

In Memoriam
A Visionary: Dumitru Ciocoi Pop (1943-2019)

C. PETER MAGRATH
Binghamton University, USA



Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop was one of the two most memorable persons I have met in my life, and fittingly, both these encounters – and friendships – were internationally based. The first is a Chinese woman doctor, by now well into her eighties, whom I came to know through educational exchange travels in China. This remarkable woman, Dr. Shuhera, and her husband both suffered brutally during the period of intense repression in the People's Republic of China known as the Cultural Revolution – a revolution that hardly advanced either culture or humanity! Because of her education and professional skills, she and her husband were exiled into a remote, rural, part of China and made to work in the fields, harvesting crops and doing heavy manual labor. At night, Dr. Shuhera performed her life-saving work, performing operations, often without anesthetics, on kitchen tables and working by candle and flashlight to save people, deal with wounds, and assist with pregnancies. Later, when the repression ended, she returned to Beijing and had a fulfilling career assisting in severely needed family planning work in China. The compelling thing about this human being was her undying enthusiasm for her work, her commitment as an internationalist to

develop strong ties with some of us in the United States, and, put most simply, her desire to do good things.

And, of course, the second truly memorable one was the person so appropriately honored in this volume. I met Professor Ciocoi-Pop in the early 1990's while serving as President of the University of Missouri. He came there with a delegation of Rectors from East European countries that had only recently become liberated from the dictatorships of their Communist governments. At a small ceremony, I welcomed this group of distinguished East European educators who were visiting the United States to observe our universities, how they operated, and to exchange ideas freely among themselves and with newly discovered American colleagues. Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop and I began a short conversation, and as we say in colloquial English, we "bonded" in an instant. And later that evening we spoke a bit more at a social event that I hosted.

All those who met Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop know he was a memorable person: his unquenchable love for education and learning and its dissemination; his lifelong efforts to promote learning even during a repressive, totalitarian dictatorship; his ability to endure when imprisoned and then later made to do meaningless technical work; his poetry and writings over the years which exemplify his spirit and love of learning and compassionate understanding of what truly matters in this troubled world; and, of course, his work in helping to revivify and energize and develop Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu into a distinguished university serving not only his beloved country of Romania, but serving the interests of international education.

All of us who know even a little about Romania – a country I truly cherish for many reasons, including in part perhaps my own ethnic background as a Latin – know the huge challenges that all of Romania's universities face in promoting learning and teaching and discovery and its application to useful social purposes. Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop was a visionary, but a visionary who moved toward his objectives by being practical and by working tirelessly, day and night, week after week, month after month, year after year.

But it was not only Rector Ciocoi-Pop's constant efforts to develop and improve Lucian Blaga University that warrant recognition. It was his commitment to decency and to education, the unquenchable spirit that animated him. This man, as we say in the United States, was an administrator or executive, but he was first and last a professor who believed in learning, promoted it in his literary work, and – not always the case in universities whether in Romania, the United States, or elsewhere – put students and their needs first.

Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop, moreover, was motivated by a profound commitment to international education. He believed passionately that universities in this twenty-first century must be not only for the people of their country but linked with universities and people in countries throughout the world. As a believer myself that the only universities that will truly count and be of value in the years ahead are those that are international in concept and practice, Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop exemplified what the modern university must become – and be – in a globalized world. There is no single model for universities with regard to their international involvements, but there must be a commitment fueled by a passion for learning as transcending national and cultural borders so that we may all learn from each other, understand each other as human beings, and strive to educate for a better world. This was Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop's commitment and life's work. It explains why, aside from his own literary and poetic work, which stands on its own great merits, Lucian Blaga is one of the universities that will be, long after his leadership as Rector ended, a significant Romanian university with an international reputation.

In recent years it has been my privilege to work in the programs of the Salzburg Seminar to learn about and to assist, where possible, with universities in Central and Eastern Europe and in Russia. The objective is that all of us, from different nationalities and educational cultures, can learn from each other and contribute to improving higher education. We work to assist universities that too often are stultified and restricted by outmoded past practices so that they can adapt to a new world that is more

democratic, more decentralized, and less controlled by some all-knowing “Center.” The universities of this century need to function flexibly in a world in which economies are interrelated and in which the emergence of the new information technologies holds the opportunity – if not the certainty – for better communication and collaboration among peoples.

Over the past decades a limited but important number of East and Central European and Russian universities have shown a willingness to change, to become as international as possible in deed and not just in word. They, I believe, while honoring the past and its best traditions, are the universities of the future. Among these, Lucian Blaga University stands out because of the leadership and commitment of Rector Ciocoi-Pop. It has shown that it can adapt to a new Romania and a changing world, collaborate with many universities around the world, and make international education in its curriculum and teaching and research a central, organizing force. That is why Lucian Blaga University with its Rector has been one of the stars of the reform efforts led by the Salzburg Seminar. That was, of course, very nice for Rector Ciocoi-Pop, but it is even more important for Romania that this university, and a few other universities in this important part of the world, are being made irrevocably international.

In short, Lucian Blaga University is, thanks to many individuals, but most especially to Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop, an international university that serves Romania, yes, but also serves the world. Without being naïve, education and understanding are a significant part of the answer to the myriad social and economic problems that all countries face. Education alone is never simply “the” solution, but without education no solutions are possible. And equally essential is the necessity of humanity and understanding.

I conclude with a story about Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop, which I hope is accurately portrayed from my memory of a conversation about twenty-five years ago. We talked about some of the hard moments he experienced during the worst period of the dictatorship, and how, finally, he emerged to again be a professor at

the university he loved and to serve it as Rector. I asked him whether or not he was bitter about what had happened. His answer in effect was no, because bitterness did not accomplish anything. And he then told me a story about a young student at his university who was bright, had promise, and was seeking a fellowship or an opportunity to pursue his studies in the United States. The student came to him, and Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop knew that the father of the young man had been his jailer, when he was unjustly imprisoned. I asked him, "Well what did you do with this young man?" He answered, as I knew he would, "Well of course I helped him; he was a fine young man, a good student, and, after all, he was the son – not the father, and even the father was not an inherently evil person but caught up in executing the orders that came from superiors in the dictatorship."

He went on to say, "Hatred has to end somewhere; we cannot continue it and let it perpetuate, for then it never ends. At some point we must understand, try to forgive, and move on." I trust that I have captured the essence if not every detail in this story, correctly. But the point is clear: the ultimate value is understanding and humanity – and promoting education. And to me that says it all about Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop. He was a human being of compassion, understanding, and sensitivity, an internationalist who was truly a citizen of the world as well as of Romania, and was one of the two most memorable people I have ever encountered. His educational legacy as an internationalist not only defined Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop and his remarkable and wonderful humanity, but it influenced and defined the university that was his life.

Farewell, dear Dumitru!