

The Discovery of the “Lost Papers” of Ludwig von Mises

Shortly after the Nazi occupation of Austria in March, 1938, the Gestapo ordered apartment 18 at 24 Wollzeile, District III, in Vienna, sealed and all the possessions in it boxed up and transported away.

This apartment had belonged to Ludwig von Mises. Mises had lived there from 1911 to the Fall of 1934, when he moved to Geneva, Switzerland, to take up a position as Professor of International Economic Relations at the Graduate Institute of International Studies. But he had kept his Vienna apartment, with his mother living there until her death in 1937.

From his residence in Geneva, Mises mailed out, on March 9, 1939, “Information” to his friends in Europe that the Gestapo had carried off the contents of the apartment, and no attempt to get it back had succeeded. He explained that he had lost his library, his personal and family documents, his correspondence, files, papers and manuscripts. They were never seen again. Mises and his friends assumed that they had been destroyed, either by the Nazis or in the destruction of war.

This was not the case.

In May, 1945, as the Second World War was coming to a close, the Soviet Red Army occupied Bohemia, the western region of Czechoslovakia. One of the towns “liberated” by Stalin’s armed forces in Bohemia had served as a repository for records, files and archives seized by the Gestapo in countries overrun by the Nazi regime. Among the tens of thousands of files, papers and boxed up archives the Nazis had stored away were those lost by Ludwig von Mises. During the months following the end of the war, Soviet military trains hauled everything found in this repository to the east—to Moscow. There, these captured documents—including those of Ludwig von Mises—were turned over to the KGB.

In one of the great ironies of history, the papers of one of the greatest intellectual opponents of socialism in the 20th century ended up in the tender care of the Soviet secret police! And they were, indeed, treated with care. On March 6, 1951, a stamp was placed on the “opus,” or annotated index, to all of Mises’ papers, indicating they had been read, arranged and organized, with a brief paragraph summarizing each of the topic sections in the “Mises Fund.” This “Fund” contained 177 separate files, with many of them running into the hundreds of pages.

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Indeed, the entire "Mises Fund" contained more than 10,000 items.

Ludwig von Mises died in 1973, never knowing that the ideological heirs of Karl Marx in Moscow had done everything possible to assure that his "lost papers" were in proper and protected order.

I first heard about the possibility that Mises' papers were, in fact, preserved and "safe" in Moscow during a research trip that my wife, Anna, and I made to Vienna in the summer of 1993. But we had no firm proof until this past summer of 1996, when we found out the name of the archive where the papers were being stored and the actual catalog number of the "Fund."

Now the problem was how to gain access to it. Besides the invaluable assistance of several archivists in the United States, access to the papers would have been impossible without the hard work of my wife, Anna (who is Russian by birth), and her numerous friends in Moscow. These friends knew how to work their way through the labyrinth of the Russian bureaucracy and the network of personal relationships which make up the Russian system of favors and privileges. Through them, contact was made with the archive containing Mises' papers, official invitations were issued and access to the "Fund" obtained. The great difficulty in arranging all of this was due to the fact that this archive still is secret and restricted. But once in Moscow, access to the entire "Fund" and ability to photocopy or microfilm almost anything we wanted would still have been impossible or greatly hampered if not for my wife's special negotiating ability on the spot with those authorities in control of the "Fund."

In addition, Hillsdale College, and especially President George Roche and Vice-President for Development, John

Cervini, provided total support for the project. They arranged from "friends of the College" the most generous financial assistance, without which the journey to the Moscow archive, and the expenses connected with it, would have been impossible. My wife (who, besides her native Russian, has an excellent working knowledge of spoken and written German) and I spent from October 17 to October 26, 1996 going through Mises' papers.

Mises kept almost everything! Indeed, he seems to have been something of a compulsive "pack-rat." There were even the smallest of things, for example, train ticket stubs from the journey to some conference and the receipts from meals eaten at hotels on some lecture trips.

There were two thick folders about his activities during the First World War as an officer with an artillery regiment on the Russian front. Mises kept numerous papers of now faded, almost unreadable, battle plans and orders for combat operations in which his unit participated, with accompanying battle field sketch maps of front-line positions. There were specific orders directed to him for various activities, including temporary transfers for rest and recuperation from illnesses he had. (During our 1993 trip to Vienna, we found his military service file in the Austrian military archive. Mises had been decorated three times for bravery under fire.)

We found in an envelope two old film negatives from which we had prints made. These eighty year-old photos were of Mises with members of his artillery regiment somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains in the Ukraine.

There was a lengthy monograph Mises had written about the economic relationships between Austria-Hungary and the

Ukraine. It had been written by him when he was the officer in command of military currency control in occupied Ukraine, after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March, 1918 had ended the war on the eastern front. Mises' headquarters was in Odessa.

Later in 1918, he was transferred to the Austrian General Staff in Vienna. Another file contained copies of various Austrian government documents about the monetary and fiscal problems of the war. Among the documents were several papers and monographs written by Mises for the Austrian General Staff about the war-time inflation, fiscal and exchange-rate problems in war-time, and on the problems of national minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In another two thick folders were hundreds of letters and postcards written to him by his mother while he was at the front. She seems to have written to him every day. His mother wrote tender words of support, told about family members and friends and the situation on the "home-front" in Vienna. There were only a few short postcards from his brother, Richard, suggesting that they were not really close.

There were also some letters and postcards from a young lady, who even had her picture put on one side of a postcard. The words in them suggest that Mises was a bit of the "ladies' man" in his earlier years!

We also found in another file love letters from his future wife, Margit, written to him in 1927-28. They had been sent in envelopes addressed to his business office at the Austrian Chamber of Commerce. Mises clearly did not want his mother to know about the relationship.

In still another file were typed lectures from some of the seminars he taught at the University of Vienna. They cover a variety of topics on economic theory and policy. He had spent part of one term in the early 1920s presenting an exposition of the mathematical-economic ideas of Leon Walras and Vilfredo Pareto, with neatly drawn graphs explaining the logic of Paretian Indifference Curves. There were also the final exams of his University students in 1919, in which their assignment had been to summarize the arguments Mises had developed during the semester on "The Development of the Marxian Theory of Imperialism."

There was a file about the private seminar he held at his Chamber of Commerce office. He kept lists of the attendees each year (usually jotted down on the back of pieces of paper) and incomplete lists of some of the topics discussed. But there were also the typed full texts of some papers Mises delivered at the private seminar, especially on questions relating to methodology of the social sciences, and the typed commentaries of other seminar participants (e.g., Oskar Morgenstern).

In yet another file were papers relating to his work at the Austrian Chamber of Commerce. There were some of the memoranda and reports he had prepared, including an account of the Chamber's work from 1926 to 1932, in his own clear handwriting.

Several files contained his correspondence. Mises not only kept many of the letters he received (including the envelopes they came in), he also kept a carbon copy of his replies, so the correspondence is complete. Mises was almost always "business-like." There are very few letters with informal comments

about friends and personal affairs. Instead, they are frequently a continuation of economic policy debates—e.g., about the monetary causes of the Great Austrian Inflation of the early 1920s, the problems of interventionism and the unworkability of socialism. Most of these exchanges are with German and Austrian writers and scholars now long-forgotten or unknown.

But there was a separate file of Mises' correspondence with Friedrich Hayek, after the latter's move to London in 1931 until 1934, when Mises moved to Geneva. And there was a thick file of correspondence between Mises and Lionel Robbins (who taught at the London School of Economics). There was even the receipt for the price of a copy of Mises' book, "Socialism," which he had sent to Robbins in 1924.

Mises took a keen and concerned interest in his students and scholar-friends. There were letters of recommendation, for example, in which Mises tried to get research grants or jobs for Fritz Machlup, Gottfried Haberler and several others in places outside of Austria. He seems to have had a good relationship with the Rockefeller Foundation in this regard.

Several files contained exchanges between Mises and publishers over the details of publishing his books (e.g., when galley pages would be sent, etc.).

The correspondence files also clearly demonstrate Mises' influence and high-profile in the central Europe of the 1920s and early 1930s. There was a large number of letters from industrial and business organizations inviting him to join their associations and deliver lectures (he usually declined joining, but often agreed to lecture). Numerous research institutes, professional associations and universities

invited him to participate in conferences or deliver a paper.

Beginning in 1928 Mises did belong to the Vienna Rotary Club. Besides the membership forms, rules and by-laws and notices of meetings, there was in the file the words of a "friendship" song that members were expected to sing. One pictures Ludwig von Mises as a vocalist at a Rotary Club luncheon!

Mises also kept copies of his articles, and he was extremely prolific. This refers not only to his scholarly articles and books, but to the large number of pieces he wrote for the Vienna newspapers and magazines on economic policy issues, with his contributions often being the lead article. (I believe that several of them that we found are not included in Bettina Bien Greaves' excellent annotated bibliography of Mises' work.)

This, I hope, gives a "flavor" of some of what we found among Ludwig von Mises' "lost papers" in the Moscow archive. The timing of this visit, it turns out, was most fortuitous, because we were told that the archive in which Mises' papers are stored is being transferred to another ministry's control that is much more secretive, and the window of opportunity to have had access to them is once again closed.

We did leave Russia with many thousands of pages from the "Mises Fund," either in photocopy or on microfilm. After they have been arranged and cataloged they will in time be available for use by scholars in the Ludwig von Mises Library Room at Hillsdale College. Important and interesting aspects of Mises' life and work during the first half of his life in Europe will now no longer be as much in the dark as they have been up until now.