

The Missing Archive

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So, what about letters? It's not so long ago that letters were considered precious. They took time to write, time to arrive. And the act of letter writing was, to repeat one of those true truisms, an art. Letters were accounts of acts and events, sequences of thought and feeling, vessels of endearments and admonishments, all committed to paper; they had to be composed and mostly by hand. Pen and ink, marks on lined pages...

It's difficult to believe that there are at least two generations now, X & Y, who have not used the letter form as the main means of engaging with others distant. Babyboomers probably still write the occasional letter, and did so more often of course in pre-internet and email days. Remember those? Only fifteen years ago.

Once upon a time, letters were the chief means of communicating across families, countries, continents. They fulfilled that role for my parents and many of your parents. In this tired but still sturdy case, there are about 1,000 of them. And in these envelopes are suites of letters that tell without exaggeration, a thousand stories; stories in human terms mostly small, but also some very large.

Most of the family letters in my and my sister's possession, the letters I want to talk about and which constitute our birth family's archive, do the things that you would expect. They are used to pass on news and general information, but they are also the chief means of getting down the things that matter. Despite that these letters contain the usual amount of mundane information and the generic formulations of address and greeting, these letters are not actually that big on trivia. In the time in which they were written they couldn't have been. The world and the circumstances of the individuals involved meant that these letters were reserved primarily for serious purposes (bulk emailers, Twitterers, Facebookers etc, please note!).

Let me now describe the contents of the suitcase: There are two strands of correspondence here, running between 1936 and 1948. Letters between my mother, Maria Lazarou as was her maiden name, and Nikolaos Loukakis, my father, form the most complete strand. Letters from one to the other, Greece to Australia, Australia to Greece. A second strand consists of letters to and from Nick and friends in Australia. Most of these are from people of Greek background in Australia with whom he had an affinity and with whom he developed correspondences. Young men generally, acquaintances from local Greek community groups, brotherhoods, friendly societies, others who were, like him Greek conscripts in the Australian army. Sadly, for now anyway, there are none of his to them.

Some are from people of Australian background, again, who became his friends and who wrote to him. And that quite often. These were composed (I'll come back to that word) between the late 1930s and late 1940s, and there are well over a hundred of them. Among

those written in English are also some letters Nick had composed, or part-composed, and never sent. These are especially poignant and for a couple of reasons. Partly because some are letters that speak of failure and longings that I don't feel I can or should speak publicly about. Not yet anyway, because there isn't time to establish context for them – which is I think a critical thing to do in interpreting personal correspondence. Poignant also because of what they reveal about the man's efforts to master English. There are practice attempts, and more complete drafts too.

Although these letters in English were never sent, perhaps they should have been. What does it say that they weren't actually sent? This is an interesting and important question. Well, in my assessment it says that the writer felt: 'this is not good enough to send to people who truly know the language'. You can see the struggle, the work to find words that match thoughts in another language.

(You know, as an aside, when an immigrant person says something like 'my English not so good...' there is a tendency to hear humour. I don't hear that – unless the person is laughing at themselves and is genuinely happy with the idea of caricaturing themselves. Maybe some are. What I hear instead, often, is a sense of shame, inferiority, failure – of exclusion.)

Then there are my mothers' letters, Maria Lazarou's letters. Nearly all of these are to Nick. A great many of them are love letters. And they are very powerful – perhaps I should temper that and say 'or maybe only to me'.

When read side by side what do the two correspondences say, reveal? It is pretty obvious that there are things that were shared and could be shared. The feelings between them for one – they were young lovers and that wasn't hidden. After that, the doings and sayings of family, friends in either place, were common subjects. These people were after all known to each, they were available to be drawn on, given their say; they spoke to them. That's to be expected. Kith and kin are a reference for two young people making their way in the world.

Then, as well as support, love, there is censure, anger, hurt, rejection, the full catastrophe. As you hear the echoes of this aunt or that father's words and deeds off-stage, you feel the weight of expectation and sense of responsibility to others that looms over these young people's lives.

But there are things also, unshared between these young people as they were back then. I would say not deliberately withheld, but withheld out of a sense of not wishing to burden each other with the dailyness of life – not the daily dreariness of life anyway. And there was much that was dreary in the rural backblocks of Crete for Maria, or the central west and outback army posts where Nick spent so much of the war years.

During the 1940s Nick could have told Maria, his bride to be, for instance, of dances at the Trocadero, of going to Pakie's Club, a bohemian haunt in Sydney during those years, of picnics with other young soldiers and in the company of Australian girls in country towns where he and his comrades were stationed, of driving in cars – still rarities in rural Crete back then – but he didn't. Perhaps he thought she would not have understood; it would have been too much. Perhaps he was enjoying it too much and felt a degree of guilt. Whatever his reasons, these were not topics in his letters. There is no evidence from Maria's letters at least

that he did. Should he have? Interesting question. What did they owe each other to say? What do *we* owe each other?

By the late 1940s, Nick would come to think it important enough to say, as he did, that things had changed, *he* had changed, after almost ten years away from the homeland. He had been swept along, to a serious extent by then, on the currents of Anglo-Australian acculturation. But he remembered a village girl of a decade earlier. And she remembered a village boy. And it seemed they still, somehow, through war and occupation and distance, wanted each other...

But, to expand that earlier idea, as you read the letters in chronological order, you realise that as time passes, a 'twin-ness' develops. The themes, subjects, content of the letters diverge. Nick and Maria share a language in all senses in the early years. But then, with the war and as his engagement with Australia and Australians develops further, something schizoid begins to appear. Nick learns to write in two modes. One is quite clearly the mode appropriate to communicating with the men and women of a new country, who actually have a few options, certainly even a few quid in their pockets. The other is the mode appropriate to relating to people living with hunger, deprivation, under Nazi occupation. We are talking the early 1940s now, a time of fear and punishment for those unfortunate enough to be living in Greece.

But there are the incomplete strands too. While there are letters from my father's family to him in Australia, there are none from him to them, none in Australia anyway. Though I'm told some are in my uncle's possession back in Greece. There's more work to do there I think. The living human beings who wrote and owned these letters are all gone. So what is there left for these letters to say? I would argue a very great deal.

To the extent that immigrant correspondence has been tapped in scholarly purpose, bits and pieces have been picked through as material for Australian sociology. The behaviours of classes of uprooted and or culturally dislocated people; for evidence of immigration's 'pull and push' factors. As a means of measuring the struggle quotient. As a barometer of tragedy, suffering, and so on. For the lived experience of history from a non-Anglo perspective...? not much, or not much outside those letters collected, say, in accounts of Holocaust survival.

And then, in the occasional exercise with a multicultural sub-theme, such as Australia Post's 2009 Letters of a Nation project. In this you see letters that mainly present expressions of relief at being saved from the miseries of another life, or country – letters presenting signs, proof, that good old Aussie really was and is a wonderful place. Letters for the purpose of nationalistic boosterism, in other words.

But immigrant correspondence viewed and worked on as records of individuals' emotional, psychological, spiritual, moral journeys...? Retrieved for the arcs of growth or decay, for the unfolding of individual lives, viewed with biographical, or aesthetic sense? Hardly at all. For understanding the 'action of another air' on a life or lives – but not simply in fictive, literary terms – hardly at all.

On the migrant correspondence, the vast trove mentioned in the synopsis, the work that has been put in is nothing like the attendance to the English language material, the intense and intensive poring over, the obsessive if not neurotic interest in and attachment to colonial and war missives in particular. As for the colonial letter writers, a further aside here: The State

Library's recent purchase of yet another bunch of these, and for an astronomical figure, really is disappointing to me. The money spent on that bunch of stuff could have bought work on fifty far more useful letter archive projects, in my view. We already know very well, beyond well, what the young Lieutenants were up to her, what properties they bought, what they thought of the Governor etc – and of course also how their attitude to the Governor improved once they were in receipt of a grant of land.

Instead, what I want to urge most of all here is a turning to and a celebration of immigrant correspondence as a trove of story and stories. As a writer of fiction, as someone who has written about family history, for me Story stands above literature, certainly above the literary where that is measured by the presence/absence of qualities of style, theme, theory. I'm not working in the academy, but I can say to you the sort of projects I would wish to see are entirely feasible, aren't that hard to drive forward. It's about other people: seeking them out, talking to them, joining with them, asking them, celebrating their lives and those of their ancestors; it's about true community, the people across the road. The work to translate, to organise and publish are challenges, and important and necessary cultural, historical and literary projects; but this work becomes most meaningful, and practically achievable, on the basis of engagement with real lives and families.

The following letter is dated 18 August 1939. Almost three years since Maria last saw Nikolaos, and a couple of weeks before Hitler launches his wars... this twenty year old woman writes as an impassioned twenty year old might, remembering a little joy since gone:

Years, months, days have passed but my thoughts are always with you. Have you forgotten that August, the fortune-filled, moon-bathed nights we passed together, the cloak of night all around, the starry universe turning overhead, sheltering us..? How much time we spent together, and then had not the strength to leave each other...

The correspondence between them continues. It's still full of endearments and promises of a better world and reunion, but it is less frequent due to censorship, communication difficulties, and the fact that Greece was under occupation. The war separates and maroons them even further. Eight years after the previous letter, in March 1947, Maria writes:

I would have dearly loved to have seen you a soldier. It's been so long since you have written. Is there a photograph at least..? As I write, sitting on our little balcony and gazing out over the fields, it's spring. Everything around is in blossom but I look as if through mist, a cloud...

I mourn the passing of my parents. I mourn also, in a different way, that the stories of a million people like them, recorded in the form of the letter, seem lost to Australia also.