

\* Assistant in the project “Registration and valorisation of business archives as a source for the study of the industrialization in the province of East-Flanders”

DERWAELE, Joachim, *Evolution of the Ideas on Registration, Acquisition and Valorisation of Business Archives in the National Archives of Belgium*. *Atlanti*, Vol. 17, N. 1-2, Trieste 2007, pp. 261-272.

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

*In 1975 the National Archives of Belgium published their first “Guide for the business archives preserved in the public archives in Belgium”. Initially it was the intention to also integrate the business archives preserved in the companies themselves, but the difficulties were too numerous and there was only a slight chance that the guide would give a good survey. Nevertheless the guide was the starting point of many publications and projects in which the National Archives of Belgium were the promoter or in which they cooperated with universities. In 1995 the National Archives published a supplement to this work. In the 1980s an “Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives” (based in the National Archives of Belgium, Brussels) was established and they immediately agreed to cooperate with the National Archives. Large companies in Belgium pay the association to inventory their archives and to prepare them for deposit in the National Archives. Besides making inventories they also publish scientific histories of companies.*

1. By business archives we mean those documents that are produced by or for the benefit of a company with the aim of enabling the functioning of the company, and that are intended to be preserved by the company itself.

# Evolution of the Ideas on Registration, Acquisition and Valorisation of Business Archives in the National Archives of Belgium

## 1. Introduction

Under the National Archives Act of June 24<sup>th</sup> 1955 and the Royal Decree of December 12<sup>th</sup> 1957 implementing the National Archives Act, the National Archives of Belgium, a federal scientific institution, are responsible for taking care of and for managing the Belgian archival heritage. More specifically this means that the National Archives supervise the records created by the public authorities, acquire the archives of authorities and private institutions (for example business archives), conserve the archival heritage, make inventories, provide public service and do scientific research in the fields of archiving and institutional history.

One of the tasks of the National Archives involves the archives of private institutions, of which business archives are an important category<sup>1</sup>. We try to record, to acquire and to valorise such archives, with a historical value for the study of the economic development of the different regions in Belgium. In this article we examine how the National Archives of Belgium paid attention to the registration, acquisition and valorisation of business archives. In the next four chapters you will see an evolution in the ideas starting from a mere registration of the business archives conserved in the public archives towards a more active acquisition policy.

Before we elaborate on this issue, it is important to explain why, in our vision, business archives are important for historic research and why, in consequence, they need to be preserved. Business archives are the result of the daily activity in a company. Annual reports, staff magazines, minutes, regulations, maps and ground plans, brochures, photos... are examples of important archive series and form a source of information for many scientific disciplines.

Some examples:

- **Economic history:** how did the company contribute to the economic growth? How did consumer behaviour evolve? How did the products and the productivity evolve? ...
- **Industrial archaeology and history of architecture:** evolution in the buildings and the patrimony of the companies; History of technology and innovation ...

- **Social sciences:** what is the part of the entrepreneur and the employee in society? What is the impact of a company on the environment? What are the industrial relations and working conditions?
- **Management and science of public administration:** what is the profile of a manager/director? How does the structure and organisation of companies develop? ...<sup>2</sup>

In short, business archives are an important, if not the most important, source for historic research in many fields.

## 2. From the beginnings to a general overview of the business archives in the public archives in Belgium

### a. *The early years*

The interest in business archives in Belgium started very late when compared to neighbouring countries. Their importance for scientific research was underestimated. Consequently, little attention was paid to preservation and sometimes radical decisions were taken. For example, in 1880 the National Archives in Ghent destroyed a large amount of registers, loose documents from craftsmen and traders and small business archives under the pretext that it's impossible to write history "*à l'aide de bouquins de boulangers et de cordonniers*" (with the help of the booklets of bakers and shoemakers)<sup>3</sup>.

Through the years the situation improved. The oldest deposits of business archives went to the city archives in Belgium (Antwerp, Ghent...). This gradually changed and as time went by the different depots of the National Archives boasted some important acquisitions. In 1934 Etienne Sabbe, who became the head of the National Archives in Belgium in 1955, wrote an article in which he drew attention to the lack of interest in Belgium for economic archives in general, and more specifically for business archives<sup>4</sup>. Thanks to the same Etienne Sabbe the archives of the companies that were placed under sequester after World War One, and that were abolished afterwards, were brought to the National Archives during the interbellum. It involves the archives of branches of major German companies and associations, businessmen, craftsmen and wholesalers and retailers, who were active in major economic branches of the Belgian capital. The legal statute of all those companies was very different. Some archives consist of only a few registers; other business archives are preserved completely. Those archives are a very valuable source for scientific research. Mostly business archives were deposited in the National Archives after a bankruptcy or when a company stopped its activities. In this case, however, it is the archives of "healthy", normally operating companies. The archives, which roughly measure 1.500 meters, were inventoried in the period 1999-2005<sup>5</sup>.

A real breakthrough in the interest in and care for business archives in the archive world in Belgium came only after World War Two. The perception grew that business archives not only give an answer to specific internal company matters; they can also be used as touchstones and supplements for governmental and public administration archives<sup>6</sup>. Under the leadership of Etienne Sabbe the interest

*The guide for business archives and its supplement didn't integrate the archives preserved in the companies themselves. In the late 1990s the Belgian National Archives, with the financial support of the Belgian Science Policy, therefore launched various projects on the registration of business archives in different provinces. The first projects (in the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp) worked mainly with postal surveys sent to the companies. The surveys asked questions about the history of the companies and about the presence or absence of historical archives. The next projects changed the methodology slightly. Besides postal surveys they would also visit the companies and search actively for business archives (for example: work together with the curator when a company went bankrupt, work together with local historians to search for contacts within companies...). In the full text we will elaborate on the subject of the methodology of the projects (changes in methodology, pros and cons...). The results of the projects were published and conferences were organised to make their results public and to discuss them with scholars in Belgium. In January 2007 the project "Registration and valorisation of business archives as a source for the study of the industrialization in the province of East-Flanders" started. The National Archives of Belgium are also present in the study group "Business Archives" of the "Flemish Library, Archive and Documentation Centre Association". The main objective of the study group is to issue guidelines on which documents in business archives have to be preserved and which can be destroyed.*

2. Other examples: H. Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bedrijfsarchieven: bronnen van roerend cultureel erfgoed*, in: «Bibliotheek- en Archiefgids», 68/1(1992), p. 12.

3. H. Coppejans-Desmedt, *Bedrijfsarchieven in België ter beschikking van onderzoek en studie: een stand van zaken*, in: DEVOS G., «Bedrijfsgeschiedenis, een uitdaging. Studiedag naar aanleiding van 25 jaar Centrum voor Bedrijfsgeschiedenis UFSIA - Universiteit Antwerpen», Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 99), 1998, p. 83.

4. E. Sabbe, *Les archives économiques*, in: «Archives, Bibliothèques et Musées de Belgique», 1934, deel XI, pp. 7-33.

5. For more information concerning the sequester archives in the National Archives in Brussels: C. Vancoppenolle, *Het fonds van sekwesterarchieven gewikt en gewogen. Een creatieve invulling van het contextmodel*, in: «Liber amicorum Coppens Herman» (at the printer's).

6. *Industriële archeologie in Vlaanderen. Theorie en praktijk*, R. Baetens (red.), Antwerpen, Standaard, 1988, pp. 114-118.

**DERWAEL, Joachim, Evoluzione delle idee sulla registrazione, l'acquisizione e la valorizzazione degli archivi d'impresa nell'Archivio Nazionale del Belgio. Atlanti, Vol. 17, N. 1-2, Trieste 2007, pp. 261-272.**

*Nel 1975 l'Archivio Nazionale del Belgio pubblicò la sua prima "Guida agli archivi d'impresa conservati negli archivi pubblici del Belgio". Inizialmente l'intenzione era stata quella di interire anche gli archivi commerciali conservate nelle imprese stesse, ma le difficoltà si rivelano essere numerose e ci fu solo una vaga possibilità che la guida offrisse un panorama accettabile al riguardo. Ciò nonostante, la guida costituì il punto d'inizio di molte pubblicazioni e progetti dei quali l'Archivio Nazionale del Belgio fu promotore o nei quali cooperò con le università. Nel 1995 l'Archivio Nazionale pubblicò un supplemento a questo lavoro. Negli anni '80 venne costituita una "Associazione per la valorizzazione degli archivi d'impresa" (con sede presso l'Archivio Nazionale del Belgio, a Bruxelles), che immediatamente accettò di collaborare con l'Archivio Nazionale. Molte ditte belghe pagano l'associazione per far inventariare i propri archivi e preparare per conto loro il versamento all'Archivio Nazionale. Oltre a preparare gli inventari, essi pubblicano la storia delle loro aziende. La guida agli archivi d'impresa ed i suoi supplementi non incluse gli archivi conservati presso le aziende stesse. Alla fine degli anni '90 l'Associazione Archivistica Belga, col supporto finanziario della Politica Scientifica Belga, lanciò pertanto svariati progetti di catalogazione degli archivi d'impresa*

in and the attention to business archives in the National Archives in Belgium got a temporary boost. A proactive policy towards business archives was developed. Etienne Sabbe wrote a letter to all the important companies in Belgium in which he explained them on the one hand the scientific value of their archives, once they had lost their administrative and legal value, and on the other hand the possibility to deposit their documents in the National Archives<sup>7</sup>. Encouraged by Etienne Sabbe and local national archivists important companies from the Walloon provinces (Hainault and Liège were for a long time the industrial heart of Belgium) and Brussels deposited their records in the National Archives (for example: some coal mines, the Société Générale de Belgique, which played an important role in the industrialisation of the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the National Bank of Belgium)<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, we may conclude there was not really a consistent coordinated policy regarding business archives.

*b. A first survey of the business archives preserved in public archives*

Gradually the survey of the business archives preserved in public archives in Belgium got lost. In 1975, to remedy this shortcoming a national archivist, Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt, on request of the Association of Archivists and Librarians in Belgium, made a guide to the business archives preserved in the depots of the National Archives, in the different city and municipality archives and in other public depots, such as museums and universities. The guide not only mentioned archives of industrial companies, but also the archives of financial and insurance companies, of transport and constructing firms, of companies active in communication, of hotels, of restaurants... Next to the nature of the company and the place where the archives were deposited, the author tried to give for each deposited archive as much information as possible on the size, the dating, the most important documents and series, the conditions for consulting, the degree of detail of the inventory (no inventory, a depositing list, a scientific inventory...) and, if possible, more specifications of the company and information on the use that had already been made of the archives (for example in publications). Besides the archives preserved in public archives, the author initially also wanted to integrate business archives that were still preserved in the companies themselves. But this could not be done. The chance to achieve a general survey was deemed too small<sup>9</sup>.

*c. A supplement to the "Guide of business archives preserved in Belgian public archives"*

In 1998 the Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives (see below), in cooperation with the National Archives, decided to publish a supplement to the "Guide of business archives preserved in public archives in Belgium". The business archives mentioned in the guide of 1975 were not repeated, unless they had undergone essential changes, such as a supplementary deposit for example or when a better inventory was available for a particular archive.

Why this supplement? The authors concluded that in twenty years time a vast amount of business archives (or parts of business archives) got saved for different reasons and became, in principle, in

7. D. Van Overstraeten, *Les Archives de l'Etat en Belgique et les archives d'entreprises*, in: «La Gazette des archives», 168(1995), pp. 173-186.

8. H. Coppejans-Desmedt, *De bedrijfsarchieven in België*, in: «Economische geschiedenis van België. Behandeling van de bronnen en problematiek: Handelingen van het Colloquium te Brussel, 17-19 november 1971 (Ie-IVe secties)» H. Coppejans-Desmedt en C. Wyffels (red.), Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Studia 25), 1972, pp. 205-220.

9. H. Coppejans-Desmedt, *Gids van de bedrijfsarchieven bewaard in de openbare depots van België*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Overzichten 5), 1975, pp. 5-9.

that way available for scientific research. To point once again out which documents were available, the association hoped to stimulate business history. This branch of historiography was seldom practiced in Belgium, contrary to our neighbouring countries.

This supplement is slightly different from the first guide. Not only the new deposits in the public archives were recorded; the authors also paid attention to the business archives preserved in private institutions and associations, such as for example the KADOC - Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society<sup>10</sup>. They also expanded the survey with references to private collections that are open for (scientific) research. Therefore they contacted 250 institutions, associations and potential owners of business archives. They also made two appeals in periodicals. After the preliminary investigation the available business archives appeared to have grown from about 4 kilometres in 1975 to more than 10 stretching kilometres in 1995. Because of the vast amount of information the authors optioned to split the guide in 7 parts (instead of 3, as in 1975). The first two parts dealt with the business archives preserved in the depots of the National Archives and the different city and municipality archives. The third part was devoted to the archives in the universities in Belgium. Part four mentioned those archives that were preserved in documentation centres and archives subsidized by the government, the fifth referred to business archives in museums, the sixth mentioned those collected by historic institutes, local historic and archaeological societies and industrial-archaeological associations. The seventh part to conclude is dedicated to business archives that were still owned by the companies or their employers' organizations. The information that the authors give for each company is similar to the guide of 1975<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. "Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives" and the "Flemish Association for Business History"

#### a. The "Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives"

On December 10<sup>th</sup> 1985 the Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives was founded. The association, which still exists, was founded as a joint venture between the private and the public sector. The foundation is due to a successful cooperation between some industrials, more specifically baron Coppée, and the National Archives. The main branch of the association is located in the National Archives in Brussels and the objectives can be summarized in as such:

- To encourage the rational management of records of industrial, financial and commercial companies, as well as records of those persons involved in the development of those companies and to prevent the loss, the destruction and the disintegration of this heritage, which is necessary for a good understanding of the economic and the social history of the country;
- To stimulate the use and the valorisation of business archives;
- To encourage people on the one hand to make, to publish and to

*nelle svariate province. I primi progetti (nel Brabant Fiammingo e nell'Antwerp) funzionarono principalmente tramite sondaggi spediti per posta alle aziende. Nei sondaggi si chiedeva della storia delle aziende e della presenza o meno di archivi storici. I progetti successivi cambiarono di poco la metodologia. Oltre ai sondaggi inviati per posta ci furono anche visite nelle aziende ed un'attiva ricerca di archivi d'impresa (ad es: lavoro accanto al curatore fallimentare in caso di fallimento aziendale, lavoro accanto agli studiosi di storia locale per cercare eventuali contatti fra aziende...). Nel testo completo si dettaglierà della metodologia dei progetti (cambiamenti di metodologia, pro e contro...). I risultati di questi progetti vennero pubblicati e vennero organizzate conferenze per pubblicizzarne i risultati e discuterne con gli studiosi belgi. Nel gennaio 2007 è partito il progetto "Catalogazione e valorizzazione degli archivi d'impresa come fonti per lo studio dell'industrializzazione nelle province delle Fiandre Orientali". L'Archivio Nazionale del Belgio è presente anche nel gruppo di studio "Archivi d'impresa" della "Associazione Biblioteca, Archivio e Centro Documentazione Fiamminghi". Obiettivo principale del gruppo di studio è la pubblicazione di linee guida per la conservazione e lo scarto dei documenti degli archivi d'impresa.*

**DERWAEL, Joachim, Razvoj možnosti registracije, pridobivanja in valorizacije dokumentacije v arhivih podjetij z vidika nacionalnega arhiva Belgije. Atlanti, Zv. 17, Št. 1-2, Trst 2007, str. 261-272.**

*Zanimanje za arhive v podjetjih je v Belgiji nastalo razmeroma pozno in še to bolj zaradi zanimanja za to v sosednjih državah. Prižadevanje določenih arhivistov je prineslo stanje, da so bili arhivi podjetij po prvi svetovni vojni določeni za upravljanje državnih arhivov, zato so jim izročali gradivo. Leta 1975 je nacionalni belgijski arhiv prvič zasnoval in publiciral vodnik po arhivih podjetij, katerih gradivo je shranjeno v javnih belgijskih arhivih. Namen tega je bil v prvi vrsti predstaviti vse gradivo, ki je nastalo v podjetjih. V letu 1980 so osnovali zvezo za valorizacijo arhivov v podjetjih, ki se je takoj povezala z nacionalnim belgijskim arhivom. Tako so nastali tudi zgodovinska znanstvena zgodovina posameznih podjetij. Na podlagi prvih potez in*

10. www.kadoc.be.

11. H. Coppejans-Desmedt, C. Luyckx, D. Van Overstraeten en R. Wellens, *Bedrijfsarchieven toegankelijk voor het publiek in België*. Supplement op de «Gids van de bedrijfsarchieven bewaard in de openbare depots van België», Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 41), 1998, pp. 15-22.

izkušeni, se je evidentiranje arhivov podjetij nadaljevalo, še posebej skupaj z belgijsko znanstveno politiko, ki izvaja mnoge projekte, npr. na Flamskem in v Antwerpen, na poštab, itd. Gre za dejavnost, ki bo prinesla povezavo z zgodovinarji. Po drugi strani pa je v januarju 2007 stekel projekt Registracija in valorizacija arhivov podjetij kot vir za študij industrializacije v provinci vzhodne Flandrije, ki bo v bodočnosti prinesel nove zgodovinske in znanstvene poglede.

## SUMMARY

*The interest in business archives in Belgium started very late when compared to neighbouring countries. The oldest deposits of business archives went to the city archives in Belgium. This changed and as time went by the different depots of the National Archives boasted some important acquisitions. Thanks to the national archivist the archives of the companies that were placed under sequester after World War One, and that were abolished afterwards, were brought to the National Archives. A breakthrough in the interest in and care for business archives in the archive world in Belgium came only after World War Two. The perception grew that business archives not only give an answer to specific internal company matters, but can also be used as touchstones and supplements for governmental and public administration archives. In 1975 the National Archives of Belgium published their first "Guide for the business archives preserved in the public archives in Belgium". Initially it was the intention to also integrate the business archives preserved in the companies themselves, but the difficulties were too numerous and there was only a slight chance that the guide would give a good survey. Nevertheless the guide was the starting point of many publications and projects in which the National Archives of Belgium were the promoter or in which they cooperated with universities. In 1998 the National Archives published a supplement to this work. In the 1980s an "Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives" (based in the National Archives of Belgium, Brussels) was established and they immediately agreed to cooperate with the National Archives. Large companies in Belgium pay the association to inventory their archives and to prepare them for deposit in the Natio-*

distribute inventories of business archives and on the other hand to make studies on business archives and histories.

The functioning of this association is, as been said, based on a joint venture between the National Archives and private companies. It's a win situation for both parties. Companies get "rid" of their records, which often occupy expensive spaces in their offices. The National Archives are able to make valuable business archives available for scientific research. How does the cooperation get financed? The companies pay the archivists of the association for the inventories of their archives, according to fixed prices, and the National Archives offer storage space in their depots. The degree of detail of the inventory depends on the financial power of the companies (the more detail the more they pay). To convince companies to deposit and to inventory their archives, the association does not only use commercial arguments, such as a gain in space and a better cost-effectiveness of deposited documents (it's easier to retrieve records), but also uses cultural arguments, such as the importance of the archives for the regional or national heritage. Besides all that the Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives also appeals to sponsors (patronage) to inventory records of companies that were deposited (we may say "dumped") after a bankruptcy in the National Archives. Not only private companies sponsor those inventories; the National Archives sometimes provide financial means too.

Besides the inventories of business archives the association also valorises the records by writing scientific business histories<sup>12</sup>. Companies often order business histories, in response of jubilees for example<sup>13</sup>.

When we look at the archives that the archivists of this association have inventoried and the archives that were deposited in the National Archives, we get the strong impression that the association mainly aimed and aims at companies in Brussels and in the Walloon provinces.

### b. The "Flemish Association for Business History"

On December 10<sup>th</sup> 1993 the "Flemish Association for Business History" was founded on the seminar "Companies and their memory". This association, with representatives of the National Archives and the different universities in Flanders, was intended to function as an advising and coordinating organ that could act as a mediating authority between universities, companies, public archives and other public institutions. The objectives of the association were very ambitious. The members would concentrate on the promotion of business history as a scientific discipline by saving archives and by making those records available for researchers. To reach those objectives, the association intended to track down and to inventory business archives, to stimulate the organization of courses for university students, to organize colloquia and workshops that contribute to the formation of business historians, to propagate the foundation of a chair in "business history" at different universities and to give scientific awards. Finally, the association wanted to facilitate scientific research by publishing manuals, guides, inventories and bibliographies, by coordinating historic research and by stimulating the writing of businesslike and analytic business histories<sup>14</sup>. One of the most im-

12. Some examples: R. Brion en J. Moreau, *De Generale Maatschappij van België: 1822-1997*, Antwerpen, Mercatorfonds, 1998. R. Brion en J. Moreau, *Van AG tot Fortis: 175 jaar verzekering in België*, Antwerpen, Mercatorfonds, 1999.

13. J. Moreau, *Quinze ans de collaboration avec "L'Association pour la valorisation des Archives d'Entreprises"*. *Politique suivie et bilan quantitatif*, in: M. Jacquemin en C. Six, «Bedrijfsarchieven te Brussel...Het geheugen van de onderneming. Akten van het colloquium van 13 december 2002 (Algemeen Rijksarchief)», Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 160), 2003, pp. 157-169.

14. *De bedrijven en hun geheugen. Verslag van de studiedag rond bedrijfsgeschiedenis. Antwerpen, 10 december 1993*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 60), 1994, pp. 9-10 en 69-74.

portant achievements of the Flemish Association for Business History was the publishing of the manual “A successful undertaking. Guide to write a business history” edited by Chantal Vancoppenolle in 2002<sup>15</sup>. The authors of this work wanted to make an interdisciplinary, easy reading and practical reference book that could be used by insiders and layman in business history. More specifically they not only wanted to work out a manual for professional researchers and students, who write dissertations, but also for “amateurs” and for people from the business world itself. For example, a staff member, still active or not, of a company must be able to use the publication to write the history of his company. In Belgium such a systematic introduction and guide on business history was never published. The manual was such a huge success that in 2005 a second, slightly modified, edition was published<sup>16</sup>. Contrary to the Association for the Valorisation of Business Archives, the Flemish Association for Business History did never appeal to private companies for sponsoring. Today the Flemish Association for Business History doesn’t exist longer, but at the universities of Antwerp and Leuven a chair in “business history” was erected and at the Catholic University of Leuven professor Buyst, with the help of his assistants, writes business histories on demand for companies, who of course pay for the research<sup>17</sup>.

#### 4. Registration on a regional basis of business archives preserved by the companies themselves (1993-2001)

##### a. *The projects*

The Centre for Business History at the University of Antwerp, established in 1971<sup>18</sup>, has launched different projects on business archives and histories in the province of Antwerp, often in cooperation with the National Archives. In 1994 the project “Registration of archives in companies in the province of Antwerp” started, implemented by the Centre for Business History, with the support of the administration of the province of Antwerp and the National Archives. The objective of the registration project was threefold. First by means of an enquiry they wanted to collect as much data as possible regarding the archives and documentation preserved by Antwerp companies. Scientific researchers would then have an extensive survey of the sources at their disposal, together with the information from the guide H. Coppejans-Desmedt (see above). Second, the registration of business archives needed to enable an active and systematic acquisition policy. They wanted to get rid of occasional deposits of business archives in public archives. For deposition in the public archives they also wanted to select interesting records of companies from economic branches and regions of the province that were not yet represented. The third objective was to make local businessmen aware of the value of their static archives and to encourage them to keep them instead of throwing them away. In 1999 the contiguous project “Registration of business archives: social relations in the province of Antwerp 1896-1996” started. An important part of the project was the enquiry for static records in the archives of employers’ organisations and trade unions. The results of both

*nal Archives. Besides making inventories they also publish scientific histories of companies. The guide for business archives and its supplement didn’t integrate the archives preserved in the companies themselves. In the late 1990s the Belgian National Archives, with the financial support of the Belgian Science Policy, therefore launched various projects on the registration of business archives in different provinces. The first projects (in the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp) worked mainly with postal surveys sent to the companies. The surveys asked questions about the history of the companies and about the presence or absence of historical archives. The next projects changed the methodology slightly. Besides postal surveys they would also visit the companies and search actively for business archives (for example: work together with the curator when a company went bankrupt, work together with local historians to search for contacts within companies...). In the full text we will elaborate on the subject of the methodology of the projects (changes in methodology, pros and cons...). The results of the projects were published and conferences were organised to make their results public and to discuss them with scholars in Belgium. In January 2007 the project “Registration and valorisation of business archives as a source for the study of the industrialization in the province of East-Flanders” started.*

15. C. Vancoppenolle m.m.v. Sas (ed.), *Een succesvolle onderneming. Handleiding voor het schrijven van een bedrijfsgeschiedenis*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Studie 95), 2002.

16. C. Vancoppenolle m.m.v. Sas (ed.), *Een succesvolle onderneming. Handleiding voor het schrijven van een bedrijfsgeschiedenis*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Studia 104), 2005.

17. Some examples: E. Buyst, A. Soete en H. Verhoosel, *Sidmar 1962-2002. Veertig jaar staalproductie in Vlaanderen*, Gent, Sidmar, 2003. E. Buyst, K. Lowyck en A. Soete, *Niches om te zien, de strategische groei van Barco*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2004.

18. The Centre for Business History wants to stimulate scientific research concerning the history of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship. In doing so the centre answers the question of the exact role of entrepreneurs’ activities in the economic and social evolution. In this perspective the centre pays attention to themes such as mental changes in entrepreneurship, the way in which society evaluates entrepreneurship and the social aspects of the history of business communities. Special attention is paid to the study of the growth and the increase in scale of the market economy (some examples of the subjects are: internationalization of the capital market, the pursuit of concentration and rationalisation and the growing role of government in the economy). For the province and city of Antwerp they more specifically study the maritime and the bank sectors and the stock exchange.

projects were published in a guide edited by the National Archives. The two enquiries gave information on the archives of about 300 companies and 69 employers' organisations. We cannot say that there was an active and systematic acquisition policy after the registration project. Some companies deposited their archives in the Centre such as the Chambre of Commerce of Antwerp, the stock exchanges of Antwerp and Brussels...<sup>19</sup>

In 1998 the National Archives in Brussels, in cooperation with the Université Libre de Bruxelles and La Fonderie (Centre for the economic and social history of the Brussels Capital Region), started the project "Guide of employers' organizations archives and business archives in the Brussels Capital Region". The objectives were almost the same as in the project on the province of Antwerp, the only major difference being an extra inventorying part. The results were also published in a guide edited by the National Archives. The enquiry resulted in information on 241 companies and 38 employers' organizations. After the enquiry ten business archives were inventoried. Just like in Antwerp there was not an active and systematic acquisition policy. There were good contacts with curators of some companies that went bankrupt. In this way some interesting business archives could be saved and deposited in the National Archives (for example the airline company Citybird and the steel works Forges de Clabecq)<sup>20</sup>.

The objectives and the methodology of the project "Industrialisation and economic growth in Flemish Brabant (1800-today). Prospecting, inventorying and valorising business archives", organised in the National Archives in Brussels in the years 2000 and 2001 with the cooperation of the Centre of Economic Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven, were quite similar to those of the projects in the province of Antwerp and in the Brussels Capital Region. The Flemish government (FWO-Max Wildiersproject) financed the project. The research also resulted in a guide of interesting business archives in Flemish Brabant preserved by the companies themselves and in the public and particular archives and documentation centres<sup>21</sup>.

## b. Conclusions

What were the conclusions at the end of those three registration projects? The assistants in the projects on the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Antwerp made a comparative study at the end of their projects with the situation in Holland as regards the registration and acquisition of business archives<sup>22</sup>. They had three points of self-criticism and some recommendations for the future. First the registration projects were organized on too small a geographical scale: a general survey of the economic branches is missing. It would have been better to create a registration project for one economic branch in the whole of Belgium or in Flanders. A sectorial approach leads to a more profound knowledge of the companies and their sensitivities. It's better (and probably easier) to define and make use of sectorial networks by making contacts in the companies and employers' organisations in one specific economic branch. Second, there was a lack of follow-up. At the end of the projects the collected results were not kept up to date. The topical value of the results lasts only for about five years (contacts in the companies change, compa-

19. G. Coppieters, G. Devos, B. Lemayeur en B. Sas, *Gids van bedrijfsarchieven en archieven bij werkgevers-, werknemers- en beroepsverenigingen in de provincie Antwerpen*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 59), 2002, pp. 7-9.

20. Jacquemin M., *Le Guide des Archives d'Associations professionnelles et d'Entreprises en Région bruxelloise: l'enquête*, in: M. Jacquemin en C. Six, «Bedrijfsarchieven te Brussel... Het geheugen van de onderneming. Akten van het colloquium van 13 december 2002 (Algemeen Rijksarchief)», Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 160), 2003, pp. 73-84.

21. M. Jacquemin, C. Six en C. Vancoppenolle, *Guide des Archives d'Associations Professionnelles et d'Entreprises en Région Bruxelloise*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 51), 2001, pp. 11-28. J. Buntinx, *Gids van bedrijfsarchieven in Vlaams-Brabant*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 54), 2001, pp. 9-14.

22. Voor meer informatie omtrent registratie en valorisatie van bedrijfsarchieven in Nederland: E.J. Fischer, G. Reudink en J. Van Gerwen, *Stap voor stap: een proeve van macro-selectie inzake Nederlandse bedrijfsarchieven*, Amsterdam, NEHA, 1994.

nies move, archives get destroyed...). Hence, registration without a periodical up-date or without acquisition is not useful. Finally there was no supplementary research into source material to replace business archives that were lost or that could give supplementary information on existing business archives<sup>23</sup>.

## 5. Towards a more active acquisition policy (2004-today)

### a. *The Province of West-Flanders*

In January 2004 the National Archives of Bruges started the 4-year project "Registration and valorisation of business archives as a source for the study of the industrialisation in the province of West-Flanders". The four objectives of the project were very similar to those of the registration projects that we mentioned before. The assistant in the project used the methodology of the previous projects, but paid attention to their conclusions as well.

One of the most important pieces of advice given by the previous projects was to work with a sectorial approach and on a larger scale (the entirety of Flanders or even of Belgium) (see above). The project adopted the sectorial approach, but couldn't work on a larger scale than the province of West-Flanders. The enquiries on business archives were sent to each economic branch separately (first the textile companies were contacted, then the food companies...). The content of the enquiry was also slightly changed. The assistant asked, contrary to the former projects, if the companies were willing to deposit their static records in the National Archives or in another public archive. In this way the project accomplished the first cornerstone: to make acquisition follow registration. Several companies were willing to deposit their archives, but the records they offered were not always interesting. The second cornerstone of an active acquisition policy was the contacts with curators of companies that went bankrupt. The curators of "interesting" bankruptcies were systematically contacted. In the beginning the assistant had to write or call the curators several times before getting a reply, but two years and some acquisitions later the project was well known and the curators answered questions on potential deposits immediately.

Another important cornerstone of the project was the development of local networks. To get a better survey of the regional social-economic significance of companies, the assistant in the project contacted all the local historical societies in the province. These societies can provide information on companies that play or played an important social-economic role in the regional field. They can inform the project leaders when a company that leaves its mark on a region or that is active in a branch that is characteristic of the industry of the region stops its activities or goes bankrupt. In the city of Kortrijk the local historical society founded a commission for business history. The assistant of the project is the secretary of the commission. In the region of Kortrijk the commission acts as a satellite for the project. Some of its members are/were active in business. The main objectives of the commission are to save business

23. J. Buntinx, S. De Caigny, W. Lefebvre en B. Sas, *De archiefdeur op een kier... De registratie van bedrijfsarchieven in Antwerpen en Vlaams-Brabant en een eerste poging tot de uitbouw van een wetenschappelijk acquisitiemodel voor bedrijfsarchieven in Vlaanderen*, in: «Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis», 33(2003) n. 3-4, pp. 665-670.



archives from destruction, to establish an active acquisition policy and to valorise business archives (to study companies that were important, to stimulate the research and to publish studies). To save business archives and to sensitize other societies to cooperate the commission made a brochure that was widely spread in the region. The commission also organises educational evenings and excursions. In cooperation with members of the commission some interesting business archives were saved and deposited in the National Archives. Unfortunately the initiatives of this commission were not copied by other local historical societies.

As has been stated in the conclusions of the former registration projects, the assistant researched source material that could replace business archives that were lost or that could give supplementary information on existing business archives in the second year of the project. This was done by means of a colloquium (“Suppliers and customers. Valorisation of the archival sources for the study of business history”), which consisted of two parts. The first part elaborated on less familiar sources for business history in the National Archives and in other public archives. In the second part the users of the sources, professionals as well as amateurs, discussed their expectations and the problems they have to face<sup>24</sup>.

#### b. *The Province of East-Flanders*

January 2007 saw the start of the 4-year project “Registration and valorisation of business archives as a source for the study of the industrialization in the province of East-Flanders in the last two centuries”. In view of the conclusions of the former projects the approach of the project will be slightly different. In the first phase we won’t work with enquiries, but more purposefully. How are we going to handle this? First, we want more cooperation with the local historical societies. On May 13<sup>th</sup> the local historical societies in the province of East-Flanders held their annual meeting in the National Archives of Beveren. There we launched an appeal to cooperate with the project. There are many ways to cooperate in the project, for example by establishing a commission for business history (see above: Kortrijk), by giving information on companies that play/played an important social-economic role, by indicating the important regional economic branches... Second, we want to work together with other government institutions, such as the province, or with institutions subsidised by the government, such as the local heritage associations<sup>25</sup>. Under the impulse of the cultural deputy in East-Flanders an archival commission was established in the province. This commission will dedicate itself to the project. So we can establish cooperation with the “House of Economy” of the province, which studies the economical situation in the province and promotes the companies, we can make use of the extensive library of the province... Third, we will try to cooperate better with employers’ organisations and their local departments. They have networks and contacts within the companies at their disposal, which we can hopefully use. Fourth, we will contact those companies that are proud of their past.

Besides cooperation with the different partners in the business world and the local heritage field, we also want to emphasise macro selection. After the preliminary study of the economic history of the province, we will search our depots and other public archives in the

24. *Leveranciers en klanten. Valorisatie van het archiefaanbod voor bedrijfshistorisch onderzoek. Handelingen van de studiedag georganiseerd op 7 oktober 2005 in het kader van het project “Registratie en valorisatie van bedrijfsarchieven als bron voor de studie van de industrialisatie in de provincie West-Vlaanderen”* Derwael J. (red.), Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 167), 2006.

25. The local heritage associations make the urban and regional heritage accessible for a wide audience. They promote the cooperation between local associations, they build out networks, and they inventory the local and regional heritage... Through them we hope to succeed on the regional level, as with the local historical societies.

province for representative samples of business archives of companies active (or companies that were active) in the important economic branches. For those branches where we draw a blank, we need to select companies, on fixed standards, such as the age of the company, its importance in the economic field, the number of employees... and then persuade the companies to deposit their archives or to make them available for research. Instead of working with a general enquiry, we will concentrate on a number of companies.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations for the future

What are the most important conclusions after the survey of these projects and which are the lessons we should keep in mind for the future?

A first important conclusion is that the guides of business archives are just surveys of the companies at a particular moment. They need follow-ups after a few years. It seems better not to publish them any longer in the future and to put them in a database on the Net straight away: it can easily be kept up-to-date. The private archives in Flanders have already such a database on the Net with a description of the contents of all their archives<sup>26</sup>. It seems obvious to follow that example and work along the same line.

Second, it may be a good idea to found an expertise centre for business archives. Such centres already exist in Flanders for architectural archives (Centre for Flemish Architectural Archives<sup>27</sup>), for ecclesiastical archives (FOKAV<sup>28</sup>)... This centre must centralize all the know how regarding business archives. At this moment too many institutions in Belgium are active alongside each other; consequently the expertise is scattered. What would be the main assignments of the centre? First, it can make clear acquisition profiles (which business archives do we want and will we acquire). Second, there need to be guidelines on which records in business archives need to be preserved and which record may be destroyed. A study group of the Flemish Library, Archive and Documentation Centre Association is trying to make such guidelines. Third, the centre must, more than the registration projects, build networks on the long term. These networks are important lest interesting business archives should get lost (for example: the curators of SABENA, the national airline company of Belgium, did not want to deposit the records of the company in an archive. Through other curators it might have been possible to persuade them). Fourth, the centre can familiarise scholars with the research possibilities of business archives. Business archives contain interesting information for different kinds of research, but they are, in our vision, not used enough in local history and in social-economic research.

The question is of course how this expertise centre will be financed. The solution may be cooperation between the public and the private sector. The government cannot bear all the costs itself. A financial effort of companies and/or employer's organizations is not only desirable, but also very necessary. We see that wealthy companies are not always willing to make that effort. They argue that the

26. [www.archiefbank.be](http://www.archiefbank.be).

27. <http://www.vai.be/CVAa/en/content/home.asp>.

28. <http://www.crkc.be/fokav/>.

static archives are no longer viable and that they have no more juridical use. But, in our vision, business leaders need to be aware of the fact that a good archive management (the storage and the inventorying) costs money and that for a permanent storage they need to make a financial effort. They can use the archives then in their communication and marketing strategy, to strengthen their brand... Besides, in Belgium even governmental institutions need to do this financial effort (the courts, administrations...). Maybe it is a good idea to make the costs of the valorisation of business archives tax-deductible.

## Bibliography

BAETENS R. (red.), *Industriële archeologie in Vlaanderen. Theorie en praktijk*, Antwerpen, Standaard, 1986.

BUNTINX J., *Gids van bedrijfsarchieven in Vlaams-Brabant*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 54), 2001.

BUNTINX J., DE CAIGNY S., LEFEBVRE W. en SAS B., “De archiefdeur op een kier... De registratie van bedrijfsarchieven in Antwerpen en Vlaams-Brabant en een eerste poging tot de uitbouw van een wetenschappelijk acquisitiemodel voor bedrijfsarchieven in Vlaanderen”, in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, XXXIII (2003) 3-4, pp. 643-675.

BUYST E., DE CAIGNY S. en VANCOPPENOLLE C., “Heuristiek en methode: de (on)mogelijkheid van bedrijfsgeschiedenis in België, 19<sup>de</sup>-20<sup>ste</sup> eeuw”, in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, XXXIII (2003) 3-4, pp. 319-356.

COPPEJANS-DESMEDT H. en WYFFELS C. (red.), *Economische geschiedenis van België. Behandeling van de bronnen en problematiek: Handelingen van het Colloquium te Brussel, 17-19 november 1971 (Ie-IVe secties)*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Studia 25), 1972.

COPPEJANS-DESMEDT H., *Gids van de bedrijfsarchieven bewaard in de openbare depots van België*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Overzichten 5), 1975.

COPPEJANS-DESMEDT H., “Bedrijfsarchieven: bronnen van roerend cultureel erfgoed”, in: *Bibliotheek- en Archiefgids*, volume 68 (1), 1992, pp. 12-16.

COPPEJANS-DESMEDT H., LUYCKX C., VAN OVERSTRAETEN D. en WELLENS R., *Bedrijfsarchieven toegankelijk voor het publiek in België. Supplement op de “Gids van de bedrijfsarchieven bewaard in de openbare depots van België”*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 41), 1998.

COPPIETERS G., DEVOS G., LEMAYEUR B. en SAS B., *Gids van bedrijfsarchieven en archieven bij werkgevers-, werknemers- en beroepsverenigingen in de provincie Antwerpen*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 59), 2002.

*De bedrijven en hun gebeugen. Verslag van de studiedag rond bedrijfsgeschiedenis. Antwerpen, 10 december 1993*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 60), 1994.

DERWAEL J., “Op zoek naar de ondernemersgeest: bedrijfsarchieven in West-Vlaanderen”, in: *Bibliotheek- en Archiefgids*, volume 81 (nr. 2), 2005, pp. 26-30.

DERWAEL J. (red.), *Leveranciers en klanten. Valorisatie van het archiefaanbod voor bedrijfshistorisch onderzoek. Handelingen van de studiedag georganiseerd op 7 oktober 2005 in het kader van het project “Registratie en valorisatie van bedrijfsarchieven als bron voor de studie van de industrialisatie in de provincie West-Vlaanderen”*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 167), 2006.

DEVOS G. (red.), *Bedrijfsgeschiedenis, een uitdaging. Studiedag naar aanleiding van 25 jaar Centrum voor Bedrijfsgeschiedenis UFSLA - Universiteit Antwerpen*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 99), 1998.

FISCHER E.J., REUDINK G. en VAN GERWEN J., *Stap voor stap: een proeve van macro-selectie inzake Nederlandse bedrijfsarchieven*, Amsterdam, NEHA, 1994.

JACQUEMIN M., SIX C. en VANCOPPENOLLE C., *Guide des Archives d'Associations Professionnelles et d'Entreprises en Région Bruxelloise*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Gidsen 51), 2001.

JACQUEMIN M. en SIX C., *Bedrijfsarchieven te Brussel... Het gebeugen van de onderneming. Akten van het colloquium van 13 december 2002 (Algemeen Rijksarchief)*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Miscellanea Archivistica. Studia 160), 2003.

JACQUEMIN M., "Les fonds d'archives d'entreprise conservés aux Archives générales du Royaume", in: AUBRY M., CHAVE I. en DOOM V. (red.), *Archives, archivistes et archivistique dans l'Europe du Nord-Ouest de l'antiquité à nos jours. Entre gouvernance et mémoire. Colloque organisé au Centre des archives du monde du travail à Roubaix par le CRHEN-O (Lille 3) et l'Association des archivistes français du 2 au 4 décembre 2004*, Villeneuve d'Ascq, IRHiS-CEGES-Université Charles de Gaulle, 2006, pp. 81-89.

SABBE E., "Les archives économiques", in: *Archives, Bibliothèques et Musées de Belgique*, 1934, deel XI, pp. 7-33.

VANCOPPENOLLE C. m.m.v. SAS B. (ed.), *Een succesvolle onderneming. Handleiding voor het schrijven van een bedrijfsgeschiedenis*, Brussel, Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën (Studia 104), 2005.

VANCOPPENOLLE C., "Het fonds van sekwesterarchieven gewikt en gewogen. Een creatieve invulling van het contextmodel", in: *Liber amicorum Coppens Herman (at the printer's)*.

VAN OVERSTRAETEN D., "Les Archives de l'Etat en Belgique et les archives d'entreprises", in: *La Gazette des archives*, 168, 1995, pp. 173-186