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"Whose Property Are My Letters?" Inside Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca's Archive

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ABSTRACT

Public use of objects belonging to private memory is what concerned me while writing this article. Under discussion will be the collection of letters received by Romanian couple Lovinescu–Ierunca during their more than sixty-year exile in France (1946-2008) from hundreds of fellow intellectuals confined to Romania by the communist regime.
The documents belonged to the couple until their death. "Whose property are my letters?" is a question that may now—once the recipients are dead—be raised by any of their surviving correspondents. (The recipient becomes the rightful owner of all the letters he or she receives; but what if the recipient dies without any legal heirs? Who is entitled to the final and legal decision about the fate of those letters?) The politics of memory—issues most germane to public policy—will therefore be the main focus of the first part of my paper.
Next, I shall address the special situation of the letters Monica Lovinescu received from her mother, Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu, a fonds which I managed as follows: recovery, selection, translation into Romanian (given the fact that most of them were written in French in order to evade political censorship), publication by Humanitas Publishing House, followed by the transfer of the physical collection to the Humanitas Aqua Forte Foundation. Editing that private correspondence was an occasion for me to fully experience what Arlette Farge (1989) has called "the allure of the archives." I shall present this experience in detail in the second part of my study.

KEYWORDS

Politics of memory, archives, heritage, letters and diaries, Monica Lovinescu, Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu.

"*Everything is a memory case.*"

— Alon Confino

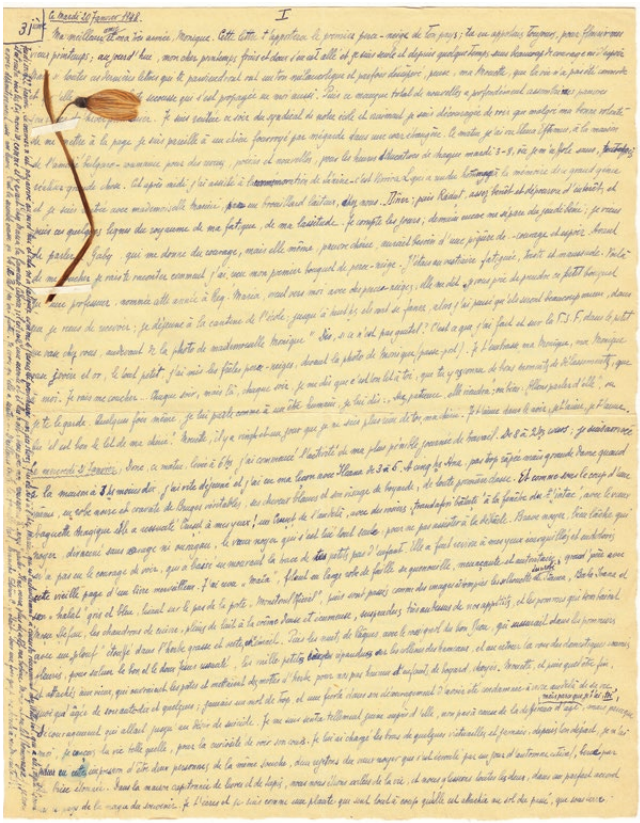
"L'acquis de la nouvelle histoire se révèle à travers la pluralité des regards, l'ouverture du champs d'observation, la variété des pistes de recherches qui mènent à l'histoire contemporaine. Quittant le régistre de la mémoire, le passé devient de plus en plus vite objet d'histoire."

— Sonia Combe

"Je qualifie l'histoire d'étude scientifiquement menée, non de science."

— Lucien Febvre)

If under pressure from the intellectual fashion of the day, and especially due to the impact of what has been considered "un certain terrorisme politico-intellectuel" (Le Goff 1988: 327), history as an ideological (usually Marxist) interpretation of the past has clearly dominated the twentieth century, towards its end the scientific world slowly began to awake from the fascination of these all-too-coherent patterns of understanding and started to ask itself how much credit should be given to the smooth, linear and logical explanations of social



Memorabilia:
portrait (photography)
of Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-
Lovinescu in the 1950s
and snowdrop letter, 1947.

history. Although no pervasive frame of reference is to be found within the humanities, too much coherence[1] appears to be rather the sign of a self-satisfied *artificial* inquiry, lacking depth, honesty and truth. Human deeds are an endless puzzle, which historical consciousness cannot take reliable control of. Here we must recall Raymond Aron's words about uncertainty, which does not mean scientific failure, but on the contrary mimics a kind of ambiguity very much connected to the essence of our human consciousness and to the interval that separates knowledge from life itself (Aron 1997: 135), or those of Lucien Febvre chosen for the motto of these pages.

Holistic hermeneutics have thus been slowly set aside, together with the ideal of having *one* single history, based on a unique truth and on a mechanical chronology, one and the same for everybody. All of the contesting ideas have consequently gained ground. Considering the increasing need for authenticity, Michel Foucault (1966, 1971) has placed *discontinuity* in a new scientific light. Indeed, of what relevance can be the closed, complete and self-sufficient patterns of knowledge when some newer events show up and want to take their place within the whole? How shall they find a place, if our explanations are already complete and there is no room left? If a particular science must be conceived by strict comparison to systematic sciences, then maybe history should no longer covet its place on the list.

A new objectivity emerged, aimed at "un savoir faillible, imparfait, discutable, jamais parfaitement innocent, mais que sa norme de vérité et ses conditions professionnelles d'élaboration et d'exercice permettent d'appeler scientifique" (Le Goff 1988: 350). Within the "immediate history" / "la nouvelle histoire," a remarkable turn has already taken place under the influence of the so-called *memory revolution*.[2] The scholar's aim seems to be not so much to diagnose the re-

1) "Coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description. [...] The force of our interpretations cannot rest, as they are now so often made to do, on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued. Nothing has done more, I think, to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe" (Geertz 1973: 17-18).

2) "The notion of 'memory' has taken its place now as a leading term, perhaps the leading term, in cultural history" (Confino 1997: 1386).

alities he/she is discussing, but to converse with them; a kind of extended anthropological field study is more alluring nowadays, seemingly in search of difficulties, controversial issues and multiple reasoning (see the famous principle "Pas de problèmes, pas d'histoire," Febvre 2009: 25). A change of scale[3]—from "big" history to the everyday life of individuals—has led historians to notice things that never interested them before. New topics correspond to the new perspective on how and for what purpose history should be practised. Moreover, the view of history as a social *practice* gradually makes its way into the scientific world.

Various policies respond sooner or later to all social practices. If memory, considered to embrace all "the ways in which people construct a sense of the past" (Confino 1997: 1386) draws public attention today, one can expect an official *mainstream memory* to be (as it has always been) consequently forged by political rulers.[4] In response, popular collective or individual memory, recorded in informal archives—namely oral or written narratives of life stories, ordinary people's letters and diaries, private memorials and celebrations, rumours, blurbs and fame itself, etc.—add to the general knowledge of history, sometimes opposing the mainstream and dismissing false explanations. The phenomenon was characterized by John Bodnar (1994) as "*vernacular* versus *official* memory."

The *politics of memory* is a notion that was coined in the 1990s, in reference to the conflicting accounts of Nazi crimes in the Allies' official history, in German official history and in the narratives of different ethnic groups that carry collective memories of the Second World War. The notion has been revisited from many perspectives: "One of the questions that arises when reflecting on key moments of the past concerns the role of the archive in disseminating political memoryscapes" (Cohen 2018: 17). Policy makers build the *official archives* according to political interests. (Of course, there have always been private archives as well, with more or less open access, but the amount of information required by historians is mainly found in public archives.) The funny thing is that when, driven by our particular scientific needs, we access a certain archive, we usually expect to find more than what we were initially looking for. And if we are lucky, we really do! But what is it that makes many of us feel this way?

Once he enters the vast domain of a public archive, the researcher is at the archivist's disposal—a situation that Arlette Farge suggestively rendered in her study on the allure of archives. Many of us have felt the impact of archivists' generally narrow concept regarding the property regime[5] of the documents they own. They are also responsible for the physical condition of the pieces they are entrusted with. But do they really *own* those documents? Comprehending how archives work within the general administration of the social and cultural life of a given society entails investigating the *politics of memory* imposed by the state. Depending on the degree of transparency (and democracy), the time lapse between the registration of a certain event in an archive and the moment when its declassification for public access is permitted may vary from instant access to thirty years in the USA, fifty or more in Europe, and up to sixty or one hundred years for state secrets or documents touching the secrets of private life. Sonia Combe deplored this interval, which she refers to as a ripening time or "temps de lattence": "Ce temps du passage de l'archive du registre de la mémoire à celui de l'histoire qui consacre sa libre communication en fait *un objet froid*, car dépourvu d'incidence sur le présent, [et] une *archive morte*" (Combe 2001: 88, italics mine). In 1996, the French archivists organized a conference[6] on private life and state secrets, examining the legal practices meant to protect those secrets, in light of a new question: In whose service are the archives when it comes to the possible proofs of repression? Are they in service of the (oppressive) state, or in service of the citizens who righteously ask for clas-

3) "Ce que la notion d'échelle comporte de propre dans l'emploi qu'en font les historiens, c'est l'absence de commensurabilité des dimensions. En changeant de l'échelle, on ne voit pas les mêmes choses en plus grand ou en plus petit, [...] on voit des choses différentes" (Ricœur 2000: 270).

4) "By sanctifying the political while underplaying the social, and by sacrificing the cultural to the political, we transform memory into a «natural» corollary of political development and interests" (Confino 1997: 1394).

5) "Tout fonctionnaire a le sentiment que ses papiers *font corps* avec lui" (Combe 2001: 111).

6) "La communauté des archivistes est en proie à une crise de conscience qui la conduit à s'interroger à la fois sur sa mission au service du publique et sur la fonction, qui lui a été implicitement dévolue, de gardienne des secrets de l'État" (Combe 2001: XVII).

sified information presumably containing shards of evidence? In 1993, Shentalinsky, a Russian poet, published a book in France on the literary archives of the KGB, selecting different documents and commenting on them; the work was so generous in details that it was compared to a Baroque artefact, but the most important thing the author did was to contextualize every document so as to make it transparent with regard to the circumstances of its creation (for example, testimonials obtained under extreme pressure meant—as the author pointed out—almost the opposite of what the torturer made his prisoner say or sign[7]). It was only the beginning of a huge interest in such archives and documents. Seuil, one of the most important publishing houses in Paris, dedicated a new collection to them in the 1990s (*Archives du communisme*), coordinated by Stéphane Courtois and Nicolas Werth, who called the phenomenon "a true documentary revolution" (Courtois 2009: 401). Indeed, the archives of former communist regimes contain billions of files, many of which had once been classified "top secret." Secrecy was a social pathology in totalitarian states. Everything had to be *secret* in order to concentrate all the power into the hands of those who controlled information. At the same time, everything that happened or was supposed to happen in society had to be *reported* (of course, secretly reported) to the superiors; reporting replaced reality, as words replaced (or hid) facts. What I mean is that few of the things that were reported really had taken place, and even if they had, reality was distorted in order to match ideological prescriptions. If communism taught us anything, it was schizoid hypocrisy. Everybody learned to pretend being what they were not and doing what they did not. Truth was considered not only the *worst policy*, but in time it became almost unrecognizable among the general lies. Mixing all of these practices resulted in counterfeiting reality on a social scale by attempting to avoid any personal responsibility, and also in the general practice of looking for scapegoats[8] whenever naked reality menaced to come out. The archives of communism speak a language (see the Orwellian *newspeak*) of their own, conventional, artificial and encoded, by means of which they translate reality into ideology. Nevertheless, historians need to know and understand that idiom in order to understand the core of twentieth-century life.

Monica Lovinescu deplored the delay imposed by Romanian laws before permitting access to the archives of the former regime—"to extend the 'secret' character of such documents for yet another forty years means to annihilate the past" (Lovinescu 2008: 415). She added that historians must have free access to all the registers; it is they who must choose, it is they who should sieve the documents. For archives to really "confess," the first historians who open them should have been themselves—in real life—among the witnesses[9] to whatever the documents refer to. Indeed, it takes a former repression subject to recognize the hidden elements that smell of terror within an ideologically reshaped document—this is what David Rousset, survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp, meant in 1949, when he asked his fellow prison mates to investigate the communist repression sites *as trauma experts* (Todorov 1999: 44).

How about the private archives and their property regime? What patrimonial laws apply to them? Should private collections be entitled to shelter valuable pieces that are potentially relevant for the general history? A comparison could be made here between the regime of art collections, on the one side, and history relics, artefacts and other findings on the other: as everybody knows, in Romania art is almost free to be traded among private collectors, on condition that it is legally sourced, whereas historical items belong mainly to the state and cannot be traded. In other words, if somebody accidentally finds an antique object, he must give it up to the state; but what if he finds a bundle of letters or a diary? Holocaust history benefited a lot from such acciden-

7) See Lovinescu (2008).

8) A striking communist social practice, still alive in Romania today, is *to find someone to put the blame on* for everything that goes *overtly* wrong, in no matter what field of activity. The general rule is that somebody has to be found guilty and punished, but never the real responsible or offender! Nevertheless, a scapegoat *must* exist. *"No guilt"* in such cases is not an acceptable logic (see the *sabotage* verdict, largely used to explain some of the most dramatic past or present failures).

9) "Nowadays [the] historian, still an eyewitness [to the events], should be the first to gain access to the files in the archives, in order to write, on each and every page, the subtext without which the historians of the future risk not ştbeingţ able to decipher what really happened to the people of the twentieth century" (Lovinescu 2008: 416).

tal findings—though private, the cultural objects accidentally found have been put to good scientific use and in fact they now serve the general interest at least as much as the private interest of their owner. The saddest situation occurs when the actual owners of such cultural objects (*memorabilia*) either dispose of them (for instance, the first owner dies and his inheritors do not understand the value of the archive, therefore they get rid of whatever they consider mere "useless papers"), or, on the contrary, they keep the archive only for themselves, denying anybody else (including the researchers) access to the documents. There must be many such silent archives all around us that we are not even aware of … Whatever materials we reach on this matter is just the tip of the iceberg; and what we successfully use is even less. We will return to this topic below.

Given the possible and quite frequent abuses to which memory is subjected by official policies,[10] the researcher should find a good spot to conduct his survey on the social practices of the period he is interested in. It is no simple job. He must place himself in what has been described as a symbolic clash: "la région des conflits entre mémoire individuelle, mémoire collective, mémoire historique, en ce point où la mémoire vivante des survivants affronte le regard distancié et critique de l'historien" (Ricœur 2000: 105-106). He must find reliable witnesses, and to do so he must take cognizance of commingled beliefs. If he encounters opposing or merely different opinions concerning the same social events, he is on the right track, because the phenomenological existence of groups shows off in such conflicting views.[11] Victims, eyewitnesses, decision-makers, torturers and so on implicitly *act as groups*, even if they don't assume a group identity; they share the same memories, engraved in their minds from a similar perspective, regardless of the psychological differences among the group members. In different shades, their past is essentially one and the same within each group. *Collective memory*—a notion coined by Maurice Halbwachs, who has analysed it in terms of positivist thinking—cannot designate the "general" memory, for there exists no such thing: collective memory is but group memory and it stretches as far as the identity of each group.[12] Therefore, where social history is concerned, collective memories will compete and fight for supremacy. If merging them is the goal of the historian, they will prove difficult to merge. Alon Confino has mentioned this apparently paradoxical situation: "A similar problem of narrative emerges when we attempt to write the history of memory by separating its construction from its contestation. But are these competing claims not an integral part of the construction of memory?" (1997: 1397-1398). On the contrary, as Tzvetan Todorov (1999) put it, the *monopoly on memory* is a psychotic characteristic of totalitarian states (a familiar tune for Eastern Europeans).

To conclude: the very process of *establishing/producing the archives* by choosing what to introduce in them and what to leave aside, the decision about the new collections to be added, and the practice of permitting or restricting access to the information they stock are among the hints that tell a lot about the state policies. Even so, the archive is never entirely available in practice: researchers must be picky because they cannot afford an endless study in order to reach their conclusions; in this matter, they need the help of archivists as guides through the archive. Public archives are nowadays labyrinths.

The situation is less difficult when a researcher or a team is able to assemble their own archive and can make professional use of it. Such cases usually refer to witness-centered, private and mostly oral archives, gradually submitted to transcription and interpretation. A recent example would be *The Archives of Memory* (Cojocaru *et al.* 2016, 2017, 2018), a study conducted during the past four years by Moldavian researchers and historians on the social trauma inflicted by the communist regime in the small Republic of Moldova. The team gathers oral and written testimonies of survivors, papers concerning their deportation, readmission

10) *Mémoire instrumentalisée :* "[…] des abus, au sens fort du terme, résultant d'une manipulation concertée de la mémoire et de l'oubli par les détenteurs du pouvoir" (Ricœur 2000: 97).

11) "[…] l'importance des mémoires plurielles, portées par des communautés linguistiques et nationales différentes, mémoires souvent antagonistes, mais toujours en référence les unes par rapport aux autres. […] Voilà l'élément central de notre réflexion sur l'application de l'idée de lieu de mémoire à un niveau européen: embrasser la pluralité de mémoires qui renvoient à un même objet" (François and Serrier 2018: 148).

12) See Halbwachs (1925).

and relocation, other documents on the historical context, material evidence transmitted within the families (such as old pictures), symbolic objects (*memorabilia*), proofs of changes in social habits, documents concerning the current relationship of former repression subjects with the political decision-makers, etc. They also take into consideration the particular cases when memory is self-suppressed by those who, having gone through the ordeal of political repression and deportation, are still suffering and refuse to speak about what happened to them. *Narration* is considered in psychology to be the fundamental mnemonic act (Janet 1928). People are generally prone to what Jacques Le Goff has termed "la conduite de récit," therefore, as the author notices, "les oublis, les silences de l'histoire sont révélateurs de ces mécanismes de manipulation de la mémoire collective" (1988: 109), concluding that: "La réflexion historique aujourd'hui s'attache également à l'absence des documents, aux silences de l'histoire. […] Il faut faire l'inventaire des archives du silence. Et faire l'histoire à partir des documents et des absences de documents" (1988: 302). As long as entire communities pass over their traumatic past in silence (usually because they are forced by the new establishment to remain silent about the former political establishment or about the circumstances of transition), what has been called "le travail de mémoire" is not accomplished. As Maurice Halbwachs or Théodule-Armand Ribot have put it, our past is the present representation[13] we create from the actual events.[14] We use these representations as connectors between the past and present of our lives. If remembrance is shaken, our identity is directly threatened. The same goes for societies. If remembrance is forbidden at a higher scale and memories stop being transmitted from one generation to the next, social identity is gradually destroyed. Totalitarian regimes forbid memory because they reject painful truths. But, regardless of their decision, historical truth remains the same and representations of trauma continue to nourish a subterranean collective memory—which is obviously a good defence mechanism, but a costly one, too. Social wounds remain horrendously open; *the deafening silence* imposed by political rulers makes those wounds bleed continuously. I strongly believe that ideological *omertà* is one of the worst possible wrongdoings when it comes to the future of a country. Try as they might, the rulers will finally be defeated by commoners.[15] When the silence is finally broken, those who break it are not "perpetrators" in the realm of collective memory, but healers of the deep, unseen and devitalizing social wounds. By speaking out, by appealing to remembrance and inclusion of former trauma in various hermeneutics, the past finally ceases to be present and is broken into various (conflicting) representations.

Social trauma may be the main theme of an archive. In such cases, the whole archive could serve for the prosecutor as well as for the historian, because memory renders past events in such a light that moral judgement is inherent to the study of the pieces of evidence themselves. Many of them are narratives of eyewitnesses, descendants of victims or persons who experienced trauma and are able to offer first-hand views of events. History itself originates in the basic gestures of memory transmission: "L'histoire a commencé par être un récit, le récit de celui qui peut dire *j'ai vu*, *j'ai entendu dire*. Cet aspect de l'histoire-récit, de l'histoire-témoignage, n'a jamais cessé d'exister dans le développement de la science historique" (Le Goff 1988: 20). But what credit can or should we give to oral relations more or less supported by documents? As Marc Bloch noticed, every trace of the past is a mix of overt testimony and hidden hints; in fact, "we should look for memory where it is implied rather than said, blurred rather than clear, in the realm of collective mentality" (Confino 1997: 1395). Narratives of repression offer a lot of factual information, as well as a lot of suggestive hints. Anything in them may be useful to the historian in building a scientific perspective, because it is the researcher who

13) "If we could compare our past, as it has really been, fixed before us objectively, with the subjective representation which we have in memory, we would find the copy formed upon a particular system of projection; each of us is able to find his way without trouble in this system, because he has himself created it" (Ribot 1887: 62).

14) "Le passé, en réalité, ne reparaît pas tel quel; tout semble indiquer qu'il ne se conserve pas, mais qu'on le reconstruit en partant du présent" (Halbwachs 1925: x-xi).

15) "The past cannot be [indefinitely] suppressed" (Tismăneanu 2006: 7).

gives scientific relevance to an object of the past by questioning it and thus transforming it into a proper document (Ricœur 2000: 216). That is exactly what has happened in the particular case which I mean to discuss in the following pages. The case has a subjective edge to it as well.

In 2010 I went to Paris on a personal mission: to look for any important remains of Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca's archive that might have been left in the abandoned house of the late couple. Born in 1920 and 1923, respectively, Virgil Ierunca and his wife, Monica Lovinescu, have been two leading figures of Romanian cultural exile. While in the country, they studied literature, philosophy, and theatre art. Before 1947, the year he left Romania, Virgil Ierunca had been a cultural journalist, a rebel against all official currents, and a promoter of existentialism. In 1946 he inaugurated the difficult debate about the crisis of Romanian literature. From 1947 to 1990, in France, he added an even sharper edge to his journalism, which became very much politically involved; Paris made him grow into a real writer, whose essays, literary criticism, and poetry evolved around the theme of exile and forbidden homeland. Monica Lovinescu, after having tried herself as a theatre director and translator and founded some avant-garde companies, became an essayist, journalist, and art critic; she worked for Radio France (1951-1975) and for Radio Free Europe (from 1962), within the RFE Romanian service, where both she and her husband starred in well-known and very influential anti-communist broadcasts. The couple chose not to leave the French exile after Romania's so-called Revolution of 1989, seemingly because of their disappointment with the slow pace of political change towards democracy. They died in Paris, in 2006 and 2008.

I said "abandoned" house because at that time the legal situation of the house—left by the couple to the Romanian state, on condition of transforming it into an accommodation for Romanian students on scholarships, who are in need of material support—was quite complicated. This was initially because of the delay of the Romanian part in paying the inheritance taxes, and later because of their explicit refusal to pay both taxes and penalties. Thus, the house with no actual owner was in danger of being broken into and the profusion of documents gathered there by the couple during their more than half a century's exile could have been lost forever. Immediate action had to be taken. So I suggested going there in order to recover and bring back to the country all the important documents.

I was not the first person to visit the archive left in the house. Other researchers, either friends of the family or helping hands, had seen it during the last years of Monica Lovinescu's and Virgil Ierunca's lives, and immediately after their death. Some personal belongings, manuscripts, pictures and letters had already been recovered, along with most of the books, records and compact discs. I knew that and hoped there would not be too much left. But much to my astonishment, I found the house still full of documents. The archive was engulfing every spare inch of space, in the entrance hall, in the basement, in the living room, in the attic. Everything was full of papers. In official terms, Monica Lovinescu and her husband Virgil Ierunca were the owners of a rich *family fonds*, valuable for many fields of study, from the history of Romanian literature to recent history, political studies, sociology, cultural anthropology and so on.

As this paper deals with the question of public use of private memory, I will bring into discussion a major part of that archive: the collection of letters received by the late Romanian couple Lovinescu–Ierunca during their French exile (1946-2008) from hundreds of fellow intellectuals confined back in Romania; some of those intellectuals are still alive today. The collection consists of thousands of documents, all unconventional. They belonged to the aforementioned couple until their death. Whose property are my letters? is a question that may *now* be

raised by any of their surviving correspondents. Indeed, many of those who wrote to the couple are important contemporary personalities of Romanian cultural life. Anyone is entitled to ask: "If I wrote some letters to someone who died, and someone else has recovered them (else they would have physically disappeared), to whom do the letters belong now?" The sender no longer possesses a letter once he mails it; the recipient becomes the rightful owner of all the letters he receives. But what if the recipient dies without any legal heirs? Who is entitled to decide the fate of those letters? To whom do they legally belong? Contemporaneity may seem an intellectual bliss due to our free and quick access to all kinds of information, but on the other hand, it may seriously hinder *the researcher of memory*, who is by definition prone to listen to each document as an individual messenger, and yet bound to follow some (often bushy and obscure) legal, deontological and ethical paths, while struggling to handle his research topic. What one would think reasonable and convenient from an ethical point of view may be subject to an unexpected reversal when dealt with from the official perspective imposed by the law. The politics of memory—issues most germane to public policy—have been the main focus of the first part of my paper.

From the already mentioned archive, I shall address the special situation of the letters Monica Lovinescu received from her mother, Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu, which I managed as follows: recovery, selection, translation into Romanian (given the fact that most of them were written in French in order to evade political censorship), publication by Humanitas Publishing House—since the legal trustee of the entire archive is Gabriel Liiceanu, the owner of Humanitas—followed by the transfer of the physical collection to the Humanitas Aqua Forte Foundation. Editing that private correspondence was an occasion for me to fully experience the feeling that Arlette Farge has called "the allure of the archives" (in my case, it was the allure of the letters). I shall focus on this experience in the second part of my study.

There were plenty of documents in the house, waiting to be classified and recovered. I spent a few weeks inside the archive, sorting manuscripts and papers and trying to make sure that nothing of value escaped unnoticed. There were many valuable pieces, and I had to go to Paris for a second time in order to get all of them. The first thing I brought back to Romania was the massive collection of letters received by Monica Lovinescu from her mother, Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu, during the eleven years of their forced separation that ended in 1960 with the latter's death in prison. There were about 2,500 letters, all kept in perfect chronological order. The recovery was followed—to my considerable surprise—by the request to publish them, a proposal I received from Humanitas Publishing House. We agreed on a selective edition,[16] with complementary apparatus and index; as most of the letters were written in French to thwart the attempt of communist censorship to break the secret of their private correspondence, translation into Romanian was needed; thus, the edition benefited from an inspired and accurate translation by Gabriela Creția, who also contributed some of the notes.

How did the collection look? I must confess that when I accepted to create an edition, I had only a vague notion as to what it contained. Scanning the letters allowed only a reasonable expectation that they would reveal interesting details.

There were about two hundred long letters, written on bluish paper with blue ink, in a minute handwriting resembling a lace made of strings of words; every such letter contained a few days' reporting, detailed over four to six pages. There were also thousands of postcards, also entirely covered in handwriting, so full of characters that one couldn't have found place to add a pinhead on them. Most of the long letters had been secretly sneaked out of the country by various means during the first and most fero-

16) Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu (2012 and 2016).

cious years of Romanian communism (in the 1950s); later on they were sent by official means, but nevertheless with much concern about their arrival at their destination. The small letters (disguised as postcards) had been sent more regularly, and they had a peculiar composition: apparently everything they contained was plain and uninteresting family matters, unappealing to the eyes of the Romanian secret police, the *Securitate*, but in reality they were written in an encrypted manner which permitted the sender a lot of freedom as to the truths she meant to express. The *Securitate* let the letters pass (after copying them) only because they were building a case against Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu. When she was eventually arrested, in 1958, those letters—whose content was severely distorted by some uneducated *Securitate* employees who pretended translating them into Romanian—became evidence in a court trial. On that thin basis, the sender was politically sentenced to eighteen years of hard prison.

The loving daughter had kept her mother's letters for decades without ever being able to touch them[17] after their sender died. From this point of view, they may be considered *subjective memorabilia*. We define *subjective memorabilia* as personal (or family) belongings of somebody who voluntarily treasures them in remembrance of important persons, events or contexts of their life. They represent our most valuable patrimony. We all have such *memorabilia*; they support the effective bringing of past into present and thus sustain our self-memory. Dramatic contexts can turn simple souvenirs into subjective *memorabilia*—the main difference between the two categories of objects being the emotional response triggered by their presence and, of course, their intrinsic resistance to being forgotten. The letters under discussion could not have been mere souvenirs; but their importance was further enhanced by the tragic circumstances of the family's rupture. From the point of view of their content, most of the narratives in the letters sent by Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu to her daughter are *first degree memorates*, as they would appear in the schema of stages in fictionalization that Ileana Benga and Bogdan Neagota have proposed (Benga 2005: 79). *First degree memorates* are self-referential narratives in which the narrator is also the main character and certifies the truth of everything he describes. Of course, *second degree memorates* (relations certified by friends or acquaintances) are also delivered in the letters, and even *third degree ones* (general facts, as part of the social knowledge) appear, but the focus is on the first person narratives. Corroborating these elements of composition with the fact that the letters were secret, even dangerous, and with the intimate relationship of the two correspondents who knew a lot about each other, the *authenticity* of the content is guaranteed. Ecaterina Bălăcoiu-Lovinescu and her daughter Monica Lovinescu have conceived their letters as a kind of diary that each one kept for the benefit of the other; their minute notation of small day-to-day facts was an impressive battle of memory against time and distance, even more impressive when there was not much to say, aside from what had already been said many times before: that life in the People's Republic of Romania (communist Romania) was miserable, full of drudgery and pain, in spite of which Ecaterina preserved her hope to be someday permitted to go to France and see her beloved daughter again. The letters spoke most of all about maternal love. What gave a tragic turn to the whole correspondence is the "reality test": after a few years of surveillance, Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu was finally arrested in 1958 and the following year she was sentenced to eighteen years' imprisonment for "high treason" (she was already seventy-two years old and ill). Knowing that she could be used (as indeed she was!) as an emotional blackmail tool by the communist authorities that were offended by Monica Lovinescu's anti-communist activity at Radio France and in the cultural magazines of the exile, Ecaterina refused the sparse medical treatment she could have

17) "[...] our letters were such a frantic expression of the fear that we would never see each other again, that even today, after forty years, I dare not read them" (Lovinescu 2008: 264), translation A.C.

been offered in the prison hospital and thus she chose an early death (which occurred in 1960, less than two years after the moment she was arrested). All the way, she had had accurate premonitions of her trial and death in prison. Knowing the way she died, whenever I ran into one of those premonitions during my reading of the letters, I was overwhelmed by the accuracy of her foresight; I wondered how she could have sharpened her inner attention to the point where her future became so clear years before it really happened. The only answer I could come up with was that she had a kind of mystic connection to her daughter, one that separated her from some of the tricky aspects of ordinary life (the so-called appearances that generally draw our attention) and made her aware of things beyond herself.

18) "Better convict a hundred innocents than let one *bandit* escape!" was a famous motto of the communist "justice" system, mainly in the 1950s.

It was a time when political trials were conducted as brutally as possible in order to make an example of each victim and suppress any future resistance on the part of other society members. Merciless convictions were frequent. Former social elites were the main prey. Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu fell into the category of those who had to be destroyed at any rate[18] and she knew that all only too well, unlike her daughter Monica, who desperately hoped to buy[19] her mother from the state.

19) See Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu (2016, vol. II, Afterword).

Why are these letters important for the general public? What qualified them for being saved from physical and cultural disappearance? Are they mere *traces* of the past, or are they more like *documents*? (Whoever asks these questions should also reverse the terms: What good comes from the disappearance of *any* traces?) The letters I am talking about are relevant to us because they offer a reliable narrative concerning important protagonists. Romanian social, political, economic and cultural life of the 1950s and '60s is there in stark outline. Some influential figures in early Romanian communist society also used to be preeminent personalities in the former political regimes; as Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu knew them from the times of *Sburătorul* literary circle,[20] their evolution through successive changes of mind is disclosed in these letters. The whole society suffered a major upheaval in the '50s, and that is exactly the period that these letters refer to. One can also see in them Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu's own struggle to adapt her behaviour to official hypocrisy: she learned to suffer in silence and to pretend social conformity, but not all the way (apart from writing her daughter, she revealed her true feelings to some of her friends and acquaintances, some of whom betrayed her trust and later served as prosecution witnesses during her trial). From this point of view, such documents add to the body of existing evidence against the official fake history of those years.

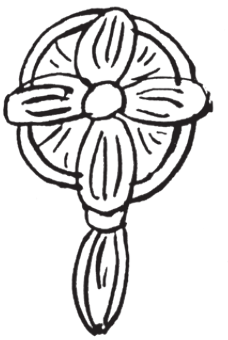
20) Eugen Lovinescu, ex-husband of Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu and father of Monica Lovinescu, had founded in 1919 a literary society called *Sburătorul*, later to become an influential literary magazine and a famous literary circle. *Sburătorul* disappeared in 1948, after being led for the last four years after Eugen Lovinescu's death by his daughter, and after 1947 by his former wife, Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu.

Less than one-third of the written material of the letters was selected for the book. When I made the selection, I tried to include all of the relevant details regarding Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu as a person, as an intellectual, as a member of the persecuted former social elite, as a mother, and as a woman subject to the deepest political experiment of the twentieth century. I looked mainly for the *history* in her memory. But I also looked for the *anthropology* and for the *literature* that her letters have to offer. She was a gifted writer, one whose only work comprises these letters. I tried to follow Monica Lovinescu's wish and contextualize the events and characters in extended footnotes, so as to help future readers understand to what or to whom the author was referring. What I myself learned while working on the edition was *to read between the lines*: I would never have imagined to what extent writing between the lines could be taken, if I would not have had to struggle with Ecaterina Bălăcioiu-Lovinescu's successful attempts to tell her daughter not only some of the truths in her oppressed life, but *the whole truth*, and to do it *without seeming to*. From this point of view, her letters are a masterpiece. She invented codes and secret signals, she hid real persons beneath nicknames, references and allusions were carefully chosen so as to be deciphered only by her daughter, she de-

vised new uses for old words and so on. And she continuously changed the codes, partly as a defence strategy and partly because she herself probably couldn't remember all of them. Her letters are a labyrinth, and reading them was a fascinating trip.

The rest of the letters I mentioned at the beginning of this article are yet to be published, each in due time, taking into account the peculiarities of each sender's situation. In fact, they are being kept as a compact (private) fonds, from which different pieces will be separated only in order to be published by *researcher-editors* as myself, with the full agreement of the fonds' owner. This might slow public access to the information hidden within the documents, but it seems to be the only way to deal with the ethical, deontological and legal issues raised by the complexity of an archive comprising more than fifty years of recent memory.

Nowadays, memories and related materials are among the most appealing sources for the historians who want to draw a new, more accurate sketch of the recent past. They are the kind of evidence that successfully fights social amnesia. When history fails or betrays people, memory takes the torch. As a matter of fact, such documents are by far more *convincing* for us than scientific reasoning on the same matters could ever claim to be. Some things are meant to be lived and transmitted directly from person to person, from soul to soul. They will continue to speak to us because we all have a feeling for authenticity and know that life comes packed in small details which only literature or memorials can properly convey.



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