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Identity: Can archives and archivists contribute to fostering and preserving local, regional, and national identities?

No model of archive activity can be regarded as universal, which, in particular, is starkly visible in Europe. Prepared by a group of experts at the request of the European Commission, a special report was published in 2005 which aimed to provide a study on the situation of the archives in the European Union, and which offered the conclusion that it could hardly be imagined to introduce common rules for all the archives operating in the EU. This international community, which now gathers 27 different countries, can develop and follow common legal regulations and principles concerning activities and practices in numerous fields, such as social, political, or economic. As far as archives are concerned, however, such initiatives are necessarily of a limited nature. The international cooperation between archives in the EU, in their most important respective areas, is thus to be guided by the following principles: providing citizens with access to their documentary heritage and, at the same time, preserving European archives' respective differences; and addressing the need for joint cooperation in order to meet the challenges presented by the revolution in information technology.

Having said that, it has to be admitted that a number of appeals have been made to build the foundations for an international understanding and cooperation, which can only be achieved through mutual interest in respective histories, traditions and systems of values that influence the attitudes and behaviours of entire communities – national, regional, or local – as well as individuals. To put it in a nutshell, it is necessary to know the documentary heritage built by our ancestors and develop it further by ourselves in order to understand ourselves better and know why under certain circumstances the behaviour of a given community differs from that of their closer or remoter neighbours.

As a representative of the State Archives of Poland, an archive institution responsible for the archives in the whole of Poland, I would like to address several

issues in this analysis. Only by addressing these will we be able to find out whether the archives of a given country play a part in fostering civic virtues, and developing and preserving national, regional, and local identities. Focussed on collecting archive fonds as well as storing, describing and making them available to the public, the analysis of the legal foundations and activity of the archives in the selected countries from all the continents leads to the conclusion that the following issues are increasingly regarded as important in the archives' activity. For this reason, research in this field should be done more often and cover a number of areas, including, in particular, **the role of archivists as those who build bridges between the past and the present**. Our contemporaries would hardly be able to access archive resources had it not been for the efforts of the generations of archivists. What is more, these resources would hardly survive if it had not been for the archivists!

This role of an archivist is becoming increasingly important nowadays, which is happening due to social and political changes as well as unprecedented technological progress in creating information, collecting it and making it available to the public. Before we proceed to the issues that are usually described as "computerisation" or "informatisation", **we should dwell for a moment on the issues related to the increased mobility of people over the last few centuries**, i.e. since the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries. In the light of the findings, complex relations occur between the concepts of "national", "regional" and "local" identities. The most striking example is the United States of America, where diverse ethnicities have emerged as one American nation. Its members now very often look for their roots in the archive collections all around the world.

Yet another finding has been provided by a group of European archives which made a joint effort to promote knowledge about the past among the descendants of numerous emigrants. In 2004-2005 they implemented the project entitled Emile – Leaving Europe for America – Early Emigrants' Letter Stories as part of the EU Culture 2000 programmeⁱ.

The overall objective of the project was to attract a larger audience to European cultural heritage, including unique historical sources, such as the letters, photographs, songs and memoirs of emigrants from 1840-1920. These records can

shed light on the causes of emigration as well as pivotal changes in European and American history. They also help us better understand the mechanisms of migration.

The aims of the project:

- promoting cultural dialogue and knowledge about European emigration to the United States,
- making unique historical sources available to audiences varying in background and age by means of travelling exhibitions and a website,
- promoting the preservation of cultural heritage by digitalising historical sources,
- raising the awareness of cultural heritage, which may one day be forgotten,
- promoting the knowledge of the abovementioned era by making it accessible to a „man in the street“; the examples from 5 different countries allow us to learn more about the similarities and differences between the respective European immigrant communities,
- encouraging young audiences and researchers to take part in the project,
- laying foundations for future research by digitalising archive records and making the most of the project's results,
- treating the experiences of European immigrants as a fundamental component in building European identity,
- fostering cooperation between European museums, archives, libraries, non-governmental organisations and cultural institutions.

As part of the project, travelling exhibitions and a website were developed, which presented content in national languages and in English.

The exhibitions and the website were arranged according to the same themes, such as the history of immigration, the history of letters in the respective countries, the causes of migration, voyages across the Atlantic, colonisation of America, work in America, family (women and children), real life stories. The catalogues of the exhibitions were also made available to visitors.

Immigrants' Letters in Poland:

The major Polish source to be used in the project was the collection of immigrants' letters from the State Archive in Warsaw. The archive fond known as Immigrants' Letters holds 355 private letters, more than 200 of which were sent from

the US (the remaining letters were sent from Brasil), written in 1890-1891. Apart from private correspondence, the collection also contains correspondence with travel agencies.

The Polish letters are unique in that they never reached their addressees and were sequestered by the Russian censors. The letters hold the traces of censors' activity, such as highlights made in pencil. The censors paid particular attention to the paragraphs concerning the following issues: bringing family to the US, the possibility of sending ship tickets, encouraging to emigrate, descriptions of illegal routes leading across the border between Russia and Prussia, describing everyday life in the new country. The letters were sequestered with everything they contained, including Russian passports, boarding passes, train tickets in the US, ship companies' adverts. These sources were produced by a group that hardly ever produced any direct written records, and yet was driven by the need to communicate with their families in the old country. Hence the type of Polish used in the correspondence which contains numerous lexical and grammatical mistakes.

The Young EMILE action

Educational activity, too, played an important role in the project. Our Italian partners conducted the action at schools entitled Our Knowledge About the Past Helps Us Understand the Present and Build a Better Future. The central idea of the action was to encourage pupils to learn more about the history of immigration from Trentino and to help them better understand immigrants' individual life stories. The pupils were encouraged to express their views, even if (or especially if, for that matter) they were prejudiced or stereotypical, and to compare their views with the knowledge on immigration they had been provided. Our remaining partner countries conducted archive classes and writing competitions for the pupils.

Promoting the project played a vital role in it, too. The enterprise attracted wide coverage from the press and other media. Other projects, too, have continued to meet the EMILE project's objectives.

In 2011, the State Archive in Warsaw was invited by the Immigration History Research Centre at the University of Minnesota to take part in the research project concerning the letters exchanged between the immigrants to the US and their families in the old country. The central point of the project was to allow the widest possible access to the immigrants' correspondence through digitalising it and making it available on the Internet.

The work focussed on the letters by immigrants from Europe written between 1850-1970 and held in the collections belonging to the Immigration History Research Center. As part of the enterprise, a website, too, was developed which ever since has been uploaded with digitalised letters together with their transcription and translation into English. Attached to the letters was the information on their authors as well as photographs.

Scholars, archivists, librarians and museum curators from Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary, who specialise in the field of immigration from Europe to North America, were also invited to take part in the project. The aim of the enterprise was to place all the mentioned immigrant letters from the archive holdings of the State Archive in Warsaw on the Internet, including both the letters from the US and Brazil, and to make these archive holdings available to the largest audience there is.

Successful as it is, the project on the immigration from Europe to America illustrates a larger problem, namely that of access to sources concerning millions of people who, in order to find out more about their roots, have to search in the archives located in the countries where they no longer reside or whose citizenship they do not hold. Especially difficult in this respect is the **situation in Central and Southern Europe**, which first arose on a massive scale as a result of the settlement between Turkey and Greece (international protocol signed on 30th January 1923 as integral part of the Treaty of Lausanne signed on 24th the same year) which stipulated that Greek population had to relocate from Asia Minor, even though they had inhabited it for more than 5 thousand years!ⁱⁱ This type of solution was very often used to settle the relations between the countries in the Balkans (e.g. the case of Eastern Thracia and the relocation of the Bulgarian population from the area), and they later served as an example to follow by the leaders of the great powers who laid the foundations for the new international order in Central Europe after World War II.

Hitherto regarded as a uniquely Balkan means of regulating international affairs, this method was also put to use at the very heart of Europe. Following the decisions made by the Allies, millions of Germans were relocated from the areas which are now Northern and Western Poland and where population of Polish extraction arrived. The latter had in turn inhabited those areas of pre-war Poland which the Allies decided to incorporate into the Soviet Union.ⁱⁱⁱ The operation constituted the ultimate stage in the process of territorial transformations in Central Europe. This has been vividly described by the following map, which illustrates how the territory of Poland evolved over several centuries:

The Map

I have taken this illustration from the publication prepared by the Head Office of State Archives for the programme organised by the Council of Europe entitled **The Reconstitution of the Memory of Poland**. The programme was launched in 1998 with the aim of registering archive records from the European countries' collections that may be used as a replacement for the documentary heritage that Poland had irretrievably lost during World War II.^{iv} To a significant extent, the objectives of this project correspond to the central idea of this paper, in which I would like to

emphasise the need to promote cooperation between the archives of those countries whose citizens can find out more about their roots only if they access the sources created and held outside the country where they reside.

The main aim of the programme is to provide information on the sources regarding Polish history that were lost in the period between the partitions and 1918, when Poland regained independence, and right until the turmoil of World War II (1772-1918/1945). The programme concentrates not only on administrative holdings, but also on the records concerning the activity of learned societies, social organisations and family archives, which are regarded as an equally valuable record of Polish history and a means to develop national identity. It has been assumed that a wide scope of the programme, both in terms of chronology and discussed topics, will allow for filling in the blank spaces in Poland's history and will make it possible to unearth the documents important from the perspective of welfare services (e.g. relocation and forced labour certificates issued during World War II) or vital in the process of recreating the history of those Polish families who inhabited those Polish territories that no longer belong to Poland. The final result of the programme is to develop the "virtual archive fond", free of charge and entirely available on the Internet.

As a result of this activity, in the years 1998-2012 the sources concerning the history of Poland and Polish people were unearthed in 60 archives in 13 different states in Europe and Asia, namely in Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Italy and Vatican.

The results of preliminary research carried out by archivists from Poland and abroad are now being registered in a digital database. Currently, the central database contains information on the archive records from 52 different archive fonds and gathers nearly 6 thousand separate documents. Part of the information on the archive records containing sources on Polish history is now waiting for verification. Once verified, it will be incorporated into the central database.

As regards the relations between Polish archives and their counterparts in the neighbouring countries, it is The Reconstitution of the Memory of Poland programme that served as a common ground for cooperation. As a result of the programme, numerous citizens of Poland obtained information on the sources concerning their past and their origins. The activity in this respect has been to a considerable extent facilitated by the use of contemporary technology, such as digital processing. Thanks to this, Polish archives have now embarked on yet another project entitled **Restoring the Memory of Poles**, which aims to provide online access to registers of births, deaths and marriages, and register office records created between the 18th and 20th centuries in Eastern Poland, which now belongs to the Republic of Ukraine. The digitalisation of several hundred registers of births, deaths and marriages should provide fast and free access to the records that are now of particular interest to

people recreating their family histories. This may involve even several million Poles in total, whose identity as such is a complex phenomenon. While on the national level these people have no difficulty defining their identity, on the regional and local level they do experience such difficulty. As they identify themselves – often unreservedly – with their region and their current place of residence, these people are also usually aware of the fact that their families – often for several centuries – lived in the places and the regions that are far away from where they live now.

I am deeply aware of the fact that there are many programmes such as Restoring the Memory of Poles that still should be launched in Central and Southern Europe. As regards Polish-German affairs, the initiative of a similar nature, and also concerning registers of births, deaths and marriages, and register office records, was taken much earlier. As a result, the catalogues^v of register office records and registers of births, deaths and marriages created in the West and the North of what is today's Poland and which are held in archive collections both in Poland and Germany. It can be said that the moment when these archive holdings are made available online is already looming on the horizon.

The initiatives presented above and many others taken by the archives in Central Europe seem to prove without doubt that the issues related to fostering and preserving local, regional and national identities in the world today go beyond the boundaries of an individual country state. This only goes to show that the concept of identity is a relative one, as it may be both connected to a sense of belonging to a given area or a given nation. What is more, it can be rightly said that each type of identity may possess specific properties. The ethnic minority scattered around the world may have a sense of belonging to a nation that lives far away from where the minority resides. Simultaneously, this minority can identify themselves with a region or a place they inhabit. From this perspective, the issues related to local identity should more often become an object of international cooperation between the archives.

All this presents a challenge that archives are facing at the moment. It seems that they have managed to solve the most important problem, or are now taking the steps to solve it, namely that of granting the right to access archive holdings to all of those who are interested in it, regardless of their nationality. The best evidence in this respect in Europe is the activity of the Council of Europe and the recommendation concerning access to historical archive records that the council enacted in 2000^{vi}. Of significance, too, is the activity of the International Council on Archives, the results of which are to be accepted by the congress organised in Brisbane^{vii}. As far as this debate is concerned, we need to be aware that the problem should be discussed from two different points of view: that of physical access (various obstacles may occur here, such as reading rooms' opening hours or limits on archive units that can be accessed daily, etc.) and that of utilised systems of description contained in information records. It happens very often that these systems are not easily understood by everyone, especially foreign users. Numerous problems arise due to

the fact that archive records are being made available on the Internet. It seems that there is still room for improvement in the way we use existing technology.

If we rightly assume that the problems related to a sense of identity on national, regional and local levels are growing and will continue to do so, as people are achieving higher levels of education and have better access to culture and information, we as archivists should seek increasingly effective tools in order to cater for growing social needs in this respect. In the IT tools that we use and the programmes that we run we should take account of specific needs of the users of archive information, both in our home countries and abroad. We can manage these tasks by digitalising archive records and making them available on the Internet; and by utilising advanced systems of description that may cater for both native and foreign users (automatic translation into foreign languages may be worth considering). Vital, too, is the need to share information on archive records which are scattered in archive holdings, libraries, museum collections in two or more countries. We should also remember about our role in the cooperation with other research and remembrance institutions, which may look to us for support in the projects they are undertaking. As far as Poland is concerned, a promising one is the Virtual Shtetl project undertaken by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is now being developed in Warsaw. If we bear in mind that a significant percentage of the Jews all around the world have their roots in Poland (this figure is estimated at 75%^{viii}), we will easily understand and embrace the importance of such a project, especially since it uses contemporary IT tools, such as tools for browsing www2 content. In the light of what has been said before, it may be added that such a project will contribute in the process of fostering and preserving identities that are at the same time national, regional, and local.

There is no doubt that archive websites have an equally important role to play (and they will continue to do so), as they have to live up to the expectations of professional researchers, genealogy specialists, various sorts of hobbyists, and individuals who often for the first time in their lives are trying to establish and confirm their personal data or legal titles. As regards the issues of fostering and preserving local, regional and national identities, state archives in Poland are using homepages of the Head Office of State Archives and individual State Archives in order to present the results of the programmes they undertake, such as the one concerning today's small towns or villages that once played an important role in the history of the country. Known as "Polish Towns and Cities in Archive Records", the programme mentioned above was implemented in 2003, and brought satisfactory results indeed. It contributed in the process of restoring the memory about the places, among those people whose ancestors had resided there over the centuries and those whose families had arrived not so long ago. It should be added that the programme enjoyed considerable popularity!

Carried on by means of a website and addressed to the largest possible audience in Poland, this activity also includes several other programmes which were

implemented by the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw (this institution is equal in rank with state archives) and which aimed to present pivotal events in Poland's history. This in turn means fostering Poles' national identity, who can later come up with their own interpretations of the nation's history, the history presented in such a way that it both mentions the events that Poles are usually proud of and those that bear testimony to the nation's weaknesses and the country's difficulties.

The results we have achieved in terms of fostering and preserving local, regional, and national identities allow me to point out that getting to know the past may be a successful process, even if it concerns a large audience of people who are interested in the data from archive holdings and access it either as images or copies of original records, or as studies on specific topics. It can be said that this type of cognition is superior to other forms presenting historical processes and individual historical events. This type of activity is the best evidence that archives contribute in the process of fostering and preserving the identity of the people who use their holdings. As we are deeply aware of the fact that the interest in archives will be rapidly growing in society, which means that the number of people visiting the archives and their reading rooms will be growing, too, we should now take steps to help these people access our holdings on an individual and independent basis. A remarkable example in this respect has been set by the National Archives in London, which offers new readers courses and training sessions on how to search through archive records and how to use these records judiciously. It is a perfect example which should be followed and promoted all around the world.

As I would like to refer to similar examples in this respect, set by Polish state archives, I have to mention our initiatives to facilitate research carried out by genealogy specialists^{ix} and the legal regulations that have been introduced to allow readers to make digital copies of archive records on an individual basis and also free of charge.

To conclude, it should be pointed out that work management and involvement on the part of archivists may be a critical factor in achieving good results. Growing access to digitalised archive records presents a challenge in terms of how to educate archive users, whom in turn we should both help to understand archive records they have accessed and to interpret various types of content that can be retrieved from documentary heritage, such as files, cartographic records, or technical documentation. Yes, archivists should bridge generations, and pay particular attention to preserve sources concerning the history of the nation, region or local community, and make it available to the public.

ⁱ I owe this information to Marta Jaszyńska, who represented the State Archive in Warsaw in this project. She took part in the work of the following team:

- the project's leader: The Foundation of the Regional Museum in Östergötland, Sweden,
- partners in the project: the State Archive in Warsaw, Poland (supported by the State Archive in Płock),
- the Mayo County Council Library, Ireland,
- Provincia Autonoma di Trento, Italy,
- The Rožmberk Society, the Czech Republic.

ⁱⁱ Pentzopoulos D., *The Balcan Exchange of Minorities and its Impact upon Greece*, Pais-Hague 1962

ⁱⁱⁱ *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*, bearbeitet von T. Schieder, Bonn 1953-1962

^{iv} Warszawa 1998.

^v *Deutsche Personenstandsbücher und Personenstandseinträge von Deutschen in Polen = German records of births, deaths and marriages : 1898-1945 / Tomasz Brzózka ; hrsg. vom Verband der Standesbeamten der Republik Polen ; [Übers. durch Jerzy Bielerzewski]. - Frankfurt am Main ; Berlin : Verlag für Standesamtswesen, 2000. - 500 pp. : faks. ; 25 cm.*

^{vi} Recommendation Council of Europe 2000

^{vii} This is taken care of by the team managed by Trudy Peterson.

^{viii} N. Davies, *A History*, Oxford University Press 1996.

^{ix} *Źródła do badań genealogicznych w Archiwum Państwowym w Krakowie [Sources on Genealogy Research from the State Archives in Krakow / Karolina Gołąb-Malowicka ; [translated into English by Bożena Traciewicz]. The State Archives in Krakow. Kraków: Archiwum Państwowe, 2008. 96 pp., [64] p. fig.: illustrations (incl. colour) ; 24 cm.*