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Zamfir C. Arbure: Memoirs of an Anarchist in Romania

Maria Lidia & Martin Veith

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About nearly no other European country is there so little known about the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movement as Romania. Although bordering on Bulgaria, where the movement had reached one of the most extended, most numerous and with the most lasting social influences up to that time – declared illegal and eventually annihilated by the communists – the influence of anarchism has at all times been less in Romania. Up to the present day, studies have shown that between 1907 and 1916 the anarcho-syndicalist movement here reached the climax of its development. Especially, in industrial towns such as Ploiești, Galați and Brăila, the majority of workers organized themselves on revolutionary syndicalist principles, published anarcho-syndicalist magazines and fought for the improvement of life and work conditions through direct action methods. Moreover, it has been proven that explicit anarchist circles existed previously in towns such as Iași and București, often as part of the social democrat party. An overview on the rise of Romanian anarchism is offered by the life and the memoirs of Zamfir C. Arbure, *Temniță și exil* (Imprisonment and Exile).

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Arbure, also known in some magazines and writings as Arbore, as well as under the pseudonym of Ralli, was born on the 14th November 1848 in Cernăuți (Austro-Hungary at the time, today Ukraine) to a wealthy family. At the age of 17 his studies took him to Moscow, the capital of the despotically-ruled Russia. Together with other students he was arrested after a massive raid following a failed assassination attempt on the czar despite his not being politically active. In prison he became politically involved and his memoirs describe this change as well as the depressing reality of tsarist Russia and the omnipresence of the secret police. Zamfir Arbure joined the narodnik social-revolutionary movement which was leading an armed struggle against the tsarist regime and its governors, at the cost of many human lives. He became acquainted with Sergei Nechaev and later on with Alexander Herzen. As a result of the pressure put on him by the Russian authorities Zamfir moved to Zurich in 1870 and then to Geneva where he became an active collaborator of Mikhail Bakunin. He met and collaborated with Eliseé Reclus and Peter Kropotkin. Ralli, as he was called in Geneva, ran a publishing house, published social-revolutionary and anarchist writings and distributed them. In 1875 Arbure published the first issue of *Rabotnik* (The Worker), the first Russian social-revolutionary publication in newspaper format. Among other numerous contributions he wrote a book about the Paris Commune, at the same time being actively involved in organizing the movement. He was a member of the First International, a supporter of the anarchist movement and a member of the Jura Federation. Together with the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta he translated a letter of Bakunin's into Spanish and intended to participate together with the latter in the Spanish revolution. However, this did not happen. In time his relationship with Bakunin grew cold. On the other hand, he was to remain in connection with Reclus all his life. Shortly before his death in 1905, Reclus visited him in Bucharest, where Arbure eventually moved.

After his return to tsarist Russia, Arbure settled in Bessarabia where he continued to be active in the social-revolutionary movement. Among other things, he attempted to send 100 weapons over the Russian border, hidden inside books, with the purpose of supporting the armed resistance there. At the same time his main preoccupation was to fight against the strong anti-Semitism and nationalism which was largely popular within the social-democrat party and even inside the workers' movement from Romania. At that time, the major topic of social concern was Bessarabia and its status as a geopolitically disputed area between Romania and Russia. Bessarabia had been part of Moldavia (and thus of Romania) until 1812. Subsequently annexed by the Russians in 1917, Bessarabia returned to Romania after the Russian revolution. After the Second World War, which Romania entered on the side of the Nazis, Bessarabia again became part of the Soviet Union.

Nowadays Bessarabia is divided into the Republic of Moldova and a territory belonging to Ukraine. As a reaction to Russian nationalism and to Romanian annexionist intentions, Arbure promoted the idea of an independent Bessarabia. Arbure travelled in Romania and gave a speech at the Bucharest Workers' Club in September 1914. Moreover, he published a great number of articles in different socialist newspapers. In addition to his activity in socialist and anarchist circles, Arbure became known through the thorough study of Bessarabian geography, a passion which he shared with Reclus. His work "Dicționar geografic al Basarabiei" (Geographical Dictionary of Bessarabia) appeared in 1904 and was the first detailed study dedicated to this region. Arbure had a son, Dumitru, and two daughters, Ecaterina and Nina. Ecaterina Arbure was born in 1873 and became a major figure in the socialist movement, and later in the Romanian communist party declared illegal. By order of Stalin she was executed in Tiraspol in 1937. Nina Arbure became a well-known painter.

Arbure kept his political beliefs unchanged till the venerable age of 84. Thus, he published articles in the magazine "Viața Basarabiei"

(The Life of Bessarabia) from Chişinău until 1932. However, he was not able to get accustomed to the country he had chosen for his exile, namely Romania. His stay there is the subject of such statements as: "Wherever I look around me I see only decay. The old and the young, the cultivated and the illiterate, all behave equally, not even asking themselves what the meaning of their life is in the general progress of humanity. Living inside Romanian society I for one was not able to merge into it. That is why no-one knows me and I also know no-one. I haven't had and I still don't have friends in Romania". "Bonds of friendship tie me with no one here" says the author in the first chapter of "Temniță și exil". There was a common purpose and a sense of change in Bessarabia and Russia which he didn't find here. These memoirs, which extend up to 1881 (the year when he was granted Romanian citizenship), are mentioned by the well-known historian of anarchism Max Nettlau in his book *The History of Anarchism* along with another book of memoirs by Arbure entitled *În exil. Amintirile mele* (In exile. My memories). Nettlau criticizes both volumes, claiming that they contain a series of inaccuracies. However, Nettlau doesn't specify what kind of inaccuracies he found. The second-mentioned volume by Arbure describes his life until 1896. Therefore, his other significant activities, the subsequent social events, as well as the origin and development of the Romanian anarcho-syndicalist movement are not recorded. There are still many things written by him and about him and about this stage of the Romanian anarchist and social-revolutionary movement which are waiting to be (re)discovered and (re)published. It is not an easy undertaking. On the one hand, the Romanian and Russian communist dictatorships locked up and concealed his numerous writings, with the exception of his geographical works. On the other hand, the various different spellings of both his name and pseudonym make the endeavour more difficult.

Furthermore, we are dealing with facts which at the first sight seem contradictory and which require an adequate interpretation.

For example, it appears that in 1920 Arbure was a member of the Romanian Senate representing Bessarabia. What the reason for this fact was remains to be further investigated. However, nationalism is out of question as far as Arbure is concerned. None other than the anti-Semite historian and extreme right-wing national democrat party leader in the '20s and '30s of the last century, Nicolae Iorga, tried to make a "pioneer of unification of Bessarabia with Romania" out of Arbure, despite the fact that throughout his life Arbure championed the cause of an autonomous Bessarabia. Nowadays, following this mystification, Arbure is considered a nationalist on the website of the Romanian Library for Internet, www.biblior.net. Similarly, today's fascists and nationalists make a similar claim. They are trying to include this dedicated internationalist socialist into the category of nationalists on behalf of an eulogistic text dedicated to the king of Romania which they attribute to Arbure.

He spent his last years in Bucharest. There he worked as a director of the statistics office and wrote for many newspapers, among which one for children and teenagers. On the 2nd of April 1933 Arbure met his end in the capital of Romania. A translation of his memoirs *Temniță și exil* from Romanian into English is being worked on. A detailed biographical description will be included. The Canadian publishing house Black Cat Press" has expressed their intention to publish it. The republishing of the Romanian original is in progress