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Finding Common Ground: Working with the Georgian National Archives to Create a Trilingual Database

Peter Carini and Kara Drake

On two separate occasions over the past four years, the authors traveled to the former Soviet Republic of Georgia as part of a team charged with the work of training Georgian archivists in international descriptive standards as part of a database project. The Sakartvelo Database Project provided an introduction to Georgian history, culture, and the development of the country's archival program. It also provided a picture of what it is like to work in a former Soviet republic and the reality of what it is to handle language barriers and physical and environmental obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern part of northern Tbilisi, the capital city of the Republic of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia Avenue runs north from Constitution Square. The square is a vast open space through which traffic whirls at a frightening pace with no apparent order. The avenue goes past the Adzara Hotel where the jazz bar has become a hangout for Americans

living in the city, past rows of Soviet block-style apartment buildings with small, unmarked shops on their ground floors, and about a quarter mile further, it intersects Avenue Vazha Pshavela. At this intersection a Soviet-era building stands with a vanguard of wide, shallow steps. This large, white block structure is nondescript except for a dramatic tower that gives it, oddly, a Spanish quality. The building bears no marking or sign to indicate its purpose. The only clue that it is a government building, in this otherwise primarily residential part of the city, is an occasional blue-shirted policeman standing in the entryway, smoking. While the street in front of the building bustles with activity, most Georgians have no idea that this building is the headquarters for their national archives, nor that most of the documents related to their nation's long and troubled history reside within these walls.

It was to this building that two North American scholars of Georgian history, Anthony Rhineland, professor of Russian Imperial Studies at St. Thomas University in Canada, and Ken Church, then a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, came in 1995. What they found inside troubled them so greatly that upon returning to their respective universities, they organized a small association of scholars and archivists who would become the Friends of the Georgian National Archives (FGNA). In addition to Rhineland and Church, Peter Carini, Kara Drake, and Stephen Jones complete the core group of the FGNA. A number of Georgian officials are also members. Ross Teasley, a computer expert, was an addition to the group's database project.

As FGNA evolved and work on the project began, those intimately engaged in the process quickly discovered that archival practices and conditions mirrored the chaotic nature of Georgian society. To understand the intricacy of the archival system, one had to absorb the history and culture of the nation. Georgia's history has been a story of con-

quest and conflict that directly affected the country's cultural heritage.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GEORGIA

The Georgians call themselves *Kartvel-ebi* and their country *Sakartvelo*, meaning "land of the Georgian people." As Georgian scholar David Marshall Lang describes, "both these names are linked with that of the mythical demigod named Kartlos, 'ancestor' of the Georgian people."¹ Westerners refer to them as Georgians, which developed from *Kurj* or *Gurj*, the Arab and modern Persian words for these Caucasians, and not, as is often incorrectly assumed, from one of the country's patron saints, St. George.

As many different ways as there are to identify them by name, so are there stories surrounding the birth of the Georgian nation. One popular story relates that when God was giving countries to different people, the Georgians were last in line and there was no land left. However, "the Georgians were in a typically festive mood and invited the creator to join them in wine and song." God so enjoyed himself that he decided to give them the one piece of land he was saving for himself: the valleys and hills that lie to the south of the Great Caucasus.²

Georgia is situated between the Black Sea to the west and the Caspian Sea not far from its eastern border. Depending upon the time period and national boundaries, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Chechnya are neighbors. Though the mountains have made habitation in this area challenging, archeologists place the beginnings of civilization in Georgia to the early Paleolithic period more

¹Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Stanford: Indiana University Press, 1988), 334.

² Suny, 3.

than fifty thousand years ago.³ Scholars also speculate that Georgia is Colchis, the land to which Jason and the Argonauts of Greek mythology traveled in search of the Golden Fleece.

The first state was established in Georgia in the 500s B.C., and most of modern day Georgia united under one kingdom in the 200s B.C. When Christianity spread across the region in A.D. 330, the various tribes and kingdoms further connected, but it was not until A.D.1008 that the word *Sakartvelo* came to represent a united Georgian nation.⁴ Throughout this great span of developmental years, Georgia suffered through internal divisions and at the hands of a large number of invading forces. Among the invaders were the Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, and Mongol armies. Such Asian invaders as Genghis Khan and Tamerlane also passed through this region. One of Georgia's two real periods of independence occurred between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries during which the country produced a strong national identity and royal tradition. To this day, Georgia celebrates rulers such as David "The Rebuilder" (1089–1125) and Queen Tamara (1184–1212) as major influences in the development of the republic.⁵

Georgia's recent history has been no less tumultuous. Though there have been many different influences, perhaps no relationship was as integral and at the same time as dangerous as that between Georgia and Russia. One region capitulated to the Russians in 1722 in exchange for military protection against Ottoman invaders, and Russia ruled the rest of the country by 1801. Then, "the first decade and a half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of

³ Suny, 3–5.

⁴ Suny, 19, 32–33.

⁵ Suny, 34–35, 38–39.

mass political movements in Transcaucasia, the brief collapse of imperial authority, its re-establishment by force (though in compromised form), and a long period of sparring between the largely discredited Russian rulers and their political opponents.”⁶

After World War I, Georgia had a brief second period of independence as a democracy when Imperial Russia fell. In 1922 Georgia became part of the newly formed Soviet Union, however, and Communism came to shape most of the next century of its history. Tbilisi, a city that burned to the ground in the twelfth century, was rebuilt with tsarist palaces in the nineteenth century, and educated Joseph Stalin—born in Gori as Iosif Djughashvili—at the turn of the century, would now become the center of the Caucasus again under a Communist regime.

The national link to Russia severed in 1990 when, on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgians elected the non-Communist candidate, Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, as president. In April 1991 Georgia declared independence and began reshaping its national identity by raising the flag that had flown during the period of independence from 1918 to 1921. “For Georgians re-nationalization involved the gradual re-establishment of their political control and ethnic dominance over their historic homeland, a process that had barely started during the brief period of independence.”⁷ Following moves by Gamsakhurdia to jail opposition leaders and to censor the press, he was forced from office, and Eduard Shevardnadze—former foreign minister under the Soviet Union’s Mikhail Gorbachev—was elected president in November 1992. Recently, Georgians elected Shevardnadze to another term.

⁶ Suny, 165.

⁷ Suny, 298.

Over the last ten years, nationalist and ethnic groups locked in violent clashes rocked the nation. Fighting occurred between the Southern Ossetia region and Georgian government forces from 1990 to 1992. In 1992 Abkhazia, a region in the northwest, declared itself independent, and fierce fighting began. Although Georgian forces and masses of refugees were driven from Abkhazia in late 1993, strained tensions continue between the two groups.

The long and complicated history of this small nation helped develop the democracy that it is today. Though times are not easy in Georgia, and the government faces serious economic problems, the sense of nationality and history are stronger than ever. Perhaps the primary proof of this is that the Georgian people remain as cheerful and confident today as they did in the fable detailing their country's birth.

GEORGIAN CULTURE

Particularly when discussing cross-cultural work, it is important not to generalize Georgian culture under the Russian rubric. While the situation in Georgia is far less than stable by Western standards, it is one of the most durable and prosperous of the former Soviet republics. Politically, Georgia has had a democratically elected government for more than ten years. The Georgian currency, the Lari, introduced in October 1995, has maintained a fairly steady place in the world market. At introduction it stood at 1.23 Lari per \$1 and, over a three-year period ending in 1998, slipped only slightly to 1.35 Lari per \$1.⁸ In the summer of 2000 there was a larger downward shift that left it at 1.99 per \$1.

Like Russia, and due in great part to Soviet neglect throughout the 1980s, the infrastructure—electricity, water, roads, bridges, and buildings—is in desperate need of repair. Fortunately, in the two years between visits, FGNA

⁸ *Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States*, 1999, 4th ed. (London: Europa Publications Ltd., 1998), 367.

members encountered fewer power outages, and water was consistently available in Tbilisi. Heating is still an enormous problem. In Soviet times a central plant generated heat for the entire capital of Tbilisi. Now each homeowner must fend for himself, and fuel is scarce and expensive in the winter months. Driving on roads outside of the capital city is still a hair-raising experience for most Westerners. Car-swallowing potholes litter the major Soviet highways, particularly those that run through mountainous regions; and in places where landslides have buried the road, it appears that traffic, rather than road crews, creates new routes by necessity. These dirt tracks skirt around the worst of the dips and heaves, avoiding the roofs of buried houses and other obstacles jutting up out of the earth, to rejoin the paved highway several miles farther.

Despite the many invasions, 117 years of Russian rule, and 70 years of Soviet rule, Georgia has managed to maintain much of its own culture in terms of food and customs. There is a Mediterranean feel to the society with emphasis placed on hospitality, food, and drink. Having over five hundred grape varieties, Georgia is purportedly the birthplace of viticulture and wine making.⁹ *Supras* (a celebratory feast) can last for days and hinges on a series of formal toasts presented by a *Tomadon* (toastmaster).

In general, the Georgian population is extremely well educated. Approximately one-quarter of the population seeks a higher degree, which is a significantly larger percentage than in other former Soviet bloc countries.¹⁰ Most professionals have a six-year college degree equivalent to a bachelor's and master's combined. While the majority re-

⁹ *In Vino veritas! Georgia: 5000 Years of Wine Culture* (Tbilisi: Georgian Wine and Spirits Company, [1999]), 15.

¹⁰ *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook, 1999* (Paris, France, and Lanham, MD: UNESCO Publishing and Berman Press), Table II, 7.

ceive their degrees from Tbilisi University, a number of people in specialized fields have studied in Moscow or St. Petersburg at Soviet universities. A significant number of women also hold higher degrees, although the society as a whole is very male-dominated.

Georgia makes a valiant effort to gaze toward the West, despite continued reliance on Russia as a trading partner. The country, as is evident from its history, has a strong sense of regionalism. The three original kingdoms established in the 200s B.C. still exist in the minds of many people, proven by the ability of most Georgians to determine ancestry based on the structure of the surname. Most people speak both Russian and Georgian. The latter is not related to any other language in the world, although the alphabet is based on the Greek.¹¹ Most educated Georgians also speak a third language, usually one spoken in another of the former Soviet-dominated countries, although younger Georgians increasingly know English or a Western European language.

STRUCTURE OF THE ARCHIVES

The Georgian National Archives (Department of Archives, or GDA) has an equally interesting history and evolution. As one would expect from a country that has undergone so many different ruling authorities, these influences shaped the structure of the archives today. From the provision of access and the description of collections to the lack of technological know-how, the archival system developed under the Russian Soviets is complex.

In ancient times, archives were kept all throughout the Caucasus, in churches and basements, in museums and universities, but under the Russians more organized repositories began to take shape. Tbilisi became the headquarters for archival material under Stalin as his administra-

¹¹ Albertine Gaur, *A History of Writing*, U.S. ed. (New York: Scribner, 1985), 122–23.

tors pulled records from all over Transcaucasia in an attempt to consolidate government and history in one swift move. Authorities shipped files from Baku and Yerevan, some of which still remain in Georgian repositories today. Thus, the systematic centralization of manuscripts and records mingled the histories of each of these very distinct republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Under Soviet leadership, archival staff assigned numbers to collections and divided series and folders numerically. They taped documents into *dela* (folders) and housed them in archival boxes that note the number coding on the outside. Particularly valuable documents, also referred to as the “ancient documents” in some repositories, composed their own collections housed separately in a secure location. Archival staff also housed “secret” documents, including not only secret police (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, or KGB) files but also records related to Georgia’s period of independence, in a separate location. These documents still remain separate today, though they are open in full to researchers.

Beyond the physical housing of the documents, the Soviet training of its archivists was a significant influence on the archival system. The FGNA project staff worked with three trained archivists, all women. Their profession was chosen for them in high school. Sent to Moscow to study history and archives at the university, they followed in the Soviet tradition by focusing their historical studies on a specific time period—in their cases, within Georgian history. After their studies were completed, these archivists-in-training interned at the St. Petersburg archives. Upon completion of their six years abroad, the women returned to their homeland to work in the archival system for the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia.

The government agency, the Georgian Department of Archives (GDA), with which the project is affiliated, formed after Georgia became independent in 1991. The main building in Tbilisi houses the Central Historical Archives, the

Archives of Contemporary History, the Central Film Archive, and the Central State Archive of Literature and Art. Additionally, the department staff administer fifty-six other provincial and city archives throughout Georgia, all of which were set up during the Soviet period.

Zurab Makharadze, who, under the Soviets, ran the State Opera, oversees the GDA. While neither a trained archivist nor historian but politically connected, Makharadze could secure President Shevardnadze's patronage for the FGNA. The deputy director, Rezo Khustishvili, is a trained historian but has no formal archival training. Under Khustishvili, the organization divides into various repositories. Each of the four main archives has a director, deputy director, and various staff members (generally, technicians without any formal archival training).

Two of these four archives are the foci of the work conducted by the FGNA: the Central Historical Archives (CHA) and the Archives of Contemporary History (ACH). The CHA houses documents dating from the ninth century through the period of independence ending in 1921. A total of 830 fonds (record groups) comprising several million pages compose the CHA holdings. The ACH houses more than 1200 fonds. These records cover the period of Soviet rule and extend to some current records in the case of Soviet administrative units that are still being eliminated. The archival holdings of this repository also reflect the dramatic changes that occurred during the transition period of the early 1990s.

The GDA is not the only archival repository in the country. In Tbilisi alone there are two other archival repositories that are administratively separate from this government agency—the Parliamentary Library and the famous Kekelidze Institute. These two repositories house materials that complement and parallel the holdings of the GDA. While the situation at the Kekelidze Institute, which houses ancient manuscripts and the papers of Georgia's intelligentsia, is far from ideal, the circumstances are not as dire as

those found at the Department of Archives. Similarly, the staff are unpaid, and electricity and water are inconsistent; but the physical condition of the building itself is not nearly as disastrous. The Parliamentary Archives, on the other hand, is comparatively well funded since it houses the records of the present-day Parliament. Not only does Parliament hold the purse strings but also the recorded history of independence as opposed to the history of servitude.

PHYSICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The physical condition in the building that houses the Department of Archives is ruinous and very near to what one would expect to find in a developing nation. From the economic state of the country to the physical situation in their work environment, the Georgian archivists who manage and work in this facility are operating under extreme circumstances. During the 1998 visit, the decay of the archival facility shocked the project staff.

While the outside of the GDA building appears solid, the condition of the interior shows that the building is rapidly falling apart. The floors buckle in spots, creating an uneven walkway; there are holes in the concrete walls allowing the flies to enter and swarm; and while there are light fixtures, in many cases there are no bulbs to install. There is a sprinkler system for fire suppression in the stack areas, but at various points during the year there is no water available to fill the system.

The temperature does not differ from the sidewalks on the street to the director's office, or to the archival stack space. In the summer months, it can register a humid 100 degrees, and in the winter the temperature drops well below freezing. There is no working climate control in the building. The lack of climate control is particularly upsetting because the formerly state-of-the-art German system that exists has been allowed to fall into disrepair due to lack of funds.



The Georgian Department of Archives, Gamsakhurdia and Vazha Pshavela Avenues, Tbilisi. Photograph by Peter Carini.

While the lack of climate control is bad for the ninth-century manuscripts, it literally is destroying the films. A treasure trove of underresearched media, the Film Archives houses the oldest films of the former Soviet Union. Upon walking into the stacks, however, one's lungs fill with the dust that was once films from the 1910s and 1920s.

For the film archives and most of the archival materials, it will take more than climate control to overcome the years of neglect; the records are in desperate need of conservation work. Despite a well-trained staff of conservators, only the most rudimentary conservation work is possible

when they cannot afford to purchase the necessary chemicals or other supplies. In 1998 the head conservator confided that her aging staff are the only people in the country with the knowledge to do modern conservation work. She expressed deep concern that there is no money to attract new, younger staff to the profession as conservators.

The state of the public works in Tbilisi is much like the rest of the country, which is desperately looking westward for assistance. Increasingly, what was publicly funded is now privatized and costs money. While some improvements occur—more consistent electricity, for instance—most problems are not eradicated. During the first visit, project staff went without water in the apartment every night and sporadically during the day. On both visits they spent many hours without electricity. In fact, one of the first Georgian phrases they learned was *Shuki ara*—no electricity.

THE ROOTS OF THE SAKARTVELO DATABASE PROJECT

When the FGNA formed in 1996, the association's initial and overwhelming concern was for the physical well-being of the archives. The group began a yearlong process of looking for funding to assist the Georgian archives. Unfortunately, raising money from United States philanthropic organizations or from similar international organizations to assist another country with anything other than humanitarian issues—even a country struggling toward democracy after some seventy years of totalitarian rule—was proving next to impossible. Discouraged but determined to lend some assistance to the Georgian archivists, the FGNA began to explore other types of projects. That same year, the group applied for and received funding from the International Research Exchange Board (IREX).

As part of a new program called Special Projects in Library and Information Science, IREX gave \$15,000 in initial funding, which was designed “to increase access and improve working conditions for American scholars using

libraries, archives and other resources in Eurasia.”¹² The award was for the creation of a trilingual database to the holdings of the Central Historical Archives (CHA). In 1999 FGNA again applied to IREX with a proposal to include descriptions to the holdings of the Archives of Contemporary History; IREX awarded an additional \$10,000.

THE TRILINGUAL DATABASE

The broad vision for the database was to provide access to holdings of the Georgian National Archives in Georgian, Russian, and English to scholars both within the former Soviet bloc and in the West who wished to use archival records for a wide variety of research purposes. Because of the mandate from IREX to improve access for American scholars, the focus of the project was on the creation of a public access tool rather than one for collections management. Although the final product could serve both purposes, the emphasis on research weighted certain decisions regarding the database and the data structure toward ease of use, rather than toward comprehensive data gathering. In its final form the database should supplant paper guides created under Soviet rule and describe a number of secret fonds that were never described in the Soviet system. In addition, other fonds, previously described in the narrow vision of Soviet doctrine, would be re-described with a broader vision.

Although the project team considered a wide array of database software, they selected Microsoft Access. Programs designed specifically for archival use (such as MicroMARC, Minaret, and GenCat) either were not sophisticated enough to fit the needs of the project or were too expensive for the limited funds available. For instance, MicroMARC had, at that time, no front-end for nonarchival

¹² Ken Church, “The Creation of an Electronic Guide to the Central Historical Archive of Georgia,” (paper presented at meeting of the Task Force of the Coalition of Networked Information (CNI), Washington, DC, 14 April 1998).

users. In fact, it had no front-end for non-MARC (machine-readable cataloging) users. Minaret, while more sophisticated than MicroMARC, is not relational, and its DOS-based structure makes it clunky to run on Windows-based machines. With minimum start-up costs of \$10,000, more sophisticated relational databases such as GenCat and Rediscovery were simply outside of the financial scope of FGNA's funding. The staff desired a relational database to enable researchers to run more complex searches by linking certain fields together. Microsoft Access was the only one that seemed to fit the needs of the project fully.

Project staff decided easy manipulation of data (the ability to move it from one format to another) to be an important factor since this activity began at a time when archival standards were in flux. They chose both the data structure and the database software to ensure that the data could be uploaded to a MARC-based catalog like Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) and moved into a Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML), archival document type definition like Encoded Archival Description (EAD) or the similar standard currently being examined by the European Union Archive Network (EUAN). At the same time, the project team wanted the flexibility of the less costly method of presenting the data via Microsoft Access over the World Wide Web. Microsoft Access can be easily augmented with other standard programming tools such as SQL (Structured Query Language) or Microsoft's VisualBasic. Using these tools, it is possible to integrate the database into a website even with extremely limited computer resources. From the project's standpoint, Microsoft Access's wide availability to computer users around the world provides an accessible, powerful tool at low cost.

The database needed to be extremely simple in format, using only the most essential fields. From the beginning the intention was to provide only fond level descriptions, and not to venture into the realm of *opisi* (series) level de-

scriptions. While fond level descriptions exist in the CHA's paper guide, it is not clear whether there are more detailed descriptions of these records. Communication with the Georgian archivists on this point was difficult to conduct via e-mail due to their inconsistent access to the Internet (their service provider kept shutting down) and to a lack of clarity as to the archival terms they were using.

Project staff devised the database structure based on a combination of UNIMARC fields and the International Standard for Archival Description (General)—ISAD (G)—elements. The final structure contains approximately twenty-two fields designed for fond level description that will allow production of K-level MARC records or collection level XML-based (Extensible Markup Language) finding aids. The staff included the following fields: main entries (corporate name and personal name), title/fond name, inclusive dates, fond number and former fond number (some fond numbers changed over the years), primary language, date of creation, scope note, source of acquisition, provenance, restrictions, fields recording the total number of series and folders, document type (i.e. papers, records, etc.), a field for listing former names of the creating body, a general note field (public), and an archivist's note field (private). They also included some ID fields for creating relational links between various fields and some fields for listing alternative name forms since almost every fond has both a Georgian and a Russian name form.

One of the major problems with the database is that most of the planning work was conducted by the archivists and the FGNA's computer consultant over long distance. Most of the work on the database design was done via e-mail with only one face-to-face meeting. The computer consultant has no archival background and was disdainful of MARC as being old and out-of-date. He was also the only member of the team with detailed knowledge of the Microsoft Access software. While he and the archivists on the project team discussed the database's needs in detail,

he created and tested the actual database himself. Due to time constraints, distance, and lack of familiarity with the software by the rest of the team, the consultant gave no one else more than an overview of the final product, and a number of changes had to be made during the first days of the project in Georgia in 1998. Despite these problems, the database has functioned well, although there is some additional work to be done prior to its anticipated public debut in the near future.

The three short-term goals of the FGNA project team's first visit were to train the Georgian archivists in the rules and standards governing the data input (MARC and ISAD (G)), to have them write the descriptions, and to enter the data into the database. Although they had computers, no one had computer skills, and they did not use computers as part of the daily operation of the archives. Despite this lack of computer literacy, the Georgian archivists input a total of 830 fond descriptions from the Central Historical Archives in three languages. During the summer of 2000, project staff traveled to Georgia once again to train archivists in the Archives of Contemporary History (ACH) how to write the descriptions. Currently, these archivists are in the process of creating descriptions for the 1,200 fonds housed in the ACH.

WORKING IN GEORGIA

The combination of minuscule or nonexistent government salaries (in 1998 archivists' salaries were a mere \$20 per month, and during fiscal crisis they may be unpaid for months or even years at a time), the physical state of the building, and the lack of consistent public works all greatly influenced project work. Physically, day-to-day work was profoundly affected, and the expectations for a half-hour would sometimes take an entire day. Whether it was being unable to print out and duplicate a form because there was no paper for the printers and photocopiers, or it was having no electricity to run the computer or turn on the stack

lights, or it was having to return to the apartment to use the bathroom, or it was struggling to get archives staff to work for more than two hours a day, project staff found themselves constantly having to compensate or change work strategies.

While Georgians tend to have a more relaxed work ethic than North Americans, they are in no way adverse to hard work. The Georgian archivists and historians involved with the project are dedicated professionals, but they are making a yearly salary that would normally cover only a week's expenses. Most of the archivists are running small business ventures, conducting research projects in the archival holdings for hire, or tutoring other Georgians in the Georgian language to make ends meet.

During the first trip, the lack of governmental salaries was a significant hindrance to project work. The archives staff were reluctant to work long hours because this took them away from other activities that made money. On the second trip, the FGNA staff discovered that the experience the Georgians had gained on that first project helped to overcome this problem. The Georgian archivists arrived at an early hour and worked even when the Americans were not around. They had learned how their involvement in the database project could benefit them both intellectually and financially, and they all came eager to assist. One of the archivists who worked with the project in 1998 explained how this experience was one of the best of her career. She noted that it not only gave her a better understanding of international archival standards but also gave her an overview of the holdings of the CHA that she had not had previously.

LANGUAGE

No amount of eagerness, however, could help overcome the problem of *kartulot* (the Georgian language). Although the project team learned some basic Georgian phrases to assist in travel prior to the 1998 visit, it was frustrating and

exhausting not being able to communicate independently. It was also distressing that no one on the team spoke the language of the host country. In the end, Russian, which Ken Church spoke fairly fluently, was the language of the first trip.

During the second visit without Church or another Russian speaker to assist with translation, language proved even more of a stumbling block. What Russian that could be learned in the two years between visits was not enough to navigate the complex and technical conversations to conduct the database work. The FGNA hired a translator who did a good job of communicating, but did not have any archival training and did not have the knowledge of the project that Ken Church had. Project staff spent long periods of time listening to arguments in Georgian followed by brief questions on specific points dealing with the descriptive process or the workflow. Had the project staff understood the issues earlier, explanations might have been interjected sooner and valuable time might have been saved. On both trips a translator's lack of familiarity with archival terms sometimes resulted in confusion when a term was mistranslated. It was not until near the end of the second visit that it was discovered that the term *provenance* had been mistranslated and thus slightly misinterpreted by both the CHA and ACH teams.

In addition, not speaking any Georgian had political ramifications for the project staff. During the first visit members of the project team met with the director of the Kekelidze Institute. Even though he was fluent in Russian, when he was informed that team members only spoke Russian, the director called in a staff member who spoke English to translate.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

Initially, project staff found that the Georgians had no understanding of the Internet or how it could be utilized in

terms of creating access to guides and other information about the repository. During the first work day in 1998 the director at the Central Historical Archives asked, “What exactly is this world-wide-web thing?” While each department had a brand new PC, the Georgian archivists were using them only for playing games. GDA Director Makharadze asked the FGNA members to speak to all the archival directors about the integral use of technology in U.S. archives. The directors asked questions and expressed significant interest. They seemed to understand how databases, spreadsheets, and word processing would enhance their work process.

On the second trip, the technological advances became evident when the project team found Internet cafes and computer-proficient archivists. One disheartening discovery, however, was the removal of the ACH’s computer to Deputy Director Khustishvili’s office, where the database entry is performed. His computer had broken, and without funds to purchase a replacement, they had to sacrifice a lesser-used machine. On the other hand, project staff noted how readily the Georgians grasped the descriptive standards concepts represented by ISAD (G) and UNIMARC. Once past initial misunderstandings caused by language barriers, project staff and Georgians would nod in agreement over the use of most descriptive elements.

The only real stumbling block was the concept of the main entry. Under Soviet rule there was only one recognized state, and no distinction was made between the records of the current government, the former Russian government, or ancient kingdoms; thus, there was no need for a main entry. In the case of personal fonds, there was a title that included the name of the creator, so again, no need for a main entry. It took several days of explaining before the Georgian archivists understood the importance of such an element both in terms of politics and of descriptive practice. Their willingness to adopt this element may well have had as much to do with the fact that for the first time they

were able to differentiate between Soviet, Russian, and Georgian rule as much as any other factor.

CONCLUSION

The Sakartvelo Database Project produced mixed results. At the time of this writing, the CHA data is complete, except for minor checking of the entries. The team was unprepared for the complexity of creating three matching descriptions in three different languages and the various translation problems involved. In essence, everyone who reviews these entries finds problems with the way someone else translated a term or interpreted a sentence.

While the database appears to have worked well to this point, a public interface is lacking, and the complexity of the extraction of data for use in other formats (MARC and SGML) is unclear to anyone on the team. The project computer consultant left FGNA following the 1998 visit, so the team has little expertise in the management of this particular software. The FGNA team's experience in finding appropriate software—and in having to expend time with data structure—demonstrates the need for a standard archival, electronic data capture device that is at once flexible, easy to use, and inexpensive. Many poor nations could use this sort of tool to assist with the democratization of their records.

Another problem facing FGNA is finding server space where the database can be mounted. The team currently is exploring possible solutions to this problem as well as funding to add descriptions from the other archives' departments. Some more urgent problems, particularly those of the film archives and the conservation lab, also need funding.

Finally, working in the international archival arena is an eye-opening experience, particularly when working in the former Soviet bloc countries or in developing nations. The foreign situation serves as a reminder of the affluence of the United States and the amazing resources available

even to its poorer archival facilities. It also emphasizes the extremely Ameri-centric viewpoint of the United States archival community. Few archivists in the United States are aware of much of the work done by the International Council on Archives (ICA). The ICA, in recent years, has created a number of important standards for descriptive practices, authority records, electronic records, and more. These are standards that in some cases parallel or complement ideas and practices used in the United States, yet they are consistently ignored by the vast majority of American archivists.

Archivists in this country seem to forget, or to be unaware that, as the FGNA team discovered when working with Georgian archivists, “archives” is an international community with a language of its own. There are valuable colleagues in other countries who in some cases need assistance. More often than not, there are international colleagues with important ideas and similar practices from which American archivists can learn and can use to advantage.

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