

MISCELLANEA

Andrei Ruse

Spring at Bug - a history of candor

The book Spring at Bug has a strong literary expressiveness. But it is not "just" literature.

This story about the lives of beings who really existed is a lesson about history, about the human condition in difficult times, it is proof of the democracy of virtues. As is always the case with genuine literature, the author does not lecture, moralize or give advice. As always with a genuine piece of art, it invites the reader to meditation. Spring at Bug encourages reflections on marginality, injustice and the cruelty of some people towards others. Our more abstract ideas of rights and responsibilities then grow on top of these themes. Having this in mind, The New Journal of Human Rights has invited writer and editor Andrei Ruse to review Mircea Tănase's book Spring at Bug, published in 2025 by Hyperliteratura Publishing House, assuring him that it has its place here in a theoretical journal devoted to human rights. We publish the review in this issue of the journal with thanks for the quality of his response.

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There is, I believe, a part of history that cannot be taught or "regimented" in textbooks or studies. A history, if you like, that we can only perceive by feeling. Not of data and facts - even if it is very much about them - but of real people who, through their memories, manage to share with us an astonishingly vivid slice of time. And don't think of great novels or important personalities, or even outstanding intellectuals - those have other "shelves" reserved for them - but quite the opposite. Think of ordinary people, caught up in the maelstrom of terrible events, who decided not to let their trauma be forgotten and, as best they could, put down on paper a history that I call "a history of candor".

After being deported to the Soviet Gulag, Anița Nandriș left us perhaps the most palpable tragedy of the Bukovinians and Bessarabians sent to Siberia. Together with her sons, she survived that ordeal as if by a miracle and, with a language as "rudimentary" as possible, she bequeathed us a testimony that has moved us as well as made us truly understand the suffering of those people better than any scholarly book. The manuscript had been entrusted to a nephew in 1982 and smuggled to Romania, where it was published only after 1989, under the title "Twenty Years in Siberia", three years after the author's death. Monica Lovinescu said of her book: "not only is it a must-read, but it deserves to be placed in libraries on a shelf with the classics".

Also, I can't help but think of Elisabeta Rizea, "the woman whose hair was torn off by the Securitate", the anti-communist heroine of Făgăraș (Haiducii Muscelului), discovered and brought to the attention of the general public by Lucia Hossu-Longin in her show *Memorialul Durerii*. Her accounts were collected and later turned into a book, "The Story of Elisabeta Rizea from Nucșoara", published in 1993, which shows the fury of the communist repression

of the dissidents in the mountains, and without which we might not even have suspected the brutality of that odious beginning of the regime. Just as the huge numbers of those exterminated in the Nazi camps are but bland statistics next to Anne Frank's harrowing diary. The raw experiences of these martyrs are true portals through time and have a miraculous power: to heal the wounds of history by "reliving" it.

Also in this category is the more recent *Spring at Bug*¹, which covers the almost unreal facts about the deportation of the Roma during the Antonescian period, which are, unfortunately, virtually unknown to most of the population. Masquerading as a novel, written in the first person, the action focuses on the fate of the family of Mircea Tănase (1939-2009), none other than the father of the well-known sociologist Gelu Duminică, but in fact describes the cruel fate of over 25,000 souls, at least according to official data. A novel that manages to reveal the harsh reality to which the Roma were subjected at Bug, without, however, falling into the trap of whining or, as would be justified, nationalist laying of blame. On the contrary, it is a story that, despite all that happens, seethes with humanity and hope, seeking a very real answer from the divine:

Oh, God, how much did I, your servant Ivan, go against your word that you have punished me such (...) And if I have done you so much wrong, these children, and they look at us with tears in their eyes, what have they done wrong?

Ivan, a blacksmith by trade, is the head of this family, who moved from Bessarabia to Galati in the 1930s at the insistence of his wife, who, however well she was doing with her hardworking and careful husband in the village of Comrat, could not break away from the custom of her ancestors of begging. With the help of two Romanian friends, Ivan and his family set up a fine household and increased their fortune from the pig trade. But life had no mercy for them, as World War II came like a hurricane. He is sent to the front and part of his family ends up being deported, although they shouldn't have been - precisely because he was in the army. There have been cases like this, it is not a unique story - and there is evidence to support this, Gelu Duminică showed me part of the archives. Just as it wasn't only criminals or those without papers who were sent to Bug. And even if those were the only ones sent, let's say, as some try to justify the decisions made at that time, in what sane world can we come up with arguments in favor of murder? Because that is what it was, and that's what *Spring at Bug* shows us in spades.

From this point in the story, we have an extraordinary novel about female survival and camaraderie - at its center are Anica (our narrator's older sister) and Ifținca, her best friend. Along them we penetrate the internment camps and make our way to Bug, where the Roma were left to fend for themselves, without food and without the basic resources to at least get through the harsh winters there. If they tried to return, they were shot by our people. If they moved eastward, they were shot by the Russians or by partisans at the edge of mass graves they were forced to dig themselves. If they were caught stealing from Ukrainian villages, the same happened. Many people died of starvation and typhus. Then they died during winter, when everyone was locked in their shelters, not knowing for months who was alive and who was dead. Countless are found only after the thaw, dead and hugging each other.

Mircea Tănase only had seven years of schooling, but he compensates for his lack of study and exercise in writing, if you will, with a storyteller's gift similar to Creangă's - you'll agree with me when you read. The image of spring - hence the title of the novel - when the Roma find out how many of them are still alive, also brings hope, and the desire to survive is reborn along with nature. This contrast, as well as other poignant images, confirms the author's strength in grasping exactly what needs to be brought to the forefront for the greatest

¹ Mircea Tănase, *Primăvara la Bug*, Hyperliteratura Publishing House, Bucharest, 2025, 272 pages.

impact. All the scenes, whether brutal or not, abound in colors or awful smells. It almost makes you want to scratch yourself as if you have lice while flipping through some pages, so well are the characters' feelings rendered, and the characters themselves are also extremely well defined, not only through descriptions, but especially through the very realistic dialog.

Anica is sent to Bug with her child and only by begging in the neighboring villages does she manage to keep on their feet the "tribe" she attached herself to - for there she finds the family of a good friend of her father's. But as the years go by, her little boy grows weaker. When she finds him dead beside her, and has to bury him in those wastelands without a ceremony or any ritual, Anica's mind begins to wander as the meaning of her life unravels. Together with Iftinca, who is by her side every step of the way - the relationship between these two women is incredible, I would say - she decides to return home, or at least to try, because to stay there would also be tantamount to death. The journey of the two women is also the most tense and suspenseful part of the book. And when you remember that the story is real, you almost can't hold back the tears.

We are learning from Mircea Tanase a piece of history that too often we have either denied or not given much importance. Bug has been talked about too little or not at all and in most cases only in figures and all sorts of "rigid" statistics. But now we have the chance to "re-live" that nightmare, in order to learn the necessary lessons and not let those times happen again. Because that is where extremism and fanatical nationalism lead: toward violence, division, hatred and inevitably towards atrocities. It is a book that perhaps makes you a little more attentive to the messages around you and alarmed when you hear from the mouths of some self-proclaimed saviors of the nation, words so similar to those of that time. Words that have led - and sadly, I believe will continue to lead - to too much innocent bloodshed.

The book was written in the early 2000s, precisely against forgetting. During the author's lifetime, Gelu confesses that he did not help his father to publish it, because he did not think anyone would be interested in the subject. Then, he also had a certain fear of assuming responsibility, which led Tănase Duminică to change his name on the cover to Mircea, as everyone who knew him called him. Gelu's father died in 2009 and Gelu took charge of the manuscript. He brought it from Galati to Bucharest, and for years he didn't have the strength to re-read it. It was only after 16 years that he was able to gift it to a publisher - and I chose the verb *to gift* on purpose.

This is where I come in. Following a podcast I made with Gelu about Roma history for the Zaiafet channel, I insisted that those stories (and many others that he has mentioned during various shows) be collected in a book to be published by my small publishing house, Hyperliteratura. By "chance" - and I no longer believe in such coincidences - at that meeting Gelu happened to drop me a few words about his father's manuscript, asking me to take a look at it, when I had time. It didn't seem very important, so somewhere between last fall and the beginning of 2025, caught up in other projects, I almost forgot about the document. Imagine the shock I had when I decided to print it and started reading this novel that shook me to the core. I remember calling Gelu immediately and saying, "Man, you gave me a treasure!" More like, you gave us a treasure. Or more correctly, you both gave us a treasure.

My only role has been to polish the text, to cut out repetitions, to check and correct small details - because, of course, memory is highly subjective - so that the reader gets a smooth reading experience. I only took out some "ballast" - as we, writers or editors, call it - which is normal even for experienced people, let alone for someone who has never written a book. And I preserved the author's voice, without any kind of intervention. Then, of course, I worked with my colleagues (Dan Iancu, paginator; Teodor Hossu-Longin and Dragoș Cărbuneanu, proofreaders) to ensure that the manuscript came to life, was printed and

reached bookstores, and from there the readers. It was essential that the cover should show a painting that I had seen some time ago in the collection of the painter Eugen Raportoru, and he gave it to us to use without any demands, for which I thank him once again.

I firmly believe that after reading this novel, some people will be better human beings. And then Mircea Tanase's goal will be achieved: to forgive, but not to forget.