

CONSTANTIN DIMOFTACHE ZELETIN

13th April 1935 – 18th February 2020

On February 18, 2020, Constantin Dimoftache passed away, after a lengthy and severe illness, which he accepted with poise and grace. Constantin Dimoftache, well-known in the Romanian medical academic community, was not only a professor and researcher in medical sciences and biophysics, but also a person of great erudition, writer (under the pseudonym C.D. Zeletin), poet, essayist, historiographer, outstanding and prolific translator of Italian and French lyrics.



Constantin Dimoftache was born on 13th April 1935, in the Burdusaci village, Răchitoasa commune, Bacău county, son of the orthodox priest Nicolae Dimoftache and of Maria (maiden name Țarălungă), primary school teacher. He followed the primary school classes in his natal village, having his mother as teacher. In his childhood, under his father supervision, he became acquainted with music.

From 1945 to 1952 he was a pupil at the "Gheorghe Roșca Codreanu" National College from Bârlad. After graduating high school, he enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest, Pediatrics section, and obtained his diploma in 1959. In 1958, for two years, he accessed by competition to a position of medical intern at the Hospitals in Bucharest. He worked then as district doctor in the heavy loaded sanitary circumscription III in Hunedoara (1960–1961). In 1961 he obtained the assignment at the Osteoarticular Tuberculosis Sanatorium in Mangalia, where he remained until 1962.

In 1962 he competed, and succeeded, for a position of scientific researcher at the Department of Biophysics of the Medico-Pharmaceutical Institute from Bucharest. Starting with 1965, he is assistant professor at the Department of Biophysics, being entitled, following competition, in 1973. In 1974 he obtained the Ph.D. in Medical Sciences, specialization Physiology. He will be appointed, step by step, by competition, in all the academic positions of the university hierarchy: lecturer (1983–1990), reader (1990–1993), professor (1993–2005).

From 1973 to 1990 he was a member of the Steering Committee of the Biophysics Section of the Union of Medical Sciences Societies.

In 1991, Dimoftache become the founder and the editor-in-chief of the *Romanian Journal of Biophysics*, Editura Academiei Române (Publishing House of the Romanian Academy). After his retirement, in 2005, he will remain as honorary editor.

He has authored, himself or in collaboration, treatises, text-books, practical works text-books, and we are mentioning: *Course in Biophysics* (1963), *Lectures on Medical Biophysics*, three volumes (1964 and 1971), *Directory of practical works in biophysics* (successive editions 1964, 1972, 1975, 1977), *Medical Biophysics* (1977), *Medical Biophysics* (in collaboration with Sonia Herman) 1993, *Principles of Human Biophysics*, two volumes (in collaboration with Sonia Herman), 2003.

He elaborated over 70 scientific papers in several domains: nuclear medicine, criobiophysics, cytospectrophotometry, cybernetic modelling of some biological processes, etc., presented at international and national scientific meetings and published in prestigious journals like: *Nature* (1963), *Biophysik* (1966), *Zuchthygiene* (1967), *Zootechnica e veterinaria* (1968), etc.

He made original contributions in several research fields, of which we mention: Design, verification and validation of an original system for identifying the lymphocytes with normal

morphological appearance but presumed to be affected by the morbid impulse in human chronic lymphoid leukemia. Together with A. Ciureș, he made a cytospectrophotometry device in the visible spectrum, the first in Romania (1963). He pointed out for the first time (1964) the existence of two types of small lymphocyte in human blood, proposing a revision of the leukocyte formula. He established a series of precise indices of the semen cell preserved in cold and freezing, the efficiency of which is reflected by the increase of fertility indices in the practice of artificial seeding in zootechnics. He developed an original cybernetic model of visual excitation (designed in collaboration with Sonia Herman), model that can be applied to certain pathological situations (amblyopia, hemeralopia, pigment retinopathy, etc.).

In 1994 he became a full member of the Academy of Medical Sciences.

At the same time with his didactical and medical scientific research activity, Constantin Dimoftache carried out a prodigious literary activity, materialized in more than 60 volumes, published under the pseudonym C.D. Zeletin. He made the debut in 1960 in the literary review *Lucafărul*. From this moment we will find his name in many literary and cultural reviews from our country: *România literară*, *Lucafărul*, *Contemporanul*, *Tribuna*, *Ateneu*, *Steaua*, *Gazeta literară*, *Familia*, *Ramuri*, *Tomis*, *Amfiteatru*, *Convorbiri literare*, *Muzica*, *Viața medicală*, *Acolada*, etc.

In 1967 he became a member of the Writers Union of Romania.

His original poetic work consists of two volumes: *Călătorie spre transparență* (*A travel to transparency*), Ed. Eminescu, Bucharest, 1977, and *Andaluzia* (*Andalusia*), Cartea românească, Bucharest, 1986. Both volumes contain a selection of the most representative poems written during several years.

In the same original tone, we will find the three volumes of apophthegms, aphorisms and short essays: *Ideograme pe nisipul coridei* (*Ideograms on the corrida sand*), Cartea românească, Bucharest, 1982; *Adagii* (*Adages*), Ed. Athena, Bucharest, 1999; *Zdrențe în paradis* (*Rags in paradise*), Spandugino, Bucharest, 2012.

C.D. Zeletin published many essays, literary studies, writings evoking personalities, historiography, memorialistic works, etc. Here are some of them: *Respiro în amonte* (*Respiro upstream*), Cartea românească, Bucharest, 1995; *Gaură-n cer* (*A hollow in the sky*), Ed. Athena, Bucharest, 1997; *Amar de vreme* (*For such a long time*), Ed. Vitruviu, Bucharest, 2001; *Distinguo. Eseuri. Evocări. Scriitori medici. Convorbiri* (*Distinguo. Essays. Rememberings. Physicians writers. Conversations*), Ed. Vitruviu, Bucharest, 2008; *Rămânerea trecerii* (*The passage of time*), Spandugino, Bucharest, 2012; *Domnu-i domn și Ieru-i Ier. Proze. Convorbiri. La arderea manuscriselor* (*Prose. Conversations. Burning the manuscripts*), Spandugino, Bucharest, 2017; *Așternutul insomniacului. Poeme gnomice în proză* (*The insomniac thoughts. Gnostic poems in prose*), Spandugino, Bucharest, 2018.

In the works of C.D. Zeletin, the volume *Principesa Elena Bibescu, marea pianistă, născută Kostaki Epureanu. Începuturile carierei parisiene a lui George Enescu* (*Princess Elena Bibescu, the great pianist, born Kostaki Epureanu. The beginnings of George Enescu career in Paris*), Ed. Vitruviu, Bucharest, 2007, has a special place. It is an ample musicological research, rich in novel data, concerning the „first vice-mother” of George Enescu, the one that had the intuition of his genius as composer, and had promoted him in the artistic life of Paris. The book is in the same time a historical-literary evocation of the history of Romania, especially of the aristocratic life in Moldavia and Wallachia, for a long period of time, from the second half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century.

C.D. Zeletin was constantly preoccupied to update and reconsider the works of some prestigious personalities of the Romanian medical, scientific and cultural life. Based on serious and accurate research conducted in archives, libraries and museums, he managed to bring valuable contributions to the knowledge of facts of their life and work. Here are some of these volumes: *Doctorul Alexandru Brăescu (1860–1917), întemeietor al învățământului de psihiatrie din Moldova, ctitorul Spitalului Socola din Iași. Contribuții documentare* (*Doctor Alexandru Brăescu (1860–1917), father of the psychiatric school of Moldavia, founder of the Socola Hospital from*

Iași. *Documentary contributions*), Corgal Press, Bacău, 2009; Ștefan Zeletin. *Contribuții documentare* (Ștefan Zeletin. *Documentary contributions*), Corgal Press, Bacău, 2002; Scânteind ca Sirius... *Scrisorile din tinerețe ale Zoei G. Frasin către G. Tutoveanu. Comentariu urmat de contribuții documentare la biografia poetului G. Tutoveanu* (*Twinkling like Sirius... Youth letters of Zoe G. Frasin for G. Tutoveanu. Comments followed by documentary contributions to the biography of the poet G. Tutoveanu*), Ed. Sfera, Bârlad, 2004.

In the same area of interest, he re-edited, in critical editions with notes, comments and studies, the works of outstanding national personalities from science and literature, originally contributing to the knowledge and understanding of the Romanian culture heritage. We are mentioning some: *Alexandrina Enăchescu Cantemir. Portul popular românesc* (*Alexandrina Enăchescu Cantemir. Traditional folk costumes*), Meridiane, Bucharest, 1971, re-edited in Japan, Kobunsha Co. Ltd., Tokio, 1976; *Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș, Scrieri despre arta românească* (*Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș, Writings on Romanian Art*), Meridiane, Bucharest, 1987; Șt. Zeletin, *Burghezia română, originea și rolul ei istoric* (Șt. Zeletin, *Romanian bourgeoisie, origin and historical role*), second edition, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1991; Șt. Zeletin, *Neoliberalismul* (Șt. Zeletin, *Neoliberalism*), third edition, Scripta, Bucharest, 1992; *Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș. Memorii, Lupta vieții unui octogenar* (*Alexandru Tzigara-Samurcaș. Memoirs, Life struggle of an octogenarian*), Meridiane, Bucharest, 2003; *G. Tutoveanu. Poezii* (*G. Tutoveanu, Poems*), Ed. Sfera, Bârlad, 2007; *Ion Buzdugan, Miresme din stepă. Poezii* (*Ion Buzdugan, The fragrance of the steppe. Poems*), Ed. Sfera, Bârlad, 2011.

Besides his original writings, C.D. Zeletin was a prolific and inspired translator of medieval and renaissance Italian lyrics as well as of modern French poetry.

Among the translation of Italian poetry, we are mentioning a couple of volumes, some of which representing also the first anthology of universal lyrics masterpieces translated in Romanian: *Lirica Renașterii italiene* (*The lyrics of Italian Renaissance*), Editura Tineretului, Bucharest, 1966; *Sonetul italian în Evul mediu și Renaștere* (*Italian Sonnet in Middle Age and Renaissance*), two volumes, Minerva, 1970; *Michelangelo. Poezii. Opera omnia* (*Michelangelo. Poems. Opera omnia*), Minerva, Bucharest, 1986, first Romanian version of the works of the divine fiorentin; *Tommaso Campanella. Cetatea soarelui. Poezii filosofice* (*Tommaso Campanella. The City of the Sun. Philosophical Poems*), Humanitas, Bucharest, 2006, bilingual edition, in collaboration with Smaranda Bratu Elian.

It deserves to be mentioned that C.D. Zeletin discovered the paternity of the unique sonnet of Leonardo da Vinci (*Se voi star sano asserva questa norma...*) in the prolegomena of the Latin poem *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanus*, known also as *Flos medicinae* (13th century), proving it is not an original poem but a translation from Latin to Italian in the fix form of the sonnet.

As a young man, C.D. Zeletin is fascinated by the beauty of the modern French lyrics and started to translate to Romanian the works of famous poets from French literature: Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Valéry, Guillaume Apollinaire and others. This activity will lead to many poetry books, among which there are the following: *Lirică franceză modernă. Florilegiu* (*Modern French Lyrics. Anthology*), Albatros, Bucharest, 1981; *Charles Baudelaire. Florile Răului* (*Charles Baudelaire. The Flowers of Evil*), Univers, Bucharest, 1991; this is the first complete translation of *The Flowers of Evil* in the vision of a single poet; *Paul Verlaine. Poèmes. Poezii* (*Paul Verlaine. Poèmes. Poems*), Pandora-M, Târgoviște, 2002, bilingual edition, translations by Șt.O. Iosif and C.D. Zeletin.

Thanks to the Publishing House Spandugino from Bucharest, and to its Director Lavinia Spandonide, the entire literary work of C.D. Zeletin was published in a luxury edition in the Collection Distinguo, in seven volumes with more than 7800 pages.

For his vast and rich cultural activity C.D. Zeletin was awarded many prices, diplomas, medals, titles: National Order of Faithful Service with the rank of Officer, awarded by the President of Romania, 1 December 2000; Book Price and Golden Medal, Edinburgh, Great Britain, 1965, for *Michelangelo. Sonnets*; Diploma and Medal at the International Book Fair, Leipzig, 1971; The Price of the Writers Association from Bucharest, 1975; Price of the National

Book Fest, Cluj-Napoca, 1991; The Price of the Romanian Writers Union, 1991, for the best translation: *Charles Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil*; Diploma of Excellence of the *Romanian Medical Journal*), 2005; "Opera Omnia" Price, Librex Book Fest, Iași, 2005; Price of Excellence of the *Ateneu* review), 2008.

C.D. Zeletin was the founder, in 1991, and the President of the Romanian Society of Physicians Writers.

In 1990 he was elected Honorary President of the Academia Bârlădeană, literary-cultural society founded in 1915.

He gave many lectures and also participated in radio and television cultural broadcasts.

C.D. Zeletin's literary work was highly appreciated by well-known authorities of the literary world of Romania: Tudor Vianu, Perpessicius, Al. Philippide, Tudor Arghezi, Șerban Cioculescu, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Geo Bogza and many others... Tudor Vianu called him *poeta doctus*, and Ștefan Augustin Doinaș remarks "a noticeable victory of the Romanian expressiveness" and an aesthetic delight in the way he succeeded the translation of high-rang universal poetry and offered it to all literature lovers from Romania.

Constantin Dimoftache Zeletin was a writer with a far-reaching work, a learned and prolific scholar, an original poet, that had cultivated with subtlety the charming musicality of the poems' verse and harmony, in his own lyrics as well as in the translated poems. He was striving for knowledge and had a fantastic memory, an outstanding working capacity and an opening to large and diverse horizons. All these made him as a multicultural intellectual, an encyclopedic spirit, a fascinating personality. With all his life, his scientific and literary work, left to the Romanian culture and civilization a rich and valuable legacy, that has to be read and preserved.

Modest, discreet, diplomat, he succeeded to overcome all seemingly insurmountable obstacles that threatened so many times his life, his career and his future (the danger of being expelled from school or faculty studies as the son of a priest, the rejection by the communist censorship of his written work, the danger, before 1989, of social exclusion, for not being a member of the communist party, intrigues from envy, etc.)

Humble, with a civilized and noble behavior, a man of absolute distinction and politesse, of exemplary ethics and moral power, being at the same time aware of his true human value.

He loved like no one else his parents, brothers, relatives, friends, his country and the Romanian language, the national history and culture. He showed an unconditional attachment and affection for children, old people, for those in need and sickness. He offered help, support and comfort, taking responsibility in solving in due time and correctly the critical situations concerning people close to him.

Intrinsic good, discreet and tactful, sensitive, bright soul, with a special vibrant sensitivity, a vocation for meditation and transcendent, with a thinking mold by understanding, softness and forgiveness, C.D. Zeletin was a born magister, that offered, restless, parts of his invaluable, fabulous, knowledge thesaurus to all those asking for help or to his disciples, with generosity and joy, without restraint.

He liked the things well done, and for that, he worked days and nights, with a strong will, attentive as a jeweler, and with Benedictine patience, with tireless passion and great application, following the sweet blowing of perfection.

The charm of his personality, his incandescent soul, his great and diverse work with such a high spirituality, for all these C.D. Zeletin will always have a special place in our scientific and cultural world, a place of erudition and refinement, a true renaissance spirit.

A wonderful man has left us!

Professor Radu Șerban PALADE, MD, PhD
Full Member of the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences

Obituary

CONSTANTIN DIMOFTACHE ZELETIN

Biophysicist and writer

whose work in the field of Renaissance poetry gave him a freedom he wouldn't have had otherwise in communist Romania

A member of the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences and the Founding President of the Society for Physician Writers and Publishers in Romania, Constantin Dimoftache, alias writer and translator C.D. Zeletin (who died on 18th February 2020), left his native village in Moldova region, to study medicine in Bucharest after the death of Stalin in 1953. The son of a priest considered under Soviet rule an 'enemy of the people', he had to be adopted by a poorer 'non-bourgeois' relative with the same family name in order to be allowed to sit university admission tests in the Romanian Proletcult capital. In 1959 he graduated with highest honors from the Pediatric Department of "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Bucharest, with a postgraduate specialization in cellular biophysics, radiation biophysics, cryobiology, and biocybernetics. In 1965 he won a scholarship to specialize in histochemistry at the Sorbonne, but was unable to take up the offer, as communist authorities did not issue his passport until 1972 (when he was no longer eligible due to age limit).

As a medical student he had been unable to publish his own original poetry for similar political reasons and began to translate from poets of the Italian Renaissance under a pseudonym. C.D. Zeletin's translation of Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Sonnets* won the 1965 Edinburgh Book Award and Gold Medal, but he was not permitted to travel abroad to collect them. In the same year – before their discovery by Western scientists through electron microscopy – he suggested, by using a cytospectrophotometer, the existence of T lymphocytes (those that assure cellular immunity and that we now know to differ from B lymphocytes, that produce antibodies and humoral immunity), thus challenging the idea that lymphocytes consisted of a single, uniform, homogeneous population.

This is the context in which Constantin Dimoftache, Professor of Biophysics at his alma mater in Bucharest, – one and the same with the original poet-scholar C.D. Zeletin, *Uomo Universale* of contemporary Romanian culture – lived and completed his work.

He was born in 1935 in the village of Burdusaci, Răchitoasa commune, in Bacău County, Romania. He detested boasting and laziness, but superlatives permanently followed him as a multidisciplinary intellectual and visionary savant: his research in cytospectrophotometry, by an original method, on the differentiation of lymphocytes in the peripheral blood (that, on a smear, have the same morphology) would have justified him, perhaps – had he lived in and been supported in a developed country – to aspire to recognition similar to that of his illustrious uncle, George Emil Palade, Nobel Laureate for Medicine (described as "the most influential cell biologist ever").

His monumental series of *Selected Works* and *Crestomația de familie* (*Family Crestomacy*), published with the occasion of George Emil Palade's centenary, are some of the finest examples of editorial work to be published in post-1989 Romania.

"To begin with I must say that I was and am a poet that translates and not a translator that writes poems," C.D. Zeletin confessed in an interview for Radio Romania. "More precisely, I've written poems since I was small and at a certain point, a certain psycho-mental and cultural structure that made me call myself *a poet* matured within me. After this I began to translate,

without anyone encouraging me; since I was in secondary school I've translated Baudelaire, Hélène Vacaresco, Anna de Noailles, Victor Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, the Parnassians. I co-translated *Espoir en Dieu* by Victor Hugo with Uncle Emil Palade, the savant's father, when he came to Burdusaci, and soon after published it."

I asked him once, on a peripatetic stroll on the shores of the Black Sea, what epitaph he would choose for himself out of world literature. He spontaneously recited the first quatrain of "Fêtes de la Patience" by Arthur Rimbaud: "*Oisive jeunesse / À tout asservie, / Par délicatesse / J'ai perdu ma vie.*" C.D. Zeletin did not squander his life, but rather fructified it through joyful and patient endurance.

According to literary critics, the charm of C.D. Zeletin's personality comes from the combination of rigour and strength of character with Christian gentleness stemming directly from Romanian humaneness. It is from this latter space that his affinity for fixed lyric forms stems, the passion with which he translated the Italian sonnets of Michelangelo and of others, but also Modern French lyric, including Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and *The Ramayana*.

As a historian of medicine, he discovered that Leonardo da Vinci's sole sonnet, "*Se voi star sano osserva questa norma...*" is in fact the prologue of the Latin medical poem *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum* (also named *Flos medicinae*, 13th c.) translated into Italian as an adapted sonnet.

In 2002, when I invited him to Oxford to participate in the graduation ceremony for my DPhil, I was the guest – together with Constantin and my mother – of Hugh Trevor-Roper, Baron Dacre of Glanton, ex-Regius Professor of Modern History at Christ Church College, former MI6 officer and a participant at the Nuremberg Trials (where he had interviewed, among others, Joachim von Ribbentrop). A few minutes after we'd entered his salon in The Old Rectory, Didcot, Baron Dacre, one of the most redoubtable and idiosyncratic Oxonian intellectuals of the last century, conversed volubly in French with Constantin, for whom he showed a particular interest (while he spoke to my mother in Russian and in English to me). After half an hour, their conversation had touched an unbelievably intimate level, up to where the Baron – who seemed not to suspect that he had cancer, stretched out as if on an altar on the sofa – allowed his abdomen to be examined and his inguinal adenopathy be palpated by the Romanian guest: that is how much trust Constantin's charisma inspired to quench the suffering of a discreet and difficult man, who he had just met...

Beyond his formidable intelligence, the genius of his apodictic lyrical formulations and his tireless stamina, C.D. Zeletin's life illustrates the oxymoronic motto used by Walter Pater, *ex forti dulcedo* (in the sense of gentleness as the sap of spiritual power), in order to describe "the true type of the Michelangelesque".

He remains exemplary for his didactic vocation as *arbiter elegantiae*, beyond his photographic memory and exceptional intellectual endowment, for the patience with which he responded to the adversity in which he lived – not just on a socio-political level, but also a biological one, if we are to recall the somatic suffering of his last years, but also the merciless insomnia that he suffered from almost all his life.

His unconditional availability to meet others joyfully – regardless of their social status, professional rank, or intellectual ability – was legendary. He himself says it in a reflection: "You pass by a sufferer and don't see him: it's possible. You pass and see him: it's something. You see him, you comfort and pity him: it's very good, but it's not enough, ideally you would make him yours. This is the key! This is what I want to see!"

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