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„HISTORIOGRAPHY IS A SCIENCE... AND AN ART”

CONSTANTIN C. GIURESCU

REFLECTS ON A HISTORIAN’S CAREER (1973)



Paul E. Michelson

I. Introduction

IN THE summer of 1973, as my wife and I were winding up a nearly 2 1/2 year research visit in Romania, I asked the late Constantin C. Giurescu (1901-1977) if he would do a brief interview with me dealing principally with his long career as a historian. We had first met in the fall of 1968 when he visited Indiana University where I was a second year graduate student in history working with Charles and Barbara Jelavich.¹ When he agreed, I gave him a brief list of questions. I was both surprised and delighted when at a subsequent dinner meeting on July 30, 1973, with Professor Giurescu, his wife Maria, and his son Dinu and his wife Anca, he handed me set of responses written in his clear and forceful hand. What follows is an account of that interview, which is of interest because Constantin C. Giurescu was one of the giants of modern Romanian historiography. Though there are few surprises in this material and some of the points covered were subsequently amplified in Professor Giurescu’s memoirs then underway,² the interview stands as a brief and useful look backward at his career by a formative participant in Romanian historical writing for more than half a century.³

1. For details on this and other contacts with Professor Giurescu, see my “Memories of Constantin C. Giurescu, 1968-1977”, in Centenar Constantin C. Giurescu. Amintiri și documente inedite, Vladimir Osiac et al. (eds), Craiova, 2001, p. 193-204.
2. Volume 1, through 1938, was first published in 1976 as Constantin C. Giurescu, Amintiri/1, București, 1976. In 2000, Dinu C. Giurescu published an expanded edition, Amintiri, Dinu C. Giurescu (ed. and notes), București, 2000, which included a partial manuscript of Volume 2 covering 1939-1940 and further comments on 1941-1944, as well as Professor Giurescu’s prison memoirs of 1950-1955, first published as Cinci ani și două luni în penitenciarul de la Sighet (7 mai 1950-5 iulie 1955), București, 1994.

II. Constantin C. Giurescu on Romanian History and Historiography

THE INTERVIEW began with Prof Giurescu discussing what he considered the two most important factors in his choice of vocation (Question #1). The first factor was the appearance of a predilection for history when he entered the 8th class of high school during World War I. Though he was enrolled in a natural sciences curriculum – which one could argue reflected in his precise and methodical nature – he felt a calling to the historical profession. This was not surprising since his father was the noted historian Constantin Giurescu (1875-1918).

The second determinative factor in Professor Giurescu's becoming a historian was, indeed, the "unexpected death of my father at 43 years of age, the historian Constantin Giurescu, active member of the Romanian Academy". It seems fair to summarize that his future vocation was decided by a combination of a growing interest in history and a sense of filial responsibility to carry on where his father had left off.

This led to a question (Question #2) concerning the role of the historian generally. Professor Giurescu's response was "To speak the truth about the past as this truth emerges from the scientific study⁴ of this past". Secondly, he felt that the historian had a duty "to develop in his readers love for country and the awareness that the country is a part of humanity, and that, as a consequence, nothing that concerns humanity should leave us indifferent".⁵

These two "duties" encapsulate perfectly the dilemma of Romanian historism that dates all the way back to the beginnings, or what I call "Costin's Quandry".⁶ This is the conflict between "civic passion and intellectual scruple" that plagued Miron Costin and subsequent Romanian scholars; in other words, how to reconcile the duties of the true scholar on the one hand and the call of civic responsibilities (in this case, political) on the other.⁷ This was and is a real problem, as

3. For a general overview, see my "Constantin C. Giurescu: A Historical Memoir", in *Romanian Bulletin*, 7, 1978, nr. 7-8, p. 3. For a detailed study of his pre-1948 career, see my "The Master of Synthesis: Constantin C. Giurescu and the Coming of Age of Romanian Historiography, 1919-1947", in *Romania Between East and West: Historical Essays in Memory of Constantin C. Giurescu*, Stephen Fischer-Galati, Radu R. Florescu, George R. Ursul (eds), Boulder CO, 1982, p. 23-108. An engaging recent survey of Professor Giurescu's life and career is found in Marina Giurescu, *A World Torn Asunder: The Life and Triumph of Constantin C. Giurescu*, n.p., 2013.
4. What Professor Giurescu probably meant here by "scientific study" was the study of the past utilizing the methods and conventions of the professional historian. Below I will sometimes translate "scientific" with "scholarly" and "science" with "scholarship".
5. Here, as elsewhere below, emphasizes in the original. This last statement was an allusion to dictum of the Roman poet, Terence: "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto".
6. Discussed in my forthcoming paper "The Origins of the Romanian Historiographical Tradition and the Development of Romanian Historism".
7. See the overview by Alexandru Zub, *Biruit-ai gîndul (note despre istorismul românesc)*, Iași, 1983, p. 11-14. Alexandru Duțu, European Intellectual Movements and Modernization

Alexandru Zub has pointed out: “The dilemma appears insoluble because the historian needs to conduct himself as a scholar at the same time that exterior factors can undermine his objectivity”.⁸ Costin wound up trying to do both, hoping that patriotism and scholarship could be combined: “biruit-au gîndul”. The success that Romanian intellectuals have had in doing this since the 19th century has not been encouraging.

Professor Giurescu’s response to Question #3, “What is your view of history? Your philosophy of history?” was interesting in its brevity: he felt that his reply to Question #2 sufficiently answered these questions. This reflects, I think, his life-long preference to focus on the work of the historian rather than on the philosophy of history. Perhaps this was also a reflection of his initial interest in high school for the natural sciences.

Moving on to a consideration of key factors for understanding Romanian history (Question #4), Professor Giurescu stressed this involved “Knowledge of the geographical situation of Romania as a Carpatho-Danubian country, bisected by the Carpathians and situated on the lower Danube and its exit into the [Black] Sea, as well as at the western edge of the great Euro-Asiatic steppe”. It is fair to say that geopolitics was a life-long concern for him.⁹ Giurescu’s father-in-law was the remarkable Romanian geographer Simeon Mehedinți; it is not surprising that his work placed a lot of weight on the role of the geographical in history and particularly Romanian history (see below).

This, and other replies, suggests that we probably need to read between the lines of some of his comments in the circumstances of 1973. Thus, though it was left unsaid here, this concern for Romania’s geopolitical situation was not only an echo of the Romanian chronicler Grigore Ureche’s celebrated lament that his people were located “in the path of all evils”,¹⁰ but a strong antipathy toward the Romanians’ Russian neighbors and Russian imperialism past and present (and possibly future?).¹¹ Of course, in 1973, negative public mention of Russia and the Russians was not generally a viable option.

Turning to his own writings, Professor Giurescu had a single response to Question #5 asking about what he considered his most important work, most useful work, most interesting work, and most difficult work: it was his multi-volume *Istoria Românilor* (1935-1946), which reached its fifth edition in parts, followed

of Romanian Culture, revised edition, București, 1981, p. 47 ff., calls this the problem of the philosopher-patriot.

8. Al. Zub, Biruit-au gîndul, p. 26.

9. Compare Constantin C. Giurescu, *Die europäische Rolle des rumänischen Volkes*, București, 1941.

10. “...Ce find în cale răutăților, Grigore Ureche, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei până la Aron Vodă (1359-1595)* Intocmit după Gregorie Ureche Vornicul, Istratie Logofătul și alții de Simion Dascălul, Constantin Giurescu (ed.), București, 1916, p. 8.

11. Cf. Michelson, “Memories”, in Centenar Constantin C. Giurescu, 2001, p. 197-198.

by a new version being undertaken with Dinu Giurescu (1974 ff.)¹² He added that he found a number of his recent works interesting, such as *Istoria Bucureştilor* (1967), *Istoricul oraşului Brăila* (1968), *Târguri sau oraşe și cetăți moldovene*¹³ (1967), *Istoricul podgoriei Odobeştilor* (1969), and his book on Cuza Vodă (second edition, 1970).

The last part of Question #5 involved the purposes and accomplishments of the historical journal spearheaded by him, the *Revista Iсторică Română*. This was a matter of some pride to the elderly professor: “*Revista Iсторică Română* pursued the goal, as was indicated in its programmatic prospectus, of publishing critical studies and reviews in the spirit discussed under Question #2 above. I believe it contributed to raising the scientific level of Romanian historiography”.¹⁴ There is not little doubt about that, nor is there little doubt that Professor Giurescu was the driving force behind the journal through its sixteen years of existence.¹⁵

Question #6 asked if there were any primary characteristics of Romanian history. Professor Giurescu replied: “The essential characteristic of the history of the Romanians is the ceaseless struggle of the Romanian people for survival and for the preservation of the state in particularly difficult conditions”. This conviction, shared by many if not most Romanians, does a good deal to illuminate Romanian history and politics, both for good and for ill. Another “Characteristic of the Romanian people is that of representing an original note, unique in the great family of romance peoples, a note which appears in its creativity”. Unfortunately, we did not get a chance to elaborate on this.

As far as unfinished tasks of Romanian historiography were concerned (Question #7), Professor Giurescu’s reply was terse and to the point: “The multi-disciplinary study of the period from 275 AD to 1241 AD”. Question #8 was related: how had Romanian historiography developed since his 1926 review essay.¹⁶ He respon-

12. He told me on another occasion that not translating his *Istoria* into Western languages was perhaps the major regret of his career. Unfortunately, the nearly completed manuscript of Vol. IV of his monumental *Istoria*, covering the 19th century, was lost and presumably destroyed when he was arrested in 1950.
13. He didn’t note that publishing a book that included parts of Moldova under Soviet domination had created something of a furor when it appeared, a fact that made the book difficult to procure. It had taken seven years for the book to see print, two years to go from proofs to publication. 1000 copies were eventually printed and circulated by special permission only.
14. On interwar Romanian historiography generally and on the critical school specifically, see Al. Zub, *Istorie și istorici în România interbelică*, Iași, 1989; and Al. Zub, *De la istoria critică la criticism. (Istoriografia română sub semnul modernității)*, revised edition, București, 2000.
15. For further on *Revista Iсторică Română*, see Paul Cernovodeanu, *Revista istorică română 1931-1947. Bibliografie critică*, București, 1977.
16. Constantin C. Giurescu, “Considerații asupra istoriografiei românești în ultimul douăzeci de ani”, in *Revista Iсторică*, 12, 1926), p. 137-185. For this era in Romanian historiography, see my comments in “*Inter-War Romanian Historiography in Transition: the Debut of Gh. I. Brătianu, C. C. Giurescu, P. P. Panaiteanu, and the Scoala Nouă, 1919-1931*”, in *Études d’historiographie*, Lucian Boia (ed.), București, 1985, p. 227-239.

ded that there had been a steady enrichment on the documentary level, in terms of monographic studies, and in the appearance of new syntheses. This somewhat vague reply suggests another area in which we need to read between the lines in the circumstances of 1973.

Asked (Question #9) about his father, he replied, not unexpectedly, “He was a remarkable parent, husband, and citizen. As a historian, he was a leading representative of the critical current in Romanian historiography, as demonstrated by his studies of Romanian chroniclers and of social classes. A learned Frenchman, Marcel Emerit, called him ‘the Fustel de Coulanges of Romania’. (Professor Giurescu elaborated on this further in the following question, Question #10).¹⁷

Constantin C. Giurescu was, of course, part of a remarkable era in Romanian historiography between the world wars. Questions #10 and #11 asked him to comment on his professors and his associates.¹⁸ He listed Dimitrie Onciu, Vasile Pârvan, Nicolae Iorga, Demostene Russo, and Simeon Mehedinți as particularly noteworthy:

“D. Onciu had a rigorous method of study, which he inculcated into me. Vasile Pârvan was an exceptional personality combining the rigor of a scholar with the talent of a literary man and the wide perspective of the philosopher: he was a unique personality in our historiography. Demostene Russo, the archetype of the erudite scholar, for whom the establishment of a detail required prolonged effort, exercised an influence on me as well.¹⁹ Nicolae Iorga, an extremely powerful polivalent personality, produced myriad of associations of ideas; his lectures were truly a fireworks display. From Simeon Mehedinți, I came to understand the tight bond between history and geography. But the greatest influence on me, though I did not have him as a professor, was exercised by my father. To him I owe my conceptions about historiography, the cult for historical truth, methodical strictness, and care for clear form, so that my writings would be accessible to the wider public.”

Among his contemporaries and associates, Professor Giurescu numbered Gh. Brătianu, Scarlat Lambrino, G. M. Cantacuzino, P. P. Panaiteșcu, Al. Rosetti, N. Cartojan, and Victor Papacostea, principally as collaborators with him in the work of *Revista Iстorică Română*.

17. He had had a lot to say about his father in his contributions to *In amintirea lui Constantin Giurescu la douăzeci și cinci de ani dela moartea lui (1875-1918)*, Alexandru Rosetti, Victor Papacostea, Constantin Grecescu (eds), București, 1944, and would say more in his *Amintiri* published in 1976. On his father’s role in Romanian historiography, see my “The Birth of Critical Historiography in Romania: The Contributions of Ioan Bogdan, Dimitrie Onciu, Constantin Giurescu”, in *Analele Universității București. Istorie*, 32, 1983, p. 59-76.

18. For more details, see his subsequently published *Amintiri*.

19. Compare Constantin C. Giurescu, “D. Russo”, in *Revista Iстorică Română*, 8, 1938, p. 1-18.

Question #12 raised the topic of Professor Giurescu's controversies with N. Iorga. Here is his reply:

"It was the result of a clash between two conceptions and two temperaments. Iorga had the temperament of a great feudal lord; he could not accept any contrarian responses, and if you had the daring to affirm in print opinions other than his, he considered you a personal enemy. I discussed in two pamphlets the evolution of my relationship with N. Iorga: *In legătură cu «Istoria Românilor» Răspuns recenziei d-lui Iorga*, (1936), and *Pentru «vechea școală de istorie»*. Răspuns d-lui N. Iorga (1937). I have nothing to modify or retract from what I wrote then. (In our conversation on this question, he emphasized his view that his pamphlets "still stand 100%")."

Professor Giurescu went on to say that "Because of his absolutist attitude, N. Iorga had strained or cool relations not only with my father, but also with Vasile Pârvan, with A. D. Xenopol, with I. Sîrbu, with Gr. Tocilescu, with C. Diculescu, to name only a few among historians".²⁰

To the question (#13), "What are some of your recollections of nearly 50 years of university life", Professor Giurescu responded

"One conclusion: scholarship marches onward, even if moments or even periods of disorder and stagnation intervene.²¹ A second conclusion: Historiography is a science, through the ends pursued and the method used, but it is also an art, therefore the personality of the historian, his talent, are important. A third conclusion: it is important for the continuity of historiography that each professor develops students who can continue his approach and work."

This was followed by Question #14 which asked Professor Giurescu to share some impressions and recollections about people and events of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. His reply here was laconic, though understandably so. "There are many memories of a political, social, economic, and cultural nature. I will put them into writing in several volumes of *Amintiri*". He added in conversation that he knew all the main political and cultural figures of the 1930s and 1940s. (On another occasion, he told me that in retrospect he wished he had not gotten involved in politics, but whether he actually could have done this is at best debatable).

The penultimate question (#15) was "What advice would you give to the young historian in general and to the foreign historian in particular?"

20. The dispute went back much further than 1936. For details on the debate, see Michelson, "Master of Synthesis", 1982, especially pp. 38 ff.

21. A sly illusion to the 1948-1965 period?

“Keep in mind the ancient principle of Tacitus: ‘Sine ira et studio’;²²

Maintain the reputation of historiography: don’t annex it to the interests of a party, a class, or national hatred;

Write in a fashion such that oneself or ones descendants will later never regret and never be ashamed of what was written.”

The interview concluded with a invitation (Question #16) to share on any other matters that Professor Giurescu thought might be interesting. He replied “Give a sense to your life, being useful to many people: your family, your country, humanity. It appears to me that an 18th century Greek inscription from St. Catherine’s Monastery on Mount Sinai summarizes this well: ‘Everything that you do for yourself, dies with you, only what’s done for others will last’.

III. Conclusions

IN 1973, Constantin C. Giurescu was not only as a prolific writer, public historian, but Romania’s leading cultural ambassador to the West.²³ His contributions to Romanian historiography were undeniable, not the least in promoting the idea that attention to detail and a critical approach are essential to the historian’s craft. His *Istoria Românilor* continues to be one of the most readable, accessible, and useful introductions to Romanian history, and his other works are always informative.

On a personal basis, he had the sort of personality that people seemed either to like or dislike, with few in between. He certainly did not suffer fools gladly. Yet he took the time to show kindness and courtesies to novice foreign historians.

And despite the vicissitudes of a career that saw him living in a world frequently torn asunder, in the end he expressed rather few misgivings about his career. He had survived, and, as noted above, survival has been and is a core value of the Romanian worldview. In the words of a Sinatra song, “Regrets, I’ve had a few; But then again, too few to mention. I did what I had to do....But through it all, when there was doubt....I faced it all and I stood tall; and did it my way”.²⁴

22. This was one of the professor’s favorite maxims. See his *Amintiri*, 2000, p. 6.

23. A testimonial to this was the publication in 1982 of the volume edited by Stephen Fischer-Galati, Radu R. Florescu, and George R. Ursul, *Romania Between East and West: Historical Essays in Memory of Constantin C. Giurescu*, Boulder CO, 1982.

24. Frank Sinatra, “My Way,” www.lyricsfreak.com/f/frank+sinatra/my+way_20056378.html, accessed 28 viii 2014.