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ACCESS TO ARCHIVES, ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

Abstract

Viewed upon as repositories of "original" materials, the concept of authenticity permeates the very meaning of archives. The aim of the following report is to present a set of research methods and techniques that historians use when embarking on a quest for original archival documents and, inevitably, a number of dilemmas connected with the (in)accessibility of sources. How important (and informing) is the archive's role in the historians' production of knowledge? Does professionalism of archivists influence profoundly the outcome of the researcher's agenda and, at the same time, help mould further awareness of relevant archival material dispersed across collections and beyond national borders? Archivists play a significant part not only in creating information to produce social and historical knowledge but also in reconstituting social memories that never should never fade.

Key words: Archives, accessibility, professionalism, archival research methods, cooperation

ACCESSO AGLI ARCHIVI, ACCESSO AL SAPERE

Sintesi

Visti come depositi di materiali "originali", il concetto di autenticità permea il significato stesso degli archivi. L'obiettivo della seguente relazione è quello di presentare una serie di metodologie e tecniche di ricerca che gli storici utilizzano quando si imbarcano nella ricerca di documenti d'archivio originali e, inevitabilmente, di una serie di dilemmi connessi con l'accessibilità delle fonti. Quanto è importante (e informante) il ruolo dell'archivio nella produzione di conoscenza da parte degli storici? La professionalità degli archivisti influenza profondamente l'esito dell'agenda del ricercatore, e allo stesso tempo, aiuta a plasmare un'ulteriore consapevolezza del pertinente materiale d'archivio disperso tra le collezioni e oltre i confini nazionali? Gli archivisti svolgono un ruolo significativo non solo nella creazione di informazioni per produrre conoscenze sociali e storiche, ma anche nella ricostruzione di memorie sociali che non dovrebbero mai svanire.

Parole chiave: archivi, accessibilità, professionalità, metodi di ricerca archivistica, cooperazione

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DOSTOP DO ARHIVOV, DOSTOP DO ZNANJA

Izvleček

Z vidika hrambe izvirnega arhivskega gradiva je koncept avtentičnosti globoko zasidran v sam pomen arhivov. Namen pričujočega poročila je predstavitev izbranih raziskovalnih metod in tehnik, ki jih zgodovinarji uporabljamo pri svojem iskanju izvirnih arhivskih dokumentov in s tem dilem, ki so nujno povezane z (ne)dostopnostjo arhivskega gradiva. Kako pomembna (in povedna) je vloga arhivistov pri zgodovinarjevem ustvarjanju znanja? Ali lahko profesionalnost arhivista učinkovito sooblikuje raziskovalno tematiko in obenem pomaga pri širjenju vedenja o pomembnem arhivskem gradivu, ki je razpršeno po zbirkah in celo arhivih preko nacionalnih meja? Arhivisti igrajo pomembno vlogo ne le pri ustvarjanju informacij za snovanje socialnega in zgodovinskega vedenja, temveč tudi pri poustvarjanju socialnega spomina, ki ne sme nikoli zbledeti.

Ključne besede: Arhivi, dostopnost, profesionalnost, arhivske raziskovalne metode, sodelovanje

The questions of the very "accessibility of the realities of the past" and of the (unmistakably subjective) efforts of historical narration to bestow meaning upon the seemingly "chaotic" and uniquely incomplete bits of human experience preserved in archival documents or oral history are primarily centred on authenticity. Historical investigation is deemed to be "objective" and "verifiable" if it is based on authentic materials that naturally establish the link between conceptual assumptions of what happened to what "really happened". As repositories of "original" materials, the notion of authenticity is embedded in the very meaning of archive (cf. Blouin and Rosenberg, 2010: 85).

As a modern historian I will try to present my own experience of working in a number of archives defined as "active agents of political accountability, social memory and national identity" (Cook, 2002: 38) while searching for original documents for my doctoral research. I studied First World War primary sources that ranged from official military and government records to personal collections, diaries, correspondences, photographs, pamphlets and posters, all of which were essential to support and enhance my historical analysis. It is important to note that my quest for primary resources is not mine alone; this paper tries to encompass and delineate historical research practice and archival work in very general terms. `What archival and legal dilemmas do historians face when conceptualising their research agenda? How helpful – if not crucial -- are in fact archives (and archivists) in the historians' production of knowledge?

The aim of this report is to show a set of research methods and techniques that historians employ when embarking on archival research and to uncover some of the complex issues related to accessibility of both archives and archival material, as well as to look at the impact of the environment and archival institutions on historian's work from the very start to the publication of research findings. This paper also draws on some of the conclusions made by the analysis on archival research practices conducted by a team of researchers working on the EU-funded CENDARI (Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure) project, ongoing between 2012 and 2016 (cf. Beneš, Bobič, Richter, Smith, Buchner, 2013).

It may be said that historians engage with the archives in order to discern the scope of material within collections, while seeing the archives as “symbiotically intertwined with evolving information and communications technology” (Gilliland, McKemmish, Lau, 2006: 18). In view of contemporary digital research tools, archival work is growingly recognised for its “complexity, sophistication and interdisciplinary value” (ibid.), although the researchers still tend to identify and access relevant material by means of traditionally published guides, finding aids, indexes, lists and catalogues.

This also gives rise to the question of what changes have been brought about in the way historians access and interpret primary sources given the digitisation of original documents and introduction of complex search engines that are challenging fundamental approaches to archival research (cf. Cunningham, 2003).

For historians, preliminary preparation before actually going to an archive is essential; this includes planning on what archives to visit and which archival collections to see, although the latter largely depends on the individual stage of research. At the beginning of my own research I stayed very open to various and voluminous sources and information and followed the narrative pattern that logically presented itself by the material in the chosen archives while hoping that the archival trail would lead me to new illuminating finds. The nature of my research on war and Catholicism in Slovenia between 1914 – 1918 dictated the selection of archives in Slovenia but also in Italy (Archdiocesan Archive in Gorizia) and Austria (Austrian State Archives in Vienna). I decided to start with smaller Slovenian archives: regional archives and especially church archives (beginning with the Archdiocesan Archive in Ljubljana) that were particularly relevant for my thesis on Catholic faith and its multifarious impacts on the shaping of the (Habsburg) loyalty among the Slovenian troops and civilians in the rear. My study was principally interested in people’s mentality and was largely based on the examination of personal accounts with the aim of discovering how people internalized, interpreted and reinterpreted their reality. Letters and diaries, written at the front, invariably give a strong sense of immediacy and I was planning to use them extensively. In spite of the fact that one has to read them cautiously because of the possibility of yielding to the author’s (un)conscious manipulation and due to the ever present likelihood of the soldiers’ (self) censorship while trying to convey the unspeakable, they give an invaluable insight into the construction of the men’s religious imagination and the way this moulded their understanding of the war (cf. Bobič, 2012).

The archival sources that were of special interest to me therefore included personal collections, especially wartime diaries, letters or postcards sent to and from the front and unpublished memoirs of people from all walks of life. According to the regulations of the diocesan archives in Slovenia, all material, older than 50 years, is available for research, unless the donor determined otherwise. Likewise, personal collections are accessible 50 years after their creation, unless the creator stipulated differently. Furthermore, church documents that contain personal information are accessible to researchers 80 years from their creation or 20 years after the death of the person in question if the date of death is known and if other regulations do not determine this any other way (cf. Regulations on the use of archival material in diocesan archives, SŠK, 2017). Another church archival source that calls for attention is *Status Animarum* (the parish family book), which is a register of people living in a parish and of events related to them and is accessible 100 years after its creation (cf. ibid). The latter gives a very concise overview of parishioners’ lives, especially in rural areas with a traditionally smaller and stable population as opposed to cities with a predominantly high migration rate.

Among the sources that proved extremely valuable for the First World War research were meticulously recorded wartime parish chronicles that were mostly kept at the Archdiocesan Archive in Ljubljana, but many still turned out to be dispersed across the parishes in the country. Given that the information on them is “virtually invisible”, one has to gather as much data on these sources as possible from the many local amateur collectors or the parish priests themselves. However, the parish (and thus, private) archival sources are oftentimes scarcely documented (if at all!); the guidebooks (cf. *Vodnik po fondih in zbirkah Nadškofijskega arhiva v Ljubljani*, Ljubljana, 1999; Krampač, 2003) provided at the Archdiocesan Archive, on the other hand, are very useful but even more useful may be the professional advice given by the archivists who work there.

The archive’s own narrative about holdings relevant for research is certainly important early on when a researcher is trying to efficiently pinpoint the most significant sources. Although the description of holdings may appear rather brief, either obtainable online or in published guides, it could still be valuable as a clue of what type of material the archive does have or of what is missing. In this manner it acts as a beckon in the archival selection process.

Online finding aids are very important through the whole research process; they also help determine the length of time one might have to spend in an archive. The physical and geographical location of the archive(s) often matters for sheer financial and family reasons; it is immensely useful to see how much research work can actually be done from afar. It may be said that the quality of archival research preparation depends on the quality of online finding aids in that they help clarify and strengthen the research questions that revolve around accessible sources and shape the research schedule.

What is of high importance here is that researchers familiarize themselves early with the existent national legislations on the (in)accessibility of archival resources; Slovenian legislation on accessing archival material containing personal information of patients, for instance, only allows access to medical records of deceased persons for scientific purposes upon written agreement of their lawful heirs (if not previously stipulated otherwise by the patient) or if the patient’s identity in the collection cannot be established without provoking considerable cost, time or effort (cf. ZAGOOP, UL RS 85/2016). Apart from the understanding of legal framework it is extremely helpful to seek advice from fellow researchers who have already worked at a particular archive: this is all the more desired because the archives differ greatly in terms of physical accessibility (working hours and restriction on the material accessed per day) and so do the possibilities of reproduction as well as the levels of the archivists’ professionalism in providing service (on the ethics of access and on access in some of the archives of the EU, cf. Winn, 2015; Križaj, 2007; Glažar et al., 2001).

The length of stay in an archive generally varies from one hour to several months and greatly depends on the nature of research, scope of relevant material, geographical location (distance), financial means, and, of course, individual’s timetable. If one starts researching in smaller archives (that may nonetheless be invaluable in terms of available research material) with little or non-existent digital presence, the only possibility left is to consult the guide books (if not the archivists themselves) upon arrival at the archive; this at the same time means that the researcher is only able to order the desired archival boxes in situ. In the case of the Diocesan Archives in Gorizia I contacted the corresponding authorities prior to the visit to explain what material I was searching for and this was also how I received the first-hand information on appropriate collections, accessibility

and some practical issues. An early consultation with archivists may be essential when working on holdings in "hidden" and little-known archives, in that they could give information that otherwise could not have been uncovered. Given the level of granularity of the kind of sources I wanted, archivists became my research assistants by readily providing me with advice on relevant material and by even making further enquiries about sources. Such collaboration can lead researchers to many new "hidden" layers of data that may significantly substantiate any archival investigation.

It may also be claimed that the advantage of working in smaller and less known private archives (such as parish/monastic archives) is the possibility of encountering unexpectedly rich biographical fragments. Moreover, the varied and comprehensive collections can include rare historical sources but also bulletins, books, journals, magazines, etc. (cf. Garaba, 2018). Such private collections as a rule tend to be less extensive and easier to manage; the disadvantage of those archives for the users, however, are often short opening hours, lack of or insufficient study rooms and restrictions on using digital tools.

With larger archives come larger options of choosing material: apart from the online guides users have the chance to consult indexes available in study rooms. This is the moment when it becomes useful to understand the organization of that particular archive and to follow the rules of access; again, once there, consultation with archivists may often prove essential. It is important to bear in mind that there are also academic restrictions to access that are enforced in some archives (e.g. the Vatican Secret Archives) and researchers need to be prepared that, for instance, the Vatican archives will not accept anyone without the reference or proven knowledge of Latin.

Following the national legislation on accessing archival material, the archivists are all the more helpful to the users when they know the collections very well. It may hold true, though, that whenever the online information on holdings is abundant or if the online resources are good, the archivist's role in communication with the researcher diminishes; so long as the archives are not poorly organised. Archivists and historians (as well as other researchers) should engage with each other to see how sources could be retained and how they could be made accessible. The archivists' help is all the more precious when offering assistance with finding aids that are in a language the researcher cannot read or when they are able to give advice about the contents of unorganised archival collections.

One of the biggest assets of the "digital turn" (or the digitisation in our professional and everyday lives) is that, upon official agreement, most public archives allow researchers to take digital photos of the archival material, yet under terms and conditions set by the archival institution. The private – church – archives in Slovenia only allow reproduction of 25% of accessible parish registers and *Status Animarum*; other photocopies of the church documents may be made with the explicit permission of the archivists and under condition that there is no danger of damaging the fragile archival papers. Users need to officially request any type of reproduction and place their personal information, the material they wish to reproduce, and explain the purpose of reproduction (cf. SŠK, 2017). In the post archival research phase, it becomes essential for the users to organize them effectively, thematically or in accordance with the location of sources, the date of particular research trips, or by research "subtopics" that can feed into further scholarly texts. Creating one's own digital archive with some level of coherence is necessary to avoid confusion and making a pdf file with exact citation and archival reference is almost always a prerequisite for compiling a reliable bibliography.

It may be said that archives provide a highly professional service when archivists are good at "creating information" to produce not only "social or historical understanding but the very elements of social and historical knowledge itself" (Blouin and Rosenberg, 2010: 86). As archival users, historians focus their debate on "how documents and papers are used" rather than created. They are seldomly interested into discussing the processes of archiving as anything more than the preserving of knowledge. Yet the goal of compiling archival collections is not merely to document collections but to consciously capture individual and national histories, to restore and reconstruct (social) memories and to prevent them from falling into oblivion.

Transnational aspect of research work undoubtedly affects one's approach to archives, all the more so given the fragmentation of sources. Yet how does the accessibility of material from different archival contexts affect the conceptualization and finalization of research projects and how do the researchers resolve the potential obstacles when working on transnational subjects?

According to Jennifer Ruthner and Roger C. Schonfeld (2012), who published an analysis on how to best support the changing research practices of historians, identifying "international" archives and coping with scattered resources kept in them, pose a large challenge to contemporary researchers, in that this "fragmentation" seriously hinders the thorough planning of research trips and the subsequent archival analysis. The term "international archives" is problematic enough since it suggests that these archives follow a different logic than "national archives" along with their specific legislation. Transnational research, however, implies that the archival work is not conducted in international but rather national contexts that may strongly differ from the national (or cultural) background the researcher is embedded in. Transnational history in essence follows the migration of ideas, peoples or objects across national (or other defined) borders, examining the nation from different angles and within a complex web of social forces that escape national boundaries.

The hardships connected with transnational research or archival trips further underline the convenience of investigating online archival documents (along with online journals) and of digitising the material in the archives. In line with Cunningham's words, a significant portion of archival work today has been shifted to work from home or office, inciting the archivists to justifiably believe that "in some cases historians' archival skills are now focused primarily upon mastering the technologies of their laptop and digital camera software in order to minimise the time they spend within [archival] search rooms" (Cunningham, 2012). Such application of digital tools to contemporary research is indeed valuable to transnational historians, whose efforts are concentrated on researching archival sources based in more than one country and written in more than one language. Comparative archival research methods with a structural or conceptual focus can be employed with an emphasis on mutual dependencies, which may be grouped together as producing studies on a "relational" basis (cf. Ther, 2003; Cohen and O'Connor, 2004; Eisenberg, 2003).

Transnational context acutely brings about issues related to inaccessibility of individual files or whole archives. This may be due to purely technical reasons, such as temporary closure of an archive due to relocation or renovation, although a more serious impact on research occurs for matters of legal restriction with privacy laws varying to a certain degree in different countries. This obstacle may greatly hinder especially the work undertaken by researchers of contemporary history while the inaccessibility of sources for political reasons nearly always remains an insurmountable hurdle. With anyone researching documents pertaining to the First World War and its immediate aftermath,

controversy with regard to legal accessibility of holdings is virtually non-existent. Major issue in this regard is having to deal with the likely fragmentation of sources which can be tackled not only by employing available digital finding aids, but also by relying on the sound advice coming from fellow researchers, archival experts from various archives or from the local collectors of First World War artefacts.

Accessibility of archival material (and awareness of laws on the matter in specific countries) definitely shapes and widens (or narrows) one's research perspective as well as hones the final strength of the historical analysis. Preliminary archival trips to gain knowledge on holdings may prove essential for expediting research and for firmly outlining or even limiting the thesis. Given the number of strategies researchers can use when uncovering "new" archival material, stretching from employing online or printed guides (along with published academic texts) to consulting colleagues, amateur collectors and archivists as research assistants, we may not entirely agree with Cunningham who voiced the archivists' concern that "those who have entered their careers with access to online catalogues and documents as a familiar basis for their research skills, the adjustment to paper indexes found only in archives, contemporary registry systems and layered arrangements of former references can be something of a shock" (Cunningham, 2012).

When centred upon the question of production of knowledge, based on the account of sources, the power of archives and archivists is to structure what is knowable and what is known. In the words of Jay Winter, archives are truly "prisms of the past, shaping narratives historians mistakenly think they create themselves." Archives are guardians of the present and the past and are legally accountable for selecting, saving and transmitting "the truth" about the world and time gone by. The archivists in this sense possess knowledge (in so far as the truth is embodied in the documents that the archives hold) and actively participate in (re)creating social, cultural, and political ideas and values. They therefore contribute towards reconstitution of social memory and of "what is and can be known" (Blouin and Rosenberg, 2010), provoking historians to admit their dependency on the archives and the strength they embody.

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