



OLGA NECRASOV, (1910-2000)
TEACHER AND SCIENTIST ACADEMICIAN,
PROFESSOR, DOCENT DOCTOR IN SCIENCE

What does Olga Necrasov represent for “us”? Which could be the secret of her glamorous development and fulfillment? Such questions come to our minds not in the hope of finding out a formula of universal applicative value, but in the hope of understanding and of giving a greater basis to the appreciation and high esteem of those who had the privilege of being close to her and of working in collaboration with her.

But, first of all, it is necessary to make clear what we mean by “us”, which we take as a reference entity in our immediate reality against which we may appreciate the meaning and the significance of a life. “Us” may include the restricted circle of her disciples, it may include the teaching staff of the Biology Faculty, or of the University. It may include the master minds of contemporary science and also those recently engaged and dedicated to scientific research with the same unavowed hope which, we suppose, had been cherished by Professor Docent Doctor Olga Necrasov, full member of the Romanian Academy. We cannot include in our evocative lines all these levels of references, that is sure, because of the complexity of the problems they represent. The ideas and the feelings we are going to speak about here come especially from the more restricted level, that of the presence of Professor Olga Necrasov among her fellow teachers, of the direct conveyance of learning from master to disciples, a level overflowing with multiple significance for the latter.

We are fully convinced that Professor Olga Necrasov, by the style of her research and teaching activities as well as by her entire life-style may well be considered a genuine instructor and guide. She did not try to make her assistants into mere reciters and echoers of her own ideas, but to make them true researchers of the new possibilities which the standard of contemporary knowledge offers.

We might be tempted to associate this high scientific and professional development, crowned with the most coveted laurels of academic achievements, to a life spared of difficulties, troubles and anxieties which most people have to go through. The celebrated scientist Olga Necrasov did not enjoy such a protected existence and that is why, except for her incidental artistic inclinations for drawing, music and sports, she was stimulated by an obstinate perseverance to face and endure the difficulties which dedication to scientific work implies. In her existence she had to live through historical events which violently convulsed the destiny of individuals and, also, of large collectivities.

Born on the 1st of September, 1910, in Sank Petersburg, the capital of Russia of that time, the future professor of comparative Anatomy and, later on, the celebrated anthropologist, attended the primary and secondary school at "Norre Dame" in Iași. Her father, an army officer, fought the First World War in the Romanian army. Following the more and more insecure and agitated events in Russia after 1917, general Necrasov brings part of his family, his wife (a teacher), little Olga and his older son, to Iași, two older daughters being caught in the Russian disorder of the Revolution. Soon, her father died in Basarabia. Little Olga, aged six and without any means of existence is entrusted for education to the private boarding school for young ladies "Notre Dame" in Iași where she remains until graduation in 1928. She gets excellent grades in her baccalaureate and is invited by Professor Paul Bujor, an important university personality of the time, to enter the Natural Science Faculty of the University of Iași.

As a student Olga Necrasov gives private lessons in order to win her living and when a student in the third year she becomes a substitute teacher at the school she graduated not long ago.

The erudition of the savant professor Olga Necrasov begins to lay its foundations in these years leaden with difficulties and concern which she overcomes with hard work and dedication. In this respect, while a student in the first years she also follows the courses of the Faculty of Geology and Philosophy, which will be of great help to her later on. We must mention that in her evolution towards a biologist and scientist her professors had an important role, especially professors Ion Borcea, Paul Bujor, Ion Botez, Leon Cosmovici and Alexandru Popovici. Due to them, the evolutionary outlook becomes an integral part of her thinking. Due to all those teachers she achieved a high level of instruction and, in her turn, she develops on the line of rigorously observing and analyzing the phenomena as a basis of systematizing scientific information by means of generalizing. We suppose that under the influence of all these scientists she learns the profound meaning of an important activity, which we have treated in a disparaging manner, the activity of increasing the number of those interested in understanding and knowing the domain of the living creatures, and more so, in the unsolved mysteries of own body. This is how we explain her presence, while a student, in the group of people who founded the Student Association "The Friends of Nature", in 1931, and also her later various initiatives on the same line.

In 1932 she graduates from the Faculty, obtains her diploma and is retained in the Faculty as assistant at the Anthropology and Paleontology laboratory under the well known professor and biologist I. Gh. Botez. In 1935-1936, during her paid holiday she undertakes thorough studies in the domain of anatomy and serological anthropology, in Warsaw, with professors H. Loth and L. Hirschfeld.

In 1937, while Professor Ion Borcea was in Paris, the young assistant teacher Olga Necrasov represents the Anthropology Laboratory of Iași at the International Congress of Anthropology and Prehistory organized in Bucharest by professors Fr. Rainer and M. Minovici. In the same year she asks again for a period of specialization in Poland and Germany on a paid leave period, without a fellowship as would have been proper, in order to study craniology, biometry and classic biostatistics, under the celebrated anthropologist Jan Czekanowski.

In 1940, she submits her doctoral dissertation "Anthropological research in North-east Romania" which is published in full in the magazine "Annales Scientifiques de l'Université de Jassy", and in an abridged form in the magazine "Études et Recherches" of the Romanian Academy. In the same years she is promoted lecturer at the Animal Morphology Laboratory, as a substitute for her colleague, the future academicien Mihai Băcescu who is taken at the Museum of Natural History in Bucharest. She becomes a titular holder of that position in 1940, after a ten years didactic career.

A period of great difficulties follow for the country as well as for the university studies and for those engaged in them: the Second World War, the entrance of Romania on this war, the removal of the University of Iași for Alba Iulia, which all meant great suffering and loss. After the end of the war and the return to Iași, lecturer Olga Necrasov takes active part in reorganizing the laboratory which was destroyed in great part.

In 1945 she doesn't accept the invitation of Professor Gr. T. Popa to move to Bucharest and she also doesn't accept the proposal of the University of Cluj, in 1949, for an associated professor position, although she could come closer to her family which remained in Transylvania after the refuge. The premature and dramatic decease of Professor Ion Gh. Botez in prison – where he was unjustly put – determines her to remain in Iași where she is rightly promoted to the position of associated professor at the Animal Histology and Embryology discipline, position which remained vacant when Petru Șușter was transferred to the General Biology Field, which was a new discipline introduced by the 1948 Reform of education. In a short while Olga Necrasov begins to teach Comparative Anatomy, too.

In 1959 she becomes full professor, coordinator and instructor of doctoral activity in Anthropology and Comparative Anatomy. Of her didactic publications we must mention the two multiplied fascicles and the four volumes of Comparative Anatomy, all characterized by clarity, precision, extensive documentation and a remarkable accuracy in the presentation of the text and of the corresponding illustrations.

Between 1958 and 1968 she acts as the head of the Anthropological department of the Romanian Academy in Iași. Since then and until the year 2000, this department was headed by her closest disciple, Dr. Maria Cristescu, who was an illustrious successor of Professor Olga Necrasov.

Her research activity of more than three decades and her remarkable results contribute to her being elected a correspondent member of the Romanian Academy, in 1963. In the same year, the Animal Morphology Laboratory is transformed into the Department of Animal Morphology and Anthropology, whose head is Professor and Academician Olga Necrasov till 1973.

In 1964, the leadership of the Romanian Academy enusts to her the position of Director of the Anthropological Research Centre in Bucharest, position which was previously occupied by another prestigious scientist, Academician Ștefan Milcu. At the same time she acts as managing editor of the magazines of anthropology "Annuaire d'Anthropologie" and "Anthropological Studies and Research" published by the Academy.

Professor Olga Necrasov continues her prestigious didactic and scientific activity beginning with September 1975 as consulting professor and as honorary collaborator of the Laboratory of Anthropology of the Iași section of the Romanian Academy where she is also scientific secretary.

As an appreciation of her acknowledged scientific achievements, in January 1990, she is conferred the title of full member of the Academy, a fact which we are proud of and which, at the same time, obliges us to greater achievements.

In comparison with this masterful affirmation on the scientific level, Professor Necrasov's didactic activity might seem less clear, assuming a generally anonymous trend, contradicted only by those who take active part in it. One might say that there have been cases of lack of complete harmony between the quality of a researcher, possessor of information, of the methods and of the techniques of the research activities – and the ability to teach other people. An example, often referred to, is that of a remarkable professor – the historian and the history philosopher A.D. Xenopol, who is said to have had a little audience and to have been little understood by his students, fact which was supposed to have been caused by his too little communication of the results of his research activities.

But those who had chance of attending Professor Olga Necrasov classes would, with no doubt, assert that her teaching abilities were not at all eclipsed by her aura of great researcher. None of those who listened to her lectures on animal histology and embryology, on comparative anatomy or on anthropology happened to meet another professor with such a talent for teaching, in such a highly academic style, as that of indefatigable scientist Olga Necrasov. The basis of this assertion is essentially the quality of the lectures she delivered, which resulted from the combination, quite difficult to achieve, between the scientific precision and accuracy and the beautiful verbal expression, between the highly professional exigency and an extended understanding and transparency of the reasoning process; a combination of temperate sobriety and passion, as well as a great appreciation for everything that supports life.

She tenaciously defended the place and role of the morphological and taxonomical branches of science among the larger biological ensemble of subject matters, and she tenaciously defended their promoters, while others attacked them and favoured other transient subjects. "One cannot talk about the function of an organ or of system of organs" used Professor Olga Necrasov to say, "... without knowing its origins, its morphology and structure, without knowing to which taxonomic unit the organism or the being having it belongs to".

The more strict, sober and austere she seemed to be, the more concern, respect and attention were discernible in her attitudes towards the students revealing the person of special modesty and of wonderful human quality she was.

Recalling a few moments of one of her lectures, we go back in time, on an October day in 1953. We see, making her way towards the amphitheatre P², in the Building A of the University, taking small but decisive steps, a lady of small height, having in her hand, as usual, a box of coloured chalk, a little piece of paper, a packet of cigarettes "Select" and a box of matches. She enters the classroom, always punctual, she casts a glance at the audience, at the blackboard and at the posters and then she faces the students. It is the course on the anatomy of man. In a grave voice she announces: "Ladies and gentlemen, from today on we shall try to

enlarge our knowledge of the most advanced species of all species that are known on earth: the man, a biological and also a social being, at the same time. We shall try to improve our knowledge of our body in order to know how it functions, how we should take care of it and how we should protect it from anything that could injure it". In the complete silence and attention of the audience, the lecture goes on maintaining the same confidence which was transmitted by the first glances and gestures, with a careful choice of the words, confidence seeming to come out also of her whole bearing, nothing is ambiguous, everything is precise, detailed, presented crystal clear and in a rhythm which allows the students to understand, to take down notes and to make drawing in their notebooks.

Her forty five years of teaching activity overlap and sometimes concur with her more than sixty years of research and scientific activity which materialized in more than 250 papers on anthropology, comparative anatomy and archaeozoology. She inaugurated, by research and teaching activity, new lines of study, such as: contemporary biologic anthropology, paleoanthropology, ecological and functional morphology, archaeozoology.

In 1937 she begins to publish her results in contemporary anthropology. By herself and then in collaboration with her pupils from Iași and Bucharest, she analyzed the structure of Romanian population of the day from many points of view: morphologically, serologically and physiologically. In perfect consonance with the international directions of anthropological research of establishing down some evolutionist coherences within the human variety, she concerned herself especially with the problem of typology. The great anthropologist Olga Necrasov had a dream, an idea, which hasn't yet come true, that of elaboration an anthropological atlas of Romania. In her endeavor to distinguish the occurrence of the genetic mechanisms of evolution among human population, Olga Necrasov concentrates her anthropological analyses on restricted, closed, isolated communities from The Country of the Dornes, The Country of Vrancea, Bistritza Valley, The Danube Delta and Maramureș. She had in view the anthropological characteristics of successive generations, broaching thus the phenomenon of microevolution at the level of the human populations. For the study of this phenomenon she even worked out a corresponding personal methodology. The anthropological analysis of the origins of some ethnically minority groups (the Găgăuzi and Huțuli from Romania, the Aromăni from Albania, the Karakaceani from Bulgaria) was another research topic for Olga Necrasov. She also made a study of the Albanian people, which was very little known from an anthropological point of view. She promoted, among the Iași group of anthropologists, the research concerning the children's growth and development in different geographical and socio-economical surroundings.

Knowledge of the anthropological structure of the populations which lived on the territory of our country in the past was increased to a great extent by the studies of the important scientist Olga Necrasov. Olga Necrasov represented, as in the case of contemporary anthropology, a great power in internationally asserting and developing the Romanian research activity in the second half of the twentieth century. She published papers about the typology of the human populations which she established on the basis of the physical characteristics of the skeletons found from different periods (from Neolithic until Middle Ages). She published papers about the bone pathology and dental anomalies, about skull trephinations, artificial skull distortions and the life span in the prehistoric time. Because of a close collaboration with archaeologists, much of the data she obtained were used in archaeological and historical works, as for example, volume I of the Treatise on Romanian History, edited in 1960.

Understanding the importance of the study of the animal remains uncovered in the archaeological sites, Olga Necrasov initiated and develops in Iași, within the Animal Morphology Laboratory, an archaeozoological research activity. In this respect, in 1942, she, together with I. G. Botez, accomplishes a first paper concerning the wild and domestic species of animals identified at the Căcuteni Culture site, from Frumuşica-Neamț. Later on, Professor Olga Necrasov and the young archaeozoologists in Iași make known the inter- and multidisciplinary character of archaeozoology, by publishing in their papers data concerning: paleoeconomy (the importance of hunting, fishing and animal breeding for the old human populations of different periods - from Paleolithic until Middle Ages), paleoclimate (paleoclimatic phenomena known because of fauna variations), paleogeography (changes in the geographic distribution of some animal species).

The research of animal morphology developed, with the collaboration of her younger colleagues, from an ecological and functional perspective, some systems of organs (the nervous, digestive and reproductive) in fish.

All these fields of research, including the one regarding the history of bintogy in which she also brought her contribution, come together in what may be called her major contribution in the domain of biology, that of developing anthropology and animal morphology.

Academician Olga Necrasov is not only successor of her illustrious predecessors in the field of biology, but also, and primarily, the founder of a school on anthropology and animal morphology in Iași, gathering and developing around her a pleiad of researchers, most of them well known names of Romanian and international science.

Among the best known works, which have been reviewed and quoted by numberless authors, is the volume "The Origin and the Evolution of Man", published by the Romanian Academy Editorial House in 1971, as well as the work "Man's Ancestors", which was edited twice and translated in German, Ukrainian, Hungarian and Serbian.

By her many scientific publications as well as by her frequent participations in the country's intellectual developments by numerous public conferences, by her personal contributions in organizing regional and national expositions, by her counseling sessions on scientific matters, Olga Necrasov offers the model of a person dedicated not only to science but also to her fellow citizens. But she was a remarkable personality not only among the national scientific community; since 1960 she was a member of the Permanent Council of the International Association of Anthropology and Ethnology, member of the permanent editorial staff of the international magazine in Brno, the "Anthropology", beginning from 1962; beginning from 1969 she was a member of the leading staff of the working group of European anthropologists and a member of the Committee of the International Association of Bio-anthropologists. In recognition of her prestige she was nominated vice-president of the 8th Congress of the International Union of Anthropology and Ethnology, in Japan (Tokyo-Kyoto) in 1968 and in 1973 she was nominated vice-president of the 9th Congress of the International Union of Anthropology and Ethnology, in Chicago, USA.

The international acknowledgment of her scientific merits, alongside the national acknowledgment, materialized in the academic titles, appointments and distinctions do credit not only to academician Olga Necrasov but to Romanian scientific world among which are her nearest collaborators. She was offered the Commemorative medal "Al. Hidiecke" by the city of Humpolec (in 1962) at the proposal of the Czech Society of Anthropology; Honorary member of the Polish Society of Anthropology (1963); Correspondent member of the Society of Anthropology in Paris (1965), External regular member of the Society of Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Science (1969); Honorary member of the Royal Institute of Anthropology of Great Britain and Ireland (1966); Founding member of the International Centre of Sardinian Studies Cagliari, Italy (1969), Associate member of the Society of Anthropology, France (1969); Correspondent member of the Society of Anthropology in Vienna (1970), the Prize and medal "P. Broca" conferred by the Society of Anthropology in Paris for her life scientific activity in the domain (1980).

One thing is beyond doubt: the achievements she obtained as a result of her faithful dedication to her scientific principles, amplified by high motivations which reach beyond the personal ego.

And what can make a man happier, one of the Nobel Prize holders used to say – D. H. R. Barton – than the awareness that he is one of those who succeeded to move forward, even if with only one micron, the barrier of knowledge in the everlasting fight with nature! You can never say that you have come to an end, you can never reach absolute peace. This is the anxiety which every teacher passes through if he has the social responsibility of bringing up the future scientists, better qualified, more competent and more capable to work in a laboratory than he himself was. Where does this anxiety come from? It comes from the simple fact that the evolution of all sciences is at least a step ahead of the generalizations which the teacher at the chair presents and this discrepancy is almost humanly impossible to diminish. In this respect, of great importance, and almost compulsory is the dedication of younger students eager to achieve high scientific results and public acknowledgement.

Professor Olga Necrasov passed away on the 3rd of October, 2000, after a prolonged and painful illness. She left behind an unequalled scientific legacy and the remembrance of a scholar of exquisite talent and nobility for whom we manifest our high esteem, reverence and gratitude.

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