
International Council on Archives – Congress 2016

Seoul, Republic of Korea, 6 September 2016

Out of the Box, Into the World

by

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Just below the North Pole, on an island of pointed peaks and ice blue glaciers, where you are more likely to encounter a polar bear than a human being, lies a special vault.

When you enter this vault, you literally walk into the side of a mountain. Through a long, dark tunnel, you reach a chamber 120 metres down into the bedrock. The walls and ceilings are frozen. It's the permafrost – which naturally keeps the temperature at a few degrees below zero. The vault is built to last centuries, earthquake, explosion-proof, and virtually impenetrable.

It almost makes you wonder if you have walked into Superman's Fortress of Solitude. But, in reality, you are inside the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.

With a capacity to house 2.5 billion seeds, the Global Seed Vault maintains the world's greatest collection of crops. The Republic of Korea alone has deposited nearly 9 million seeds. From Chinese rice to Californian sunflowers, almost every pocket of life on earth is represented. From the amaranth eaten by the Aztecs to the grains domesticated by our Mesopotamic ancestors, about 12,000 years of human history are lined up on these shelves.

Protected in Svalbard, these seeds will keep humanity alive in the event of natural disasters or human catastrophes.

In 2015, much earlier than anybody ever expected, a withdrawal was made from the Global Seed Vault for the first time. 128 boxes containing wheat, barley and chickpeas sent from Aleppo, Syria, were extracted from the vault to be replanted in the Middle East. The reason for this withdrawal was not a flood or a drought, but collateral damage of war in Syria. Some of these seeds were no ordinary crops, but Neolithic wheats from the dawn of agriculture.

The Svalbard Global Seed Vault has been called a seed bank, the world's largest freezer, the agricultural hard drive, and even a modern day Noah's Ark, but I would like to think of it as an archive. It has preservation standards, a strict access policy, controlled by what you would call the office of record, and the content of its boxes has been selected for permanent

preservation because of its intrinsic value. But, perhaps most importantly, this repository embodies what I consider the essence of archives in today's globalised world.

In our increasingly interconnected globe, a vault in the Arctic can become a life raft in a war fought thousands of kilometres away, and even the barren permafrost can be vital for the Fertile Crescent. But when a vault in the Arctic becomes a “gift to humanity and a symbol of peace”, as United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon put it, it is easy to see that any archive can help the world.

In today's interconnected world, any archive, any archivist, anywhere, at any time can help tackle a global issue. Every day, archivists go out of the box and into the world.

No matter if your archives contain crops, records or traditional songs passed down from generation to generation. No matter if you work for national archives, small community archives, or the United Nations archives. No matter if you are based in a world's capital or on a small island nation. Your archives, anywhere, at any time, may just contain a clue to a global issue.

War and terrorism, climate change and the environment, human rights abuses and crime, hunger and poverty – the great challenges of today, as International Council on Archives (ICA) President David Fricker said, are “fundamentally information management challenges”. And in facing these challenges, you, archivists, are in the major leagues.

As you preserve the past, you are, at the same time, protecting the present and the future. As you appraise records inside a box, you may discover a solution outside the box. As you develop ‘finding aids’, you may end up helping more persons than you initially thought possible. Your work connects past and future, problems to solutions, and people with people.

Events such as this galvanising 2016 ICA Congress in Seoul help you connect. The challenges you are facing back home may be opportunities, or problems solved, for colleagues from other parts of the world, who this afternoon may be sitting just a couple of chairs away from you. This Congress is a wonderful opportunity to powerfully remind all of us how essential your day-to-day work is for the world. How your work truly embodies the spirit of the Universal Declaration on Archives to contribute to the “promotion of responsible citizenship.” And how your work spreads far beyond your archives by going out of the box and into the world.

I see every day the powerful global impact that archives can have.

For the last 20 years, I have worked with the United Nations courts that deal with the international crimes which shattered the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and which killed nearly 1 million people in 100 days in Rwanda.

The archives of the Tribunals contain the voices of the victims describing rapes, killings and other unspeakable crimes. They contain the pleas of the accused and the verdicts of the judges. In a sense, these archives are like a mosaic of horrors and devastation. But amidst the clothes exhumed from mass graves in Rwanda and the remains of a mortar from the shelling of Sarajevo, the Tribunals' archives also offer beacons for a brighter future.

They can show us a path towards personal and collective reconciliation, perhaps through the story of a witness who shares how he or she was able to forgive, the apology of an accused or the analysis of the many symbols they contain.

For instance, one of these symbols is cows. Approximately 13% of the testimonies at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda include some reference to cows. Always central in Rwandan culture, as a symbol of wealth, cows served at some point to identify the targeted Tutsi minority, with the genocidal consequences that followed. 75% of the transcripts in our archives which include the word “cow” or “cattle” also include the word “kill” in close proximity. Typically, the witnesses would recount a perpetrator raping or killing and then killing and eating the cow of the victim. Cows could also be seen as a reward for the killing of Tutsi men, women and children.

But when we look carefully, the same archives also tell us another story about cows in Rwanda. They also remind us that giving someone a cow was the ultimate sign of friendship in the Rwandan tradition, a “symbol of love, faithfulness and cooperation”. It is this story that now prevails in Rwanda. In 2006 the Rwandan government launched a programme called Girinka – in English “may you have a cow” – which gives cows to the poorest Rwandans, rejecting the notion that cows belong to a privileged few. In 1994 neighbours killed neighbours, but today, with Girinka, the beneficiary of the cow offers the first born calf to a neighbour, a gesture that, in keeping with the tradition, “seals a bond of friendship” and helps to rebuild the fabric of the society.

As archives can help reconciliation, they are also there to remind us and counter those who seek to rewrite history, by preserving for posterity the integrity of eyewitness testimonies and judges' findings on the crimes committed in Rwanda and in the Balkans.

In consulting these archives, we can also learn how and why atrocities happened, and in doing so, become more alert in detecting early signs and triggers of emerging crimes, so that we can do more to help prevent them. Archives do not just document an inexorable past, they are a cherished heritage upon which we can build a more resilient future.

And where atrocities could not be prevented or halted, our archives can assist the many courts around the world committed to delivering justice and ending impunity. I remember that when I joined the Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, as a young legal officer, international criminal law was still a new frontier. Today, courts prosecuting genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity can find in our archives a rich jurisprudence that may support them in their own work.



At the International Criminal Tribunals, we work tirelessly to bring our archives out of the box and put them at the disposal of the world. Our new fully searchable database, JRAD (jrad.unmict.org), already includes 30,000 entries and counting. JRAD has been accessed from all continents and from 7 out of the 9 provinces in the Republic of Korea. I hope it will be 9 by the end of this conference.

But do you have to be an archivist of a United Nations criminal court or of the Global Seed Vault to help justice or to prevent hunger, or to make any meaningful difference in the world? My take is that you can help a person and a society from any archive, wherever it may be.

For instance, you can help people retrieve what is most precious to them, their identity, and, in doing so, help an entire society right its wrongs and move from a divisive past into an inclusive future. That's what many Australian archivists are doing.

Your identity is what makes you who you are. What makes you "you"? Maybe it will be your native language, perhaps the values you were taught as a child, your history, or the clothes you wear or the food you eat. Imagine if your name, your family tree, your beliefs and eventually your memories were stolen from you. If your identity was erased, how would you feel? Who would you be?

For well over half of the last century, thousands of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were forcibly removed from their families and their communities to be brought up in non-indigenous foster families and institutions. They became painfully known as the Stolen Generations.

As the Australian people have embarked towards personal and collective healing, archives have been identified and are harnessed as an essential tool to reclaim identity and help Australians along the journey to reconciliation.

Where, in the past, records of forcibly removed children might have been destroyed to sever bonds with their communities, today they are preserved. And where some administrations might have tried to distort data, now Australian archivists work to maintain the integrity of all information. Church archives, registries of births, deaths and marriages, libraries and 'first stop shops' across the country are helping First Australians in the daunting task to locate, amidst myriad offices, any helpful information on their background and the cultures of their people. Efforts such as those of the National Archives of Australia in creating indexes and training Indigenous archivists, all enable greater access to information by those who need it the most. They bring information out of the box, into the world.

I see in the many archivists engaged in this inherently difficult challenge the efforts of my mother. At a time when women barristers were few and far between, she became the junior counsel who, together with Eddie Mabo, started a then inconceivable and unlikely legal

battle. A decade of efforts later the Mabo case would grant, for the first time, legal recognition of Indigenous people's rights.

Having the courage to look back and then the strength to look ahead is not easy for the service providers and is not easy for the service receivers. There is pain in finding the information, and there is pain in revealing that there is no information. Even with the best intentions, cultural clashes and setbacks are always around the corner. But we must always remember that monumental changes in societies are often brought about by pushing through these difficulties.

From a seed vault in the Arctic to repositories across Australia, any archive, any archivist, can help tackle the problems of the world. With terrorist attacks striking from Nice to Dhaka, and earthquakes razing villages from Italy to Nepal, we realise that we all share the same challenges. And be it explosions or tremors, solidarity immediately spreads out from all corners of the globe. People that never met before get connected through a donation, a message on a blog or working together in the rebuilding efforts. This is the humanity that links us all, that breaks linguistic, religious and geographical barriers, that makes us go out of the box and open up to the world.

Crises can happen anywhere, anytime. That's where and when archivists like you play a special role. But would you be ready to embrace the challenge?

Imagine, chaos erupting in your town. Your archives are at risk. Would you try to smuggle them? Would you quietly and secretly pack them up? Would you hide them in the houses of your friends? But would you do so if this endangered their lives? Would you transport them in the heat, and across water? Would you load some in the car of your nephew? And what if militia blocked him at a check point? Would you risk being arrested? Would you try to save your archives?

There is a man, a collector, a librarian, and an archivist, who said yes to each of these questions, Mr. Abdel Kader Haidara, the guardian of the legendary Timbuktu manuscripts collection.

Timbuktu enchanted the dreams of travellers and enlightened the minds of philosophers, astronomers and poets across aeons. In the spring of 2012, Timbuktu was sieged by rebels and extremists, who subjected this essential centre of Islamic learning to a brutal 10-month occupation.

I visited Timbuktu in June 2013, just a few weeks after the French intervention. The city was slowly beginning to live again. But across the small desert town laid piles of what looked like debris and rubble of construction material, but to my astonishment, these were, instead, the famous Timbuktu mausoleums, or all that remained of them after the siege.



It is against this backdrop that Mr. Abdel Kader Haidara acted. “I could never have imagined such a thing happening just a few months before. Everything collapsed overnight” – Mr. Haidara said. But it did happen and he was ready to act. When the assailants entered Timbuktu, Mr. Haidara gathered a team and made a plan to save the manuscripts from plunder and destruction. Silently, and in the dark, they packed. Little by little, trunks filled with manuscripts were carried by donkeys to family houses around the town. As the situation worsened, they smuggled the manuscripts with couriers out of Timbuktu by road and along the Niger River, past rebel checkpoints and alert troops. They faced multiple close calls, once Mr. Haidara’s nephew nearly had his hand chopped off in the public square, but nothing stopped them. This complex operation rescued 350,000 manuscripts, 90% of the entire Timbuktu collection, and hid them in Mali’s capital city, Bamako, a thousand kilometres away.

Archivists, librarians, friends and relatives all came together in Timbuktu, fighting to save their heritage, not just for their families, or Timbuktu or Mali, but for humanity as a whole. These manuscripts of poetry, astronomy, medicine, human rights and Islam belong to Timbuktu, but they also belong to us all. Mr. Haidara took them out of the box and returned them to the world.

And the world came in to help. Reinforcements arrived from far and wide. Colleagues from Iraq and Afghanistan gave him advice. UNESCO launched a Timbuktu Manuscripts Project, under the Jikji Memory of the World programme. And in August 2016, we all heard Mr. Ahmad al Mahdi pleading guilty to the war crime of destruction of cultural heritage in Timbuktu.

“I had lots of friends, lots of partners, people who gave me a lot of advice, so that I never felt completely abandoned,” said Mr. Haidara. That is the humanity and friendship that links us all.

From the exceptional friendships that extreme circumstances spark, to small every day gestures, it is often friends and colleagues who push us to do more, face new challenges and help us tackle them. Congresses such as this are a unique opportunity to unveil how friendship and cooperation among archivists may bring greater harmony into the world.

At the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals, our archivists are fostering friendship and organisational cooperation.

In Arusha, Tanzania, we have built a centre of archival excellence, a repository of best practices and, increasingly, a reference point for archivists in the region and beyond. Spearheaded by Arusha-based archivist Tom Adami, we are vigorously supporting the ICA Africa Programme. We have shared our experiences in advanced digital preservation, archival repository management and information security with archivists, and civil servants of government bodies, educational institutions and public agencies of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Botswana, Ethiopia, Malawi and Rwanda. We are also ready to give our support to developing e-Court systems and in the preservation of audio-visual records.



We have constructed the first United Nations purpose-built archives. It all started with my audio-visual archivist, Martha Hunt. Her few coloured cells on an Excel spreadsheet have now become brick and mortar which we hope will inspire similar projects across the world.

Our new home sits atop this gently sloping hill. The premises are minimalistic and multi-purpose. The design revolves around a single, prominent tree which symbolises justice in many parts of Africa. Three buildings face onto the courtyard: the office, the courtroom with its conical shape, and the archives, the largest of the three, with a 670 square metre repository, which soon will house our collection. Traditional thick concrete walls and prevailing energy efficient cooling systems work together to maintain steady environmental conditions.

Alongside the physical archives, we are at the final phase of establishing a digital preservation system. It is designed to contain 3 petabytes of records, including nearly 100,000 hours of audio-visual recordings of our trials. This is the first project of its kind at the United Nations. We passionately took up the challenge of meeting the stringent requirements of ISO 16363 and we are tirelessly working to join the few institutions worldwide which have already obtained certification. We are eager to put this experience at the service of other global archivists.

Since the opening of the Mechanism in 2012, we have given the opportunity to young students of archival science, many from Tanzania, to join us for a few months and have a hands-on feel of what it means to be an archivist. From checking the temperature of the repository twice a day to helping respond to access requests, we have involved them deeply in our operations. I commend the ICA for their emphasis on supporting youth and those new to the archival milieu and would like to salute the New Professionals, who are with us today. And I am particularly proud that one of them, Mr. Tibaut Houzanme, is now a new staff member of the Mechanism. He joins a team of archivists whose unwavering will and dedication have proven their commitment to get out of the box and into the world.

Archivists are the Leonardo da Vincis of our time, modern Renaissance men and women excelling in multiple disciplines. You are communications experts, activists, movie makers, IT wizards and project managers, therefore cooperation and friendship amongst archivists is already a very good start. But it is joining forces with experts outside the profession which will truly bring archives out of the box and into the world.

Even unexpected partners and improbable leverages can lead to a breakthrough. Archival projects around the world are already finding this out. For instance, Singapore's Citizen Archivist Project is calling for everybody's help to make records of their National Archives more discoverable. When shared, the intensive burden of transcribing documents and audio recordings is lighter and, when harnessed, collective memory gathers metadata of undescribed photos faster. The New York Public Library has invited all to "[k]ill time, make history" through transcribing historical menus, or digitally aligning antique maps with present day locations. It has worked – and even surpassed expectations. Transcribed seafood



menus have helped marine biology research and rectified maps have enabled earthquake aid workers in Haiti to save lives.

The possibilities are endless when you bring the archives out of the box and into the world.

After this long journey, let us return to Seoul. In 1988, Seoul hosted the world's greatest athletes in the summer Olympic games. Today it welcomes the world's leading archivists. Like the Olympics, every four years the ICA Congress challenges its participants to set new trends, break barriers and achieve what seemed unachievable. Like the Olympic athletes, you must now compete. Not with each other, but with yourselves, to be ever better guardians of the authenticity of your archives, ever better guides in a world of over-information, and ever better responders to the world's global issues. The gratitude of those you help, from Syria to Rwanda, and from Mali to Australia, will be the most precious gold medal you will ever receive.

Thank you President Mr. Sang Jin Lee of the National Archives of the Republic of Korea for inviting us here from all corners of the world. Thank you President Mr. David Fricker for leading and inspiring us to greater heights. And thank you all for bringing more harmony to the world through your work.

From Seoul, out of the box, into the world.

Thank you.
