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In Memoriam Professor Mihaela Irimia: "Solemnest of industries"

In the bleak midwinter of 2022, as we were all preparing to celebrate Christmas, the terrible news came of Professor Mihaela Irimia's passing. It spread very fast: within hours, I received several phone calls and messages announcing it. Her network was wide as it was tightly knit. We were not so much surprised – she had been gravely ill for some time – as bereft: a bright light had gone out in the small world of Romanian Anglistics, and we were all much the poorer and smaller for it. Christmas would never be quite the same again. But I found some consolation in the thought that, rather than commemorate Mickey on Christmas Eve from now on, we could celebrate her, just as we also celebrate her birthday, which she shared with poet Mihai Eminescu, on National Culture Day.

As the weeks went by, many of her circle mourned her publicly, in writing, and the annual conference of the English Department in Bucharest was dedicated to her. As I read the obituaries and listened to the tributes, I realised how much I was already forgetting about her: things she had said, things she had done. I had taken her effervescent presence and intellectual ebullience for granted. She had been such an important part of my professional life, such a fixture of scholarly events and such a tremendous mover of people, that I could not imagine Bucharest without her in it. I thought she would be there for ever; I was wrong.

Mickey's professional achievements were, by any standards, immense. Many of them have been mentioned in the two obituaries that accompany mine in this volume, as well as in just about every other tribute devoted to her. From the European Early Modernity to Postmodernity and beyond in both directions, she was conversant on the most diverse topics of history, culture and literature, but was most

passionate about cultural identity, the history of ideas, and her beloved Long Eighteenth Century. Accolades were not slow to pour in: she was a fellow of some of the best universities in the world, from Oxford to Yale and Harvard, and was invited to give lectures and keynote speeches literally all over the world. She did us the great honour of accepting an honorary membership in our own Academic Anglophone Society of Romania, based in Sibiu.

Mickey's most enduring legacy, however, was her ability to bring people together and bring out the best in them, intellectually, socially, even morally. The last decade of her life was overwhelmingly devoted to creating an international network of Anglicists by organising conferences in every corner of Europe, publishing the proceedings, encouraging emulation. To keep that network going would indeed be an undertaking worthy of her memory, and one that she cultivated assiduously. I remember her telling me repeatedly, imperatively, and, as I've learned since, others, too: "Stick together! You must all stick together in the face of mediocrity and imposture!" I imagine her dream was to preside over a club of fellow luminaries, not dissimilar to the academies and societies of eighteenth-century England, but she was also devoted to nurturing a younger generation of scholars who would perpetuate her lofty notions of erudition, intellectual brilliance, professional excellence and integrity.

"Gașca lui Mickey": Mickey's gang, that is how we were sometimes referred to. Its international membership included truly resonant names such as Andrew Sanders, Thomas Docherty, Francis O'Gorman, to name only a few of those that cropped up regularly on her mailing lists. Of the Romanians, many had been her doctoral students. I was very flattered to discover one day that Bucharest colleagues had become so accustomed to find me among her gang that they assumed I, too, had been one of her students. Alas, I had not: by the time she could supervise doctorates, I was well on my way with mine. We had in fact first met as equals, as it were, at one of the faculty seminars organised by the British Council in the late 1990s, while she was already a well-established Professor and I was a fledgling. She did not care for such distinctions: with a generosity of spirit that is still rare in Romanian society, she promptly invited me to call her Mickey, and Mickey she remained to me

until the end. Or "Shepha" (a playful transcription of the Romanian feminine noun for "the chief"), or "Tanti Mickey," or whatever other witty moniker she devised for signing off her messages. She had the marvellous gift of making people feel welcome and involved and a part of things, whether by speaking their language – not only was she a polyglot but she could say a few welcoming words in just about any European language –, by telling them a little anecdote, or by assigning some unnecessary chore that would make them feel that they were contributing. Her self-deprecating sense of humour was legendary; her love of etymologies, puns, and learned quotations, her informed and penetrating mind, and her quick wit made her a delightful conversationalist. With a joke and a wink, she put everyone at ease, included them, and galvanised them.

To orbit around the truly great is a rare privilege, if also a highly demanding situation: we had to measure up to her expectations, and her expectations were very high indeed. She was particular and selective and exacting. Some found her intimidating; some downright infuriating. She had no time for timidity, hesitancy, procrastination, or incompetence. She was a force of nature and she carried everything and everyone along with her, if only they let her. Her indomitable spirit and erudition shone through in everything she undertook. She left her imprint on those that surrounded her: they celebrate her legacy by evincing a heightened appreciation of archival research, encyclopaedism, allusive expression, the apt quote and bon mot. In the words of Emily Dickinson, "[her] labor and [her] leisure too" have now been "put away." And in Auden's, it is hard to imagine "the squares of [her] mind" empty. She "became [her] admirers."

ANA-KARINA SCHNEIDER
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania