

MEMORIES OF NICOLAE CAJAL – AN EMBLEMATIC PERSONALITY OF THE ROMANIAN ACADEMY OF MEDICAL SCIENCES

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Abstract

The Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences is the institution that includes the elite of the Romanian medical and pharmaceutical professionals. This is an article of recollection of one of the most outstanding presidents of the Romanian Academy of Medical Sciences, Nicolae Cajal. A distinguished scientist, Cajal accepted not only the task of president of this forum, but was also involved in social and political projects, as chairman of the Jewish Community of Romania, gaining the respect of both his colleagues and the general population. His activity is put in the context of the period in which he lived.

Keywords: Academy of Medical Sciences, history of medicine, memories, Nicolae Cajal

The Academy of Medical Sciences was founded in the summer of 1969 and initially included 81 members, of which 41 were full members – *Clausus numerus*.

They were well known personalities, of high scientific value, accomplished professionals who had made their mark in their specialty, in the academic and social life. They created schools and contributed substantially to the organization and modernization of medical education and the promotion of Romanian medicine both nationally and internationally.

This select group included Professor Nicolae Cajal, who was among the youngest members in the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Romanian Academy, to which he had been elected as corresponding member in 1963.

Highly appreciated by the medical, academic and political leaders of the time, a full member of the AMS, Nicolae Cajal held a number of important positions: *section president, member of the AMS Board, AMS vice-president, interim president and president of the AMS*.

In 1969 the AMS had 4 sections, each with its president: *the preventive medicine section* – Prof. Nicolae Cajal; *the medical biology section* – prof. Stefan Milcu; *clinical medicine section* – prof. Radu Paun; *pharmacological research section* – prof. Petre Ionescu Stoian. All the four section presidents were members of the Board of AMS.

In the history of the AMS presidents, it is mentioned that professor Aurel Moga was the first president, followed by Constantin Arseni, when Nicolae

Cajal was vice-president. After December 1989 Nicolae Cajal was nominated interim president by the Minister of Health, prof. Dan Enachescu; he held this position until 30 April 1990, when the AMS General Assembly elected Stefan Milcu as president for a period of four years. It is well known that this nomination of the president was due to Nicolae Cajal, who worked hard to organize the General Assembly and presided the meeting of 30 April, held at the AMS headquarters in Bucharest, 125 Calea Victoriei. During this important meeting Nicolae Cajal emphasized the importance and role of the AMS as a national forum of Romanian medical science, meant to continue the valuable traditions on modern bases, promoting advanced research in biomedical sciences. The AMS aims at developing studies and strategies, assessing the results of Romanian research work. At the same time he expressed his conviction that the exceptional professional, scientific and managerial qualities recommended professor Stefan Milcu as president of the AMS, and such qualities were a guarantee for his successful mandate. These are just a few ideas of his speech delivered at that meeting.

After Stefan Milcu's death, the presidency was held by Nicolae Cajal, who held this position until the very last day of his life (7 March 2004).

In his activity at the AMS Nicolae Cajal demonstrated exceptional human qualities, he was extremely kind, optimistic and generous, an open personality; he was nice to everyone – including the personnel of the AMS, and in their turn they admired and endeared him. His presence brought joy in the offices of 29 Biserica Amzei ST. I am personally proud and lucky

Manuscript received: 26.01.2014

Accepted: 10.02.2014

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to have had a privileged relationship with professor Nicolae Cajal, which makes me feel that it is my duty to share the thoughts and testimonials of his prodigious activity in the AMS. I must say that I had two important moments in relation to Nicolae Cajal: I had him as a mentor in the period 1964-1965, and then after 1989 when I was part of the committee of reorganization and restructuring of the AMS, lead by Nicolae Cajal in his position of interim president. But I knew Nicolae Cajal ever since the AMS was founded in 1969. For four years, till 1973, I coordinated the *foreign affairs, secretariat and human resources department*. I admired him for his natural kindness, his healthy and often contagious optimism, for his rare generosity and availability, his moral stature and scientific worth. Professor Nicolae Cajal knew how to be close to people, he manifested genuine understanding and kindness. He even brought little presents to the personnel working in the AMS, and thus he brought joy. He was much admired, loved and esteemed. I was one of the witnesses of these manifestations of sympathy, admiration and appreciation of the people who were around him at the AMS.

From the history of the AMS I would like to mention the period after December 1989, when I had the opportunity to work directly with Professor Nicolae Cajal. In the first days of January 1990, the new Minister of Health, professor Dan Enachescu, nominated Nicolae Cajal *Interim President* of the AMS, who was to lead a team of which I was also part. The team had the mission to ensure the continuity and good functioning of the AMS, as well as its reorganization according to new principles.

In our meetings, the Minister of Health Dan Enachescu emphasized how important it was to find solutions for the problems facing the AMS. He insisted on both current and future issues. I remember one of the meetings held in his main office, during which he received a phone call from **Professor Mihai Draganescu** – Vice-Prime Minister (future President of the Romanian Academy, elected in 1990); finding out that Nicolae Cajal was there, he had a friendly chat with him.

The team coordinated by Nicolae Cajal started its activity by developing projects meant to solve the existing problems, which were:

- medical research which had lagged behind and needed to be restructured through developing new programs and research contracts;
- support for the research institutes subordinated to the AMS, and which had to develop new methodologies of *fundamental scientific research, preventive medicine and public health*;
- organization of the annual session of 1990, finding a building for the headquarters of the AMS.

By fulfilling these objectives the bases of the AMS restructuring were laid. The election of the AMS president

and the project of the new statute were also priorities.

The interim president initiated various and concerted actions. He had rounds of discussion with the members of the Romanian Academy and the AMS, asking for their support and active implication. It is worth mentioning the people who were actively enrolled by the interim president, especially professors Stefan Milcu, Vlad Voiculescu and Radu Paun, who had a great contribution to the restructuring of the AMS. Prof. Radu Paun, former minister of health, a very thorough, delicate and discrete man, generously shared his experience as public health manager, medical researcher and fine clinician. Other AMS members also brought their valuable expertise and contribution: professors Dan Alexandrescu, Ion Cinca, Ovidiu Popovici. I am the only one still alive from this team.

I think it is very important to emphasize that in **the four decades and a half** of the existence of the AMS (since 1969 to the present), for a period of **three decades and a half** Nicolae Cajal held leading positions. He was a model of moral conduct, a brilliant manager both in the education and scientific fields. With a *prodigious and prestigious* activity he decisively contributed to set up a scientific, warm and friendly climate, raising the AMS to a high level of prestige in Romania and abroad.

For Nicolae Cajal the Academy of Medical Sciences was a true source of spirituality meant to set forth the academic style and spirit in Romanian medicine. Nicolae Cajal promoted like no one among the AMS members the climate of intellectual friendship based on the respect for the opinions of the other. He promoted an academic spirit, which means respect for individual values and taking into account opinions of specialists and the academic community. He always found the right words to evoke the scientific patrimony of the medical personalities of the predecessors, as illustrated by his **reception speech at the Romanian Academy**.

On the 10th of January 1991, in a public meeting, Nicolae Cajal delivered a speech in honour of his Master, **Professor Stefan S. Nicolau – THE CREATOR OF THE ROMANIAN SCHOOL OF VIRUSOLOGY** – extremely emotional, Nicolae Cajal talked about his feelings as a young researcher, his thoughts while he was on the threshold of spiritual freedom, close to academic life. In these moments when he was on the verge of entering academic life, Nicolae Cajal said: “*I am overwhelmed by emotions when I evoke the figure and work of my spiritual parent, academy member Stefan S. Nicolau, his role in the creation of the Romanian school of virology (infra-microbiology)*”. From his speech under the dome of the Romanian Academy we would also mention the following: “I believed and still believe that nothing in this world can be understood outside the relationships in which MAN develops. Moreover, this is uncontested by science, where the step of my predecessor is the threshold of the birth of the followers. In other words the liberty of spiritual continuation, the tradition, its liberty and acknowledgement, which means in fact SCHOOL, are, in

my opinion, the key conditions FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANY SCIENCE. I consider the Academy not just a forum of validation, but also a creative institution, which is the hardest school, a true source of spirituality that will build the future of the city and the city of the future. A symbol of spiritual perenity and the citadel of thinking ready to fight with all its forces for the defense of the right of science to be". These are just samples of ideas in the confession of a scientist, a true declaration of faith formulated as follows: "human mind is the source of science, science is an important reason for the chances of man on earth, and science without tradition (without a School) and without a team is unconceivable.

Along time, under the dome of this temple of spiritual creation illustrious voices were heard: **Victor Babes, Gheorghe Marinescu, Constantin Istatti, Constantin I. Parhon, Mihai Ciuca, C. Ionescu-Mihaiesti, Ion Bruckner, Octavian Fodor.** Many of them were also members of the Academy of Medical Sciences.

One of Nicolae Cajal's contemporaries was another great scientist, a great personality in Romanian medicine: Professor Stefan Milcu. He was Chair of the Romanian Academy as Secretary General (1995 – 1963) and as vice-president (1963 – 1974). *Starting with 1969 he held different positions in the Academy of Medical Sciences, since its foundation, and for two decades as section president, vice-president and president (1990 – 1997).* I would like to emphasize that these two prominent physicians of the academic world were good friends, they respected and praised each other.

Professor Stefan Milcu in his answer speech to Nicolae Cajal's *reception speech* said: "I am honoured to have the floor for the reception speech delivered by one of the most reputable scientists of Romanian medicine:

Professor Nicolae Cajal. In his reception speech he referred mainly to the life and work of his Master, Stefan S. Nicolau – with extreme modesty and assuming a role of disciple and continuator. I would like to praise *the scientist and fine intellectual Nicolae Cajal, an old colleague and friend*, whose activity in the Romanian Academy is most fruitful." And after presenting the main characteristic features of Nicolae Cajal he ended with the words: "*Dear colleague, you hold today scientific and public positions of high responsibility. But above all, you are a good and generous man and you do not spare any effort to be useful to people, to the science and to the country*". To which we would add the results obtained in the AMS for 35 years, fulfilled with devotion and dignity. They are responsibilities never taken before and that cannot be ever be doubted or forgotten.

All these are arguments in reaffirming the fact that in the history of the Romanian Medical Academy Nicolae Cajal remains an emblematic figure with remarkable and unequalled performance for three decades and a half.

In the AMS history I have detailed two periods, the first four years since its foundation in 1969 and the short period of the first months after December 1989. Another period should be added, namely between the death of Aurel Moga, AMS president (19 August 1977) and the nomination of Constantin Arseni as President. It is the period when Nicolae Cajal, as one of the AMS vice-presidents, in collaboration with professor Emil Magureanu ensured the continuation of the AMS activity.

There are periods when I knew him *for real*. I could be regarded as lacking false modesty, but I am just a modest chronicler of those times writing a page of live history, the one of Nicolae Cajal, an illustrious figure in the gallery of the famous men of Romanian medicine who contributed to its promotion in the world.