

## FROM THE CHAIR

*Elizabeth Wilkinson*

Greetings from Virginia! It was great to see so many people attend the section meeting in Washington, DC. I would like to welcome Cyndi Shein as Vice-Chair, Katy Rawdon as Member-at-Large, and Sarah Jones as Secretary. They will be joining returning members Rachel Searcy, Ashley Toutain, and Cheri Crist. Martha Bace continues as Immediate Past Chair. We also must say farewell, with much gratitude, to Molly Marcusse, Immediate Past Chair, and Karen Spicher, Member-at-Large.

This year will bring some new objectives for us. In the beginning of February, the Steering Committee will be sending out a survey asking for your feedback regarding your interests, professional needs, and how you would like to see the section meeting organized. The survey will be available throughout the month of February and we strongly encourage you to fill it out. Please be on the lookout for it on our Section's listserv.

Steering is also embarking on a processing manual portal. This effort is being led by Rachel Searcy with Sarah Jones and Katy Rawdon assisting. If you are interested in working on the portal, please contact Rachel at [ras26@nyu.edu](mailto:ras26@nyu.edu).

We are beginning to plan for the section meeting in Austin. If you have any interest in presenting at the section meeting, please contact me with your ideas at [ewilkinson@virginia.edu](mailto:ewilkinson@virginia.edu).

I will end with a call for nominations and self-nominations for leadership positions in the Description Section. We will be in need of one Member-at-Large and a new Vice-Chair/Chair-Elect. This is your opportunity to take a more active role in the section and help shape our future. Please feel free to contact me at [ewilkinson@virginia.edu](mailto:ewilkinson@virginia.edu) to submit your name or ask any questions about the process or the activities of the Steering Committee. Please join in!

### DESCRIPTION SECTION LEADERSHIP

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Cyndi Shein

#### Immediate Past Chair

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#### Council Liaison

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## FEATURE ARTICLES

### Opening Up the Archive: Using MARC Records to Increase Access to Genocide Testimonies

Daryn Eller, USC Shoah Foundation—The Institute for Visual History and Education

Working on the film *Schindler's List* gave director Steven Spielberg both an education and an idea: There were thousands of untold stories about the Holocaust. Why not videotape those personal accounts and make them available as part of the historical record and, most importantly, use them to educate the world about the dangers of hate? Twenty-five years later, that notion lives on as USC Shoah Foundation—The Institute for Visual History and Education, an archive of 55,000 audiovisual testimonies of survivors and witnesses to the Holocaust and other genocides, collected in 65 countries and in 43 languages. The archive includes testimonies relating to the Armenian, Cambodian, and Rwandan genocides, as well as mass killings in Nanjing, Guatemala, South Sudan, and Myanmar.

Its famous founder notwithstanding, the Shoah Foundation, like any archive, wanted to expand awareness of its collection. Enter Sam Gustman, the institute's Chief Technology Officer (and associate dean at the University of Southern California Libraries), who tasked our team with creating MACHine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) records for the individual testimonies, to be made available to the public through the USC Libraries catalog and OCLC's WorldCat. Each record provides a hyperlink to the testimony described, driving users to our archive's website ([vha.usc.edu](http://vha.usc.edu)) and giving users biographical data on the person who gave testimony. In many cases—3,000 of the testimonies are available online—users can view the video immediately. If it's not online, they are given information on how to view it through one of our 138 access sites.

So, 55,000 records from scratch? It was a daunting assignment, but we found many ways to make the project more manageable. First, Metadata Manager and project supervisor Sandra Aguilar recommended scaling back slightly. Over the past few years, the Shoah Foundation has incorporated testimonies recorded by other organizations into the archive. Records for most of these, it was decided, would be created at a later date, bringing the number of records down to about 51,500.

It was still a big number, and one that would prohibit us from describing each testimony one by one. Our group, which included archivists Svetlana Ushakova and

Inna Gogina as well as the archive's curator Crispin Brooks, put our heads together to come up with an alternative. The good news was that we already had data tables filled with detailed information about every single testimony, ranging from where the person was born and language they spoke to what experiences they may have had (such as being imprisoned in concentration camps, forced on death marches, hidden from perpetrators by rescuers, being rescuers themselves). The bad news was that, for various reasons, only some of this data could be easily mapped into MARC fields.

For instance, MARC includes a summary field (520). Ideally, the summary field for the testimony of Jewish Holocaust survivor Renée Firestone might read something like: "Audiovisual testimony of a Jewish Holocaust survivor from Uzhorod, Czechoslovakia, who was imprisoned in Auschwitz II-Birkenau and later liberated from Liebau concentration camp." But because of the prose-y nature of the summary field, there was no way to automate the mapping of these particulars about Firestone. So, instead, we first established groupings of testimonies based on what we call experience groups. Some examples: Jewish Holocaust survivors, Jehovah's Witness Holocaust survivors, Tutsi survivors of the Rwandan Genocide, survivors of the Armenian genocide. Next, we created template records for different experience groups, then wrote uniform summaries for each. Thus, the summary for Renée Firestone's testimony—and all other Jewish Holocaust survivors—became: "Audiovisual testimony of a Holocaust survivor. Includes pre-war, wartime, and post-war experiences."

The same process was repeated for the subject fields. For Jewish Holocaust survivors we chose these uniform subject headings: Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945) -- Personal narratives; Holocaust survivors -- Biography; World War, 1939-1945 -- Personal narratives, Jewish; Jews -- Nazi persecution; Jews -- Social life and customs -- 20th century. While it was disappointing not to be able to describe each person's testimony in greater (and more helpful) detail, we also knew that links provided in the record would allow users to access a fuller biographical profile of the person.

Our templates in place, Svetlana used her knowledge of Excel spreadsheet formulas to map the Shoah Foundation data into the MARC fields. Many fields were easy to map. For instance, to create a title we put the phrase "\_\_ oral history (interview code \_\_), \_\_" in place on our MARC spreadsheet, then pulled from the Shoah Foundation

data tables to drop in the rest. The result was something like “Shony Braun oral history (interview code 1242), 22 Mar 1995.”

The next step, which I took over, was to use the MARCEdit tool to create xmls ready for uploading into the USC Libraries catalog system ExLibris Primo. Thanks to the considerable help of the USC Libraries cataloging team, we were then able to refine the records so they were ready for prime (or you might say, Primo) time. Ultimately, we were also able to go back and add geographical subject headings to some of the experience groups, making these records less generic. Now, for instance, it’s possible to determine that the Jehovah’s Witness Holocaust survivor John B.D. Steinfort discusses the Klinkerwerk concentration camp; Lehnitz, Germany; and the Hague in his testimony. Hopefully, we will be able to add geographical terms to all of the records in the future.

The USC Shoah Foundation testimonies are now discoverable by anyone who uses the USC catalog or WorldCat. If that introduces the archive to a whole new group of users, mission accomplished.

### **Creating Context: Description of Collections When “Aboutness” Is Uncertain**

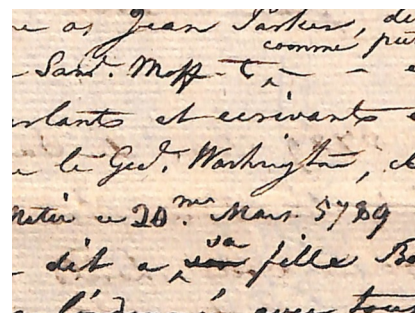
*Katy Sternberger, Research Librarian, Portsmouth Athenaeum*

As archivists, one of our primary functions is to describe the “aboutness” of the collections in our care. But how do we describe materials for which we have no context? I encountered such a collection as a research librarian at the Portsmouth Athenaeum in New Hampshire: One folder of eighteenth-century correspondence that was awaiting translation from French. When the Athenaeum acquired the letters, it was supposed that they were written by Nicholas Rousselet, a Portsmouth merchant. With no confirmation of the letters’ provenance, however, I was tasked with translating them in order to identify names and subjects.

I quickly realized the complexity of describing this collection. The letters were very challenging to decipher, not only because of the minuscule eighteenth-century handwriting, but because they were written in French by an evidently non-native speaker. There were many grammatical errors, and English words and phrases were mixed into the sentences. Sometimes the wrong verb tense was used, making it more difficult to understand a given letter’s meaning. In addition to those challenges, the

creator used copious abbreviations and unnecessarily “Frenchified” his language. I decided to track the dates, names, and subjects of the letters using an Excel spreadsheet to help me gather context.

While reading each letter, I slowly began piecing together the puzzle. A breakthrough came more than halfway through the collection when I read about the death of the creator’s father, “R. E.,” in August 1788. With some genealogical research, along with searches for local people with those initials who had died in that month, I found Richard Evans. Looking back at my spreadsheet, the letter writer had previously discussed his birthdate, which I calculated to 1737, and Richard Evans had a son born at that time. I finally recognized that the creator was Portsmouth merchant John Evans (b. 1737–d. 1791), who traded extensively in the West Indies. This was further confirmed by matching mentions of other family members and anniversaries to genealogical and shipping records. I also compared the handwriting of the letters to other documents known to have been written by Rousselet and could see that the materials clearly did not match.



John Evans supported the Patriot cause during the American Revolution. A letter from March 1789 reads, “le Gen[era]l Washington, clairement saviour de son Country.”

In addition, it turned out that the “letters” more closely resemble journal entries where Evans, referring to himself as “Ange,” writes in the second person, as if from the perspective of a conscience or guardian angel. While unusual in form, Evans’s letters record his life experiences, his family, his business affairs, and Portsmouth history. He tends not to delve too deeply—he already knows the context, after all—but the collection documents what it was like to be a merchant in Portsmouth during the late eighteenth century.

Obviously, working item by item through a collection does not fit well into “more product, less process” (MPLP) workflows. But a tradeoff to efficiently processing a collection is less thorough description of the materials. I invested many hours in reading and researching Evans’s letters, doing a little each week over the last year since I started working on the project. Ultimately, the Evans papers were loaded with access points that increase the collection’s discoverability in the online catalog.



Across thirty letters, Evans lists nearly 600 unique names, not to mention all of the ships' names and geographic areas, both local and in the West Indies.

The John Evans Papers, 1784–1789, are now described using required as well as added value DACS elements. But this collection is still a work in progress. After completing my description, I digitized the letters, some of which are in rather fragile condition, in order to reduce the need to handle them. Due to the complex nature of these materials, it may also be beneficial to translate and transcribe a select number of letters as an aid to future researchers.



John Evans's grave is located in Pleasant Street Cemetery in Portsmouth along with other prominent merchants.

There are many levels of archival description, and description is an iterative process. The level of description needed for a given collection depends on the materials themselves. Certain collections warrant extra attention. In the case of the John Evans Papers, I started with a perplexing set of letters but was able to create context by giving the materials a close reading. Archival materials serve as evidence, regardless of whether their answers are immediately evident to us. Our duty is to describe the materials in such a way that makes them accessible and enables researchers to help unravel the mysteries within.

### **Bio/Historical Notes: How Much Is Too Much?**

*Andrew Harman, Center for American War Letters Archives, Chapman University*

One of my number one concerns when thinking about description is how much research to do; that is to say, how much do I need to help the future researcher, and how much is okay leave to them?

This issue is not specific to my manuscript repository, the Center for American War Letters Archives at Chapman University. I would venture to guess, supported by some of the finding aids I have seen out there, that many manuscript repositories are confronted with the question of how much background to add to their descriptions.

While some add simple elements such as birth and death dates, a proper title, and geographic locations, others write novel-length historical notes that can be found in

secondary sources by the researchers. For me, the middle ground tends to be my comfort zone.

When working with material in our collections—primarily correspondence written between service members overseas and their families—contextual research regarding the war is unnecessary; however, I do find it helpful to provide a little background on the person and their family. Even something as simple as an Ancestry.com search to confirm dates and family members helps make my description accurate and steer the researcher down the right path.

Details such as where and when the soldier served, the soldier's draft or enlistment date, and whether or not they made it home from the war can then be added to information from the collection to form a cohesive narrative bio/historical note. The collection then begins to make more sense to a historian looking at the finding aid, and in turn this helps make the materials more accessible, guiding the researcher to the right collection for the right research.

As a comparison, two recent additions to our archives provide examples of how a deeper description can sometimes be necessary, while a minimal description sometimes better serves both the archivist and historian.

One large collection of correspondence from SSgt. Anthony Krebes, USA, to his wife Juanita during the Second World War contained 400 letters from training until he returned from the Pacific—almost a letter every day. The content note naturally became quite large, but the biographical note also grew in length because the collection also contained the correspondence of his brothers, all seven of whom returned home from different parts of the war. Proper ranks, geographic locations, relationships, and how the family was structured, along with the letters' recipients, all became important to add to the description.

On the other side of this comparison, the collection of Signalmen Second Class Harold E. Summers, USN, required much less biographical or historical description. Sadly, this sailor went down with the USS Arizona during the attack on Pearl Harbor. His biographical note contains pertinent information, including the circumstances of his passing and the family notification, as well as information about the main recipient of his letters, his sister. It was also noted that his brother was then prompted to join. The entire note, however, is only about four sentences

because it was unnecessary to add any more information regarding the history of Pearl Harbor, which is extensively documented and any future historian knows where to find that information. That is not our job.

I would be remiss if I did not touch on the divide between archivists and historians. A recent questionnaire, several articles—some biting and negative—and a history of discussion on the relationship between the two intermingled fields has enjoyed some controversy. I will simply say that, in my opinion and as it pertains to this description topic, accessibility is paramount. Archiving does no good without a historian to find the material and put it to use. We as archivists need to aid in this endeavor.

That being said, the archivist's primary job is to preserve and provide access. We are not here to write the beginnings of a paper for some future historian. Archivists need to avoid this over-description tendency for two major reasons. The first reason is of course our own time management. Most archivists have at least a minor backlog, some with a pipeline that will take years to get through even if new materials aren't coming in, and it just is not feasible to spend hours researching background information that a historian is perfectly capable of finding on their own.

The second reason is for the historian themselves. An overly described historical note takes away from the materials and gets a researcher lost in your narrative of events. Whether we as archivists are trained historians or not, we need to avoid, where possible, leading the historian's work with our own skewed views. Let the secondary research they choose to employ do that for them. Our job is as it sounds; to describe the materials. Context is helpful and—once again this is my belief—very necessary to the accessibility of collections. Our job is not to turn the collection into a historically analyzed document of our own making.

So let us do our due diligence and describe to a level that makes the collection more accessible, findable, usable, and contextual. However, just as important as determining descriptive levels for a collection is knowing where the descriptive process should end, lest our own biases creep in.

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**Do you have a photo, article, project update, or announcement to share?**

Contact the newsletter editor: [cherijcrist@gmail.com](mailto:cherijcrist@gmail.com)