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ARCHIVING THE PAST, DEFINING THE PRESENT

**OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVES,
BUDAPEST**

by **Anna Kharkina**

A series of interviews with the Open Society Archives' (OSA) employees, which I conducted while staying at the archive as a recipient of the Visegrad Scholarship in summer 2016, took place before the conflict between the Hungarian government and the Central European University (CEU), of which the OSA is a part, came out into the open. Nevertheless, even then it was obvious that the CEU is a special place in contemporary Hungary's political landscape and that it made things uncomfortable for those in power. The conflict was in the air, though as yet unexpressed. The aim of my stay at the OSA was to study the functioning of an independent archive: how it establishes cooperation with other archival institutions, which professional standards it follows, and, and how it defines its aims and policies. I tried to approach these questions from different angles depending on who I was interviewing, but one question seemed to re-appear during all of the interviews: how does the archive position itself in relation to the current political authority, which tries to undermine the democratic ideas that the CEU and the OSA stand for? How does it evaluate and react to the situation around it?

The foundation of the OSA goes back to 1995, as a realization of an idea that an archive with documents related to the communist history of Central and Eastern Europe should be present where people speak the languages of the region. Financially supported by George Soros, the archive was able from the very beginning to be totally independent of the influence of any local

The article is based on interviews with the Open Society Archives' employees in July 2016: Iván Székely, Senior Research Fellow; István Rév, Director; Csaba Szilágyi, Head of the Human Rights Program; Nóra Bertalan, Public Relations Officer; András Mink, Research Fellow; and Robert Parnica, Senior Reference Archivist.

state authorities. According to the agreement with the US government, the archival materials are owned by the US but deposited at the OSA for a period of 50 years. István Rév, a Hungarian historian and former dissident under the Soviet regime, became academic director of the archive (he still holds this position, leading the archive for more than 20 years). The professional basis and routines for the archive were established by Trudy Huskamp Peterson, Acting Archivist of the United States (1993–1995) and US National Archives archivist with a long career record. Peterson previously was director of the Open Media Research Institute (OMRI) in Prague, an analytical office for analysis of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with its headquarters in Washington. After the OMRI was closed, she was asked to become the professional leader of the newly established OSA, which took over OMRI's archive as well as the archive of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute in Munich.

Being an archive in *between* political systems and different organizations, the OSA's funding sources create interesting challenges for the archival representation of history as well as for

the employees. In the interview, Rév recalled that the research potential of the archive was not clear to him from the start: “In the beginning I was doubtful about the importance of the material of Radios’ propaganda machinery.” According to Rév, the archive’s owner, the US government, also had doubts because it considered Soros to be a dubious public figure and it was reluctant to accept that the position of academic director of the archive was offered to Rév, whose father was a communist party member. As a consequence of this, only the research materials of the RFE/RL archive were transported to Budapest, and the corporate part of the archive of the archive remained in the Hoover Institution Library & Archives. Rév testified that initially communication with RFE/RL Research Institute in Munich was difficult, and several documents were removed before the archive came to Budapest. He takes this with professional wisdom: “This is a fate of archives. Archives are looted, bombed; it is part of the history.” In addition, the relation with the Hoover Institution was colored by a scandal. Some documents from the Hungarian government offices were stolen and sold to the Hoover Institution by a Hungarian politician. Rév, highly critical of this fact, published several articles criticizing both sides of the deal.

NOW, AFTER MANY years of work, the OSA has demonstrated significant research potential and has been actively used by many researchers studying the Cold War period. Relations with the Hoover Institution have gone from tense to friendly and an agreement was signed that entitles the OSA to receive documents from the Hoover Institution’s part of the RFE/RL archive. The documents are sent to Budapest, where they can be digitalized and made accessible to European researchers, while the originals are returned to the Hoover Institution. The employees of the archive call the OSA “the archive of copies” because they are more interested in information than ownership of original documents. The OSA’s only real concern is that researchers can access the information, which is difficult to obtain otherwise because it is scattered across many different countries, and local archives also often have more restrictive access policies to their materials. Though independent, the OSA strictly follows international archival standards, “much more than other archives of the region”, as Rév notes. He continues: “This is a real archive with public, research, and teaching programs, and it takes researchers and its own social intellectual role seriously”.

Although the primary interest of the OSA was the heritage of the Cold War and communism, it soon extended its interests to include human rights archives. The first was an archive on the Yugoslav wars, including documents of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Initially, interest in this archive was based on its relation to the aftermath of communism, but later it was realized that “it was a document of hu-



István Rév, academic director of the OSA.

man rights”, and this subject was accepted as a part of the OSA’s key activity. The OSA started to be approached by human rights organizations such as the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the Index on Censorship, and Physicians for Human Rights. As Iván Székely explained, the human rights organizations often have limited resources for archiving documents related to their activities, so they are interested in preserving them in a professionally established but independent archive.

From the outset, OSA employees took an active position towards the documents they were in charge of. They did not want to wait until researchers came to them as many other archives do, but were keen to promote and exhibit documents, to inspire others, and to show the research potential of the archive. This is how Galeria Centralis, the OSA’s exhibition space, and numerous public programs started. The archive felt obliged to react to the local political environment and take a role as an intellectual commentator on what was happening in Hungary. In addition, the OSA sees itself as an archive with in-house research: its employees often have an academic background, and part of their duties is to work with the archive as researchers and to publicly promote the results of their research.

Being an archive of the Cold War, with material reflecting the history of a competition between two ideologies/regimes, it cannot avoid being dragged into a new round of international tensions, although the border now is defined less by geography and the type of economic system and more by relations to the ideals of democracy. It lies in between such dichotomies as human rights vs. security, global vs. local, open vs. protected. Therefore, a moral choice between these two sides has become an important part of current politics, both for individuals and institutions. The position of the OSA’s director is: “What we have here matters. Our programs are not just historical; they have relations to today. To put it in a somewhat

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melodramatic way – matter of facts matters. We try not to be didactic, but we are not a value-free institution”.

I asked Rév whether it feels as though the archive plays the role of a dissident in today’s Hungary. He answered that “the OSA has always been marginal. The CEU has always been in-between – partly Hungarian and partly American – and the OSA has had a special relation with other Hungarian archives and institutions; others like to work with us, but they keep their distance”.

ACCORDING TO ANDRÁS MINK, the identity of the OSA has not changed during the years of its existence, but the political context has, and it is just natural to be in opposition. A few interviewees noticed that it has become more problematic to be visible. The Hungarian regime is trying to take ideological and administrative control over cultural institutions, and cooperation with other archives on an institutional level is becoming more and more difficult, although it is still possible through inter-personal networks. Because of the political pressure on state cultural institutions, the independent OSA has become more and more isolated. Mink summarized: “We are alien in this regime”.

Csaba Szilágyi continues this thread: “We have certain values. When they come into confrontation with power, we act as an activist archive.” In a society where anti-Semitic moods are re-emerging, the OSA carried out a project, “Yellow-Star Houses”, which raised the people of Budapest’s awareness that in 1944 under the Hungarian race laws, 220,000 Jews were relocated into so-called yellow-star houses – before the establishment of the ghetto – so that “everyone could see who was Jewish and where they lived”.¹ It was a reaction to Fidesz’ attempt to re-write history: “Yellow-Star Houses was a painful but liberating project”, as Nóra Bertalan defined it. During the project, the OSA employees and volunteers managed to list more than 100 yellow-star houses. It is no surprise that information about this project did not reach the official media. Bertalan remarks that state control had become more active in the previous six months (the interview

took place in July 2016). “I can see how things are changing and how they put labels on Soros. I am aware that there are people who do not like what we do professionally”.

Another example of the OSA’s activist projects relates to the Syrian refugee crisis. When the Hungarian government chose a “zero refugee” strategy, the archive hung a note on its doors: “Immigrants are welcome here”. As the interviewees noted, the OSA is a private institution and can afford to do things that other cultural institutions cannot because they are state funded. The price to pay is the silence of the official media.

Simultaneously, not all OSA employees agree with this activist role of the archive and see the necessity of focusing only on traditional archival work. Some I have talked with said that the archive has become overpoliticized, and it is too difficult to keep several balls in the air with so many projects at one time. They note the necessity of keeping a distance from the local political situation and being more international. Although most of the archive’s previous projects were on the history of the region, the OSA is more and more interested in organizing projects with international partners such as the Goethe Institute or Instituto Cervantes, but this is also a sign of the shrinking opportunity to act within the context of the local political arena. In the current political situation in Hungary, the international context and support for the OSA from international organizations will play an increasingly important role in the functioning of the archive. It is important, as Mink said, not to fall into provincialism: “If we lose interest in the international context, the world loses interest in us. My greatest fear is to be marginalized. One can do a lot by being isolated, but not by being marginalized”.

Anna Kharkina, PhD in history, is a participant in the research project “Transnational Art and Heritage Transfer and the Formation of Value: Objects, Agents, and Institutions”, CBEEES.

reference

¹ See <https://yellowstarhouses.culturalspot.org/home>

A gallery that explores a dark past

THE YELLOW-STAR HOUSES GALLERY explores the history of the Hungarian yellow-star houses, a network of almost 2,000 apartment buildings where 220,000 Budapest Jews were forced to live for half a year, from June 21, 1944. Both the houses and their residents were forced to display the yellow star.

After World War II in Hungary, the Holocaust, the murder of half a million Hungarian citizens, and the history of the Budapest yellow-star houses remained taboo subjects for two generations — in public and even within families.

On the 70th anniversary of this forced mass relocation, the OSA documents why and how the yellow-star houses were created, who lived there, what life and death were like in the Budapest of 1944, and how this is remembered in 2014.



Yellow star above the entrance of Kossuth Lajos Square 18.

Pedestrians in Budapest reading anti-Jewish regulations.