EHRI helps increase the visibility of archival holdings

EUROPEAN HOLOCAUST RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

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Kazerne Dossin, the [Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights](#), and its predecessor, the Jewish Museum of Deportation and Resistance (JMDR) have collected archival materials on the Holocaust in Belgium since the mid-1990s. The way these materials have been catalogued and made available to the public changed dramatically as Kazerne Dossin and EHRI started to work together to share information about Holocaust-relevant sources via the [EHRI Portal](#), and thus with a broader audience. EHRI developed bespoke methods and tools to populate its portal and shared these with Kazerne Dossin to optimise their workflow in archival management. Kazerne Dossin benefited significantly from this knowledge transfer. Before working with EHRI, Kazerne Dossin's archival management system of item descriptions developed in-house for museum curation purposes was hard to use for both non-employees and employees not acquainted with the work methods. Because of the partnership with EHRI, Kazerne Dossin started using standardised methods for encoding descriptive information on their archival records. Now, it can share valid metadata with partner institutions, thereby increasing the visibility of its archival holdings. Furthermore, it has gained new opportunities to join other initiatives and connect its (meta)data with partner projects and institutions worldwide. Hundreds of Kazerne Dossin's collections are now shared online, helping to honour the 25,843 Jews, Roma and Sinti that were deported from SS-Sammellager Mechelen, better known as the Dossin barracks, in Belgium to concentration camps in the East, mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau, during the summer of 1942 and 1944.
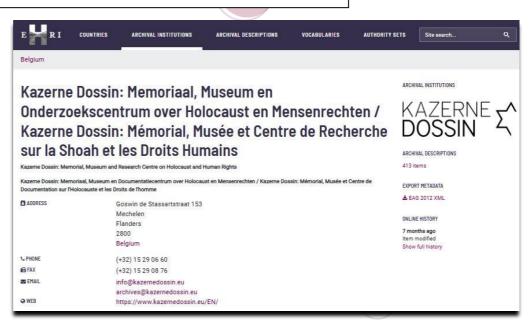
"I have seen how in this institution, the benefits of data management have worked out in a wonderful way, with not only the audiences that were interested in the archives happier, but equally the people working on the data".

Veerle Vanden Daelen, Curator and Director Collections & Research

In 1994, two researchers started to collect documents, photos, objects, testimonies and other archival materials to create a permanent exhibition for the JMDR that was inaugurated in 1995 at the former SS-Sammellager Mechelen. To facilitate and catalogue all possible objects for the exhibition, all items – whether they were obtained physically or digitally, and whether they fell under the copyright of other institutes or under the copyright of the JMDR itself – were described on item-level in one large MS

Kazerne Dossin entry in EHRI Portal

Access database. The items were not organised as a unit on collection level, as is more common in archival practice. They were grouped according to types, such as photos or newspapers and magazines, within four different series. As such, the way they were organised was not compliant with international archival standards: the museum staff developed their own standard.

After the inauguration of the JMDR, survivors started donating their private collections to the museum. The accumulation of these archival sources led to the establishment of a documentation centre onsite. Staff members continued to describe archival additions according to the system that was developed for the exhibition, thus dividing the donated collections and assigning items to one of the four series that then became collections.

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This work method resulted in detailed descriptions that often also contained biographical information that could not be openly shared due to data protection. However, because initially intended to develop the exhibition, the descriptions were work documents meant for and only accessible to staff. As there were no collection-level descriptions either, the context of the collection and many items as well as the link with the donor were unclear. The system of item descriptions was hard to use for both non-employees and employees not acquainted with the work methods. The knowledge transfer among staff and between "generations" of employees was challenging. This began to change around 2010, when two things happened: the JMDR became Kazerne Dossin and the museum made it its mission to collect, research and share metadata and digital copies of archival collections related to the history of the Holocaust in Belgium; consequently, it invested in a digital asset management system to create a closed-source portal website to share its archival collections with partner institutes worldwide. At the same time, Kazerne Dossin was contacted by EHRI who had just received its first project funding. EHRI was keen to engage Kazerne Dossin and its archival collections as a test case to analyse methods to standardise archival processes and to identify the necessary tools to help collection holding institutes to share their descriptions with researchers and other institutes. In short, EHRI wanted Kazerne Dossin to help them develop what became the EHRI Portal.

Veerle Vanden Daelen

This partnership has led to the growing professionalisation in preservation, digitisation and description standards for Kazerne Dossin. First, Kazerne Dossin focused on reworking its archival methods and materials. EHRI coached Kazerne Dossin in introducing good practices and standardised archival methods and helped adapt the existing infrastructure, as the institute's databases were created and maintained in MS Access. The most challenging and most crucial step in this phase was to master the jargon, or in other words: to learn to speak ICT and use international standards in archival management to communicate with EHRI's IT staff and the software provider and transmit this to the institute's staff.

The partnership with EHRI allowed Kazerne Dossin to grow towards a more standardised and thus more broadly usable format. A first important step was to give unique and persistent identifiers to archival collections received as of 2012. Also, all new collections would be described on collection-level according to the international standards and no longer on item-level (except for photos). This had the double advantage of (1) allowing to process and provide information on archival collections much faster and (2) allowing more broadly sharable descriptions as collection-level faces fewer challenges on privacy regulation than item level descriptions. Subsequently, based on the name of the donor, items donated before 2012 and catalogued in series were recombined into their original collection and described on collection level. Today, 230 collection descriptions have been made and more than 75 of these are available via the public end of Kazerne Dossin's portal website.

After reworking its own archival methods, Kazerne Dossin explored how it could share its collection level descriptions with a broader audience. Again, EHRI helped in using Kazerne Dossin as a test case to install and explore two new key tools it was developing: one to allow institutes to map and convert bulk xml files into individual xml files containing metadata of one collection; and another to allow institutes to present the xml files for harvesting and publishing on the EHRI portal. These EHRI tools enabled Kazerne Dossin to provide partners with publicly available xml files containing valid encoded archival descriptions for sharing purposes.

Today, Kazerne Dossin has advanced enormously in its archival work thanks to EHRI. Their partnership will be further cemented as EHRI becomes a permanent organisation and both look forward to continuing their fruitful knowledge exchange.[1]

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[1] For an in-depth description of Kazerne Dossin's professionalisation in preservation, digitisation and description standards for Kazerne Dossin, read this entry in the EHRI Document Blog

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