



Posthumous Tribute to a Great Professor and Researcher - Academician Prof. Constantin Toma, PhD

2020 was undoubtedly a fateful year for the field of biology in Iasi, which was deprived, within a short timespan, of no less than four of its important representatives: Professors Mihai Mititiuc, Vlad Artenie, Nicolae Ștefan and Academician Constantin Toma. The latter, who was taken from us on September 8th, was unanimously acknowledged as an exceptional teacher and researcher, a devoted and faithful servant of the institution that benefited from his service for more than six decades, the man for whom “Al. I. Cuza” University represented everything - the supreme love of his life. I do not think it possible for anyone in this country to have surpassed him when it comes to the amount of time spent in his university lab and office. From morning to late evening, you could find him at university, even on Sundays. Had he been provided with the necessary conditions, he would have probably stayed there overnight, so passionate was he about his work and his mission. Accustomed to hardship from an early age, he worked day and night to make a name for himself in the field of research which he embraced, leaving behind a lasting work and numerous students. He functioned all his life like clockwork. I have never before encountered so much inclination and passion for a job well done in anyone else, which is why, in an homage article published 13 years ago (1) I had attributed him the title of "Mister Diligence".

I was present on the 11th of September at the funeral service of our former colleague, friend or mentor – Academician Prof. Constantin Toma, a distinguished personality of Romanian science. This sad event in itself, was made, in my opinion, even sadder by the manner in which the memory of this excellent scientist and teacher was honoured during the funeral and burial. I perceived the moment rather as a formality to be fulfilled and not as one that remains imprinted in the consciousness of those present at the ceremony through its emotional charge, by depicting not only his professional and managerial performances, but also the MAN Constantin Toma, who has supervised dozens of generations of future specialists in biology, who

created and developed a working group well-known and appreciated in the field of Botany and who did not spare time and effort in order to place the Biology field in Iași among the most prestigious schools of Romania. I make abstraction of the relatively flat, sapless speeches made by the parish priest and two of the teacher's collaborators, the fact that many of those who benefited from his support did not attend the funeral (because the pandemic seems to have destroyed brotherly love as well), but I was downright aggrieved to find out that no official representative from the University or Branch of the Romanian Academy in Iasi had anything to say on the occasion of parting with one of their most brilliant colleagues. How is one to interpret this elementary lack of respect, appreciation and gratitude to a man who dedicated his body and soul to these two institutions?! Did the "original democracy" established after 1990 change us so deeply that even our most representative fellows have forgotten good manners?! Nor did the final resting place for the great departed man seem to me proper to his stature and status, being situated in an isolated area, where few of those desirous of laying a flower or occasionally lighting a candle at his grave, will dare to venture. However, it was professor's choice and we cannot further comment on this, the explanation of this option being probably the proximity to the Botanical Garden, whose director he was at its beginnings, an institution very dear to him, for the development of which he put his heart and soul and contributed fully.

If only you find out his origin, financial situation, the number of souls in his family and the way in which the future professor Toma went through life, you cannot help but be impressed. Most of us condemn in its entirety the communist order established in Romania after the Second World War, forgetting or denying its good parts – mainly its facilitating the access of young people to education. Who could have possibly imagined that in the pre-war regime a poor peasant's son, such as Constantin Toma, from a family of eight souls and of little wealth, could become a university student?! It was out of the question. No matter how gifted such a child was, he was condemned to serfdom because he lacked material support for higher education; all he could hope for was to become a good homemaker or a craftsman. Shortly after the war, the situation of the Toma family became dramatic, as they were left without their provider, who made a living for his family by working as a furrier. What a tragedy and irony of fate for his poor father, to return home safely from the slaughter at Cotul Donului and to be killed by a skittish horse, when Constantin, his eldest son, was only 12 years old. The head of the family becomes the mother, a woman worthy of all praise, who does not give up, she herself learns the profession of her deceased husband and manages to support and educate her six children. The sacrifice, the strength, energy, ambition and will this mother must have had to break through, a true heroine! After seven years of widowhood, the mother remarries a man with a soul as big as hers, because only such a man could have the "courage" to marry a woman with six children, adding to this "dowry" one more. The young Constantin followed his destiny and with the help of his mother and the facilities of the regime

established after the war he was already a student. His diligence and excellent academic results helped him to get scholarships during schooling, without which he could not have completed it. In his old age, the professor, unlike many others, does not hide and does not deny his political affiliation before 1990, the fact that he was part of the pioneer, UTC and PCR organizations, because he had nothing to blame himself for, as he had been at that time the same man, devoted to his work and profession, fair in his relationship with his fellows. In fact, in a tribute book published in 2010, he confesses: *“Without being nostalgic and without glorifying the era in which I attended middle school and high school, I must admit that without the support of the then regime... by providing scholarships..., I - the son of poor peasants, orphaned at the age of 12, with six brothers younger than me - I couldn't have left my village to attend other schools, I couldn't have gotten to where I am today”* (3).

The excellent results obtained by the young Constantin Toma during his studies determined those who were in charge of the Biology Department of the Faculty of Biology, Geography and Geology, to employ him in his department, after completing his studies as a teacher's assistant. My first contact with the future professor took place in 1962, when he was already an assistant professor and I was a fresh man interested in participating in the activity of a scientific circle led by His Lordship. I recounted this episode in the afore mentioned paper (1) and I will not mention it again. Since I did the practical work for the course "The morphology and anatomy of plants" with a colleague of his, I did not get to know him that well as a teacher. However, I know from my colleagues who carried out the practical work with the assistant C. Toma, that he was extremely demanding in terms of discipline and student behaviour, asking them to pay attention to the information taught and insisted on the careful use of related research equipment. At the same time, no one was admitted to the laboratory without a white protective coats, as he himself was the proud bearer of such a coat, and he asked the girls who exaggerated with the miniskirts that at least their laboratory frocks should be of a decent length!

Our paths crossed several times along our lives. It all began with the mentioned scientific circle and continued in my third year of studies at political level, he then being the UTC secretary at the university, and I, the president of the Students' Association on the faculty and member of the National Students' Council. We both came from the countryside and had a similar life experience, but different characters. Throughout his life, His Lordship was and remained extremely respectful of the authorities, of the persons higher in the hierarchy, I proved less docile and conformist, because of an event which I had witnessed as a student and greatly impacted me - the brutal way in which a completely innocent man I was staying with had been treated and "picked up" by the Securitate in 1959. I had since become very wary of political orders. Thus, in the snowy winter of 1965/1966, I did not respond to the UTC secretary's order to mobilize the students for snow removal, an attitude he described as an act of indiscipline, even though I had health problems. A proud person, the

assistant professor C. Toma got over that moment with difficulty, but he did not forget it for an even longer time. He was later convinced that we were different and reacted differently in some situations, that that refusal had not been an act of rebellion on my part, so that in an article he dedicated to me (3), he wrote *“I would come to know and appreciate him ever since his student years.... a sociable, communicative guy, loved by his colleagues, a good organizer, with a distinct personality, sometimes nonconformist, even slightly rebellious in the face of measures and decisions that he considered, and some really were, unfair, in the early years of the 7th decade of the last century.”*.

Out of delicacy, but also out of the desire not to create unnecessary discussions and animosities, the young assistant and lecturer C. Toma did not retaliate against some aspects and "habits" that bothered him within the department or at the university. After my graduation, we became closer and closer, so we had full trust in each other and did not hesitate to reveal ourselves when faced with less pleasant situations and events. There is no written testimony left by him in this regard, but he was extremely upset that, although he was like quick silver in the Faculty, he was promoted only after seven years from the position of assistant to that of university lecturer, while colleagues from other departments were promoted after only three years. He was also disturbed and perplexed by the fact that, although in the 1960s the equipping of teaching and research laboratories was greatly suffering, some devices that were still purchased from time to time in the university came into the possession of department heads and remained unused in their offices. He was also very upset that his work and achievements at the Botanical Garden in Iasi were not properly appreciated and he was removed from its management after only four years, after turning this institution into a real jewel, an institution of research and not just a museum, by demanding that the staff which had higher education obtained their doctorate. It is time to emphasize that no matter where he went as a manager – as the head of the faculty, in the management of the university, of the biology institute within the university, Constantin Toma left deep traces, because he had leadership qualities, being sober, firm, rigorous, responsible, balanced, meticulous, a declared enemy of imposture, amateurism and incompetence, both in teaching and in research.

I remember what an impossible atmosphere and real scandals there were within the Institute of Biological Research in Iasi in the early 1980s, an institute that according to the triad "education, research, production" imposed at the time by the PCR leadership, was led by the dean of the Faculty - Professor Corneliu Zolyneak. As we presented in a previous article (1), a real "commando" group of four researchers from the institute had formed around one of the faculty professors, former friend of the dean, a group which, out of envy, immeasurable pride, incomprehensible reasons, attacked him abjectly on every occasion. It should be noted that Professor Zolyneak was not just anyone: in addition to being dean and director, he was also the PCR secretary of the Iași University Centre, a truly special, distinguished, well-mannered,

kind, tolerant guy, loved by most colleagues and students. I think that these very qualities, the fact that he was loved and appreciated by those around him, that he was superior to them, that they could not manipulate him, had determined the few opponents to make his life a living hell. No one had managed to put that pack of "jackals" in place, not even representatives of the competent ministry present at some meetings. The continuous mischievous attacks on him, sometimes in meetings attended by students, severely affected his health and eventually he reached his breaking point, leaving us prematurely (in 1985). I kept wondering then, did any of those "brave" men have any remorse after the disappearance of their imaginary "mortal enemy"? I doubt it. After his demise, the leadership of the faculty and implicitly of the mentioned institute was taken over by Professor Constantin Toma, who did not like at all the manner and situation in which his former colleague had been treated. The new director was built differently and, unlike his predecessor, he did not show much leniency when dealing with those reluctant to discipline and common sense; hence, through his decision-making ability, intolerance and firmness against such manifestations, he quickly reinstated order, peace and a conducive work atmosphere in the institute. As I showed in the above mentioned article, at that time *"there could not have been a better choice"* for the management of the institute.

The tireless work in the scientific and didactic field brought great satisfaction to Professor Toma. His name appears in an impressive number of publications: over 400 original articles in his field of work, 15 books and monographs, various courses and textbooks, over 50 articles on the history of biology, numerous reviews and articles popularizing science. His meritorious scientific activity was also honoured by three prizes awarded by the Romanian Academy for some of his published papers and books. The professional recognition he enjoyed in the world of specialists materialized in his co-optation in scientific societies both in the country and abroad, in the editorial boards of prestigious scientific journals, in the scientific and organizing committees of national and international meetings, in bodies such as the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation, the National Council for the Attestation of University Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates. In terms of teaching, he contributed during his teaching activity to the training in the field of biology of over 45 generations of students, to the doctoral specialization of over 30 biologists, to the improvement of biology teachers in pre-university education through guiding qualified teacher status degrees, second degrees and the implementation of the scientific-methodical studies for obtaining the first degree, he was part of numerous boards for granting the title of doctor of science or first degree professor. Professor Toma impressed when teaching not only with his knowledge of biology, but also with his impeccable academic attire. Never have I met him within university walls in a casual outfit, but only in an elegant suit, as a way of showing respect to students and the workplace. It may seem an exaggeration to some, but it is also through his attire that he educated the students. The professional and managerial

qualities of Professor Toma recommended him for holding important administrative positions: head of department, vice dean, dean, chancellor, scientific secretary of the Iasi Branch of the Romanian Academy, director of the doctoral school of biology, director of some research units. In all of these positions, he fulfilled his duty, he proved to be an upstanding, constructive, efficient man, eager to put his experience and competence to work for the development of scientific education and research. The assiduous and fruitful activity as a professor and researcher were rewarded with numerous titles, medals and honours: Highlighted Professor, Professor Emeritus, Doctor Honoris Causa of the Universities of Bacău, Oradea and Arad ("V. Goldiș"), the National Order and Medal of "Merit for education" as Knight.

As I mentioned at one point, a relationship has been established between me and Professor Toma since my student years, which over time has turned into a sincere and lasting friendship, based on a lot of trust on both sides. According to him, I was one of his very few friends, which honoured me and forced me to be very careful in my relationship with him. I may be wrong, but I don't think he had any friends among his colleagues, because he never offered them to me as an example. He appreciated some professionally, but he was puzzled or even annoyed by the performance of others, by the lack of attachment of some colleagues to a job so special and coveted, but he did not see solutions to problems. Among his good friends was certainly Professor Marin Andrei from the University of Bucharest, a botanist like him, of whom he often spoke to me. It was not easy to get close to Professor Toma's soul, to gain his trust, because he was a distant guy, a bit inflexible, sometimes even edgy when something or someone bothered him, which is why some felt afraid in his presence. The professional authority he enjoyed everywhere in the country made those who had him in the evaluation, promotion, doctoral committees, etc, to get the chills even though it was not the case, as he was normally a fair and well-intentioned man. He showed a certain weakness for the fair sex and for this reason he sometimes suffered, an aspect on which I will return.

As friends, I discussed with Professor Toma any problem without any restraint, without worrying that some of our opinions, sometimes divergent, will "leak" and put us at some point in delicate, unwanted situations. He was a great lover of the country, a true patriot and he did not understand how things got deteriorated in our country, in such a short time and to such an extent that nothing worked normally, everything was destroyed, shattered or robbed, so much that there does not seem to be any perspective left as a country. He was downright outraged that such a gifted nation, who gave the world great personalities, cannot find statesmen capable of representing us, people whose main belief and duty is the national interest, people who can take Romania where it could and deserves to be. He was equally concerned about the future of Romanian education, its degradation year by year and step by step, about the fact that people who do not have the necessary pedagogical and scientific training in teaching students have entered universities. He also counted on his fingers the

younger colleagues in the faculty who had the necessary qualities and professional authority to further the field of biology in Iasi in the future.

Although at a distance from each other, His Lordship living in Iași, I in Piatra Neamț and Bacău, we were often together at scientific meetings in the country and abroad, in doctoral committees, on more special occasions. We co-authored scientific papers, we collaborated towards the conclusion of research contracts, in the organization of national and international scientific meetings, and we supported each other whenever necessary. I was always happy for the professional successes, awards and honours obtained by Professor Toma and, in turn, he was by my side and supported me to achieve some goals in my career. I honoured him whenever I could: I awarded him the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Bacău and I invited him to some of its festive moments, I included him in the editorial board of some scientific journals, in the organizing committee of some scientific meetings initiated by me, as a referent in the committees for granting the title of doctor in biology of some of my doctoral students, etc. I was terribly impressed by a gesture of his made seven years ago, when I was nearing the age of 70 and he felt, more than ever, the urge to be by my side. In his small, but very orderly and legible handwriting, he wrote to me on July 4, 2013: *“Being a graduate of the Faculty of Biology in Iași, a researcher at “Stejarul” Research Station of our university, and then... a doctoral supervisor at “Al. I. Cuza” University from Iași... I consider that you are much more connected to us (and ourselves to you) than to those from Bacău, who did not know how to value you as you deserved even after you were no longer rector! After taking counsel with ... I think it would be good to celebrate you in Iasi in two stages.... What do you think?”* And things happened just the way he imagined them. A superb gesture from a true friend! How can you not hold high respect and cherish such a man?!

Certainly, the child, pupil, teenager and former student - Constantin Toma, born in the countryside near Huși, in a family with many children and few material resources, did not hope to reach so high, but ambition, tenacity, passion, tireless work and maybe a touch of luck, they brought him to the top of the social pyramid, in the position of academician. Those who did not know him well enough might think that he lacked nothing, that he was spared trouble. He made some of that himself. He was only human, so he was wrong sometimes, but some mistakes cost him more than he would have imagined. I have written about two of his great disappointments before (1, 2) so I shall not insist on them: the first took place at the end of 1973, when he was unduly replaced from the position of director of the Botanical Garden by the university management with a colleague, less valuable and suitable for this position than he was; the second occurred in the early 1990s when pupils and students had gone crazy all through the country and challenged some of their teachers, with Professor Toma being blamed for some aspects of his personal life. The latter had serious repercussions on his health— within a few years, he underwent two open heart surgeries.

I was saying at one point that Professor Thomas had a weakness for the fairer sex, which caused him, sometimes, to lose his usual exigency, rigor, prudence, and flair, choosing to believe unrealistic, distorted, or deliberately erroneous statements or information that sometimes hid subversive interests. In the early 2000s, the teacher even got in the way of a "devil" with the face of a woman, who declared a devastating love for him and using all the feminine tricks and "weapons" of equipment to be fuddle and blind him, causing him to forget of all and sundry and to become her husband. How the professor had fallen into such a trap is hard to understand, but he was so excited and happy about this change in his life, it was as if he had caught God by one leg and not the "devil" by the tail! Being so bewitched by his new wife, whom he loved with passion, the professor put everything to the test, brought her to the department, made her a doctor in biology, promoted her in the didactic hierarchy, did not refuse her anything from what she wanted materially, being convinced that she deserved all his trust and support. The "Little Devil" also managed to influence the professor in terms of his conduct, which became more flexible, warmer and more tolerant, mobilized him to partake in actions organized outside the university and in the wider world, provided technical support for research, publications and conferences. What followed were about six beautiful and serene years in the lives of the two, with outstanding professional achievements, participation in conferences and congresses abroad, elaboration and presentation by the professor of interesting synthesis papers at various internal scientific meetings, publication of articles in foreign journals, spending holidays in Europe, "habits" not previously taken by the professor. During that period, I was with the two of them at a scientific conference in Nitra (2004), at a congress in Athens (2005); I organized in 2006, together with professors Constantin Toma and Ursula Stănescu, the 4th edition of the Conference of the South-Eastern European Association for Medicinal and Aromatic Plants [considered many years later by the company's president, Mihailo Ristic (also departed in the meantime), as the most successful of all], we met at many scientific meetings across the country. On all these occasions, I found that the professor was on cloud nine with the one chosen as his beloved. But, slowly, the "devil" grew "horns" and, after she realized that the one next to her was not exactly what she had imagined at first, not to mention that he was a little old, she abandoned him for the first man who came her way. A real drama for the poor professor, who expected everything, but not something like that. He suffered enormously not only because he had been humiliated and abandoned, but also because this failed "intermezzo", this whim of his life, cost him dearly, including in terms of personal image, led to unfortunate "collateral losses" and the alienation of some of his family members.

But life goes on. Being strong, the professor gritted his teeth and moved on, but I think that this episode in his life, both beautiful and ugly, weakened his health even more. It was not easy for him to get over it, nor am I sure he ever overcame it, but he found refuge again in what he knew best. Professor Constantin Toma surprised me on

many occasions with his praises towards colleagues, often exaggerated and undeserved, as he himself felt good when he was praised. Knowing in particular his opinion about some of those publicly praised, I asked him a few years ago why he does so, seeing that he risks that some of them take his words for granted. He did not give me a clear answer to the question, but he told me that he has a book planned in which he will solve this problem, which I do not think has happened. The great departed person liked to feel good at various events, anniversaries, festive meals. He appreciated fine dishes, some spirits or a good wine, he would not refuse to dance when conditions allowed it. For the past 15 years, every 5 years, he celebrated his birthday with pomp. I was always impressed with the way these parties were organized, the large number of guests, among whom were all the colleagues from the faculty (whom he considered his family), the special toasts made on these occasions.

I like to believe that he left us with no shade of doubt about my affection, respect and friendship, which puts my mind at ease and my soul at rest. This is what I wished him, five years ago, in an anniversary message, on the occasion of his 80th birthday:

"How swiftly years pass by! It seems like only yesterday that I participated in the scientific circle conducted by you and yet, there's already been half a century. Life probably brought us together due to our common origins, but mostly owing to the way in which we decided to approach things in general and our profession, in particular.

I have struggled throughout all these years to be of use to you, to make you feel me close to you, as an honest friend on whom you count for better or for worse. I have fraternised with you whenever life set you traps or put to less pleasant tests.

I sincerely rejoiced at all your successes and felt them as if they were my own. We have shared lots of good times, some of them truly unforgettable. My consideration, respect and devotion to you have manifested on several occasions and under different forms, and these feelings have always been sincere, honest and disinterested.

I have honoured you the best I knew and could. After so many years since we have known each other, I have also felt some regrets about us, but at such anniversary times, there is no room for that.

I wish you, My Dear Professor and Academician, that God will watch on you and give you many more beautiful and serene days, a tranquil and careless life, as well as the power to be invaluable to those around you!

Many happy returns of the day!"

I last met academician Constantin Toma in December, last year, at the annual symposium of "Ion Borcea" Museum of Natural Sciences in Bacau, where we were both present for more than a decade. He was telling me then that he was preparing for his 85th anniversary in 2020 and invited me to be with him. There followed a period

in which he had a series of health problems, then came the pandemic that prevented us from meeting, so we kept in touch with His Lordship only by phone. I was almost certain that he would overcome his health problems and I would see him on his birthday, on November 19, at the planned celebration event. Unfortunately, time no longer had patience with him, and in the last two months of his life he was tormented by great suffering. I am sure that he left us firmly convinced that as long as he lived, he did his duty fully. It will be difficult for me to get used to the thought that Professor Toma is no longer among us, but I will carry in my soul the image of a bold, deserving man, animated by high feelings for his countrymen and country. Those of us who knew him, were close to him and appreciated him properly, will be startled whenever we will hear around us the name of Toma, automatically thinking of him, the one who was our mentor, colleague or good friend. Let me be forgiven by all his faculty colleagues for what I will say in the following, but this is my opinion: *A lot of water will flow on the Bahlui until another biologist is born with the virtues and achievements of Academician Constantin Toma, with his devotion and unconditional attachment to Alma Mater Iassiensis.*

[1] GHIORGHITĂ G. - *Profesorul universitar Constantin Toma la 70 de ani*. Studii și Cercet. Șt. (Univ. Bacău), 2007, 12, 82-85.

[2] GHIORGHITĂ G. - *Să ne trăiești întru' mulțianii Domnule Profesor Constantin Toma*. In Honorem. Profesorului Constantin Toma la a 75-aa aniversare. Edit. Graphys, Iași, 2010, 346-348.

[3] Toma C., *Biologi de altădată și de azi*. Edit. Univ. "Al. I. Cuza", Iași, 2015, p. 57-61.

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