

SOURCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Ethics and truth in archival research

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The complexities of the ethics and truth in archival research are often unrecognised or invisible in educational research. This paper complicates the process of collecting data in the archives, as it problematises notions of ethics and truth in the archives. The archival research took place in the former Czechoslovakia and its turbulent political history influenced the way data were accessed and collected. The article analyses the productive power of archival institutions and their guardians, and examines the ethical dilemma of discovering sensitive information. Archival institutions hold the secrets that, once uncovered, can have powerful ramifications. It will be argued that the nature of truth in the archives is complex, and the author complicates and challenges the perception that archives are ethically neutral research spaces that do not need to consider approval from research ethics committees.

Keywords: ethics; truth; power; archives; Czechoslovakia

Introduction

Library archives are strangely exciting places. They sit there, quiet stacks of books and old paper, silently humming with thousands of stories. Closed to random rummagers, guarded by librarians, the past seems to wait for someone to reach out to it. To open a box or a book on a page of old handwriting, with its browning ink on yellowing paper, requires a steady nerve. Having been discovered, the ancestors demand attention. We cannot simply close the box and leave them alone again.¹

This paper analyses archival research from the perspective of ethics and truth, with a focus on data collection in the archival institutions of the former Czechoslovakia.² It draws on my experiences as an archival researcher, on the power and politics of the archival institutions, and on the complexities of the ethics of research when dealing with sensitive histories of communities. Whilst the data collected in the archives were useful in shaping my research topic during my doctoral studies, it was the research experience itself that formed my understanding of how to consider data that concern the production of childhoods in communist Czechoslovakia of the 1970s and 1980s. Jones and Jenkins write about ‘muddying’ history, which they understand in postmodern research as adopting perspectives

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¹Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins, *He Kōrero – Words between Us: First Māori–Pākehā Conversations on Paper* (Wellington, New Zealand: Huia Publishers, 2011), 1.

²This research was part of my doctoral study titled ‘Governing Childhoods through Stories’, completed in 2012 at the Faculty of Education, the University of Auckland.

‘that do not claim objectivity’.³ The challenge of this article is to ‘muddy’ the story of researching in archival institutions in a post-communist country. This muddying attempts to disturb, as I argue, the artificial calmness of archival research, its procedures and portrayal as research without ethical implications, unlike research that ‘deals with human subjects’. However, this article does not strive to determine who should be protected in archival research, but to complicate the question of how to be an ethical researcher, and how to conduct ethical research in archival institutions.

Power, politics and guardians

This paper argues that archival institutions have tremendous power. As Rose claims, institutions such as galleries and museums produce a certain type of knowledge, and in doing so they create a certain type of visitor. These institutions decide which pictures to make visible and which to keep locked inside the depository.⁴ As institutions they lay out a certain public space, for example by placing chairs and benches in front of some pictures and not others. They allow visitors to touch some things whilst others remain protected. Archival institutions operate on a similar principle, using their productive power to issue catalogues and to grant researchers access to some materials and not to others. Within these institutions it is their guardians who execute this power over visitors and researchers.

Archival institutions need to decide on what they will archive, display and allow researchers to see, and how this will be done. They therefore cannot be considered to be neutral. Rose reminds us of this, and that the process of storing data involves complex decision-making and politics.⁵ The notion of archiving, and classification, is also Derrida’s concern as he argues that the way archives operate and store data puts certain limitations and categories in place and that therefore ‘order is no longer assured’, while new order takes place.⁶ The power and politics of archives have been extensively researched by Jimerson, who also considers these institutions to be ‘sites of power’.⁷ Similarly Foucault’s work alerts us, through the example of a prison, to how institutions use rules and surveillance to produce docile bodies, subjected and colonised to self-discipline and self-governance.⁸ In the latter part of this paper I demonstrate how I was also produced as a ‘docile’ archival researcher, following Derrida’s argument that there is ‘no political power without control of the archive’ as a pertinent focus of my analysis.⁹

In the sense of poststructural archival research,¹⁰ it was not my intention, when I embarked upon my archival research project, to discover or report on ‘the truth’, in

³Jones and Jenkins, *He Kōrero – Words between Us*, 6.

⁴Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage, 2007).

⁵Rose, *Visual Methodologies*.

⁶Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5.

⁷Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 2.

⁸Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, ed. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991); Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Interviews (1966–1984)*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotexte, 1989).

⁹Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 4.

¹⁰Ben Gidley, ‘Doing Historical and Archival Research’, in *Researching Society and Culture*, ed. Clive Seale (Oxford: Sage, 2004).

the sense of historical accuracy. I was reminded that, as children growing up in communist Czechoslovakia, we had developed a complex relationship with truth. For example, after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, what we had learnt to believe to be the truth suddenly became redundant. We had memories and experiences of growing up in the communist context, whilst the world around us changed dramatically with the fall of the Iron Curtain. Almost all that we had learnt and acquired as knowledge was suddenly proclaimed to be false. I was reminded of this experience 22 years later, when I returned to Czechoslovakia after living and working in New Zealand for many years, to conduct my archival research. Once a citizen of Czechoslovakia, but now treated as a foreigner in the country where I was born, I entered these powerful archival institutions. From my first point of contact with the guardians of the archival institutions, I was constantly reminded of and confronted with my memories of attitudes towards the people, and decisions they made, during the post-totalitarian era. I spoke with many of the guardians: their memories of childhoods, children's literature and living conditions differed amongst themselves, and often differed from my memories, and from the stories I had been told.

Archival research is a strange classification of a certain type of research. For example, Comay asks 'what isn't an archive these days' as she argues for the importance and power of archives in these 'memory-obsessed times'.¹¹ I wanted to prepare carefully for this research trip to minimize potential problems whilst visiting institutions that deal with people's memories. I read research handbooks and methodological literature, as preparation for any research trip is an essential part of research practice.¹² First of all I studied what data are actually available in the archives. Data can be categorised in many ways. Some handbooks and researchers prefer the approach of stating that all that can be accessed in the archives is a public record, whilst others distinguish between private data (such as correspondence, diaries, personal notes not originally aimed for public consumption) and public data (memos, published articles, documents which were widely disseminated).¹³ Private data are more sensitive than items classified as public; and researchers should be more careful in how these are used and published. However, this distinction does not answer the question of how (or whether) the person who produced the data, or about whom the data were produced, gave consent for this information to be accessible in any archives.

Getting permission to enter the archival institutions in post-communist times was a complex procedure. These institutions hold knowledge and carry memories of a nation that had lived under communist governance for almost 40 years. This knowledge is protected by the archive guardians, whose job it is to determine whether a researcher can enter, what he/she can research and for how long he/she can carry out this research. Protection is also provided by the governing agencies, such as the Ministry of the Interior, that fund and guide many archival institutions. The public archival institutions are governed by the Ministries' departments and by the guard-

¹¹Rebecca Comay, *Lost in the Archives* (Toronto: Alphabet City Media, 2002), 12.

¹²Earl R. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage, 2010); Judith L. Green, Gregory Camilli and Patricia B. Elmore, *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, ed. American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).

¹³Gidley, 'Doing Historical and Archival Research'; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, 'Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality', *American Archivist* 57, no. 3 (1994): 514–27.

ians situated in the archives, who have varied education and are usually trained within the institution itself. The guardians themselves and their actions are governed by complex legislation that they are left to interpret in order to protect the institution. The guardians thus act on individual responsibility, performed within these rules of the general archiving legislative framework, and within each archival institution's specific rules.

Whilst researching, I had numerous discussions with the guardians concerning the power of the archival institutions that they worked in. I was told stories about how, since the fall of Communism, many documents had been lost or destroyed, and about the deliberate under-financing of the institution to control the 'mapping' of uncategorised archival documents to reduce the possibility of exposing sensitive information. As one guardian told me, 'it is only 22 years since the Velvet Revolution'. What the guardian meant was that the agencies in power have a good reason for maintaining the archives in the current unmapped and uncatalogued state. Such deliberate mishandling of documents was also reported by Van Rossum, who claims that there were thousands of metres of unmapped archival spaces with uncatalogued data when the archives were handed over from communist agencies after the Velvet Revolution.¹⁴ Since the change of the system in the early 1990s, I argue in this paper, this mapping, cataloguing and categorising of archived materials has not progressed much. Archival institutions in Czechoslovakia constitute rough, uncharted terrain and since the first day in the field I realised that my task as a researcher would be much more difficult than I had imagined.

The notion of ethics is often not considered to be important in archival research, nor do methodological handbooks commonly discuss it. I was intrigued to know whether other researchers also encountered ethical dilemmas in their archival research, and problematised the ethics of conducting archival research. Soon I realised that I was not the only researcher who struggled with the (lack of) ethics guidance in archival and documentary research.¹⁵ Ethical dilemmas make researchers re-think the ethics of archival research. For instance, Moore argues for further consideration of ethics in relation to the politics of archives, and the way archives (and their guardians) can potentially censor researchers and their research projects.¹⁶ Also Jimerson problematises the ethics of archival research and argues that the accountable, ethical archival researcher is determined by his or her ideas of objectivity, neutrality and social justice.¹⁷ Both of

¹⁴Leo Van Rossum, 'The Former Communist Party Archives in Eastern Europe and Russia: A Provisional Assessment' (1997), <http://www.iisg.nl/publications/rossum.pdf> (accessed October 26, 2012).

¹⁵Laura Cameron, 'Oral History in the Freud Archives: Incidents, Ethics, and Relations', *Historical Geography* 29 (2001): 38–44; Annamaria Carusi and Marina Jirotko, 'From Data Archive to Ethical Labyrinth', *Qualitative Research* 9, no. 3 (2009): 285–98; Gilfoyle, 'Prostitutes in the Archives'; Pamela Innes, 'Ethical Problems in Archival Research: Beyond Accessibility', *Language & Communication* 30, no. 3 (2010): 198–203; Sue Middleton, 'Jane's Three Letters: Working with Documents and Archives', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research in Education*, ed. S. Delamont and A. Jones (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012), 299–312; Judith Schwarz, 'The Archivist's Balancing Act: Helping Researchers While Protecting Individual Privacy', *Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (1992): 179–89; Daniel Taube and Susan Burkhardt, 'Ethical and Legal Risks Associated with Archival Research', *Ethics & Behavior* 7, no. 1 (1997): 59–67.

¹⁶Francesca P. L. Moore, 'Tales from the Archive: Methodological and Ethical Issues in Historical Geography Research.' *Area* 42, no. 3 (2010): 262–70.

¹⁷Jimerson, *Archives Power*.

these researchers recognise the power of archival institutions and the materials they contain, and how they may affect the researcher.

I agree with Locke, Alcorn and O'Neill when they use the quote 'everything is ethics'.¹⁸ Other researchers have also considered ethical dilemmas and pointed out the unsuitability of ethical guidelines which research ethics committees tend to apply, such as the notion of informed consent as 'an ethical remedy' to protect human subjects,¹⁹ while others have pointed out the complexities of ethics and ethical dilemmas.²⁰ Fogel, Quinlan, Quinlan and She also investigate the limitations of ethical guidelines and methodological handbooks with regard to archival research, and contest the notions of informed consent as an ideal tool to protect participants when they are not face to face with the researcher in the flesh, but exist in their archival form.²¹ In the ethical dilemmas that I faced, I struggled with complexities of who to protect whilst researching childhoods in archival institutions. The data I found, if made public, could potentially implicate people's lives. Other researchers, when faced with ethical dilemmas, refrain from disclosing their sources; and so in the case of my discovery of sensitive data, I too will refrain from disclosing the names of some specific archives or references to the particular documents in this paper.

Producing the researcher and encounters with subjects

The archival institutions produced me as a certain type of researcher. Inside them, I faced different conditions and experiences than in most of the Western archives I had visited or read about. Despite the fact that a certain level of supervision by guardians, control over researchers, and requiring a contribution towards the reproduction of documents can be traced within most archival institutions in the Western world, the difference from those I visited is in how these rules are performed; how archives are allegedly purposefully underfinanced; and how public archival institutions are still centralised and governed by Ministries in the same way as during communism. Most importantly, the concern for all involved, for both researchers and the guardians, is the unspoken notion of what kind of secrets about the sensitive past these institutions may hold. Therefore, the power of the guardians, I argue, is exerted not only in protecting the documents, but in controlling and shaping the research subject; by allowing the researcher to access some materials, and not others. While many Western archival institutions include uncategorised data, in post-communist Czechoslovakia such a situation raises concerns about how and why these archives remain uncategorised. I claim in this paper that this concern may relate not only to the materials, but also to an unwillingness, and fear, of exploring the past.

¹⁸Terry Locke, Noeline Alcorn and John O'Neill, 'Ethical Issues in Collaborative Action Research', in *Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) Conference*, Vienna, Austria, 2011.

¹⁹O. O'Neill, 'Some Limits of Informed Consent', *Journal of Medical Ethics* 29, no. 1 (2003): 4–7.

²⁰P. Alderson and V. Morow, *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Young People* (London: Barnardos, 2003); Heather Piper and Helen Simons. 'Ethical Issues in Generating Public Knowledge, in *Theory and Methods in Social Research*, ed. Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin (New Delhi: Sage, 2011); M. Punch, *The Politics and Ethics of Fieldwork*. London: Sage, 1986).

²¹Curtis Fogel, Andrea Quinlan, Liz Quinlan and Qianru She, 'Ethical Issues in Socio-Historical Archival Research: A Short Skit', *Research Ethics* 6, no. 3 (2010): 91–4.

In the archival institutions that I gained access to, I felt pressured with only a few hours to get through the documents, knowing that the next day new boxes of data would arrive. I felt frustrated that I could not change my requests based on discoveries in the boxes I searched on one day, and that I would have to wait an additional two to three working days for the boxes that I chose. I often felt lost, as there were hundreds and hundreds of boxes to choose from with no real description, and my selections were circumstantial or just pure guesswork. In one archival institution, however, I also felt privileged as I was able to negotiate access to data that were still in sealed boxes. But in most cases these privileges were disheartening as they led to further complications. The documents were often not in order, and many pages that seemed important were missing. Some files had only a cover page and no contents, with the name of the person from the Ministry of Education who had last borrowed (and obviously never returned) them. Some others were marked 'secret' and instead of minutes of meetings, they merely stated 'oral discussion – no minutes taken'. Some other passages were blacked out.

Pressured by the limited time in which I had access to archival documents, and by the restrictions implemented by the guardians, I decided to use a camera and photograph many pages of data, even if they seemed only distantly relevant to my research. I counted on substantial analysis at a later point. This was a research approach that I had not considered before. I had been expecting to study the documents carefully before attempting to copy or photograph them. I was also expecting that I would pre-select my data from well-described lists of contents from the archival boxes. Under the circumstances and pressures already described, I decided to take the approach of collecting and creating databases of data that may be only potentially relevant to my research. I hoped to carefully re-select them and analyse them in the evenings. My approach therefore was a very raw data collection. I consciously chose quantity over quality, and after some days of data collection, despite my initial disapproval of this approach, I began to realise its potential advantages. I was gathering data during the day and throughout the evenings I was categorising, searching, and finding links between documents that I might otherwise not have studied in detail. This quick pre-analysis helped me to make more informed decisions about which boxes I should ask for in the next days, and about what information could possibly be inside them. I started my selection of archival boxes with a 'hit and miss' approach, but towards the end of my fieldwork I was picking up a trail of links that led me to important data.

There are many complexities involved in working with images and photographs, whether it is a photograph discovered in the archive or a photograph of a document found in the archive. In my case, the concern extended to collecting digital images. Despite much debate on this subject in the literature, I will enter this discussion with only two remarks. Grosvenor reminds us that:

[t]raditionally, historians, when they have worked with photographs, have been generally concerned with extracting evidence about the materiality of the past. This is done by looking at what is made present in an image. Looking, however, always has a subjective quality which shapes the ideas that are formed.²²

²²Ian Grosvenor, 'The School Album: Images, Insights and Inequalities/L'àlbum De L'escola: Imatges, Introspecció I Desigualtats', *Educació i Història: Revista d'Història de l'Educació* 15, no. 2 (2010): 163.

This quote highlights the importance of the relationship between the researcher and an image; and of the subjective interpretation that links to the muddying of history inferred earlier. In my situation therefore, once I had decided to take digital images, it was important to acknowledge that they could be perceived

in a wider variety of intentional relationships to the objects that they depict. And, because they are so easily distributed, copied, transformed, and recombined, they can readily be appropriated (or misappropriated) and put to uses for which they were not originally intended.²³

This is a concern that complicates the often simplistic use of the notions of image and photograph, and it guides us to seek a deeper ‘dialogue’ with an image, and to consider its context, histories, genealogies, without necessarily searching for an objective truth.

I will now turn to analyse three experiences of engaging with archival institutions. They differ in nature but are connected by the experience of researching in the archival institutions where the notion of accessing and collecting data became an ethical problem.

The act of removal

My first example illustrates the power of the archive guardians over the researcher, and over the research topic in archival research. The Ministry of the Interior governs one archive that I visited, where I aimed to collect data from the kindergarten chronicles, and to discover links that would provide information about how the children’s magazine was used in kindergartens. The guardians of this archival institution did not reply to my emails, so once I was in the country I called the archive and made an appointment. However, I missed the appointment because I arrived at the wrong address, as the website and relevant documents with the address of the archive had not been updated, and the archive had moved to the other side of the city. I was upset, and this ‘episode’ did not help my relationship with the guardians. I learnt that the archive had changed locations and storage areas many times over the past years, and that it had lost historic documents and materials in the process of moving, or due to incorrect storage and handling. The new location of the archive was in the middle of a residential suburb, in the building of a former kindergarten, a place not suited to storing and researching data. The archive operated under restricted opening hours, giving researchers only three hours a day to study, and it was closed on Fridays.

The archival administrator who welcomed me upon my arrival was a powerful guardian. The guardian’s desk was in the same room as the researchers studying the documents, so the guardian was constantly observing them. I noticed how guardians raised their voice at the researchers who did not follow the archival protocol for handling the documents. I observed this as I filled in the long application form, outlining which data I wanted to collect and why I was interested in them. Once I had finished the paperwork I was told that another guardian of higher status would be in touch with me. Despite trying to communicate about the time management of my research and when I might expect a response from the archive, I could only wait, as my application had to be reviewed by a more powerful guardian. As my entry in my

²³William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 222.

research diary states, at this point I was not dealing with one guardian, but with a hierarchy of guardians within the archival institution. It was not the power of the guardian, but of the whole apparatus of the archive, with its rules and protocols, that dictated when and how I was able to access and collect the data. Derrida refers to such institutional procedures as the science of the archives.²⁴ And in this case the archive told me: you need to wait.

After a week of waiting I received an email from the guardian advising me that the archive did not hold any information or data that would be useful for my research, and that I should focus my research on other archives. However, encouraged by discussions with guardians from other archives who claimed that important data were indeed held there, I decided not to give up. I called the archive and requested an appointment with a higher-ranked guardian in an attempt to get past the bureaucratic wall. Following many long discussions, the guardian I eventually got to speak to asked me why I was even interested in this particular period of time. The guardian did not want to provide me with a list of archival holdings, and as I noted in my research diary, I was beginning to wonder whether such a catalogue even existed or I was simply not permitted to see it. More phone calls led to an interesting turn of events: the guardian found some kindergarten chronicles; and they were available for me to access. I was excited; the guardian promised to prepare them for me and asked that I should be ready to study them the following week.

The next week was not as smooth as I anticipated it to be. When I entered the archive the guardian requested a confirmation letter from my university, confirming that I really was conducting research and collecting data in line with my application to enter the archive. The guardian refused to accept my confirmation letter in English and requested that it be officially translated into the Czech or Slovak language, and for the translation to be signed by the university. I was disappointed, as I knew this would take days. I was also informed about payments for reproducing the data. Photocopying was expensive, and other researchers were complaining about the photocopier not working well. The cost for using a camera was at a daily (three hours) rate of almost 15 euros, which concerned me as I was rapidly exceeding my research budget. I tried to negotiate and argued that the archive is open only three hours a day, and not for a full day. At this particular moment I thought I would give up. The experience felt like being in one of Havel's absurd plays, combined with the notion of Franz Kafka's castle: the archival institution was pressuring and testing me, and the closer the data in the archives were physically, the further away they seemed to be moving. I did not know how to deal with the power that this institution was exerting over me. I left the archive, complied with the requirements, and returned some days later.

Three days later, as the guardian went to retrieve my requested data, I did not expect to see such a scene. The guardian wheeled in a trolley loaded with chronicles, photo albums and archival boxes, all laid on top of each other in one huge messy pile. The sight of the cart filled with unsorted, stockpiled materials that were so hard to access shocked me: after all this effort, to see the desired materials in such a state was demoralising. I started to study them at one of the school desks; the room was dark, with the guardians' desks in the corner; the phone on their desk rang constantly and I could hear casual discussions amongst them. The school desks were small and uncomfortable, and so close to each other that researchers had no privacy. Every

²⁴Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

researcher was observed and reprimanded in harsh tones for not turning pages correctly, or just for holding the archival material the wrong way. After about an hour of researching the chronicles, the vast amount of important and relevant material amazed me. I was taking many photographs of documents with huge research potential, very aware of the three-hour research limit, when after about an hour of research, suddenly the guardian approached me. The guardian said, 'That's enough!'. At first I could not understand what the guardian meant, but soon I comprehended that somehow the guardian was convinced that I had seen enough materials. When I attempted to protest and requested more time, the guardian said that the rules of the archive, which I had signed, clearly state that the archive staff have the power and the right to decide at what time I should stop my work. I packed up and finished my research at this archive; the guardian stated that I could continue the following week, but I had already made an appointment in another archive. Later on, this experience made me wonder whether there was information, or secrets, that these guardians may be protecting, and did not want to risk uncovering. While I am not suggesting that they were hiding a particular document, perhaps they were protecting the unknown, and the notion of 'what if' something of an explosive nature could be discovered.

Dangerous freedom

I had a different experience in the archive operated by the Ministry of Education. Here I aimed to research teachers' reports on children, and educational processes in the kindergartens. The difference in the governance and the approach to the researcher in this archive was obvious from the first meeting and I developed a good rapport with the guardians. Because of the prior email contact, I had a clear understanding of the requirements for entry into this archive, as well as about the local research protocol and access to the catalogues. Unlike my experience of other public archives, I was surprised by the amount of data I was allowed to research. I could focus solely on my research without worrying about negotiating access to the catalogues. I felt welcomed as a researcher. However, the guardians here also influenced my research through the way they perceived my topic. At first, they allowed me to see slightly different documents from those I had requested. Sometimes the guardians navigated me in a different direction, following their perceptions of how the post-totalitarian system operated in education. The guardians of this archive also had certain memories and experiences, and diverse urges that they expressed to me; it turned out to be the only public archive in which I managed to successfully negotiate to collect the data that I aimed to gather.

These guardians trusted me; after a few visits I was able to continue my research outside of the official opening hours, and even during holidays. I was allowed to take some documents away and return them the next day. Sometimes I was even left in the archive on my own; and I gained permission to access materials from the archival depository myself. I realised only upon my return to New Zealand that this experience raises serious ethical and security concerns. However, at the time of conducting my research I entered into my research diary: 'I wish all archives were like this'. The guardians were sympathetic towards my time and financial restrictions, and I collected data without being charged for reproductions. I was amazed at the conditions in which I was able to conduct my study: I had a quiet space, and I could carefully explore documents without time pressure or complaints about how I was handling them.

The research environment of this archive was different from the others, perhaps because the Ministry of Education and not the Ministry of the Interior governed it. This archive also seemed to have different types of stored documents and no confidential files. The guardians' attention to the rules and protocols, and to researchers' circumstances, were friendlier and more approachable than at the other archives. The archival institutions that reported to the Ministry of the Interior were not only difficult to access, but collecting data in them involved a constant struggle with unknown power relations. As I noted in my research diary: 'all guardians were willing to bend the rules [either for themselves or in the researcher's favour], but in this archive they did so as a favour to the researcher'.

My personal ghosts

The foregoing stories illustrate my experiences of the power of the archives and the complexities of researching post-totalitarian childhoods produced in them. I will now turn to analyse my discovery of an unexpected document containing sensitive information, which adds an additional angle to the already complex notions of ethics and truth in archival research. The journey to this discovery started when, after many negotiations, I was granted access to the still unmapped and uncategorised parts of an archive. There were boxes and boxes of information on governing kindergartens and children's magazines, and I was just flipping through pages of hundreds of documents wondering whether I would come across anything more directly relevant to my research, or whether I was just wasting my time. All these boxes were sealed, and based on the condition they were in it seemed most likely that they had never been opened or searched through before.

Whilst going through these boxes I made an unexpected discovery. Amongst all the documents stored in one box, I found lists of teachers and professors alongside evaluations of their work by Academic Deans at universities and Communist Party representatives, outlining why they were considered worthy of advance in their academic careers. Pages and pages of documents outlined their relationship and orientation to certain politics, to the Communist Party, whether they had any connections to the West, and the way they cooperated with the official power forces and how they behaved during the Prague Spring. Based on this evaluation, the Ministry of Education advised the universities and schools whether these teachers and academics should advance in their careers. The most disturbing parts were those that alluded to teachers' reports on suspicious, anti-socialist behaviour of children, students and their parents.

Most of the names of the teachers were unknown to me. But some were the names of my former teachers and others that I knew of, specifically those whom I had admired and cared for. The information that I found about them both shocked and upset me. Some of them may now be dead, whilst others could still be active in education today. At this moment I was confronted with my biggest ethical dilemma, one that I had never considered. Should I continue reading? Or should I close the box and pretend that this experience did not happen? I had a choice. I wrote into my research diary the question: 'How to be an ethical archival researcher?' The notion of truth concerning what I found in those files about my teachers illustrates my concern regarding whether there is any historical truth in my archival research on childhoods.

Kundera's guilt

To complicate this story of how to deal with data discovered in the archives, and the concern of the ethics and truth of archival research, I now turn to the case of the famous Czech writer Milan Kundera. Kundera has lived since the 1970s in France, after emigrating from Czechoslovakia. He was considered to be a symbol of intellectual resistance against communist power and ideology, and his work is deeply rooted in the post-totalitarian era and used by researchers to analyse this period.²⁵ However, in late 2008, a story was published about Kundera in the weekly magazine *Respekt* by an archival researcher named Hradilek. In summary, Hradilek accused Kundera, on the basis of a police report that he discovered in the archives, of denouncing another citizen and collaborating with the secret police in the early 1950s.²⁶ Hradilek portrays Kundera as a reclusive character, who has not given an interview in the past 25 years and who visits the Czech Republic only incognito. As Hradilek claims, '[the discovery in the archive] indicates that there may be other reasons for his reclusiveness than we previously imagined'. With regard to the truth of the document Hradilek wrote in the last paragraph of his article: 'I pondered for a long time on whether I had a moral right to publish the story. But in the end I decided that its publication could throw light on some unanswered questions.' Hradilek claims that he had given Kundera an opportunity to comment and explain before publishing this story, but that he had had no response from Kundera.

Hradilek suddenly became the best-known archival researcher in the country. In his article, he claims that institutions such as the archives 'offer valuable material for seeking out eyewitnesses and provide the scholar with an unprecedented tool for reviving memories'. After publication of this article, other respected Czech researchers made statements clearly rejecting the idea that a police report, as an archival document, could be false, whilst others questioned its interpretation. A spokesman from the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, in which the document was discovered, denied the possibility that the document that points to Kundera's guilt is a fake.²⁷ Despite researchers' claims concerning the validity and originality of the document, and not about whether the document contained the truth, the way this document was interpreted by the media was not concerned with whether the document was 'original' but whether the 'content' of the document is 'true'.

Kundera's story caused turmoil both in the former Czechoslovakia and around the world. Within a few days, the media worldwide was reporting on this subject. Renowned newspapers compared Kundera with Günter Grass,²⁸ and the message that was disseminated around the world was that Kundera must be guilty: the archives had produced their secrets, and these secrets must be true. Others who were not archival researchers, such as the famous writer Škvorecký, however, shared their reservations. He claimed that the secret police and forces 'were almighty, uncon-

²⁵Jimerson, *Archives Power*; Marci Shore, 'The Sacred and the Myth: Havel's Greengrocer and the Transformation of Ideology in Communist Czechoslovakia', *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 3 (1996): 163–82.

²⁶Adam Hradilek, 'Milan Kundera's Denunciation', *Respekt* (2008), <http://respekt.ihned.cz/english/c1-36380440-milan-kundera-s-denunciation> (accessed October 26, 2012).

²⁷B. Bindasová, 'Kundera: Guilty or Innocent?' *Prague Daily Monitor* (2008), <http://praguemonitor.com/2008/11/07/kundera-guilty-or-innocent> (accessed October 26, 2012).

²⁸Hans-Jorg Schmidt, 'Der Schändliche Verrat Des Milan Kundera.' *Welt Online* (2008), <http://www.welt.de/kultur/article2570692/Der-schaendliche-Verrat-des-Milan-Kundera.html> (accessed October 26, 2012).

trolled and uncontrollable organisations. He who trusts their records like the Holy Script is an idiot.²⁹

Kundera, after a quarter of a century of silence and granting no interviews, issued a statement: 'I have been absolutely taken aback by something that I did not expect, something that I did not know about until now, and something that did not happen' and called the Hradilek article 'an assassination attempt'.³⁰ Soon after this, 11 world-famous writers, including four Nobel prize winners, issued a joint statement published in the *Guardian*: 'We note that Kundera has issued a categorical denial of these claims Too often, the press has spread this defamatory rumour without taking care to report the evidence refuting it.'³¹

Suddenly, Czech and Slovak citizens, artists and scientists, former communists and dissidents, were interested in the archives and their secrets. Citizens offered their perspectives and opinions. For example Czech dissident and writer Klíma wrote an article on this subject:

The document would probably not have caused such a big stir if the student had not gone on to become a brilliant writer of international renown.... Despite the credible appearance of the police report facsimile I believe in the principle of the presumption of innocence. The police report was written after the event (it includes a record of the subsequent police action) and it does not bear Kundera's signature.³²

Václav Havel also joined the heated discussion. He issued a statement, in the same magazine as Hradilek's original article appeared, entitled 'Two messages', where he problematises Kundera's case.³³ Havel carefully states that while he does not believe in Kundera's guilt, he understands that the events, as described by Hradilek, could have occurred. Havel analyses what some people did under the pressure of the Communist regime, including himself; and how difficult it may be for young citizens and researchers to imagine how it actually was to live under totalitarian governance. Havel understands the complexities of the Communist system, and how each and every citizen became both a supporter and a victim of the system:

And for the hundredth time, I had to ask myself: would I have proved myself in a real battle? While in prison, I often wondered what sort of things and what secrets I might blurt out under physical torture. And, the other way around: what would young historians think if they unearthed a document showing that I had informed on a fellow prisoner? Of course, I could explain that this person was about to commit suicide and that technically this was the only way of saving his life, and they might understand and appreciate what I did. However, this complicated postscript of an explanation would always be cowering in the background, behind the terrible original news of my betrayal.... Finally, I have two things to say. One for the young historians: please take care when judging history! Otherwise you can do more harm than good. Just like your grandfathers did. One for Milan: try to stay above things! As you know, worse things can happen in the course of one's life than being defamed by the media.³⁴

²⁹Bindasová, 'Kundera: Guilty or Innocent?'.

³⁰Rob Cameron, 'Kundera Rejects Czech "Informer" Tag', *BBC News* (2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7668484.stm> (accessed October 26, 2012).

³¹J. M. Coetzee, 'Support Milan Kundera', *Guardian* (2008), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/nov/04/milankundera-nobel-prize-literature> (accessed October 26, 2012).

³²Ivan Klíma, 'Informing under Terror', *Lidové noviny* (2008), <http://www.salon.eu.sk/article.php?article=728&searchPhrase=ivan%20kl%C3%ADma> (accessed October 26, 2012).

³³Václav Havel, 'Two Messages', *Respekt* (2008). <http://www.salon.eu.sk/article.php?article=732&searchPhrase=havel> (accessed October 26, 2012).

³⁴Havel, 'Two Messages'.

Kundera's story presents us with the complexities of dealing with the past and how difficult it is to use archival documents to determine the truth that researchers and citizens long for. Perhaps it comes back to Jones and Jenkins' notion of muddying history: each of us can interpret documents in any way we want; and in that way we contribute to and enrich the discourse.³⁵ The discovery of a document concerning my teachers is perhaps unimportant compared with the Kundera story; and the world media would not pick up my story, nor would Nobel Prize winners write defensive statements about those teachers. But perhaps these are the very reasons why it has become my responsibility, in a Havelian sense, to protect these teachers, and to treat this document as an illustration of the era, rather than to point my finger and judge. My experience, and my careful exploration of Kundera's case, forces me to treat all archival data as illustrations of particular conditions and not to search for 'real' citizens and 'real' children behind the collected stories, chronicles and letters. This reinforces the notion that there is no real 'truth' in the childhoods that I research, but that there are multitudes of truths in the stories that they tell.

Concluding comments

There are many differences between the post-communist archival institutions and 'traditional', Western archival institutions. While certain practices such as surveillance are common in most of the archival institutions around the world, this act can also be perceived as a form of control over what knowledges should be researched. The presence of uncatalogued items and the temptation to uncover potentially dangerous data can have serious repercussions. In my case, the guardians perhaps removed their consent to research because they understood what could be found in the archive; they truly guarded the material held in their archives. My research subject of childhoods was relegated to the background and the actual experience of archival institutions and their interpretation became elevated to centre stage.

When Kundera was accused of collaborating with the secret police, the archivists and historians confirmed the validity of the archive as a source of 'true' evidence. Once the report entered the public media, Kundera was seen as guilty in the eyes of the public. Even now, years later, many discussion forums on the internet provide a space for arguing for or against Kundera, based purely on the snippets of information available to citizens. Kundera's case and my concern regarding the ethics and the truth of the document about my teachers demonstrate the inextricable connections between documentation and society. They also shaped the way I approached archival material, leading to my decision to treat any collected data as illustrations of childhoods, rather than as the truth. In my research diary, as I was reflecting, I returned to the preparation stage of my research, and wrote: 'Would ethical approval from my university have supported me with this mess?' While there is no clear answer, the absence of ethical considerations for archival research became problematic. This paper's concluding argument is therefore that ethical experiences with the subject and data are essential and inseparable, and that ethical considerations *are* relevant in archival research.

³⁵Jones and Jenkins, *He Kōrero – Words between Us*.

Notes on contributor

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