

“A FEW PAGES IN THE HISTORY OF MY LIFE”: MEMORY TRANSMISSION AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY. CASE STUDY: V.A. URECHIA’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Leonidas Rados, PhD, ”A. D. Xenopol” History Institute, Iași

Abstract: It is well known that the personalities who are preparing their memoirs for publication during their lifetime, have to correct something in their own image, have to clarify problematic aspects, facts or circumstances according to the natural desire to transmit to future generations a corrected version, full of wisdom, of their own passage through life. This text deals with the memoirs of the historian and man of letters V.A. Urechia (1834-1901), who prepared and published them in the last two years of his life. As they were published in serial form in two obscure newspapers, they went unnoticed by his contemporaries, including his own friends. On the other hand, as often asserted, he planned to leave to his family, as a legacy, the full manuscript of his autobiography, containing additional data, in order to be published after his passing away. This version would clarify the “grey” points in his career as a professor and a liberal politician and would also bring some light on different aspects of his rich and controversial family life.

Keywords: *memory transmission, autobiography, V.A. Urechia, academic life*

Introduction

Speaking about the memoirs writers, the literary critic Tudor Vianu rightly noticed that “he who engages in such a work usually does it out of subjective reasons as well, out of the need to justify his activity as a politician or of the need to bring out to light circumstances that had led to fatal outcomes in his times”¹. Respected and admired by some of his contemporaries, mocked at by others (and not few), V.A. Urechia was fully entitled to publish his own biographic variant, meant to correct all the shortcomings of a deficient image or even impose a different image, according to the way he saw himself or he would have wanted to be.

A man of letters and a historian, one of the first Professors of the University of Iași, V.A. Urechia had the chance to live special events in Romania’s history, like the 1848 Revolution, the period of the Union and Alexandru I. Cuza’s rule, Carol of Hohenzollern’s coming to Romania, Independence and the proclamation of the Kingdom. Without being, in the period of the great classics, a genius writer, and although he manifested himself first of all as a man of action, and as a cultural and especially an educational animator, he however stood out as a writer in the service of the national cause. His memoirs, published for the first time when he was old, in 1901, in a serial form, represent an excellent epoch document that the author bequeathed to young generations.

In the case of V.A. Urechia, the autobiographic temptation, discovered in the last years of his life, appeared in the context of his health problems and while growing aware that the new generation, more thoroughly educated and apparently more impatient than the “elders” who

¹ See Tudor Vianu, *Figuri și forme literare*, București, Casa școalelor, 1946, p. 198, *apud* I. Slavici, *Amintiri*, Ediție, prefață, note și indici de George Sanda, București, Editura pentru literatură, 1967, *Prefață*, p. VII.

had built modern Romania, asked for recognition, both in the University and in the public area, creating a gap that could not be ignored any more.

A life of yesteryear, recorded in memoirs

The writer was born in Piatra-Neamț, on 15 February 1834, in the family of the *clucer* [judge] Alexandru Popovici (son of the protopope Ghenadie of Hârlău) and of Eufrosina (daughter of the haji Manoliu from Iași), both at their second marriage.

At his mother's insistence, he takes French courses in the house of a rich boyar from Piatra-Neamț, having as a teacher D. Xenopol, the father of the future historian A.D. Xenopol; shortly after the sudden death of his father, he gets into the family of the Swiss Baliff, where he learns French very well. Wishing a good education for his son, so that he could be able to make his own future, the writer's mother enrolled the young Vasile in the Academia Mihăileană of Iași, where he learns his first lessons of nationalism.

After 1848, when the Academia Mihăileană is abolished, he works as a civil servant in the administrative system and, after a while, he finishes his secondary studies at Iași. It is the period of his first literary essays, like *Mozaicu literar* [Literary Mosaic] and *Grinda de aur* [The Golden Beam] (1851), or *Un vis* [A Dream], a satire against the Latinising trend, that the public enjoyed, and which occasioned him to meet great personalities of the cultural life of Iași, like Vasile Alecsandri, Costache Negruzzi, or Mihail Kogălniceanu. He falls in love with a young lady from a good family, "Miss R.R.", a school pupil aged 16-17, the niece of a bishop, and wishing to build a good future he leaves to Paris in 1856, the "sweetest and dearest dream", as he writes himself in his memoirs. He had obtained a small scholarship from the *Society for the Youth's Encouragement to Study*, recently established at Iași by Anastasie Fătu, who added up to the modest sums that his father had left him by testament.

After a long, adventurous trip for the young man coming from Moldavia that he recalls in his writing, V.A. Urechia reaches the City of Light and decides to enrol at Humanities, after having first passed his baccalaureate, on 18 August 1856², after a few-month preparation with the jurist emeritus Emile Acollas³.

At Paris, Basile Alexandresco, as he is recorded in the school documents, studied with professors Henry Patin, Saint-Marc Girardin, Émile Egger, Charles Lévêque, Charles Benoît Hase, philosophy, compared grammar, Latin, lecturing, chronicle and archives research, etc.

A genuine patriot, and attracted by the unionist ideas, the young Moldavian gets involved in the political life, supporting from Paris, as much as he can, the unionist cause and collaborating with different Parisian editorial boards, where he sent well thought articles. Here he also meets his future wife, Francisca, a young Iberian woman from a Parisian boarding school, the daughter of the physician de Plano from the Spanish Court. In August 1857, the two newlyweds travel to Madrid, for the young man to meet the wife's parents.

² The written test is available at the Library of the Romanian Academy (beneath: BAR), Archive V. A. Urechia, IX bis acte 169 (1841-1900), f. 7-9.

³ Acollas played an important role in the life memoirist. Beyond training, Acollas helped to quickly integrate into French society, took him best man at his own wedding, took a visit to the "angel" Georges Sand, put him in contact during his studies and thereafter, with "the greatest men of republics" as would recognize later the memoirist.

Thus, V.A. Urechia gets in contact with a culture that will deeply and permanently mark him, to such an extent that some of his contemporaries and critics considered he did his studies in Madrid, not in Paris.

The memoirist writer gave up the idea of finalizing his studies and the young couple settles down at Iași, where V.A. Urechia's Parisian experience played a decisive role in his employment and in his social advancing. At the end of winter and the beginning of spring in 1858, the "bachelor" Vasile Alexandresco was appointed teacher of "Romanian and Latin literature for the high secondary classes"⁴. Starting with April, he also received the chair of Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy and that of History in secondary school⁵.

From that moment on, V.A. Urechia's career will start an always ascendant trend. Involved in public life and in the administration of the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, whose secretary general he was, the memoirist becomes, in 1860, Professor at the Faculty of Letters and Sciences of the freshly established University of Iași, transferring in 1864, in the same position, at the University of Bucharest where he will stay for almost four decades.

He had a tumultuous family life, with many problems and many complications. His wife Francisca died in 1858 at the birth of their son, Tancred, and Urechia remarried in May 1860 Luiza Wirth-Pester⁶, a florist when he met her, as he wrote himself in the autobiography, whom he hesitated to get closer with in order not to offer "my son Tancred a step mother"⁷.

With Luiza he had four children, three of them surviving childhood: Alceu, Corina, who tragically died for love in 1890, and the young Nestor. The marriage with Luiza faced many problems, starting at least with 1868, because of the wife's infidelities, so the two will separate in 1872. After the divorce, the historian was assaulted by matchmakers and, as he tells himself, quite ironically, "not a day passed without an old hag from the slums irritating me with her jabbering!"⁸

He got married again late, in the autumn of 1882, legalizing the older relation that everybody knew about and which had been the topic of pamphlets, with the sister of his former wife, Ana Wirth-Pester, the one who, after Luiza's going away, took care of the house, of the children and even of the private school that the historian had created for the education of his own children.

But tragedy strikes again. After six years of problematic marriage, his daughter, Corina, divorces from the physician Eugeniu Rizu, whom she had married at Iași in 1882, and moves to Bucharest, where she falls in love with captain Guriță. But their relationship is forbidden by V.A. Urechia, who reveals to his daughter that her lover was in fact her step brother, V.A. Urechia's natural son from his relationship with Emilia, the fourth of the Pester sisters who

⁴ BAR, Arhiva V. A. Urechia, IX bis acte 169 (1841-1900), f. 21 și 23.

⁵ Ibidem, f. 57-59.

⁶ National Archives Iași, Collection „Stare Civilă – Căsătorii, Mitrici”, file 616/1832-1865, no. 42, the marriage „Alexandrescu Vs. with Luiza Vurt”.

⁷ Tancred will end succumbed to illness in adolescence, as a student in the city of Iași.

⁸ V.A. Urechia, *Din tainele vieții. Amintiri contemporane (1840-1882)*, Ediție îngrijită, studiu introductiv, tabel cronologic, note și glosar de Leonidas Rados, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2014, p. 249.

had been married, at a given moment with General N. Dona. Corina's suicidal in 1890, followed by captain Guriță's suicidal impressed Bucharest's society for a long while⁹.

V.A. Urechia had a rich activity as a secretary general (director) of the Ministry of Cults in Iași, marked by many firsts: the introduction of the Latin alphabet in administration and schools, the proposition to orient the scholarships towards universities and important schools from neo-Latin states, in order to facilitate the shaping of a unitary public state¹⁰, the establishment of the University of Iași, where he played an important role. At Bucharest, he focused on the issue of village schools, and on the systematization of education. He held a major part in the project of the Romanian Athenaeum society, in the appearance of the publication *Buletinul Instrucțiunii Publice* [Bulletin of Public Instruction] and especially in the establishment, in 1867, of the *Academic Society*, writing the documents in accordance to the model of the French and of the Spanish Academies, and organizing the inaugural ceremony with great pomp¹¹.

As far as his image was involved, the memoirist was almost annulled by the polemics he had with Titu Maiorescu and the Junimea society. After having sent a few articles in which Urechia distanced himself from the cultural perspective of Junimea and showed his discontent towards the evolution of the "New Direction", Maiorescu published in 1873 two studies of literary pathology, *Beția de cuvinte* [The Verbiage] and *Răspunsurile "Revistei contemporane"* [The Answers of "Revista Contemporana"], who made history in literary criticism and disconcerted the memoirist for a long time.

At the same time, Maiorescu's criticism made him pay more attention to his writing, rather exuberant until then. The last decade of the 19th century is also the most important one in the memoirist's life, from the standpoint of publications. In 1891 he started the publication process of the monumental *History of the Romanians* (14 volumes), whose last volume (of the several tens that were planned) appeared right before his passing away. In 1892, the first volume of the famous *Istoria școalelor de la 1800-1864* [History of Schools in 1800-1864] saw the light of day, a work that had received the "Heliade" Award of the Romanian Academy in 1890.

At a public level, many of the pieces of criticism of Junimea remained groundless, and the pamphleteers' ironies seemed to stop. The "old Professor", as he liked to be called, sets up in 1890 the V.A. Urechia Library at Galați, an institution where he donates thousands of books of his private library¹²; one year after, he inspires and participates in an initiative of the students from Bucharest, establishing the *League for cultural unity of all Romanians* whose chairman he is starting with 1893.

In 1900, something changes in his attitude. From an excessively enthusiastic man, he turns into a rather meditative one. He works at the *History of the Romanians* series, obstructed by his grave condition that will soon cause his death. He feels really old and he starts to keep a

⁹ N. Iorga, *O viață de om, așa cum a fost*, vol. I, București, Editura N. Stroilă, 1934, p. 183.

¹⁰ For more informations, see my research *Studenți și profesori ai Universității din Iași la studii în străinătate (deceniul șapte al secolului XIX)*, part I and II in *Historia Universitatis Iassiensis*, 1 (2010), p. 37-113 and 2 (2011), p. 9-59.

¹¹ See [V. A. Urechia], *Actele și serbarea națională a inaugurării societății pentru gramatica și glosariul limbei române*, București, Imprimeria Statului, 1867.

¹² Idem, *Situațiunea Bibliotecii publice „Urechia” din Galați, de la înființarea ei 11 noembrie 1890, până la 1 ianuarie 1897*, f.a, f.e.

diary, to write down notes regularly, interrupted by relapses of disease. In spring he even starts publishing a serialized autobiography in the newspaper *Apărarea națională*, continued then, in 1901, in the newspaper *Secolul XX*.

After he saw the fourth volume of the monumental *Istoria școalelor* [History of Schools] published, and after having been reconfirmed vice-president of the Senate, the scholar died, on 22 November 1901, as a result of a violent heart attack. Rather isolated over the last years of his life, the “great patriot and the illustrious historian”, like the newspapers’ headlines read, gathered however for the last time all of his intimates, benefiting from national funerals, organized on 24 November 1901 at the Belu cemetery¹³.

The strategy of memoirs and their transmission to new generations

The irony is that the first autobiographical reflection were published by V.A. Urechia in the *Convorbiri* review, where he had been criticized and “executed” by the mentor of Junimea in 1873. Meanwhile, the old hostilities had subsided, in the public space at least, so that at the 25-year jubilee of the review (1892), the historian published a charming article, *Oameni și fapte din trecut* [Men and Deeds of Yesteryear], where he was skilfully inviting his readers to listen to “a few stories, and not stories of the old days, but from nowadays”¹⁴. The process of personal recollections was well-argued, also by invoking, repeatedly, his old age and his role of chronicler of the old times. As a matter of fact, he had discovered his inclination to storytelling during his travels across the country, in the different feasts organized in the 1880s with a view to gathering the necessary money for Miron Costin’s statue¹⁵.

Another autobiography-like essay, *Șuba lui Alecsandri* [Alecsandri’s Fur Coat], saw the light in 1894 in the review *Vieața*; here the authors accounted shortly but with the skills of a real storyteller one of his Parisian experiences, since “the days of youth” and of his university studies¹⁶. Encouraged by the reaction of the public, he published these narratives in 1892 in a volume of Romanian legends (*Legende române*), very appreciated by his contemporaries, as the successive editions of the following years show. At the 3rd edition, in 1896, he considered necessary to add a short chapter entitled *Reminiscențe contimporane* [Contemporary reminiscences], where we can find, together with the historical sketches, some of the above mentioned narratives, specifying that “these reminiscences could be considered pages of memoirs. Here, like in a kaleidoscope, contemporary illustrious men pass by. These *Reminiscences* will be later completed and updated and will make up – if I will live – a separate volume”¹⁷.

The first step had already been made, so in 1900, when V.A. Urechia started to publish his memoirs *proper* (but not the *complete* ones, which were supposed to see the light

¹³ See *Moartea lui V.A. Urechia*, în „Secolul XX”, no. 756, 24 November 1901, p. 1 and *Înmormântarea lui V.A. Urechia*, in no. 757, 25 November, p. 2 and no. 758, 27 November, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Convorbiri literare*, număr jubiliar, an XXV, nr. 11 și 12, 1892, p. 928.

¹⁵ Cf. V.A. Urechia, *Legende române*, 3ed edition, *Dedicațiune la I-a ediție*, București, Editura Socec, 1896, p. 7.

¹⁶ „Vieața”, year I, no. 7, 9 January 1894, p. 4.

¹⁷ V.A. Urechia, *Legende române*, 3ed edition, București, Editura Socec, 1896, p. 497.

only after his death, as he often mentions himself), he was already experienced in the memoirs field.

At the turn of the century, the historian reached the moment of survey, at a both spiritual and intellectual level. Time was pressing him to finish faster the projects that he had begun, among which *History of the Romanians*, *History of Schools* and the memoirs. The difficult moments were growing more and more numerous, providing him clear signals that the moment to take care of his autobiography had arrived, if he wanted to make of his life a lesson for the young generation and to save in a fresh fresco the essential of the times he had lived.

That is why, on 1 January 1901, he started to keep a kind of diary, of which three notebooks were preserved (two of them at the Library of the Romanian Academy and one at the National Library), containing his own notes, newspaper clippings, lecture drafts, or the correspondence that he deemed important for the shaping of his image. It is interesting that this journal reveals him as patriot in his intimacy as in his public speeches, especially that he had been amended by some of his contemporaries and critics for his “noisy” patriotism. In fact, he sincerely believed in Romania’s national agenda, in the writing of which he participated directly.

The scholar started the cycle of his memoirs in the 20 May 1900 issue of the newspaper *Apărarea Națională*, where he had been collaborating for a short while. He justified his action with the fact that, on the one hand, even “the men less famous” should make “a confidence of their life” and, on the other hand, saying that his story could be regarded as a historical document, due to his relationships and collaboration “with the greatest men of the nation”¹⁸.

Obviously, no author could be totally impartial, even when he is old, when he does not expect anything else from the future. And yet, the frankness of narration provides the indispensable note of authenticity, as the author proves to be sincere with his readers, to whom he does not hide controversial or even delicate situations for him, except for those of his intimate life, not deemed to be of public importance.

Known today less due to his literary creations, and rather due to his capital historical works, V.A. Urechia turns out to be an unexpectedly gifted storyteller, noticed by exegetes like Vistian Goia¹⁹ or Gabriela Drăgoi²⁰, so that his memoirs provide pleasant moments to the memoirs readers, just like they prove to be equally useful to the historians interested in the less exposed side of the 19th century.

V.A. Urechia’s autobiographical writing, very close to Ion Ghica’s, is not at all monotonous, the author alternating the evoking of memories, with less known anecdotes, short speeches, descriptions of persons and characters, society tableaux, etc. The tone is less harsh than we would have expected, especially in the case of delicate episodes recollections. In spite of some naturally grave accents in the places where he speaks about the tragic moments of his life, like the sudden death of his first wife, the loss of his son Tancred, or the terrible suicidal of his daughter Corina, self-irony and humour prevail, for the delight of the memoirs lovers.

¹⁸ Idem, *Din tainele vieții. Amintiri contemporane (1840-1882)*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Vistian Goia, *V.A. Urechia*, București, Editura Minerva, 1979, p. 67.

²⁰ Gabriela Drăgoi, „Literatul V.A. Urechia”, in *Anuar de lingvistică și istorie literară*, t. XXV, 1976, p. 170.

Urechia also records the sensational events that happened in his time, like the 1874 comet, but he does not insist on issues that are well known and part of the public memory, like the Unification or the Independence War, preferring less notorious topics.

The most charming parts of the *Memoirs* are those where the authors indulges in memories, forgetting about the imperative of the example for the successors, and tells in a detached and jovial manner different episodes of his full life, or of the travels he had made or where he refers to conflicts with some of his contemporaries. At the opposite end of the spectrum come the pages where he presents coldly and impersonally the agenda of the day, or where the public character Urechia gives lectures about schools or politics.

For the faithful reader, a special charm comes from the stories related to the travels of his youth, especially the trip to Paris for studies and the evoking of those particularly special years. For instance, the incident in a restaurant in Poland where, not speaking the language, he insisted to get the last dish on the menu, being convinced that this was the desert, while he was actually ordering the “enjoy your meal”, then the flirt with “lady Marjenko”, fascinated by the looks of the young Moldavian in the diligence, whom she had thought to be a harem owner Turkish man, or the stay at the National hotel in Vienna, where the employees did not bring him his meal and candles. Equally captivating is the story of the travel to Italy, where, as he was tired of answering the questions of the Austrian policemen, his passport was filled in with the specification “dumb”. Gheorghe Mârzescu’s extreme jokes, the inventor of a funny student language (“miata” language) among the Romanian students to Paris, like the fake duel arranged to his mate Pilat, the future general, or the advice given to another fellow countryman to use the “little houses meant for relieving oneself” and ask, besides, a payment for his “services” would make any reader laugh.

When it comes to intimate episodes of his life, more difficult to display in front of the public, the memoirist tries to delicately disregard the details, although he does not completely avoid the issue. An exception would clearly be the story of the first love, for Miss R.R., his own pupil, who always aroused nostalgic feelings, a story that ended with a betrayal about which we find out enough details. He also tells about the way he met Francisca, his first wife, dying then of illness at Iași, or about the love story between him and Luiza, his second wife, at the Pester villa. But when he mentions the problems of this second marriage, he is reserved, saying just that the details “as they are not interested for the public, will be omitted and will be kept in the manuscript only, for the knowledge of my family members”. His divorce in November 1872 is treated equally discretely, being just mentioned in passing. He adopts a different position in relation to Ana (Zetta), his third wife, who took care of him in his old age; in this case, the tone softens very much and the same thing happens, like in a mirror, in his personal diary started in January 1900.

Conclusions

V.A. Urechia was, more than other contemporaries, the man of his time. He lived his life fully, an extraordinary life, marked by political and sentimental plots, a life during which he established numerous fundamental institutions for the Romanian culture and over which he witnessed very special historical events.

He grew old while making a rich experience both in the public and political life, and in his personal and professional one, so that the decision to publish his memoirs came as an adequate epilogue. This way, he entered posterity, he joined the category of the “great people”, of those who played an important role in society during his life, and who therefore have the right to address future generations, and to educate them by means of their own lives. Probably the decision of writing his memoirs had been made a long time before, but he delayed this moment as long as he could, to the last years of his life, fearing that, like it happened in other people’s case, writing his memoirs would have hurried his end, which was a terrible thought for a person who had loved so much activity, life, getting involved. But when the long disease relapses grew more numerous, he started to publish them in a systematic way, relying upon his recollections, upon the thick archives files that he had preserved in relation to his public activity and, last but not least, upon his own writings from the years of his youth.

At a rhetoric level, at least, V.A. Urechia thought that his memoirs had a special documentary value, describing in a pretty faithful fresco the society of the times he had lived. It is possible that he sincerely would have believed in his contemporaries’ taste for history. Yet, we cannot ignore the subjective side of the writing process, especially as the memoirist himself was interested in correcting an image that, most of the times, disadvantaged him. Consequently, we must see his initiative from 1900-1901 as an attempt to present to the public the favourable variant of his biography.