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Sergiu Celibidache Followed through the Iron Curtain

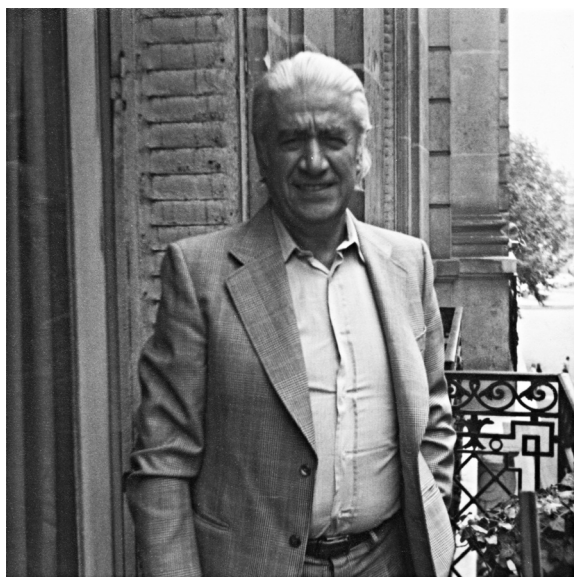


Fig. 1. *Sergiu Celibidache, Bucharest, 1978 or 1979 (photo from the author's personal archive).*

Keywords: Romanian secret police (*Securitate*), Celibidache's correspondence, Prague Spring festival

Sergiu Celibidache was no doubt a unique musician. One critic stated he was “equal to Furtwängler” (Trancu-Iași 1997: 59) whom he unexpectedly succeeded as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic when the former was removed on the grounds of his association with the Nazi regime. He wrote to his parents in Romania in 1947: “Everybody is astonished by my spectacular career and my age . . . I find everything normal as in these eight years I only studied and I calmed down in every respect” (Trancu-Iași 1997: 92).

Celibidache could cause controversy and generate envy. He sometimes gave the impression that his acid comments, particularly the shocking ones directed at other conductors, were meant to attract publicity. But a different

person emerges from his letters to friends and family and from reports compiled by the Romanian authorities.

Those who met him in his Bucharest years before leaving to study in Germany in 1938 thought he was an eccentric and interesting young man. But nobody foresaw his subsequent development and career. He had moved from Iași to the capital to read engineering. His friend Eugen Trancu-Iași, who noticed his intense piano-playing, introduced him to his friends and this is how he came to coach for a while a ladies' volley ball team:

Nobody knew how he was surviving in Bucharest. Everybody knew he was stubborn and that he had nothing to eat. Yet he lived his life, he preferred to play jazz and to dance in clubs in order to earn some money, but never renounced his ideas. (Trancu-Iași 1997: 8)

The writer Petru Comarnescu, who had met Celibidache in 1936-37, did not rate him highly. Twenty years later, having become an informer sent to visit prominent Romanians abroad, he was briefing the Communist Secret Police (*Securitate*): “. . . Celibidache was born in Roman to an average family, he had it hard in Romania, he was a sort of vagrant.” (CNSAS Archive, R File no. 330218, vol. 4: 80.)

Leaving Romania shaped the vagrant's destiny. He assiduously studied at the *Hochschule für Music* in Berlin, read philosophy and mathematics and embarked on a remarkable career. Yet he was never again to see his parents and most of the family in Romania, apart from brief meetings with two of his siblings 25 years after he left the country.

The *Securitate* monitored Sergiu Celibidache through its departments handling Romanians living abroad. Three files dealing with him are held by the National Council for the Study of the *Securitate* Archives (CNSAS). The files, of which the most complete is the one compiled by the Foreign Intelligence Service – SIE (File no. 269), store data gathered by undercover agents working in the Romanian Legations or Embassies and by agents recruited amongst Romanians exiles or Romanians allowed to travel abroad. Hundreds of classified pages include action plans, reports, and dossiers describing the way Celibidache, his family, and his friends were kept under surveillance. Letters sent by him to friends or family and their replies are also preserved in the files.¹

¹ For more detailed information about Sergiu Celibidache monitored by *Securitate*, see Voicu-Arnăuțoiu 2013.

The first “strictly secret” document approved by the head of SIE – Directorate 1, Vasile Vălcu, is the 14 July 1955 Decision to open a separate file on Sergiu Celibidache. It says:

After graduating from the Conservatoire, he quickly establishes himself thanks to his talent and is considered one of the best conductors. Through his profession and all he achieved he manages to make contacts in the highest capitalist circles. On this basis I have decided to open a separate file on Sergiu Celibidache, who will be known under the code name “KOLB”. (SIE File no. 269, vol. 1: 1.)

In fact, the *Securitate* had started monitoring Celibidache as early as 1948 when it intercepted two letters sent to his relatives in Roman. The officer who reported on their content described them as being “directed against the people’s security”. His parents, Demostene and Maria, were put under surveillance, although – it was noted – they were “not involved” in politics. But the file records that Maria “looked with deadly hatred upon our regime of popular democracy”. His sisters Magdalena, Tatiana (who lived in Venezuela), Paraschiva, Maria and his brother Neculai-Radu were also watched over. And so was Celibidache’s old friend Eugen Trancu-Iași to whom the conductor regularly wrote and whom he hoped to see again.

Whilst focussing on Celibidache’s career, the *Securitate* was also interested in his “political activity”. Acting as its honorary president, he is supposed to have “organized the Romanian community in Berlin... consisting of reactionary elements who defected the country after 23 August 1944 or had been living there for a long time” (File 269, 1: 19-22). The *Securitate* set out to collect data on the conductor, opened his letters and copied the photos sent to his family in preparation for a next step, trying to recruit Celibidache. The head of Directorate 2 sanctions a memorandum of 26 December 1959 which concludes:

“KOLB” was targeted in 1951 by the 2nd Department of the Germany bureau. Their observations and the actions taken to create favourable conditions for recruiting him led to nothing as “KOLB” does not have a stable address. He travels all over the world through his profession and lives for 4-5 months in different countries. Neither was it possible to achieve our goal through his relatives in Romania. None was in a position to influence him to work for us. Nor could anything be done in view of “KOLB”’s financial status abroad.

Nevertheless, being an interesting element for us, considering the characteristics of his work as a conductor and the connections he forged, were there to occur any opportunities for drawing closer, we PROPOSE transferring the case from the observation stage to the operational one. (File 269, 1: 87-89.)

A report by the Directorate 1 refers to a first attempt to establish contact with Celibidache in Rome asking its agents to describe in a telegram “the circumstances under which ‘LEONARDO’ took the parcel from him and what did he tell him about ways to send the parcel to Romania. We are very keen to know if the two talked about ‘LEONARDO’'s relations with us” (File 269, 1: 87-89).

Another note of 10 August 1957 refers to the circumstances under which Celibidache was contacted by two Romanian diplomats and reveals the real identity of “LEONARDO” – the Romanian tenor Petre Munteanu who defected after the Communist take-over and who collaborated with Celibidache in several musical projects. The Rome station reports that “KOLB” “wants to include in his repertoire Romanian music. He wants to come to Romania as soon as possible but for now he fears the Americans. Petre Munteanu insists that Comrade Ionel should talk with “KOLB”. “KOLB” sent a watch to his sister in Bucharest through Petre Munteanu and Comrade Ionel considers it is necessary to attract “KOLB” in intelligence work.” (File 269, 1: 104.)

In fact, Celibidache did not like conducting in the US as he could not get the number of rehearsals he insisted upon. He wrote to his friend Trancu-Iași: “In America I am offered whatever I want, but I do not go there” (Trancu-Iași 1997: 52-53). And in another letter in 1957: “All I achieved has been through music without spending a single dollar on advertising, without recording disks, without concessions . . . and without conducting in the US, from where all international careers are launched” (Trancu-Iași 1997: 57-62).

On hearing in 1965 that Celibidache will conduct at the Prague Spring festival, the State Committee for Culture and Art decided to send a delegation to the Czechoslovak capital. It was tasked to discuss a possible visit by the conductor in his country of birth. Celibidache accepted to conduct in a Communist country in the hope of being able to see his siblings. He urged them to apply for passports and visas for Czechoslovakia. The Iași Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs recorded the content of his letters. Thus, Celibidache wrote to his sister Irina:

I believe that in your case the Romanian government will put some pressure on me by refusing to issue passports for my relatives, in the hope that I will come there. If this is their calculation, they are mistaken. It is not true I will visit in spring. I will travel nevertheless to Prague on 19 May. I would be so happy to see someone from my family. (File 269, 1: 131-140.)

The documents show that although the State Committee for Culture and Art was favourable to the idea of allowing members of Celibidache's relatives to travel to Prague, the *Securitate* was raising obstacles. His sister Magdalena had her application initially turned down. According to a report dated 15 June 1965, Celibidache showed his displeasure to the official delegation of Romanian musicians sent to Prague. Some members informed the Romanian Embassy and the matter was promptly communicated to Bucharest:

Magda Celibidache was summoned by Comrade Constanța Crăciun² and asked if she wants to see her brother on the next day – on May 19 – and was put on a plane to Prague together with her 12 years old nephew (the son of the conductor's younger brother). She was met at the airport by professor Avachian,³ a member of the delegation of Romanian musicians invited to the festival and taken to Sergiu Celibidache's hotel. On seeing her – she was tired having had no sleep and having travelled – Celibidache was indignant about her appearance and said: "Oh, dear Magda, how you look, these scoundrels want to kill you". Magda Celibidache tried in vain to explain she was tired and that the long time which had elapsed since they last saw each other (n. b. 24 years) left its marks; he was not to be persuaded. (File 269, 1: 111-112.)

This dramatic reunion after so many years led to an exchange of reproaching letters. To his astonishment, Celibidache found out that Magdalena held left wing views, although the Communist Party had expelled her with serious consequences for her life and professional career. Thus on 13 September 1965 Celibidache wrote to her from Berlin:

² Constanța Crăciun (1914-2002) was a supremo in the field of arts and culture under the Communist dictator Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Minister of Culture (1953-1957), President of the State Council for Culture and Arts (1962-1965).

³ Garabet Avachian (1908-1967), a famous violin teacher in the '60s, at the Conservatoire of Bucharest.

Dear Magda,

I haven't written to you for a while trying to digest my Prague impressions . . . I wasn't expecting at all to find you as you were with certain opinions I cannot get used to . . . I did not like your cheap ostentatious Communism, lacking any depth . . . You still believe in the problems of the moribund capitalism.

I have to get used to your way of being and thinking. I hope to have the opportunity as soon as possible. Romania's musical reorganisation is on my mind. All the important Romanians abroad advise me, beg me, even implore me not to come, even on a visit. I will come nevertheless . . . But I don't know when . . . I want to come only when the people on whom the cultural future of the country depends will have time to listen to me and the power to make decisions evading the conservatism and traditional apathy of our artistic life. I will bring the lancet; they should be the ones wielding it. I will show them how. (CNSAS Archive, I File no. 258930: 116-121.)

Celibidache felt a sense of guilt towards his siblings and in particular towards his elder sister's incomprehensible attitude. "It's not only your fault – he writes – it is also mine. I did not look after you, I thought I had to concern myself with music. A mistake: I know it." (File 258930: 116-121.) He wrote to professor Garabet Avachian, asking him to enquire about his family. Avachian replied:

Dear maestro,

It is only for a while that your brother Radu did not have a normal engineer's salary. Your sister in Iași, Sonia Macovei, has two grown up children. . . . Magdalena is employed by the Romanian Chemical Plant as an unskilled labourer. It is her express wish to do menial work in order to regain the status she had lost. But after her return from Prague things have started to settle. (File 258930: 94.)

Indeed, on her return from Prague, Magdalena Celibidache, who had been a history teacher till 1950, when she was expelled from the Communist Party and sacked, was now transferred to the Ciprian Porumbescu Conservatoire in Bucharest as a librarian (Archive of the National University of Music Bucharest, File no. 3532).

Celibidache triumphed in Prague. Not only the music critics acclaimed his concerts and master classes. Romania's ambassador to Czechoslovakia wrote to his superiors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

Sergiu Celibidache enjoyed the greatest success at the Prague Festival as a conductor and artistic personality. . . . He proposed our country should also send young conductors to his master classes . . . and is offering to obtain 2-3 grants. . . . He accepted our invitation to visit our country for a fortnight in September this year. He was pleasantly impressed by the fact that our structures made it possible for his sister to be sent from Bucharest to Prague in order to meet him. I believe it would be useful to keep in touch with the conductor Sergiu Celibidache; if he will visit the country he should be received by the State Council for Culture and Art and everything should be done to attract him to help our musical life. (File 258930: 42.)

As news about Celibidache's conducting spread in Bucharest, players in the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra were increasingly enthusiastic about the prospect of a visit. On the other hand, the conductors employed by the orchestra were opposed. And the leadership of the State Council for Culture and Art was hesitating. A report produced by the *Securitate* officers dealing with the philharmonic orchestra summed up the situation:

In connection with a possible arrival in the Socialist Republic of Romania of the conductor of Romanian origin Sergiu Celibidache, there are many discussions in the Philharmonic, and the atmosphere between the conductors on one side and the players on the other has become very tense. It reached the point in which one player, Mircea Oprean, stated in a plenary meeting that "90% of our players do not trust our conductors". On the other hand, from what we hear from our informers, the conductors employed by the Philharmonic are, indeed, poor and in order to conceal their weakness they do not bring over good conductors from abroad, or if they do, they are at best of the same level. (File 258930: 39-40.)

Notwithstanding the hesitations and procrastination, Celibidache came in 1970 with the RTV Orchestra from Stockholm, and conducted five concerts. It was a complete triumph. It confirmed all that had transpired in Romania about his exceptional abilities. Yet paradoxically, in the *Securitate* files there is no mention of this event. Neither is there one about the rehearsals and concerts given in 1978 and 1979 with the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra. It is difficult to accept that after 1970 Celibidache ceased to be of interest for the Romanian authorities.



Fig. 2. Sergiu Celibidache at the National University of Music Bucharest, 1970 (photo from the author's personal archive).

What is certain is that Sergiu Celibidache did not visit again Romania until the fall of the Communist regime. In February 1990, at the helm of the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, he gifted his fellow Romanians with the first major cultural event of the new epoch.

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Voicu-Arnăuțoiu, Ioana-Raluca

2013 *Celibidache privit prin Cortina de fier* [Celibidache Followed through the Iron Curtain], (Bucharest: Ars Docendi).

Documents in archives

CNSAS Archive

I File no. 258930 (File of informative surveillance of Sergiu Celibidache)

R File no. 330218, vol. 4 (Network file of Petru Comarnescu)

SIE File no. 269, vol. 1 (File of Sergiu Celibidache)

Archive of the National University of Music Bucharest

File no. 3532 (*Cadre* file of Magdalena Celibidache)