

Dr MATEJA JERAJ

## THE SOCIAL ROLE OF ARCHIVES AND THEIR PUBLIC IMAGE

The public image of archives should conform to their functions, or to their role in society. Is this really the case?

In recent decades, archives have increasingly gained relevance both in Europe as well as in other developed parts of the world. Archives are seen as the institutions that bear major responsibility for the preservation of human memory. Interest in archive material is increasing. The number of professional or amateur researchers of the past is also on the rise, as are the needs of the state and public administration for documents kept in the archives. Archive material has already been acquiring importance from the aspect of democracy, while access to archives is ever more becoming a right and no longer a privilege. The increased prominence of archival institutions is also leading to changes in their functions. Archival institutions may be viewed as repositories for historic archives, or, they may also control how creators within the public sector manage documents.<sup>1</sup>

In Slovenia the functions of public archival institutions - both the state and the regional archives - are regulated by the Protection of Documents and Archives and Archival Institutions Act<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the acquiring, saving, processing and making available for use of public and private archives, these functions include the evaluation of documents at public law entities, professional training of the employees in such institutions, cooperation with the owners of private archives, keeping records of public and private archives (including archives kept abroad that refer to Slovenia and its citizens), disseminating cultural values in connection with archives, and doing research on archival science, history and other fields connected with archive material. In order to be able to carry out all these activities, both new expert skills as well as sufficient funds need to be acquired, particularly owing to the increasing amount of electronic documents. The fact that archives perform important functions is not enough in order for them to be valued by society. The conditions, including the material ones, which the state is willing to provide for archives depend much on the public awareness of the importance of archive material.

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<sup>1</sup>Taken from: Claes Gränström: E-uprava in upravljanje z dokumenti - zahteve, problemi in rešitve. Tehnični in vsebinski problemi klasičnega in elektronskega arhiviranja [E-administration and document management – requirements, issues and solutions. Technical and substantive issues of classical and electronic archiving]. Collection of scientific papers from the supplementary training course. Maribor 4/2005, No. 1, p. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup>Article 53 of the Protection of Documents and Archives and Archival Institutions Act, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 30/2006.

But how do archives win the trust and favour of the public?

This issue is not new. Ever since the French Revolution, when archives were gradually being opened to the wider strata of society, archivists strove to arouse interest in archives and thus facilitate the acquisition of premises, human resources and funds. Due to their very existence, archival institutions are interested in attracting people, acquainting them with their work and stirring them to make use of archive material. Today archival institutions turn to both state bodies as well as the broader public. They often seek to establish contacts with researchers in history, expecting they would be the right ones to help realise their plans.<sup>3</sup> Establishing such contacts “is not easy and requires patience, sustained efforts, cogent arguments and lobbying skills...”<sup>4</sup>

Archivists in Slovenia choose many different channels to communicate with the public. They meet in person with the creators of documents or the people attending lectures and visiting exhibitions, they meet with the users of archives in libraries, or get to know them through their written requests and desires. They address the public indirectly through various publications or through the mass media.

Contacts with the creators of public and private archives are extremely important as they decide which material may enter an archival institution and in what form. As concerns public documents, archival institutions cooperate with their creators in drafting guidelines for the extraction of archive material from a body of documents, and organise various education courses and lectures for them. While public material enters archival institutions through official channels, cooperation with the creators of private documents is somewhat different. The number of such creators increased after 1991 when the new Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia abolished so-called public property. Archival institutions have to exert special efforts to acquire private documents. The owners have to be assured that their material will be taken good care of by a competent archival institution. In addition, some owners have to be offered assistance in systematising and cataloguing their material. In recent years the Archives

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<sup>3</sup>Taken from: Andrea Wettmann: Arhivski stiki z javnostjo v Nemèiji – težišèe strokovne diskusije in nove zasnove v strokovnem izobraževanju [Contacts of archival institutions with the public in Germany – the focal point of expert discussion and new concepts in professional education], Arhivi (Archives), Year XVIII, No. 1-2, Ljubljana 1995, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Claes Gränström: E-uprava in upravljanje z dokumenti - zahteve, problemi in rešitve. Tehnièni in vsebinski problemi klasiènega in elektronskega arhiviranja [E-administration and document management – requirements, issues and solutions. Technical and substantive issues of classical and electronic archiving]. Collection of scientific papers from the supplementary training course. Maribor 4/2005, No. 1, p. 61.

of the Republic of Slovenia, the country's central archival institution, have invested special efforts in acquiring those privately owned documents which refer to the period of Slovenia's democratisation and its path towards independence.

All archive work is essentially public-oriented, with its ultimate goal being the easiest and broadest possible use. Public archives are accessible to all people.<sup>5</sup> The spectrum of users is highly varied, ranging from “those constituting the so-called public opinion, to those actively participating in state management.”<sup>6</sup> Interaction with the users takes place in archival libraries or through other channels such as telephone conversations or mail, and similar. Users could be divided into three groups. The first group is represented by those who use archives to conduct scientific research; the second group is users who are interested in archive material for a particular reason which cannot be considered science-oriented, such as genealogy researchers; the third group is composed of “those who require an archive to exercise or protect a right, as well as state politicians and civil servants who grant these rights.”<sup>7</sup>

Professional researchers usually know what they are looking for; amateur researchers are generally able to make use of archive material only with the help of archivists, while clients who need certificates or supporting documents for administrative reasons, take up most of our time. For many years Slovenian archives were used to meeting the demands of the first group of users only. After the political system changed in 1991, the number of users comprising the third group rose drastically, eventually surpassing the numbers of all the other users.<sup>8</sup> Such developments prompted numerous measures to redress the injustices that befell many people under the former political system. The Denationalisation Act of 1991<sup>9</sup> provided the legal foundations for the return of unjustly confiscated property while the Redressing of Injustices Act of 1996<sup>10</sup> granted former political prisoners and relatives of the victims of post-war killings the right to redress. However, redress had to be granted also to the victims of World War II who had not yet received any compensation. This led to the adoption of the Victims of War Violence Act in 1995.<sup>11</sup> Employees of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia soon had to contend with thousands and thousands of written applications from administrative units,

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<sup>5</sup>Article 63 of the Protection of Documents and Archives and Archival Institutions Act, Official Gazette of the RS, No. 30, 23 March 2006, p. 3133.

<sup>6</sup>Jelka Melik: Arhivi in državljani [Archives and the citizens]. In: 20th meeting of the Archival Society of Slovenia, Ptuj Historic Archive, »Archives and their users. Archives and Historiography«, Ptuj 2001, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup>Jelka Melik: Arhivi in državljani [Archives and the citizens]. In: 20th meeting of the Archival Society of Slovenia, Ptuj Historic Archive, »Archives and their users. Archives and Historiography«, Ptuj 2001, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup>Taken from: Vladimir Kološa, Delo za javnost in stiki z javnostjo v slovenskih arhivih [Public-oriented work and public relations in Slovenian archival institutions], Arhivi (Archives), Year XVIII, No. 1-2, Ljubljana 1995, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>Official Gazette of the RS, No. 27/1991.

<sup>10</sup>Official Gazette of the RS, No. 59/1996, Article 1

<sup>11</sup>Official Gazette of the RS, No. 63/1995.

offices of the prosecutor and other bodies, as well as from individuals who wished to use these new rights. Many people came in person or asked for information over the telephone. As a result, no less than 21,970 replies were issued in 1997 to those who exercised their rights granted by the Victims of War Violence Act.<sup>12</sup> This was an obvious manifestation of how it is not only documents of cultural and scientific importance that are indispensable but also those assuring legal certainty. These developments made many individuals fully aware that archival institutions not only keep old documents that are of interest for historians, but that they are important for all citizens.

Archival institutions are also visited by those desiring to familiarise themselves with their work or to attend exhibitions, lectures and similar events. One could say that organising exhibitions is a well developed activity. A number of documents related to important events or personalities from the political, cultural or economic past have been put on exhibition. A catalogue is usually issued for major exhibitions while at least a brochure is issued for the minor ones. Slovenian archival institutions also organise exhibitions in other cities at home and abroad. Visitor groups frequently include school students. For them, and for other interested groups, visits to archives are organised so as to include a sightseeing of the premises, a presentation of some of the most interesting documents and of the methods of making use of the archive material. Various lectures are also offered, while the Slovenian Film Archives, operating within the framework of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, also organise film presentations.

The Slovenian archives make great efforts to reach the public through publications. To this end, expert manuals and textbooks, aids for the use of archive materials (such as guidebooks, inventories and similar), general information publications and collections of treatises on archival science and history are published. Since publishing houses show little interest in non-commercial projects, most of the publications are prepared and published by the archival institutions themselves, sometimes in cooperation with another scientific or cultural institution.<sup>13</sup> The Archival Society of Slovenia also publishes the *Arhivi* (Archives) magazine which, in addition to scientific papers dealing with topics from archival science, includes other articles, as well as reports on the work of archives, and the presentations of archival

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<sup>12</sup>Metka Gombač: Department of dislocated archive material II of the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia and its adaptation to the requirements of the Victims of War Violence Act, 21st meeting of the Archival Society of Slovenia, Koper Regional Archive, Archival institutions and archives during transition changes, Infoarh, Koper 2003, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup>Vladimir Kološa, Delo za javnost in stiki z javnostjo v slovenskih arhivih [Public-oriented work and public relations in Slovenian archival institutions], *Arhivi* (Archives), Year XVIII, No. 1-2, Ljubljana 1995, p. 3-4.

inventories and collections of special interest. In addition, the Archival Society of Slovenia issues the *Viri* (Sources) collection of publications in which documents of special importance for Slovenian history are presented.<sup>14</sup>

Articles in newspapers and magazines, as well as radio and TV presentations contribute crucially to public awareness of archives. In recent years, however, information on the Internet has also acquired increasing prominence. Many users search the Internet primarily when they are interested in a particular service in the archive or when they wish to see a particular document. On the other hand, through the media users may also come to know archives and their work spontaneously or coincidentally while watching other topics. Which archive-related contents can be seen in the media? It may be new legislation, the opening of new archival facilities, new publications being issued, new documents being acquired by an archival institution, or commemoration events and similar. In the desire for the media to cover these events as frequently as possible, archives strive to achieve media attention. That is not always an easy task. Disasters, such as flooded archive repositories, seem to attract more interest. But archives are usually keen on getting such events covered in the media, since through drawing attention to such dangers they may win the attention of those who finance archives as well as the wider public. Media interest in archives increased after the fall of socialism. However, archives are rarely given the opportunity to arouse media attention by themselves, and are largely reduced to the role of supporting actors in political affairs. In 2007, the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia received media coverage largely in relation to two “scandals”. The first one broke when at a waste dump near the Ljubljana Psychiatric Clinic old documents were found bearing the stamp of the Clinic. Among them was a report on the medical condition of a person who was sentenced to death at a political trial sixty years ago. More precisely, the report was written by an expert who obviously was responsible for the death sentence.<sup>15</sup> The other scandal, which caused an even greater stir, was connected with the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency (SOVA). The Slovenian Government had established a special Working Group to evaluate the operation of SOVA which, among other things, ascertained that SOVA had not yet handed over all of the documents of the former

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<sup>14</sup>Archival Society of the Republic of Slovenia in 2004 – a Year of Anniversary and Work, p. 1. From the website: <http://www.arhivsko-društvo.si>.

<sup>15</sup>Ne v arhiv, v smeti? [In a waste dump, not in an archive?], Veèer, 4 August 2007.

State Security Administration to the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, despite the fact that it should have done so years ago.<sup>16</sup>

Any responses and polemics, either positive or negative, are useful for the archival institutions. Such reactions underline the importance of archives; they help the archives in acquiring a particular sensitive document more quickly, they encourage citizens to familiarise themselves with the key issues of national and world history and adopt a critical attitude towards these topics. However, awareness grows slowly and with difficulty ... Wider strata of the population should be involved in the process. Archival publications, exhibitions and lectures and similar events address excessively limited groups of people who deal with culture and science as part of their profession. School groups do indeed often visit archives; still, more attention should be paid to young people. One should not forget the youngest ones, as well.

Countries where archival institutions have a long tradition provide a good example. The National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, for example, offers plenty of neatly illustrated leaflets, specially designed for youngsters. There, even on Saturdays, one can see long queues of visitors patiently waiting for a sightseeing tour of the archives. But let us return to the European Union. An excellent example, among others, is the Family Records Centre which is part of the National Archives of the United Kingdom in London, and is the most important source of information for British genealogists. Websites are designed so as to appear attractive to adults and children, who can thus get to know their cultural heritage through play and quizzes. The 2003 open day, which chose espionage as its theme, offered presentations of documentary films, live enactments and expert lectures. Children could learn through fun the falsification of passports, fingerprinting, and the deciphering of confidential documents. Of course, one could also simply visit the archives or see an interesting exhibition, and enjoy a snack in the park in front of the archives. But the most astonishing fact was the number of visitors! Huge numbers of people of all ages came; parents brought their children, grandmothers and grandfathers brought their grandchildren. Many a Londoner thus spent that beautiful, sunny Saturday in the archives!

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<sup>16</sup>According to Article 55 of the Slovenian Security and Intelligence Service Act, adopted in April 1999, the documents should have been handed over to the Archives eight years previously: "Documents comprising the archives of the former State Security Administration shall be handed over to the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia no later than within a year of the entry into force of this Act." (The Republic of Slovenia, Working Group to Evaluate the Operation of the Slovenian Security and Intelligence Service: Interim report on the handing over of archive material of the former State Security Administration to the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia; the Government took note of the report at its session on 19 April 2007 /Source: Internet/)

Nowadays archives are more recognisable and recurrent among Slovenians than they were a few decades ago, however, their overall public image still is not entirely satisfactory. Just by looking at the material situation, one can see that it does not befit the notion of archival institutions.

The National Inspector responsible for archives mentioned in a meeting last year that Slovenia's public archives neither have enough premises, nor are all premises adequate. The central Archives of the Republic of Slovenia are no exception in this regard, as their documents are kept at several locations of varying adequacy. He considered it intolerable that archives are largely housed in renovated monasteries, barracks and industrial facilities. The first and the last newly built premises were opened more than twenty years ago.<sup>17</sup> A Slovenian historian expressed surprise at the fact that the country's archives still do not receive the attention they deserve in face of increasing prominence of archives in the wider European area and the development of archival science: “Surprisingly the public image of archives still evokes the notion of fustiness, disorderliness, inaccessibility, and often unnecessary keeping of records, and similar. ... When the 'living' and 'extinct' cultures encounter each other, the latter frequently seems to get the short end of the stick. When peeping into the pages of Slovenian newspapers devoted to culture, one gets little information on archival institutions or archives. When an archival institution participates in the production of a TV broadcast, it receives only a brief mention in the main title.”<sup>18</sup> In a word, the prejudices of archives as warehouses for dusty old papers are not easily refuted.

Why is this the case? The answer for the unsatisfactory reputation of Slovenian archives is partly to be found in the legislation that was in force until recently. Individual archives were produced on different occasions, having become archives in the modern sense of the word only after they were able to fulfil two functions: the function of a legal document of the nation, the country, a region or a city on one hand; and the function of a source of information for research on these respective areas on the other hand. This should be reflected in legislation, too. When legislation endorses only one aspect of archives, for example, the cultural and scientific, or only the legal aspect, the archives lose their identity and their fundamental function: “In the first case, archives become in a way museums – museums of old papers only a narrow group of culture or science researchers are interested in... In the

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<sup>17</sup>Dragan Matiè: Arhivski depoji – odraz stanja mentalitete v arhivski javni službi [Archives depositories – a reflection of the mentality of the civil service in archives], 23rd Archival Conference of Slovenia, Celje Historical Archives, Conditions in Archives depositories. The (un)known in archives inventories and collections. Interarchival meeting, Velenje 2007, p. 25-26.

<sup>18</sup>Arhivi – zakladnice èloveškega spomina [Archives—the treasures of human memory], keynote address by Mr Marjan Drnovšek upon the bestowal of the Aškerc Award and Aškerc tributes for outstanding achievements in archival science, Ljubljana, 18 October 2006. In: Arhivi (Archives), Journal of the Archival Society and the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, Year 29, No. 2-2, Ljubljana 2006, p. 366.

second case, archives become dumping sites for antique, unused documents from administrative, legislative or judicial bodies. This is not the mission of the archives.”<sup>19</sup> For a number of decades (1981-2006<sup>20</sup>) archives legislation in Slovenia stipulated that only documents of lasting importance for science and culture could be considered archives. Only the Protection of Documents and Archives and Archival Institutions Act of 2006, in Article 2, set out the due importance of archive material for the legal certainty of people. Citizens value an institution only if it efficiently meets their requirements. For example, while the role of health care, the education and the judicial systems is self-evident to most people, science and culture often appear as marginal spheres. Patient elucidations, lasting education, persistent informing of the results of work and their influence on day-to-day life are therefore required.<sup>21</sup> The adoption of the laws on redress in 1990s and the resulting need for various supporting documents made Slovenians aware that even a decades-old paper might eventually turn out to be a useful, topical document. The situation probably made many people who lacked the necessary pieces of evidence start thinking. On the other hand, the situation was an opportunity for the archives to assert their interests - an opportunity they did not seize effectively.

Archivists will have to exert efforts in order for the public to come to know their activities and their importance. By constantly informing the public and objectively bringing to the fore this importance, archivists should make the public aware of the following matters: firstly, national archives are an integral part of the mechanism of a modern state; they are the only institutions safeguarding important national cultural heritage and at the same time they provide evidence for judicial and administrative purposes, serve the needs of the research and scientific spheres, and grant the right of public access to all citizens (other institutions fulfil only part of these functions; even museums and national libraries, for example, keep certain archive material and make it available for use, but they do not keep records from the judicial or administrative bodies); secondly, being familiar with the documents connected with state administration is a prerequisite for true democracy, as it provides citizens with the possibility of checking the functioning of the state<sup>22</sup>; thirdly, by keeping original documents, archives preserve the truth

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<sup>19</sup>Jelka Melik: Arhivi in državljani [Archives and citizens]. In: 20th meeting of the Archival Society of Slovenia, Ptuj Historical Archives, “Archives and their users. Archives and Historiography”, Ptuj 2001, p. 53.

<sup>20</sup>Natural and Cultural Heritage Act, Official Gazette of the SRS, No. 1/1981; Archives and Archive material Act, Official Gazette of the RS, No 20/1997. The Act provided that archive material is deemed to be those documents that were received from or produced in the working process of natural and legal persons and are of lasting importance for science and culture (Article 2). The Act further provided that archive materials are cultural monuments (Article 3).

<sup>21</sup>Jelka Melik: Arhivi in državljani [Archives and citizens]. In: 20th meeting of the Archival Society of Slovenia, Ptuj Historical Archives, “Archives and their users. Archives and Historiography”, Ptuj 2001, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup>Claes Gränström: E-uprava in upravljanje z dokumenti - zahteve, problemi in rešitve [E-administration and document management – requirements, issues and solutions. Technical and substantive issues of classical and



for the future; and lastly, archival documents are as important to every country as life and the soil, a fact which invading countries were well aware of when they tried to destroy the national archives of their conquered countries in war times, both during World War II and later.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, archives should demonstrate that they are not only the guardians of collective memory but also its shapers. As French historian Jacques Le Goff said, those who have the power and the authority have always been the ones to decide who has the right to speak and who has to keep quiet. This holds true of both the spoken and the written word. For example, researchers who deal with women's history say it is no coincidence that so little information is preserved on women's movements. Since their early existence, archives have thus been crucial actors in upholding the legitimacy of those who hold power and marginalising those who have no such power.<sup>24</sup> The archives are the ones deciding which documents are to be preserved and which documents should be destroyed. In fact, when a document is safely placed in a public archive, its “lifetime” does not end. To use the words of the eminent Dutch archivist and professor, Erich Ketelaar, it is only in an archive that documents are “activated”, while the archivists are primarily the ones to decide how and when (and if) that happens. The ensuing fate of archives often depends on how they are systematised and catalogued. Researchers may note and hence prefer to use the archive material that is easily evident in archival inventories and guidebooks, or published on the Internet, or the material to which archivists personally draw attention. The wider public usually knows only those documents which are largely treated in scientific papers and newspaper articles, or presented in television broadcasts and exhibitions. These are the documents that leave the deepest imprint on the collective memory of a nation or state. Many stories are quietly waiting in archives to be discovered. The history of an archive never ends. As Jacques Derrida said, *the archive is not a sheltering of the past: it is an anticipation of the future.*<sup>25</sup>

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electronic archiving]. Collection of scientific papers from the supplementary training course. Maribor 4/2005, No. 1, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Conference report: Political pressure and the archival record

The conference was organised by the Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies (LUCAS) in July 2003. It was attended by delegates from Britain, the USA, Japan, Taiwan, South Africa, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, Botswana, Belgium, New Zealand, Slovenia, Mozambique, St Lucia and Norway.

Executive Summary

<sup>24</sup>Taken from: Terry Cook, What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift. Website: [www.mybestdocs.com/cookt-pastprologue-ar43fnl.htm](http://www.mybestdocs.com/cookt-pastprologue-ar43fnl.htm), p. 2, 20 November 2007. (The paper was originally published in *Archivaria*, the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists, 43 (Spring 97).

<sup>25</sup>Taken from: Eric Ketelaar, Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives, In: *Archival Science* 1, 2001, p. 36-38.

If archives succeed in building public awareness on the importance of their mission, if through their activities (in accordance with the Code of Ethics, adopted by the International Council on Archives in Beijing in 1996) archives win the trust of the public and respect for their mission, if they show that they truly serve truth and justice, as underlined by South African archivist and philosopher Verne Harris, public opinion will be on their side when they need support and assistance, and their social status will gradually improve. The more the public follows the work of the archives, the lesser will be the appetite of the authorities to use archives for the pursuit of the demands and goals of those in political power.