

THOUGHTS ABOUT ȘTEFAN PROCOPIU

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It was a calm and gentle autumn, so familiar in Iași – a splendid sunset and a carpet of copper-coloured lime-tree laying down the Copou boulevard – when we, young students [...] were waiting, in an old lecture room of the old University building, the arrival of our future professor of electricity. Beside me, the presence of a deep amber-eyed girl with long hair was a more than sufficient reason to distract me from the ceremony introducing Ștefan Procopiu: a ruthless and heartless person. “Imagine a 50 year-old bachelor who sleeps during the day and works at night, devoting his world exclusively to wires and sparks. No poetry in this life of eremite [...] wholly devoted to science”. With no academic conceit, slowly entering the door placed behind the laboratory table overloaded with equipments wholly strange to us, there advanced a middle-sized man, rather squat, with a large forehead and ill-arranged hair, his eyes half-opened, as if after a tiresome contemplation of light. Somehow innerly closed in himself, he began – in a pleasant, Moldavian deep-toned, musical voice – his first astonishing lecture delivered to my series of graduates. Scrupulously writing down his ideas, I was well-aware of the immense distance I suddenly felt between him and me, in spite of my first-bench position, just near the desk. The most logical ideas of his discourse were offered to us as impeccable, dense, highly meaningful sentences. I felt as if his brain was endowed with some kind of rheostat capable of adjusting the whole process of knowledge delivery to his audience. The theoretical ideas put forward were immediately concretized in experiment. In this respect, his assistant, Breviman, was an important link of the didactic show offered to us. Until that day, I used to think that physics is even more abstract than chemistry, requiring increased efforts for its understanding. Now, due to the didactic gift of its master, who viewed it as “queen in the battle of knowledge”, I was offered the proof of its beauty.



We, the students, left the lecture room less vociferous than usually, all agreeing that this new professor was a special person, indeed.

In my student years, the call to catalogue was unusual, the professors simply captivated their audience, if they really wanted to be listened to; students' presence to lectures was the proof of their interest in acquiring knowledge and, equally, of their reverence for academic values. No absence was ever registered at the university lectures of electricity and magnetism. Only once, a tall and sturdy colleague of ours, bearing a German name, dared to enter the room after his professor; ironically but severely, the latter one asked: "I am Professor Ștefan Procopiu, who are you?" My colleague mechanically declined his name and rapidly took a seat in a bench. We were delivered an original lesson of indiscipline rejection. In numerous other Tuesday afternoons of each week, we were listening, with increasing interest, to the concert of electricity and magnetism orchestrated by Ștefan Procopiu, performed at the light pipe organ producing wire vibrations, in the cadenced rhythm of the formulae he used to write down on the blackboard.

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The direct contact with our teacher and the rich information the students were given conferred to him the stature of a giant. Our emotions were ever increasing when the moment of a direct confrontation with him was approaching. The electricity exam included both a written work and an oral discussion, the thesis being an eliminatory test. The only two students accepted to the oral exam divided the space of the blackboard between them, tensely waiting to receive the problems to be answered at. For my part, the subjects, concisely formulated, were: "potential" and "radio lamps". Eager to leave a good impression, I believe I obtained, even if I was only "a chemist", a few favourable words from his part. At the door of the lecture room, the colleagues waiting for us manifested exactly as at the stadium, when a goal was scored. Our victory was the victory of the whole team, and it had to be marked as only students can do.

The years have passed and, at the Polytechnic Institute of Iași, I became the colleague of Professor Ștefan Procopiu. Over all these years, I had read, balancing between admiration and such a perfectly understandable human envy, more about his achievements: in 1912, he formulated the relation – which brings his name near that of Niels Bohr – on the dependence of the theoretical magneton on the load and mass of the electron, respectively on Planck constant. I understood that such discovery of a brilliant mind was widely opening the gates to modern physics. Ștefan Procopiu was waiting his consecration among the Nobel Prize winners, the more so that his friend of Grenoble, Louis Néel, had been awarded this honour. Untold to anyone, bitter disappointment, besides other sufferings, consumed mind and health, altering his optimism and confidence in his fellow men. The refuge was found in the great classics, whom he used to read over and over again, with the same passion as in his young years, meditating in solitude, or discussing with few of his closest assistants, invited on the terrace of the house on the Copou Hill, upon

the meaning of the surrounding world, of the main forces conferring equilibrium and immensity to the surrounding nature.



The house on the Copou thill.

I dare say some affection sprang between us, rooted in and nourished by the community of ideals and sensitivity, always well-hidden behind a severe conduct, manifested for the values of culture, with their long-lasting but fragile beauty, for the achievements and sacrifices of our predecessors. Even after the stroke he suffered, Ștefan Procopiu preserved his spiritual criticism, his acrid irony, disdain for ignorance and superficiality, as well as the perfect order of his reasoning, so unlike the disorder of his working table, and his exceptional memory. He was irritated by the gap between the spontaneity of thinking and the low speed of its expression. Our dialogue was frequently accompanied by ample gestures, reflecting his deep, well-argued convictions and passions.

Until late in his life, another sign of his characteristic constancy, he spent the summer in the silence of Văratec, an ideal monkish setting offering psychic health and therapeutics. Here, near the citadel built up by Stephen the Great at Târgu Neamț, following the steps of Mihai Eminescu, he used to walk in the silver forest, passing by the house in which the broken-hearted Veronica Micle died. The fairy, sunny and hospitable realm whose flowers falling in cascade was equally enchanting and melancholic, bringing together the human person and the surrounding nature – a perpetual attraction for Ștefan Procopiu. Overwhelmed by memories, here, his feeling of belonging to this country was stronger than ever. He knew the history of the province of Moldova as thoroughly as a learned historian, and glorified it as a poet. In his way, he was a Stephen the Great in science and an Eminescu in the intensity of his feelings. The laws of the universe were around his little finger and the force of his intellect was ceaselessly investigating the labyrinth

of knowledge. The tiny amounts of attention he used to offer to people and to events were always punctual, non-concessive and exigent. The same unique temperamental structure also drove his relations with his few friends and partners. His feelings were always expressed in volcanic, short and steadfast sentences, with no concern as to the – good or bad – impression they would produce. This is why, some of his university fellows considered him a difficult person, underrating his qualities and overvaluing his human feebleness. He let me know of his high appreciation for a few of his “great” contemporaries: Eugen Bădărău, Nicolae Bărbulescu, Alex. Proca, Ion Agîrbiceanu, Costin Nenişescu, Miron Nicolescu, Gheorghe Vrânceanu.

Along the last years of his life, assaulted by health problems and by the long expectation related to the external recognition of the new paths he opened in the structure of matter, he received a few token of appreciation at national level, which acknowledged his position of great man of science and patriot, and paid homage to his unstained dedication to school, science and culture. The Order of Work Medal he was offered crowned the sacrifices and nights of work spent in the basements of the University, where he used to watch, with simple instruments created by himself, the hardly distinguishable phenomena created by nature. He was pleased, indeed, by the very name of the medal.

A second event refers to his election as a member of the Romanian Academy and director of the Centre of Physics in Iaşi, offered to him in his old years. Bringing to him this news in a moment of patriarchal isolation, he uttered – as usually – a single word: “Bravo!” After all these years, I still do not know to whom was it addressed: to the decidents of this honour, or to himself!

Finally, even if the University remained his “great love”, to which he devoted four decades of professorship, his bright mind and his rare pedagogic endowment, it was the Polytechnic Institute of Iaşi, to the edification of which he had contributed either directly or by his followers – professors at the Faculty of Electrotechnics – that conferred to him, in the year 1967, the high title of *Doctor Honoris Causa*. On this occasion, I have soulfully attempted at presenting, well-aware of my limited powers, the man of science and his whole opera, ranking him among the great geniuses of humanity. This time again, all he said was: “Thank you!”

I am perfectly aware of the truth that this evocation is far from reaching the altitude of the name Ştefan Procopiu, which he added, by his fundamental discoveries, to the history of the universal science. This is because the real dimensions of his personality cannot have any equivalent in simple words and phrases, similar to those through which he encompassed some of nature’s laws or its indescribable beauty.

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