

Živana HEĐBELI\*

\*Office of General Administration Service of the Croatian Parliament and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, head of Registry Office; E-mail: zhedbeli@inet.hr

## Why I Am (Not) Proud To Be The Archivist

HEĐBELI, Živana, **Why I Am (Not) Proud To Be The Archivist**. *Atlanti*, Vol. 16, N. 1-2, Trieste, 2006, pp. 39-42.

*Original in English, abstract in English, Italian and Slovenian*

**Key words:** *archives, archivists, archival ethics, users, power.*

*In this rather short paper author discuss what is really mean to be an archivist. That simple question, or what is very first feature of her profession, is more and more important to her. What is a hallmark that archivists give to themselves? Relations between archivist and users and between archivist and power are discussed as well.*

HEĐBELI, Živana, **Perché (non) sono orgogliosa di essere un'archivista**. *Atlanti*, Vol. 16, N. 1-2, Trieste, 2006, pp. 39-42.

*In questo breve articolo l'autrice discute di cosa veramente significhi essere un'archivista. Questa semplice domanda, o quale sia la caratteristica primaria della propria professione, sta divenendo per lei sempre più importante. Qual è l'impronta che gli archivisti danno a se stessi? Si discute inoltre dei rapporti fra gli archivisti ed i fruitori dell'archivio e fra gli archivisti ed il potere.*

HEĐBELI, Živana, **Zakaj sem ponosna, da sem arhivistka in zakaj ne** *Atlanti*, Zv. 16, Št. 1-2, Trst, 2006, str. 39-42.

*V tem kratkem prispevku pišem o tem, kaj naj bi bil arhivist, o bistvu arhivistovega dela in kaj je pomembno za mene kot arhivistka. Kaj je glavno znamenje, ki si ga arhivisti pripisujejo, ko govorijo o sebi? Na to odgovarjajo vseeno tudi odnosi med arhivisti in uporabniki, prikazujem pa tudi razmerja med arhivistom in javnostjo.*

I choose archival profession when I was 15 years old high school student. Finishing my high school education I become archival technician. History and archaeology studies, working in archives and registry office, and postgraduate study of archival science followed. I have been working on all jobs and tasks which one ordinary archivist could do in Croatian circumstances (accept being archives' director): records arrangement, finding aids, working in reading room, answering on users requires, preparing materials for microfilming, supervising registry offices, making rule books, reports and planes, educating younger colleagues, international co-operation, exhibits and lectures organization, translating foreign manuals, writing scientific and professional texts, taking part in professional associations...

From present-days' experience it seems odd to me that no one taught me (us) what really mean being an archivist, although there might have been lectures about that, I simply didn't recognize and memorize them then. Till recently my attention was directed to pure practice: how, why, what about, who have written something about it, which legal provision...

But now, question "What really means to be an archivist? / What is an archivist's nature (essence)?" becomes more and more important to me. What is the infallible significance that everyone could recognize archivists for, like for example doctors are recognized for their stethoscope, tailors for scissors, teachers for being confused? What is that sound that we, archivist, make by which other people can distinguish us from others so that everyone could say: "This is a clock! This is a cat! That is an archivist?" What characterize us? What our brand is? What is main (and as a result of it also ontological) level of identifiability of my profession as well as me as professional person?

In most cases the public recognize us through: old papers, dust, unreadable manuscripts, something that need to be search thoroughly to find something we are asked for, people turned to past with heavy eye-glasses... profession which is found as a shelter by those who weren't able to succeed in some more "profane" or "vital"

professions, dissidents from other occupations. I believe I will not mistake saying that public, hopefully only for time being, isn't able to link archives and archivists with modern times and mediums – electronic records.

What is the thing that archivists link them with? In the first place it is a work with records, and main goal of that work are users. How many times we felt bad when we were not able to find something that we have been asked for, and document was necessary for a user to find the truth about his/her parents, to get better pension, to take back lost property? How many times we were happy when user phoned us and said: "You helped me more than all books together!" or just: "Thank you!" How many times we were proud to expose archives' holdings and interpret its values to public? How many times we were happy to take possession of important and valuable documents? Who of us, archivists, didn't experienced destinies of people we found out reading documents? Who of us didn't feel bad because of unfair verdict, feel proud because of courage of a hero against execution or triumph because of someone's inauguration on important duty? Who of us, working with Holocaust or any other genocide documents didn't suffered from nightmares at nights and at daylights? How many times we have chosen our (non)favorites, not known to us in real time in space, following in documents one person's or family's life through yeas or decades? How many times archivist wanted to shout to a person: "Be careful!" or advise him/her not to for a trip because he/she wouldn't be back any more? How many times we made our opinion of someone as arrogant and ignorant full or smart and careful person, just by reading a document he/she had been author of.

From archival manuals we can find out that there aren't relevant facts about beginnings of first archives, but we can also find out that archives exist since beginning of literacy. There are preserved information engraved in stones from ancient times. Archives were found in Ur, the cradle of literacy. In Athens, in 4th century Before Christ, there was archives in Metroon, in temple of Mother of Gods. In Rome documents were kept in Saturn's' temple and Saturn was the god of time, as well as the father of Jupiter, supreme god, patron of justice, truth and marriage. As educated historian and archaeologist, I would say that even Homer was an archivist, as well as all the others who had by oral history, or in many ways, brought over information about life, work, hopes and fears of their contemporaries.

Archivists usually service to the government and save things that are important to government: diplomas, deeds of gift, intergovernmental contracts, genealogies of aristocratic families, and letters of national great men/women. Documents keep tracks on certain job, offer facts about subject they deal with, show what it is about, and are used for preparing and performing certain job. In archives there are kept subjects as evidences and testimonies of national history. Till the end of 18th century archives were efficient instruments of administration and were not available to the public. Archival

science and records' management developed as an answer for easy reference and control of sent and received documents as well as from necessity of documents' systematization. We could also say, from necessity of control. And control has always been characteristic of power.

Archivists have always been closed to the authority and power, persons that authority can count on, people from backstage, logistic. Perhaps that is the reason that public doesn't recognize them - archivist are here, but they are nearly invisible. Closeness to the authority is the main reason of vanity and ill reputation, inadequately masked low self-esteem or arrogance. It is well known that behind overbearing behavior impotence is hidden. Being pompous you can very easy mix-up things and believe that being close to the authority means you are authority. Controlling over decades and centuries old documents it is easy to believe that you have control over time. It stands to reason that documents were kept in Saturn's temple! Having control over file of a person, it is easy to believe that you are familiar with her/him, that two of you share something, that you are able to ruin or improve her/his life. The fact that you act from backstage, that there won't be your signature, can only be the advantage. Immeasurable lightness of being!

Our, western European civilization is born in ancient Greece. How different Athens was from Rome by filing documents in Metroon, temple of Mother of Gods. As far as I'm concerned that is what archives should be: the cradle, the shelter, the stability, mother that gave the life to everyone – good ones and bad ones, loving mother who does not judge and does not condemn. Archives like to be seen as memory of human race or that is what they would like to be. Extremely honorable and responsible role! The question is: Are we capable to perform that role? Are we able to be priests, liberated from secularly wishes, inordinate desires, and lusts for power? Or is it just unattainable ideal?

Archival science needs new revolution or, in science language, new paradigm. If, in the year 1794 French Revolution introduced principle of accessibility of archival records, new revolution should introduce principle of records' equality. The main goal for archivists should be civil society and its documentation. Civil society is usually explained as society with, for example, three colors: red, yellow and green, and all three of them are equally treasured nevertheless red is 95%, yellow 3.9% and green 1.1% of the whole. We keep red, yellow and green documents equally, without saying that yellow or green documents are not as valuable as red ones just because they belong to poor ones or rich ones, to the authority or to people with no belongings. Memory should include everyone: rich and poor, well-educated and illiterate, majority and minority, men and women, grownups and children, government and nongovernmental organization, good and wrong, true and false...

Documents are kept to be used again, used by people and for

people. That is the proud and glory, vanity and ill reputation of my profession – who and what we serve to, what is our goal. Archives originate from people and for people. That is all about – working for people. Archivists are employees, employees of human race. In cities on the seaside there is a proverb: “Put your finger on the sea and you are connected with the whole of world.” Imaginative archivists could say: “Take the document in your hands and you will be connected with the whole of human race.”