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Community archives in Poland – multiple case study: description of the research project[1]

1. Research Project Objectives

Community archives are historical archives (those which preserve their holdings eternally) created on a grass-roots level, commonly organized by foundations and associations, but also by private persons or informal groups. This type of archives significantly differs from other types, especially from state archives. Community archival projects are created "from below", which means they have no institutional back-up (or at least they had none when they were created). It means that their existence is a result of citizen activity and passion to history and past, an effect of belief that some records or memories are worth preserving, even if state archives do not recognize so. Community archives almost always lack professional archival staff (with only few exceptions). Such archives collect their materials actively, by themselves. They gather mainly photographs and oral histories, but sometimes also traditional, paper records – but those latter are not very popular part of community archives' holdings. Donors, who pass their materials to community archives are almost only private persons, and just sometimes other community projects or NGOs. What is very important for this study – community archives create their collections by themselves – not also by collecting them, but also by organizing and describing their archival materials in their own way, sometimes carefully planned and thought through, but rarely reflecting professional, scientific way of arrangement and description of archival collections.

The aim of the project is to explore and describe community archives currently existing in Poland.

This study will be conducted by a professional, trained archivist and will describe community archives especially from the archival science point of view.

Research objectives include following detailed research questions:

- how do community archives collect their archival materials?

- how do they store them?
- how do they arrange and describe their archival holdings?
- how do community archives provide access to their collections?
- why some people decide to set up grass-roots documenting projects? why do people decide to preserve some historical sources?how do they select a topic of the collection?
- what is the value of archival heritage preserved by community archives in Poland?
- what organizations do community archives cooperatewith(NGOs, local governments, schools, state archives, other community archives)?
- what is the impact of these projects on local societies?
- what do relations between community archives and state archival services look like?
- how are community archives funded?
- who does engage in such grass-roots archival projects – what is the leading age group, how well are they educated and what profession do they represent?
- what is the place of the particular community archive in the Polish community archives movement?

Apart from the above mentioned research objectives concerning particular cases of community archives, some generalization on the whole phenomenon of grass-roots archiving in Poland will be made, but due to the qualitative character of the study this generalization will be limited. Even though, I will make an attempt to describe the cultural phenomenon of community archiving in Poland, especially considering the archival aspect of the issue.

Moreover, there will be an attempt to relate research findings on particular community archives (especially parts concerning arrangement and description of collections) to the current state of the art of archival theory, which could give answers to the question of the nature of theoretical archival principles. Community archivists, who in many cases are not familiar with archival science, arrange their collections mainly in groups according to the form or topic of materials. The research question is if they use the organic way of organizing collections, that could resemble archival fonds, to what extent, and why? Findings could be of considerable importance to the knowledge of the development of archival theoretical principles.

An additional objective of the research is implementation of methods of social sciences to archival studies.

Because the main objective of the study is to describe the phenomenon of community archiving by providing descriptions of particular case studies, as well as introducing

findings of empirical studies on such archives to the scientific literature, presentation of the findings will be crucial. Detailed reports from particular case studies and methodological introduction, as well as final conclusions (with generalization) will be published in a monograph, which would be available on-line in full length (charge free).

2. Significance of the project

Polish archival science has been interested in community archives for only several years, but the phenomenon has been existing and working dynamically in Poland since the early 1990s. But many initiatives are even older – the works of the KARTA Center date back to the 1980s, documentary activities of the current Foundation of Elzbieta Zawacka started back in the 1960s (by General Zawacka herself), and the oldest Polish community archive – the Polish War Archives – started its existence during the Great War. Still, majority of scientific archival literature on the problem was issued after 2010. What is more, it is not numerous and consists of only articles in journals and chapters in monographs. An exception is a handbook published by the KARTA Centre in 2012, which does not have fully scientific character. Despite a growth in professional archivists' interest in the issue of community archives, the Polish literature on the subject (apart from few exceptions) consists of two types of texts: those written by theorists of archivistics, lacking empirical experience in community archives; and those written by representatives of community archives described in these texts (with dominant role of the KARTA Center). Thus those first lack knowledge acquired during field studies, and those latter – needed distance and (sometimes) valuable view of an archival academic. What is truly needed, is a detailed, professional empirical research planned and conducted from the perspective of archival science, and scientific generalization of the phenomenon based on the research, as well as on the thorough knowledge of archival theory.

This little percentage of works concerning community archives present in the Polish archival literature does not reflect the current archival reality, because the number of such archives is estimated at several hundreds. Such archives often include precious archival materials, and perform valuable activity in cooperation with local environment, motivate the elderly, conduct education actions and promote history – often successfully and modernly. Due to their actions numerous historical sources are preserved, and without their engagement many of them would be destroyed. Moreover, the recent amendment to the Archival Law states that since 2016 NGOs that keep community archives can become beneficiaries of granting programs organized by the National Director of State Archives. It is a sign that community archives are now in the scope of attention of the National Directory of State Archives – the main body in Poland that takes care of archives. All the more, it is important to conduct a study that provides valuable

insight into the phenomenon of community archiving in our country, especially on this particular stage of its development.

But the phenomenon is very difficult to study, and probably because of that fact no wider scientific research dealing with community archives in Poland has ever been conducted. The phenomenon is both very numerous (several hundreds of archives, but the exact number is not known) and very diverse. Community archives are set up by different subjects (NGOs, private persons, informal groups) and keep various types of materials (photographs, oral histories, postcards, written personal accounts, pamphlets, short-run printed materials, personal documents, personal correspondence and many others). They also serve functions of museums and libraries, and not only public archives. What is important, community archives are ephemeral – they are set up, and they fall, so the landscape of grass-roots archival projects changes constantly. Community archives can be very small or truly massive (but the latter are fewer), they can be focused on one type of materials, or only one past event, or they can collect everything from the vast past, both traditional and electronic materials, originals and copies.

Community archives differ significantly from public state archives, which are best recognized by the academics, so it is difficult to implement the specific archival methodology in exploring them (like the method of archival fonds reconstruction). Thus this project will apply methodology of social sciences – quality multiple case study, and data will be gathered using interviews, observations and documents analysis. The methodology will be adopted to the research questions arising from the archival discipline – which are most of all questions concerning collecting, storage, arrangement and description, and providing access to archival materials. Even though interviews and observations have been used or at least proposed for using in research of archives in Poland, they have never been used in vast qualitative research on this particular type of archives.

The study's results will have considerable impact on archival science due to two reasons. Firstly, the study will provide enormous base of information regarding community archives that can be used by academics. Thus these archives will finally become a considerable area of research, especially that such a massive empirical material can be used in further studies – for example comparative studies looking at other types of archives. On the other hand, archival science will benefit from using social sciences methodology in strictly archival research. Particularly interesting is implementing case study research, that comprises of the preliminary studies (well-known for archivists from processing archival fonds in archives) and techniques of interview and observation. Due to that fact this research might encourage archivists in studying other types of archives using

methods borrowed from social sciences, as well as conducting other case studies of community archives – also in Bachelor's and Master's dissertations.

I also believe that the project might improve the impact of the Polish archival science on the international arena, thanks to translating the research findings to English and publishing them in respected English-language scientific journals, as well as presenting results during international conferences (e.g. International Conference on the History of Records and Archives, ICHORA). Moreover, results of the study can also be used in comparative studies on community archives in other countries, and enable to examine the Polish specificity of the movement (strictly connected to the Polish history, especially the World War II and the underground state, and the anti-communism movement in the period of the Polish People's Republic).

3. Work plan

The study is planned for 24 months.

Outline of the work plan:

month 1 – initiating contact with the chosen archives, preparation for the fieldwork

months 2 – 17 – fieldwork; gathering data concerning particular community archives; particular cases analysis and preparing case reports

months 18 – 21 – cross-case analysis of the data

months 22 – 24 – preparing generalization of the collected data, as well as preparing for publishing both data about particular archives (case reports) and general conclusions

The research project consists of empirical field study of 10 community archives, chosen by criteria of sample selection – purposive sampling. The number of archives was set due to both pragmatic and substantive reasons. By practical considerations, which are the terms of the PRELUDIUM 10 competition, I have decided that this number of archives will best fit the proposed lengths of projects, that can be submitted in this edition of the competition. Moreover, the number will best fit the method of purposive sampling I used, setting 10 community archives, as varied as is it possible – chosen due to several qualities I considered most important in community archives collections (more about sampling in Part 4: Research Methodology).

A single case study will consist of:

- contacting representatives of the archive,
- preliminary studies (literature, websites, social media accounts, on-line reports etc.),

- several days of field work: interviews, observations, documents analysis,
- preparing data for analysis: transcribing interviews, filling observation sheets, sorting out photographs,
- analysis of material concerning the particular case,
- preparing a report on the particular case.

Then, I will carry out cross-case analysis of the gathered data – both the data from the fieldwork and from initial studies. It must be stressed, that for this purpose I will use the professional software for qualitative data analysis – MAXQDA (described later). Due to big amount of information gathered using quality research methods, this stage of the project will take 4 months.

The next part of the study will be an attempt at generalization of the phenomenon of community archiving in Poland, thanks to the cross-case analysis, and preparing narration describing both data on particular cases (with results of initial studies) and closing conclusions. Also visual tools like charts or mind maps will be used (if possible). This task will take 3 months.

What is more, also 1 month at the very beginning of the project will be devoted to introductory contact with community archives and their representatives, as well as to further studies on literature concerning specific methods and techniques of fieldwork and uses of the software.

For the topic of studying community archives using the method of case study, I conducted a pilot study on 5/11/2015. The object of this study was Łódzkie Stowarzyszenie Inicjatyw Miejskich Topografie (Topographies – Association of Municipal Initiatives in Łódź), that set up Cyfrowe Archiwum Łodzian Miastograf.pl (the Digital Archive of Łódź Inhabitants Miastograf.pl). The aim of the pilot study was to improve techniques used in fieldwork – interviews and observations – as well as establishing particular ways of recording the research (through recording the conversation by creating audio files, backed up with notes, and notes from observations). Moreover, thanks to this pilot study I created specific aids used for documenting the case study of an archive – so called card of observation and card of interview (basic information on actions in the field, which makes easier coping with field notes later), as well as sheet of observation and a list of interview questions (with a form for noting answers).

I am convinced that the research objectives are feasible and it is completely possible for one person to conduct such research in 24 months. What needs to be stressed, is that data analysis is conducted on two levels: on the level of the case, and it ends with the mentioned detailed report; and on the level of all the cases, and it is based on the

previously prepared case reports, and not on all the materials gather during the fieldwork (unless it is essential to come back to the "raw" data). A valuable virtue of the project is the set of documentation prepared especially for this study, which aims to organize the data gathered during multiple case studies. I am aware that the number of 10 case studies will provide huge amount of qualitative data, and thus I have created tools that will help in structuring and, later, analyzing it. These tools are: cards of interviews, cards of observations, lists of interview questions, sheets of observations, and a model of final case report (showed in Part 4: Research Methodology). It must be mentioned, that this amount of data must be organized and analyzed using professional software for qualitative data analysis. I strongly believe, that thanks to using all these tools – well organized data gathering, well-thought data organizing tools and a proper professional software – it is feasible to fulfill the described research objectives.

4. Research Methodology

The study will be conducted using the monographic method in its special form of multiple case study. The study will be focused mostly on aspects of archival actions taken by a particular grass-roots archiving project, and problems like personal relationships of employees, legal issues or specific financial status will be omitted.

I decided to use the purposing sampling to choose the research objects. The sampling was based on most important characteristics of community archives collections, which are the topic and format of collections. During initial studies I managed to find out most characteristic variants of these qualities that can be found in community archives in Poland. This gives a following set of qualities that the archives to be researched will have:

1. only digital materials,
2. only paper (traditional, analogue) materials,
3. both digital and paper materials,
4. about history of a minority,
5. about history of a sport team,
6. about local history,
7. about a very specific fragment of the past (a specific period or event),
8. only photographs,
9. only oral history interviews,
10. with varied materials.

Simultaneously, among these 10 categories, 6 more categories (describing the size of collections and who created the archive) will be situated; these categories are:

1. small collection,

2. big collection,
3. set up by a foundation,
4. set up by an association,
5. set up by a person,
6. set up by an informal group of people,

It means, that every quality from the above listed 16 will be represented in the research, and some archives will represent two categories of community archives, described in both lists (e.g. an archive with only digital materials, set up by a person; a big archive with both digital and traditional materials; an archive that collects only photograph, set up by an informal group of people).

This set of qualities for purposive sampling is needed to choose the research group, that will represent the phenomenon of community archiving in Poland as widely as it is possible. The purposive sampling is necessary because the whole group of community archives in Poland is currently impossible to enlist. But what needs to be stressed: the KARTA Center, the biggest Polish community archive created a database of Polish community archives (www.archiwa.org). Still, the database is not full, and the KARTA uses a definition of community archives that is not fully respected by the academics. Thus it is not possible to describe the phenomenon as a whole and to point out all the grass-roots archiving projects, so only non-probability sampling is available here, and I believe the variant of purposive sampling is the best one for this research problem.

The case study of a particular community archive will start with contacting representatives of the archive (persons employed by or co-operating with it). If they agree to take part in the research, a date is set and the initial study starts. It comprises of analyzing scientific literature, the KARTA Center database records (www.archiwa.org), and materials available on-line – both put on the Internet by the archive (e.g. its website, social media accounts, financial reports) and by others (e.g. reports from meetings), and in some cases office records collected on the ground of free access to public information.

Then, a fieldwork starts. Data will be gathered using three techniques: interview, observations and documents analysis.

The interview will be carried out with a person that is an expert in this particular archive – "an archivist" – a person that is more than anybody engaged in keeping the records in this archive. The interview will be oral/aural, non-covert (a person knows that he/she is interviewed) and individual (or, if there is no other possibility, two archivists can be interviewed if they volunteer to). Moreover, the interview will be semi-structured – the interviewer will have a list of basic questions and topics, which will help define the areas

to be explored, but it will also be possible to change their order or to add some new – according to the shape of the conversation. This approach is both flexible (allows the interviewer to adjust the discussion to the specificity of the archive) and easier to structure and analyze, and provides more comparable qualitative data.

Interviews will be audio-recorded digitally, also handwritten notes on most important parts of the interview (and issues that appeared during the talk) will be made. Moreover, every interview will start with filling out the form of the interview card that contains basic information about the interview:

- interview's identifier (a signature that will help organizing the documentation of the fieldwork)
- name of the community archive,
- who keeps the archive (name of organization/person),
- date of interview,
- interviewer,
- interviewee and his/her function (archivist, head of the project etc.),
- place of interview,
- tools of recording.

The interview card also contains the list of information, that must be provided just before starting the interview: repeating the objectives of the study and information about the interviewer, information about ways of recording the interview and what will happen with the records, and others.

Apart from interviews, also field observations will be conducted. These observations will be direct (close visual inspection of a natural setting) and non-covert (it will be known, that the archive is being observed by the researcher). Observations will focus mainly on:

- seat of the archive (e.g. building, rooms),
- reading room (e.g. location, number of seats, equipment, access to finding aids, staff),
- storage space (e.g. location, equipment, description)
- archival description (e.g. of shelves, boxes, folders, but also separate documents/objects).

Observations will be recorded using notes focused on these four main observing aspects, mentioned above, and also structured according to these four aspects. Moreover, there will be cards of observations that will record basic information about observation, resembling those listed above according to interviews. Observation will also be documented by photographs (only if representatives of the archive will allow it). Those

photographs might be useful in later publication, but also may help recalling particular situations, objects or characteristics while reviewing the notes after observations.

Next technique of gathering field data will be documents analysis. In this case these documents will be finding aids present in the archive's location (catalogues, indexes, databases and others) and on-line, but also current records of the community archive: users records/books, financial records, grants applications, NGOs statues – if representatives of the archive will provide access to them.

It must be stressed that these three techniques of gathering data in qualitative research – interview, observation and documents analysis – will complement each other. Especially interviews will complement information gathered through observations and documents analysis – the community archive's representative will be asked to explain some objects/situations observed directly by the researcher. But despite this cooperation between the techniques, I will try to separate their records from each other in order to enable their analysis.

For analysis of the data gathered in multiple case studies I will use the method of inductive reasoning. Conclusions will be drawn in two stages.

Firstly, every community archive will be described in a detailed standardized report, which will ease the later cross-case analysis. The model of the report is partly based on case studies reports built up by the Community Archives Development Group from the United Kingdom while conducting research on the impact of community archives in 2007. The model constructed by me especially for this research project consists of the following information:

1. Basic information
    a) Name of the archive
    b) Project summary (character of archival holdings and project exemplifies)
    c) Informant (name and function)
    d) Sources of information
        i. Date and place of interview
        ii. Date and place of observation
        iii. Date and place of studying documents
        iv. Other sources (including literature)
    e) Other remarks
2. Project profile
    a) organization/person running the project
    b) subject matter of archive

      c) location and terrain for activities (and specificity of location, if possible)

      d) date of establishment

      e) other crucial dates

3. Origins – causes and way of establishment

4. Aims and objectives

5. Nature of premises

6. Nature of collection

      a) traditional (paper)/digital/both

      b) size of collection (linear meters, number of folders, number of shelves, number of computer files, size in GB)

      c) formats of material; are the following present:

          i. parchment manuscripts

          ii. paper manuscripts

          iii. other manuscripts

          iv. traditional photography

          v. digital photography

          vi. analogue video

          vii. digital video

          viii. analogue sound recordings

          ix. digital sound recordings

          x. electronic documents (other than photo, video or sound)

          xi. books

          xii. periodicals

          xiii. (museum) objects

      d) heritage value of collection

7. Project activities

      a) exhibitions

      b) conferences, meetings, workshops

      c) education projects (archival lessons, lectures, games etc.)

      d) publishing

      e) collecting activities (including collecting oral history)

      f) other activities

8. Structure and cooperation

      a) type of organization (foundation, society/association, informal group, personal initiative, local government, other – what?)

      b) management and governance

      c) cooperating institutions (which and how do they cooperate)

9. Funding – ways of funding (grants, state or local government funds, membership fees, donations, none, others) and its height

10. Staff
   a) number of persons engaged
   b) their functions
   c) their level and type of education received
   d) age (less than 20, 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, more than 60)
   e) status (student, doctoral candidate, employers, retired)
   f) type of cooperation with the project (volunteer, contracted employer (full time, part time, and type of contract), practices, internship)
   g) ways of recruiting volunteers

11. Collecting archival materials
   a) who does that
   b) ways of collecting/reaching donors
   c) registering acquired materials
   d) selecting acquired materials (what criteria)
   e) are originals or copies accepted
   f) terms of acquiring materials (donation, deposit, lending, other)

12. Storage of collections
   a) storage conditions
   b) equipment (shelves, cabinets, boxes, folders etc.)
   c) monitoring of temperature and humidity
   d) other remarks

13. Arrangement and description of collections
   a) archival aids (type, structure, accessibility)
   b) structure of archival holdings
   c) names of parts of the collection
   d) signing
   e) are materials for professional archivists used? (guidelines of the General Director of State Archives, scientific literature)
   f) does this archive own its own information system and characteristic archival aids?
   g) other remarks

14. Providing access to collections
   a) ways of providing access (on-line, at location, both)
   b) archival queries
   c) assessment of accessibility and restrictions in access

   d) number of users

   e) types of users

   f) way of registering access

   g) information value of the project website

  15. Current problems

  16. Future plans

   a) in case the project ceases to exist

  17. Place in the community archives movement

  18. Evaluation of the project (including heritage value of collections, impact on local community, possible effect on the public image of archives, sustainability)

It is important that on this step not only description, but also some level of analysis of a particular community archive will be provided.

Secondly, after completing the fieldwork, there will be conducted a cross-case analysis on the basis of all single case reports. The analysis will be carried out by coding the gathered data using mostly codes from the model of report (presented above), as well as other codes that will appear during the study. It is essential to underline, that the analysis must be conducted using professional software for qualitative data analysis (I have chosen MAXQDA). Thanks to that, some patterns of similarities and differences in archival functions of the studied community archives will be discovered and described. But it must be stressed, that these generalizations will have a limited character due to the qualitative type of the research and a relatively low number of studied cases.

The scientific validity of the research project will be provided by:

- data triangulation – use of various data sources in a study: observational fieldwork, interviews, and documents and literature analysis,
- informant feedback – sending a full report on the case to the representative of the archive (via e-mail) so they can comment on it (the feedback will be given also via e-mail),
- paying special attention to mistakes made by the researcher due to her bias caused by her personal characteristics, experience with various archives and professional education in archival science.

Finally, some ethical issues concerning the proposed empirical investigation must be mentioned. First of all, community archives are kept by NGOs or private persons; thus it is common, that people who work in these projects devote their spare time to it, and I, as a researcher, will have to use their private time. It is important to be aware of it and not to overstay my welcome, especially that this kind of study (interview and attending

observations) is very demanding for informants. Secondly, it is important to ensure that the community archive also benefits from this study. It is crucial then to assure its representatives, that it is a good situation, when a community archive gets "discovered by the science" and is in-depth described in scientific literature (or its description is presented on scientific conferences). Naturally, the archive must receive its own copy of the final publication at the end of the project. Thirdly, I believe it is significant to leave the field (the community archive) "untouched" and not changed by the study conducted (as far as it is possible) – to let people engaged in it do their archival works the way they are used to, and not to implement principles or methods used by "professional", esp. state archivists. Thus it will be possible to maintain the ego-document, "self-describing" nature of these archives. The only exception would be a situation, when national archival heritage is endangered, for example by poor storage.

For structuring, analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected during fieldwork, a software called MAXQDA 12 will be used. The program was chosen due to following advantages:

- allows importing data from various sources: interviews, photographs, web pages, and others,
- has a built-in mode for transcribing audio and video records,
- enables coding documents of all types – even with a complicated system of codes – with a user friendly, intuitive interface,
- contains a feature that enables comparing and exploring data differences and similarities (helps identifying patterns),
- enables visual retrieval of data,
- allows creating reports and exporting data.

During carrying out the planned research following equipment will be used:

- digital tape recorder (to record interviews),
- digital camera (to record observations),
- personal computer (to store data gathered during the fieldwork, as well as to analyze the data and prepare it for publishing),
- external hard drive (to store back-up of the data),
- printer (to print cards of interviews, cards of observations, sheets of observations and sheets of interviews).

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