

NICOLAE STEINHARDT. BIOGRAPHICAL PORTRAIT

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Abstract: Once in a while, certain personalities appear in our history who stand out from the ordinary and break the mould, impressing the public not only through the writings they have left behind, but also through their very existence, which becomes a model for others to follow. Although they are subject to the laws of nature and the codes imposed by society, their lives and work do not go unnoticed, destined to be forgotten, but on the contrary, they shake the consciences of beings, changing both mentalities and destinies. One such privileged and eloquent person is Nicolae Steinhardt. Clad in a monk's robe, engaged in an intermittent battle with the windmills of crazy history, the humble monk from Rohia exposed the communist lie and spoke the truth, taking the Cross as his protection and Christ as his companion. Thanks to Nicolae Steinhardt, suffering became a true path to salvation for those tested by life's obstacles, locked in prisons both narrow and wide. The paper combines documentary, Christian and psychological aspects, reconstructing the essayist's destiny, but also the way in which he was perceived.

Keywords: Nicolae Steinhardt, biography, prison, Orthodoxy, monk

Nicolae Steinhardt (Nicu-Aurelian) was born on 12 July 1912 in the village of Pantelimon, where his father (Oscar Steinhardt), a former colleague of Albert Einstein at the Zurich Polytechnic, lived: “My father knew Einstein well, about whom he told me that he didn't study very hard, but proved to be very intelligent”¹. He ran a sawmill and furniture factory, and his mother (Antoinette Neuman), a distant relative of Sigmund Freud², took care of the children's education: “Every person has a childhood alley. Mine was there, in the very ordinary Pantelimon, between Capra and Fundeni - and in the endless courtyard of a sawmill, perhaps the cleanest industry, deeply permeated by the smell of cut wood and sawdust”³. The place of his childhood, as it appears in *Primejdia mărturisirii* and *Jurnalul fericirii*, anticipates the first signs of his future conversion to Christianity: “For me, becoming a Christian is like a love story: a double love affair with the Christian church and the Romanian people. At first, it was my native Pantelimon, a suburban commune of Bucharest where my father was an engineer at a sawmill. I was drawn to and enchanted by the bells of the nearby Capra church as soon as I could distinguish them from the background noise that surrounded me. The bells were therefore the first sign. (And I bless St. Paulinus of Nola, who is said to have introduced them into the ceremony of the new religion.) Alongside the bells – the initial trigger of my spiritual destiny – stood the village of Pantelimon itself, with its modest acacia trees (the trees of the undaunted) and its low houses, with its people at peace with life and convinced that nothing truly tragic could happen to them”⁴.

According to his statements, in an autobiography published in the magazines *România literară* (no. 46/19-25 November) and *Ziua* (no. 913/21-22 June), which was later broadcast on *Europa Liberă* (specifically, in the programmes of 12 and 15 July 1997), he attended primary school privately at the Clementina School, and then went on to attend the Spiru Haret High School, where some of his classmates were Constantin Noica, Alexandru Ciorănescu, Mircea Eliade, Arşavir Acterian, Alexandru Paleologu, Haig Acterian, Dinu Pillat, Marcel Avramescu,

¹ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Escale în timp și spațiu*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 1987, p.127.

² George Ardeleanu, „Acasă la Sigmund Freud”, in *România Literară*, 8 feb. 2008, pp.16-17.

³ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, Ediție îngrijită și postfață de Virgil Ciomoș, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1991, p.49.

⁴ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Primejdia mărturisirii. Convorbiri cu Ioan Pinteau*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1993, p.163.

Barbu Brezianu, Traian Lalescu, and others. At this high school, he was the only student of Jewish faith who enrolled in Christian religion classes, being accepted and always treated with kindness and goodwill by the priest Gheorghe Georgescu, who often told his students that rather than see “Maniu’s papist” as Minister of Religious Affairs, he would rather see one of their own “Jews”, a good boy like Nicolae Steinhardt, mentioning his name. He passed his baccalaureate exam in 1929 and then went on to study at two faculties: Law and Literature. He obtained his bachelor’s degree in 1934 and his doctorate in 1936, with a thesis on constitutional law entitled “Classical principles and new trends in constitutional law. A critique of the work of Léon Duguit”⁵.

During this period, Steinhardt also met Emanuel Neuman, whom he nicknamed Manole, one of the most radiant and brilliant figures in *Jurnalul Fericirii*, described by Steinhardt as a Jew from the Danube, liberal in his thinking, sceptical about religion, but very conservative in politics. During a letter-writing project taking place in Brussels, where Emanuel Neuman had settled, Steinhardt confesses: “I owe you the little common sense I can take refuge in, I owe you for having succeeded, later than the others, in finding my way a little in this world that is so confusing to me; I owe you for having been rescued from the morass of conventional lies specific to the society and era in which we were young, for having come into contact with such “honourable” people as Tocqueville, Guizot, Royer-Collard, de Brogile, Prévost, Paradol, I don’t know how many judicial lords and constitutionalists, according to your principle that if we cannot frequent the aristocracy, we should at least seek it in the House of Lords or among Roman doctrinaires and senators; you, many years before Raymond Aron, knew and proved to me that the opium of intellectuals is called socialism; you broke me free from the influence of the conceited ignorance and blind illusions of the Sărindar press; you made it easier for me to understand what almost everyone who lives in the same part of the world as you today cannot understand, they who are struggling with all their might to get where we are here”⁶.

It was also during this period that the Synagogue failed: “Our Jewish experience did not last long. Manole mostly railed and gave guidance, while I struggled with difficulties: after learning Hebrew, I was confronted with Aramaic, after the common alphabet, that of the learned Rashi, and even another, supra-esoteric one. These were flowers in my ears, but the emptiness in my soul, the dust and ashes in my heart (as Bialik says - u va lev afar va efer) weighed heavily on me”⁷. In 1934, under the pseudonym Antisthius, he published a parodic volume entitled *În genul...tinerilor* (Ed. Cultura Poporului), in 1935 he published the essay “Essai sur une conception catholique du Judaïsme” (published in collaboration with Manole, Emanuel Neuman), and in 1936 he published, in Paris, also in collaboration with Neuman, “Illusions et réalités juives”⁸. During this period, between 1934 and 1935, Steinhardt frequented the “Sburătorul” literary club and began to publish various articles in “Revista burgheză”. Until the outbreak of the war, he continued his studies in England and Paris. In 1939, on the recommendation of Camil Petrescu, Steinhardt took up a position on the editorial board of “Revista Fundațiilor Regale” alongside Vladimir Streinu, but they were removed after only one year of activity⁹.

Unlike Mihail Sebastian, during the war, Steinhardt does not seem to have been so affected by all the persecutions that were unjustly applied to the entire Jewish population of Romania, stating that once he returned to the country, he did not suffer because he was Jewish, his father having been naturalised by a law passed by Parliament as a reserve officer, thus

⁵ George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt. Monografie, antologie comentată, receptare critică*, Ed. Aula, Braşov, 2000, p.56.

⁶ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, Ediție îngrijită și Postfață de Virgil Ciomoș, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1991, p.239.

⁷ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Primejdia mărturisirii. Convorbiri cu Ioan Pinte*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1993, p.166.

⁸ George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt. Monografie, antologie comentată, receptare critică*, Ed. Aula, Braşov, 2000, p.57.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

recognised as a second-class Jew, which protected him from those vexatious measures: "Not once did housewives come out of their homes carrying trays of boiled plum brandy and cups of hot tea to comfort the Jews who, in Bucharest and provincial towns, were working in the snow on the streets, and it seems that the verb *to comfort* has never found a more precise meaning"¹⁰. However, Steinhardt is not spared his father's reproaches when he gapes in amazement as Russian tanks enter the capital (August 1944): "You idiot, you stand there and stare, you fool, you all stand there and stare and don't know what's coming; look how they laugh, they'll cry bitter tears and so will you"¹¹. After the war ended, he resumed his work at "Revista Fundațiilor Regale" (RFR), while also working at "Universul literal", "Viața românească" and "Libertatea". In 1947, following a denunciation by G. Călinescu, Steinhardt was once again removed from RFR.

After 1947, Steinhardt began to experience the same privations endured by all those Jews who refused to sign the "pact with the devil". He was expelled from the bar, began to take on various odd jobs, most of them unskilled, and his texts and publications were completely banned. However, on a spiritual level, things were completely different: "I increasingly sought refuge in churches, in Christian books, in prayer, in hopes that left the realm of the vague and gradually took shape in certainty. I don't know, though, if I would have had the courage and confidence to take the decisive step - out of laziness? Out of fear? Out of inner chaos? Out of distraction? So as not to upset my relatives and acquaintances? So that they would not consider my gesture bizarre? - if He whose ways are inscrutable and who, as the English say, walks mysterious paths had not come to my aid through the person of the philosopher and writer Constantin Noica, a former high school classmate. I was among those who visited him at his compulsory residence in Cîmpulung, I met him when he came (clandestinely) to Bucharest, and I also hosted him"¹².

In 1959, his group of friends was arrested, the first of whom was Constantin Noica. After him, Dinu Pillat, Alexandru Paleologu, Vladimir Streinu, Păstorel Teodoreanu, Sergiu Alexandru-Nicolae, Mihai Rădulescu, Dinu Ranetti, Marieta Sadova, Theodor Enescu and others were also arrested. On 31 December 1959, he was summoned by those from the Security, where he was asked to be a witness for the prosecution, being informed from the outset that if he refused, he would be arrested and would also be part of that group of "mystical-legionary" intellectuals. He was given three days to think it over, being scolded by his father once again: "Why did you come home, you bastard? You gave them the impression that you were hesitating, that you might betray your friends. In business, when you say let me think about it, it means you've already agreed. Don't agree to be a witness for the prosecution for anything in the world"¹³. On the day he left for prison, his father encouraged him, saluted him militarily, and then said the words that have become famous in *Jurnalul fericirii*: "It's true that you will have very difficult days. But your nights will be peaceful, you will sleep well. Whereas if you agree to be a witness for the prosecution, you will have, admittedly, quite good days, but your nights will be terrible"¹⁴ and, in particular, "And make sure you don't embarrass me. Don't be a cowardly Jew and don't shit your pants"¹⁵. Nicolae Steinhardt heeded his father's advice, refusing to be a witness for the prosecution; he was therefore arrested, then tried in the "Noica-Pillat Case" and sentenced to 12 years in prison and hard labour. This is the key biographical element that will lead Steinhardt to accept Christian baptism in prison, converting to Orthodoxy: "There, in Jilava, in room 18 of the second section (where blood had been shed twice), I received Holy Baptism (15 March 1960). Father Mina (Dobzeu) wanted to give this

¹⁰ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Primejdia mărturisirii. Convorbiri cu Ioan Pinte*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1993, p.184.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Nicolae Steinhardt, *Primejdia mărturisirii. Convorbiri cu Ioan Pinte*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1993, p.169.

¹³ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, Ediție îngrijită și Postfață de Virgil Ciomoș, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1991, p.15.

¹⁴ Nicolae Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii*, Ediție îngrijită și Postfață de Virgil Ciomoș, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1991, p.23.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

baptism, which was much like a hold-up, an ecumenical character, and invited the two Greek Catholic priests in the cell to the small clandestine ceremony”¹⁶. In August 1964, thanks to a general pardon for all prisoners, Steinhardt was released from prison. After his release, he completed his baptism through chrismation at Darvari Skete. From that moment on, Steinhardt began to live a true Christian life, and after his father’s death in 1967, he began his search to settle in a monastery, an experience he had wanted since he was in prison.

In 1973, Constantin Noica announced that he had found the “right place” for him, namely Rohia Monastery, where he would lead the life of a monk: “It was only in 1973 that Constantin Noica informed me that he had been to Cluj, where he had met the newly ordained bishop Justinian Chira, and that he had visited Rohia Monastery, where the bishop had been abbot for thirty years. ‘I have found the right place for you’, Noica told me”¹⁷. After Noica’s announcement, he left for Rohia, together with Iordan Chimet, where they were welcomed by the abbot of the monastery, Serafim Man. For seven years, Steinhardt made pilgrimages to Rohia, and on 16 August 1980, he became a monk, being tonsured by Bishop Justinian Chira and Archbishop Teofil Herineanu, who took Steinhardt under their protective wings. As a task, the abbot of the monastery, Archimandrite Serafim Man, entrusted him with the care of the monastery’s library, which contained over 23,000 volumes: “I have now been a monk for seven years. I managed to organise the monastery library as best I could, I made sure not to miss the Holy Liturgy and midnight prayers – the main moments of monastic discipline – and I was, I believe, of some use to several candidates for the entrance exam to the theological seminary. I give all my heart to God for making me worthy of Holy Baptism and monasticism, much more than a man like me could have hoped for. Since my youth, I have carried a heavy and ugly cross: a nasty intestinal disease. I should have despaired, I should have become gloomy. My faith helps me to bear it with sufficient stoicism and not to shake my joy of being a Christian and a monk – to the extent of the gift, which is very little, but still giving me the right to say: ‘Et in Arcadia ego’. Blessed be the name of the Lord”¹⁸.

So, in this wonderful corner of Romania, Rohia Monastery, Steinhardt has his own cell, located in the Poet’s House, which was built between 1977 and 1979, with two floors with splendid verandas and a ground floor. The poet Ioan Alexandru, whom Steinhardt greatly admired and cherished, especially for his strong and intermittent love for God, which always permeated his poetic creation, also lived in this cell for a certain period of time. The cell where monk Nicolae Steinhardt lived and worked has become a small museum, commemorating the man who lived there. As a museum, the cell preserves Steinhardt’s personal belongings, such as manuscripts, icons, books, paintings, furniture etc. Furthermore, “in the Thraco-Dacian region of Rohia”, where he experiences numerous moments of complete happiness, the Proustian Steinhardt plays the role of a civilising hero”¹⁹, a role of mentor, as he introduces the young monks of the monastery to the secrets of the English language, teaching them language courses in the monastery office, which are conducted with particular rigour.

After his death, Ioan Pinteia and Virgil Ciomoş recovered a large part of his texts from his cell, which were published posthumously. During this period, following the insistence of Constantin Noica and Alexandru Paleologu, Steinhardt began writing again, re-entering the literary life and publishing chronicles, translations, and essays in “Secolul XX”, “Steaua”, “Familia”, “Viaţa românească”, “Echinox”, “Vatra”, “Orizont”, “Opinia studentească”, and other publications. Steinhardt also published the following volumes: *Între viaţă şi cărţi* (Ed. Cartea Românească, Bucureşti, 1976), *Geo Bogza, un poet al Efectelor, Exaltării, Grandiosului, Solemnităţii, Exuberanţei şi Patetismului* (Ed. Albatros, Bucureşti, 1982),

¹⁶ George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt. Monografie, antologie comentată, receptare critică*, Ed. Aula, Braşov, 2000, p.59.

¹⁷ Nicolae Steinhardt, “Autobiografie”, in *Ziua*, no. 913/21-22 June 1997.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Nicolae Morar, *Dimensiunea creştină a operei lui N. Steinhardt*, Ed. Paideia, 2004, p.206.

Incertitudini literare (Ed. Dacia, col. Discobolul, Cluj-Napoca, 1980), *Critică la persoana întâi* (Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1983), *Prin alții spre sine* (New and Old Essays), *Escale în timp și spațiu* or *Dincoace și dincolo de texte* (Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 1987), *Cuvînt înainte* (to the book by Svetlana Paleologu-Matta), *Eminescu și abisul ontologic* (Ed. Științifică, București, 1994)²⁰. Steinhardt is not a “Ferapont-type” monk; on the contrary, he participates in numerous lectures, colloquiums, poetry and literature festivals, etc.: “Knowing my nature better than I do, Father Serafim obtained permission from our kind and indulgent hierarchs in Cluj to keep a room in Bucharest, where I can go from time to time to continue my literary activity to some extent, which is considered to be indirectly beneficial to the Church”²¹.

Nicolae Steinhardt also had numerous connections with intellectuals in exile, such as Monica Lovinescu, Mircea Eliade, Virgil Ierunca (an intellectual with whom he would have and maintain an intense and long correspondence in his volume *Dumnezeu în care spui că nu crezi...* (Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2000), Eugen Ionesco, Emil Cioran, and others. Through Steinhardt, and without fear of losing anything, these intellectuals began to receive the latest publications from the West. Obviously, *Jurnalul Fericirii* (which covers the period 1924/1925-1971) also came to the attention of the Security, which carried out several “raids” on the Rohia Monastery and confiscated it in 1972. He rewrote another version, which he tried to reconstruct from memory, and in 1975, following the insistence of the Writers’ Union, the first version was returned to him. In the meantime, he prepares and finalises an abridged version of his *Jurnal*, which reaches the West and is broadcast by Radio Free Europe between 1988 and 1989. After 1980, Steinhardt revises both versions of the *Jurnal* and, after being summoned again by the Security, as a new search of the Rohia Monastery was to take place, both versions of the *Jurnal* were safely stored and looked after by his friend, Virgil Ciomoș (the 1999 edition transcribes the first version).

Nicolae Steinhardt passed away on 29 March 1989, hoping that in heaven he would be part of “a Judgement in which the Judge would cheat as shamelessly as possible on the scales”²². Two days before his death, sensing his departure to the “other side”, Steinhardt wrote a letter to his friend, Ioan Pinteș, asking him to take care of all his testamentary documents: “Dear Ioan, I am finding it increasingly difficult to cope with my angina pectoris. The attacks are becoming more frequent and more painful. It is very possible that I have only a little, very little time left to live. I have asked Fathers Justin and Emanoil to give you all the files in my room. They contain nothing new or particularly important; however, I ask you to take them, so that they are not thrown away. (...) I would still like to try to leave behind a proof, a testimony of Christian faith. I know I am giving you a headache, but I trust in the friendship, affection and devotion you have shown me in abundance. (...) From my heart and mind, Nicolae”²³. Steinhardt made a final confession to his close friend and disciple Virgil Ciomoș: “I have fed on this world! he had told me some time before. However, we are left to wonder whether he would have said the same thing about the world we were all about to enter very soon”²⁴. “He lived like a beggar and died like a king”²⁵, said Alexandru Paleologu at his funeral (Alecă Paleologu, as Steinhardt used to call him), with the crowd including some big names in literature and the arts from all over Maramureș, Cluj, Zalău, Bucharest, and Bistrița.

As for his posthumous works, the following books have been published: *Jurnalul fericirii* (Ed. Dacia, ed. îngrijită și postfață de Virgil Ciomoș, Cluj-Napoca, 1991), *Dăruind vei dobândi, Cuvinte de credință* (Ed. Episcopiei Ortodoxe Române a Maramureșului și Sătmăruului, Baia Mare, 1992), *Monologul Polifonic* (Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1991), *Primejdia*

²⁰ George Ardeleanu, *Nicolae Steinhardt. Monografie, antologie comentată, receptare critică*, Ed. Aula, Brașov, 2000, p.59.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Nicolae Steinhardt, *Primejdia mărturisirii. Convorbiri cu Ioan Pinteș*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1993, p.175.

²³ Ciprian Băra, „19 ani de la plecarea apostolului de la Rohia” in *Ziarul Lumina*, 29 martie, 2008.

²⁴ Carmen Dragomir, „Părintele Steinhardt a murit vegheat...”, in *Jurnalul Național*, 30 martie, 2009.

²⁵ Ioana Botiș, „Sfârșitul lui N. Steinhardt” in *Gazeta de Maramureș*, 3 martie, 2003.

mărturisirii – *Convorbiri cu Ioan Pinte*a (Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1993), *Nicolae Steinhardt. Monahul de la Rohia răspunde la 365 de întrebări incomode adresate de Zaharia Sîngeorzan* (Ed. Revistei Literatorul, București, 1992), *Drumul către isihie* (Ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1999), *Călătoria unui fiu risipitor* (1995), *Cartea împărtășirii* (Biblioteca Apostrof, Cluj-Napoca, 1995), *Dumnezeu în care spui că nu crezi...* (Scrisori către Virgil Ierunca: 1967-1983, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2000).

As for the books and works he left behind, they were all conceived with particular modesty and humility, a philosophical modesty that defines a soul tested by existence and enriched by culture, as Eugen Simion states: "None of N. Steinhardt's books display the usual arrogance of the distrustful and cynical moralist. On the contrary, there is modesty in the essayist's attitude, his approach is based on programmatic humility. A modesty and humility that suit a spirit tested by existence and relativised by culture. [...] We know from other cases that the modesty of the man of letters is very vain. N. Steinhardt's modesty is philosophical. He knows how uncertain our judgements are and, as a man of common sense, he does not want to add to the world's arrogance with new examples"²⁶.

At the end of his visit to Romania (9 May 1999), Pope John Paul II, aware of the conversion of the Jew Nicolae Steinhardt to the Orthodox religion and wishing, at the same time, to pay homage to the Romanian Orthodox spirit, mentioned the name of Nicolae Steinhardt: "Among the many witnesses of Christ who flourished on Romanian soil, I would like to mention the monk from Rohia, Nicolae Steinhardt, an exceptional figure of faith and culture who perceived in a special way the immense richness of the common treasure of the Christian Churches"²⁷.

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²⁶ Eugen Simion, „Critici și esești. N. Steinhardt”, în *Scritori români de azi*, III, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 1984, pp.562-564.

²⁷ ****Foaia Națională* – Revistă liberă de credință, cultură și imaginație - <https://foaienationala.ro/>.