

Archival Appraisal in Community Archives

Abstract

Archival appraisal is one of the basic functions of archives. This chapter provides an initial analysis of the contexts in which community archives make appraisal decisions. The author draws attention to the different degrees of archival selection, how archival selection is perceived by community archivists, the importance of the human factor in this activity and how value is attributed to documentation. The chapter applies methods of analysis of texts and data from semi-structured interviews with community archivists.

Keywords: community archives; archival appraisal; archival selection

Community archives – and this means independent documentary initiatives – are becoming an increasingly important component of archival heritage. Growing in number (in Poland, at least several hundred are estimated to exist),¹ they are increasingly studied at university and researched.² At the same time, community archives are becoming more and more recognisable as a phenomenon of cultural heritage. However, they are still relatively obscure, including in terms of how they function on a daily basis and how they create their own archival collections.

The aim of this text is to present the issue of constructing archival collections by community archives, and more specifically, how their archival appraisal is made. In community archives, this process is informal and extremely diverse, unlike in state archives. At the same time, it is a highly relevant context for the functioning of community archives and a key factor influencing how their collections are shaped. Very often this context is hidden (albeit unintentionally) from the potential user, so it is important to be aware of its existence and possible consequences.

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1 *Baza archiwów społecznych* [2021].

2 Czarnota 2017.

The analysed data originates in particular from interviews with archivists involved in the work on independent community archives, conducted between 2015–2018 within the scope of the *Community archives in Poland – multiple case study* research project. The descriptive (in a sense, “encyclopaedic”) objective of this project was to learn about a wide range of aspects regarding the functioning of community archives, such as methods of collecting, preserving, processing and providing access to archives, the characteristics of archival collections, the people involved in creating archives, methods of financing or the problems faced by archives.³ One element of the specific research question concerning the collection of archival materials by community archives was also the issue of archival appraisal. However, due to the time constraints of the project, this was only one of many issues raised, and it received insufficient attention during the cross-case analysis stage, which is addressed in this chapter. Secondary analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted directly, on site (in most cases at the archive headquarters) was supplemented with an analysis of the literature and existing data.

The chapter looks at the practices and mechanisms of selection in community archives in Poland. Indeed, they provided empirical material and it is the context in which they function that is of particular interest here. However, the results may to some degree extend beyond this geographic location, especially since they were to some extent contextualised with the findings of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Due to their huge variety, community archives are difficult to define – as both Polish⁴ and English-speaking authors⁵ tend to agree. In Poland, the term “community archive” dates back to the 1990s.⁶ It began to gain special attention in 2012, when the KARTA Centre (the largest independent archive in Poland) stepped up its operations regarding other community archives. Currently, this term is promoted by the Community Archives Centre (*Centrum Archiwistyki Społecznej*) – an organisation co-created by the KARTA Centre (*Ośrodek KARTA*) and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.⁷ It is worth noting that the Polish version of the term “community archive” is *archiwum społeczne*, which in direct translation means “social archive” and does not refer to any community, but instead to the society. In this sense, “social” means:

Relating to society or part of it; produced by society and owned by it as common property; [...] working selflessly for the good of a community; concerning the attitudes

3 Wiśniewska-Drewniak 2016.

4 Czarnota 2011, p. 15; Ziętał [2022], p. 3; Wiśniewska 2015 (1) p. 222; eadem 2016, p. 195.

5 *Listening to the Past* 2004, p. 43; Flinn 2007, p. 152; idem 2011, pp. 5–6; Gilliland / Flinn 2013, p. 2; Flinn 2015; Welland / Cossham 2019; Poole 2020.

6 Gluza 2002.

7 *Zarządzenie Ministra Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego* 2020.

or actions of the majority of the society; organised by a community independently, without the participation of the state.⁸

According to the regulations regarding the community archives database, currently run by the Community Archives Centre (previously by the KARTA Centre), community archives are “organisations that arose as a result of grassroots, deliberate civic activity in terms of collecting, processing and providing access to archival materials.”⁹

In Polish-language literature, the most common features of community archives are: grassroots,¹⁰ non-state, very often associated with non-governmental organisations,¹¹ intended for the permanent storage of collected materials,¹² social and civic motivation to operate the archive.¹³

The operation of community archives is both varied and complex, encompassing both the classic roles of archives (such as acquiring/collecting or processing archives) as well as activities beyond the archive mainstream (e.g., project financing of core activity). This chapter focuses on one classic role of historical archives – archival appraisal, although the context of its use in the case of community archives is definitely different than in other types of archives (e.g., state archives).

In this chapter, “appraisal” will be understood according to the Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology as “the process of identifying materials offered to an archive that have sufficient value to be accessioned”¹⁴ – i.e., determining whether a given document or documents have any archival value that qualifies them for long-term (permanent) preservation.

The first level of selection (though not yet the selection of documents) occurs very early in community archives, already at their creation stage. The creators of an archive declare what thematic, territorial or chronological scope they are interested in to such an extent as to collect archival materials or copies thereof. Otherwise, they state that the official narrative presented by mainstream heritage institutions is unsatisfactory for them (as incomplete or incorrect), and so they decide to document a given topic (or a social group) on their own terms.¹⁵

8 “[...] odnoszący się do społeczeństwa lub jego części; wytworzony przez społeczeństwo i będący jego wspólną własnością; [...] pracujący bezinteresownie dla dobra jakiejś społeczności; dotyczący postaw lub działań większości członków społeczeństwa; zorganizowany przez jakąś społeczność samodzielnie, bez udziału państwa.” *Spoleczny* [2021].

9 “[...] organizacje, które powstały w wyniku oddolnej, celowej działalności obywatelskiej gromadzące, opracowujące i udostępniające materiały archiwalne.” *Regulamin bazy* [2021].

10 Cf. Ziętał 2012; Wiśniewska 2013; Czarnota 2014; Giziński 2016.

11 Cf. Ziętał 2012; Wiśniewska 2013; Czarnota 2013.

12 Cf. Czarnota 2011; Wiśniewska 2014; Ziętał 2014; Wiśniewska-Drewniak 2019.

13 Czarnota 2014; Ziętał 2014; Wiśniewska 2015 (1).

14 *Appraisal* [2021].

15 Caswell et al. 2017.

Therefore, community archivists, in giving a certain topic archival value, make a decision – even if at this point it is not yet possible to speak of appraising documents. Moreover, the decision to select a particular topic does not necessarily have to be made only once, at the outset of an archive. Archivists may add another theme to the original concept of the archive that, for various reasons, interested them later, or they might change the chronological, geographic, physical or formal nature of the material collected.

One of the basic principles of archival selection, developed decades ago by archival methodology in Poland, is to select records creators first, and then appraise the records.¹⁶ In some cases, the practice of community archives can refer to this principle, albeit to a very limited extent.

Sometimes community archives decide to announce campaigns to collect materials for their collections (or (co)create them, e.g., by recording oral history interviews). Such campaigns are sometimes advertised widely, to the general public, without any specific targeting (e.g., by distributing leaflets, newspaper advertisements, posts on social media). However, sometimes community archives decide to narrow down the target group of such campaigns, focusing their action, for example, on residents of a nursing home or a veterans' union. Here, in a sense, we can witness a partial selection of potential records creators – indeed, the archive states that people in such institutions or organisations may have such valuable materials (or memories) that they would be worth including in archive collections. In this informal way, on a macro scale and a priori, they select potential donors of archival materials (or interviewees for oral history interviews).

It is also worth mentioning the key role of personal contacts in creating community archives, which has already been highlighted in the Polish literature.¹⁷ Very often, community archivists approach some of their friends, acquaintances and family members in order to enrich the archive collections, by requesting that they provide documents or record their memories. After all, they do not turn to everyone they know, but to those whose recollections or family archives may be related to the topic area documented by the archive and may represent some value for the archive. Another criterion is undoubtedly the availability of these people or their potential willingness to cooperate.

A similar mechanism occurs when using the snowball sampling method – for example when recording an oral history interview, when the witness, after being interviewed, is asked if they can recommend other speakers.¹⁸ Then the “burden” of selecting subsequent records creators, though clearly informally, shifts par-

16 Borodij 2007, pp. 35–36.

17 Martini / Józwick 2017.

18 Atkinson / Flint 2001; Cohen / Arieli 2011, pp. 426–429.

tially to the donor, which is a situation unheard of in traditional archival appraisal mechanisms.

Generally, it can be said that sometimes community archives do indeed carry out a two-stage archival appraisal, starting first with the selection of records creators. However, this is informal in nature, not fully acknowledged by community archivists and, compared with the subsequent stage of records selection, merely supplementary. Definitely, the selection of the documentation itself happens much more often, and is definitely more important for community archives, more visible and easier for the researcher to grasp.

In the case of community archives, the selection of documentation consists in choosing what the archive would like to include in its collections.

As in previous cases, this mechanism is informal and the form of this activity depends on how exactly the archive collects its materials. Interestingly, all archivists when asked about archival selection (although this term was not used directly in the question, unless it proved helpful) replied that their archive did not conduct any selection. Only auxiliary questions made it possible to establish that, of course, the selection of documentation is indeed conducted, even if the archivists are not fully aware of it.

The most common criterion applied in all the community archives examined was that the documents should comply with the objectives and theme of the archive.

So, the Miastograf.pl Digital Archives of Łódź Citizens (*Cyfrowe Archiwum Łodzian Miastograf.pl*; Miastograf translates in English as “cityographer”) – a name coined to refer to its purpose of describing a city – collects photographs documenting (or describing) the city of Łódź, and therefore does not collect photographs that only depict people or photos from holidays taken outside the city.¹⁹ Community Archives in Bronowice (*Bronowickie Archiwum Społeczne*) only collects materials related to the history of everyday life in Bronowice Małe – once a village near Cracow, now one of its districts.²⁰ South-Eastern Research Institute in Przemyśl (*Południowo-Wschodni Instytut Naukowy w Przemyślu*) collects materials on Ukrainian and regional issues (the Polish-Ukrainian borderland and the vicinity of Przemyśl) and on Greek Catholics in this region (although this archive, due to its limited capabilities, currently refuses new

19 Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu, Wydział Nauk Historycznych, Katedra Archiwistyki i Zarządzania Dokumentacją: *Community archives in Poland – multiple case study (2016–2019). Project documentation* [interviews held by Magdalena Wiśniewska-Drewniak] (hereinafter: UMK: *Community archives*); Michał Gruda (Miastograf.pl Digital Archives of Łódź Citizens), interview by author, 5.11.2015.

20 *Ibid.*, Natalia Martini (Community Archives in Bronowice), interview by author, 4.03.2016.

materials).²¹ General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation (*Fundacja General Elżbiety Zawackiej*) documents three main topics: the history of military service performed by Polish women on various fronts, the history of the Home Army (the underground armed forces from World War II) in Pomerania (in northern Poland) and the history of *Zagroda*, the Home Army's Foreign Communication Department (*Wydział Łączności Zagranicznej Komendy Głównej Armii Krajowej "Zagroda"*). As these topics deal mainly with World War II and the period shortly after it, and people who were usually adults (or nearly adult) at that time, the foundation primarily collects secondary materials and contacts the heirs of the soldiers whose fate is documented. That is why all new materials entering the archive are so valuable and cannot be subject to any further selection.²² The Storytellers (*Opowiadacze Historii*) are keen to record an interview with anyone who has any recollections of Lower Town (*Dolne Miasto*), a district of Gdańsk. Ideally, they should be people closely related to the area – living, working, studying or on military service there, but respondents who just visited Dolne Miasto are of interest too. When making digital copies of photos from family albums, the criterion of compliance with the archive topic is also applied – if possible, all photos related to Lower Town lent by their owners are copied.²³ The thematic criterion is also used by Civic Archives of Podkowa Leśna (*Obywatelskie Archiwum Podkowy Leśnej*), which collects materials on the history of Podkowa Leśna (a small town near Warsaw) and its immediate surroundings, from the time when the town was founded in the interwar period, to the present day. The main topics are the actions of the anti-communist opposition and the history of the Parish of St. Christopher, the beginnings of the town and local society in the 1930s, and the everyday life of its inhabitants.²⁴ Also, LGBTQIA+Fem Historical Club (*Klub Historyczny LGBTQIA+Fem*) only requires that the collected materials comply with the topic of the archive (non-heteronormativity and feminism).²⁵

21 Ibid., Bogumiła Kowal (South-Eastern Research Institute in Przemyśl), interview by author, 11.04.2017; Stanisław Stępień (South-Eastern Research Institute in Przemyśl), interview by author, 10.04.2017.

22 Ibid., Elżbieta Skerska (General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation), interview by author, 27.09.2017; Anna Rojewska (General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation), interview by author, 26.09.2017; Dorota Zawacka-Wakarecy (General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation), interview by author, 26.09.2017.

23 Ibid., Jacek Górski (Storytellers from the Lower Town in Gdańsk), interview by author, 13.01.2018.

24 Ibid., Bogdan Wróblewski (Civic Archives of Podkowa Leśna), interview by author, 27.01.2018.

25 Ibid., Agnieszka Wiciak / Kamil Prykowski (LGBTQIA+Fem Historical Club), interview by author, 4.08.2018.

The selection criteria were described somewhat differently by the co-founders of Archeology of Photography Foundation (*Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii*) – an organisation collecting photographic archives documenting the work of outstanding Polish photographers. The purpose of the archive is to protect photographers' legacies from dispersion and destruction. The basic criterion for selecting materials is their value from the perspective of art history and the history of photography; it is mainly a question of artistic value as well as, to a certain extent, documentary value. As a rule, the foundation tries not to work with archives of living artists, as this is hindered due to artists' possible attachment to their materials. The foundation places tremendous value on freedom of work, and this kind of situation, as well as the heirs' lack of openness to the foundation's ways of working, could significantly hinder the day-to-day running of the organisation.²⁶

None of the archives indicated time as a criterion, and some even emphasised that there are no materials too fresh to be included in their archives. Some of the archives were also involved in creating sources, not only oral history interviews (which, as a rule, speak about the past), but also, for example, by creating contemporary photographs of a changing city space like, for example, *Miastograf.pl* and *Storytellers* from the Lower Town in Gdańsk. Civic Archives of Podkowa Leśna included relatively new (only a few years old) photographs of members of the local community in their collections. This indicates a certain feeling among community archivists that nothing is too new to be preserved for the future.

Most of the archives studied did not attach much importance to forms of documents or methods of recording information that might serve to create a coherent conglomeration of originals and copies, photographs, written documents, publications, memoirs, leaflets, museum objects and other various types of materials. This diversity of collections of community archives is largely highlighted in the Polish and English literature,²⁷ and is a characteristic feature of community archives, which care more about the thematic suitability of the materials than about following well-trodden paths by creating separate categories for archival materials, library and museum objects, or works of art.

A certain exception here is Community Archives in Bronowice, which, being an exclusively digital archive, does not collect copies of museum objects (e.g., accolades offered by donors), due to the difficulties in making digital copies of them. Likewise, Community Archives in Bronowice does not collect documents

26 Ibid., Marta-Przybyło-Ibadullajev (Archeology of Photography Foundation), interview by author, 12–13.02.2018.

27 Ziętał 2012, p. 10; Wiśniewska 2015 (2), p. 64; Sobczak / Kudosz 2016, pp. 15–17; Ziętał 2017, pp. 25–26; Flinn 2011; Gilliland / Flinn 2013; Welland / Cossham 2019; Poole 2020.

larger than A4, as this is the maximum document size that can be scanned by the equipment at the archive's disposal.²⁸

The appraisal is not always made by the archive. Very often, a complete or preliminary selection is made by the document holder who decides to submit the materials to the archive, or a witness of history with whom the archivist recorded an interview and then asked to share materials from their personal archive. In such a case, the creator often independently selects whether they want to donate something to the archive, thus indicating, in accordance with their opinion, what may be valuable for a given archive. As suggested by the interviews conducted during the research, this kind of appraisal made by the donator often misaligns with the assessment made by the archivist. Indeed, the latter often notices value where the owner of the materials sees none.²⁹ Therefore, community archivists know from experience that in such situations it is worth asking for a presentation of the entire donor's archive and making a selection of materials together with them.

Community archives allocate archival value differently than traditional archives. According to the Dictionary of Archives Terminology by the Society of American Archivists archival value is "the ongoing usefulness or significance of records, based on the administrative, legal, fiscal, evidential, or historical information they contain, justifying their continued preservation."³⁰ Due to the nature of community archives (independent, grassroots, not representing any authority), it cannot be said that archival value is given due to any administrative, legal, fiscal or evidential worth that the materials might have. If we are to understand historical value as a potential value for professional historians (as sources for creating historiography), then here too it is of limited importance, because not all of the studied archives intend to collect documents for academic purposes, although some do, such as General Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation, Archeology of Photography Foundation and South-Eastern Research Institute in Przemyśl. Of course, the fact that a given archive does not aim to meet the professional needs of historians does not mean that the latter will not make use of them. This is a fundamentally difficult issue and certainly requires further empirical study to identify the purposes of community archives, whom they target, their users and how they use the information they collect. Returning, however, to the main topic of the considerations – i. e., appraisal in community archives – it can be noticed that they perceive the value of archives more locally, more practically and more emotionally.

28 UMK: *Community archives*; Martini, interview.

29 Ibid.; Górski, interview.

30 *Archival value* [2021].

Local perception of archival value consists in acknowledging what is important “to us” as valuable – for the creators of a given archive, its immediate surroundings, social group or local community represented by the archive – and what would not necessarily be of value to professional historians, state archivists or mainstream heritage institutions. What counts is the fate of ordinary people (rather than outstanding individuals), details related to the documented place, stories of everyday life and personal experiences, not necessarily great events and historical meta-narratives.

The practical perception of archival value is related, *inter alia*, to the collection of archival materials with a view to their potential use – e.g., for a publication, exhibition, or social media post. Sometimes community archives even set themselves this kind of practical goal (creating an exhibition, publishing a book, making an artistic installation) as the overriding objective of a project, to which the entire functioning of the archive and its collections are subordinated, rather than just the mechanisms of archival selection. This, in turn, may be related to a very important topic, which is the project management of community archives, related to their application for financing from public funds offered in grant competitions.³¹ Consequently, community archives that benefit from this method of financing (and the alternative is usually no financing or limited financing from their own resources) have to meet competition requirements over other, more rational considerations affecting archival practice. This is also the case with archival selection. The creators of Miastograf had to select respondents for their oral history interviews depending on whether or not they had information relevant to the project at hand; moreover, the projects were always thematic. Indeed, it was impossible to write a project that would simply involve collecting stories from the oldest inhabitants of the city, because grant competitions always had some thematic focus. As a result, for example, a collection of oral history interviews were created on the topic of vanishing professions in Łódź.³² Also, the quantity of collected materials and their types may be dictated by the grant requirements and the shape of the application written by the archive, and may not necessarily fulfill the actual needs of the archive.

In community archives appraisal, emotions play an important role, as indicated by examples from the literature in the field of archival science.³³ Since community archives do not seek value for great history, meta-narration, state, political and capital history, it means that they search for small, local things, often trivial from the perspective of “great history”. The importance of a person, place, object or event may be dictated by emotional considerations, the organism’s

31 Wiśniewska-Drewniak 2018.

32 UMK: *Community archives*; Gruda, interview.

33 Caswell 2020; Cifor 2016.

affective response to a photograph, recording, or object. Something might be particularly funny, surprising, traumatising or shocking; it may evoke a certain joy, or simply hit a note of nostalgia and, because of these emotions, be included in the holdings of a community archive, even if it does not convey any particularly valuable information. In any case, the emotional impact of community archives on the donors, archivists and end users would seem to be a particularly interesting research issue.³⁴ The emotional selection of materials to include in an archive is also dictated by considerations related to sharing these materials – i. e., with the assumption that documents so emotionally charged will make attractive social media posts, or be used in art projects, publications, exhibitions and so on (which is linked to in turn with the above-mentioned practical criterion).

Finally, one should look at the archival selection mechanisms in community archives from a wider, theoretical perspective. Appraisal is one of the key functions of archives, which – when viewed with a critical and postmodern eye – are instruments of power, both literally (supporting administration and oppression) and symbolically. An archivist in a state archive has limited influence on selection mechanisms, because currently the main tool for selecting records for permanent preservation is predetermined retention schedule. While it is true that a state archivist does have some influence both on the shape of the retention schedule (within the scope of consultations with the records creator and the relevant archive) and on issuing permissions for the destruction of documentation (the archivist may refuse to grant such consent). However, in comparison with these mechanisms, a community archivist has far more freedom. An archivist (in particular, a community archivist) does not find archival value in documents, but creates it. This is not an archivist as an objective seeker of historical value, but a completely subjective one, with an individual system of values, opinions, predilections and experiences – a creator of archival value.³⁵ As Marika Cifor rightly puts it, “Community archives literature has extended the discussion about and pushed the bounds of who has the power to appraise, how appraisal decisions are made and what is deemed to be of archival value.”³⁶

When looking at the mechanisms of appraisal in community archives, it is worth paying attention to the enormous significance of the “human factor” at virtually every possible stage. The interests of the archive creators influence its subject matter and the forms of the materials collected, and these may also change over time. The archivists’ personal contacts often provide a path for selecting who might donate archival materials and who could give oral history interviews. Finally, the personal decisions of community archivists, their pas-

34 Wiśniewska-Drewniak 2019, pp. 400–402.

35 Cifor 2016, p. 13; Harris 2002, p. 84.

36 Cifor 2016, p. 13.

sions and opinions on what should be preserved in the archive directly influence the choice of materials for archiving (and potentially long-term preservation). But the “human factor” does not end with the archivist, because the donor also performs a kind of self-assessment as a records creator (by contacting the archive or agreeing to work together if the archive contacted them first). According to the so-called snowball method too, anyone giving an oral history interview may recommend other potential respondents to the archivists, thereby making a certain selection of people from certain circles and deciding whether someone might be a valuable interviewee for the archive. Moreover, the donor often selects which documentation to present to the archivists, deciding on its potential value for the archive. Sometimes these decisions are made in consultation with the archivists, whose selection criteria may disagree with those used by the donor. Such a situation ends up being a negotiation to form an agreement on what is important for the donor and what is relevant for the archive or archivist. Finally, the “human factor” in community archive selection can also be seen in the potential end users, who react to archival materials in different ways and whose perceptions of how an archive operates and its archival collections may potentially be a factor taken into account by community archivists when shaping their collections.³⁷

However, a whole catalogue of detailed research questions emerges in relation to how community archives appraise documentation, which this chapter certainly does not answer. Who, and in what situations, gives value to records – the archivist, the donor, or maybe both together? How is the archive value negotiated? Should – and if so, how – community archives document the archival selection process? What selection criteria are used by community archives and, consequently, what features of documentation give it value, in the eyes of community archives, that justify its permanent preservation? What is the relationship between archival appraisal and the objectives and activities of the archive? And so, to what extent does the archive shape its collections in terms of how it might potentially be used? Is archival selection performed only once or is it repeated and may the decision to classify materials for permanent preservation change (as opposed to state archives where it is final)? What impact do the mechanisms of project financing of community archives have on decisions regarding archival appraisal? The catalogue of such research questions could certainly be much broader, and the above-mentioned proposals might just crack it open a little.

Archival appraisal in community archives is completely different than in public archives (for example, state archives). Community archives do not supervise the office procedures and institutional archives in their area of operation,

37 Caswell 2020, pp. 30–34.

and giving materials archival value is not based on retention schedules used in institutions controlled by the archive.

Community archivists themselves do not realise that they perform archival appraisal and selection of records creators and records. Nevertheless, certain mechanisms underpinning the selection of materials for community archives do exist and, once acknowledged, constitute a very interesting topic for future empirical research.

[Translated by Steve Jones]

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