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ONE HUNDRED YEARS FROM THE BIRTH OF THE GREAT ROMANIAN BIOLOGIST - THE ACADEMICIAN MIHAI BĂCESCU (1908 – 1999)

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Abstract. Short description of Academician Mihai Băcescu's life and work (28th of March 1908–6th of August 1999), a distinguished Romanian biologist – at 100 years since his birth.

Résumé: Courte description de la vie et de l'œuvre de l'Académicien Mihai Băcescu (28 mars 1908–6 août 1999), biologiste roumain distingué – à son 100^{ème} anniversaire.

Key words: Mihai Băcescu, biographic data, zoological work, oceanological work.

INTRODUCTION

For the 90th anniversary of the Academician Mihai Băcescu I thought that, being one of the venerable scientist's oldest disciples and collaborators, I could ask, in writing, to some of the biologists that knew him closely, especially those whom he thought he formed himself, to express their appreciations and congratulations that I would publish afterwards. The answers to my appeal, filled with data and emotions, came promptly. They were all made of old memories evocations, superlative appreciations and greetings coming from their hearts. Without knowing, the interviewed persons have built him, while still alive, an invisible statue cast in words of bronze – a testimony for the future generations of biologists, for the Romanian and the universal science's history. These testimonies have been published in the local magazine “*Interferențe*” (no. 2/1998), under the Edition of the Fălticeni Mayor's Office, in the column “*Ad magistrum*” (p. 4-13). “*No doubt – I was writing in the presentation of that column – the Prof. acad. Mihai Băcescu is one of those strong personalities that do not give way even at the venerable age of 90 years old. Let's wish him a good health and a long life, the strength to keep on working and may God allow us all to live to celebrate the Centennial of his birth!*”. Unfortunately for the Romanian and universal biology, Mihai Băcescu lived only a year or so after this celebration, dying on the “Transfiguration” day – the 6th of August 1999 – at 91 years old. This is why today¹, instead of celebrating his centennial in his presence, we gathered here to evocate the life and the work of the great man, who still remains one of the pillars on which was built the Romanian biology.

He made substantial contributions to the development of different domains of the animal biology: carcinology (mostly), herpetology, ichtiology, ethnozology, museology; he is the Romanian biologist that represented the best, after Grigore Antipa, the biological and physical oceanography worldwide; he is the school leader due to whom the Romanian zoology has so many specialists today; he is the one who

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¹ The communication was made at the 28th of May 2008 during the spring session of the Science History Division within the Romanian Academy.

created a strong oceanological team at Constanța and a zoological one at the “Grigore Antipa” National Museum of Natural History (Bucharest); finally, we owe him the existence of a strong nucleus of world famous carcinologists studying the peracarids from the oceans of the world, as, for example, Modest Guțu and Iorgu Petrescu. And the list continues...

BIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Mihai Băcescu was born, in a family of teachers, on the 28th of March 1908 in Broșteni, the former county of Baia, whose capital was the city of Fălticeni. After his father's death – when he was four years old – and of his mother – when he was nine – he was brought up by relatives: first his grandmother from Pleșești (1912–1915) and then his mother's brother, Nicolae Băciu, of Fălticeni (1915–1919) and by his grandmother of Bogdănești (1919–1921). These are the years of his childhood, when he attended the elementary school no. 2 of Fălticeni (teacher Vasile Jitaru – father of the future academician Petre Jitaru), and then he attended the secondary school of the same town. During 1921–1928, he attended highschool, first at the “Nicu Gane” Highschool of Fălticeni (his mentor being Vasile Ciurea) and then at the “Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu” Highschool of Chișinău (with the help of the university professor Ioan Hudiță).

After the difficult years of childhood, when he had to cope without the parent's love and protection, we find the young Mihai Băcescu as a student at the Natural Sciences Faculty of Iași University (1928–1933). Noticed by the professor Paul Bujor, Mihai Băcescu was appointed curator of the Animal Morphology Department and encouraged to publish his first work with his colleague Sergiu Cărăușu about the Black Sea Fauna (1932).

After sustaining his License dissertation on the “*Vipera berus in Moldavia and Bessarabia*” (1933), Mihai Băcescu dedicated his following years (1933–1938) to the thorough preparation of his Ph.D. thesis, entitled “*The Mysidaceans of the Romanian waters – taxonomical, morphological, biogeographical and biological study*”. At the sustenance in front of the Ph.D. examining commission, formed of four most prominent specialists (Paul Bujor – head of examining commission, G. Botez, C. Motaș and I. Atanasiu – members), he received the highest qualification with “*cum laude*”.

In 1938, Băcescu has the satisfaction to see the fulfillment of his dream: to be retained as Senior Lecturer of the Animal Morphology Department under the supervision of his mentor, Paul Bujor. One year later, at the proposal of the same professor, with the recommendation of the scientist Emil Racovitza, he qualified for a scholarship in France, at the oceanographical research centers of Roskoff and Banyuls sur Mer, including the National History Museum in Paris and the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco. It is worthy to mention that, at the famous Museum of Paris, he specialized under the guidance of the illustrious professor Louis Fage.

² For the authenticity of the informations I used, mainly, the biographical charts published by Valeriu Filip in *Interferențe*, no. 2 Fălticeni, 1998 and by George D. Vasiliu in *Biologi din Romania*, Ion Borcea Editions, Bacău, 2001, both made according to the CVs received from Mihai Băcescu himself, as well as facts and dates from the conversations I had along the years with the distinguished scientist.



A family portrait: Academician Mihai Băcescu (middle) and his wife, Eliza, with their dear ones: Mihaela (granddaughter), Lotus (daughter) and Radu (son in law).

Back in Romania, Băcescu had to face a dilemma: to pursue the carrier he started at the University of Iași or to demand his transfer to the Natural History Museum of Bucharest, where he was persistently demanded by Grigore Antipa? Finally, Mihai Băcescu made his mind up. Saying farewell to his university career, he moved in the Capital city, at Antipa's Museum, where, in 1940, he was appointed Head of Department, a function assimilated with the one of a University professor. One year later, he also accepted the appointment as Chief of Laboratory in the Fish Research Institute (1941–1954) and, later, the appointment as the Institute's Director (1954–1957), chief of Academy's Oceanology Laboratory (1958–1968). All these functions were considered as "cumulus" to the "main function" in the "Grigore Antipa" National History Museum, where he ended his activity as its Executive Manager (1964-1988). At his retreat, at the age of 80, in 1988, he appointed instead Dumitru Murariu, US specialized mammalogist, who proved to be a worthy successor at the head of the Museum, still running it as we speak.

What else could one add to his museographic activity, his main and constant professional preoccupation that provided him with the most important satisfactions, functions and honors? One could add that, during the 1944–1947 period, he participated first hand to the restoration of Museum's building, that took place under the supervision of the professor Constantin Motaș (Antipa's successor, who, in 1946, appointed him as Assistant Manager), by rebuilding and endowing the exhibition halls with new furniture and show cases but, first of all, by reorganizing it

on modern principles, by separating the general fauna from the Romanian fauna, by tracing an unique visitation direction and by presenting the exhibits in phylogenetic order, things that were mostly appreciated at the reopening of the museum, in 1948. We might also add that, during the period of 1965–1974, he presided the Natural Sciences Museums Committee of the UNESCO International Council of Museums (ICOM). Starting with the year 1964, he was appointed Chairman of the Museum Council of Romania. During 1980-1982, he created and opened to the public visitation the Natural Sciences Museum of Fălticeni and, in 1993, the „Water Museum” of the same town received his name.

A ZOOLOGIST BY EXCELLENCE

Mihai Băcescu was a born *zoologist*, standing apart by his accomplished work as a specialist in decapod crustaceans and as ethnozoologist. He has been and still is considered, both in Romania and abroad, as one of the greatest Romanian biologists, besides Grigore Antipa, Emil Racovitza, Ion Borcea, Constantin Motaș, Radu Codreanu and Nicolae Botnariuc, if I were only to mention some of the contemporary celebrities from the distinguished scientist’s domain.

He always loved nature, but this love materialized since the moment he became Vasile Ciurea’s student, his mentor and natural sciences professor, a passionate lover of the flowers and the animals and also a wise educator. Later, as a student of the Science Faculty in Iași he benefited of professor Paul Bujor’s guidance who noticed Mihai Băcescu’s inclination for research and allowed him to use his Animal Morphology laboratory. Another opportunity was provided by the professor Ion Borcea, the Agigea Marine Station’s Director, who, during the summer vacations, taught him research methods in the laboratory and at sea, preparing him as biologist and oceanologist.

He was blessed with great initiative and a demanding nature, with exigency and thoroughness, during the field campaigns, while collecting the studied material, as well as in the laboratory, while studying it. In his opinion, the success of a specialist studying a group of animals is increasing proportionally with the time spent by the specialist with his behind (he used a more genuine term for it) on the turning stool, in front of his binocular magnifier and his microscope. Thus, in more than 66 years of scientific activity (he started in 1930), he succeeded in bringing a substantial contribution to the Romanian and universal aquatic and terrestrial zoology thesaurus and, since the 50’s, to the one of the marine ecology. During his zoologist career, he described, by himself or in collaboration, more than 350 new taxa, mostly crustaceans. Among others, he discovered and described five peracarid, four tanaidacean and a cumacean crustacean family, two tribes of mysidaceans and 42 copepod, mysidacean, cumacean and tanaidacean genera. The remaining 290 taxa are new species, 280 taxa being peracarids and 6 taxa of fishes. Naming 6 new genera and 60 new species from different groups of invertebrates and fishes after Romanian and foreign zoologists demonstrates the worldwide scientific prestige he was enjoying as a zoologist. It would be so much to talk about but, in order to save space, I shall add to this paragraph that, in “*The Fauna of the P. R. of Romania*” collection, the distinguished zoologist published three volumes: “*The Mysidacea*” (1945), “*The Cumacea*” (1951) and “*The Decapoda*” (1967). To these volumes he added later: “*Abyssal Crustacea*” (a collaboration with R. Menzies and J. L. Barnard), in the Columbia University Edition (1967) and “*Crustaceorum Catalogus*”

Pars 7 et 8 Cumacea”, at Academic Publishing, The Hague (1988). As a zoologist, he always stood out through his permanent activity, carried throughout his doctoral study, since 1963, as trainer for dozens of specialists for the Grigore Antipa’s Museum and the specialized institutions of Constanța and Agigea.

As an *ethnozoologist*, his contribution is greatly significant and, at the same time, ground breaking, original and extensive – a true treasure for the Romanian cultural patrimony that the author held dear. The constant passion and interest for ethnozoology is rooted, as he confessed later, in “*the contact with the rural world, with the life of woods and waters, and then with the tireless treasure hunters of the language, Mihai Lupescu and Ion Teodorescu, both pillars of the “Șezătoarea” magazine; finally the yearning I discovered in the Romanian peasant for the knowledge of all the nature’s creatures*”. The decision to walk the unthreaded path of ethnozoology, begun only by the folklorist Florea Marian before him, he took, while still a student, after reading the book “*Fishery and fishing in Romania*”, where Grigore Antipa was writing, in 1916: “*the person who will undertake ethnographic studies in our country will be fully rewarded by his work, as he or she will find at our people /.../ a real treasure of knowledge in all the branches of activity, learned from our ancestors and perfected by centuries’ worth of experience /.../. It is every scientist’s duty, regardless of his specialty, to gather, while there is still time, this rich ethnographic material*”.

Mihai Băcescu understood this sacred duty towards his people. He engaged in passionate researches thanks to his extraordinary stamina and based on his rich scientific culture, he published a total of 19 papers on folklore, crowned by two masterpieces of our literature in that field, and unfortunately remained unique. We are talking about his two major contributions: “*The fishes as seen by the Romanian popular fisherman*” (1947) and “*Birds in the nomenclature and life of the Romanian people*” (1961). We have to emphasize that the latter was close to being rejected by the Censor’s Office, being saved only by the defense of the linguist Alexandru Graur, who was the Executive Manager of the Academy’s Edition House and who considered it as “*gold for the specialists*”. During his field campaigns, Băcescu managed to gather, over a period of 16 years (1930-1946), over 800 names of plants and over 1000 vernacular names of animals and anatomic pieces, all unprecedented. From this ethnic treasure, he selected all the material referring to fish and he published the first title, which he dedicated to Antipa’s memory. Why? Because, on the day of Antipa’s death, Băcescu’s manuscript was on the desk of the great scientist, waiting for a preface. Among the 500 new names, the author was doubling the vernacular denominations, as known at that time. For its exceptional value, the book was awarded the Romanian Academy’s “*Vasile Adamachi*” award of 1947. In the second synthetic book, Băcescu published over 4600 names, from which 300 were authentically popular for 325 species of birds from the Romanian fauna.

In 1996, at the age of reason, the academician Mihai Băcescu, with a withering handwriting, managed to finish his third book of ethnozoology, “*Contributions to the knowledge of the Romanian zoological folklore*”. Written in a true storyteller’s voice, reminding of Ion Simionescu, the book contains novel observations on the popular beliefs gathered on terrain and folkloric data related to different living creatures of our countryside, mostly insects, snakes and mammals. Through his published work, Mihai Băcescu can be considered, in my opinion, *the true founder of the Romanian ethnozoology*.

AN OCEANOLOGIST OF INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION

Mihai Băcescu has been and still is unanimously recognized as the true creator of the modern Romanian Oceanology school. As proof, during 1964–1969, he was the one who represented Romania at the International Oceanographic Commission (I.O.C.). No doubt, he was the most distinguished successor of Grigore Antipa, not only as Director of his Museum, but also as a researcher of the marine and continental waters. Since 1956 and to the final years of his life, he participated in numerous limnology and oceanography international congresses, held in different countries of Europe as well as in USA, USSR, Tunis etc. As an internationally reputed peracarid specialist, he was invited to participate in oceanic scientific expeditions. Thus, in 1965, he worked for two months on the ship “Anton Brunn” that explored the abyssal life of the Peru-Chile deep trench down to 6300 m deep; during the years 1967–1968 he worked in the Caribbean Sea in the coastal waters of Cuba; in 1970 he participated in the expedition of the ship “Thalassa” in the tropical Atlantic, on the Mauritanian shelf; in 1977 he participated, on the same ship belonging to the French Institute for Exploitation of the Sea, in a cruise in the western Indian Ocean (the Persian Gulf area); during November 1973 – February 1974 he organized and led the first Romanian oceanographic expedition on the east-African coast, in Tanzania. Thus he brought back from all over the world a rich material for the „Grigore Antipa” Museum, based on which he described dozens of new taxa.

Regarding his marine ecology researches in the Black Sea, it would be so much to tell. Accompanied by a large team of scientists from the „Grigore Antipa” Museum, the Institute for Fish Research, the Academy’s Hydrology Commission, the Hydrobiology Department of the Biological Institute from Bucharest, the Marine Research Station, created by Grigore Antipa at Constanța and the Marine Zoological Station, created by Ion Borcea at Agigea (team that I took part to during 1954–1955), Mihai Băcescu undertook complex ecology researches throughout decades – time during which the seaside based stations merged to form the “Romanian Institute for Marine Research”. He himself emphasized the study of the *Corbulomya* sands, describing population ratios, trophic cycles, reproduction factors etc. (1957).

The results of his research comprising the entire Romanian shelf area have been published in a collection of five volumes, under the name of “Marine Ecology” and resumed in numerous Romanian and foreign scientific periodics.

EPILOGUE

More than 480 scientific and science popularization works, published as books and articles, are the tangible result of his 66 years permanent, every day work, since his debut in “The Scientific Magazine – Vasile Adamachi” of Iași (1930) to the apparition of his last ethnozoology book, dedicated to his wife, Eliza Băcescu (1996). At his 90th anniversary, he still had, in press, two books on the Indian Ocean expeditions of 1973–1974 and 1977 (mentioned above). This lifetime work, impressive in quantity, thematic diversity and content quality, places Mihai Băcescu in the ranks of all times most important Romanian biologists and as one of the internationally most important ones. He had the opportunity to see, during his lifetime, the appreciation of his creation, which rendered him immortal. In 1963 he

was chosen as Academy's correspondent member and, in 1990, he was selected as titular member of the Academy. He was a member of numerous and prestigious scientific societies and academies here and abroad. He was awarded Romanian and foreign prizes and awards. He was decorated with the "Order of Labor" class II, the "Cultural Merit" class I and the "Scientific Merit" class I. He received the "Prince Albert I^{er} de Monaco" medal, from the French State (1978).

One of the most memorable moments of his life happened before my very eyes, in Bucharest, in 1966, during the XXth Congress of the "International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean Sea" (CIESMM), organized by himself and where the Prince Rainier the Third of Monaco has been chosen as President of the Mediterranean Commission, commander Jacques-Yves Cousteau – as General Secretary and himself as President of the Benthos Commission. I remember perfectly the academic atmosphere, the words spoken by the three, the radiant face of the 58 years old scientist, savoring his success as a host.

For his 85th birthday (in 1993), Mihai Băcescu was celebrated at Fălticeni, where he received the title and the medal of city's Citizen of Honor, and the „Water Museum” was named after him. In the same town he was celebrated for the last time, at his 90th birthday, on the 28th of March 1998, when he received the Diploma and the Medal of Honor of the Prefect's Office of Suceava County and the Highschool no. 1 of Fălticeni received his name. This celebration remained in the memory of those who had the honor to be invited, as a major event, worthy to keep in mind.

Since then ten years have passed. Ten years without Mihai Băcescu calling me from time to time, each time addressing me with the same phrase: "Ștefan, your Highness, I beg of you, come pick me up with your car on the way to the Speleological Institute and drop me at the Museum; I really need to take some separata and to examine something at the microscope!". I went there, of course, and picked him from home, and only after listening to the advice of Mrs. Eliza and promising her not to let him work for more than 2–3 hours, we were good to go ...

Now, ten years later, all I can see of him is his name inscribed on the Museum's frontispiece in Victory's Plaza, along other famous biologists' names – on that museum that owes so much to the scientists, Grigore Antipa and Mihai Băcescu, that fought for the museum to become what it is today: a first importance national cultural and scientific establishment of Romania.

O SUTĂ DE ANI DE LA NAȘTEREA MARELUI BIOLOG ROMÂN – ACADEMICIANUL MIHAI BĂCESCU (1908 – 1999)

REZUMAT

Articolul conține o scurtă prezentare a vieții și operei Academicianului Mihai Băcescu (28 martie 1908 – 6 august 1999), distins biolog român de renume internațional, carcinolog și oceanolog. Articolul a fost scris cu ocazia împlinirii a o sută de ani de la naștere.

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