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“WE WERE NOT MEANT TO DIE”

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Abstract: Review of Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Persecuție și rezistență: Vasile Cesereanu – Un preot greco-catolic în Dosarele de urmărire de către Securitate* (Persecution and resistance. Vasile Cesereanu. A Greek Catholic priest in the files of Securitate), ediția a II-a. Târgu Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2017.

Key words: persecution, resistance, memoir, Securitate, Vasile Cesereanu, Greek Catholic Church, communist regime, prisons, exile, Ruxandra Cesereanu.

Memory studies have largely spread in the last decades due to the possibility of accessing new documents which reveal additional information that was previously hidden from the public sphere and due to increasing awareness of historians and researchers of the importance of knowing the historical truth. One can argue that truth is a social construct and historical truth will be never known or proved. Regardless of this assertion, one must inquire and search for the facts that shape the history of society because inherently we define ourselves in relation with our own past. For this reason, the field of studying the use and the function of memory is a must, especially for those countries with a traumatic past. Furthermore, in the light of the recent events around the globe, the preoccupation with memoirist writings becomes a duty in revisiting the past.

Nowadays, Romanian society needs more than ever a profound reformation and a healthy system of values. But first of all, it has to understand its past and its failures of the past. Among the public figures who shape the current intellectual discourse in a lucid and wise manner proposing an example of moral attitude and of identity consciousness are the writers. One of the most distinguished and influential voices that marked the memorialist field of Romania is Ruxandra Cesereanu. Besides being a brilliant poet, essayist, and novelist, a professor of comparative literature, a coordinator of creative writing workshops, Ruxandra Cesereanu is sensitive to all political and social changes from Romanian society, successfully joining the writers of *littérature engage* list. Over the past decades, she also dedicated herself as a researcher to memoirist writings of the Romanian Gulag from the Stalinist 1950s to the aftermath of the 1989 revolution. Her notorious political works such as *Journey to the Centre of Hell: The Gulag in the Romanian Awareness* (2018), *The Fugitives. Escapes from Prisons and Camps in the Twentieth Century* (2016), *Panopticum: Political Torture in the Twentieth Century* (2014), *The Violent Imagery of Romanians* (2003), *December '89. Deconstruction of a Revolution* (2009), *The Gulag in the Romanian Awareness: The Memoirs and Literature of the Communist Prisons and Camps* (2005), *Letter to a Friend and Back to the Country* (2018) struggle to analyze the concentration camp universe of that era, pointing out the methods of how the system was operating and the resistant solutions of the victims. All works together serve as an indispensable and crucial study of the mentality of the communist regime, helping us to understand the evolution and the mindset of the Romanian society until the present moment.

One recent well-documented book that continues to expose the oppression of the communist regime is *Persecution and resistance. Vasile Cesereanu. A Greek Catholic priest in the files of Securitate*, whose second edition has been published in 2017 by Galaxia Gutenberg Publishing House. The book is a meticulous study that investigates and attempt to

reconstruct the life of Vasile Cesereanu, a Greek Catholic priest who had been persecuted regularly by the bodies of Securitate. The reason for writing this study is based on the autobiographical cause, but we have to admit that the intention transgresses the personal interest of the author, inscribing in the collective history because the figure of Vasile Cesereanu had become a prototype of resistance of communist dictatorship for many similar destinies of those hard times.

The book is composed of documents from C.N.S.A.S. (The National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives) that covers the period between 1950 and 1977, and that include tracking files, denunciations, incriminations, peasants' statements; of documents from the family portfolio such as letters addressed to family, memoirs addressed to the Court and to the Ministry, medical records, telegrams; and of fascinating and of historical relevance photos representing important personalities. One the most valuable testimony written by Vasile Cesereanu of highly moral virtues stays the Memoir sent to Pope John Paul II in 1980, whose protégé eventually became.

It is important to notice that the documents contain grammar or spelling mistakes and have not been corrected in the process of editing in order to maintain the authenticity and accuracy of the facts. The author clarifies the method of working and reveals how the symbols given in the text have to be read. The entire research reveals to be demanding and meticulous detective work.

Ruxandra Cesereanu explains in the preface how she became aware of the necessity of writing this particular book. The foreword evokes in a nostalgic manner the encounter with the subject aiming to make justice and to recover the dignity of the protagonists at least through a form of remembrance. The author became aware of the role of her grandfather recalling her visit to his tomb in Campo Verano cemetery from Rome where she has felt the death of Vasile Cesereanu as a sign, as a delayed requiem that has to be fulfilled. Consequently, the narration of the memory of the past is perceived as a duty. Thus, the whole book turns into a lesson of honoring the memory of those who had fought for freedom, faith, and justice.

The writer manages to describe all the features that characterize her grandfather as a priest, a man, a father, a husband, a true fighter for faith, insisting all the time on the ethical scope. The biographical course of Vasile Cesereanu has turned into a nightmare with the interdiction of Greek Catholic cult by the communist regime in the fatidic year of 1948. Until leaving Budești village, Vasile Cesereanu has been working clandestinely as a priest. He was serving the religious ceremonies in his small house that was crowded by believers who came from different villages around. He was loved by the community and represented a source of hope and spiritual strength. The fearless priest wrote letters and memoirs, pleading for the cause of reestablishing the Greek-Catholic cult.

Because of these activities, Vasile Cesereanu has been imprisoned for six times in Gherla, Cluj, Bistrița, Aiud, Jilava or Văcărești during 1952 – 1964 period of time. The researcher has discovered in the archive that he was considered an enemy of the communist state being labeled as “the deadly enemy of the popular democratic regime” for “counterrevolutionary activity”. Moreover, the peasants who came to the improvised church were forced to testify against the priest, inventing false depositions. Furthermore, his son was expelled from school on the grounds that his father is a priest and a “kulak”. The denunciations and the whole process of defamation did not weaken his faith, but, on the contrary, strengthened it. The readers find out also that he had an intelligent and refined mind, in the court being able to defend himself without needing a lawyer.

Because of persecution by the authorities, many priests converted to Orthodox religion. One can read letters written by Vasile Cesereanu asking with pain those priests about their choices. His speech is elevated, moderate, and never incriminating. There is also important to mention his religious, human, ethical, missionary, and confessional model who was the bishop Iuliu Hossu, from whom he took the most valuable spiritual lessons.

The life of the Greek Catholic priest completely changes when he decides in the summer of 1978 to emigrate. The initial plan was to go in America in a community of Brazilian monks but the fate made him stop and settle in Rome, where lived until his death in 1984. The multitude of documents records Vasile Cesereanu’s stay in Rome. In my opinion, one of the most valuable documents represents the handwritten Memoir to Pope John Paul II from 1980. In this memoir addressed to the Pope, Vasile Cesereanu describes in detail his own life as a priest and the reasons why he went abroad. He brings into light the condition of the religion in the communist era, emphasizing on the cruel and perfidious methods of the system. He was also expressing his wish to be able to be a priest again, eventually succeeding. This memoir has historical value because exposes the injustice of those times in Romania and underlines the resistance through figure of Vasile Cesereanu. His destiny overcomes the personal boundaries, becoming a prototype for other priests who sacrificed themselves in the name of faith and justice. The book promotes some ethical values as well and we can definitely say that in its own way makes justice for those martyrs who fought endlessly against oppression. It is obviously a book not only for historians and researchers but also for common readers who must know their own history, even it is an ugly one.

Lastly, I would like to explain the title of this review. It is a phrase from a letter of Vasile Cesereanu addressed to his daughter where he mentions this sentence. In my opinion, it contains a symbolic significance, synthesizing all the suffering caused by separation from family, religion, beliefs, country, and friends. It is a muffled cry of pain and regret, even all the lessons given by the Greek Catholic priest were about loyalty, faith, confidence, and resistance. In consequence, this study becomes an

important informative document that sheds light on the communist past and encourages other researches to follow this example.

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