

THE (WEB)SITES OF MEMORY:
CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE


Edited by
Donald E. Morse – Zsófia O. Réti – Miklós Takács

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Defining Two Types of Cultural “Micro-heritage”: Objects, Knowledge Dimensions and a Quest for Novel Memory Institutions

László Z. Karvalics

Documentary [artefactual] heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear for ever.

(UNESCO Memory of the World Programme)

Personal/family documents, photos, warrants, tickets, credentials, (identity/organization) cards, private contracts, postcards – examples from the universe of the so-called “Shoebox memory” objects.

Rocking horses, toothpick holders, scissors, mangles, old flat irons, slips, headgears, stoves, napkins, canisters, placards, bills, enamelled tables – examples of extraordinary/amazing private collections.

Archives, museums and libraries are accidentally guarding, storing and exhibiting pieces from these two kind of cultural memory “domains,” but do not focus systematically and institutionally on collecting and preserving these objects and/or related information/knowledge—even though they are greatly endangered cultural assets. Despite their common nature, there remains a lot of differences between these two clusters of memory objects in terms of the digitization challenge, institutional support, infrastructure needs and community involvement. They require a dissimilar approach and practices, driving us towards defining a third and a fourth type of cultural memory institution.

Let me begin by briefly tearing across a bunch of fresh news, leading us closer and closer to a conceptual innovation: the “cultural micro-heritage.”

Six “messages” from an almost invisible continent of cultural heritage

1. The hoard of the Tsui family

An 80-year-old Chinese farmer shocked the archaeologists by showing them two rare, four meters long, very similar 540- and 472-year-old silk rolls, containing family-related statutes, issued by the emperors of the Ming-dynasty (1368–1644). His forefathers

were state officials, and they received these promotion-like, laudatory-commendatory documents. The rolls became family treasure, and the keeper was always the first-born boy of the next generation. The old man is about to deliver the relics to his descendants, inspiring them by the achievements of long-ago representatives of their lineage (which is a quite a different motivation to safeguard and preserve old documents from that of the noble families who sought to enlarge their legal archives).

2. Surviving images of an unknown Hungarian family

In January 2016, an envelope was found lying on the ground of Badcove Road in Cromer, Sydney, with the date of November 8, 1972 on it (Swain). Its overawed finder saw a number of 40-year-old black and white family photos of a young couple, their wedding and children. Some of them were taken in Budapest in the mid-sixties, and the text, “memories of love” was also written in Hungarian on the back, along with the name, Ms. Nemeth as was also on the envelope. The journalist who posted the story now attempts to get the Hungarian online community to help identify the late Hungarian family, its members and their Australian acquaintanceship.

3. Seven large trunks

Outstanding publicist and Minister of Commerce, Sándor Hegedüs (1847–1906) used seven large trunks when travelling the World. After his death, his daughter, Rózsi (1881–1947) started to collect every document related to her father, and within decades she filled up the trunks. In the difficult years of the Second World War she closed the trunks, which were then put into a cellar in the Buda house of Rózsi’s grandchild’—and remained untouched during the next 60 years, until renovation works of the cellar began. Then family members opened the trunks, called in a few historian friends to review, treat, and publish the most interesting pieces of the collection. They composed a 645#page-book with a voluminous document section (see figure 4), reviving the importance of the late Hegedüs in Hungarian intellectual life, sharing lots of details about his life, based on the content of these numerous, enlarged “shoeboxes” (Katona & Szász).

4. A crown jewel of computer history

In April, 2017, a California widow threw away an intact Apple 1 desktop at the Clean Bay Area recycling centre, which she found in the process of clearing out her garage. It was only weeks after that when the staff recognized that the unknown woman had junked one of the world’s most famous computers, cca. \$200,000 worth, one of around 200 built by Apple founders Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Ron Wayne. They sold the rarity to a collector, and then tried to find the late owner to share the prize with her.

5. “Schlüsselgerät 41”

Two German treasure hunters, using a metal detector, found a rare coding machine in the Bavarian forest, near Aying, buried deep (40 cm) under ground in May 2017.

The Nazis made only 500 such machines from this successor of Enigma. The finders immediately delivered the machine to the Deutsche Museum, Munich, and, even more impressive is that the Museum had just received an *almost complete coding machine collection only a few months before from a private collector* but that collection did not contain this version of Schlüsselgerät 41!

6. The Arcanum Databases

One of the largest, reputable corporate champions of market-led digitization of cultural heritage objects in Hungary, Arcanum, began a project to provide a complete, accessible, and searchable database of local newspapers' full content. They started the voluminous digitization process in the biggest libraries a few years ago, and then had to realize that there were many missing copies in the public collections. When Arcanum opened channels to *private collectors* then these collectors offered their copies that almost completed the entire run for digitization.

Nature of the challenge

These six examples clearly illustrate the state of the art and the common features of two special divisions/classes of cultural heritage objects and most of all, the fact that they are extremely endangered. For it is also an everyday experience that the pace of wrecking is accelerating. There are few or no targeted, special efforts, and one must also keep in mind the unlikely and unexpectedness of those rare rescue moments. For example, where no direct family relations exist yet the exposure to market evaluation is sufficiently high, marketability becomes the only forceful factor generating individual responsibility. Also, there is a lack of intergenerational and community awareness, cultural/political agency and intentionally operated platforms for organized, *en masse* safekeeping. Absent as well is a lack of ambition in existing memory institutions (libraries, museums, archives) to expand their official and standardized mission to include these two categories. They suffer from their own sustainability difficulties which run parallel to the permanent loss of specialized knowledge about the saved items and their background domains. The only countercurrent force has been some earlier civic activity to save every piece of great value of this branch of documentary and artefactual heritage.

Raising awareness

Nowadays the situation is much better. The British Library, for example, has started its *Endangered Archives Programme* (EAP) and in its manifest takes cognizance of the danger in a clear, unequivocal way:

If heritage collections are frequently at risk even when housed in recognised archives, how much more endangered are private collections? They may belong to private societies no longer able to maintain their facilities; or represent the life's work of one collector after whose death no further family interest is shown; or be the papers of an outstanding literary, cultural or historical figure which suffer neglect after his or her demise. (EAP)

There are several other forward-looking representatives of memory institutions, who realized this gap in time. Such libraries and museums began special projects to raise attention and support civic efforts (like the awareness raising campaign and digitization support of *African American Family Histories* in the Library of Congress) and started to involve civil society volunteers in research and safekeeping activity.

When the international conference of *ICARUS* (International Centre for Archival Research) examined and reviewed the archival landscape of the twenty-first century in April 2015, the participants highlighted the importance of bridging the professional archival area with their user community. The European Union's *Civic Epistemologies* project is about the participation of citizens in the research of cultural heritage and humanities, sharing the values of open data, open source, and open innovation. The main missions of civic partners are the discovery of hidden heritage objects, and multichannel support in dissemination of preserved, but unknown collections.

Another European project (*ENArC—European Network on Archival Cooperation*) explored the possibilities in the crowdsourcing and harvesting of private archival material and its implication for perceiving and experiencing history. They identified the main benefits of public-private partnerships on the field of digital genealogical research and cadastral maps, popularizing user-side platforms, like *Monasterium* or *Matricula*. The Hungarian National Széchenyi Library is preparing a project to involve volunteers in the data processing phase of the digitized *Death Report Collection*, including more than 500,000 items.

The perceptible steps ahead are all about including civic partners in processing and metadata-generating in existing collections and not about creating new ones or saving endangered collections. An exception is the *Endangered Archives Programme*, which targets not only the official/institutional side, but private archives too. It is, therefore, important to realize that autonomous civic efforts may be sometimes stronger and more effective than public-private partnerships. Three examples of these civic efforts include a Hungarian blogger dealing with old photographs (Fénytképező), who runs a charity project for old, homeless, poor people in reconstructing and digitizing their surviving family pictures which are their last memories. A second example is Tom Tryniski, a retired American engineer, who bought a microfilm-scanner few years ago, and started to digitize old local newspapers in his home. So far, he is approaching 30 million newspaper pages, which quantity is four times larger than the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* collection, while the number of his visitors is more than double compared to the twin database managed by the Library of Congress. And last is the Open Society Archive (OSA) and its volunteers, who collected every data available about the buildings of the Second World War Budapest Ghetto (Starry Houses Project).

Transformations from private collections to private museums

Nowadays, we find best practices only in the transformation from private collections to private museums (as legal entities, regulated by cultural laws). There would have been no Medical Museum in Larnaca, Cyprus, if Marios Kyriazis, a descendant of four

generations of doctors and pharmacists in Larnaca had not founded it. Set in a traditional restored and listed town mansion, Kyriazis has donated items including medical instruments and books inherited from his grandfather Neoclis Kyriazis (1878–1956) and from his great grandfather Antonios Tsepis (1843–1905) both of whom practiced in Larnaca. The story of the Pierides Archaeological Collection is very similar. According to their brochure, this private collection, founded by Demetrios Pierides in 1839, was protected and systematically enriched by five consecutive generations of the family. In 1974, the Pierides family decided to give access to the public to visit their residence and archaeological collection, which consists of about 2,500 Cypriot antiquities. Since then, it has operated as a Private Archaeological Museum, supported by the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

In Central Europe, private museums are extremely popular. There are several pharmacies in their original buildings with old furniture and facilities, which could successfully transform themselves from living drugstores to musealised cultural heritage objects without any support from memory institutions (Nékám; Szarvasházi). Currently, Hungary has four lamp museums in Zsámbék, Szentendre, Kőszeg and Fertőszéplak (Railway Lightmuseum); they are all private collections. A book series, *Magánmúzeumok a Kárpát-medencében* [Private Museums in the Carpathian Basin] was launched in 2008, presenting Aunt Ida's private museum in Torockó, Fehér County, Romania (Benedek & Kürtössi). In this lovely small museum there are only family matters (tools, clothes, small everyday objects), inherited from family members or made by the owner. It is intriguing that there is such a private museum in Torockó besides the “official” folklore museum.

Private museums present private collections to the public and organize special exhibitions. The Berzsenyi Library in Szombathely issued a call for private collectors to sort out the most interesting items from their collections and share them with the public. They then opened an extraordinary exhibition with samples from 34 individual private collections, from uniform-buttons to tile-whistles. A Szekszárd branch of a local history association (Tájak-Korok-Múzeumok [Landscapes-Ages-Museums]) organizes regular visits to regional private collections, from cast-iron stoves to embroideries.

The micro-community dimension: round of the duties of great urgency

Yet, private museums are not only about micro-communities, the local/family cultural ecosystems as memory borders (Örsi). There is another micro-community dimension: involving people with similar interests from any corner of the Earth: collectors, researchers, representatives of related professions, tourists, culture consumers, young people—all may discover unknown provinces of challenging fields.

In the age of personalized services, Expedia, the travel management company provides a tool for its clients, which combines possible visiting targets with the closest available hotels. Figure 1 shows that the Guinness Recorder Lamp Museum in Zsámbék, close to Budapest has become a consideration for those planning a visit which illustrates how a “micro-heritage” might transform into a reasonable marketing object.

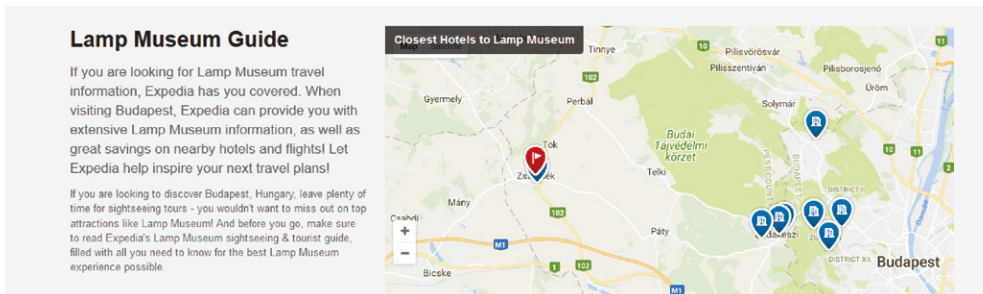


Figure 1. Screenshot of Expedia's guide to the Lamp Museum taken by László Z. Karvalics
<https://www.expedia.com/Lamp-Museum-Budapest.d6311303.Vacation-Attraction>.
 12 January 2018.

Yet, the pressure of market value represents a real danger for cultural micro-heritage. “*Heritage capitalism*” (Di Lenardo & Kaplan), which has started to “monetize” the family/ancestry/genealogy/DNA heritage, currently focuses on photography collections. The story of the Bettmann Archive illustrates the threat. Otto Bettmann, a German immigrant could successfully build a private photo and film collection between 1936 and 1981 in the United States. In 1981, the whole archive was sold to the Kraus Thomson Organization. In 1995 the Archive was bought by Corbis, the digital stock photography company of Bill Gates. They acquired other collections and made extraordinary digitization and storage development—up to 2016, when they sold the whole company to the Visual China Group, which immediately started to trade with this treasure, together with the Getty Images.

But the epistemic value is more important than the market value. Cultural micro-heritage is not only about local memories and ad hoc interest communities. In the crossroads of local, family, regional, national, cultural, professional, material, documentary and other heritages, *every single object has a universal information value*. If an object has even one or more metadata, which represents relation channels with other objects, we get into an endless, undivided space of affordances. And we need to identify the most urgent tasks:

- In the domain of the “shoebox-memory”: these include exploration, registration, physical security, digitization, restoration, collection building, metadata generating along with institutional background, cooperation agreements, awareness raising, privacy issues
- In the field of *personal collections*: discovery and documentation of existing databases, frameworks to establish new ones, network-like exhibition spaces, online representation, methodological and logistical support, legal background necessary to own the collections after the collector’s death.

To be able to take steps ahead, it is time to define and name a fourth (“FamDocArchive”) and a fifth (“Collectorium”) type of cultural memory institution and to start the discussion about their institutional/participative nature, financial and physical space needs, stakeholders involved and disciplinary buoyancies.

Fortepan, a Hungarian non-profit digital photo collection is a good example of imagining, building and enlarging a collection. The two founders decided to share their special collection with the public in 2010, creating a platform to receive other donations. Now, the open collection of Fortepan has almost a hundred thousand photos, and they have volunteers, who try to save and obtain photographic materials in flea markets and from junkyards. The collection is open for family materials, and, hopefully, will be able to maintain its non-profit nature.

We need to create a dedicated, fresh narrative about these issues as soon as possible. Local/practical efforts may not be enough to generate an effective umbrella framework behind the recognition of the importance of cultural “micro-heritage,” but they could be substantial supporters of nation-wide initiatives and the champions of narrative-making could be members of the academic community, without reference to any position in their disciplinary entanglement.

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3. New Media for Old Ideologies