

Conflict of the Archive: Imagining Thülö Röhl's story

Welcome to SPEME. The SPEME project investigates how various traumatic pasts can be preserved and transmitted through space, and what kind of innovative actions might both improve knowledge of the past and serve as an opening to actual issues and new social subjects. To achieve this aim, we, SPEME in the Netherlands, are creating a two-part audio production about the Srebrenica genocide and the Second World War, in which pasts will be recounted through the lens of narrative. In addition to these podcasts, we will curate a multimedia exhibition that combines the tangible objects of trauma with the oral histories from witnesses and individuals related to the events to shed light on the complexities of remembering.

This particular podcast covers the Second World War. SPEME's specific object of investigation is a diverse array of memory spaces, such as museums, sites of commemoration, or in this case: archives. In the format of imaginative storytelling, the podcast will focus on different conflicts which can be found in an archive such as the authority of the archive and the under-representation or lack of representation of certain narratives in archives.

Why storytelling? Why are stories even important? They are, after all, 'just' words. They entertain us, they give structure, they spark connections. They give meaning and identity. Even though technology provides us a plethora of dynamic options for the creation of content, people continue to desire storytelling in order to make sense of this world. Stories have the transformational ability to allow us to perceive the world in ways we wouldn't if we merely encountered it on our own.

Storytelling is a cultural and social practice. Although this has not altered since the advent of the written word nor with the more recent age of digitality, the medium has shown to be interchangeable. This specific story begins in an archival setting - pictures, files, archive boxes. Are you interested in the prospect of discovering what is concealed in those boxes?

For this podcast, we want to look into the storyline of Thülö Röhl by making use of the archive of H401. The extensive archives of H401 contain stories of many people connected in one way or another to this historical house at the Herengracht. The mother of Thülö Röhl was a good friend of the people living there; they found each other in their shared interest in German poetry and literature. The Herengracht offered her a space to store her archival material.

The archive consists mostly of letters between three key figures in the life of Thülö; his mother Alexandra Röhl, his teacher Baron Edgar von Heyking and close friend Achim von Akerman, who also died in the war in 1945. Next to the letters are some personal belongings. A first look at the archive of Thülö Röhl shows us his poetry, the drawings he made as a kid and the meticulous way in which he kept his notes. A second look brings our attention to the 6 war medals he earned because of his bravery, the photographs he took travelling east and his Wehrmacht passport. Thülö was a well educated, romantic and artistic young man, but also an ambitious Nazi soldier during the Second World war.

The photographs of landscapes, churches and animals stand in sharp contrast with the pictures of burned down villages, a death soldier and the smoke of recently fired missiles. They clearly portray the distinction between a sensitive young man raised by parents that found themselves in the high cultural society of Germany in the early 20th century, and an ambitious soldier with a growing form of *Kriegsbegeisterung*. What do these pictures tell about Thülö? And do they tell the complete story?

A first question when looking at an archive is wondering about who put it together, and if there was a special purpose for doing so. This brings us to the problem of Authority. The person composing an archive has its own principle in selecting what comes in the archive, and what stays out of it. However, There are principles and ideals that are of course being pursued.

First and foremost, the pursuit of objectivity is of course a common premise of the archive. The goal is to establish a democratic archive practice, characterized by the ambition to document and describe materials in the most neutral manner possible. This way, the researchers will hopefully experience the content in a comparable way. Or, that's the idea at least. Of course, archivists, researchers, you and I understand that none of these procedures can be fully objective. Because archivists affect our experiences with the archive, it is both a record and a product of the past. Although the archive is often seen as a reliable source, mostly free from subjectivity, it is a necessity to ask oneself who exactly composed the archive, when, how and why.

Take Thulo's archival material for example. An archive that was born out of a mother's grief and sorrow. When Thulo died in the war in 1943 during an unexpected attack by Russian tanks, at the age of 23, his mother Alexandra was left with a great hole in her heart. A family friend suggested Alexandra to write about the life of her son as a way of processing her loss and trauma, something she didn't initially feel quite ready for. Thus, she wrote countless letters about Thulo, his youth, academic career, passions, vacation trips, and war career. She also wrote about her dreams. In 1974 Alexandra dreamt about Thülö. In her dream, she was standing in front of her house in Ostpreussen and wept. One of the maidens walked up to her from the house and asked her; "But Mrs Röhl, why are you crying? After all, there is young Mr. Röhl!" And then, with his typical elegant way of walking, Thülö slowly approached the train station.' After this dream Alexandra felt Thülö was somehow with her again.

In another letter, Alexandra is reminiscing about a beautiful moment she shared with her son Thülö. She wrote:

"Thülö and I were standing at the house where I was living at that time in Wolfsbrunn, near Odenwald. We say our goodbyes, for the last time, before Thülö returns to the war. Together we stand in front of the little pathway that fights its way through the beautiful valley of Odenwald. Tall spruces line both sides of the road. And below these tall spruces stood Thülö and I. My mind wandered off in thoughts of goodbye, he was looking with his head tilted, at a little bird that was singing on top of one of the trees. He always tilted his head when looking at something he thought was beautiful. The entire dreamy valley was filled with the bird's songs while the sun slowly disappeared behind the trees. We were standing next to each other, till Thülö suddenly exclaimed; 'What such a little bird can do!' These words, spoken to me by a 23 year old young adult, grew in meaning as the years went by."

Alexandra pictures her son in her letters as a wise, dreamy, creative young man, full of spirit. The archive of Thülö Röhl is a perfect example of an archive where categorization plays an important role. When scouring through the countless pictures, letters, notebooks, one can wonder: Does the archive categorize him as a soldier? War-hungry, with contested ideologies, or rather a person, born in the wrong country, in the wrong time? Or is the fact that he took part in the war not as paramount as one would initially assume, and is it his artistry which his mother praises him for that really frames and defines him?

The archive shows these contrasts in many expressive ways. The cold, shiny war medal he got for continuous bravery during war time versus the drawings of a mountain landscape he made as a kid. Our idea of the archive as an authoritative source of knowledge transcends from the notion of belief that the archive would be 'the' space where solely authentic materials exist. In reality, the people and events described and classified by the archive do not necessarily represent this sole 'truth'. Rather the contrary - the archive molds the individuals and events into entities that are recordable and fit into the Archives own classification. But how to categorize or classify a person? And what happens to those that do not fit into any category? Can they exist in archival spaces?

While looking at the archive multiple stories are there to be found. Categorization plays a role in which story you find, or find first. Let's slowly unravel the multiple layers of this persona by examining the content of the archive. Both the correspondence between his mother and teachers, and his report cards demonstrate that Thülö Röhl was a promising student at a prestigious school in Hofgarten, Wertheim. He excelled in arts like essay writing and poetry. It is no surprise where these talents originated from, since his mother was a writer and his father was a talented painter.

Alexandra (Alexa) Gutzeit and Thulo's father, Karl-Peter Röhl met at The Staatliches Bauhaus where they studied and worked together with some of the great names in Bauhaus and Dadaistic history like Theo van Doesburg, Wassily Kandinsky and Walter Gropius. They married in 1920, the same year Thülö Röhl was born. Their marriage didn't last long and after a few years they separated and both pursued their own careers. Thülö stayed with Alexandra which forced her to let go of her artistic aspirations and take on a job at a fashion studio in Berlin. Meanwhile Karl-Peter Röhl remained in the middle of the new developments around 'De Stijl', the Dadaistic and the Constructivist movements. In 1933, the year Hitler became Reichskanzler, Röhl joined the NSDAP. The contact with Alexandra and his son Thülö slowly diminished.

As his parents got divorced at a young age Thülö found a father figure in one of the teachers at Wertheim, baron Edgar (Eddy) von Heyking. Baron von Heyking, coming from a Baltic background, stimulated Thülö in representing Germany in the war. At Wertheim Thülö proved to be a diligent student and a look at his notebooks tells us that this diligence persevered during the war. Thülö's Kriegsbegeisterung grew, which was noticed by his superiors. He stood out in leadership and was loved by many of his colleagues, proven by his six war medals which can be found in the archive. Only because of a period of illness he wasn't promoted to Adjutant but there was no doubt he was destined for a leading role in the German army.

Asides from the war medals and notebooks, the archival material also exists of more than four hundred photographs Thulo took during his war duty. The photographs he made during this time are unique. Firstly, It was not very common for soldiers to own a camera and secondly, the quality of the pictures was outstandingly high. The pictures are a perfect example of the two sides of Thülö Röhl. As his mother described in one of her letters Thülö could really enjoy the beauty of nature. "He always tilts his head a little to the side when appreciating something he thinks is beautiful", as she would say. The archive contains photos of mountains, architecture and animals. Thülö clearly had a good eye for nature. On the other hand, the pictures also showed the more grim sides of the war, with close up shots of dead people and animals, tanks and burning villages.

Thus, when categorizing Thülö Röhl in the archive, where do you start? Do you categorize him as the son of two artists in the middle of new exciting movements at the beginning of the 20th century? Do you describe him as the protégé of a teacher of Lithuanian nobility at a prestigious private school in Germany? Or do you present him as a young rising officer climbing the ranks of the German army, being rewarded for his continuous bravery. It is sometimes hard to imagine that what we see as pure evil, a Nazi soldier, also has a human side that can appreciate beauty. Somebody who took poetry classes at a beautiful school in Germany and has a thing for painting and drawing. And had a deep loving bond with his mother.

The contrast between the two clearly brings forward the problem of categorizing. When using an archive as the main source for your research the challenge is to translate this information so well organized in names, numbers and data back to the narrative it used to be. How the archive is categorized plays a role in which story you find. The silence that is left in an archive is more difficult to find. For example, there are no signs of Thülö Röhl being part of the NSDAP in the archives at H401. However, after requesting more information about his possible membership to the Bundesarchiv we found out Thülö indeed was part of the NSDAP. This has at least partly something to do with who composed the archive, and which material was used for this. In the case of Thülö we mostly look through the eyes of

his mother who was less enthusiastic about the war than Thülö was. In addition, the vision of the father, Karl-Peter Röhl, is absent.

These examples illustrate how the archive exists as both spaces of explanation and silence. One of the numerous tensions in archival spaces reflects researchers' assumptions regarding the content of the archive: they are frequently disappointed by the expectation that the archive would be precise and complete. Despite the researcher's recognition that the archive is a useful source, it does not always include what we want or anticipate to discover. Some 'gaps' in archives are defined by their unpredictability - content is lost or destroyed as a result of day-to-day processes. Sometimes a cup of coffee gets spilled, or a researcher brings some documents home with him or her that he or she should not, and so on. Other 'gaps' are less innocent and are defined by the exclusion of specific people and events. Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes in his famous work *Silencing the Past* that silencing is also active and aggressively done. Some histories become invisible, like the Haitian Revolution. Trouillot emphasizes the relationship between power and the production of knowledge. He argues that power works together with history. Power determines which and how stories get told. Inequalities experienced by the actors lead to uneven historical power in the inscription of the traces. Historical facts are not equally produced. Therefore Trouillot argues that the past as a fixed reality is a myth. He fights the view of knowledge as a fixed content. The links between what scholars do in their ivory tower, and also the links with government positions and the states shape the conditions of knowledge products and make some sorts of knowledge productions harder than others. Consequently, some facts will never reach the archive, simply because they contradict the official narrative. In that manner, every archive is in a sense political; it's subject to the people that compose it and the time during which this happened. Each archive is a result of its era's social structures and processes.

This is also why some research questions will always go unsolved due to the archive's failure to include and reflect specific historical viewpoints rightfully. These, and the other problems discussed around the archive as a source of research are illustrated in expressive ways in the story of Thulo Rohl. Contrasts, objectivity, authority. The archive shows to be on the one hand an inexhaustible source of information, on the other a melting pot of conflicts.