



Panait Istrati

Summary :

Panait Istrati (1884-1935) was a significant writer during the inter-war era, whose oeuvre, in Romanian and French, gained popularity in many countries. He was born in Brăila, where his mother, a Romanian maid, lived and worked. As his natural father was probably a Greek smuggler from Kephallonia Panait Istrati lived in a mix greek-romanian milieu. He counted among his friends important Greek (Nikos Kazantzakis) and French (Romain Rolland) writers and intellectuals, who admired his expressive style.

Other Names

Gerasimos Valsamis, Panagis Valsamis

Date and Place of Birth

10 August 1884, Brăila

Date and Place of Death

18 April 1935, Bucharest

Main Role

Writer

1. Birth, origin and education

Panait Istrati (1884-1935) was a bi-lingual writer (Romanian and French) whose origin was Romanian. The name which is mentioned in his birth certificate is Gherasim: «Year: a thousand eight hundred and eighty four; month: August, the eleventh; ten o'clock p.m.. This birth certificate is issued for the child called Gherasim, sex: male; born yesterday, on Friday, on the tenth of this month, at seven p.m., in Brăila; in his mother's dwelling situated in Romană Street, district yellow; the son of Mrs Joița Stoica Istrate, aged 29, Christian Orthodox, profession: maid». ¹ Despite this document, the boy was never to be called Gherasim, but Panait. His father might have been a Greek called Valsamis, originating from Faraklata, Kephallonia. In Panait's birth certificate there is no mention of the father, but there was a witness called Gheorghios Valsamis (Γεώργιος Βαλσάμης), who signed the certificate as «he who was living at the same address as the child's mother». This so-called witness gave rise to all sorts of speculations regarding Panait Istrati's natural father.

Panait Istrati wrote that he was born in [Brăila](#) (Romania), on the 10th August 1884, «as the son of an immortal Romanian peasant and a Greek smuggler» whom he never really knew as he was nine months old at this of his father's death. Panait Istrati repeatedly mentioned his double origin: «Among all the peoples, the Romanian and the Greek ones are the closest to me. I love and understand them because of the blood they “gave” me. Their good and bad qualities are also mine. Every time I immerse into their culture, I feel at home».

Panait Istrati left school after graduating the first grades and he became a typical self-taught person: he read extensively, he learned the foreign languages spoken in Brăila at the time (the Greek being then the most popular one), he travelled so much that he was nicknamed «the world wanderer» and lived out of numerous temporary jobs.

2. Panait Istrati' s literary oeuvre

After 1916, he taught himself French by using the dictionary first in Switzerland and then in France. Panait also read the French classics' entire literary works, improving the knowledge he already had from other books. After his literary talents were made known to the readers by the famous French novelist Romain Rolland, at the beginning of the '20s, Panait Istrati rapidly became one of the best-known writers in the world. In a few years his oeuvre was translated in around 40 languages.

At the beginning of his career as a writer, that is before the publishing of his first major novel *Chira Chiralina* (1924), Panait Istrati



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published only leftist socio-political reportages and articles in the Romanian press (in newspapers like: *România Muncitoare*, *Dimineața* and *Adevărul*, etc.) and in some European publications (*La Feuille*, *L'Humanité* and *L'Humanité Dimanche*). Nevertheless some published literary fragments, as for example *Nicolai Tziganou*, were showing his talent.

He wrote his oeuvre directly in French (with few exceptions) while describing the Romanian environment and preserving the Romanian mentality and language particularities. This made him to be called an 'exotic', 'picturesque' and 'Oriental'-type of writer by the Western literary world. After that, he re-wrote a good part of his works into his maternal language.

Despite him being compared with Maxim Gorki and other great writers, Panait Istrati's style is highly original as he had an unsurpassed narrative talent. He also expressed his compassion for people who were living at the margins of society, as it is proved by his books: *Chira Chiralina*, *Moș Anghel*, *Codin*, *Neranțula*, *Mediterana* or *Spovedanie pentru învinși*.

3. Characterization

Panait Istrati was a 'Romanian author writing in French' – and he was raised above all group or Party interests. He was accused of being both a right winger and a hard leftist. He dismissed the Communist ideas after visiting the Soviet Russia and he wrote articles for a Romanian right-wing publication called *Cruciada Românișmului*. His ideal of humanity is expressed by his love for the people and for freedom. He was saying that freedom is «the only worldly good which must be acquired at any cost by sacrificing: money, glory, health, life and even our own freedom».

A victim of the European political disputes during the interwar period and especially after he published a book on his travel to Soviet Russia, the writer's 'voice' was engulfed in a series of attacks and slanders directed to him by the political parties and their affiliated newspapers.

Isolated and in low spirits he returned to Romania at the beginning of the '30s. He died from tuberculosis, on the 16th April 1935.

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1. Mocioiu, N., Bounegru, S., Iavorschi, Gh., Vidiș, A. (eds.), *Documente privind istoricul orașului Brăila (1832-1918)* (București 1975) p. 386-387.
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Bibliography :

	Jutrin-Klener M. , <i>Panait Istrati, un chardon déraciné. Écrivain français, conteur roumain</i> , Maspéro, Paris 1970
	Pintea G.M. , <i>Panait Istrati</i> , Cartea Românească, București 1975
	Iorgulescu M. , <i>Celălalt Istrati</i> , Polirom, Iași 2004
	Ionescu M. , <i>Les (en)jeux de l'oral et de l'écrit: le cas de Panait Istrati</i> , Istros, Brăila 2000
	Bălan Z. , <i>Panait Istrati, tipologie narativă</i> , Istros, Brăila 2001
	Stiehler H. , <i>Panait Istrati</i> , Frankfurt 1990

Webliography :



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The Renegade Istrati

<http://www.archipelago.org/vol10-12/tanase.htm>

Sources

Mocioiu, N., Bounegru, S., Iavorschi, Gh., Vidiş, A. (eds.), *Documente privind istoricul oraşului Brăila (1832-1918)* (Bucureşti 1975).

Auxiliary Catalogs

Works of Panait Istrati

1. Autobiography Series

Les récits d'Adrien Zograffi:

Kyra Kyralina, with a foreward by Romain Rolland (Paris, Rieder, 1924)

Oncle Anghel (Paris, Rieder 1924)

Les Haïdoucs: I. Présentation de Haïdoucs (Paris, Rieder, 1925)

Les Haïdoucs: Domnitza de Snagov (Paris, Rieder, 1926)

Enfance d'Adrien Zograffi:

Codine (Paris, Rieder, 1926)

Adolescence d'Adrien Zograffi:

Mikhail (Paris, Rieder, 1927)

Vie d'Adrien Zograffi:

La Maison Thüringer (Paris, Rieder, 1933)

Le Bureau du Placement (Paris, Rieder, 1933)

Méditerranée. Léver du soleil (Paris, Rieder, 1934)

Méditerranée. Coucher du soleil (Paris, Rieder, 1935)

2. Other works

Trecut şi viitor. Pagini autobiografice (Bucureşti, Renaşterea, 1925)

La Famille Perlmutter (Paris, Gallimard, 1927) A novel written jointly with Josué Jéhouda.

Isaac, le tresseur de fil de fer (Strasbourg, Joseph Hessler librairie, 1927)

Le Refrain de la Fose (Nerantsoula), with a foreward by Apostolis Monastirioty (Paris, Grasset, 1927)



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Mes Départs (Paris, Librairie Gallimard – N.R.F, 1928)

Les Chardons du Baragan (Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1928)

Vers l'autre flamme. Confession pour vaincus. Après seize mois dans l'URSS (Paris, Rieder, 1929)

Le Pêcheur d'éponges (Paris, Rieder, 1930)

Pour avoir aimée la terre (Paris, Ed. Denoël et Steele, 1930)

Tsatsa Minka (Paris, Rieder, 1931)

En Égypte (Paris, Ed. des Cahiers libres, 1931)

Film and stage versions

Kira Kiralina, silent film produced in „VUFKU“ Soviet studios, Crimea, 1927, director: Boris Glagolin.

Ciulinii Bărăganului, French-Romanian co-production, 1957, directors: Louis Daquin and Gheorghe Vitanidis. Film version of the novel with the same name.

Codin, French-Romanian co-production, 1962, director: Henri Colpi. Film version of the novel with the same name. Script: Dumitru Carabăţ, Henri Colpi and Yves Jamiaque. The Prize for the best film script taken in Cannes Film Festival, 1963.

Balkán! Balkán!, Romanian-Hungarian-French-Turkish co-production; Romania, 1993, director: Maar Gyula. Film version of the autobiography writings.

Chira Chiralina, 1996, stage version by Cătălina Buzoianu, Maria Filotti Theatre, Brăila, producer: Cătălina Buzoianu.

Méditerranée, 1999, stage version by Cătălina Buzoianu, co-production Maria Filotti Theatre, Brăila & Toursky Theatre, Marseille, producer: Cătălina Buzoianu.