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International Conference

Restitution of confiscated works of art. A wish or reality?

Documentation Centre for Property Transfers of Cultural Assets of World War II Victims

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In search of information lost in facts.

The archival research concerning Belgian cultural losses during WWII

(Panel 6: The first segments of the mosaic. The archives and their importance to clarify the origins of the confiscated cultural assets)

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Pieces of an archival puzzle

The availability of relevant archival material is crucial to the research on confiscated cultural goods. The difficult work of identification of such goods forms a first and indispensable step towards their recovery. In this contribution the experience with respect to the Belgian case is presented.¹

In the early nineties we joined the international research that made a new start based on the formerly unknown archival material that came into sight in Moscow.² Initially our aim was rather practical: the compilation of well-documented restitutional demands. But quickly we broadened the scope and aimed at a full reconstruction of the destiny of the cultural goods in our country during WWII, mainly focusing on archival and library material.³

This research did not proceed without difficulties:

A first practical problem is due to the worldwide spread of the various archive records. This forms a primary obstacle to accessibility of information. It certainly constitutes a financial hurdle.

Moreover it seemed that the documents brought together by the Office de Récupération Economique (ORE) shortly after the war were untraceable. ORE was the official Belgian State service responsible for the discovery, identification, and restitution of cultural goods between 1944 and 1967.⁴

It was only with the help of colleagues in France and the Netherlands that the newly activated service from 1993 onwards -then led by our colleague Jacques Lust- was able to start the archival reconstruction work.⁵

On the other hand there was a positive element in the early nineties, as we could depend on ‘new’ material that was not available to researchers shortly after the war. We quickly discovered the possibilities of the newly opened archives in Moscow. But during our first steps in the Moscow archival depots –in the beginning of the 1990s- it cost us a lot of time, trouble and diplomacy just to get some idea of the nature and the extent of the archival records that were available.

Intellectual accessibility is a crucial factor in the free consultation of archives. Instruments such as guides and inventories enable the researcher effectively and efficiently to prepare for research in the archives, showing the way to the relevant documents and providing information on the archival context. In other words: the availability of adequate archive access tools and their distribution, possibly in digital form is a first condition to free research. In this respect, Russian archive institutions have come a long way in the last decade. But there is still a long way to go.⁶

The real breakthrough in our research came in 1995 when we were able to see the archives kept in Kiev. Our basic work of reconstruction could really start from the moment essential records surfaced in the Central State Archives of the Higher Government Bodies in Kiev. There the records are kept on the activities in Belgium of the most important German plundering organisation during the war: the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), including an exceptional document that provided a chronological review of all ERR actions from 1940 to 1943.⁷ On the basis of this record and correlating correspondence and reports of the ERR-Arbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nord-Frankreich, it was possible to draw a clear picture of the ERR's archive-plundering trips through our country from August 1940.

In putting together the new data from the previously inaccessible Nazi papers in Russia and the Ukraine and the information which had already been available in Western Europe, increasingly clear insights into the systematic cultural robbery carried out by the Nazis was provided.

All this information was brought together in a simple database, containing information on more than 200 cultural ‘assaults’ in Belgium.⁸ This database was continuously updated as new information became available. It turned out to be a very helpful and important tool in our ongoing research.

Alice Pels-Brodsky

In order to give this presentation a human face, I would like to illustrate the case of Alice Pels-Brodsky with some documents that were brought together during our investigation. Alice Pels (1882-1963) was the secretary of the International Committee of Socialist Women and an active anti-fascist before the war.⁹ She first came to the attention of the Geheime Feldpolizei as they were searching the offices of the Socialist International in Brussels in the first weeks of the Nazi-occupation.¹⁰

By that time she had fled the country but was arrested –as a Jew- shortly after her return in October 1940. She went into hiding immediately after her release from prison in December 1940.

During her absence in these first months of the war her house was requisitioned.¹¹ When the ERR showed up in 1942 her library was confiscated on February 27th.¹² and sent to Berlin in 21 cases on April 17th.¹³ It contained a lot of valuable first prints (according to German confiscation documents¹⁴, books in French, Dutch, German and English on socialism, women’s rights, philosophy, history and German literature of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries.

In her claim for war damage she described it as a library of 7,500 bound volumes, containing publications on Belgian history, Dutch, French, German and English classical works, some 17th and 18th century prints of Plantin and a great number of memoirs (Chateaubriand, Talleyrand, Goncourt, Saint-Simon, etc...). She provided a detailed descriptive list of all her lost possessions.¹⁵ On the basis

of that list it is clear that Alice Pels was a victim of the Möbelaktion, a vast plundering programme started in Belgium in May 1942 for emptying the entire household contents, including works of art, of deported Jews. The purpose of the operation was to seize furnishings for houses destined for German settlers in the occupied eastern territories. It resorted under Rosenberg's Reich Ministry for the Eastern Occupied Territories – RMbO (Reichsministerium der besetzten Ostgebiete).¹⁶ The ORE would finally be able to restitute (through the French restitution services) 200 publications, or less than 3% of the total library loss and some objects (some china, a cupboard and a carpet). Her demand for war damage was honoured up to an amount of 100.000 Belgian francs (or less than 25 % of the estimated financial loss).¹⁷

I present this case as an illustration of the importance of archives in clarifying provenance – however fragmented the information may sometimes be presented.

An overall overview of archival sources

I reported on some of the problems we faced, and also mentioned some of the results. To conclude I would like to draw a prospect for the future.

It is clear that intense cooperation among colleagues provides advantages for everyone in approaching the problems facing us today. This has been a positive experience for us throughout. It has strengthened our conviction that international cooperation can be achieved in practical terms. Small-scale cooperation is based primarily on mutual respect and draws its strength from a common concern for our historical heritage.

On the basis of this experience we should be looking to a structural extension of international cooperation. We are convinced that the existing international structures or institutions with an international scope could play an active part in such a process.

We are holding some pieces of what could become a beautiful archival mosaic. It is perfectly possible nowadays to set up a database of archival holdings documenting the property transfer of cultural assets during WWII.

There are good practices in the field to be noted. Some are linked to an institution, providing in that instance an automated version of the traditional overview of archival holdings. Others have a larger scope, like the web database of Archival Fonds of the Czech Republic, an initiative of the Ministry of the Interior to present to a larger public [the cultural and historical treasures contained in the Czech archives](#).¹⁸ I could also refer to other examples of national or regional overviews such as the Scottish Archive Network¹⁹ which was an inspiring model for 'Archiefbank Vlaanderen' in my own country.²⁰

There are, of course, the international portal sites such as the Unesco Archives Portal, but this is merely a overview of archival institutions rather than a presentation of holdings.²¹

A thematic approach is presented by [Artists' Papers Register](#) a computerised register of papers and primary sources relating to artists, designers and craftspeople located in publicly accessible collections in the United Kingdom.²²

These tools have proved to be of great help to researchers who formerly were obliged to find their own heuristic paths. The centralised presentation of information with links to finding aids and in some cases also towards digitised records can improve accessibility of sources on a huge scale.

From these examples it is clear that the adequate software is available and that archivists are finally talking the same language with the International Standard on Archival Description (ISAD-G) that

was first published in 1998 by the International Council on Archives.²³

I can speak from my own experience with the development of 'Archiefbank'. This is a database of private archival holdings in Flanders, subsidised by the government. The main objectives here are the search for and registration of endangered archives and –most importantly- their disclosure to research. The database has been online since 2005. The input of data is organised through colleagues in several institutions who are willing to make their holdings a more accessible. At the moment there are more than one hundred contributors to the project. They get an account to log in to the import module of the database. From the administrators module it is possible to follow the day-to-day movements in the building up of this new archival instrument.

In the setting up of such a project a solid financial basis is of course indispensable. A structural platform is also needed; a consortium of archival institutions, for example, that is able to host the project and especially the technical equipment.

Other clues to success are the availability and the implementation of the International Standard on Archival Description (ISAD-G) and the cooperative attitude of colleagues.

I think that in our specific field of study most of these preconditions are present or at least can be arranged for. I would strongly recommend considering the possibility of setting up such a specific database. In recent years we have built up a clear insight of the importance, accessibility and problems of different archival units. They form the construction bricks, our raw material for further research. This archival expertise should be preserved for the future.

Only in doing so would we be able to meet the high demands of our ongoing investigations with international dimensions and in different directions. That sort of research clearly exceeds the institutional level or even the national framework.

We would be willing to contribute to such a project, because the whole is more than the sum of its parts... and I am convinced that in this way we could derive information still hidden now in random facts. It is also clear that through building up an interactive database still more unknown pieces could be added to the archival mosaic.

An overall archival overview of sources -showing in the first place the way to the documents – rather than the documents as such- would of course be of benefit to all specific fields of research. This is an archival project presented here by an archivist, but it would or could obviously be of importance to the research on works of art and provenance for example. In this sense it could play a role in bringing art restitution closer to reality.

NOTES

- ¹ For a full coverage of confiscation and restitution issues in Belgium during World War II, see: M. Vermote & J. Lust, 'Papieren Bitte! The Confiscation and Restitution of Belgian Archives and Libraries (1940-2003)', in: P.K. Grimsted, F.J. Hoogewoud, E. Ketelaar (red.), *Returned from Russia: Nazi Archival Plunder in Western Europe and Restitution Issues* (Leicester, Institute of Art and Law, 2007), pp. 190-224.
- ² W. Steenhaut, D. Martin, J. Gotovitch and M. Vermote. 'Mission to Moscow. Belgische socialistische archieven in Rusland', in: *Amsab-Tijdingen*, vol. 11, n° 16 (1992), extra n°, pp. 1-24.
- ³ J. Lust, E. Maréchal, W. Steenhaut, M. Vermote, *Een zoektocht naar Archieven: van NISG naar AMSAB* (Gent: AMSAB, 1997).
- ⁴ J. Lust, 'Recovery of Belgian Artworks and Libraries Lost during the Second World War', in: Opper, D., and D. Lemmermeier. *Cultural Treasures Moved Because of the War - A Cultural Legacy of the Second World War Documentation and Research on Losses. Documentation of the International Meeting in Bremen, 30.11.-2.12.1994* (Bremen, 1995), pp. 13-22.
- ⁵ Services of the Prime Minister, *Eindverslag van de Studiecommissie betreffende het lot van de bezittingen van de leden van de joodse gemeenschap van België, geplunderd of achtergelaten tijdens de oorlog 1940-1945* ([Brussels], 2001)
- ⁶ M. Vermote, 'Archiefervaringen in Moskou: niets is mogelijk, alles kan', in: *Bibliotheek- & Archiefgids*, vol. 76 (2000), n°6, p. 3-11.
- ⁷ Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg - Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich, 'Übersicht über die Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien in zeitlicher reihenfolge' (n.d. [March 1943]), Central State Archive of Highest Agencies of Power and Administration of Ukraine (Kiev), 3676/1/164.
- ⁸ *Niet-exhaustieve lijst van archief-en bibliotheekmateriaal in beslag genomen in België tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Gent, Amsab – Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, 2000).
- ⁹ 'Alice Pels est morte'. In : *Le Peuple*, 12 Novembre 1963.
- ¹⁰ Geheime Feldpolizei Gruppe 530, 'Bericht betr: II. International, Brüssel, Rue de Laeken 162' (Brussels, 18 June 1940), Bundesarchiv Berlin: R58 (formerly BA Potsdam, Archiv RSHA Abteilung IV, st. 3/364).
- ¹¹ Formulaire général de déclaration of Alice Pels – Intercalcaire B (Brussels, 1952), Archives of the Ministry of Reconstruction, War Damage (Brussels): dossier Alice Pels, n°2.083.771.
- ¹² Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg - Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich, 'Tagesbericht' (Brussels, 27 February 1942), Central State Archive of Highest Agencies of Power and Administration of Ukraine (Kiev), 3676/1/161.
- ¹³ Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg - Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich, 'Übersicht über die Arbeitsvorhaben der Arbeitsgruppe Belgien in zeitlicher reihenfolge' (n.d. [March 1943]), Central State Archive of Highest Agencies of Power and Administration of Ukraine (Kiev), 3676/1/164, p.12.
- ¹⁴ Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg - Hauptarbeitsgruppe Belgien und Nordfrankreich, 'Aufstellung der wichtigsten Arbeitsvorhaben' (n.d., 8 January 1943), Central State Archive of Highest Agencies of Power and Administration of Ukraine (Kiev), 3676/1/164, p.27.
- ¹⁵ Formulaire général de déclaration of Alice Pels – Intercalcaire B, annex: 'Objets disparus' (Brussels, 1949), Archives of the Ministry of Reconstruction, War Damage, Brussels: dossier Alice Pels, n°2.083.771.
- ¹⁶ K. Stabel, *De Möbelaktion. Het Duitse beheer van de in België geconfisqueerde Joodse goederen tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Leuven, KUL, 2000).
- ¹⁷ Formulaire général de déclaration of Alice Pels – Intercalcaire B, annex: 'Objets récupérés par les soins de L'O.R.E.' (Brussels, 1948), Archives of the Ministry of Reconstruction, War Damage, Brussels: dossier Alice Pels, n°2.083.771.
- ¹⁸ <http://www.mvcr.cz/archivnictvi/index.html>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.scan.org.uk/>
- ²⁰ www.archiefbank.be
- ²¹ http://www.unesco.org/webworld/portal_archives/pages/index.shtml
- ²² <http://www.aah.org.uk/apr/index.php>
- ²³ International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, (Madrid, ICA, 2000).