

## THE FIRST WORLD WAR – TESTIMONIALS FROM HELL

Anemari Monica Negru, *Viața pe front - în scrieri personale (Life on the Front – In Personal Writings)* (Târgoviște, Romania: Cetatea de Scaun, 2019), ISBN: 9786065374423, 544 pp.

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Before proceeding to the actual volume, it is appropriate to make a short review of the author's experience: Anemari Monica Negru, historian, has an extensive activity regarding research in historical events on our shores, especially the ones related to the army's conflicts. Following the research activity, a series of publications, appreciated by historian critics and the general public, are being published. The most important volumes are: Alexandrina Cantacuzino and the feminist movement of the interwar period, volume I, publishing house Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2015 and the History of the National Orthodox society of Romanian Women, publishing house Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2016. Besides the mentioned volumes, Anemari Monica Negru, has a fruitful activity as a publicist, publishing studies and reviews in the Archives Magazine, Olenia's Archives, Directory National Archives from Bacău, Târgu – Mureș, Euroregionalia – interdisciplinary studies magazine, The National library of Romania magazine.

Therefore, the work *Viața pe front - în scrieri personale (Life on the Front- In Personal Writings)* is nothing but a continuation of the vast work that the author does in order to keep the collective memory of the romanian people alive, regarding the events that happened in a period that most of the times seems to have dissapeared forever. The book was published in 2019 at the publishing house Cetatea de Scaun Târgoviște.

It is a massive work that bundles up in its 543 pages all sorts of adventures and events that the active participants of the First World War have been through between the years 1916 – 1918. The volume has three big chapters: The First World War from different human perspectives – writers, scouts, doctors, troops, romanian prisoners, Times from war in memories, journals, letters, postcards, The endurance of women in the occupied capital.

To the chapters listed above are added a series of annexes, comprising a list of the documents inserted in the volume, footnotes that are very well documented, as well as the athroponimical index and the toponymic index.

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The book has been designed not only for historians, students or historian researchers, but also for history lovers in general. It must be mentioned that when it was first published, the book had a great success, being appreciated by specialists and by the general public.

The first contact with the book's title – *Viața pe front - în scrieri personale (Life on the Front- In Personal Writings)* – drives us to think of another history book, which emphasizes the events of the First World War, obviously supported by historical sources, history books and so on. However, what draws the attention since reading the title is the second part: 'in personal writings'. What is the meaning of this mention? We will not be able to decipher on by starting reading the book. It is this aspect that makes the book so original. Using the manuscripts, the original documents inserted in the volume, the author brings the reader right in the middle of the events, in the time of World War I. Furthermore, you can experience the emotion of the participants of this crucial event. From great personalities to simple soldiers or scouts, everybody will get the chance to make its presence felt in this volume. The first chapter starts with the notes from the war days of the great writer and politician Octavian Goga (1881 – 1938), advocate for the union of Transylvania with Romania. We can notice here that besides the military or strategic mentions, we are also told about the great writer's emotional experiences: 'I'm living the most troubled moments of my life...' (p. 33).

Another aspect that draws attention is the transcript from one of the meetings of the Crown Council, in which Romania's entry into war was decided. The simple reading of this dialogue makes the reader think about a movie, the only thing missing from it being the sound, but that could also be actualized by using the power of imagination.

After the explosion of the thoughts of the great writer Octavian Goga, the author of the volume summons simple people, without a well – sounding name to expose their thoughts and impressions regarding the social situation of those years. These are people that come from all social categories (scouts in the Romanian army, soldiers, leaders or simple soldiers). When you read these documents, the thoughts of these people, you get some kind of feeling of profound emotion. In this chapter, Anemari Monica Negru succeeds with the help of the documents, the manuscripts from those times, more than any other historian author to create a bridge over time and to introduce us to that sorrowful period.

In this fascinating and troubled journey, we encounter emotional moments, indicated by military postcards sent by Lieutenant Alexandru Tutunaru to his mother, to whom he tells about the triumphal march over the Carpați mountains. Moreover, it is noteworthy to mention about the letter the philosopher Ștefan Zeletin wrote to the philologist Vasile Bognea, in which he describes in great detail the horrors of war and the mess that can be encountered on the field (p.126). besides the technical information related to the war, what caught my attention was the fact that people, especially the ones involved in war, have adjusted to the social conditions of the time, and through the messages sent to their families, friends and relatives, they pointed out things that were a part of their everyday life: "the weather is nice, the sun is shining

and it warms the ground, the people of Brezoi are on the road and are wishing us victory, girls are giving us flowers, I got so many that I couldn't hold them, on some of their faces you could see happiness, on others you could see tears, everybody with their own problems" – 12<sup>th</sup> of August 1917 – War journal of Captain Ioan Ciulei from Regiment 2 Infantry Vâlcea. This shows the importance of this volume for the readers, in terms of the inserted documents. None of the great writers would have managed to expose the thoughts of the participants of war better than these documents that were selected by the author.

In order for this scenario to be complete, the author brings to light the suffering of the prisoners of war. How did she manage to do this? Very simple.. by using the romanian soldier`s letters addressed to Alexandrina Cantacuzino (1876 – 1944) – diplomat and philanthropist, letters by which it is foreground presented the struggle, the suffering and the injustices to which the Romanian soldiers have been submitted while they were in imprisonment.

Obviously, the war causes human victims (injured, dead), therefore it was impossible to hear information from the field from a medical perspective. Hence, we listen to the confession of the Second Lieutenant doctor S. Demetrescu, through "Daily notes from romanian – hungarian- bulgarian war" in August – September. I am convinced that the author did not randomly select this manuscript, due to the fact that dr. Demetrescu managed to encompass all the relevant elements that happened on the field everyday, starting with the way the regiment was organized, to his personal observations. Certainly, from a doctor's journal, information about health problems on the field or the care they were wearing for their companions could not be missing.

Another notable aspect is the fact that on September the 8<sup>th</sup> (Thursday), the doctor makes the following statement: "Beautiful day... I can't even remember the days; if it weren't for this daily notebook I would have forgotten them for good...". How sad... for soldiers every day was the same. Time did not exist for them. It was just a fight for existence. For their existence and the eternal existence of romanian ground. The chapter ends with the evoking acts of heroism of the romanian army, fixed in the collective memory for building the Mausoleum from Mărășești. It is an epic closing in which the author gives voice to the manuscripts that transmit what was stated above. We are referring to the manuscript belonging to retired general Breban Gheorghe, from which we keep in mind the ending: "We left and the heroes were left alone, sleeping forever, on the ground that they defended with bravery and dedication, and the thousands of passangers from our country that traveled by train everyday, were thronging at the wagon`s windows in the train station in Mărășești screaming: Praise you heroes! Praise you! – the Mausoleum with the remains of tens of thousands of hero fighters, unlike the Egyptian pyramids, where appressing pharaohs of hundreds of thousands of slaves that built the pyramids were burried. The last part of this volume, as important as the others, highlights another aspect, this time more human, that happened durin first world war, namely: the endurance of women in an occupied capital, the concerns, duties and goals that they had in that period. Using the help of the documents and pictures, the author emphasizes the intense activity that a group of women associated in different organisations has: The National Orthodox Society of Romanian Women, Red Cross. As a social worker, I can strongly confirm

that Anemari Monica Negru brings to light the pioneering of social work in Romania. Eventhough I am convinced that the advocates of these actions did not expect this to happen, looking backwards we have to do with the rise of social work. It is a commendable initiative of the author to highlight this humanitarian scenario, refusing to focus only on the historical segment of that period. This time, more than in any other subchapter we have to do with the visual part of history, using pictures. We can easily observe the way in which these organisations are arranged, wounded soldiers that were getting care, soldiers eating at the 113 hospital, action organised by National Orthodox society for romanian women. We also have a very wide report presented by Alexandrina Cantacuzino regarding the society`s achievements, from where we can better see the actions of the society. Another important aspect ist hat to this day accounting reports were kept, the donated amounts from each person and so on. From this report we find out that the amount used for all of these actions is aproximately one million lei. A massive sum for those time, but that says everything about people`s disponibility to help.

The report is concluded by the following statement: "breaking away from work without bitterness and with the gratitude of fulfilled duty scrupulously day and night, we kindly ask you to read carefully this report and to receive, mr. President the assurance of our great consideration".

All things considered, these are some of the main ideas that can e drawn out of this review: the first impression of the reader when they first start reading the book, might be that this is a collection of manuscripts, documents, journals, pictures from that terrible period. But after studying in depth it is impossible not to notice what lies beneath this masterpiece, namely: hard work in finding all the materials, research and assembling, similar to puzzle pieces. Through this volume, the author put together perfectly her abilitie as a researcher with those of historian or archeologist. It is a volume that succeeds to get to the reader`s national spirit, but also to the social worker spirit, that of empathy and sacrifice.

The volume *Viața pe front - în scrieri personale (Life on the Front – In Personal Writings)* – is a very important piece in remembering what happened in those troubled times. Nicolae Iorga said: " A nation that doesn`t know its history, is like a child that doesn`t know its parents". Using this volume, Anemari Monica Negru, helps us learn about history and our spiritual "parents" that lost their lives in order for us to keep speaking romanian on these grounds.

I would like to conclude by quoting Daniel Cain – the Institute of South – East European Studies, who in the foreword of the volume stated: "gradually, from this volume`s pages, is shaping up the human profile of those who got to exeriece the great war. There are not simple snapshots anymore, they come to life. The volume does not only represent a research pleading, but also a sign of normality. The moral? The book is sacred, but even more sacred is the document!"