

Appeal for volunteers from the Director of the Cologne archives

Dr Ulrich S Soénius, Director of the Stiftung Rheinisch–Westfälisches and the Wirtschaftsarchiv zu Köln, has sent out the following circular letter explaining the disaster recovery plan set in place by the organisation, and appealing for specialist volunteers.

'Interest in the fate of the Historical Archive in Cologne continues to grow. Much help has been offered — hence this report and further information on co–ordinating aid. Today [March 8] an archive crisis–team has been assembled consisting of representatives of the city, the historical archive, the professional fire–fighters of Cologne, the state archive of North Rhine–Westphalia and restoration experts, which will advise and make decisions on further steps of the recovery process.

'On Wednesday, a large portion of the rubble–heap will be projected from the rain that set in a couple hours later, by being covered by tarpaulins. Delays occurred while a roof was constructed over the rubble; these had to do with the uncertain stability of the school opposite. Only once that stability had been assured could the construction of the roof be undertaken. As of today, one third of the rubble heap has been stabilized by the roof; the remaining portions of the roof are being prepared and will be erected in the course of the next couple of days.

'What has been saved, and how? First, from the areas of the site that had to be cleared in order to allow for the construction of the roof and to search for missing persons, fire–fighters excavated the archival materials by hand — very carefully and according to established techniques. These materials are undergoing a preliminary examination and then being packed up by archivists, restorers, museum workers, and other specialists on site before being readied for transport to the warehouse and/or packed for freezing.

'The condition is highly variable. Some of the materials have been damaged considerably, but there are some files and even boxes of files that have been completely preserved, and that could, in theory, be used again right away. Wet materials have been set aside away from the accident site, in a covered hall. All of the building debris that is being hauled away in trucks is also going to be examined and sorted. At the moment we are negotiating with the city administration for the use over the long term of a building that is safe, climate–controlled and technically appropriate for the conservation work that the archival materials need.

'On site, in addition to fire–fighters, rescue workers and other emergency specialists, there is a team of 50 people in action, working around the clock in three shifts seven days a week. The helpers include many colleagues from Cologne archives and from other places as well. In the next few days, the Archive School in Marburg will send more than 50 students, teachers and other staff. The Fachhochschule in Potsdam has also offered help, which will be arriving soon. Colleagues throughout the state and country are also giving tremendous support.

'Nonetheless, help is still needed, now and in the coming weeks — especially from archive and conservation specialists. Offers of help are coming in from all over the world. In order to ensure a better co–ordination, we would like to channel the aid as follows:

'1) Offers for shelving and storage units: please contact the LVR–Archivberatungs– und Fortbildungszentrum, attn Herrn Dr [Arie Nabrings](#). There the donated units will be pre–sorted and transferred to the Historical Archive.

'2) Offers of personnel (archivists): please contact me first (ulrich.soenius@koeln.ihk.de), as the representative of the Association of German Archivists (VdA) on site. To facilitate all our work, please also be sure to contact this address — rwwa@koeln.ihk.de — with information about your position or that of your group. We need the following information: first and last names, current position, address, telephone number, email address and duration of your availability. Please understand that any archivist who needs a place to stay overnight (we'll help with this) should count on spending at least three days here; otherwise the administrative costs are prohibitively high. In particular the large archive administrations are asked to [vet or oversee] an assembly of specialized workers.

'3) Offers of personnel (restorers): Please contact [Bert Jacek](#) with the same information as detailed above.

'If you have already offered help, there is no need to contact us again. At the moment, the priority is for personnel to join the teams involved in the systematic and co-ordinated recovery of items from the rubble. Once this work has been completed, we will move to working through the salvaged materials.

'The Historical Archive of Cologne, as an institution, did not collapse on 3 March 2009. We will all work to ensure that it receives a secure and adequate new building, in which the previous holdings as well as new ones can be used. The memory of Cologne, the Rhineland and the nation will have a future.'