

The amazing adventures of private Nistor

A manuscript kept in a library in Cluj tells the story of a Romanian artilleryman in the Great War, who came to fight against the Japanese, to defend a German colony in China.

By Bogdan Stanciu

During The World War I, a soldier from Nasaud arrived in the Far East, aboard an Austro-Hungarian cruiser. He took part in the first recorded battles between a plane and a boat, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese and wrote a diary with all his adventures. This is his story.

The Departure

Nasaud was way too small. Transylvania likewise. Neither the whole Austria-Hungary, the largest empire in Europe, was not enough for him. Dumitru Nistor, a 19 years old lad, slim and straight as a mast, wanted to see the wide world.

It was the end of 1912, after such a rainy uncommon autumn. Ehausted after a day carrying corn from the field, in deep mud, Dumitru braces up and tells his father he wants to go to recruitment. Most probably inside his veins was boiling the hot blood of his maternal great grandfather, Ioan Iovu Moldovan, standard bearer in the Second Wallachian Regiment of border guards a veteran of battles between 1848-1849.

Dumitru receives instantly the paternal approval and then, after a few tears, the approval of his mother. Together with fellow villager Funer István, Dumitru Nistor gets to Bistrița, at the headquarters of the line regiment 63 where he volunteers for the Imperial Navy. After a few days he receives at his house the acceptance letter from the Imperial Navy Commandment. On December 4, accompanied by his mother, Firona, father, Nicholas, and by his comrade István, Dumitru Nistor leaves to Bistrita with the carriage. He makes a medical visit, then he is allowed in the city, where he buys his soldier trunk. He takes one more meal with his mother, in the carriage, then he gets seven crowns from the garrison, money for food on the way to Pola (today in Croatia), the main military port of the Austro-Hungary.

Accompanied by his parents, he enters the train station where senior Nistor buys a cup of wine, which they all drank before the departure. It was the last time that Dumitru would see his parents.

The newly recruit travels by train on route Bistrița - Cluj - Budapest - Zagreb - Pola. In this military port, where the navy headquarters was located, he attends the recruits school, instructing himself as „first cannon straightener” (aid gunner). He serves on several warships to learn how to use guns until he gets, in 1913, on the cruiser Kaiserin Elisabeth (Empress Elisabeth).

Getting on the old cruiser deck, launched at sea as early as 1890, the soldier saw his dream coming true: „Empress Elisabeth” is sent on a long mission in the Far East.

According to Liviu Bordaș, a scientific researcher, the expedition begins in August 17, 1913, about a year before the onset of the First World War. The cruiser's journey is routed Port Said (Egypt) - Aden (Yemen) - Colombo (Sri Lanka) - Singapore - Hong Kong - Chefoo (now Yantai, China) -Chingwangtao (today Qinhuangdao, China) - Chefoo - Nagasaki (Japan) - Shanghai (China), Foochow (today Fuzhou, China) - Hong Kong - Amoy (today Xiamen, China) - nine stopovers in Japan - Shanghai -Chingwangtao - Chefoo- Tsingtao (today Qingdao, China).

During this trip, which carries the gunner aid from Năsăud around half the globe, Dumitru Nistor is impressed by the tropical weather, the palm trees and lush flora, the exotic fruits, the elephants, by the colonial buildings and the diversity of goods, by the color, the port and the ornaments of the Indians and so on. "The author becomes an extraordinary storyteller of characterizing the habits, the life and the particularities of the peoples in the countries through which he passed", notes Maria Maxa, the author of a study dedicated to Nistor's manuscripts.

The soldier diligently takes notes of everything he is impressed of. For example, in Singapore, he observes the poverty of the natives, whom wealthy Europeans used to throw money into the water to see how they will dive after them: "again I saw something new, a surprising thing, namely: Indians like those in Colombo were walking in numerous groups to all ships, with small boats, like those pans where you bath little babies and if someone was throwing them something in the water, like ten cents, they would jump headlong into the sea and catch it.

They walk with their eyes wide open through the salty water, I pity them, because of their harsh life different from ours, living on the Somes Valley. And people at home they keep saying that they are poor fellows. Then what should these poor people say who for one cent they are forced to jump into the sea or to pull the cart instead of horses".

The War

The Great War caught Dumitru Nistor when he was already a year and a half in the Austrian-Hungarian Military Navy. The cruiser was anchored in the port of Tsingtao, Qingdao today, on the East coast of China, "opposite" to South Korea, over the Yellow Sea.

The moment that triggered the Great War was recorded vividly by our soldier in his diary: "The news of the European war roamed far and wide throughout the world, even to us in Asia, in Tsingtao. On Wednesday, July 29, news came to us on the ship that on July 28, Tuesday, Austria declared war on Serbia. This news was received by the sailors on the ship with "Hurra für Vaterland, Nieder mit Serbien" (that is «Hooray for the country, down with Serbia»). On July, 31, they mobilized Germany against Russia, on August, 3, Germany declared war on Russia and Belgium, and also that day France on Germany. In August, 4, England declared war on Germany, in August, 6, Russia declared war on Austria, in August, 7, Montenegro declared war on Austria, now the whole world is at war with weapons in their hands. Now we see that it's the «end of the world» (dooms day) I pondered myself inside me, as the elders were saying that on the dooms day emperors over emperors and kings over kings shall rise, brother with brother will fight and this time just arrived".

Complications

At that time, Tsingtao was a German colony, and Germany was the ally of the Austria-Hungary. In this context, the commander of the Austro-Hungarian vessel presented himself available to the colonial governor. On August, 16, Japan gave an ultimatum to Germany to give in Tsingtao. As concerns the Austro-Hungarian cruiser, Japan, which was not at war with Austria-Hungary, said that it can sail in a neutral harbor. The expiration date of the ultimatum was August 23, the day when Vienna advised the crew on "Empress Elisabeth" to leave the ship and head for Tientsin, a city where there was an Austro-Hungarian consulate.

On August 26, pressed by the Germans, Vienna got behind the decision and tells the crew to engage in a Japanese attack on the city of Tsingtao. But most of the crew members had already left for Tientsin, so the sailors were forced to make way back. The trip back to the ship was difficult because of China's hostility to the movement of troops on its territory. Nearly a hundred soldiers got stuck in Tientsin, but organized into several groups, seven officers and 299 soldiers have made it back aboard the cruiser.

Among them, Dumitru Nistor, who remarks the commander's joy when he sees that his crew had returned: "At about 11:00 at night we arrived to the shores where our boat Kaiserin Elisabeth was tied, here we cried three times «Hooray». The commander of the boat came outside and seeing us, tears of joy went on his face, happy to be back together with his sailors".

Witness to the writing of history

The return aboard the cruiser happened on September 6, 1914. On the same day, in Tsingtao harbor the first attack in history of an airplane on a ship took place. According to the author Wilhelm M. Donko, expert in the naval history of Austria, a Farman airplane launched from the Japanese carrier Wakamiya, attacked the Austro-Hungarian cruiser and another German warship.

In the following days, the air strikes continued also with the engagement of Dumitru Nistor. Fighting techniques were primitive, both in the case of the aircraft and in the case of the "anti-aircraft", as the combatants were firing one after the other, without hitting the target. The moments are described in the soldier's diary: "Every day English and Japanese airmen were overflying the city with aero and hydroplanes, and were throwing bombs on ships and batteries; and we would always be firing at them with guns and rifles but we didn't get any, and it's true that they didn't do any damage either with their bombs".

The outcome of the battle of Tsingtao has become more and more clear in early November 1914. Being afraid not to fall into the hands of the enemies the sailors on "Empress Elisabeth" scuttled the ship on November 2 and withdrew to land. Here, on November 7, Austro-Hungarian and German troops surrendered to the Japanese.

"The siege around Tsingtao's lasted for 41 days, shame on the Japanese as they sat for so long near a small town. About 60.000 soldiers came upon (...) and 5-6,000 Englishmen also, as for us, the long-faced, we were all about 5000, including the cats", Dumitru Nistor concluded with bitter irony.

Prisoner in Japan

In November 14th the march through the mud started towards the ships that transported the prisoners in Japan. Dumitru Nistor was first assigned to the camp at Hijemi, then to Aonogahara. About the prisoners' camp, he writes in the preface of another manuscript that it consisted of "about six Romanians", some Italians from Istria, Polacks, Czechoslovaks, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, Germans from Austria and also from Germany and "a group of the most dreadful enemies for us, the Hungarians".

The soldier talks about his four years of captivity in Japan through ten depressing journal pages, marked by homesickness and family longing. Although he abandons the journal, Dumitru Nistor continues to write, instead, two volumes of poetry.

The soldier does not complain about the conditions in the camp, but about the tragic fate of the prisoners. The journal concludes also with a sad poem about the unfortunate fate of prisoners.

Back at home

According to a biographical profile made by the Nasaudean publicist Teodor Tanco, on returning home, Dumitru Nistor found his parents both dead. He settled in and founded a family, continued to write and paint, he collected newspapers and magazines and has turned his house into a museum. "He was visited by people of culture and by writers, he was known even in the circles of the writer Octavian Goga" says Teodor Tanco.

Dumitru Nistor died in the early 1960s. In Nasaud nobody knows much about his bloodline. Those who know the city well say that he has a grandson in Canada. His descendants sold some of his manuscripts, which mostly (26 books) are being held in Nasaud at the Romanian Academy Documentary Library.

Heritage

Three of the manuscripts, the journal and two volumes of poetry were bought in 1994 by the Cluj County Library with 137,000 lei, from an antique store and now can be found in the library's catalogue under inventory numbers 99, 100 and 101.

Soldier Nistor's journal has been digitized a few years ago and made publicly available on the website www.europeana1914-1918.eu as part of a continental effort to save the memory of the First World War.

Liana Vescan is the librarian who looks after the manuscript and the one who has digitized it, by scanning it page by page. She gladly recounts how impressed Frank Drauschke was, the coordinator of Europeana 1914-1918, when he visited the library in Cluj and saw the log. "When he saw it, he kindly asked to get it digitized. He realized immediately how valuable it was and that the ship where Dumitru Nistor served the army took part in the first battle between a plane and a boat" the librarian says.

The manuscripts carry a series of images drawn with talent by Dumitru Nistor: his parental home, naval battle scenes, the cruiser "Empress Elisabeth" etc. Each chapter begins with a vignette pictured very-very carefully.

Enclosed between hardcovers, in gray fabric covering, the lined notebook where the Romanian soldier wrote his memoirs seems dull. It's enough to open the gray cover and, from the original cover, Dumitru Nistor, tall and straight as a mast, with his sailor beret looks upon from a medallion, ready to tell you the story of his extraordinary adventure: "Dumitru Nistor's navy service. Written by himself as a war prisoner in Aonogahara-Japan 1918".

Box:

The Great War pictured by Dumitru Nistor

Dumitru Nistor has left a series of pencil drawings which he made while being captive in Japan. Most of them illustrate one of the two poetry volumes which are now in the possession of Cluj County Library. The illustrations used for this text, as those in the gallery below, are some of them.

926 500 soldiers in Transylvania were called to take arms between August 1, 1914 - November 1, 1918. 52.27% of them were Romanians, 27.75% Hungarians and 9.44% Germans. Almost exclusively they were sent to the front line.

Box:

The great journey

Why did Dumitru choose to serve in the navy and not in the ground troops is clear from the preamble of another book, of poetry, written by him:

"1) because I didn't want to be entirely under Hungarian command;

2) to have ethnographic experiences during service; knowing that in the navy there are lads from all nations in the "Monarchy" (Austro-Hungarian Empire – e.n.);

3) to make trips to foreign countries; to convince me about the things I learned as a child in school at geography classes"