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All our memories: the outcomes of the Europeana 1914-1918 campaigns in Romania

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Abstract:

In the last years lots of projects and activities have been developed worldwide to mark the Centenary of the Outbreak of the First World War. Some projects like Europeana 1914-1918 tried to describe the Great War from the perspective of the simply people, no matter which side they were on during this conflict.

In such a case, a valuable digital archive has been built up using Europeans' family documents, stories and memorabilia from WWI time.

This 'People's WWI Archive' proved to be a communicative, digital memory, a comprehensive digital infrastructure which encourages audiences to use the stored data not only as a material basis for historical reconstruction, but also as a medium of a European culture of remembrance.

The five community collecting campaigns developed in Romania from September 2013 gathered interesting WWI stories and facts, but also revealed fascinating feminine characters unknown to the large public in the communist regime .

So that now the story of the only military enrolled nun in WWI stands together with photos and stories about the most beloved Queen of Romania or stories about people belonging to different minorities.

The paper describes the outcomes of these campaigns where the public engagement was overwhelming with contributors from 17 to 101 years old, coming from large cities to isolated monastery communities.

Gathering and preserving such valuable personal documents from WWI time is even more important in the former socialist countries where many times personal archives were confiscated and destroyed during the communist period.

Keywords: World War One, crowdsourcing, digital archives, community engagement

Remembering *The Great War* - general context

In the last years, we have been witnessing a great interest and a rediscovery of the First World War times illustrated by many media and editorial productions covering the period 1914-1918 - television documentaries, feature films, popular history books, as well as other projects and events : exhibitions , new-openings of museums, re-enacting events etc.

Public interest and engagement in WWI related events has been unexpectedly high almost everywhere in Europe and worldwide and governments and officials also have provided proper financing for the commemoration events.

The interest in *war tourism* is also extremely high as , only in France it brings more than 20 million tourists a year to visit its' battle sites and its 155 war museums. As an example, the opening of the Museum of Great War in Meaux (October 2011) brought an unexpected high number of visitors . Stéphane Grimaldi, director of the Mémorial de Caen, in Normandy, one of France's most visited war museums explained very well this interest in WWI :

"This current taste for history comes partly because we're living in a time of confusion, in a world that seems to have lost its bearings. People try to anchor themselves by striving to understand the past. It's as if we're in a car facing a thick curtain of fog and looking in the rear-view mirror."¹

***Europeana 1914-1918* project**

Within this plethora of projects and events dedicated to WWI a special role is played by the ***Europeana 1914-1918*** project which brought a different approach to the describing of the Great War times and to cultural history, linking people's own stories to the official histories of the war .

Europeana 1914-1918, the most successful project of *Europeana* - Europe's digital Library, Archive and Museum - has been launched in 2011 with the first Community Collecting Day in Germany . Up until May 2017 over 150 roadshows have been organized along 22 European countries and almost 200 000 digital images have been gathered.

Anyhow, the original idea belonged to the Oxford University who, in 2006 had the initiative to ask people across Britain to bring letters, photographs and keepsakes from the WWI time to be digitized. This pilot project which was intended to contribute to the big *WWI Archive of UK* was funded by JISC, the UK's educational technology innovator.

Its' huge success encouraged *Europeana* to extend this project across Europe in a partnership with Oxford University and other major European cultural institutions (libraries, museums, Ministries of Culture etc).

The *Europeana 1914-1918* project invited the public to participate either directly on the established Community Collecting Days or by adding a picture of an item or type in a story online on the *Europeana 1914-1918* website (<http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu>).

At the Collecting Days events, members of the public were invited to bring their documents, artefacts, personal stories and other memorabilia from the First World War to be recorded and

¹<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/26/french-war-museum-foreign-tourists>

digitized by the project staff. The stories and the scanned or photographed images of the objects were then added to the *Europeana 1914-1918* digital archive.

The Romanian Family History Roadshows of *Europeana 1914-1918*

In Romania the *Europeana 1914-1918* project was launched on 17th September 2013 at the Romanian Academy Library where also the first Romanian *Community Collecting Campaign* took place on 27th and 28th September 2013.

This first Romanian *Europeana 1914-1918* roadshow benefited of the patronage of His Royal Highness Prince Radu of Romania which was also the first Romanian contributor of the Collection Days . He contributed two beautiful, originated 1917 photos of Queen Maria of Romania dressed as a nurse, from the Royal Family's photo collection.

Considering the extremely important role Queen Maria has played in the World War I events in Romania, the contribution of the Royal House of Romania to the *Europeana 1914-1918* Bucharest roadshow was considered a very good start of the campaign which also in a symbolic way brought into the public interest and debate the historical role of the Royal House in that times .

The public response regarding the first collecting campaign was enthusiastic and all kind of objects from WWI have been brought to the Romanian Academy Library (RAL): a harmonica, military effects (bayonet, cartridge box, uniforms), paintings, photos, drawings, letters, postcards , diaries etc.

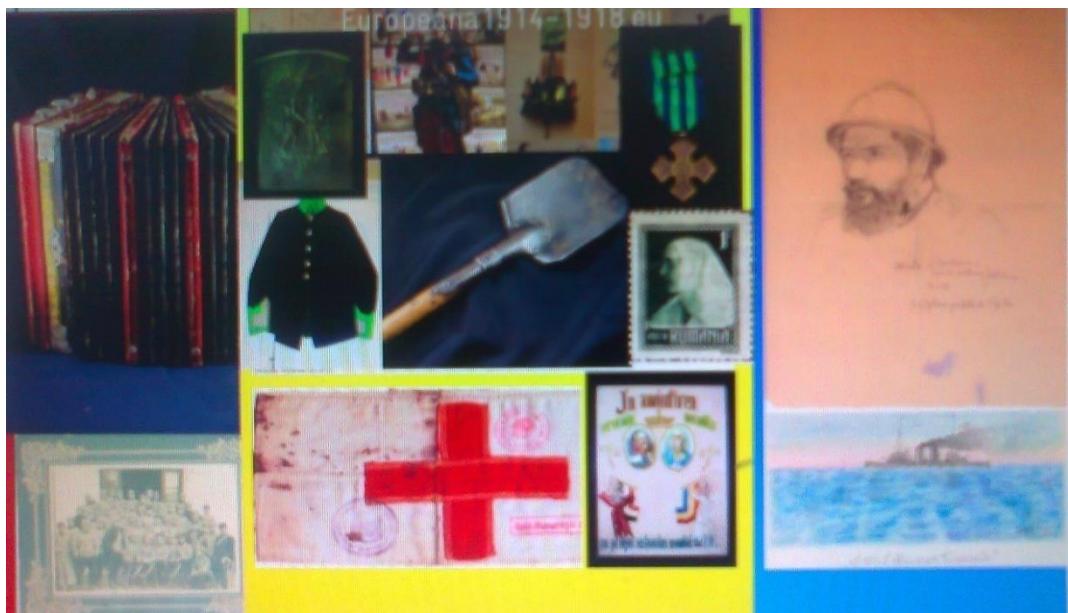


Figure 1. Objects and documents collected during Europeana1914-1918 Campaigns in Romania

Especially elderly people made great efforts in order to bring or send their family documents to the library, like an 90 years old doctor from Câmpina or an 85 years old gentleman from Brașov who travelled more than 7 hours by train for this purpose .

The contributor from Brasov and his family have kept those documents with devotion and care almost 100 years, as they are still very precious for the entire family.

The postcards written by his father² who fought in WWI have been kept well organized, all arranged by date and very well preserved.

Many important documents have been discovered among the items brought by the public like some letters written by General Henri Mathias Berthelot - Chief of the French Military Mission in Romania or a beautiful unknown drawing of Ion Jalea, one of the most important Romanian artists, at that time enrolled in the Romanian Army.

The first Campaign brought into the public attention also the first Scout patrol in Romania which had various missions during WWI, including transporting and first aid for wounded soldiers.

Some documents and an audio recording belonging to one of the youngest boy scouts in Romania contributed to this campaign are illustrating the importance of this lesser known association in WWI times³.

The Cluj Napoca and Sibiu Campaigns

The next four family history roadshows have been organized in Cluj Napoca (4-5 October 2013), Sibiu (23-24 May 2014), Orăştie (8 -9 August 2014) and Iaşi (21-22 October 2016).

During these roadshows other interesting stories and characters have been revealed as Dumitru Nistor's fascinating adventure in the China Sea , a contribution made at the Cluj collecting days.

Dumitru Nistor, a peasant from the village of Nasaud was enlisted in 1912 in the Austro-Hungarian navy not the Transylvanian militia, where Romanians from Transylvania were usually enrolled.

The Great War finds him in the China Sea, on the ship *SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth* as a Geschützvormeister ('first cannon pointer'), where it takes part in several naval battles. The ship was scuttled on 2 November 1914 and its crew captured, along with numerous German naval personnel and Dumitru was also made a prisoner by the Japanese and taken to Japan.

For the next ten months, he remains a prisoner in a Buddhist monastery in Himeji, and is then moved to a prisoner of war camp specially built for German and Austrian prisoners at Aonogahara, where he remained until the end of 1919.

Dumitru Nistor 's diary entitled *My diary – Dumitru Nistor's navy service, written by himself as a war prisoner in Aonochara – Japan 1918*⁴ has a great historical value offering many information about the battles and the camp life.

It also looks very good, with a lot of charming handmade watercolor drawings.

In the chapter *The European war, or rather, the Universal war*, Dumitru describes in detail, the battles fought by the SMS *Kaiserin Elisabeth*'s personnel to defend the German colony of Kiaotcheao.

For instance, this is how Dumitru Nistor tells the story of the surrender to the Japanese:

"As the Germans realized that any resistance from our side would be futile, they raised the white flag and surrendered, and us Austrians with them, at exactly 6.30 in the morning. As such, Tsingtau fell

²http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2020601/contributions_7007.html

³ http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2020601/contributions_6964.html

⁴ http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2020601/contributions_6191.html

to the Japanese on Saturday, November 7th, at 6.30. After surrendering, we laid down our weapons in "Motke Kaserne", at 7 in the morning.

(...) At about 6 in the evening, they took us Austrians to the "Governament Schülle", where we slept that night. The next day, on Monday, November 9th, we went with the Japanese to the battlefield and gathered up the dead. We were now talking to each other like friends, we were giving each other cigarettes, only the poor dead lied there motionless, they were all crushed by grenades and pierced by bayonets, some had their skulls bashed in and their guts out, with no arms or legs, God forbid, it was horrible to touch them, but what else could we do? We couldn't leave them there as loot, they were not dogs, they had been our brothers and comrades. In the afternoon we organized a funeral for them with parades, a German priest held a beautiful service, we all shed tears, and then we buried them, we shot three volleys, and the music ended the ceremony.

The siege (Belagerung) around Tsingtau had lasted for 41 days, a shameful fact for the Japanese who lingered so much around this small town. They came upon it with 60,000 soldiers, the entire garrison of Himeji, and another 5-6,000 Englishmen, while we poor saps were in Tsingtau about 5,000 cats included. We were 318 Austrians, while the others were Germans".

The Story of Sister Mina Hociota the only military enrolled nun in Romania

During the Sibiu Campaign (23-24 May 2014) the story of Sister Mina Hociota was added to the WWI archive with users rating it as one of the most interesting Romanian stories gathered .

Marina Hociota was born 1896 in Saliste near Sibiu, at that time a territory belonging to the Austro - Hungarian Empire. Very affected by her father's death and by the Hungarian compulsory education system, she crossed the mountains' border to the Romanian Kingdom at only 18. She joined the community of nuns at the Varatec Monastery in Moldavia , where a sister of her mother was nun , and became also a nun under the name Sister Mina.



Figure 2. Sister Mina Hociota as a nun and in military uniform

In the first two years of WWI, a time when the Romanian Kingdom was still neutral, she completed her general education and received also professional medical training provided by the Romanian Red Cross Association.

Right after Romania entered the war in August 1916, she was assigned to the Tecuci Regional Hospital (near the Romanian General Military Headquarter) where she cared the ill soldiers as a nurse and also received military training.

When the 1916 first Romanian war campaign ended with the occupation of provinces of Oltenia and Muntenia, Sister Mina was enrolled as junior lieutenant (according to the military order no. 671/1917) and was appointed as chief of the medical train transport service near the Marasesti front line , organizing the transport of the wounded soldiers to the nearest hospitals.

On July 1918 she was awarded by King Ferdinand I the "*War Commemoration Cross*" and the "*Marasesti Badge*" for exceptional military merits and bravery in WWI.

Discovering Sister Mina's story⁵ and the important role she played during the WWI times was one of the most important results of *Europeana1914-1918* campaigns in Romania, as very few people knew something about her before these campaigns and she was totally ignored by historians in the communist times.

The Romanians discovered with huge interest her story and a large public debate about her case is being developed at the moment.

The last roadshow organized in October 2016 in Iași brought more details, photos and some corrections to the Sibiu story regarding Mina Hociota, and has also recorded the first contribution coming from a monastery community⁶.

Sisters from the Nămăiești Monastery where she lived after WWI ended, contributed some very interesting photos from the monastery private archive and museum illustrating Mina Hociota wearing a military uniform or other similar documents .

We found out what huge moral dilemmas Sister Mina had during the war time trying to adapt the military life to some monastic habits (like a regular praying program in the morning and the evening which she tried to keep in order to maintain some connections with her former life) .

She also confessed later to her fellow sisters her permanent fear of using the guns, which she had been determined to use only for warning purposes.

This fascinating woman, who cared and treated the wounded soldiers and the civilians during the severe typhus epidemic in WWI was also active in WWII (she was 45 years old at the beginning of the Second World War).

Some remarks about public engagement

Public engagement in all types of crowdsourcing or community participatory projects is still very low in Romania compared to other Western States, with very few examples of successful projects.

⁵ http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2020601/contributions_15707.html

⁶ http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/record/2020601/contributions_21112.html

To a certain extent, that is the situation in all the former socialist countries where people have not at all been encouraged to develop any activities outside the official planned and approved projects during the communist time.

After the 1989 events, the situation improved anyhow with people learning more and more to actively participate at the community life in many ways.

In this sense *Europeana1914-1918* in Romania managed to actively engage the public at a national level, being in this way the most successful project of this type.

As previously mentioned, the enthusiasm and engagement of the people were overwhelming for the organizers as it is hard to forget a centenarian who wakes up at 5 am in order to be ready in time to tell his story, or some old people travelling many hours by train for the same purpose.

The fact that the campaign ‘entered also in monasteries’, which are normally very isolated communities in Romania, gives the right measure for the great interest in this project.

Some old people also confessed they had never entered a library in their’ last 20 years of life, but did so especially for this project.

People know that are so many important things to be said and to be preserved for the future, that we still don’t have the whole picture of that times and that *digitization saves precious memorabilia from being lost or thrown away*.

As expected, the best represented age group among contributors belonged to seniors with the following distribution :

- Contributors aged 60 - 101 years ...56%
- Contributors aged 45 - 59 years... 15%
- Contributors aged 17 – 44 years.....29%

The main reasons for participating in the *Europeana 1914-1918* project in Romania, according to contributors:

1. We owe to remember the heroic sacrifice of our forefathers who made the Modern Romania, to honor those who served, to remember those who died.
2. The picture of the Great War is not complete without the experiences and stories of the civilians, the people left home who all had hard times, no matter which side they were on during the conflict
3. The civilian and military experiences of the people from Transylvania in WWI times are less known, as “they fought on the wrong side”, but they deserve to be told , recorded and preserved for future.
4. Young generation has no models of life and the experiences of their ancestors in war times might be a good example.
5. We must ensure that the lessons learnt from WWI time live with us forever.

Surprisingly, the reason most often given referred to the necessity of models for the young generation and the generations to come

Digital encounters on *Europeana 1914-1918* platform

It must be emphasized that from the very beginning people were very enthusiastic about digitizing their WWI related memorabilia as in digital format the objects are safely saved and preserved for future.

In this way, using technologies and techniques unimagined in 1914, the project enables everyone to contribute to the collective memory based on our family's histories.

The other major benefit of digitizing all these items , is that people don't have to separate from their precious family documents and they can still keep the originals at home as they did before.

On *Europeana1914-1918* digital platform, stories can be shared online, accessed by others worldwide and re-used in many ways by historians, genealogists, educational or cultural institutions.

On this huge digital platform it was possible for instance for Dumitru Nistor's family from Năsăud to find images and other unknown stories about their forefather.

Thanks to Gerald H. Davis, a contributor from the United States, other stories, facts and photos about SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth's crew can be found in this unique digital archive which in this way becomes not only an European but also an international "*people's archive of WWP*".

Gerald Davis contributed some personal documents of Pasko Rogulj⁷ - his father in law, sixty two photos of the ship SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth, her crew, and scenes from captivity in Japan along with copies of a personal interview of Rogulj in 1973 and an inspection report of Camp Aonagahara from 1915.

Pasko Rogulj (called Pat Roguly in America) (1891-1973) was a Croatian sailor/cook on the Austro-Hungarian cruiser SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth who shared the same fate in WWI time as Dumitru Nistor and whose stories and documents confirm his narratives.



Figure 3. Dumitru Nistor in a portrait made by himself (left side) and in some photos with Pasko Rogulj (contributed by Gerald Davies, USA, right side)

⁷http://www.europeana.eu/portal/ro/record/2020601/contributions_13354.html

Camp activities like dramatic representations, exercises, sports, holiday celebrations (attended by Japanese officers) and funerals suggest that treatment of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners was humane, if not completely joyful as Davis states . Dumitru Nistor had also all he needed in order to keep a beautiful illustrated journal or even to compile two poetry volumes.

The titles of the volumes are *The longing and misery chased away* and *Youth is life's flower* and they contain the poems and songs composed by himself or gathered from his army colleagues. He describes them as '*international songs, specifically Romanian, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Slavonic, Bohemian, German and Hungarian songs, as I really loved singing, since I was always a happy person*'.

In his way Nistor wanted to bring together a part of a rich cultural European legacy, to find something beautiful that brings people together emphasizing a unity in a very difficult shared situation.

The digitized collected material of this archive is in this way highlighting *the importance of World War I for a common European identity* and is being reflective of the different experiences of individuals and groups on all sides of the conflict including different ethnic, linguistic, political, social and religious communities and those opposed to the war.

Europeana 1914-1918 is a place of all kind of encounters, building bridges over time, over far territories or different communities, bringing people from all over Europe or worldwide together as they are now “building their own WWI archive - the peoples’archive”. This is what an old lady from the Ruhr region in Germany has written when she contributed to the Sibiu campaign a beautiful story of her father in WWI time in Romania together with more than 400 impressive photos .

After putting together the digital resources collected during the other two Europeana World War One related projects - *Europeana1914-1918 Collections* and *Europeana Film Gateway*, in January 2014 the resulted archive, one of the most comprehensive dedicated to WWI offers valuable informational resources for anyone interested in this topic.

Why we all need to tell stories

After five campaigns during which so many interesting documents, stories and keepsakes from WWI times have been gathered, it was clear that people want and need to tell their family story about WWI times (but not only), and this need for telling stories has been described so well by Vargas Llosa :

“Why does a man need to tell stories to others and himself? It is a way by which the mind uses fantasy to structure the chaos of the original experience. Complex and unpredictable, the vivid experience always lacks what fiction can provide: a closed time, a hierarchy of events, the value of people, effects and causes, the connections under the actions.”⁸

By reading stories from WWI time simply people, amateurs come closer to history as personal experiences are easier to understand and remember .

⁸ Vargas Llosa, M. 1997. The Truth of Lies. In [Making Waves](#). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Conclusions

During the five *Europeana 1914-1918* collecting campaigns in Romania 127 people contributed, hundreds of interesting stories and thousands of digital items have been added to the *Europeana 1914 - 1918* archive.

Very important missing pieces, stories and facts about WWI in Romania, previously unknown by the public are now brought into public debate.

Four out of five campaigns have been organized by and held *in libraries* of all types : academic and national libraries - Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest , public libraries (County Cluj Library), university libraries - Library of the L. Blaga University in Sibiu, college libraries (Library of the National College A. Vlaicu in Orastie).

We have all learnt a lot during these campaigns: the libraries' personnel about the best ways of engaging community, the people who contributed about the importance of being an active part of the community .

In this way, libraries are becoming more and more , important social hubs in Romania , building up not only collections or services, but also communities.

We are now aware of 'the power of the crowds', but also of the power of the shared commitment and work .

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End note :

Starting 21st June 2017, **Europeana 1914-1918** officially re-launched as a Europeana thematic collection , has a new web address , therefore the website contributions mentioned in the paper have been re-assigned accordingly.