

PANAÏT ISTRATI, POVESTITORUL FOTOGRAF, FOTOGRAFUL POVESTITOR

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Zamfir Bălan's recently published volume adds to the corpus of contributions devoted to Panaït Istrati's biography and works. This bilingual edition in Romanian and French brings an exciting insight into Istrati's childhood and early formative years, his interest for egalitarian, socialist politics, and lifetime friendships such as those with the Russian refugee Mikhail Kazanski, the illuminating encounter and literary guidance received from the French writer, Romain Rolland. Throughout his life, Istrati has followed a committed type of writing meant to support intellectual growth among those with less fortunate prospects than the upper classes of the Romanian society. Bălan's latest book adds to a publication about Istrati's experience as a photographer, "Panaït Istrati – fotograf și în fotografii", marking the centenary of his birth over three decades ago (1984).

The recent volume debuts with an introduction bearing a similar heading as the volume itself: "Fotograf ambulant, povestitor înăscut / Photograph ambulant, conteur inné" [Itinerant photographer, born storyteller]. The first paragraphs go back to dramatic events taking place in 1921, when the Romanian writer addressed Romain Rolland, the 'magician' he had admired all his life. In a rather troubled state of mind, the 37-year-old writer declares: "Aujourd'hui commence l'année 1921, mais pour les autres. Pour moi, c'est le commencement de la fin. Est-il besoin de s'expliquer, lorsqu'on se décide à quitter ce monde ? Non, on peut partir en silence, et ce serait, je crois, la meilleure preuve de sincérité" (Cahiers Panaït Istrati, 1987: 32). Istrati's letter to Rolland was meant to be as a good-bye, suggestively hinted at by the opening words: "Dernieres paroles", but the subsequent response from the French writer was to impact the fate of the young Romanian intellectual: "Une letter de lui et voilà Panaït, l'obscur photographe ambulant de Nice, devenu célèbre!" exclaims Bilili, his partner during the trip to the USSR (Samios-Kazantzaki: 36). In later correspondence to the prominent French writer, Istrati details his apparently endless 'adventures': childhood years spent either in Brăila or in the countryside, to his relatives, numerous places his mother and him had to take lodgings in, ongoing hardships generated by his

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apprenticeship to a pastry owner, Kir Nicholas, or various other local industries, practically a whole range of professional experiences meant to keep the adolescent/young man going in terms of mere survival. For Istrati, friendships with socially labelled 'vagabonds', impulsive decisions leading to his first or second marriage or group trips taking him further and further on the route of voyage to new territories and encounters were simply related to his temperament. His travels were increasingly distant from Brăila and his mother, first to places such as Sinaia, Bucharest or Constanța, and later to Cairo, Piraeus, Marseille, Naples, Port-Said, Yaffa, Beirut, Lebanon and Damascus, before returning to Europe, in Switzerland, France, Romania and the Soviet Union.

According to his autobiography sent to Rolland, the Romanian author saw in his mother's death the collapse of his interior world which, coupled with interior dissatisfactions, made him attempt to take his own life in 1921 (8). During his travel, the encounter with an old friend, met in 1917 in Geneva, Antoine Bernard, is going to impact his coming years while he travels and works as a photographer. Learning the basics of this job, Istrati spends his time until 1923 working, often as a housepainter, and writing. As Bălan indicatively points at, the novelist uses the word-play featuring the Romanian noun "zugrav" coming from the Greek root "zographos" to make a choice for one the main protagonists of his writings, Adrian Zograffi (10). The young man bearing this name was, in fact, a genuine alter ego of the writer himself, recounting his travels and experiences in longer or shorter stories, and transmitting the declared mission of the author himself: to present an authentic image of the world to the others, while supporting a deeper journey to the individual self.

Istrati's work as an itinerant photographer was also connected to a vigorously depicted meeting with Jacob Rosenthal: "A Nice, il y a trois ans, alors que j'errais avec mon appareil sur la Promenade des Anglais, un homme à l'allure vaillante et au visage jovial me hèle en roumain : «Dis donc, ce n'est pas toi, Istrati ?»" (15) In fact, as Bălan shows, Istrati's gift for capturing the accuracy of details similarly to that of a camera comes out from portraying individuals, such as Mikhaïl Kazanski, in sharp, strong touches (16) or the image of another friend, an equally outstanding intellectual of his time, Nikos Kazantzakis. As a result, details add up and compose a certain personality, and the wording chosen by the writer becomes the medium of a visual reading, facilitating the understanding of significant human experience.

The human face, as well as the green or grim landscape often turn into iconic representations meant to stimulate the search for deeper meanings beyond mere facts or features. Such a perspective transpires from his trip in the Soviet Union, where, Bălan notes, the group made of four individuals including Istrati underwent a dramatic experience in Samara. Istrati then realizes that the benefits of the Bolshevik revolution are actually questionable, and his photographs act since then as a testimony, seizing moments which should remain in the memory of posterity.

Commenting about certain unreliable photographs versus authentic ones about the hunger taking place in 1920-21, Eleni Samios describes in her own book dedicated to Istrati and their group journey the impact left on the four by the stories of the locals regarding scenes of cannibalism. Istrati's reaction, as described by Samios, indicates an intellectual willing to accept apparently horrific statements if committed to find the truth: "Raconte, raconte, camarade Vladimir. Je veux tout savoir. Le lèvre de Panait blêmit. « Raconte ! » La pauvre main au doigt mutilé tremble." (21) Yet Istrati's interest in the human nature and his empathy towards his fellows link him not only to recurrent friends and figures such as those mentioned above, but also fugitive impressions about other fellow professionals, such as photographer Soultanof (Samios-Kazantzaki: 47)

The volume follows a chronologically-built or thematically-planned sequence, starting with Brăila, from its masterplan to images of the harbour during Istrati's youth, succeeded by family photographs (25-38), while a second section presents individuals with a profound impact on his life, including Mikhaïl Kazanski, Stefan Gheorghiu, Cristian Rakovski, Josué Jéhouda, Margareta Istrati, Frédéric Lefèvre, Jacques Robertfrance, A. M. de Jong, Nikos Kazantzakis, and numerous members of the Romanian intelligentsia (39-60). The third unit switches to feminine figures in his life, including Anna Munsch, his second wife, or Bilili (Marie-Louise Baud-Bovy), his partner in the Soviet Union, and Margareta Istrati (61-70), his last wife. The last two sections cover photographs taken during his trips, many of them being from the voyage made in the Soviet Union. The volume continues as a camera coming closer to the subject of a skilled photographer: the writer himself, in portraits in darker or lighter tones, accompanied by suggestive testimonials written by those who have met him (107-114) and it closes with a biographic section (115-131).

The collection of testimonies and photographs presented in the book bring a refreshing perspective on Istrati's life and works. The author has brightly assembled fragments from his stories to illustrate the the experience underwent by the Romanian author, and to widen the understanding of his contribution on the local and international scene. Given the textual interstices from his works and correspondence, providing a personal touch, the final grouping stands out and inspires the reader to return to the works left by Istrati for those who think that ideals can turn into reality, as Bilili has decoded his artistic vision: "Famille, patrie, humanité, art, voilà ses grands amours. Mais il revient toujours à l'art, parce que c'est en lui qu'il croit trouver la liberté et la justice" (Samios-Kazantzaki: 36).

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