

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SUCEAVA: LAURIAN SOMEȘAN AND NICOLAE POPP

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ABSTRACT:

In the first part of the paper, the author presents the general background (political, social and cultural conditions) of the period when the pedagogical institutes were created. Among them was the pedagogical institute in Suceava (1963), inside which a year later (1964) appeared the History - Geography Section.

The paper focuses on the main aspects that define the contributions of the first professors in ordinary, Laurian Someșan and Nicolae Popp: their high reputation as geographers known from the inter-war period; their activity at Suceava institute; to what extent they managed to have disciples; their organizing abilities; the way in which they were perceived by their colleagues and students as didactic and ethical examples.

In H.C.M. no. 680 /September 1963, almost half a century ago, the old Fortress of Moldavia, Suceava, became a university town. The event occurred at a time when, step by step, against the meltdown background of the de-Stalinization initiated in Moscow, even in Romania a certain political loosening started to be felt, augmented by a distinct alienation from the eastern “big brother”, whose tight “hug” had been suffocating our country for nearly two decades (M. Iacobescu, 2003).

The first signs coincided with the withdrawal of the Soviet occupation troops, obtained by Romania in 1958. Two years later, in 1960, the necessity to recognize and respect the criterion of equality of the socialist countries was publicly formulated, and in 1961 and then in 1964 there was the firm rejection of the *Hrușcirov plan* or project and also of the well-known *Valev plan* about the necessity of socialist division and the methods of economic integration of the socialist countries that were members of C.A.E.R.

A true earthquake was triggered by the known Declaration from the 23rd of April 1964, interpreted as a statement of independence of Romania (M. Iacobescu, 2003).

The signs of change were felt in school policy, marked by an attempt to turn back to the progressive tradition from the Romanian education, timidly

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taking some Western European elements. In a first stage, the change meant the generalization of the seven years education, almost immediately extended to 8 years.

No less symptomatic were the dissolution of the “Maxim Gorky” Institute of Russian Language and Literature in Bucharest and, in parallel, the elimination of the compulsory Russian language in education, or the transformation of the Russian names that had been “baptized”, some cities or Romanian institutions returning to their old names during the Soviet occupation: the best known example is the city I. V. Stalin, that takes its previous name, Braşov.

Leaving the tutelage of Moscow meant the reconsideration or elimination of school textbooks and Soviet-inspired university courses in humanities and, at another level, the release of the majority of the political prisoners who had managed to survive in prison. Of these, many were teachers, who slowly-slowly, after careful steps and thoroughly checked measures taken by the security organs of party and security were “rehabilitated” and were able to return to the departments.

In accordance with the decisions of extending the duration of the compulsory secondary education at 7 and then 8 years, with the shortage of qualified teachers in urban and especially in rural areas and perhaps anticipating the measures to redress the birth rate (which were indeed to be realized through the famous no. 770 decree from 1966 and had to lead, implicitly, to the increase of the school population and staff need), in the 60s in Romania no less than 14 educational institutions were established.

Some of them were localized in centers with long academic tradition such as Bucharest, Iaşi and Cluj, and some others in other big cities, regional residence, with less or no academic tradition: Braşov, Timişoara, Craiova, Constanţa, Galaţi, Baia Mare, Bacău, Oradea, Piteşti, Târgu Mureş and, among them, Suceava.

In the particular case of Suceava, it seems that the decision was based on a historical and geopolitical argument: the proposed institute would have to be a noteworthy act and somehow a compensation for the irreparable loss, together with the whole Northern Bukovina, of the old and the important university of Czernowitz. Also it could not be forgotten that in the region of Suceava, at Câmpulung Moldovenesc, a higher education institution functioned for a short period, it is true (1948-1953) -The Institute of Forestry and Mining, Wood Processing and Transport, (with two faculties), later transferred to Braşov.

Accordingly, if we refer to the whole area of the historical Bukovina, it meant rather a certain continuity and tradition, and not opening an entirely new way.

Here is the general context in which a few years after the creation of the Institute (1963) and, respectively, of the Department of History and Geography (1964), the waves of life brought Laurian Someşan to Suceava in 1965, and Nicolae Popp, two years later, in 1967.

Undoubtedly, the selection, hiring and promotion of teachers at the early stage of the young university, as fundamental prerequisite for success and sustainable continuity, were to be neither simple nor easy. As a result, there was opted to form a group as valuable and well structured as possible, by adding prestigious teachers experienced both in higher education and in specialty

research to younger ones who had recently finished a tradition university, not only enthusiastic, but also recommended by a very good professional training as a students. Credited with promising potential, it was hoped that the young teachers, under the guidance of a careful and competent support of the former, would be formed “on the fly” and improve their academic career.

The solution was the invitation of two renowned professors from the “Al. I. Cuza” University, Ion Sîrcu and Victor Sficlea, who, commuting from Iași, could cover the basic courses between 1964 and 1968, through the system of payment by the hour. But in a short time, as the series of years of study was completed, it was obvious that some posts could not be covered. As a result, taking profit of “green light” signal given by by the central level, the leadership of the institute opened the competitions of tenure and accepted the applications for the position of of lecturer (the disciplines General Economic Geography and respectively Regional Physical Geography and Geomorphology) of two known geographers, made known and respected in the interwar period: Laurian Someșan and Nicolae Popp.

Their life and work as well as those of other geographical figures (S. Mehedintși, V. Mihăilescu, V. Tufescu, N. Al. Rădulescu, I. Conea, Gh. Năstase, G. Nimigeanu) were marked and accurately reflected the turbulent times and the sequence changes in the interwar and postwar Romanian society. Thrown into prison for invented political reason¹, sentenced to hard labor at the Danube-Black Sea Canal yard (after which N. Popp to was imposed also house arrest in the Danube Delta), the two were released a few years, but, due to the unjust exclusion and stigmatization of the totalitarian regime only with great effort they managed to find jobs in areas that were not related to education². It seems absurd, but from the CV submitted to the competition we learn that after the period of house arrest, the reader doctor N. Popp had to be employed a period as an electrician, just as other personalities from the academic and cultural world, with studies in psychology and philosophy in Czernowitz and Rome and a with a brilliant doctorate defended in Paris, was forced to work as worker in the city rat control service³.

Only as a result of persistent requests, L. Someșan and N. Popp could

¹ In a discussion carried on the day when the retirement ceremony of Professor L. Someșan (1971), then rector, took place, Prof. V.G. Ionescu confessed to assistant M. Iacobescu that not long ago the security had notified the leadership of institute that all the charges brought against L. Someșan proved to be unfounded. Perhaps the decision that the information was not to be made known to the professor, because, at his 70 years, it could have been caused to him a fatal shock, was correct.

² The two professors never confessed to us, the younger colleagues from Suceava, about the reasons, the context and the details of their arresting and detention. And I understood: they did not want to reopen wounds and to relive the painful years that shook their lives, broken the hopes and their careers and affected their families. The fact is obvious also in the autobiographical volume of N. Popp, *The Story of Some Generations*, finished probably in 1986, but published after the revolution, posthumously (1997), where the story line is suddenly interrupted and silence lingers questioning over the years after 1944.

³ It is about T. Chelariu, immortalized by Marin Preda in the novel *Cel mai iubit dintre pamanteni* (*The Earth's Most Beloved Son*). Through a freak of fate, T. Chelariu came later in Suceava (as a lecturer at the Department of Psychology-Pedagogy), where he shared the apartment provided by the institute with L. Someșan.

return to education, in Suceava, and after obtaining their doctorates recognition (both in 1967), they were able to climb again in the hierarchy of university education, gradually up to the position of professor

To these four prestigious geographers, known by their results in academic teaching, research and specialized publications, there were added by contest, a group of young probationer assistants, to hold seminars and practical works: Dionisie Morar (1964), Ioan Iosep (1967), Mioara Frânceanu (1969) and Rodica Rugină (1969).

Also in this first stage were hired (by competition), occupying the positions of lecturer, Dumitru Tudose (1965), who came from the Mining Plant Gura Humorului, where, though he was a geography graduate, he worked as a geologist, Maria Lucaci (1966), coming from the undergraduate education system, with a very solid methodological training and, later (1970), Ion Popescu Argeșel - from research.

We should also mention the cooperation (unfortunately episodic) in teaching, scientific and methodological activities, with two very good undergraduate teachers, Dragomir Paulencu and Ioan Stan, who were working at the School Inspectorate and decided to remain in this structure: the two were known for their ability to organize scientific events, competitions and school contests, to coordinate field applications and perfective activities for their colleagues from secondary education.

It was, therefore, a heterogeneous group (in a good way), well structured in terms of age, training, teaching and research experience and branch profiling. Inside the Department there dominated a fertile and stimulating climate, and the relationships were really collegial.

The majority of the young people hired became in short time doctoral students, but unfortunately, due to the atmosphere of uncertainty, instability and even confusion about the future of the institute, job insecurity and insufficient professional reasons, few of them completed and defended the doctoral theses (D.Tudose, I. Popescu Argeșel, I. Iosep).

These were the conditions and human resources that the two masters L. Someșan and N. Popp, adopted by the local academic community, were called to render profitable.

In order to assess the extent to which they managed to create a graduate school in Suceava, we consider necessary to explore and shape the following aspects: their prestige as professors and researchers already consecrated in the Romanian geography; their teaching and research in activity in the Suceava stage; the extent to which they managed to cultivate disciples, followers: their organizational capabilities; the way in which they were perceived by their colleagues and students as didactic and moral models.

1. L. Someșan and N. Popp – models already established in the Romanian Geography. As pointed out by all those who wrote about their life and scientific work (see also the studies that comprise the volume published in 2011 in Brașov and the references quoted by those who signed them), L. Someșan and N. Popp, both having as mentor G.Vâlsan, the first in Cluj, the second in Bucharest, had already been long known and recognized as first class personalities of the

Romanian geography, with doctorates and prestigious publications known widely, whose value and validity have never been affected by time.

Laurian Someșan can be considered, above all, a representative exponent of the Romanian school of Human Geography, born and evolved in direct connection with the French school of Human Geography and the German school of Anthropogeography. In all his works, among which we mention *Viața pastorală în Munții Călimani (Pastoral in Călimani Mountains)* (1934) and *Viața umană în regiunea Munților Călimani (Human life in the Region of Călimani Mountains)* (1938), L. Someșan proved to be a keen observer and analyst of the relations between man and his life environment.

Personally, we consider of an exceptional depth, value and originality the work *Vechimea agriculturii românești în Transilvania (The Age of the Romanian Agriculture in Transylvania)* (1941), where the geographic and ethnographic arguments are as convincing and accurate as the letters of the historical documents, as the archaeological remains or as the old local toponymy.

Nicolae Popp was already recommended by the well-known results in the field of regional physical geography, especially in geomorphology (The Romanian Sub-Carpathians, The Danube Delta, etc.): the list of his published works was impressive.

From this follows another important aspect in the sense that through their preoccupations, domains and issues raised and even through their special behavior, the two professors not only competed but they also completed each other (we leave aside some small “biting remarks” coming only from Mr. Someșan), which maintained a favorable climate in the Department, without strained relations.

N. Popp was also a keen observer of the interconnection and causality relations within the geographical environment. If we were asked to choose one book to represent him, we would stop to a theoretic work: *Raporturi geografice între formă, rocă și structură (Geographical Relationships between Form, Rock and Structure)* (1947), where he proves an exceptional ability to handle connections, causality and comparison.

2. Advancing towards to the second aspect – the achievements in the Suceava stage, we consider it correct to refer to its extremely low duration of only a few years – too few – (L. Someșan – between 1965 and 1971; N. Popp – between 1967 and 1973).

At a relatively advanced age (64 when he arrived in Suceava) and of course due to the traces of the trauma he suffered, L. Someșan published a little, remaining loyal to the concepts and methodology adopted in the early years. We consider relevant the studies entitled *Aspecte geografice în cultura populară carpatică (Geographical Issues in the Popular Carpathian Culture)* (1970) and *Relații străvechi între „Țara de Sus a Moldovei”, Maramureș și ținuturile de la poalele apusene ale Călimanilor (Ancient Relationships among “the Upper Country of Moldavia”, Maramureș and the areas at the Western foot of the Călimani Mountains)*, published posthumously (2003), under the care of the author of these lines.

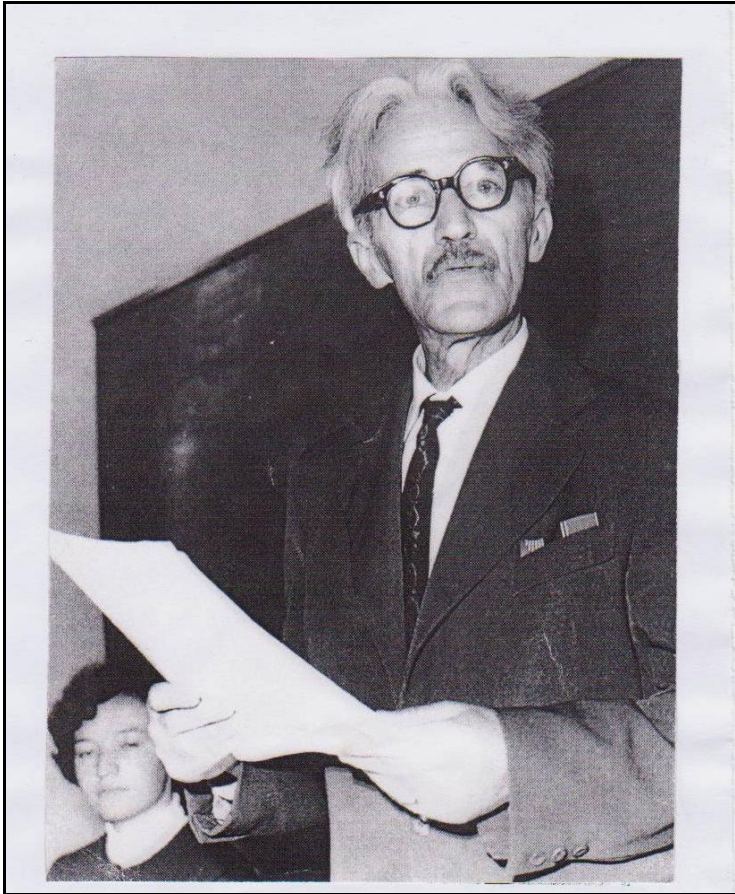


Fig. 1. LAURIAN SOMEȘAN (1901-1986) – Professor at the Pedagogical Institute of 3 Years of Suceava between 1965-1971.

Probably, in that situation, he considered that it would be more useful to focus on teaching. His courses of *General Economic* (I-II, 1968) and *Regional* (Part I, Europe) *Geography*, written in this period (of whose preparation for multiplication the undersigned was asked to handle, as he did with great interest, to the courses held by Professor N. Popp), quoted in reference works (e.g. I. Letea and Al. Ungureanu – *World Economic Geography*, 1979, I. Velcea, Al. Ungureanu – *Economic Geography of the Contemporary World*, 1993) were learned out of pleasure. A possible syncope, “sanctioned” by the professor with a mild reproof was perceived by the students as a great shame. Delicate and of a proverbial politeness, he always addressed the students with “Miss” and “Mister”, in full era of “comradeship”.

N. Popp – this thing was to be seen quickly – asserted himself as a master of systematic, concentrated and rigorously scientific but very intuitive exposures. A true successor of his masters, S. Mehedinți, G. Vâlsan and V. Mihăilescu, and

working to complete his thesis with Emm. de Martonne, he had a special preference for comparisons and deciphering causalities, and his syntheses and conclusions were always carefully prepared. His courses, his scientific communications or his conferences were so naturally structured and so captivating that those who heard them, followed them easily and couldn't imagine them presented in a different manner. All of them were remarkable. You didn't know what to notice first: the scientific rigor, the natural elegance of phrasing or the pedagogical mastership.

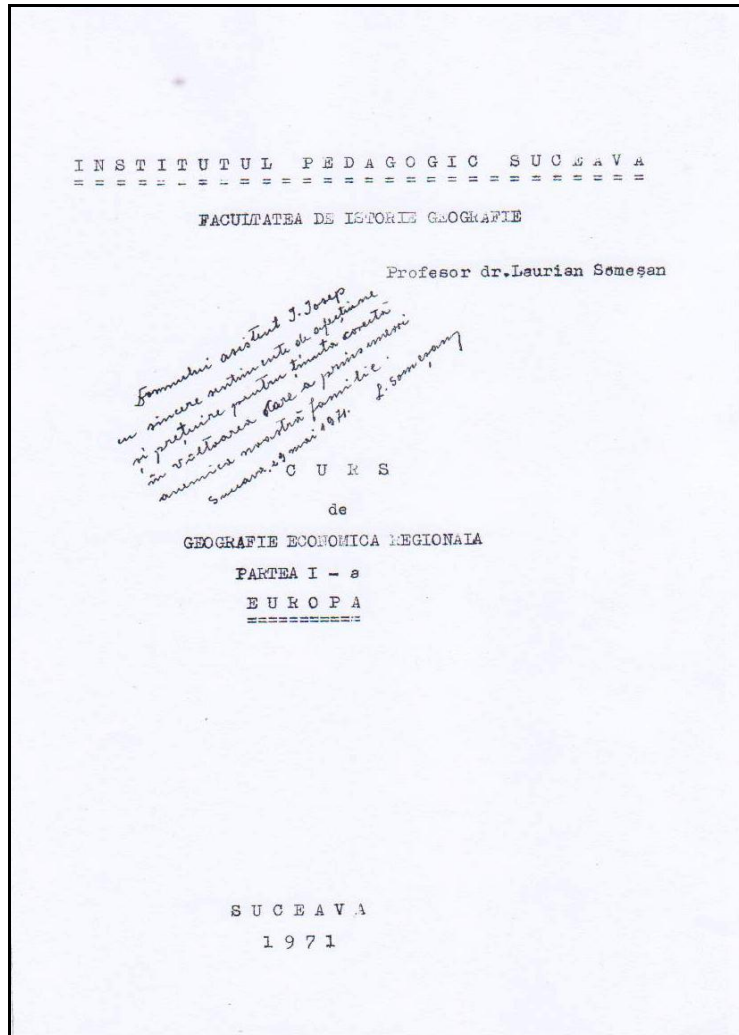


Fig. 2. Cover of the course of *Regional Economic Geography*.

Being always – as before coming to Suceava, but also after he pensioned off and retired to Bucharest – in the middle of the Romanian geographical

movement and in permanent opening to geographical events in Europe and in other continents, he took part in numerous congresses, symposiums and applications.

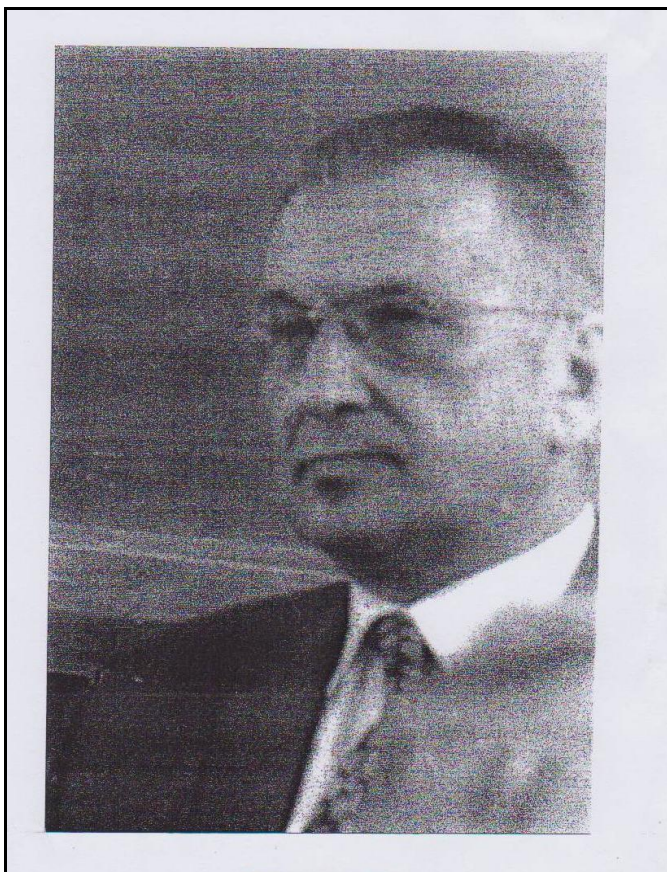


Fig. 3. NICOLAE POPPE (1908-1989) – Professor at the Pedagogical Institute of Suceava between 1967-1973.

Knowing “the field” of many typical regions, he was able to design, both figuratively, and literally, landscapes and phenomena that he himself had studied, pointing out with great conviction observations and personal opinions. Many of these notes were to form the basis of the scientific and popular geographical works published later, after he retired: *Orizonturi nordamericane* (*North American Horizons*) (1977), *Orizonturi europene* (*European Horizons*) (1/ 1980, 2/1981), *Orizonturi euroasiatice* (*Eurasian Horizons*) (1984), *Fluviul Dunărea* (*The Danube River*) (1985), *Europa* (*Europe*) (1986), which complete his work.

Not accidentally the course *World Regional Geography* (3 volumes), published in 1968, was awarded by the Ministry of Education.

When he came to Suceava he was 59, in full scientific maturity, N. Popp emanated an impressive energy consumed in numerous field research, in processing results and publishing them. The weekly commute Bucharest – Suceava – Bucharest was not a burden for him: his train compartment was a second office where he worked.

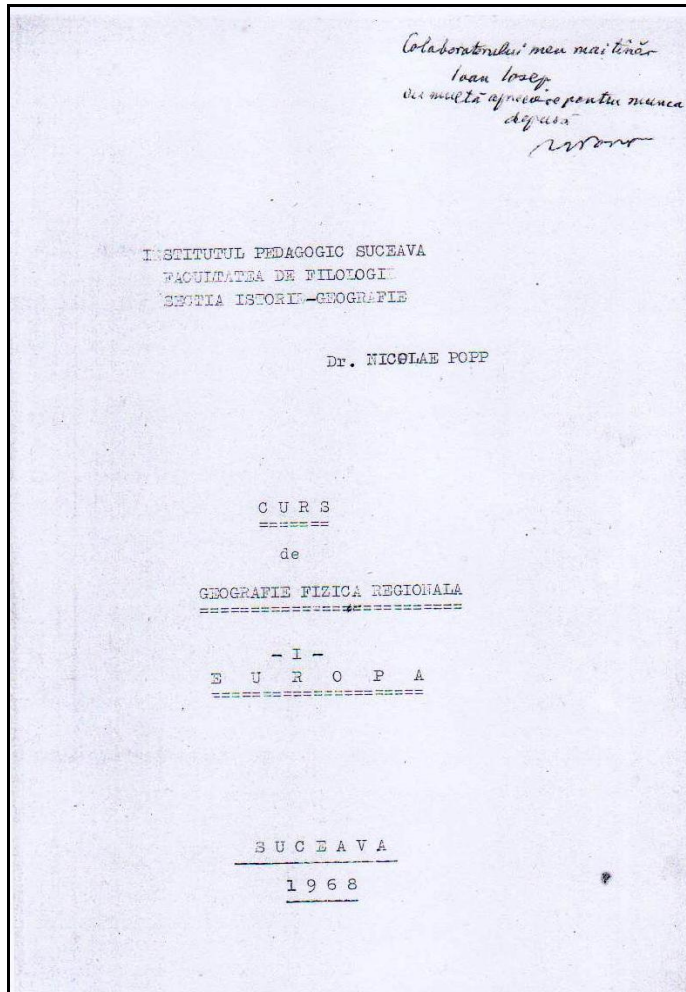


Fig. 4. Cover of the course *Regional Physical Geography*.

Mention should be made about the fact that among the nearly 30 papers published in the Suceava stage, many illustrate problems of local geography: the natural environment of Suceava county, the specific of the contact area between the Bukovina Obcine and the Suceava Tableland, the Geographic Dictionary of Suceava County, the monography of the physical, human and economic geography of the county (in collaboration) etc.

In contrast with the exams they were to take with professor Someșan, at professor Popp's exams the students from Suceava admitted that they learned also out of fear, not only out of pleasure. Besides, the exigency with his students, which was nothing but an external projection of his own exigency with himself, was a trait he had even from his youth. Professor V. Mihăilescu remarks this trait in the recommendation that, as head of department, he writes for him. He was to have the exam for the position of assistant at the University of Bucharest in 1938. After professor Mihăilescu underlines the seriousness and conscientiousness in his professional preparation, he adds that he might be reproached "a certain amount of excess of severity" (N. Popp, *The Story of Some Generations*, APP House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 448).

3. Perhaps that L. Someșan and N. Popp did not form at Suceava, a proper **university school**, in the sense of training and modeling several disciples. In such a short period of just 7-8 years, without having the right to guide doctorate theses, with a baneful fluctuation of the young members of the staff that was so small numerically (this refers the meaning of the epithet "anemic" in one of dedications reproduced above), they couldn't have done more than they did.

However, those who were most of the time around them (D. Tudose, I. Popescu Argeșel, I. Iosep) could see in them true role models, discover and enjoy many of the secrets of the geographer profession, both in terms of theory, concepts and research methodology and also in terms of practical study of land and of results interpretation. Therefore, these lines want to be a moral duty and an expression of our gratitude for the privilege of having been formed professionally under the guidance of the two unforgettable mentors.

4. As he himself admitted, he had no particular organizational qualities. Therefore, L. Someșan, the first administrative head of the Department of Geography, fulfilled his administrative obligations without much enthusiasm. Therefore, after having supported N. Popp to come to Suceava, he immediately proposed and gave him this position (in the mean time it started to be paid). More dynamic and more involved, the new head of department made himself known through the impeccable organization and management of the students' practical applications, the collaboration with the School Inspectorate and the Teaching Staff Place in order to organize symposiums and joint annual applications with the secondary education teachers (he was president of S.Ș.G.Suceava Branch), the publication of three volumes of scientific communications (stimulating thus his colleagues from the undergraduate education system to publish), through providing the library and the Department with specialty literature, wall maps, topographical, geological, pedological maps, atlases (*The Climatological Atlas of Romania*, *The Water Cadastre of RPR Atlas*, *Britannica World Atlas* etc).

5. If we review some of the thoughts written by the former geography students during 1965-1973, there are some common ideas (Iacobescu M., 2003, p. 265-293): that they feel indebted to thank destiny, from the depth of their hearts, for the chance of having met and having been taught in Suceava by two reputed masters, two deep but modest people, real models, who devoted themselves to

their followers and who shaped and lit like torches over their destiny. They remember L. Someșan and N. Popp as professors who experienced the joy of communication and appreciated the initiative, the geographic way of thinking and reasoning. They remember that at Suceava they learned much and the professors molded their characters. They did not have complex that they had learnt in a small “provincial” academic institution, being appreciated and getting good results at competitions for positions in education and also at their training exams (professor in ordinary exam, the second degree, the first degree) or studies continuation (long form) held in the big universities – Iași, București, Cluj-Napoca.

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From all the statements above results as convincingly as possible that the period 1965-1973, although it was a period of start in the geographical education at the University of Suceava, it was defined, thanks to the contributions of professors Laurian Someșan and Nicolae Popp as a decisive period, rich in achievements and accumulations.

They brought to the Department of Geography the prestige and notoriety that other similar chairs, from other young educational institutes, did not enjoy or benefited less.

These profound and solid beginnings were continued by Ion Bojoi, Ion Popescu Argeșel, Costică Brânduș and Ioan Iosep and after 1989, in another turning point, when the former institute turns into “Ștefan cel Mare” University, the geographic higher education is resumed, the activity is continued by prestigious researchers coming from Piatra Neamț research Station (Maria and Nicolae Rădoane, Liviu Apostol, Constantin Catana), from the research network of the Romanian Academy (Gheorghe Romanescu) from the State University of Tiraspol – Moldova Republic (Vasile Efros) and by young graduates of the “Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași, most of them after short periods of work in the undergraduate education (Viorel Chiriță, Liviu Popescu, Daniela Alexandra Popescu, Despina Saghin-Vasilcu, Adrian Grozavu, Cornel Iațu, Simona Dranca, Maria Magdalena Lupchian, Marcel Mândrescu, Vasile Budui etc.).

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