

Dennis Hormuth¹

REMEMBRANCE AS RESTITUTION OF DIGNITY: VICTIMS OF NAZI-REGIME IN THE DESCRIPTION OF ARCHIVAL HOLDINGS AND PROJECTS ABOUT CONTEXTS OF INJUSTICE

Abstract

Purpose: *During Nazi-regime several staff members of Hamburg University had been persecuted, marginalized, driven out of university, or murdered by Nazi-regime. Even though staff members who survived Shoah, war and the political persecution had an official right to get back in office, in many cases this promise had not been fulfilled. Hamburg University Archives are preparing an online-exhibition and a publication about these issues. This paper provides an introduction to this project and discusses issues of archival canon debate.*

Method/approach: *This paper is a case study on the question if a special project with a specific focus and which consumes rare resources should be carried out even if it prevents archives from their daily work and leads to a distorted view on their general holdings.*

Result: *Everyday work and carrying out special projects should be possible. The challenge is to perform one task without neglecting the other.*

Conclusion: *Highlighting special parts of the holdings distorts the view on the general holdings and the identity of an archival institution. The archives should act openly in this inter-relation. Archivists should disclose their priorities and strategies on access, description and digitization to the public.*

Keywords: *dignity, persecution, Jews, archival project, public service, digitization, Hamburg University Archives*

1 Dennis Hormuth, Dr. phil., Head of Hamburg University Archives, Mittelweg 177, D-20148 Hamburg; dennis.hormuth@uni-hamburg.de; orcid: 0009-0003-8414-4924.

1 INTRODUCTION

Security and dignity in archival theory and practice was the conference theme of the 8th International Symposium of Archivists which took place in Maribor/Slovenia on 11 March 2023. At this conference, Eric Ketelaar from Amsterdam University pointed out four major fields in which dignity played a significant role to archives:

- dignity of archivists
- dignity of archival documents
- dignity of archival endeavor
- human dignity

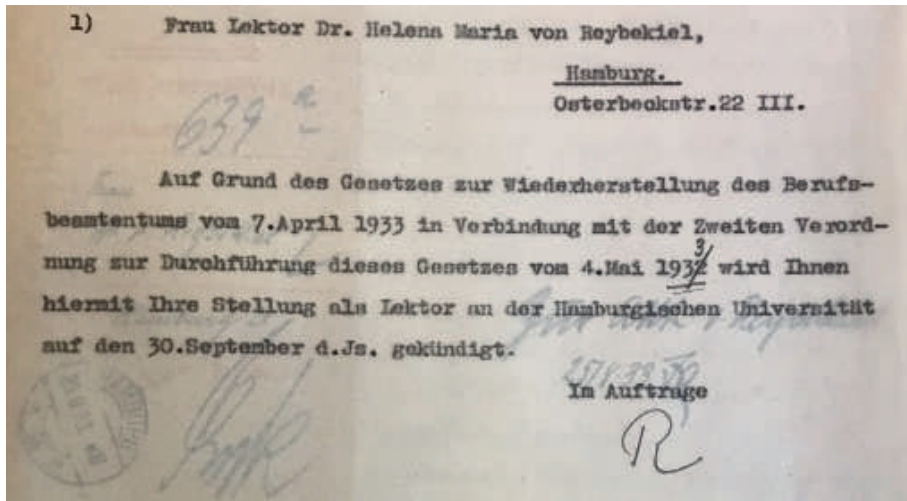
The idea of serving human dignity means giving an archival voice to those who cannot speak for themselves anymore, to those who were suppressed or persecuted either by the state or by major parts of the contemporary society. Archivists should provide opportunities to make remembrance possible by making available documents about the victims and about the way how major societies treated suppressed minorities.

In Germany one of the most outstanding archival projects concerning human dignity and remembrance of victims of the National Socialist time is #everynamecounts: a citizen science project about digitizing the names of victims and survivors of National Socialism provided by the Arolson Archives (Arolson Archives, 2023). Since June 2022, German Federal Archives started working on an online collection "Compensation for National Socialist Injustice" (German Federal Archives, 2023) which focuses on the question of how and if survivors of Nazi persecution could gain financial or other compensation for their losses. Compensation – and reintegration as such – suffered a lack of sense for responsibility in the German post-war society. The historian Christian Pross assesses this collective behavior as a "Kleinkrieg gegen die Opfer", a 'small-scale war against the victims' (Pross, 2021).

A discovery by chance at Hamburg University Archives brought up three files about compensation at Hamburg University during the 1940s and 1950s (Hormuth, 2022). This recovery was the inception of a project where the Hamburg University Archives work together with the Institute for the History of the German Jews. The intended outcome is an online collection based on individual biographies. This paper focuses on this project.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Based on a wide-spread antisemitism in German society, the governmental persecution of Jews began immediately after the Nazi-party had been elected into German government in 1933. This ended in the murder of six million children, women and men. One of the first campaigns in Nazi-Germany in 1933 was to expel Jews from public service. The "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service" from April 7th enabled all administrative institutions to dismiss Jews and other so called 'politically disloyal people' from office. So did Hamburg University (Nicolaysen, 2014).



**Image 1: Letter of dismissal of Helena Maria Reybekiel
(Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 361-6 IV 1185 Helena Maria Reybekiel, pp. 48)**

Image 1 shows the letter of dismissal of lecturer Helena Reybekiel from 1933, preserved in her personnel file at Hamburg State Archives. All these letters had the same text: Mention of the law and date of dismissal.

After the end of World War II, German public service suffered a lack of employees due to the death toll and prisoners of war, as well as dismissals in contexts of denazification (for denazification at Hamburg University, see Guhl, 2019 and Guhl, 2020). Therefore after the war, one of the first actions was to restore the positions in public service to the dismissed from 1933 – if they had survived war and persecution. Another option to amend the persecuted was to grant financial compensation for lost salary and pension. Constantin Goshler and Christian Pross described the German overall system of compensation for national socialist injustice in detail (see Goshler, 2005; Pross, 2021). Former members of public service had a better position to gain these amending compensations than persons who had worked in the private sector (Hockerts 2001, 176–177). At Hamburg, restoring processes began immediately after war had ended and even before the English occupation authority made orders. This is very well analyzed by Christian Römmer (2003).

Although contemporary universities were public institutions and their staff belonged to public administration, the dismissed researchers and professors of 1933 had bad chances to be reinstated to their old positions or to get any other compensation. This may have been due to several reasons. One reason might have been that Germany lost some universities like Wrocław and had to take care of the displaced researchers from its former eastern universities. This situation caused a competition between displaced researchers after 1945 and those who had been expelled from office in 1933. Even more striking, those who had to confirm the scientific qualification of the expelled from 1933, were often the same persons who had expelled them or who were their successors in their old positions. Furthermore, these researchers had built up and fostered their networks during wartime with other non-persecuted or even loyal Nazi scientists who were also looking for new employment.

3 THE PROJECT

The project of Hamburg University Archives focusses on the university's treatment of its expelled staff members from 1933 in the postwar period (for first analyses on this topic at Hamburg University see Nicolaysen, 2008). The purpose of the project is an online-documentation based on individual examples representing different types of compensation after 1945. Each specified person should be represented by a selection of four to five documents concerning persecution, dismissal, being or not being restored to their old position and gaining or not-gaining financial compensation. Each document will be transcribed and annotated, but will not be enriched with interpretations or analysis. The outcome of the project will be a documentary against neglect and will offer a curated basis of sources for further historical research.

The case of Walter A. Berendsohn may be presented briefly as an example of a scholar who tried to get restored into his position as a researcher from Hamburg University. He was a German scholar in literature studies and was expelled from Hamburg University in 1933 (for his curriculum vitae, see Nicolaysen, 2006; Bischoff, 2014; personnel files). He moved to Denmark and later during the war he fled to Sweden, where he worked as an archivist for the Nobel-Institute of the Royal Swedish Academy from 1943 to 1970. In Sweden, he developed a new branch of research on literature: the research on exile literature.

In 1950 he wanted to return to Hamburg University for some lectures. His intentions were prevented by scientific expertise and the reluctance of Hamburg faculty of philosophy under the lead of Hans Pyritz (Hempel-Küter, 2000, 105–115), who was a person of influence in German studies on literature and a convinced Nazi.

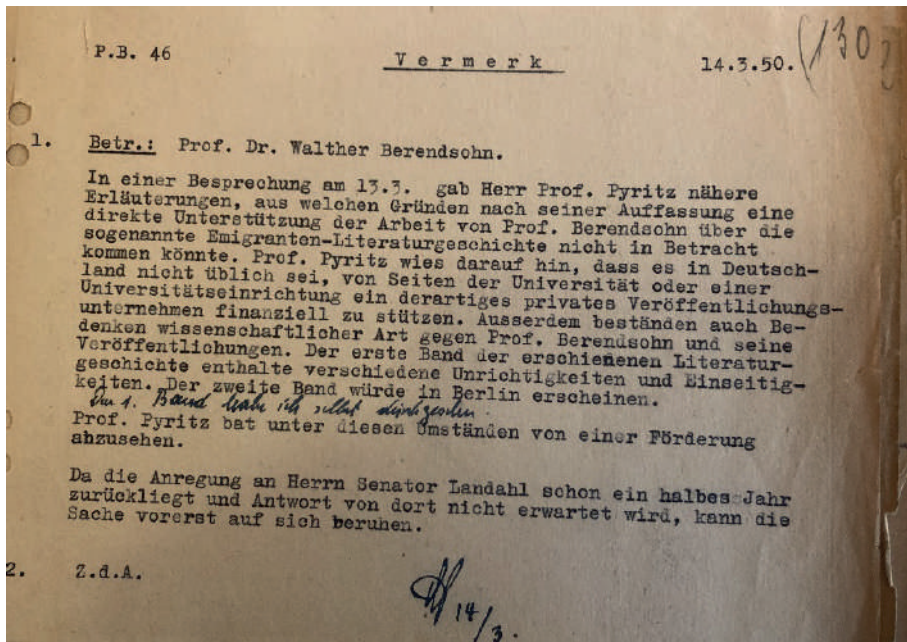


Image 2: Note about the refusal of Pyritz to support Berendsohn, 14.03.1950 (Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 361-6 I 0121, Walter Berendsohn, pp. 130)

It wasn't until 1982, when Walter Berendsohn, at that time already 98 years old, was given an honorary doctorate by the University of Hamburg – after the experiences of the 1968-student-revolution and more than one generation change in the faculty / professors. In 2001, seventeen years after his death, Hamburg institute for studies on exile literature was re-

named "Walter A. Berendsohn Forschungsstelle", 'Walter A. Berendsohn Research Center' (Bischoff, 2014, 53–54). It took a long time for Hamburg University to recognize Berendsohn as a persecuted member of its own staff and to honor him and his scientific merits.

4 MINORITIES AND CANON DEBATE

"The dignity of man is inviolable". These are the first words of Article 1 of the German constitution, describing dignity of man as the highest value in German administrative and governmental acting. The article was written in 1949 under the direct impression of the dehumanizing of Jews by Nazi-regime. In this point of view, remembrance of people, persecuted by the Nazis, is a question of dignity. There is a widespread understanding in today's German society that historical awareness of an institution's role during Nazi-period and its behavior towards the victims are mandatory tasks to these institutions.

There is no question if such a project of remembrance to victims of Nazi-persecution is of political or social value. The question is if it fits within the archival duty and archival strategies. There is probably not a single archival institution without a lack of human or financial resources. Even if this online-project of Hamburg University Archives is limited to a documentation and will not be enriched with texts of historical analysis, it will provide rare resources.

Since the 1960s onwards, there has been an ongoing debate on archival canon (Assmann, 2010). Common understanding nowadays is that the archival holdings, which are catalogued in an archival documentation and especially those which are presented in an online database, are looked at and used for historical research more often than those holdings for which no finding aids have yet been created. That is obvious. The conclusion is that archives should be aware of mainly and primarily describing and cataloguing the holdings that are representative to its holdings.

Digitization intensifies the trend of creating knowledge by focusing on easily available records (Audunson et al., 2020; Digital Archive and Canon, 2021). Digital accessibility generates a shift in the perception of archival holdings: What is not on the internet, does not exist. Digitization has thus been called the third appraisal of archival holdings (Schwarz, 2023) – after selection which documents have value to be accessioned and after prioritizing their description. Archives should better be quick to create an online context to have a chance to be part of social discussion and scientific research, but they have to be aware of their specific profiles and common duties. From this point of view, it could be counterproductive to spend time and manpower for creating an online-project concerning a special group – even if this small extract of the entire holding concerns actual debates. One can easily imagine that the documents about restoring and compensating the Nazi-victims are not very numerous compared to all documents of 100 years of Hamburg University. The core question is if the focus on smaller holdings, which have a relative high value to research, prevent utilization of more representative holdings. Does such prioritizing prevent discussion and research on the core-holdings and distort the view on the institution's historical identity?

This is one of the cases when quality meets quantity. The task is to do one thing without neglecting the other. How to achieve this under the condition of a lack of time and money depends on the special situation of each archival institution and cannot be answered ex-cathedra.

What needs to be done? Archival institutions should communicate openly the decisions about their priorities in describing and in digitization, as demanded for example by Farrenkopf, Ludwig and Saupe (2021). An archival institution should inform transparently

about the choices which were made to present a selection of holdings and how these focused documents relate to the vast majority of files preserved in these archives. Users should be invited to talk about their research interests with the archivists – the need for communication between archivists and users will increase the more the level of digitized archival material rises. Archivists have to be aware that users cannot know what they do not see – they only see what is prepared, catalogued, and published for use on the website. They are not aware of what is behind the finding aids and the internet presentations. It is the job of archivists to attract users to the homepages of their institutions. There is a need of a new culture of archival consultation, archival access, and the use of archives for scientific and individual research (Plassmann, 2022, 46).

5 SUMMARY

Remembering persecuted and suppressed minorities is a field in which archivists may serve human dignity. The latest contribution of Hamburg University Archives is a project of documentation of compensation for Nazi-persecuted staff members who were expelled from university in 1933, which corresponds with other archival projects in Germany like an online collection of German Federal Archives. Based on a few biographies, Hamburg University Archives will present sources about persecution and contemporary efforts and discussions concerning compensations and about failed chances of amends. But how does such a project fit into strategies about archival management under the condition of a lack of resources? Does such a project distort historic tradition? And should archivists focus on their core-holdings before turning to projects about special groups and topics? The answer is to do one without neglecting the other, to decide consciously about priorities of cataloguing and digitizing and, first of all, to act transparently in this field. Under the condition of digitization, the importance of disclosing archival priorities and strategies is increasing. Open communication between archivists and users is eminently important to improve research services, to foster historical consciousness, and to strengthen democratic processes.

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