



## **MIHAIL SEBASTIAN (1907-45) AND LEISURE SPORT PRACTICES IN THE 1930s' ROMANIA**

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### **Abstract**

The question is, within the work of the Romanian novelist and dramatist Mihail Sebastian (1907-45), to explore the investment of certain social groups in leisure sport practices in the 1930s' Romania. These social groups are the author's proper ones, or with which he has relationships, and all the characters of his literary work: intellectuals, professions, artists and architects, etc. These fictive or real individuals live in Bucharest, the capital, and invest practices in peripheral spaces (mountain or sea resorts) in year special times. In the other hand, the fact to wear sport clothes is often underlined, and the word "sport" is often used by the author to describe a body, an attitude or a psychological character.

### **1. Introduction**

How to accede to the knowledge of sport leisure practices of the past time history when this topic was not scientifically legitimated in the sociology field, which signifies that studies concerning this subject did not exist. The historian, as the sociologist, can explore archives from sporting associations (sport clubs and federations), municipalities, ministries, etc. He will obtain counting data about the number of sporting clubs, sportsmen and sportswomen, their age or sex dispatching, etc., information about the association organisation, and the persons who manage them.

However, the sociologist accedes by this way with difficulties to the leisure sport practices embedment in the population everyday life, the interest of this latter for the leisure sport practices, their ludic, social and regenerating dimension, or their living mode.

Meanwhile, other sources can permit to the sociologist not to give a précised counting dimension to the leisure sport practices, but to accede at what Sansot calls "sensitive" ("sensible" in French), which is as "the sensitive [...] is always what affects us and heard us" (Sansot, 1986, p. 38), stating that "when an object, a territory, a monument, a group affect me, I derive some pleasure or

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some inconvenience but more importantly it means that I have grasped the meaning” (Sansot, 1986, p. 53).

Thus, through the literature of the time, it is possible to access this sensitive that affects individuals who engage in leisure sport practices, and grasp the meaning they give to them. So this is a comprehensive sociology (Weber, 1995).

## 2. Material and methods

The material used consists of the literary work of the writer Mihail Sebastian (1907-1945), translated into French, which is particularly rich in ratings for leisure sports practices, as most of his writings refer to it at a time or another: a novel like *L'accident* even see almost half of the action takes place in a ski resort!

The method is firstly to identify all the different practices of leisure sports or sports events mentioned, identify what moments of social life they are, and understand the meaning that the characters give to them.

All these elements of course are connected to the social groups to which the protagonists of the literary work belong.

## 3. Results and discussions

Mihail Sebastian, who became his name in 1935, is the pseudonym of Yosef Hechter (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 71). He is born October 18, 1907 in Braila, a port on the Danube. He studied law at Bucharest, and then did a PhD in Paris (1930-1931), “where the masters of the Faculty of Law distinguish him” (Dupront, 1968, p. 6).

He writes in the daily *Cuvântul* (1927-1934) and then in other periodicals as *Rampa*, and *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* until 1940 and the establishment of anti-Jewish laws. These same laws prevent him to exercise his profession as a lawyer. He accidentally died May 29, 1945 in Bucharest (Paruit, 2002).

So, social groups described by Mihail Sebastian in his novels, plays and stories refer mainly to those he frequented in Bucharest during his outings and cultural activities: intellectual professions (journalists, literary critics, scholars, teachers ...), professionals (lawyers ...), artistic professions (architects, painters, actors ...).

It is from this social context that come the characters portrayed in his literary works and, with them, their practices of leisure sports. However, in addition to the practices themselves, Mihail Sebastian made a whole set of notations that refer to sports to describe situations, body types, attitudes, outfits.

When we see the great importance of the leisure sport practices in the life of the author and of the social groups he attends, they also seized the place that already has sports as a category for perceptive and descriptive the intelligentsia, we understand the place that sport already has for this intelligentsia as perceptive and descriptive categories.

### 3a. Leisure sport practice.

Several leisure sports practices are present in the work. Have been identified in one form or another, and in alphabetical order: boxing; canoeing; dance; fishing; football; hiking; horse racing; swimming; skiing; table tennis; tennis; volleyball; water polo. In this context, of course, not all have the same importance.

They are not located in the same places, they do not involve the body in the same way, nor yet have the same importance in the plot in the literary works, or in real life of the author, through its accounts for a large share autobiographical.

For example, football - already popular - is mentioned less than a half-dozen times. However, as of April 23, 1935, the author attended the derby between the two biggest clubs in Bucharest: Venus-Juventus; the first is the defending champion, and already five-time national winner (1920, 1921, 1929, 1932 and 1934), only once his rival (1930).

However, participation is more of worldliness obliged, as fan culture as we can know it today, because her friend Leny, actress, is "arrived late, having a rehearsal at the theater for its next premiere" (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 28).

- "Ann was for some time a figure of Bucharest life, a 'celebrity'. She appeared everywhere, at the theater, at the racetrack, at the stadium for big games..." (Sebastian, 2002, p. 104).

The only practices performed by the author or the characters of his works are: canoeing, dancing, hiking, skiing, swimming, table tennis, tennis, and volleyball.

Canoeing by the author on Lake Annecy (Sebastian, 2007a, pp 202-205), table tennis and volleyball by the author in Bran where he spent holidays in August 1938, adding that he has played all kinds of games: chess, backgammon, billiards, table tennis, volleyball (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 157).

The dance is primarily an urban socialite activity, during nights out in the cafes of Budapest (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 44-45).

In fact, three leisure sport practices are particularly found in abundance on the work of Mihail Sebastian: swimming, hiking and skiing. If swimming and hiking are involved with more or less acute in the scenario of *Femmes*, as well as in the autobiographical narratives and the *Journal*, skiing is the fundamental practice that organizes the author's leisure sports, and the linchpin of his novel *L'accident*.

Indeed, one of the two main characters of the work, Paul (embodies the author's romantic difficulties) fortuitously met Nora, crashed on the descent of the tram, and helps her to go home.

After many vicissitudes, the teacher Nora leads the lawyer (actual occupation of the author) for a month's vacation in the mountains at the time of Christmas and New Year, in the Prahova Valley (place frequented assiduously by Mihail Sebastian - see *Journal*).

Avid skier in real life, Mihail Sebastian has no trouble transferring the subtlety of his skills in the character of Nora, who teaches the other hero (Paul), the art of using sticks, plow snow, turning, and stopping at the bottom of the slopes.

In this natural setting (forest, sun, altitude, physical exertion, ski touring several hours, healthy fatigue), Paul manages to distance his complicated relationship with Anna, a fickle painter. Moreover, in his autobiographical work, Mihail Sebastian is not lacking on several occasions emphasized that effect on him:

- "Skiing is my only recreation. Yesterday at Poiana, now Timiș, as I ski I'm happy. Heavy snow, sparkling decor, pleasure to fly on skis, jumping successfully crash land, triumph, finally, when I manage to finish the race, to stop almost correctly, at least without falling..." (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 131).

- "I come home refreshed (...) three days of skiing, and I go the nerves calmed down, put in their place" (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 143).

- The fictional work highlighting the sensations experienced when skiing in the winter and natural environment:

- Nora: "So what's it like?" Paul: "I cannot express it. It's beyond words. It's intense. It's a great light... I think I'm drunk. He fell in the snow, open arms, and there wallowed" (Sebastian, 2002, p. 188).

### 3b. Clothing

The work of Mihail Sebastian highlights another aspect of the sports phenomenon that refers to the dress. Indeed, the practice of leisure sports is not achieved without the use of a proper cloth, different from the traditional town clothes of Bucharest social groups considered, with "men in superbly suits, dressed to the nine", wear "well-dressed (...) suits" (Oudard, 1935, pp. 4-5).

Thus, several heroines are, at one time or another, noticed in sportswear:

- "[Marjorie] was an amazing gravity, which clashed with the incredible teenage air that gave her the blue ski suit" (Sebastian, 1998a, p. 219).

- "Between them, a third [photo], smaller, where I recognized painstakingly Marjorie of last summer, wearing sandals and tennis skirt" (Sebastian, 1998a, p. 219).

- Eva Nicholson: "Come alone, driving a small convertible, she wants to leave in two hours. She wears a tracksuit and a white raincoat" (Sebastian, 1998a, p. 292).

- Odette is 18, wears a blue beret placed obliquely on the neck, a sport dress tightened by a leather belt and white sandals without socks” (Sebastian, 2007b, p. 45).

- Odette: “I would go right now, as you see me in a swimsuit, wet and disheveled” (Sebastian, 2007b, p. 57).

- Nora: “You need something?” Paul: “No. I looked at a picture on the desktop. Who is this?” Nora: “It’s me.” Paul: “In this suit?” Nora: “Yes, a ski suit. I was in Predeal. I please you?” (Sebastian, 2002, p. 20).

### *3c. Sport as perceptive and descriptive categories*

We can already see through the above quotes, the sports clothing, worn in other circumstances, indicates a form of personality, a psychological or physical trait. One of the remarkable aspects of the work of Mihail Sebastian consists precisely in the fact that sport is a perceptive and descriptive category of individuals, both in their physical appearance (description), either in their psychological (perception).

#### *3c.1. Physical description*

Of course, sport is part of building up the body of individuals, as the exercise of a physical occupation (farmer, craftsman, builder, etc.).

So, sport practiced from an early age, and at that time, led to the construction of fully identifiable silhouettes by social categories, subject to the same academic or social requirements, thus they make the sporting body as a perceptual category to assess the physical of individuals, male or female:

- His friend Sami Winckler is described as having a “silhouette of a boxer, square and massive” with a “picked up physical strength” (Sebastian, 1998a, pp. 101-102).

- Andrei: “he blocked with his silhouette of a boxer so many doors that could lead to other people and other stories” (Sebastian, 2007b, p. 140).

- “Here Radu Siriu, broad-shouldered, athletic, pink and chubby...” (Sebastian, 1998a, p. 202).

- Beb: “he had changed, indeed. Less pale than before, he was taller, sportier” (Sebastian, 2007b, p. 211).

#### *3c.2. Perceptive category*

However, beyond the physical assessment of individuals, engaging in sport also infers an attitude and social behavior shown by fair play, which means “should never seek to gain an unfair advantage over an opponent” (Cox & al., 2000, pp. 133-134).

- About Marjorie Dunton: “I would bet that you would stay, even in an adultery situation, a sporty, simple, ignoring cowardice” (Sebastian, 1998a, p. 194).

- Odette “plays seriously, in good faith, as a sportswoman, without handshakes other than those required by the game” (Sebastian, 2007b, p. 46).

- About moving of all the guests of the pension to admire a rainbow sky, Odette calls this behavior “trivial”: “I would not have found this word says Stefan, and he sent the girl a sign of approval, which reads sincere admiration with which, in a football match, in a football game, a forward would welcome a remarkable goal succeeded by a teammate” (Sebastian, 2007b, p. 47).

- In Predeal, October 31, 1938, by -3°, while it's snowing, “Why do I only have to put my shoes and a ski outfit to feel younger?” (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 216).

- Bucharest: “... to see women elegantly dressed in bright and light dresses - it was early June - who brought in the night of this Bucharest summer a vague rustling of beach, sea...” (Sebastian, 2002, p. 97).

- Nora: “I was a boy too long (...) leaving his ski suit for a dress; wearing this modest dress, Nora felt becoming a woman” (Sebastian, 2002, p. 271).

### *3d. Sport as constitutive of Bucharest life*

Through various forms of the literary work of Mihail Sebastian, one can note the importance that takes the sport in the Bucharest society of the 1930s (we have no indication from him on the Romanian society as a whole), and functions leisure sport practices begin to assume, at least for the intellectual classes of the capital: winter holidays for skiing in the Prahova Valley, summer holidays at the edge of the Black Sea or in the Carpathians to conduct hiking. In any case, through the real or imaginary experience of the author, it is a time of regeneration, compared to the Bucharest life:

Two days in Balcik (Black Sea): “I got home last night. For two days I could think of nothing, forget that I have no money, forget the rent, the flat owner...” (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 191).

“I wonder why I did not take advantage of the Christmas holidays to leave Bucharest. I could finish my novel, I could ski... (...) Here I am, at the end of vacation, tired, without enthusiasm, without envy, lazy, confused, consumed with remorse” (Sebastian, 1998b, pp. 175-176).

For his part, Paul Morand summarizes the contrast between the bustle of the city and the tranquility of Sinaia and the Carpathians:

- “Located near Predeal and the former Hungarian border in a pleasantly wilderness, Sinaia is only sources, silence, shadow, freshness, granite, trout and softwoods, while Bucharest is only noise, dust, sterlets, sun and plaster” (Morand, 1935, p. 277).

- What Mihail Sebastian expressed in another way, more in relation to his everyday life:

- "What is depressing in Bucharest are the phone calls, going out in the city, the premieres in the theater, the invitations. The first day, I felt - compared to a simple life in Predeal - to get into a big madhouse" (Sebastian, 1998b, p. 219).

### 3e. Discussions

Of course, the elements previously mobilized refer to very specific social groups: the intelligentsia and, probably, the small commercial and industrial bourgeoisie.

Also, we are not able to extrapolate regarding the entire Romanian society. However, it is clear that during the interwar period, Romania and social elites see themselves caught up in, or voluntarily commit to the lifestyle of Western Europe and, through the personality certainly unique, but at the same time emblematic of Mihail Sebastian, it is possible to identify a stream of civilization that would certainly be amplified without the Second World War (this, without minimizing the anti-Semitism of a part of Romanian society of the time).

## 4. Conclusions

It appears that literature, that is to say fictional or autobiographical works, writers are always rooted in their observations of the everyday lives of their own society or other ones, provides access to information that the "institutional" historical archives do not offer or just a little.

The novel or short story, such as autobiographical narrative, leaving the author the demiurgic creative freedom offer him an opportunity to reinvest his ratings on daily life

From this point of view, Journal of Mihail Sebastian is a methodological tool of prime importance to understand how an author injects all or part of his personal life in the fictional characters he creates. And how they take their autonomy and impose non-planned responses.

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