

Katalin Lajos

Perspectives and Insights on the Analysis of Private Correspondence: Hungarian Women's Experience of 1960s Romania

Abstract: In the digital age, private letters are increasingly valued as sources for identity, memory, and microhistory. This article analyses a corpus of nineteen letters exchanged in 1965 by three women from three generations of an urban Székely Hungarian family in Romania. Using qualitative content analysis, it examines recurring themes alongside silences, omissions, and taboos. The study highlights intercultural contact as lived experience, focusing on a young woman's temporary stay near Bucharest as a site of linguistic and cultural adaptation. It explores materialised care, language learning, and long-distance relationships as interconnected domains shaping everyday minority life. By foregrounding practices of accommodation and self-formation, the article complements dominant narratives of oppression and resistance. Ethical considerations – especially issues of voice, ownership, and posthumous privacy – are treated as analytically productive constraints that shape both interpretation and representation.

Keywords: Private Correspondence; Content Analysis; Written Legacy; Private Letters; Microhistory.

KATALIN LAJOS

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Miercurea Ciuc, Romania
lajoskatalin@uni.sapientia.ro

DOI: 10.24193/cechinox.2026.50.18

1. Silence as an Anthropological Clue in Family Correspondence: Introduction, Hypotheses, Possible Theoretical Approaches

In the humanities and particularly in the fields of cultural anthropology and social history silence is increasingly interpreted not as a void in communication, but as a culturally situated form of expression and a subtle mechanism of social regulation.¹ In their book *Tracing Silences: Towards an Anthropology of the Unspoken and Unspeakable*, Dragojlović and Samuels survey how silence is theorized across disciplines, with cases from Holocaust testimony to feminist and postcolonial studies, healthcare, and trauma, bringing together an extensive bibliography on the study of voice and silence across various disciplines within the human sciences.² Related insights also appear in sociological and methodological discussions, where silence is examined as a condition shaping knowledge production and interpretation.³

If silence is recognised as a socially meaningful phenomenon, then the communicative forms through which it

becomes observable also require analytical attention. Personal correspondence offers precisely such a site. Numerous edited collections of medieval correspondence in Romanian historiography demonstrate the long-standing scholarly interest in epistolary sources.⁴ The study of elite correspondence has a long tradition, and edited volumes have made such materials central to cultural history and linguistics.⁵ Hungarian ethnography has likewise established vernacular and peasant writing as a legitimate field of inquiry, treating rural correspondence as a key source for everyday literacy and cultural transmission.⁶

András Vajda's 2013 study, based on a peasant archive, demonstrates how writing structures everyday routines and textual practices across the life course.⁷ He argues that family archives matter not only for the social sciences and historiography but also as records of lived experience and relationships to written culture.

Mária Szikszai's study of a locally influential priest's letters likewise foregrounds voice and silence as instruments of social positioning,⁸ where voice and silence emerge as intertwined instruments of social positioning. As historian Cristian Vasile notes in his review, one guiding question is "what Mihály Tyukodi chose to speak about, and what he remained silent on."⁹ Silence thus appears not as absence but as an integral dimension of communication.

While studies confirm the established scholarly interest in the correspondence of socially prominent figures, they also point to a broader issue: to what extent can comparable analytical attention be directed toward the private letters of individuals without public status? Although the correspondence of nineteenth-century

peasants and other groups associated with traditional rural culture has likewise long been recognised as a legitimate object of ethnographic and historical research, the everyday private letters of ordinary twentieth-century urban individuals – situated outside both elite and "traditional" cultural frameworks – have received far less systematic attention than their scholarly potential would warrant.

Precisely for this reason, private family correspondence offers a revealing vantage point on how silence operates within relationships – through unanswered questions, ellipses, and unarticulated meanings that may signal desire, conflict, fear, loyalty, or the maintenance of cohesion. These letters are especially important for microhistory and "history from below", documenting gender roles, life-cycle rituals, epistolary conventions, and patterns of intra-family cohesion within specific social contexts.

The corpus examined in this study – a set of letters exchanged in 1965 among three generations of women from an urban Székely (Sekler) family – reveals numerous instances of silence, both at the individual level (self-censorship, restraint) and in relational dynamics (shared silences in correspondence, absence of certain topics). These patterns reflect power, gender norms, and adaptation to a partly foreign culture, thereby providing a meaningful framework for anthropological reflection.

From the perspective of Romanian minority studies, this article advances a micro-analytical contribution by shifting attention from macro-level narratives – often framed predominantly through oppression, resistance, and collective suffering – toward the everyday textures of intercultural contact and adaptation. The

empirical core of the paper examines how a young Sekler Hungarian woman's three-month detachment to a Romanian-speaking village near Bucharest becomes an arena of lived minority experience: a space in which linguistic acquisition, cultural accommodation, professional recognition by members of the majority, and affective self-positioning unfold simultaneously. In this sense, the letters capture not only what minority-majority relations "are" in institutional or political terms, but how they are negotiated as ordinary, embodied practice – through small routines, objects, and interpersonal interactions under the conditions of socialist Romania.

This focus also allows the article to address a gap in the field. While interethnic Romanian-Hungarian relations have been widely examined, far less is known about the private emotional and communicative dimensions through which minority subjects experienced and narrated contact with Romanian culture in everyday life. By reading the correspondence through the interplay of voice and silence, the analysis illuminates the subtle ways in which intercultural exposure is translated into claims of competence, emerging self-confidence, and reconfigured belonging, without denying the broader constraints of the period. The empirical analysis therefore concentrates on three main thematic domains emerging from the correspondence: the materialisation of care and home through objects and exchange, the negotiation of identity through language and intercultural contact, and the mediation of intimate relationships within a female epistolary network. Together, these strands allow the article to examine how silence operates across emotional, social, and relational

registers in everyday minority experience. The central hypothesis, developed and substantiated in Section 3.2, is that epistolary discourse provides a privileged site for observing how intercultural contact catalyzes identity formation and how silence functions not merely as absence but as a relational strategy within minority women's communicative repertoires.

2. Subjectivity versus Objectivity: Advantages and Disadvantages of Analyzing Family Correspondence by a Family Member

As a Romanian ethnologist, Ioana-Ruxandra Fruntelată argued, "wherever there is a community – that is, a group of people sharing an informal culture that binds them through invisible threads and makes them part of an organic whole – there can also be an ethnologist studying it."¹⁰ The following analysis will be that of an "ethnologist" examining the written legacy of his or her own family. This intimate relationship with the material raises two issues that must be addressed at the outset: the ethical and methodological implications of analyzing one's own family correspondence, and the relevance of a small twentieth-century urban corpus for anthropological research.

In my view a valid analysis is possible if the researcher's positionality is acknowledged and the criteria are explicit and consistently applied. An advantage is contextual familiarity with persons and family narratives; the main risk is emotional involvement and inherited interpretations. Another ethical issue concerns the need to request permission from living persons who appear in the letters. After weighing

the advantages and risks, I proceeded with a thematic analysis of the corpus. All individuals are anonymized and referred to by pseudonyms, and consent for the use of the material has been obtained from the only living close family member.

Beyond these procedural steps, however, the ethical dimension of the research also carries interpretive implications. These considerations do not merely constitute procedural safeguards; they also form part of the interpretive framework of the study, since questions of privacy, consent, and posthumous representation are closely tied to how voice, silence, and intimacy are produced and negotiated in private correspondence.

2.1. The Corpus and the Correspondents

In the present study, I analyze a corpus consisting of 19 letters exchanged between three women of the same family during the period February to May 1965. The corpus forms part of a larger family legacy (1913–1980). The group of letters examined here thus forms part of the author's family heritage, comprising the three-month correspondence from 1965 between her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. All these letters are in Hungarian, some of them contain Romanian elements.

The relationship among the three women is examined from the perspective of the youngest, Mária (24), who lived in the same household with her mother, Elza (51), and grandmother, Rózsa (78). All three women had experienced early bereavement and widowhood in the family, circumstances that contributed to their unusually close and interdependent relationship.

Their social trajectories reflect generational change: Rózsa had only primary schooling and remained a housewife, while Elza completed secondary education and later worked as a clerk. Mária, the first in the family with professional training, graduated from a technical medical school as an obstetric nurse.

The correspondence is connected to her first professional assignment in 1965, when she was sent for three months to the village of Vasilați, near Bucharest, as part of a national program aimed at reducing infant mortality. This temporary relocation represented both a first separation from home and an encounter with a predominantly Romanian-speaking environment. Communication with her family was maintained almost exclusively through letters, which provide the primary material for the present analysis.

2.2. Methodology

Narratives from the maternal side of the family, together with elements of oral history, were transmitted primarily through conversations with the author's mother. She acted as custodian of the documents; they came into the author's possession only after her death, and their existence had not previously been known. Although Mária exercised *de facto* control over these materials, she willingly recounted episodes from her youth that she considered significant, the period of deployment in Vasilați included. These narratives, stabilized through repeated retellings, are treated here as oral history.

The analysis began with the digitization and classification of the written materials. This process led to the identification

of the corpus under study, which proved suitable for analysis owing to its thematic unity and the relatively complete set of both sent and received letters. Nineteen letters were transcribed into a Word document and ordered chronologically, making them accessible to both linguistic inquiry and content analysis. During the analysis of the letter corpus, I identified the most important thematic keywords, examined their frequencies and the meanings they acquire in context, and focused on presenting the meanings that proved most salient.

I made a deliberate methodological choice to refrain from conducting interviews with contemporaries – friends, colleagues, and acquaintances still living from that period – and to focus exclusively on the letters themselves. This does not preclude such efforts in future research: testimonies from individuals who lived through the same period could offer valuable perspectives for a broader investigation.

Throughout the paper, excerpts from the Hungarian language letters are presented in English in translation by the author of this paper, omissions are signaled by brackets [...]. Some passages also reflect the experience of progressively mastering Romanian and therefore some letters contain Romanian elements in the source language, these elements are not translated into English. All the citations from the corpus appear in *italics* in order to clearly differentiate them from secondary citations. Since not all letters include a date, I establish a sequential numbering based on their relative position within the correspondence, and refer to them accordingly (Letter 1, Letter 2, etc.).

3. Dominant Themes in the Correspondence

As noted above, nineteen letters survived from the period between mid-February and mid-May 1965. The correspondence suggests that additional letters were sent but have either been lost or remain unlocated. References are also made to letters exchanged between Mária and her romantic partner, Tibi, but these have not survived. Although, according to the extant texts, no formal marriage proposal from Tibi had yet occurred, the couple married in October of the same year.

The letters indicate regular written communication between mother and daughter, albeit not at the frequency Mária would have preferred.

The analysis identifies several dominant themes in the corpus. The most frequent keywords are: health (38 occurrences), shopping (29), money (18), communication (18), Tibi (16), work (14), provisioning (14), apple(s) (9), and weather (7). The high frequency of health-related references partly reflects conventional epistolary formulas, yet in this case it also corresponds to the mother's recurring illness and its importance in everyday interaction. Similarly, references to the weather follow a common epistolary topos, but here they also appear linked to mood and everyday emotional states, as confirmed by other family documents.

Beyond these dominant themes, the corpus also contains elements of micro-historical interest, including intercultural encounter, language learning, and processes of growing independence and self-recognition.

3.1. Analytical Focus and Thematic Scope

The present study focuses on intercultural relations and processes of identity formation as they emerge in the correspondence, with particular attention to the articulation of the female voice. The letters provide a space in which emotional self-positioning, relational negotiation, and forms of agency are expressed through everyday language. The analysis therefore examines how proximity and distance are constructed, how disclosure is managed, and how voice and silence operate as gendered communicative strategies within an epistolary exchange shaped by separation and social norms.

At the same time, the corpus would support additional lines of inquiry beyond the scope of this article. Financial practices, gift exchange, and household accounting could be examined as indicators of economic agency and familial power. The long-distance relationship and its communicative asymmetries offer material for studying emotional regimes and mediated intimacy. The letters also contain reflections on writing practices themselves, as well as occasional references to political events, which could sustain linguistic, discourse-oriented, or historical analyses.

Acknowledging these background themes clarifies the interpretive frame of the present study while situating its primary focus on intercultural encounter, identity formation, and the gendered dynamics of voice and silence within the broader communicative landscape of the correspondence.

3.2. Reflections on a Foreign World: Intercultural Contact and Identity Formation

While official historiography on the Hungarian minority's experience under Romanian communism foregrounds narratives of oppression, resistance, and suffering, ordinary people – even in this minority context – aim first and foremost at survival and advancement. For a small-town girl, working near the Romanian capital represents an opportunity for material and professional mobility: on the one hand, earning more and being able to save; on the other, gaining recognition from members of the majority nation, mastering the state language effectively, and thereby improving her prospects further. Temporary separation from home thus emerges, in the protagonist's case, not primarily as a story of hardship, but as a process of negotiated adaptation and emerging self-definition.

3.2.1. Home, Distance, and the Materialisation of Care

The creation of a sense of “home” in a foreign environment is a recurrent theme in the letters: the young woman is away from home for the first time, and certain people, foods, or objects become carriers of the comfort associated with home. Mária makes every effort to secure those small pleasures that make enduring the distance from her loved ones more bearable. The topic of apples appears nine times in the correspondence, seemingly as a symbolic expression of homesickness, and a similar topic is the craving for home-made sweets (3 occurrences). The ‘apple’ function as more than a food motif: supply difficulties,

caregiving (doctor, family), and the logistics of sending packages together structure a narrative of care and scarcity around it.

In her letter of March 2 she writes: *“Please, send me apples (and whatever else you can). Something good. Cakes, the ones you usually make, if you have time.”* (Letter 6) On March 10 she repeats the same request: *“Mother, if you can, would you send me a small package with just apples in it? I crave them so much. And a face cream (apples and a face cream from Aunt Babi) – my skin looks terrible!”* (Letter 9) In her reply of March 17 the mother reassures her that she will send them through her Romanian colleague, T., who frequently travels to Bucharest: *“My darling, at the end of the week T. is going to Bucharest. Then I will send you apples, though they are so miserable it is dreadful. I will not send them by postal services; it is better if he brings them himself. I will also send you chocolate.”* (Letter 11) Moreover, the gesture of the local doctor, who brings apples from Bucharest for his young assistant, is interpreted as an act of comfort: *“The doctor is very kind. In the autumn he bought 100 kg of apples and, imagine, every day he brings me two. He knows I like them and they cannot be found here. One day (it is true, with my money) he bought ½ kg of oranges, lemons, butter, bread. Whatever I ask for, he brings me. Do not worry, I will not starve.”* (Letter 9)

Objects such as apples, sweets, and small packages function not simply as tokens of nostalgia but as materialised forms of relational care. Through them, emotional ties are maintained by means of gendered practices of provisioning, exchange, and everyday attention. In this sense, “home” is not merely remembered but actively reproduced through circulating objects and gestures of care.

3.2.2. Language, Silence, and Cultural Translation: Negotiated identity

The processes of negotiating identity within a different cultural and linguistic context are also highlighted: the experiences lived here lead to a strengthening of self-image, of belief in one’s own abilities, of the capacity to cope and to elicit the sympathy of those around her.

In her first short letter – undated but presumed to be from mid-February – she briefly recounts how they arrived in Bucharest, how she and her two colleagues were assigned to different villages around the capital, presents the place where she settled, and provides the address where she expects letters. To reassure those at home, she recounts only positive details about her experience:

When I arrived in Bucharest, I met a girl from Gheorgheni and together we managed to solve everything, because she spoke Romanian well. Now I am 30 km from Bucharest. By train it takes three quarters of an hour. It is a very good place. There is a beautiful maternity hospital, a kind doctor, and a midwife who has become very attached to me. Poor Olga ended up in a rather bad place. The other girl also reached a muddy village. I will not say my village is not muddy, but the maternity is like a palace. The people are kind and somehow I manage. I have a room just for myself. A refrigerator, a tiled stove, a gas stove, a bed, a cupboard, a table, and a chair. What else could I need? (Letter 1)

In a humorous postscript she adds: *“I have become so used to living among*

Romanians that in three months I will probably not speak Hungarian anymore." (Letter 1) Romanian had been a language of silence for the young nurse; in her oral recollections she often said that she had successfully learned Russian and French at school, but had never properly mastered Romanian – and only through this immersion in a Romanian-speaking world did she succeed in learning the language.

The correspondence also reveals that language functions as a site of cultural translation. Romanian had previously been, for the young nurse, a language of hesitation and partial silence: it belonged to the institutional and public sphere rather than to the intimate world of family and emotional security. Hungarian structured everyday interaction, care, and belonging, while Romanian was the language of authority, administration, and external expectations.

The three-month stay in a Romanian-speaking environment transforms this relationship. Learning to speak, understand dialectal forms, and use professional terminology becomes not simply a linguistic achievement but a shift in social positioning. The ability to "say something about everything", to write a presentation in Romanian, and to communicate with doctors and patients signals the gradual movement from silence to voice within the dominant linguistic order. In this sense, acquiring the state language functions as a form of social mobility and symbolic legitimacy.

The letters show that this process does not replace the emotional centrality of Hungarian. Instead, the writer inhabits two communicative spaces simultaneously: Hungarian remains the language of

intimacy, reassurance, and relational belonging, while Romanian becomes the language through which competence, independence, and professional identity are performed.

3.2.3. Performing Integration: Social Acceptance and the Silence of Conflict

Her enthusiasm for the place, the warmth of the people of Vasilăți, and the kindness of the doctor under whose supervision she worked also appear in the second letter – written before receiving any replies from home for the first letter. These early descriptions are not merely informative but form part of the writer's attempt to position herself within the new environment as competent, socially accepted, and emotionally stable. She writes: "*I am very glad that I have come to such a place. I have time for everything. I am kind to people and they have already started to like me. Already, when I tell them that I will stay only three months, they are regretfully wailing¹¹ why I have to leave!*" (Letter 2)

Such statements function as more than expressions of satisfaction: they construct a narrative of successful integration. This self-positioning is further reinforced by the way she describes her living conditions, which she narrates in detail: "*My room, for example, is 2x4 meters. It has:*

– *A light green PVC floor covering, with a carpet on top so it is not cold.*

– *A two-burner gas stove, a hot plate, a tiled stove, a bed, a small coffee table, two plastic chairs, a linen cupboard, and a metal wardrobe for clothes, equipped with a hanger. The family doctor, so that I would not get bored, brought me his portable radio from home, so I do not need mine.*" (Letter 2)

The listing of domestic objects does more than describe material conditions: it performs independence and adult competence. By presenting her room as orderly and comfortable, the writer constructs an image of herself as capable of managing her own life, thus contributing to the broader narrative of emerging autonomy in the correspondence.

The doctor at the dispensary emerges in the correspondence as a protective, almost paternal figure who supports the young nurse both practically and symbolically. The writer repeatedly emphasises the kindness of those around her and presents the local community as welcoming rather than exclusionary. At the same time, she explicitly frames this positive reception as partly the result of her own efforts to adapt and integrate, thereby linking social acceptance to personal agency and self-fashioning. She writes: “*The district doctor was so kind that he brought me homemade sour cherry jam. My subordinates are good people as well. Here, Hungarians are not disliked – and, in addition, I have learned very well how to adapt. My patients, my superiors, even those from the district, as well as my subordinates, have all grown fond of me.*” (Letter 4)

This statement is significant not only for what it says but also for what it does not emphasise. In a historical context often narrated through interethnic tension, the absence of explicit hostility in her account becomes meaningful in itself. The writer constructs an identity based on competence, sociability, and adaptability. Silence about potential prejudice thus functions as a relational strategy: instead of defining herself through minority vulnerability, she narrates belonging through successful interaction.

This pattern of integration is also visible in everyday practices. Her comments on food reinforce this process of negotiated identity. She notes that she has begun to get used to Romanian food, buying refrigerated fish and eating it with *mămăligă* (polenta). Both dishes are commonly associated with Romanian cuisine, and their acceptance signals more than simple dietary adjustment. The willingness to incorporate local foods into everyday practice becomes another way of performing integration, suggesting that identity here is not fixed but enacted through small, embodied acts of participation in the surrounding cultural world.

3.2.4. Narrating Competence: Voice, Self-Confidence, and Female Self-Legitimation

In the third letter (the first dated one, March 3), the writer notes the physical inconveniences of the new environment but places greater emphasis on her growing linguistic competence. Mastery of Romanian is presented as evidence of personal capability and social legitimacy. The correspondence frames language learning as a turning point in her experience: what had previously been a space of hesitation and partial silence gradually becomes a domain in which she can act, speak, and be recognised.

The following passage illustrates how central this transformation is to her self-understanding. The language that once marked distance and insecurity is now narrated as a source of agency and validation:

Dear Mother, you raised such a clever and resourceful girl, just as you should

have. Here, too, people have grown fond of me, and already, so soon, they regret that I will leave in May. I have learned Romanian so well that you cannot even imagine. I already understand the local dialect, for example:

- *Drajeuri* = tablets = pills
- *Răsuri* = stabbing pains = cramps
- *Bre* = form of address
- *Mama ea* = grandmother
- *Vatraj* = coal hook

I know many more, but now I do not want to fill the paper with such examples. I have already written a presentation in Romanian. You will see how much I have learned. Even the doctor was surprised by the change. When I arrived, I barely knew anything, but now I can say something about everything. I can already describe events fluently (although not without mistakes...). (Letter 6)

The careful listing of dialectal expressions and specialised vocabulary does more than document linguistic progress. It performs competence. By demonstrating her ability to understand local speech, communicate professionally, and even prepare written material in Romanian, the writer constructs herself as someone who has crossed the boundary between outsider and participant. The movement from silence to articulation thus becomes a central element of identity formation: linguistic fluency is presented as proof of adaptation, of adulthood, autonomy, and professional legitimacy.

At the same time, the fact that this achievement is narrated to her mother in Hungarian underscores the coexistence of two communicative worlds. Hungarian remains the language in which reassurance, gratitude, and self-reflection are expressed,

while Romanian becomes the language through which competence and public recognition are performed. The letter itself becomes the space where this dual positioning can be articulated and stabilised, allowing the writer to transform linguistic success into a narrative of personal growth and emerging self-confidence.

This emphasis on linguistic competence is closely connected to a broader pattern of self-narration that runs throughout the correspondence. Even in her earliest letters, the writer presents herself as capable, resilient, and worthy of recognition. Rather than emerging only as a result of the new experience, this confident self-positioning appears to be an already established part of her identity, which the new environment allows her to articulate more openly.

Still, reading these self-evaluations in the very first letters, we can deduce that Mária's self-esteem was already at a high level even before this experience:

Yesterday I cooked again. Every evening and morning I make tea. I have spent little of my money on food, but what can I do? I am in the Plains and my appetite has returned. Do not worry, I will die neither of hunger nor of clumsiness. Do you know what kind of daughter you have? Excellent! Already in Bucharest I attracted the attention of the provincial chief physician. In Oltenița everything went well. My district doctor gets along well with the district chief physician. He clearly said he needs a resourceful girl. They thought that of all, I am the most capable, and they assigned me to Vasilași. A very good place. The doctor here built the dispensary a year ago, only with voluntary work, without the knowledge of

the district. It has all the necessary comforts. (Letter 2)

Voice as self-assertion also appears beyond the professional sphere, particularly in the domain of intimate decision-making. The correspondence surrounding Mária's relationship with Tibi reveals a similar pattern of negotiated speech and strategic silence. While the young man's voice is largely absent from the letters and information about him circulates mainly through female relatives, the daughter's own stance becomes increasingly explicit.

When her mother expresses unease about the relationship and hints at doubt, Mária responds with an unusually direct declaration: "*Prepare yourself physically and mentally, for I want to be his wife. Don't let him read this letter; he would panic seeing what I dare assert with such certainty – but I feel it will happen.*" (Letter 9)

This moment is significant not because it concerns romantic attachment, but because it marks a shift in communicative authority. The daughter openly articulates a life decision while simultaneously managing who should and should not hear it. Voice and silence are thus strategically distributed: what is withheld from the beloved is asserted toward the mother in order to secure recognition of her autonomy. The letter again becomes the space where emerging adulthood is voiced and negotiated.

Such passages matter not simply because they express confidence but because they construct it. The writer narrates herself as capable and resourceful, turning the letter into a space of performative self-definition in which recognition by doctors, supervisors, and colleagues confirms her own worth. From the perspective of voice and silence, this

strategy is particularly revealing. In a cultural context where explicit self-praise is often discouraged, the young woman nevertheless refuses modest silence and foregrounds her competence as evidence of maturity and successful upbringing. The correspondence thus becomes the arena in which she negotiates not only her position in the new environment but also her right to speak about herself in affirmative terms, shaping a distinctly female epistolary voice that links professional ability, social recognition, familial belonging and even intimate commitments.

Taken together, these letters reveal intercultural contact not as dramatic confrontation but as a gradual process of positioning, translation, and self-narration. Identity emerges here less through explicit statements than through everyday practices – language learning, material exchange, and the narration of competence. Silence plays a crucial role in this process, not merely as absence but as a structuring principle that shapes what can be said and how belonging, authority, and intimacy are negotiated. In this sense, the correspondence documents the emergence of a distinctly female epistolary voice that moves between emotional dependence and professional autonomy, turning the private letter into a space where identity is continually produced rather than simply described.

4. Conclusions: Silence as a Relational Strategy and a Resource for Survival

The analysis of this small corpus of family letters demonstrates that silence operates not as an absence of communication, but as a structuring element of everyday relational life. Across the main thematic

strands of the correspondence, it appears in different yet interconnected forms that shape both interaction and identity.

First, in matters of home, distance, and material exchange, silence functions as an emotional mediator. Objects such as apples, sweets, and packages carry meanings only partly verbalised, while care is often expressed through sending and mentioning things rather than through explicit declarations. Silence thus becomes a culturally familiar mode of affection that sustains emotional ties without overt speech.

Second, in intercultural contact and language use, silence marks asymmetry and transition. Romanian initially appears as a language of hesitation and institutional authority, while Hungarian remains the language of intimacy and belonging. Learning Romanian therefore represents not only a linguistic shift but a social one: a movement from peripheral silence toward recognised voice within the dominant cultural order. Silence here signals both inequality and the starting point of mobility.

Third, in the sphere of self-narration and emerging adult identity, silence appears as a norm that the writer actively negotiates. In a setting where explicit self-praise is discouraged, she repeatedly foregrounds competence and recognition. A similar negotiation is visible in the domain of intimate relationships, where the young woman voices her intentions and emotional commitments more openly than her mother might expect,

while also strategically maintaining silence toward the beloved himself. Voice thus becomes a strategy of self-legitimation rather than a spontaneous assertion of individuality, and the private letter turns into a space where female agency is articulated within existing norms of modesty and relational hierarchy. In this respect, intimate correspondence and the mediation of the long-distance relationship confirm the third thematic strand of the study, showing how silence also structures affective communication and the emergence of adult female autonomy.

Taken together, these dimensions show that silence in private correspondence functions simultaneously as emotional language, marker of power relations, and resource for identity work. The letters reveal how everyday writing enables individuals – especially women positioned between family dependence and professional autonomy – to negotiate belonging, competence, and recognition in shifting social contexts.

By foregrounding these dynamics, the present study contributes to Romanian minority studies not by revisiting dominant narratives of oppression, but by documenting how intercultural experience, gendered communication, and identity formation are articulated in ordinary epistolary practice. It demonstrates that even a small corpus of private letters can illuminate the subtle ways in which voice and silence structure lived experience at the intersection of family, language, social mobility, and gendered emotional communication.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Coca, Monica Geanina, "Documente românești din arhivele Bistriței (scrisori domnești și scrisori private) de Nicolae Iorga și Scrisori românești din Arhivele Bistriței (1592-1638), publicate de Al. Rosetti – privire sintetică", (Romanian Documents from the Archives of Bistrița (Royal Letters and

- Private Letters) by Nicolae Iorga and Romanian Letters from the Archives of Bistrița (1592–1638), Published by Al. Rosetti – A Synthetic Overview), in *Meridian critic*. 2020, XXXIV/1, p. 197–204.
- Dincă, Adinel C, “Scrisori private din Transilvania medievală în context local și European” (Private Letters from Medieval Transylvania in Local and European Context), in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie “George Barițiu”* – Series HISTORICA. 2020, LIV./59, p. 361–384.
- Dragojlović, Ana–Samuels, Annemarie, *Tracing Silences: Towards an Anthropology of the Unspoken and Unspeakable*, Routledge, New York, 2023.
- Frunțelată, Ioana–Ruxandra, “Cercetarea calitativă în etnologie: concepte, metode, principii de validare” (Qualitative Research in Ethnology: Concepts, Methods, Principles of Validation), in *Studii și comunicări de etnologie. Tomul XXXI/2017*, p. 87–94.
- Jaworsky, Adam, “Introduction. An overview”, in Jaworski, A. (ed.): *Silence. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, New York–Berlin, Mouton De Gruyter, 1997, p. 3–15.
- Kokó, Julianna, “Egy vargyasi család levelezése az első világháborúban” (The Correspondence of a Family from Várghis during the First World War), in *Krizsa János Néprajzi Társaság Évkönyve 7. Írás, írott kultúra, folklór*. Cluj Napoca, Krizsa János Néprajzi Társaság, 1999, p. 240–265.
- Keszeg, Vilmos, *Kelt levelem... Egy mezőségi paraszttasszony levelezése. (I Wrote My Letter... The Correspondence of a Peasant Woman from the Câmpia Transilvaniei Region)*, Debrecen: Györffy István Néprajzi Egyesület, 1996.
- Németh, Krisztina (2017). “Beszédes hallgatás A csend interpretálása és a megismerés dilemmái a társadalomtudományi kutatásban” (Eloquent Silence: The Interpretation of Silence and the Dilemmas of Understanding in Social Science Research), in *Szociológiai Szemle* 27(2): 2017, p. 4–22.
- Sabău, Claudia Septimia–Onofreiu, Adrian, “... cu scrisorile tale îmi astâmpăram focul ce-mi arde în piept” Corespondența intimă între locotenentul năsăudean George Pop și Anica Popovici (1855–1886)”, in *Banatica*. 2021/2. 339–371.
- Sas Péter (ed.), *Kós Károly levelezése*, (Correspondența lui Károly Kós), Budapest, Mundus, 2003.
- Sümegei, György, „Kós Károly és Papp Aurél levelezéséről”, (Despre corespondența între Kós Károly și Papp Aurél), in *Enigma*. 24/92. 2017, 5–18.
- Sziksza, Mária, *Letűnt világok antropológiája és a megismerhetetlen különös szépsége. Szociális kapcsolatok és kulturális gyakorlat az írógép korszakában (The Anthropology of Vanished Worlds and the Peculiar Beauty of the Unknowable: Social Relations and Cultural Practice in the Typewriter Era)*, Cluj Napoca, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2020.
- , *Levelek egy letűnt világból. A mindennapok dokumentálása a 20. század papíralapú kultúrájában (Letters from a Vanished World: Documenting Everyday Life in the Paper-Based Culture of the 20th Century)*, Vol. I–II. Cluj Napoca, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2021.
- , *Community Networks and Cultural Practices in Twentieth-Century Romania. Paper-Based Cultures in the Writings of a Catholic Priest*, Lanham – Boulder – New York – London, Lexington Books, 2023.
- Tannen, Deborah, “Silence: Anything But”, in: *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood NJ, Ablex, 1985.
- Vajda, András, “Analiza unei arhive populare din Dumbrăvioara” (Analysis of a Popular Archive from Dumbrăvioara), in Marisia. *Etnografie – arta populara*, XXX., 2013, p. 211–244.
- van Dijk, T. A. – Kintsch, W., “A stratégiai beszédfeldolgozás modellje felé” (Towards a Model of Strategic Speech Processing) In Síklaki I. (szerk.): *Szövegi befolyásolás I. Nyelv, gondolkodás, kultúra. (Influențare orală I. Limbă, gândire, cultură)*, Budapest: Typotex, 2008 [1983], p. 37–61.
- Vasile, Cristian, “Scrierile unui preot catolic: o perspectivă antropologică”, in *Apostrof*, Anul XXXV, 2024, no. 3, 2024, p. 406.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

NOTES

1. Adam Jaworsky (ed.), *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, New York–Berlin, Mouton De Gruyter, 1997.; Ana Dragojlovic–Annemarie Samuels (eds.), *Tracing Silences. Towards an Anthropology of the Unspoken and Unspeakable*, London, Routledge, 2023.; T. A. van Dijk and W. Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*, New York, Academic Press, 1983.; Zerubavel, Eviatar, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006; Tannen, Deborah, “Silence: Anything But”, in: *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood NJ, Ablex, 1985.
2. Ana Dragojlovic – Annemarie Samuels (eds.), *Tracing Silences. Towards an Anthropology of the Unspoken and Unspeakable*, London, Routledge, 2023.
3. Krisztina Németh, “Beszédés hallgatás A csend interpretálása és a megismerés dilemmái a társadalomtudományi kutatásban,” (The Interpretation of Silence and the Dilemmas of Knowledge in Social Science Research), in *Szociológiai Szemle* no. 27(2), 2017, p. 17.
4. Some examples for this research field: Coca, Monica Geanina, “Documente românești din arhivele Bistriței (scrisori domnești și scrisori private) de Nicolae Iorga și Scrisori românești din Arhivele Bistriței (1592-1638), publicate de Al. Rosetti – privire sintetică”, (Romanian Documents from the Archives of Bistrița (Royal Letters and Private Letters) by Nicolae Iorga and Romanian Letters from the Archives of Bistrița (1592–1638), Published by Al. Rosetti – A Synthetic Overview), in *Meridian critic*. 2020, XXXIV/1, p. 197-204. Dincă, Adinel C, “Scrisori private din Transilvania medievală în context local și European” (Private Letters from Medieval Transylvania in Local and European Context), in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie »George Barițiu« - Series HISTORICA*. 2020, LIV./59, p. 361-384.
5. The correspondence of major Hungarian and Romanian figures, such as Ady Endre or Zsigmond Móricz, Mihai Eminescu or Titu Maiorescu, has been published either in separate volumes or within collected works editions. As an illustrative example, I refer here to the published correspondence of Károly Kós, a Hungarian cultural figure whose work stood at the interface of Hungarian and Romanian culture and who played an important role in promoting rapprochement between the two communities: Sas Péter (ed.), *Kós Károly levelezése (The correspondence of Károly Kós)*, Budapest, Mundus, 2003.; Sümegi, György, „Kós Károly és Papp Aurél levelezéséről”, (*Despre corespondența între Kós Károly și Papp Aurél*), in *Enigma*. 24/92. 2017, 5-18.
6. The topic of peasant correspondence is analysed in Kokó, Julianna, „Egy vargyasi család levelezése az első világháborúban” (The Correspondence of a Family from Vărghis during the First World War), in *Krizsa János Néprajzi Társaság Évkönyve 7. Írás, írott kultúra, folklór, Cluj Napoca, Krizsa János Néprajzi Társaság*, 1999, p. 240-265. Also a relevant bibliography in this field is Keszeg, Vilmos, *Kelt levelem... Egy mezőségi parasztasszony levelezése. (I Wrote My Letter... The Correspondence of a Peasant Woman from the Câmpia Transilvaniei Region)*, Debrecen: Györfly István Néprajzi Egyesület, 1996
7. András Vajda, “Analiza unei arhive populare din Dumbrăvioara,” in *Marisia XXX. Etnografie - arta populara*, ed: Zoltán Soós, Târgu-Mureș, Muzeul Județean Mureș, 2013, pp. 211-244.
8. The author’s books in this topic are: Mária Szikszai, *Letűnt világok antropológiája és a megismerhetetlen különös szépsége. Szociális kapcsolatok és kulturális gyakorlat az írógép korszakában. (The Anthropology of Vanished Worlds and the Peculiar Beauty of the Unknowable: Social Relations and Cultural Practice in the Typewriter Era)* Cluj Napoca, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület 2020, Mária Szikszai, *Levelek egy letűnt világból. A mindennapok dokumentálása a 20. század papíralapú kultúrájában. (Letters from a Vanished World: Documenting Everyday Life in the Paper-Based Culture of the Twentieth Century.)* Vol. I-II. Cluj Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2021; Mária Szikszai, *Community Networks and Cultural Practices in Twentieth-Century Romania. Paper-Based Cultures in the Writings of a Catholic Priest*. Lanham – Boulder – New York – London: Lexington Books, 2023.
9. Cristian Vasile, „Scrierile unui preot catolic: o perspectivă antropolocică”, *Apostrof*, XXXV. no. 3, 2024, 406.
10. Ioana-Ruxandra Fruntelată, “Cercetarea calitativă în etnologie: concepte, metode, principii de validare”, in *Studii și comunicări de etnologie*. no. 31, 2017, p. 88.
11. In the Hungarian text “wailing” is expressed by a Romanian interjection conjugated as a Hungarian verb: “vájoktatnak” – meaning “they say repeatedly *vai-vai*”.