

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Listening to the Languages of the People. Lazar Sainéan on Romanian, Yiddish and French* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2022), 200 pages

Maria CRĂCIUN 

Professor, Faculty of History and Philosophy,
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: maria.craciun@ubbcluj.ro

This discussion concerning Natalie Zemon Davis' book, *Listening to the Languages of the People: Lazar Sainéan on Romanian, Yiddish and French* could begin by asking: What's in a name? This particular question would be inspired by the fact that the book's main protagonist is Lazăr Şăin, who became Lazăr Şăineanu and later Lazare Sainéan, bringing to the fore the transformations, the refashioning, that a change of name could elicit. The book, acknowledged as a biography by its author, relies partly on an autobiographical essay written by Şăineanu in 1901, when he had decided to leave Romania, and partly on several other sources, mainly reviews of Şăineanu's work, written by his contemporaries, friends, enemies, scholars, politicians and renown public figures. Starting from this enmeshing of stories, the one written by the subject and the one pieced together by his biographer, this review would like to start a discussion about narrative, the function of narrative in the field of history and the role of one well-documented biography as illustration for the mood of an era.¹ This attempt will be framed by a larger issue, bringing into question the value of a story, in this case a biography, as a source in the writing of history.

¹ The return to narrative has been discussed by Lawrence Stone, "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past and Present*, 85 (1997): 3-24; James West Davidson, "The New Narrative History. How New? How Narrative?," *Reviews in American History*, 12/3 (1989): 322-334; Peter Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) suggests that historians should borrow the anthropological principle of thick description, which integrates story and context.

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In thinking about this particular biography, one is first of all compelled to ask what motivated Natalie Zemon Davis to write the story, as her interest in Lazăr Șăineanu may come from several sources. First of all, the two individuals, subject and biographer have a lot in common: their interest in language, in stories and in crossing borders, not to mention their ability to live in multiple and diverse contexts. In the case of Lazăr Șăineanu, his interest in stories, obvious in the study of folklore, brought him notoriety as a scholar, while Natalie Zemon Davis, who first made her mark as a social historian of the Reformation in France,² was increasingly interested in stories, forcing history to return to the narrative, while staying true to its analytical dimension. The two, subject and biographer also share their interest in identity, from the perspective of an outsider, which makes them think about inclusion and exclusion, and ultimately about being Jewish in a Christian world. Finally, they may have been brought together by their interest in fashioning identity, in situations where the subject takes matters into his\her own hands and crafts an identity for him\herself.

By the time she had embarked on writing the book on Lazăr Șăineanu, for Natalie Zemon Davis, this process of self-fashioning was already a much-older concern, which started with her portrayal of Arnaud du Tihl, the imposter who wished to become Martin Guerre in sixteenth-century France,³ or with her focus on Hasan al-Wazzan, otherwise known as Leo the African (Leo Africanus), who also assumed a new name, or merely a new identity, whenever he immersed himself into a new world and who lived between Africa and Europe and between Islam and Christianity.⁴ Thus, it is not very surprising that Natalie Zemon Davis's attention should land on Lazăr Șăineanu's life, which is a story of major transformations, that she felt tempted to fashion into a biography. From the historian's perspective, Lazăr Șăineanu fits the marginal, or peripheral mould, as he constructed his identity as a continuous process of adaptation, while living in several countries, for various lengths of time, without being able to call any of them his own.

² Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

³ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Tricksters Travels: In Search of Leo Africanus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006).

In focusing on Lazăr Șăineanu's life, Natalie Zemon Davis does not produce a classical biography, because this is not a text put together by an impartial external observer. Instead, the author pieces together her subject's life meandering between the details of his biography and his work, as if each segment of his life was marked by a particular scholarly interest. The story is also not written from the, perhaps detached, point of view of the author/biographer, or of Lazăr Șăineanu as its subject, for that matter, but rather from the perspectives of various recipients of his work, admirers as well as detractors. In a way, one might say that the point of view is dictated by the sources the historian has used, articles in the media, praising him or disparaging him, allowing us, the readers, to hear several voices and become aware that they each represent a distinct perspective and a particular understanding of the main character. What results is a portrait similar with Salvador Dali's *Lincoln in Dalivision* (1977), where one sees two characters/two portraits in the same image, one of Abraham Lincoln and one of Gala, Dali's wife, pending on the vantage point. Lazăr Șăineanu's auto-biographical memoir, which Davis uses is just one of the voices in this polyphony, sharing the space with his works, articles written about him in the media, some in praise, others openly disparaging him, correspondence between the subject and his friends, mentors and like-minded scholars. One is thus led to the conclusion that the storyline is decided by the sources used, shifting the point of view from which Lazăr Șăineanu is seen and forcing us, the readers, to look at him in a different way each time.

Besides the issue of multiple viewpoints, which is brought forth by the use of very different types of sources, Natalie Zemon Davis was concerned with the fictional element in storytelling, which derives from the crafting of the story itself, thus becoming a process of self-fashioning for the protagonist. I have already mentioned her interest in this process, as illustrated by the stories of Arnaud du Tihl and Hasan al-Wazzan. This is also obvious in her book dedicated to the biographies of three women, Glikl bas Judah Leib, Marie de L'Incarnation and Maria Sybilla Merian, who travelled the world, crossing all sorts of boundaries and immersing themselves in different cultures.⁵ The historian pieced together their lives, focusing on their beliefs, their values,

⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

their dreams, their relationships with families and children, with men, with cultural others, gleaned in their entirety from the writings, of very different nature, that these women left behind. This *modus operandi* is, in a sense, also used in Lazăr Șăineanu's case, as every aspect of his life is addressed as if it were framed by all possible entanglements. His story is always set against the backdrop of political upheavals, social tensions and a bumpy road towards modernization.

If the stories mentioned so far in Natalie Zemon Davis's work are, at least partly, anchored in reality, the tall tales told by those who sought royal pardon for crimes they were actually guilty of, and which are the subject of Natalie Zemon Davis's book, *Fiction in the Archives*, are fake narratives – in other words, lies – that tell us more about the socially-acceptable than about the events themselves.⁶ One must consequently surmise that they provide information about groups, world views and appropriated social norms. This is again similar to examining Lazăr Șăineanu's life through its own fake narratives, particularly tendentious reviews of the scholar's work, or undisguised attacks and accusations levelled at his person, placing his biography in the context of a world where prejudice and discrimination prevailed.

By choosing these two perspectives, stemming from the subject himself and from the spectators of his life, Natalie Zemon Davis has successfully avoided the packaging of the story in one neat box. Instead, we are faced with an untidy bundle, which includes scholarly interests, career development, life decisions, big and small, success and disappointments, recognition and neglect. A messy bundle, like life itself. The gist of the story can be reduced to a couple of sentences: Lazăr Șăineanu was a great, internationally-recognized scholar, a linguist and folklorist who was not allowed to integrate into society in the country of his birth.

The book is extremely informative in minutely following Lazăr Șăineanu's work, his interest in language and folklore, in comparative linguistics and comparative mythology, while mapping his descent into a maelstrom of inclusion and exclusion, in his efforts to obtain an academic position at the University of Bucharest and citizenship in Romania, as both a position and naturalization were denied to him, despite several attempts and the weight of arguments in favour of his rightful and well-deserved recognition.

⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

Natalie Zemon Davis's interest seems to have been captured by the details of Lazăr Șăineanu's biography, which are likely to project him as an individual with a dual identity, as all his life he tried to find a balance between being a Jew and being a Romanian. This again raises complicated issues about how he saw himself as a Jew, how he saw other Jews and how he dealt with how "others," particularly his countrymen, saw Jews. The Jewish question is already complicated enough, as outside observers at least find it difficult to decide whether they are dealing with an ethnicity or a religion. Living in a post-modern age where ethnicity is recognized as a construct, a construct busy creating the polar opposition of "us and them," should make it easier to tackle the issue.⁷ But it does not, because Lazăr Șăineanu's story is intertwined with that of anti-Semitism, a fact made obvious by several pivotal events in his life.

Although he had a Jewish circle of friends and a Romanian circle of friends, mentors and, up to a point, supporters, as well as an international scholarly community that he was part of, Lazăr Șăineanu appears to have been a perpetual outsider, as he was always on the fringes of each group, never fully included, despite all his efforts. This is best illustrated by the story of his conversion, which separated him from some of his Jewish friends, without really bringing him any closer to being accepted within mainstream society. It is as if his one pragmatic decision was held against him by both groups. The event itself, namely the baptism, and its aftermath raise the question of what being Jewish meant to him, an issue that Lazăr Șăineanu himself grappled with. He tried to define Jewishness, but he had never been a practicing Jew and he did not end up practicing Christianity either, posing difficulties for those who wished to put him in a box. The dual identity that seems to have suited him best, being a Jew and a Romanian at the same time, was never fully understood by his contemporaries and remains a tough nut to crack for his biographers.

Oddly enough, it is precisely his identity as a scholar that provides the most valuable clues for Lazăr Șăineanu's worldview. His opinion is hidden within his work, especially his work on folklore, where his choices clearly spell out that he believed in the universality of human experience.

⁷ Michael Banton, "Ethnic Origin and Ethnicity," in Michael Banton, *What We Know about Race and Ethnicity* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018).

The anthropological approach to folktales, the motifs present in the genre, his effort to classify folk tales according to type and prevailing narratives, amount to his belief that human nature was the same everywhere. Folk tales also offer the opportunity to discuss, and one might add, with great subtlety, the issue of difference. What seems to interest Lazăr Șăineanu is the stigmatization of difference which he approached by looking at antitypes, the culprit or the trouble maker in a story, who often deceived by impersonating the hero. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the antitype is often the “Gypsy” and obviously the “Jew”. The lower position or the more negative perception of the Jew is highlighted, in Lazăr Șăineanu’s opinion, by the fact that, while Gypsies were occasionally also storytellers, and thus able to craft their own narrative, the Jews were never cast in that role, and were thus deprived of their voice. This again highlights the issue of self-fashioning that seems to have been central to Natalie Zemon Davis’s work and thus Șăineanu joins the cast of characters featured in her books who wished to craft their own narratives.

This concern for the excluded translates to Șăineanu’s studies in linguistics, where the language of the marginals increasingly becomes the subject of his research. This peaked during his early visits to France, when he became aware of studies dedicated to “patois” and regional dialects, and then, after 1901, when he actually made France his home. At this later point he studied the “argot,” the language of criminals from which he moved on to the study of Judeo-German dialects in east central Europe. His work is consequently innovative, because communication stands at its centre. His interest in language, his life-long struggle to show that languages are hybrids and full of borrowed words are strong arguments in this respect. This is once more aligned to Davis’s interests in language as a form of integration, which surfaces in many of her books as she dwells on the young Martin Guerre’s efforts to learn the dialect spoken in Artigat, as opposed to the Basque language spoken in his territories of origin, or on the fact that Glikl wrote her memoir in Yiddish, or on the circumstances that compelled Marie de L’Incarnation to learn a native language for her work as a missionary in Canada. Insofar as this is a story about language(s), it is also a story about a historian who, towards the end of her career, learned Dutch in order to read sources from Surinam.

Finally, to Natalie Zemon Davis, Lazăr Şăineanu must have been interesting because he was, in many ways, ahead of his time. By choosing the comparative method in linguistics and in the study of folklore he anticipated what was about to happen a few decades later in the field of history.⁸ Moreover, his interest in storytelling is inspiring for what happens in history as a field to this day, as competing, ideologically-informed, hegemonic and subaltern narratives continue to take centre stage. One could even note that this may act as a cautionary tale for what might happen in history in the future, as digital stories, which are an exercise in self-fashioning, take over and will become the headache of future historians.

To end on a more sober note, Lazăr Şăineanu's career should also be a cautionary tale. Although his commitment to Romania is obvious in the fact that he wished to study its language and its folktales, his career highlights his exclusion, as his two major wishes, to obtain a position within the University of Bucharest, in a field he was more than qualified for, and to become a citizen, were never fulfilled. The reason may have been a combination of professional rivalries, petty jealousies, and a complicated political and social context, as Natalie Zemon Davis astutely suggests, but as historians we need to be aware of the bigger dangers of intolerance, bigotry and discrimination. Lazăr Şăineanu's commitment to his work and attachment to the country of his birth remained explicit as he continued to refer to himself as a scholar and to Romania as his country until the end of his life. Although this leaves questions concerning his identity open-ended, it is also a sobering reminder that, in the words of Natalie Zemon Davis "Identity is not just a scholarly question."⁹

⁸ Marc Bloch, "A contribution towards a comparative history of European societies," in Marc Bloch, *Land and Work in Medieval Europe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 44-81 was originally published in 1928.

⁹ Quote taken from an interview. See https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ecc/people/davis_tribute/#:-:text=Medal%20in%202013.-,music%20and%20charivari.%5B2%5D (accessed on January 2026).