

Bilješka iz povijesti psihologije
Note on the history of psychology

Nicolae Mărgineanu (1905-1980)

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“Most foreigners who visit us see only our faults, but you were wise enough to adopt our few virtues and use them. I always think you were one of the best Rockefeller Foundation research scientists we have ever had. Are there other Romanians like you? If so, then send them here...”. These are Gordon Allport’s words addressed to Nicolae Mărgineanu in a letter from March 1936. Most likely, Allport appreciated the way in which the Romanian psychologist succeeded in distinguishing Virtue from Fault, and Good from Evil, maintaining his honesty and discreteness for the rest of his life.

Early life

Nicolae Mărgineanu’s journey began on June 22nd, 1905 in Obreja, a village in central Transylvania that belonged then to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and ended on June 13th, 1980 in Cluj. Decades after his death, his lessons in psychology and life are still valid. He was the only member of an entire generation from his native village who attended a Romanian-language school in a Hungarian-ruled Transylvania. His older brother should have been the one to go to school, but the outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914

made the older brother stay home and help in the household while his younger brother, Nicolae, went to school in a small city called Blaj (one of only three Romanian-language high schools in Transylvania at the time). At that time, children were sent to school to become priests or teachers, doctors or lawyers, professions with an important added value for their communities – psychology was certainly not considered among these. With the Great Union of 1918, Transylvania joined the other Romanian territories and formed the Kingdom of Romania. For N. Mărgineanu, this event presented an opportunity: he abandoned the idea to become a schoolteacher and embraced the thought of becoming a psychologist. Political turmoil was soon to flood Romania – and N. Mărgineanu lived through three dictatorships that would mar the face of Romanian modern history: Carol II’s royal dictatorship, Marshall Antonescu’s military dictatorship, and the communist dictatorship. His mother’s last words before him leaving Blaj were: “From now on, you listen to those learned teachers of yours, because I will not be able to give you any advice. One last piece of advice from me, though, to never forget, no matter what comes, even if you were to be an ‘archpriest,’ my dearest: Wear your soul as clean as the shirt I wash with my own hands

for church on Sunday”. These words represented a moral compass for all of his later experiences and were passed on as life guidance to the next generation of the Mărgineanu family.

Bachelor degree (1927) and doctorate (1929) in Psychology

He graduated Psychology in 1927, after only three years of studies, due to his very high grades, which allowed him to be exempted from the fourth year. He immediately enrolled in his doctorate, writing his dissertation on the influence of exercise and learning on individual differences, at the suggestion of his professor, Florian Ștefănescu-Goangă. Interested in problems of metrical methodology – the choice of units of performance and time, and the problem of substantive and relational judgments – he investigated these psychological phenomena as they would have been approached by the hard sciences. In the summer of the same year, he attended German language courses at the University of Vienna at the suggestion of the same F. Goangă. His dissertation was published under the title *The Psychology of Exercise* in 1929. He received his doctorate with a *Magna cum laude* distinction in the same year.

Courses at the universities of Leipzig, Berlin, Hamburg (1929)

After completing his doctoral thesis, Nicolae Mărgineanu studied at the University of Leipzig with F. Krueger, Wundt’s successor as the chair of the department. Other two reputed psychologists, C. Rădulescu-Motru of

the University of Bucharest and F. Ștefănescu Goangă, from the University of Cluj, both credited as the founders of scientific psychology in Romania, had studied at the same university.

In Germany, he focused on professional orientation in the detriment of theoretical psychology, visiting vocational guidance centres in Leipzig, Hamburg, Berlin, Munich as well as the psychology laboratories of the railways in Berlin, Dresden and Munich. His report on the offices for professional orientation, and on the vocational selection labs for unemployed, or for tram conductors and locomotive mechanics later appeared in the book *Psychothechnics in Germany*, published in 1929 in the collection *Psychological Studies and Research*. Mărgineanu later continued to explore the domain of work psychology, a field that he introduced in Romania.

At the University of Hamburg, following Professor Stern’s advice, Mărgineanu wrote a paper on the effects of exercise on individual differences, which later appeared in the journal *Zeitschrift für Angewandte Psychologie*. At the University of Berlin, he had W. Koehler, M. Wertheimer, and K. Lewin, as professors, who, together with K. Koffka, founded Gestaltpsychology, one of the most debated schools of psychology between the two world wars.

Mărgineanu’s doctoral thesis was reviewed in the journals *Industrielle Psychotechnik* by Professor Moede and *Psychotechnische Zeitschrift* by Professor Rupp. When Nicolae Mărgineanu returned from Germany in 1930, he published *Contemporary German Psychology* at Cluj, in which he summarized his documentation of theoretical psychology and its practical applications in Germany.

It was during that time when he met his future wife, an open, “sincere and honest student, whose eyes expressed only humanity”, as Nicolae Mărgineanu described her in his

memoires. Surprising his family and teachers, their engagement took place in the summer of the same year. She would accompany him in his various travels in the United States and Europe.

As part of his military service (during the next two years), Nicolae Mărgineanu developed a plan to set up a psychotechnical laboratory for the military.

Postdoctoral exam (1931)

In 1931 he took his Postdoctoral exam at the School of Philosophy and Letters, University of Cluj. Both his doctoral and postdoctoral dissertations considered the need for robust methodology, formal logic and mathematics in the study of personality; it was already visible at this time that Nicolae Mărgineanu was looking for a way to combine his interest in methodology with his interest in the study of personality.

In 1931, he published two books: *The Psychology of Learning* and *The Problem of Evolution*.

Rockefeller Foundation scientific research scholarship at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Chicago, and Duke universities (1932-1934)

Nicolae Mărgineanu's memoirs record his experience during the tour of the universities and laboratories he visited and in which he studied, providing valuable historical information about the most important figures of the evolution of psychology as a science. Following the postdoctoral exam on experimental psychology (1931), Nicolae Mărgineanu received recommendations

from F. Goangă (Romania), as well as W. Stern and W. Koehler (Germany), to visit the USA as a Rockefeller Foundation research fellow in order to continue his research.

He spent the first four months at Harvard University. While at Harvard, Nicolae Mărgineanu studied both normal personality with G. W. Allport, and pathology with Henry Murray, who was the director of the Psychological Clinic and head of the psychology laboratory in charge of selecting intelligence officers during WWII. He also did research on basic problems of logics and mathematics with A. N. Whitehead, who had migrated to the Department of Philosophy at Harvard from the Department of Higher Algebra at Cambridge. Mărgineanu and Allport became close friends and collaborators. Their conversations on the psychology of personality were crucial for both of them. The following months he spent working on personality traits with H. Hartshorne and M. May and attending E. Sapir's seminar.

The months of April and June of the same year were spent at the University of Chicago with L. L. Thurstone, gaining experience in the field of social attitude measurement and factor analysis. In June and July, N. Mărgineanu studied at Columbia University with E. Thorndike, G. Murphy, G. Watson, and with P. Symonds in New York. At Columbia, he developed his study of personality dimensions, which is the core of the book *Psychology of the Personality*, that was published later, in 1941.

His second stay in Chicago resulted in the 1938 book, *The Analysis of Psychological Factors*. While in Chicago, he also interacted with President Roosevelt's advisor, C. G. Ogburn, who conducted research at several universities on the attitudes of academic youth toward the president's new policy – The New Deal. The results of this study were never made public, but in 1935 N. Mărgineanu published an article in the *Journal of Psychology* (likely based on these studies) on techniques for the measurement of public opinion and on the new scale (developed

together with L. L. Thurstone) focusing on attitude toward public policy. He also participated in panels with M. Adler on logical problems in the technique of factor analysis, in which L. L. Thurstone was guided not only by mathematical, but also by logical criteria.

During his studies abroad, N. Mărgineanu gave a series of lectures and presentations at seminars and psychology clubs at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Chicago, Stanford and Duke Universities in the United States, as well as in London and Paris. W. McDougall offered him a teaching position at Duke University and E. J. Thorndike offered him a position at Columbia University.

Courses at the universities of Sorbonne (1935), and London (1935)

Before his new departure to the United States, Nicolae Mărgineanu spent a month in Paris, where he met P. Janet and also H. Piéron, who was a professor at the Collège de France and the director of the experimental psychology laboratory at the Sorbonne. While in Paris, Nicolae Mărgineanu prepared notes for his volume *Contemporary French Psychology*, which was published in 1932. With P. Janet he continued the study of psychopathology, which he had previously begun with H. Murray at Harvard. Also, at the invitation of H. Piéron, N. Mărgineanu contributed an article to the Festschrift volume dedicated to P. Janet, a volume that was published on Janet's 75th birthday, *La nature de la loi scientifique et ses conditions d'exactitude*. Topics discussed with H. Piéron included bio-psycho-social assessment for professional selection and orientation, and the technique of factor analysis, about which N. Mărgineanu wrote two studies for the journal *L'Année Psychologique*, coordinated by H. Piéron.

He met C. Spearman of the University of London at the Congress for the Progress of Science, held in conjunction with the World Fair. Already familiar with simple factor analysis from L. L. Thurstone's lecture, C. Spearman and N. Mărgineanu discussed the technique in depth and had talks about the psychological structure of human personality.

Communist prison

Nicolae Mărgineanu's personal history is important from both a psychological and a historical perspective, being indicative of the strife of Romanian intellectuals during the communist regime. He was a leftist sympathizer but never got involved in politics and was never a member of any political party.

Nicolae Mărgineanu was arrested on April 14, 1948, and was accused of high treason by the communist authorities because of his so-called participation in an anti-communist movement and because he was supposed to have given sensitive information to the "Friends of America" Association, whose vice-president he used to be. N. Mărgineanu did not know any of the others who had been charged with the same false accusation. The absurdity of his conviction and the inhumane conditions he had to face in prison are described in his book *Confessions about a Tumultuous Century*. He was sentenced to 25 years, but he served only 16 years and two months in the jails of Aiud, Jilava, Pitești and Gherla. After he was released, he lived 16 more years, during which he wrote and read avidly to make up for the time he had lost in jail. About his time in jail, he said: "The only defense I had to counter the abuse and injustice was my firm conviction that Justice and my belief would triumph in the end."

What one can certainly state about Nicolae Mărgineanu is that he did not have an ordinary life. What could have been a life dedicated to sci-

ence and teaching, in the most prestigious universities of this world, was instead relegated to a life in prison based on false charges. Still, as he confesses in his book of memoirs, each day of the 16 years he spent in prison, he used his psychological skills and insights into human nature, as well as his gift for teaching in order to pass on some of what he had learned to those with whom he shared the prison experiences of freezing, hunger, and pain. One of his fellow prisoners was a professor of nuclear physics at the University of Bucharest. While Mărgineanu introduced psychology to the physics professor, his colleague taught him the structure of the atom – these were hours of daily conversations, which became lectures for their inmates.

It is likely that during this time, N. Mărgineanu further developed his preferred theme of personality psychology, coming to distinguish sharply between superior evolved personality structures (with a strong voice in the face of destiny, being bio-socially adaptable), and inferior evolved personality structures (more inclined to give in under pressure).

His professor and friend H. Cantril, who was the Director General of the Institute for International Relations Research at the United Nations and an advisor to four US presidents, later asked him about the secret to his strength, and Nicolae Mărgineanu answered: "... two secrets. First, during detention you had to be so busy that you had no time to think that you were in prison, and if eventually, willingly or unwillingly, this thought came to you, then you had to believe that in two weeks at most freedom awaited you. But the precondition was a clear conscience that you had done your duty and not made a fool of your country, your people, and yourself". Later even, he wrote about those sad years: *The great advantage of the intellectual in prison was the richness of his inner life, which made him be enough for himself and not feel alone no matter where he was. These criminal conditions, unimaginable in their barbarity, we could only bear by withdraw-*

ing into our own consciousness, where we found enough tranquility so as not to lose confidence in ourselves. In people and in ourselves. And in justice in the world, which had to come eventually.

Later works

After he was released from jail, he tried to catch up to his calling as a researcher and academic. In 1969 he published *Under the Sign of Culture*, in which he shares his trust in culture and civilization, in harmony and balance, in a word, about humanity, the outmost quality which "closes the circle of human features, intellectual, practical or moral". He became a substitute professor and researcher at the "Babeş Bolyai" University in Cluj, School of History and Psychology, between 1971-1980. Later, he was a visiting professor in Bonn (1971), Hamburg, (1972), the Rockefeller Foundation (1979-1980), and a Senior Scientific Researcher Grade II at the Pedagogical Science Institute, and Head of the Cluj Branch of this Institute between 1969-1971. In 1980, in his last year at the Rockefeller Foundation, he was diagnosed with cancer, and returned to Romania.

In his *Psychology and Literature*, published in 1970, N. Mărgineanu discussed major trends in personality psychology that have influenced universal literature or have been influenced by literature. He considered that these two disciplines support each other. While in *The Human Condition*, psychological theory was concerned with both the interpretation and description of cases, in *Psychology and Literature* these two fields are seen as separate endeavors: case studies belong to writers who create characters, while interpretations are the domain of psychologists. The book examines the influence of psychoanalysis, Adler's overcompensation of inferiority

complexes and Jungian archetypes, without which authors like Thomas Mann and Herman Hesse, Eugene O'Neill and William Faulkner would have probably approached human nature differently or their works might have been largely misunderstood. The impact of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology, on the one hand, and Jaspers's existentialism, on the other, is analysed in the writings of Camus, Sartre, and Heinrich Boll. Historical materialism and class struggle are analysed in the context of George Bernard Shaw's work, the novels of Gorky, Dreiser, Malraux, and Roger Martin du Gard.

In *The Human Condition. The bio-psycho-social and cultural aspects* (1973), Nicolae Mărgineanu describes the human being as the supreme creation of the world. For him, the biological infrastructure, the social superstructure and the psychological infrastructure are at the basis of understanding the psychological structure of a person. Thus, the human condition finds itself in a permanent evolution. In his view, personality psychology is not only the study of a person's psychological structure, but also the study of the human condition as defined by the interaction between an individual and society, whose final goal is culture.

His son, the renowned film director Nicolae Mărgineanu, filmed the documentary *Universities and Prisons*, in 2010, a touching work of art dedicated to the memory of the one who could have been the greatest Romanian psychologist of all times and who has left a solid heritage even under the adverse conditions he had to live through. He described his father like this: *"He was the son of peasants and he kept with him for his entire life the optimism and vigour of his peasant origin. He treasured books, school and later his university studies and scientific research. For a peasant son leaving for school in those times, his career has been stunning. He enjoyed the good life, but never complained when life was hard. He fiercely loved the nation he was born in and was grateful that even in the most difficult circumstances he had to live through, he never made a mockery of his beliefs. Every time I had to make a decision in my life, I asked myself: what would my father's advice be? He would always pay attention to me, listening with consideration to all I had to say, even if my explanations were rather clumsy. He would rephrase my musings with clarity and simplicity and draw a clear and logical conclusion which I could easily comprehend"*.