

*Anthropology*

**PRACTICES OF SILENCE:  
SELF-DOCUMENTATION AND NARRATIVE LIMITS IN A  
ROMANIAN CATHOLIC PRIEST'S TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
ARCHIVE<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This study examines how unspoken elements are given meaning in a specific case study and how they shape our understanding of everyday life as it is documented and narrated in the context of dictatorship and personal relationships. The investigation focuses not on what the documents say, but on what they conceal. Based on a corpus of over 2,400 documents – including carbon copies of letters, notes, and other paper-based documents – the study investigates how silence and reticence are embedded in everyday writing practices under conditions of censorship, surveillance, and personal constraint. The archive reveals that silence operates on multiple levels. In this study, we do not view silence as deficiency, but rather as a form of expression that is culturally shaped by the environment. Politically, it is shaped by self-censorship and the avoidance of sensitive topics or names. Personally, it appears in the suppression of emotions, indirect expressions of affection or allegorical writing in correspondence. Interpretation of the texts shows that omitted or concealed elements are often just as revealing as those that are written down. The fragile boundary between writing and its narrative limits is central to understanding not only the personal history of the main protagonist, but the broader conditions of writing under authoritarian rule. His documents speak not just through what they say, but through what they choose not to say – leaving traces of silence as durable as ink.

**Keywords:** silence; correspondence; censorship; narrative limits; self-documentation.

**1. Introduction**

Anthropologists have increasingly recognized that silence is not the opposite of communication, but one of its modes. Silence is presence, as Iza Kavedžija writes, capturing the affective space created by moments of shared quiet in caregiving environments: “(...) being silent, facilitated a comfortable space, one that would be inclusive and welcoming for others, but also a companionable, shared silence could offer a respite from loneliness (...)” (Kavedžija, 2025, p. 18). Such silences can be saturated with care, tension, or moral weight. Ana Dragojlović and Annemarie Samuels state that for a researcher, silence may appear as a meaningful, multivocal and sometimes opaque phenomenon that requires focused ethnographic

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attention, arguing that anthropology must identify and incorporate “traces of silence” in relation to verbal articulation, voice, visibility and representation, while confronting its potential unknowability (Dragojlović & Samuels, 2021, p. 417).

Authors ask how silence becomes recognizable, how it connects to voice, visibility and representation, how it can be sensed both bodily and narratively, and how we might begin to interpret it even when it resists full understanding (Dragojlović & Samuels, 2021, p. 418).

Silence is not simply the mere absence of sound or speech. In what follows, silence is understood as written silence, embodied in letters and documents, which can only be inferred by the reader. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has forcefully argued:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). (Trouillot, 1995, p. 26)

Silence, therefore, is a socially and politically produced condition that reveals the workings of power. It functions transversally across history, memory, and narrative, encoding absences that are themselves meaningful (Trouillot, 1995).

Anthropological studies about silence have further shown how it operates in interpersonal relationships, in institutional and political domains. Several authors describe silence as a practice with clear moral and ethical weight, influencing how acts of concealment and revelation take shape in social life (Ushihakala et al., 2019, p. 5) This duality complicates normative readings of silence as either oppression or resistance. James Scott had earlier conceptualized the notion of “hidden transcripts,” which emerge in silenced or encoded forms of resistance under domination (Scott, 1990, p. 4).

Silence can be both enforced and chosen – a point also made by Andru Chiorean in his study of censorship in early socialist Romania (Chiorean, 2019). The control of discourse, especially in written forms, became central to postwar regimes of Eastern Europe.

Cultural norms around silence vary widely across contexts. For example, in his classic work on the Western Apache, Keith Basso (1970) shows that silence becomes the appropriate, socially expected response in a number of situations – meeting strangers, courtship, interacting with others in different situations. In these moments, silence is not a matter of individual reserve but a culturally shaped way of handling relationships when social intentions and roles are uncertain. (Basso, 1970, pp. 217–223, 226)

These studies show that silence is a socially constructed practice that creates meanings and shapes relationships. It is a layered, productive phenomenon that can simultaneously reflect affective, epistemological, and political realities. As Trouillot states, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences” (Trouillot, 1995, p. 27).

## **2. The Research Project**

The research project I am referring to here began in 2013, when the key documents forming the basis of this investigation were recovered. The 2,400 documents at the core of my study were written, edited and collected by the Catholic priest Mihály Tyukodi, born in 1916 in Căpleni, Satu Mare County (Romania), and deceased in 1997 in Alba Iulia (Romania). The discovery of these documents in 2013, in the attic of his native village, alongside other documents belonging to the parish, marked a crucial moment, as their provenance and content

were already unknown at that time. The research takes a microhistorical<sup>2</sup> approach that focuses on small-scale life worlds and the ways in which individuals navigate social and political constraints (Szikszai, 2023).

The archive comprises documents left behind by a Catholic priest of Swabian origin.<sup>3</sup> The texts and analyses published so far about this archive have not addressed the theme of silence – which is precisely what I intend to discuss now. During the repressive political regime in Romania, correspondence served as a tool for exchanging information and also as a nuanced form of communication. The study examines the role of personal silence and institutional silence through the presentation of a specific case: the main protagonist is a Catholic priest who served in small and isolated communities and who deliberately chose remote locations where silence allowed him to avoid political and social unrest, while maintaining his social networks and resilience. The correspondence not only conveyed information, but also became a carrier of hidden messages, contributing to a delicate balance between silence and speech, between what was expressed and what remained unsaid. In this sense, paper-based culture became an essential form of survival and resistance – an observation that resonates with work in the anthropology of writing, which stresses that writing is an everyday communicative practice that shapes social interaction and knowledge (Barton & Papen, 2010, pp. 18–33).

In my analysis, I viewed the twentieth century as an era in which the typewriter played a decisive role (Szikszai, 2023, pp. 57–61). The protagonist, Mihály Tyukodi (1916–1997), began using a typewriter in his youth, around 1942, when he was ordained in Satu Mare. He corresponded extensively, writing his letters with carbon paper and keeping copies of them. In addition to letters, he preserved many paper-based documents: official papers such as birth and marriage certificates of his relatives dating from the mid-nineteenth century, diplomas, driver's licenses, bills, journal-like notes, photographs and more. My analysis is based on those 2,400 paper documents. My questions focused both on the historical background and on the everyday lives of the people involved: What kind of world did the protagonist and those he interacted with inhabit? How did they live their everyday lives, how did they organize their existence, how did they make important decisions, what were their sorrows, hopes and joys, what did they write about, and what did they leave unsaid? The archive offers insight into the life of a man from Eastern Europe who lived from the early to the late twentieth century, attempting to document the era in which he lived.

The collection is unique above all for its extraordinary quantity of personal documents. The volume of personal documents examined is exceptionally large, making it a rare collection in this field.<sup>4</sup> This is a distinctive situation, as not only the letters he received are available, but also those he wrote. All of these bring us closer to understanding the protagonist's worldview and the mentality of his narrower community. Second, the protagonist's particular situation ensures the uniqueness of the material. Mihály Tyukodi lived through the twentieth century and several political regime changes. He belonged to an ethnic group undergoing a process of identity transformation – the Swabians of Satu Mare. The region where he was born was historically multi-ethnic and multi-religious; in the past three hundred years as many as six significant ethnic groups and several denominations have lived there (Tátrai, 2013, pp. 19–37).

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<sup>2</sup> On the concept of microhistory: Levi, 1991; Ginzburg, Tedeschi & Tedeschi, 1993; Magnússon & Szijártó 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Mihály Tyukodi's family was of Swabian origin. Their ancestors were settled in the region by the Károlyi counts in the first half of the 18th century. By the 20th century, the family spoke only Hungarian and no longer knew the Swabian language. Mihály's parents also spoke Hungarian at home, and this was characteristic of his native village, Căpleni (Romania), as well. The family originally bore the surname Kind. In 1941, they decided to change their family name, similarly to other families in the village. Tyukodi was the family name of one of their female grandparents, which is why they chose this name. Mihály received the official document confirming the name change in 1942, a few months before his ordination as a priest.

<sup>4</sup> The original language of the documents is predominantly Hungarian, but the collection also includes letters in Romanian and German, as well as some notes written in French and Latin.

The Roman Catholic Germans arriving from South Germany were called Swabians in Hungary, and they have been living in the area since 1712 after the aristocratic Károlyi family settled Catholic German peasants there to repopulate the region (Tátrai, 2013, pp. 60–80). Tyukodi was a first-generation intellectual who did not entirely distance himself from the values of his peasant family. Although he lived his life as a priest and teacher, he also practiced agriculture: as a parish priest, he worked in the garden, planted vines, made wine and raised animals. He knew not only Hungarian, Romanian, Latin and German, but also was able to write and to read French. He was imprisoned during the early communist dictatorship, between 1950 and 1953, as one of the priests persecuted by the regime of that time. And finally, although scholars in Eastern Europe have begun to work with twentieth-century documents, we still know relatively little about the everyday lives of priests under the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe.

One of the dilemmas researchers face when dealing with such written materials is the issue of personal data. When publishing research results in the social sciences, it is necessary to protect the confidentiality of personal data in such a way that the rights of the individuals involved are not violated, while maintaining the relevance of the research. Some researchers opt for full anonymization, while others argue that the credibility of the material would be compromised if the identities of the subjects were obscured. After much deliberation, I decided to apply partial anonymization in my publications. Individuals who are no longer alive but played an important role in the life of the community – as public figures of their time (e.g., priests, bishops) – are mentioned by name. Those frequently referenced but who were not public figures, such as members of the protagonist's family (siblings and their families), are mentioned in the analysis using encrypted names. This procedure is justified both by the need to protect personal data and by my intention to emphasize that my interest does not lie in individual biographies but rather in social processes. My research objectives are not historical or ecclesiastical but belong to the domain of social sciences and anthropology.

It is also important to mention the historical and religious context of the protagonist. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Károlyi counts brought a Catholic Swabian population to the region; as a result, by the twentieth century the area had become highly diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion (Tátrai, 2013, pp. 19–37). In the Swabian villages of Satu Mare County, an ethnic identity shift began in the nineteenth century, occurring at varying paces across the region. The language shift to Hungarian in the community where the protagonist was socialized likely began at the end of the nineteenth century and progressed gradually. Although the majority eventually adopted a new language, a sense of Swabian identity persisted into the twenty-first century. Throughout my research, I kept in mind that the documents do not necessarily reflect facts, but rather personal points of view, potentially distorted or biased. Nevertheless, I considered these texts to be important imprints of the past, and I believe that research must pursue not only the personal destinies of the protagonists but also the social and cultural contexts in which these texts emerged.

The researcher's alienation and the levels at which it manifests in relation to the examined documents is another aspect worth mentioning in the context of anthropological analysis. In many respects, the world revealed in these letters was foreign to me. First, there was the temporal distance between me and the world described in the documents. Another challenge was understanding the economic and technological context of the period, as well as the ecclesiastical context – since the protagonist was a priest, the texts often contain liturgical and religious expressions specific to this social segment. Lastly, the family background of the protagonist – a Catholic Swabian peasant family – added an additional layer of foreignness for the researcher.

An important aspect of the context is the practice of correspondence during the period covered by the archive: the cultural context of letter writing, the toolkit of correspondence, the

unwritten rules of postal communication and the ways in which people built their social relationships in the age of correspondence. The use of carbon copies and their effects are also relevant from the perspective of the anthropology of writing. Writing research emphasizes that writing is an everyday practice that pervades social interaction and that written texts are central to how societies operate (Barton & Papen, 2010, pp. 18–33). In the region under study, for most of the twentieth century, written correspondence – alongside face-to-face interactions – was the primary mode of communication. Given that most of these texts were written during a dictatorship, they are often evasive and tend to avoid specifics. At the same time, they invite us to read between the lines – as we shall see in the next chapter.

### **3. Communication as a Strategy of Survival and Resistance**

Under conditions of political oppression and isolation imposed by the Romanian regime in the second half of the twentieth century, writing became a means of survival and, at times, a form of silent resistance. James C. Scott’s concept of “hidden transcripts” helps to frame this observation: subordinate groups who cannot speak openly in the presence of power create secret discourses that critique domination behind the backs of the authorities (Scott, 1990, pp. 128–135). Our archive shows how such hidden voices operated in the everyday correspondence of a rural priest.

#### **3.1 A Transnational Epistolary Network**

Mihály Tyukodi maintained an extensive correspondence network that extended beyond Romania’s borders. He wrote to fellow priests and believers within the country, as well as to friends who had emigrated abroad (to Hungary or Germany). The fact that he duplicated his letters (using carbon copies) demonstrates his intention to amplify his “voice” – each letter sent left behind a copy as testimony for those who might one day be interested in his life. This practice can be interpreted as a form of resilience: the priest ensured that his messages would survive, and even if intercepted or the recipient discards it, a copy remains in his possession.

#### **3.2 The Voice of the Ordinary Person under State Surveillance**

In the communist regime, written communication became an essential tool for Mihály Tyukodi and his network in a world where spoken voices were often silenced by terror. The dictatorial state profoundly shaped what people could say: openly expressing political opinions, or even mentioning ideas related to national culture or religious faith, were dangerous. Self-censorship was pervasive: as one commentator on Romanian censorship observed, writers tried to disarm the censor by censoring themselves, creating “wooden language” and indirect messages that forced readers to probe between the lines (Vianu, 1998, pp. 282–349). In this context, the letters and other documents left behind by Mihály Tyukodi were used to record events, maintain connections and share information and emotions – all under the looming shadow of surveillance.

#### **3.3 Archiving Memory as an Act Of Resistance**

Mihály Tyukodi consistently documented his own everyday life and that of his surroundings, and this endeavor can be seen as one of his strategies of resistance. In an era when even the use of a typewriter required a permit (as was characteristic of Romania in the 1980s), every page written for documentation purposes can be considered a gesture of

resistance. On 3 May 1983, Mihály Tyukodi wrote the following lines in the form of a note, at a time when the Romanian authorities required typewriter owners to register their machines in order to monitor the activities of those who possessed a typewriter:

A cultured person naturally considers it self-evident, all over the world, that a typewriter should be available to them. After all, whom does its use harm? The secular authorities? Is a typewriter a weapon? Yes. The weapon of the free spirit. One of the instruments for expressing thought. But does this expression harm the state? I say it boldly: a weak person is one who is terrified to death by a spoken word. Even more pitiable is the one who is frightened by a written word or sentence, when that word or sentence is kept in a desk drawer without anyone reading it. The wider world believes that there are one million three hundred thousand typewriters in this country. And it is only the number above one million that represents typewriters in private use. I ask: are these three hundred thousand people who sit down at a typewriter engaged in anti-state activity? Is it these few hundred thousand that the twenty-two million – or the leadership – are afraid of?

They begrudge us as the typewriter. And where is the photocopier? Where is color television, where is three-dimensional television, or the video recorder?

In 1953 I read a Russian study about the conquest of outer space. It spoke of rockets, of devices carrying humans into space, of space laboratories. All this was included. I believed it all at first reading. And it has been realized in many forms. Since then, humans have even been to the Moon. There they ‘drove around’ in lifeless dust, from one place to another. Through research, we grow richer. The community is growing richer. Is it only the law governing the individual that demands moving backwards? True, if there is no typewriter, there remains a pen or pencil. After all, there was a time – a hard three years – when even those were lacking. Is this perhaps the ideal hovering before the eyes of the authorities, which the society and its leadership, so deeply concerned with our prosperity, are keeping in reserve for us as a gift?

We thank them in advance – but we do not ask for it.

I await the representatives of the authorities, for them to knock on my door, as they did at the beginning of the summer of 1953, and to take this machine from me as they took that one.

This is our fate under present conditions. (Tyukodi, 3 May 1983; in Szikszai, 2021, vol. I, p. 159 – my translation)<sup>5</sup>

In the passage above, he subtly alludes to his own years of imprisonment, when for three years he did not even have access to paper and pencil to make notes. While the regime dictated

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<sup>5</sup> This text was a personal note in Hungarian that Tyukodi wrote for himself and did not send to anyone. It was common for him to put a sheet of paper into the typewriter and write a note, recording daily events or setting down his thoughts. Even so, this was dangerous at the time, because the anti-regime document could have been discovered in his possession at any moment. The original text: “Egész világon természetes dolognak tartja a kultúr-ember, hogy írógép álljon rendelkezésére. Mert hiszen kinek árt ennek használatával? A világi hatalomnak? Hát fegyver az írógép? Igen. A szabad szellem fegyvere. A gondolat kifejezésének egyik eszköze. De vajon ez a kifejezés árt az államnak? Kimondom bátran: gyenge ember az, akit egy kiejtett szó halálra rémít. Még sajnálatra méltóbb az a valaki, akit megrettent a leírt szó, vagy mondat, ha azt a szót vagy mondatot az íróasztal fiókja őrzi, anélkül, hogy bárki is olvassná. A nagyvilág úgy véli, hogy egy millió és háromszázezer írógép van ebben az országban. És csak a millió fölötti szám jelenti a magánhasználatban levő írógépeket. Kérem: ez a háromszázezer ember, aki az írógép mellé ül, végez államellenes tevékenységet? Ettől a pár százezertől fél a 22 millió, vagy a vezetőség? Sajnálják tőlünk az írógépet. Hát hol van a fénymásoló? Hol a színes televízió, hol a háromdimenziós Tv készülék vagy a képmagnó? 1953-ban olvastam egy orosz tanulmányt a világűr meghódításával kapcsolatban. A rakéták, az emb(e)r(t) világűrbe szállító készülékek, az űrlaboratórium. Ezek szerepeltek benne. Elhittem első olvasásra az egészet. Meg is valósult sok formában. Hiszen már a holdon is járt azóta az ember. Ott »szekerezett« az élettelen porban egyik vidékről a másikra. A kutatások révén gazdagodunk. Gazdagodik a közönség. Csak az egyéneknek a törvénye az, hogy visszafele haladjon? Igaz, ha nem lesz írógép, marad a toll vagy a ceruza. Hiszen volt idő – kemény három év – amikor az sem volt. Ez talán a hatóság szeme előtt lebegő eszmény, amelyet ajándékképpen tartogat a boldogulásunkat szíven viselő társadalom és vezetősége? Előre is megköszönjük – de nem kérünk belőle. Várom a hatóság embereit, hogy bekopogjanak, mint 1953 nyár kezdetén, és úgy vegyék el ezt a gépet is, amint az(t) elvették. Ez a mi sorsunk a mai viszonyok között.”

official archives and told the “official version” of history – often erasing traces of opposition or real human suffering – Mihály Tyukodi quietly gathered evidence of the genuine lives lived by his community. By preserving copies of his sent letters and the originals of those received, as well as taking notes, keeping journals and saving various paper-based documents, he created a parallel memory of the era. Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that historical narratives are produced under specific conditions of power and that focusing on the processes by which narratives are produced helps us understand why some stories are amplified while others are silenced (Trouillot, 1995, pp. 104–115). Every piece of paper priest Tyukodi preserved can therefore be read as a counter-narrative resisting official memory.

We can therefore say that Mihály Tyukodi documented the era in which he lived. This documentary impulse can be considered as a form of intellectual resistance – a refusal to allow the lives, sufferings and joys of his generation to be erased or distorted. In his archive we find the surviving voices of many ordinary people who otherwise would never have been known. Through his insistence on not throwing anything away that had been committed to paper, Mihály Tyukodi gave them a chance to speak from beyond decades of silence.

Tyukodi Mihály himself would not be the subject of scholarly research today had he not written these notes and set the letters aside. Nearly his entire circle of correspondents – priests, friends, parishioners, and former students – and the thoughts they committed to paper and sent to him would not be readable today if he had not preserved these documents. With the exception of a few leading figures, such as Scheffler János and Márton Áron, the individuals appearing in these documents would not otherwise have entered the spotlight. We would know nothing about the fate of Mihály’s siblings and their children, the sometimes-difficult circumstances of his fellow priests, or the everyday concerns of his friends. The archival material reveals not only his own person, but also the ordinary people of his immediate social world (see: Szikszai, 2021, 2023).

In short, paper-based communication served this priest and his circle as a lifeline – both practically (informationally and emotionally) and symbolically. Each note taken defied the isolation imposed upon them, and every preserved document became a brick in the monument of memory built against time and oppression.

### **3.4 The Limits Imposed by the State**

Nevertheless, his voice had to be calibrated. The regime monitored correspondence – everyone knew that letters could be read by the authorities before reaching their destination. As a result, Mihály Tyukodi and his interlocutors often practiced preventive self-censorship, deliberately avoiding certain topics or formulations. They learned what could be said and what could not: for instance, they would allude to a person rather than explicitly naming individuals or institutions deemed “sensitive”. Written communication thus became a balancing act between conveying information and avoiding suspicion. Writers and readers became accustomed to indirectness and allegory, a strategy that – according to testimonies of Romanian writers – turned censorship into a “school of poetic indirectness”, creating devious writers and eager readers ready to probe between the lines (Vianu, 1998, pp. 282–349).

### **4. Political Silence: Self-Censorship and “between-the-lines” Messages**

Under dictatorship, external censorship and internal self-censorship created a metaphorical layer of silence over Mihály Tyukodi’s correspondence. And yet, people found ways to convey messages “between the lines,” using coded language, allusions or intentional omissions. Silence itself became a message, as noted by scholars of silence who argue that

tracing social silences requires attention to multivocality, unintelligibility and uncertainty of interpretation (Dragojlovic and Samuels, 2023, pp. 48–60). Other authors also explore self-censorship. Chiorean, for instance, notes that even after in Romania the Department of the Press and Printed was formally abolished in 1977, censorship did not disappear. It transformed into a mode of self-censorship in which the fear of committing ideological errors – and facing the resulting sanctions – functioned far more effectively than the earlier system of decrees and official controls (Chiorean, 2019, p. 7).

#### **4.1 Silence as Protection**

At times, the safest option was complete silence on a given subject. In some letters, the authors explicitly stated that certain things could not be put into writing. For example, in a letter to a friend, Mihály Tyukodi mentions that he cannot write down what he has to say and that he will only share it face to face. With this kind of phrasing, he signaled two things: (1) that an important message existed, but one too risky to commit to paper – either politically or personally sensitive; and (2) that postal surveillance was a reality, and both parties needed to exercise caution. This type of explicit self-censorship – “I cannot write more” – was routinely used to indicate the presence of a problem without naming it: silence itself became a message.

#### **4.2 Subversive Coding of Language**

Many letters contain indirect or coded expressions designed to convey information without stating it explicitly. This subversive coding echoes Scott’s description of hidden transcripts, in which subordinate groups create secret discourses behind the backs of the dominant (Scott, 1990, pp. 128–135). Readers needed to decipher euphemisms and allegories, and mistakes could be costly. An example from the 1950s shows a family asking the priest for news about their detained relative by referring to the term prisoner as “pensioner.” They ask him to write to them “what it means to be a pensioner in there.” The family knew that Mihály Tyukodi had met their imprisoned relative in prison, and when Mihály was released in 1953, they wrote to him in order to obtain news about their family member. They encouraged Tyukodi not to respond with an open postcard but with a closed, personal letter – naively believing that private letters would not be read by the censors. Their euphemisms illustrate how people attempted to talk about prohibited topics without triggering surveillance.

#### **4.3 Avoiding Names and Concrete Details**

Mihály Tyukodi’s correspondence shows that explicitly naming sensitive persons or places was often avoided, out of fear that the letter might be intercepted. In 1984, for instance, Tyukodi wrote to an acquaintance in Germany and offered his own explanation for an earlier letter that had gone missing: “And because there were names in the letter, it never reached you.” (Tyukodi, 9 April 1984; in Szikszai, 2021, vol. II. p. 195 – my translation.)<sup>6</sup> For him, the only plausible reason for its disappearance was content-related censorship triggered by the mention of specific individuals. This suggests that, in his and his circle’s view, any concrete name or identifiable detail could raise suspicion and lead to the interception of a letter.

As a consequence, in letters, which they themselves considered delicate, intentional anonymization became common practice: friends were turned into “an acquaintance”, places were described vaguely or reduced to initials, so as not to give the censor a pretext to stop the

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<sup>6</sup> Original text: “És mivel nevek szerepeltek a levélben, az nem jutott el hozzád.”

correspondence. For example, shortly after the death of the Catholic bishop Áron Márton (1896–1980), Tyukodi referred to him in a letter simply as “our great departed”, without mentioning his name.

#### **4.5 Fictional Scenarios to Mask Reality**

One particularly inventive way of communicating under the nose of the censor appears in a 1964 letter, where the writer resorts to the fiction of an imaginary friend. A young priest was writing to Mihály Tyukodi about the possibility of visiting the pilgrimage site at Șumuleu Ciuc. Fully aware that the authorities might read the letter, he devised a small narrative trick: he framed his message as if he were asking Tyukodi to pass on a note to “a common friend” who was supposedly planning to travel to Șumuleu. Thus, he wrote: “Please be so kind as to tell him that, if possible, he should bring his camera with him, so that we may capture a few beautiful winter landscapes of the Harghita” (Tyukodi, 1 March 1964, unpublished letter – my translation)<sup>7</sup>, adding that if this friend announced the time of his arrival, they would meet him at the station. The name of the friend is never mentioned; everything remains deliberately vague. In reality, no third person existed – the “friend” was none other than Mihály Tyukodi himself, who was considering the visit. The unusual formulation was intended precisely to mislead the censor’s scrutiny.

Tyukodi’s reply, written two weeks later, confirms their tacit understanding: this time addressing the matter in first person, he wrote that he was cancelling his planned trip to Șumuleu Ciuc. The two were, in effect, conveying their intentions to each other indirectly. The solution to hide the real content in a message addressed to a third party clearly shows that they had anticipated the letters being monitored by the Securitate and they attempted to avoid direct implication. Ironically, if Tyukodi had written back with his exact arrival time, the authorities could simply have sent someone to observe who actually showed up at the station in Șumuleu Ciuc. Their caution did not extend that far, and this underlines the limits of such strategies: they were never foolproof, merely the improvised solutions of amateurs seeking some measure of safety. Such tactics reflect the “arts of political disguise” that Scott identifies as characteristic of subordinate discourses (Scott, 1990, p. 136).

#### **4.5 Silence after Imprisonment: Narrative Limits and Traumatic Omission**

One of the most conspicuous absences in Mihály Tyukodi’s documents concerns the years he spent in prison between 1950 and 1953. For this period – and even in the years immediately following his release – he offers no personal account of his experiences. The only mentions appear in official correspondence or in brief, factual references, without emotional or narrative elaboration. This silence is particularly striking given his otherwise consistent habit of documenting the events of his life. Before the prison years, Tyukodi regularly recorded his activities, thoughts, concerns, and joys. After he returned from prison and gradually began making notes again, he still did not reflect on his years of imprisonment. The absence of any reflective writing about this experience suggests not forgetfulness, but a different kind of limit: one that concerns what could not be narrated. In the absence of a direct text, I cannot verify whether Tyukodi’s post-prison silence was primarily driven by psychological trauma. What the archive supports more directly is that narrating prison on paper could have been dangerous. In a context where letters were assumed to be monitored, any concrete detail - names, places,

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<sup>7</sup> Original text: “Tessék szíves lenni megmondani, hogy lehetőleg hozza magával fényképezőgépjét, hadd örökítsünk meg néhány hargitai szép téli tájat.”

dates, fellow inmates - could have exposed both the writer and others. This is consistent with the wider epistolary norm visible in the corpus: imprisonment is referenced in coded, euphemistic terms (for example “pensioner”), and sensitive matters are either anonymized or deferred to face-to-face communication. Read this way, the absence of a prison narrative is not only an “unspeakable” experience but may also be understood as a deliberate practice of self-censorship shaped by surveillance and by the everyday obligation to protect others.

As has been discussed above, anthropologists have increasingly emphasized that silence must be understood not only as the absence of speech, but as a meaningful, multivocal phenomenon in its own right. Ana Dragojlović and Annemarie Samuels (2021) have argued that certain silences are rooted in the limits of articulation – in experiences that are unspeakable not simply because they are forbidden or shameful, but because they resist being made intelligible through narrative. As the scholars point out, the unspoken and the unspeakable are not opposed to narrative experience but form an integral part of it (Dragojlović & Samuels, 2021, p. 422). In their view, silence often marks the edge of what can be rendered into discourse: it is not emptiness, but a trace of something that remains unformulated and unresolved.

In Tyukodi’s case, the absence of reflection on his imprisonment aligns with this anthropological understanding of silence. Even in contexts where he otherwise felt free to express himself – in private notes, in letters to close acquaintances, or in retrospective comments – he only returns to the subject much later, with rare and superficial references. And when he mentions those years, he doesn’t talk about what happened to him during that time, he just refers to his imprisonment. Given his detailed and persistent documentary practices, this omission stands out. It suggests that the experience of detention created a break not only in his life, but in his narrative self-understanding – a rift that could not be easily mended with words.

What matters here is not the content of the prison experience itself, but the way its absence affects the structure of Tyukodi’s self-documentation. His writing usually follows a steady rhythm: everyday events, duties, encounters and concerns are recorded in a cumulative, almost continuous manner. The years of imprisonment interrupt this continuity, yet they are never fully reintegrated into the narrative afterwards. In this sense, imprisonment does not appear as a narrated episode, but as a rupture in the flow of documentation. It divides the narrative into a distinct pre-imprisonment and post-imprisonment phase, while the prison years themselves remain outside what Tyukodi seems able or willing to put into words. The silence, therefore, does not erase the prison years from the archive, but marks them as a boundary of narration, shaping the material through omission rather than description.

This kind of silence is not uncommon in the aftermath of political violence or personal trauma. I agree with Dragojlović and Samuels, that anthropological approaches must learn to attend to such silences not as gaps in data, but as forms of presence that shape memory, subjectivity and voice. The challenge lies in recognizing when silence is a way of signaling that the experience in question cannot be fully contained within the available frameworks of narration – and in resisting the impulse to “fill in” such silences with retrospective interpretation. In this sense, Tyukodi’s restraint does not reflect a lack of testimony, but rather a recognition – perhaps intuitive, perhaps deeply personal – that some aspects of experience cannot be said, only held.

## **5. Personal Silences and Unspoken Emotions**

In addition to silence driven by political reasons, Mihály Tyukodi’s documents also reveal a spectrum of personal and emotional silences. Certain feelings, conflicts or vulnerabilities were not directly expressed in his letters – sometimes out of personal discretion,

other times as part of his role-related obligations. Scholars of silence emphasize that silence relates to voice, visibility and representation and that interpreting silences requires acknowledging unintelligibility and uncertainty (Dragojlovic and Samuels, 2023, pp. 48–60). The correspondence indicates that Tyukodi generally refrained from openly expressing anger or personal grievance; when he did break his restraint, he marked those moments explicitly.

The letters also reveal pain and concern left unspoken: even when dealing with his sister's accident or a friend's despair, Tyukodi suppressed his own distress to comfort others. Such emotional self-censorship can be read both as an act of generosity and as a way to maintain an image of strength. Similarly, expressions of love, affection or longing were cloaked in allegory and metaphor. Tyukodi's correspondence with a woman who emigrated to Hungary shows that both parties used seasonal metaphors ("spring," "blossoming") and references to a third-person "friend" to express feelings without breaching propriety. Again, the real message was between the lines.

### **5.1 Affection and Longing Expressed between the Lines**

Some of the most intriguing "messages between the lines" in Mihály Tyukodi's correspondence emerge in his exchanges with certain individuals from his social circle. One particularly revealing case is that of Melania, a woman from the same community who emigrated to Hungary in the early 1960s. In her letters to Tyukodi, Melania often conveyed a deep sense of unhappiness. She described her new life in Hungary as a "forced solution," openly admitting that she took no pleasure in her surroundings – she disliked the people, the places, and her work – and confessed to suffering from an overwhelming homesickness, at times feeling "nearly in despair."

In these moments of emotional turmoil, it was Tyukodi she turned to. Gradually, he became her emotional anchor, a living link to the home she had left behind. The tone of her letters reveals a deep and sincere affection toward the priest. In one particularly personal letter, she writes that only she knows – not even her older brother – that she owes everything to Mihály. This powerful statement suggests an extraordinary sense of gratitude and attachment, although the exact nature of the help he had once offered remains unstated.

Toward the end of that same letter, Melania mentions her hope to visit her brother in Romania the following year. She adds that she would be glad if they could see each other then. While she does not explicitly say that she wants to meet Tyukodi, her wording seems deliberately open to this possibility. It is evident that both correspondents were fully aware of the subtext: Melania could not openly state her wish to see the priest again – perhaps out of modesty, or perhaps out of fear of compromising his reputation – but she found a way to allude to it, using the visit to her brother as a socially acceptable pretext.

Tyukodi, for his part, seems to have cherished this special bond, though he consistently maintained a proper and restrained tone in his letters. (A note from the future: the two never met again – not that year, nor ever after.)

In March 1987, Mihály Tyukodi wrote a personal note after reading one of Melania's letters, remarking on her allegorical style of expression:

She likes to speak allegorically in her letters, telling her experiences in this way. We rejoice that we are at the end of winter. An old heart can carry spring as well. Old branches, too, burst into bloom. The scent of the great acacia tree is intoxicating, its nectar sweet as honey.<sup>8</sup> (Tyukodi, 10 March 1987; in Szikszai, 2020, p. 78 – my translation)

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<sup>8</sup> Original text: "Ő szeret alleg(ri)kusan beszélni levelében, így mondani el élményét. Örvendünk, hogy a tél végén vagyunk. Öreg szív is hordozhat tavaszt. Öreg ágak is virágba borulnak. A nagy akácfa illata bódító, nektárja mézédés."

What struck him most in these poetic images was their function as a kind of encrypted emotional language. Melania's references to "spring" and "blossoming" are not merely decorative – they are metaphors for a personal rebirth, a tentative return of joy and hope to her life. Tyukodi admits (again, only in a private note) that, as the correspondence continued, he noticed a shift in his own feelings toward her. In other words, something within him changed during the course of their letter exchange. And yet he stops there. He does not elaborate on the nature of this change. What is telling, however, is that he never shares these reflections directly with her – he records them privately, for himself. The attachment, then, remains silent in their direct communication. It is never openly stated, only implied, hovering just beneath the surface. This is a striking example of personal silence: even though affection is present, and the parties occasionally allude to it, it is never spoken by either of them. It is merely suggested – through symbols like seasons and flowers – and silently understood.

For us, as readers, these hidden emotional messages lend the correspondence a quiet depth. They reveal that, beyond political caution and social constraints, people also concealed their personal feelings in letters – safeguarding them from prying eyes and preserving their intimacy through metaphor and silence.

One of the distinctive features of Mihály Tyukodi's correspondence with Melania is the recurring presence of a third figure – a so called "friend" who is not named – to whom he attributes the thoughts and emotions he does not express in his own name. Over a longer period, this rhetorical device appears repeatedly: instead of articulating his own feelings, Tyukodi describes the feelings of this "friend". In one letter, for instance, he writes:

May these few lines, which now and then enter your home, serve as proof that my friend has a heart in which you – as lonely as he is – can read its warmth, reaching you like the rays of sunlight that enter our homes and bring joy.<sup>9</sup> (Tyukodi, 12 February 1988; in Szikszai, 2021, vol. II, pp. 291-292– my translation)

What makes this particularly intriguing is that Melania understood the allusion. She, too, addresses this non-existent friend in her reply, subtly adopting the same code: "To your friend as well, wishing all good things, thinking of him always with true affection, Melania." (Melania, 15 December 1987; in Szikszai, 2021, Vol. II, p. 274 – my translation).<sup>10</sup>

This brief yet telling exchange reveals a delicate interplay of distance and intimacy. The use of a third person serves both as a protective veil and as a shared metaphorical space, allowing them to express emotional closeness without ever breaking the bounds of discretion. The "friend" becomes a narrative device through which affection can be voiced obliquely, maintaining a carefully sustained balance between suggestion and silence. It only becomes clear that this person does not exist when Tyukodi fails to consistently maintain the references in his narratives, thereby revealing that he is not speaking about a friend, but about himself.

Based on these examples, it becomes clear that the personal silences found in Mihály Tyukodi's documents – whether in the form of repressed anger, unspoken sorrow, or affection transfigured into metaphor – are not merely shaped by fear of the regime, but also by individuals' own moral, psychological, and cultural frameworks. People may choose silence out of love, respect, or shame, not just fear. And these silences, too, tell their own story – one that unfolds through close attention to both context and subtext.

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<sup>9</sup> Original text: "Legyen ez a pár sor, ami néha-néha beköszönt a hajlékba bizonyíték arra, hogy a barátom olyan szívvel rendelkezik, amelyben Te, aki magányos vagy, mint ő, kiolvasható, hogy szívének melege úgy hatol Hozzád, mint a napsugár beköszönt hajlékainkba, hogy örömet hozzon."

<sup>10</sup> Original text: "Barátodnak is minden jót, igaz szeretettel mindig Rá gondolva, Melánia".

## 6. Conclusions

As can be seen from the examples above, silence and non-disclosure were not always complete. We know that a letter writer has more to say than he or she writes, as he or she indicates this, but does not disclose the sensitive content itself. For example, although we never receive a detailed description of the events, we learn about Mihály Tyukodi's years in prison from brief references in later documents. Emotions were similarly considered a category to be kept secret: letter writers tend to only allude to their emotions, even allegorically, while never naming them. The aim in such cases is not to conceal the information completely, so that the content in question is not addressed at any level or in any form, but rather to communicate the minimum amount of information to the communication partner and leave the rest to their imagination. In other cases, the letter writers aim to arouse the reader's anticipation by hinting that the exchange of information will take place during their next personal meeting.

The case of Mihály Tyukodi and the silences in his documents reveals the complex relationship between repression and the unspoken, inviting us to read meaning between the lines. At the macro level, the dictatorial national state imposed enforced silences (through censorship and fear), but it also stimulated the development of alternative modes of communication – hidden transcripts or coded behavior (Scott, 1990, p. 139). For anthropologists, tracing these silences is essential: silences must be interpreted alongside the voices, and what is not said can be as important as what is said.

For Mihály Tyukodi, silence was often a conscious decision: it was used to protect others, to hide emotions, or to preserve one's social role. Paper became both a medium of expression – a written form of voice – and a medium of omission: a place where silences were carried not visibly, but perceptibly, for those attuned to reading between the lines.

From an anthropological perspective, evaluating these documents as cultural data reveals both the explicit and implicit layers. Examining written texts is essential for understanding how societies operate and are organized; writing is created by people, passed on culturally and crucial to interaction and knowledge creation (Barton & Papen, 2010, pp. 60–68). The writing strategies identified here and the concealment strategies hidden between the lines – deliberate self-censorship, metaphorical drift, the creation of trusted networks – are not unique to Mihály Tyukodi. They appear in various forms among many individuals who lived under oppressive regimes, but not exclusively so, underscoring the need for micro-historical approaches that attend to small-scale life worlds and the contradictions they reveal. We can observe how people structured their daily lives, how they made decisions, what forms of pain, joy, or hope they experienced – and what they felt compelled to articulate versus what they were forced to leave unspoken. Examining hidden references provides a more nuanced picture of everyday life under dictatorship: not merely as a story of fear and control, but also as one of quiet resistance, creative adaptation, and solidarity. In the end, we might say that when the human voice was silenced, paper spoke in its place – and today, thanks to this archive, those long-muted voices and silences can once again be heard and interpreted, offering enduring lessons about power, vulnerability, and hope.

One of the most profound revelations of this anthropological research is that not everything was written down, not everything was spoken – and yet, in certain cases, posterity can still read between the lines, though from a different historical and experiential position. As I read through Mihály Tyukodi's letters and the silences surrounding them, I became increasingly aware that what is essential often hides in these unspoken spaces. Between the silences imposed by censorship and the ones shaped by inner restraint, another force was at work: the desire to protect what language cannot carry.

The absent presences, the sentences never written, the gaps left intentionally – these do not fragment the message but complete it. Silence does not narrow down meaning, but expands it, while also rendering it more ambiguous. This openness, this dense and deliberate silence, is precisely what remains beyond the grasp of archival material, and yet, paradoxically, it bears the deepest kind of testimony.

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