GEORGIAN ARCHIVAL PROJECT - Progress Report for *CHA Bulletin*

The Central State Historical Archives [CSHA] of Tbilisi, Georgia, exemplifies the plight of many of the world's archives. It is a vivid demonstration of the urgent need, but also the possibility of utilizing the new technologies, to make at least the guides to their holdings, and ultimately perhaps the holdings themselves, both safe and accessible to the international community.

The CSHA is one of several national archival collections housed in a decaying complex of Soviet-era buildings located at a busy intersection in the city of Tbilisi. The walls are cracked. Rusty iron pipes crisscross the yard. The flow of electricity is erratic, usually halted for a few hours during the day or night, summer or winter. Temperature and humidity controls have long ceased to function. The floor of the reading room is gently subsiding into a widening cavern caused by a man-made if unintentional underground stream.

The CSHA operates on a budget inadequate for salaries, much less physical repairs. The Director is supposed to receive the handsome salary of $52 Canadian equivalent per month, but the salary is usually in arrears. The salaries of the rest of the staff, highly trained graduates of the legendary Soviet archival training system, are similarly meagre, but they are nevertheless dedicated to their jobs and proud of their role as the guardian angels of the paper that preserves their past. Despite Georgians' national independence in 1991 and freedom at last from "the Centre," meaning of course Moscow and Russians, and despite their hopes and intentions of joining the modern West, old habits and legacies die hard. Archive administrators are wary of proposals by outsiders to make public their contents. With their limited, nay, non-existent, exposure to computers, they are suspicious of them too, and particularly their promise to decentralize and democratize access to information.

Yet the apparent disarray is also a perfect opportunity for undertaking a project of renewal. Georgia inherited from Soviet days a phenomenally well-organized and extensive archival system. Its administrative staff, for all their wariness about publicization, have recognized the enormous organizational advantages to re-cataloguing electronically their collections. Young Georgian archivists are keen to learn to use computers, and to use English as their second language instead of Russian. For them, the Soviet legacy of secretiveness is eminently forgettable. The chance to work with fellow professionals and students of their country from around the world, to learn to use the latest technology, to join the world of the Internet, is an exciting opportunity their elders never knew. For all the archivists, young and old, re-organizing and republishing the catalogues, in their own language, is an exercise in building national pride. Somewhere down the road, micro-forming, scanning, and digitizing the documents themselves is a real possibility, and then every Georgian will have at his or her fingertips access to the national treasure itself: the national past.

The Friends of the Georgian National Archives (FGNA) is an international group of scholars of Georgia and Caucasia, most of whom have done research in the Georgian archives. In 1996 we decided to repay the archival services rendered to us in the past by offering to begin the process of archival renewal that the new technology has now made possible. We organized ourselves for business with a Constitution and Statement of Purpose, a Board of ten interested persons, an Executive of five that included a professional archivist and a computer specialist, and a panel of honorary associates and patrons that included all the relevant Georgian officials. That was the easy part.

After discussions, demonstrations, and considerable stroking, archival officials in charge of all the Georgian national archives, both governmental and non-governmental (e.g., the Academy of Sciences), came to see collaboration as an opportunity and accepted the notion of making public the catalogues. Instrumental to this acceptance was the personal and enthusiastic support of Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, a cosmopolitan devotee of the arts. He personally entertained visiting members of our Board this past summer in his Presidential office with the press in attendance. The meeting was reported favorably next day in the Georgian newspapers and television.

The task of electronically cataloguing all of Georgia's archives is obviously daunting. There are at least seven large national collections, some of which contain early Persian, Turkish, even Hebrew manuscripts, and several more local collections, not to mention the archival collections in other Caucasian countries besides Georgia (Armenia, Azerbaijan). We decided to choose one Georgian archive as a pilot project. We chose the CSHA, an archive under the state archival administration containing historical documents from the eighth century through the Russian imperial period (1801-1917) and the period of independence up to the Soviet takeover in 1921. We applied to an American granting agency, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX, Washington, DC), in a competition for "projects to promote innovation in archival software and greater exposure to former Soviet archives," and succeeded in winning an initial $15,000 in "Title VIII funding." Our proposal was to create a MARC-based electronic guide to the CSHA in Tbilisi, one which included a description of each of the 830 record groups (*pondebi* in Georgian, *fondy* in Russian) contained within the Archives. In technical terms, we are encoding the descriptions in SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language) in order to create an archival guide using EAD (Encoded Archival Description).

Problems. Even with its narrowed focus, the pilot has been a challenge. We anticipated a number of obvious problems, such as finding a suitable and very "friendly" database programme - we eventually chose MSAccess - that could handle our tri-lingual *and tri-alphabetical* demands (Georgian, Roman English, and Cyrillic Russian); locating dependable archivists to gather the data and a computer operator to enter the data once gathered into the database; determining suitable salaries for our "team," including the archival administrators; finding reliable paymasters to pay the salaries monthly; arranging a production timetable; and so forth. It has been the unanticipated problems, the ones that have made the Georgian situation appear "primitive" to our pampered library and computer friends, that made it a real challenge. For example:

Electricity. We have had to cope with frequent power outages. These are common throughout Tbilisi and particularly frequent in Saburtalo, the Tbilisi city district where the CSHA is located. Since the IREX funding was restricted to travel, training, and software expenses, we had to raise funds separately to purchase a generator and a supply of fuel, as well as finding a reliable person to keep the machine oiled and running. Then we discovered we needed a battery system to prevent data loss at the moment of power interruption until the generator could be started.

Transfer of funds. "Economic turmoil" is a reasonable description of what most former Soviet countries are experiencing. Getting actual cash (that is, US dollars, the universal medium of exchange in the former Soviet world) into the hands of the people it is intended for, in a land without debit or credit cards or even chequing accounts, where banks are

seen as temporary cash vaults rather than facilitators of financial transactions, requires care and imagination. It is relatively easy to take bundles of cash strapped to one's person, but that method is obviously restricted to occasional visits by a member of the FGNA executive. Otherwise, getting cash to far-off Georgia is fraught with difficulties. One small, but typical, example: A sympathetic American philanthropic group sent our treasurer a cheque for $250 USD to buy the needed computer battery. We attempted to transfer the funds by Western Union (at an exorbitant rate) to a bank in Tbilisi, but owing to the "financial crisis" at the time banks there were not accepting dollar transfers. We located a personal friend visiting England, a Georgian, who would shortly be returning to Tbilisi. He agreed to take the cash with him, so we transferred the money to his English bank account (at a slightly less exorbitant rate). He received it, took the somewhat reduced package of dollar bills with him, and tried to locate one of our Georgian board members who could deliver it to the archives. That Board member was in Budapest on business at the time, however, so our friend gave it to his own mother, who was a good friend of our Board member's wife. Our friend's mother gave it to the wife, who misunderstood whom the money was intended for. She set it aside in an envelope for her husband, who in the meantime had returned from Budapest and left again, this time, ironically, to the US as a visiting scholar to the campus of one of our American Board members. When no word about batteries came from the archives, we contacted our Georgian friend, who told us his end of the story. When the Georgian Board member visiting the US was informed of the missing money, he notified his wife (by e-mail, fortunately, since the Georgian postal system is even slower than the Canadian, no matter how "romantic" the letter). She then personally delivered the money to the secretary at the Archives, who took the cash to her boyfriend, who was able to purchase a suitable computer battery at a reasonable price on the "open" market and deliver it to her office at the archives. All's well that ends well, but one has to learn to laugh to keep from crying.

Internet. Obviously we had to arrange an Internet connection for the archives, since part of the aim of the project is to demonstrate how to make archival guides accessible to the international community. Besides, we needed e-mail to be able to supervise the progress of things from a distance. The Internet provider whom we first contacted last summer when we actually began the pilot project, and to whom we paid several months' worth of service, appeared to be unreliable. No messages were getting through. Furthermore, when we contacted the provider, we were told that our entire budget had disappeared. Some intemperate words were exchanged. Finally, visiting Tbilisi in October, we decided to cut our losses and find another Internet provider. While contracting for several months' service, we discovered the initial problem. It turned out that the hook-up had been to the (only) other computer in the Archives building, where the young operator had used up the entire budget discovering the joys of plying Internet games. We attempted to correct the problem by having the new service provided directly to the telephone and PC of the secretary of the Deputy Head, since she was the person we

had contracted to enter our data in the new CSHA database. Still no e-mail. Eventually, we traced the problem to a fault in the telephone line, which apparently could transmit voice messages scratchily but not electronic data. We purchased a new wire and strung it outside the building from the office with the archive's other computer to the Deputy Director's secretary's office. Finally, momentously, we know the joy that Alexander Graham Bell felt when he found he could communicate electronically at a distance.

Despite all problems, and thanks to the absolute dedication of the local archivists, the data gathering and database entry was completed on schedule by the end of December 1998. Translation of the entries into English and Russian is underway. The guide should be ready to place on the Internet by next summer, where the plan is to include it in the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN). At that time we shall produce the guide in a paper edition for use in Georgia, not least by the staff of the CSHA itself, who will be able to replace their own thumb-worn, Russian-language, much annotated, nearly unreadable copy.

Next Steps. Our next task is to raise funds to proceed with cataloguing Georgia's, and Caucasia's, other important archives. We are holding discussion with the University of Michigan's School of Information (UMSI) to explore the possibility of fitting into their plans for digitizing archival collections in "primitive conditions" in less developed countries around the globe. We are hoping to organize a presentation of our project in the US, perhaps at Rice University Library and the Baker Institute in Houston, Texas. If we can find the funding for it we shall fly in Dr. Zaza Aleksidze, Director of Georgia's famous Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, a man as charming as he is knowledgeable, to demonstrate some of the national and international manuscript treasures contained in his institute's archives. This particular archival collection is so under-funded that the entire collection is at grave risk of deterioration, and so inaccessible that only a few scholars have any idea of its extraordinary wealth.

If we succeed in securing the necessary funding, the next two archives to which we will immediately extend our cataloguing project are the Kekelidze Institute (which resides under the umbrella of the Georgian Academy of Sciences) and the Contemporary History Archives (which, like the CSHA, resides under the umbrella of the Georgian State Archival Department). There is little point, obviously, in cataloguing collections that are disappearing, yet perhaps our efforts, by bringing to worldwide public attention the desperate situation of Georgia's fabulous collections, will begin the huge process of preserving the collections, both physically and by microform, and even, finally, electronically.

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