

Vasile Turdean
(November 14, 1926 – February 21, 2003)

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Before 1989, living “from day to day”, in a cruel hopelessness, being convinced that the evil, the darkness in which our days were led could not be ended, that the reign of ignorance (or rather of a false culture, directed and distributed like food supplies) would go on for ever, we wondered if, over the years, those who wanted to decipher the meaning of our activities, our hidden efforts, would understand at least “between the lines” that some of us were, indeed, ruled by good intentions. That, beyond survival, we were meant to create something good, something positive... We naïvely imagined that those who followed us would strive to discover, in every word uttered intentionally, elsewhere than it was supposed (figuratively speaking), a little resistance in the front of the ruthless wave of mud which swept and stained everything, and then the real message would be translated... It seems that I was mistaken; the people of today, who took our place, will not, or cannot tell good from evil, cannot draw conclusions, cannot learn... All there is left to do for those of us who knew such deeds is to tell them, to leave traces for testimony. Many people of those times, placed at the head of institutions, were gray and dull... Some were intentionally chosen by those in power in order to “proletarize” culture; others, in the cover of these intentions, camouflaged, well intended, silently and anonymously did their work (doing it with honor), in order to make us reach an end, to ensure continuity, to guard tradition. Such a man was Vasile Turdean, director of the *Cluj County Library*, having one of the longest activities of over 18 years. His name was unjustly forgotten; browsing through the *Clujeni ai secolului XX (Dicționar esențial)* (Important people of Cluj in the 20th century. An essential dictionary, Cluj-Napoca, 2000), many “sons” of the city can be discovered, but however much we looked, we will not find the name of Vasile Turdean.

His “turn” to run the county library arrived at the most ill-fated time of Romanian history, after a line of directors (passing more or less rapidly), who were unprepared, or unskilled, or were just travelers to more important jobs.

Vasile Turdean was born in Sânger village, Mureș county, on November 14, 1926. He attended elementary school in his native village, and continued his studies at the famous Saint Basil the Great Lyceum in Blaj, well-known for its teachers, and also for the students who stepped over its threshold, spreading its fame. He graduated from the Faculty of History of the “Victor Babeș” University in Cluj in 1956, and was placed at the State Archives in the same city. His profession as a historian, and his work as an archivist evidently brought him to books; as a natural consequence, so it seems, he was appointed Director of the County Library, first called Regional Library, then Municipal Library, in 1969. Doubtlessly, the University and his consequent work as an archivist made him a good expert, capable of running such an institution, differing from activists with studies made “pe puncte” (“on points”; i.e., the symbol of the rations received in the communist age, which were of a poor quality), incomplete, or exams passed in pubs. In the *interregnum* between the declaration in 1964, the death of Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, and the theses from July 1971 (i.e., a set of political commandments aimed at turning culture back to *prolet-kult*), new winds started to blow in the country. Unskillful leaders (in all respects) were changed for professionals, often disregarding the candidate’s “folder” (i.e. his background and communist activity) in favor of his training. The “mistake” was then gradually “corrected”, and was not repeated again, beginning with 1971, and throughout the years until 1989. The time of activists (even if often experts, but with biased intentions), very devoted to the unique leader, returned. Whoever had the chance to “escape”, managed to survive, more or less, controlling his behavior; others were isolated, pushed into inactivity, and many people withdrew voluntarily. For others, various reasons were invented, more or less plausible. Even the list of prime-secretaries of the Cluj County Committee of the Communist Party, or that of the propaganda secretaries proved the same thing.

The public library of the city was founded (as a separate institution) in the 1950’s, having some very vague popular origins. Its “birth” was meant to be a sign of the “new times”. Between the two World Wars, the role of a public library was successfully fulfilled by what is today the *Central University Library*, which was a customary institution all over Romania or Europe. The existence of a public library in a large (university and cultural) city will always stand, we regret to say, in the shadow of the similar University-Academic institution, even if it has a different purpose. This was probably how local leaders viewed this, to the detriment of the public library (then in formation). Little by

little, it started to grow, and stopped being the rival of “rich” institutional libraries, even if it was an “achievement” of the regime. With a belatedness of a couple of years, characteristic for the Romanians’ approach to culture, the “defrost” was to be felt there as well. After only two years of directorate, Professor Vasile Stanca was replaced by Vasile Turdean. Unfortunately, these lines may seem quite vague, but we only have a few testimonies from members of the Turdean family, and some librarians who knew him (among whom the author himself); and, especially, from the book of Traian Brad, *Lectura și biblioteca publică la Cluj* (Reading and the Public Library in Cluj), Cluj-Napoca, 2001.

The first achievements of the library (not to mention current book acquisition) were rare book acquisitions: “An extremely active policy of rare book acquisitions, significant for the historical and cultural past of the country, started in this year [1969, a.n. A.G.]; among the acquisitions were: *Canonicii diezezei Greco-catolice de Gherla, 1857-1937* (The Canons of the Greek-Catholic Diocese of Gherla, 1857-1937); *Chestiunea autonomiei bisericii unite în șirul luptelor noastre pentru existența națională* (The question of the autonomy of the Greek-Catholic church in the line of our fights for national existence); Nicolae Iorga, *Drepturile Românilor asupra teritoriului lor național* (The rights of Romanians over their national territory), 1919 edition; *Din trecutul orașului Cluj* (From the past of the city of Cluj), by Augustin Rațiu; *Psaltirea Proorocului și Împăratului David* (The psalms of Prophet and Emperor David), published in Sibiu, in 1837, or *Carte folositoare de suflet* (A book useful for the soul), published in Bucharest, in 1827, etc.” (T. Brad, op.cit., 113).

Current book acquisitions were adequate from our perspective. There was the Library’s Collecting Office, which “supplied” books with due correctness (the entire book production from Romania); the budget allotted money for purchase, and books were cheap. After all these years, the majority of the valuable publications of those years are still present in the inventory books (Romanian books, original, or important translations). The number of copies for one title might have suffered because of saving or preferences (dictated, obligatory) for social-political books (especially the works of Nicolae Ceaușescu and party-literature). But even this could be compensated by buying good translations (economic, philosophical, etc.), commented, with a preface, mostly from the Editura Politică (The Political Publishing House), and therefore in a sufficient number of copies.

It is very interesting to follow (even with reservations) the “dynamics” of the acquisitions in Turdean’s years (see T. Brad, op.cit., 116, and 130). At that time, all statistics had to increase as the “incontestable” sign of progress, but there were some years with decreasing figures, which paradoxically showed record numbers, compared to previous years, in book loans and reading. 1974 and the following years were disastrous for Romanian book production and journalism. In the spring of that year, under the pretext of unfavorable international circumstances, the Party invented “paper-crisis”, “revolutionarily” (how else?) transforming book production: few copies, less titles, avarice in the case of expensive, luxurious, hardcover editions, shorter editorial plans, large type face and small blanks, little space between chapters, thin newspapers and periodicals in small formats, giving up illustrated magazines... Figures and statistics, unless corroborated with information (or, unless this information was “discovered”, brought to light, explained), became uncontrolled boomerangs.

A “very important” committee visited and controlled the library in 1972, putting together a very “acid” critical material (was it “on orders” or on their own initiatives?). Reading these lines today seems hilarious, like a comic novel (were the authors having any “bad thoughts” about the director?). Among other things, the library’s minuses were listed in the form of questions: How did the library contribute to patriotic education? How did it popularize party and state documents? How did it support political education? How did the library contribute to the general effort of the working class to achieve the five-year plan ahead of schedule? What had it been doing for scientific education? What about fighting against mysticism? (T. Brad., op.cit., 121) Those times were very troubled, nothing compared with the 1950’s. This was now a new regime, the music was playing in a different register... Many leaders of institutions (especially, but not only cultural) were dismissed from their position, for some utterly ridiculous and childish reasons, and were replaced by people devoted in body and soul to the demolishing intentions of the Ceaușescu-regime which began to clearly show its true face; the dismissals were carefully prepared beforehand, by the fabrication of folders containing “evidence” about disloyalty or “incompetence”. On a local level, there was the replacement of Dumitru Mircea, first from the *Tribuna* (The Tribune), then much later from the Committee for Culture. Later on, there was the elimination of Al. Căprariu from the Dacia Publishing House, Ion Noja from the Committee

for Culture, then the accepted resignation of other directors, also in Bucharest. For the most part, intellectuals were changed for real activists, that is, with their papers “in order”, and coming only from the working class. The old librarians who worked directly with Vasile Turdean, emphasized the great humanity that he proved in his relationship with the subordinated.

The landmarks of modernization had already been laid down by his predecessor, Vasile Stanca, being taken over and developed by Vasile Turdean. He employed personnel with high training (suitable for a librarian’s work), and intensified participation in professional training programs, being aware that it was the only way to progress. During his directorate the catalogue system was modernized (in fact, modified), our public library having the best system in the country for a certain period. It was also the time when a new service was brought to life, the task of which was the direction and control of village libraries. Times only allowed him to be a good manager; these were not the times for one’s own initiatives. The first branch libraries were also founded during his time, in the new districts of Mănăştur and Gheorgheni. Also then began the first, very popular activities, complementary to the library: the contest *Eroii cărţilor citite* (Heroes from books read), children’s drawings from the books they read, and the Festival of Poetry, *Eterna epigramă* (The eternal epigram), all enjoying a very large public, and being continued even today. As far as I am concerned, my memories are connected to frequent conversations about the history of the Greek-Catholic Church, about Blaj, about historical personalities with whom he was acquainted. He made it easier for me to borrow books that I required for my preparation, at the time when I was editor of the Dacia Publishing House.

I used to consult him (after his retirement) about the (occasional) book offer in history, or the Greek-Catholic Church, of which he remained devoted even to his last minutes. I should also like to emphasize another of his traits, less known to many, and perhaps comical today; namely, his exaggerated emotiveness, the troubles he had to face (naturally, fear from the “power”, but also abhorrence) when he was called to the “leading” official organs.

His activity as a director of the County Library presupposed also a series of real “drudgeries” which could not be avoided, along with the leaders of the People’s Art School, of the Municipal House of Culture, or of the Center for Direction, being used for works which normally should

have been done by Party activists, but which they were incapable of doing.

It was in the same period that “open access” was first initiated, now a modern requisite without which no library can be conceived. It was also the director’s task to put into practice the addresses from the Council of Culture about leaving aside the books of fugitives, the undesirable, or of those who spoke evil, from the inside or the outside, of Romania, and the “revolutionary conquests” of its people. There was also the obligation to participate in local cultural “plenary sessions” (in fact, of the vulgarization of culture), where, for hours on end, workers, illegalists, or soldiers were speaking ineptly, suggesting “healthy” directions for this domain. We discover in the same book cited (T. Brad, 113), that Vasile Turdean suggested in an address sent to the Cultural Committee in 1970 the attribution of a name to the library, by choice among: Avram Iancu, Simion Bărnuțiu, Gheorghe Barițiu, Lucian Blaga, or *Octavian Goga*...

It seems that it was also this period (if not somewhat earlier) when the library passed unnoticed to “second-rate”. It was probably due to the parallel existence of the Central University Library, and maybe even the Cluj branch of the Academy Library, which, however, had stopped to fulfill the function of a public library a long time before. All this happened here, while in almost all smaller towns (which were county centers), or even in simple cities or towns, the public library directors were members of the local “notabilities”. In Cluj, however, the place, “the honor” given to this library was much behind certain industrial institutions. (The problem of “second-rate”, which is extremely important in the evaluation of the library’s activity, is not merely a joke or a simple impression... I knew it (without being aware of its true motivation) from the corridors of the Committee for Socialist Culture and Education, neighboring the Center for the Direction of Popular Creation, where I spent my first years of employment. I have forgotten it, as I did not believe it, I found no logic in it, and I haven’t asked anybody about it; but I have found it, vaguely, but clearly named, without being explained in the book of Traian Brad (p. 108 and 120).) There could also be another, scientific explanation (with or without quotation marks, depending on the conclusion one might draw from it): in the time when the *Ghidul Bibliotecilor din România* (A Guide for Romanian Libraries) appeared, written by Valeriu Moldoveanu, Gheorghe Popescu, and Mircea Tomescu (Bucharest, 1970), the Cluj County Library possessed 170,000 books (p. 192). It did not have an old book “inheritance”, like other libraries which had taken over the collections (even if bowdlerized) from the *Astra*, or

from other collections. According to T. Brad's book, the public libraries in other cities possessed publications, as follows: 1,166,000 in Bucharest, 370,000 in Sibiu, 350,000 in Braşov, 300,000 in Timişoara and Târgu Mureş, 275,000 in Galaţi, 260,000 in Oradea, 235,000 in Arad, and 180,000 in Iaşi, 150,000 in Craiova, 130,000 in Constanţa, 100,000 in Baia Mare and Brăila. This might be an explanation...

Retired in 1987, Vasile Turdean did not live to see the changes and intentions he himself once hoped for. Among other things, the former director was reproached to have had dissents with the County Party Committee and Committee for Culture, reproaches which in time have ennobled the description, the characterization of his activity. In all events, following many years of ideological dogmatism (proved also by the selection of library directors), he was the first director, apart from the two years of Vasile Stanca, who took over and placed on a new platform the activity and the development of the library.

He died on February 21, 2003, unreconciled with the fact that he could not participate in the effort of modernization, of synchronization with new requirements of what he had consolidated in his years of leadership.