received, the situation changed radically in the next stage, the lack of food becoming a plague of the army. Potatoes and sour cabbage, salty like "sea water," were considered delicacies and served as a reward after a difficult mission. The lack of food was complemented by the acute shortage of water. This was urgently felt, especially in the hot summer months.

The squalid conditions of food and medication facilitated the accelerated spread of epidemics. The author mentioned especially typhus, which wreaked havoc. From the Albanian front, he kept alive the image of the diseases that haunted the country, particularly malaria, which caused the death of thousands of soldiers, many of whom came from Banat and Transylvania. He referred to several acquaintances from Lugoj who perished in those lands. The author wrote that the fear of disease, rapid contamination and the lack of effective treatments had led many soldiers to use popular medication, based on excessive alcohol consumption.

Only after he dwelt long enough on these issues related to daily existence did the memoirist capture the image of the armed conflict itself. This is an aspect on which he insisted less, the text being thus in dissonance with most memories of war. The explanation lies in the fact that during the Balkan stage of his soldierly experience he was exempt from fighting in the front line. The only battle he reiterated was the one at the foot of the fortress Danilovgrad, waged against the Montenegrins, where two comrades were killed and several others were injured. The information presented to the reader focus on several

<sup>29</sup> *Marele Război*, 326.

structural elements depicting his concerns on the battlefield, during this stage of the conflagration.

As a *sapeur* or a trench digger, he examined this action in detail, focusing on the making of the trenches, their destruction and the immediate effects of this, namely the exposure of the soldiers, deprived of a safe haven. The author emphasized the hard work necessary for digging the trenches, stating that this operation occupied the soldiers' entire time, the major concern of the troop being that of creating a refuge to save their lives.

He frequently invoked the infrastructure work he directly participated in, from the position of a *sapeur*, in which he had enrolled: the eight weeks of hard work on the road linking the towns of Trebinje and Nikšić, the month for the repair and construction of bridges across the rivers Vallas and Shkodër in Albania, the bridge with three pillars built in Podgorica in three hours, the bridges in Stari-Bar, in Montenegro, the small port built for embarking the troops at Lastva on the shore of the Adriatic Sea, all for facilitating the transport and movement of the troops.

The author outlined a relation between the armed conflict and the way in which nature influenced its development. Heavy snowfalls, high winds, torrential rain or sweltering heat, all these affected not only the morale but also the military capabilities of the troop, highlighting the dramatic atmosphere of the long days and nights spent in the Balkans. The vagaries of nature had direct repercussions on the poor condition of the roads, which evinced advanced deterioration and had become impassable after the endless rainfalls. He insisted on the effort made for the advancement of the army under these difficult circumstances, referring to the huge distances travelled on foot, about 40–45 km, daily, which – combined with an insufficient diet and the heaviness of the weapons – exhausted the troops. From the time spent on Albanian territory, he remembered the very high temperatures, which had the same negative effect as the bitter cold, hindering the advancement of the troops to a significant degree.

In the context of memoirist notes, the text referring to the Balkan front marks a clear shift away from the belligerent theme of the conflict to a more humane area, focusing on the history, geography and demography of the places the front advanced through. It is an obvious change of direction, as the issue of fighting is moved into the background. The suggestive force of description is thus capitalized upon, often clad in literary garments. Through this device, the harsh image of reality alternates with expressive descriptions of nature and geographical locations, as an escape from brutal reality.

We also notice a clear demarcation between two psychological stages that unfolded during the conflagration, which the author captures in very clear manner. There is an initial stage, characterized by the enthusiasm of mobilization,

present in all the warring armies and supported by the conviction of an easy and quick victory that will positively change the destiny of the states involved. This is followed by the second stage, marked by anxiety, fears and terrors, which is gradually established, increasing in intensity with the passing of the months and years of war. The whole scenario of the first stage collapses, making room for a painful, implacable reality, which reveals the extensive suffering at the macro level.

Reading the diary pages, one may note the transition from euphoria to despair. The relaxed, enthusiastic image of the early days, rendered in the mobilization stage, is in blatant contrast with the next stage, in which the protagonist has a lucid perception of reality, the discursive tone and the assessment of the events changing radically. The élan of enrolment, described at the onset of the war, contrasts sharply with the desire for peace, strongly expressed after the direct contact with the horrors of the conflict. The representation of the war appears in its hideous aspects, in the form of total disaster, presented under multiple facets that are not necessarily correlated with fighting in the front line, all in all, a literary short story that might be described as what specialized literature calls “bad memories,” those reminiscences about horrible or abominable events and things.<sup>30</sup> The opinion is also strengthened by the treatment the combatants in the Austro-Hungarian army received, as well as by the rather precarious conditions in which daily life happened on the front. If in the beginning there was plenty of food, garments sufficed and the spectrum of the battles seemed distant, with the approach of the enemy armies and as the months of war extended, the situation worsened considerably.

The detailed narrative of the Balkan campaign supports the idea of the vivid memories that were always present in the mind of the one who experienced them. Threatened by the process of omission and enhanced by the time criterion, memory resorts to a selective process, sorting out lived events, keeping only those with major psychological intensity, which affected the subject's emotional make-up. There occurred thus a separation from banal, prosaic facts, which were quickly erased from memory. The memoirist evoked memories pertaining to the category of “flash-bulb” reminiscences, remarkable memories that are faithfully preserved, affixed in memory through the emotions they aroused<sup>31</sup> and that induced that state of “wakefulness” in the mnestic process.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, *Istoria prezentului. Eseuri, schițe și relatări din Europa anilor '90* (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 221.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Yapko, “The troublesome unknowns about trauma and recovered memories,” in Martin A. Conway, ed., *Recovered Memories and False Memories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23–33; Constantin Ticu, *Memoria autobiografică. Definirea sau redefinirea propriei vieți* (Iași: Institutul European, 2004), 15–17, 150–164.

<sup>32</sup> Moscovici, *Epoca maselor*, 114.

The Balkans remained in his memories as a territory full of epidemics, as a barbaric and indigent world. The departure for the Italian front, depicted in the following part of the memoirs, is presented as a journey to the civilized centres of Europe. While acknowledging that military dangers were much higher on the Italian front and the risk level of the operations was greater, the memoirist recognizes that all the troop members preferred this area. The spectrum of imminent death was thus invested with a heroic character, a glorious death in battle being preferable to one caused by hunger, cholera, typhus, malaria or jaundice.

The text indicates a troubling reality, suggesting that the vicissitudes, shortcomings and the constant fear of disease or starvation had a similar effect with the atrocious battles waged on the front line. The calamities presented here played the role of military enemy, whom they replaced, producing comparable effects in the personal or the collective perception.

The scourge of the conflict had changed the world, the eminently negative transformation being transposed into the ruin and destruction left behind, but also converting the human universe and the spirit of those who experienced those terrible times, one of whom was the author of this text, aware of his own inner metamorphosis.

## UN MEMORIALIST DIN BANAT PE FRONTUL DIN BALCANI ÎN TIMPUL MARELUI RĂZBOI: „LAE DIN BANAT”

### *Rezumat*

Studiul își propune prezentarea unui document memorialistic al combatantului băănă-țean care a publicat sub numele “Lae din Banat”. Încadrat în rândurile Regimentului 43 Infanterie Caransebeș, autorul a pornit în 1915 spre câmpul de luptă. Memorialistul străbate mare parte a Peninsulei Balcanice în drumul său spre frontul italian, unde va participa direct la operațiunile militare. Față de memoriile de război clasice, care au focalizat mai cu seamă luptele și linia de bătălie, textul prezentat propune o perspectivă de analiză mai puțin apelată în istoriografia Marelui Război. Atenția este transferată spre fațete rareori activate în cadrul memorialisticii, care aduc în prim plan factorul uman, dar și imaginea complexă a teritoriilor traversate, cărora li se face o prezentare detaliată din punct de vedere istoric, geografic, demografic. În ciuda faptului că nu se concentrează pe operațiunile militare, documentul surprinde fapte emoționante, cu mare impact psihologic asupra protagonistului. Realitatea este redată într-o formă literară, cu rolul de a atenua brutalitatea concretului cotidian. Un aspect important al textului este creionarea relațiilor interumane, înfățișate din două perspective: al raporturilor cu populația civilă locală din teritoriile pe unde se perindă compania eroului, dar și al relațiilor din interiorul trupei, stabilite între camarazi. Cu aceeași atenție sunt prezentate informații din existența cotidiană, dificultățile cu care soldații se confruntau zilnic. Este vorba mai cu seamă despre problema hranei, a necesarului

de apă, a bolilor, starea vremii și modul în care aceasta a influențat mersul războiului. Deși a fost ferit de violența armată a luptelor din linia întâi, memorialistul reiterează experiența balcanică într-o notă dramatică, socotind că aceasta a fost la fel de cumplită ca și bătăliile propriu-zise. Dificultățile ivite în traseul străbătut se transformă astfel în inamici direcți, asemenea soldaților din armatele dușmane.