**26th EBNA Conference and EAG Meeting**

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**Session 2**

**‘Archives Serving Society’**

Like many other newly independent countries Cyprus had the fortune or misfortune of being for many centuries subjected to foreign rule. From the late twelfth century, when Cyprus was cut off from the Byzantine domains, it was successively ruled by Richard I of England (1191), the Knights of St. John (1192), the Lusignan dynasty (1192-1489), the Venetian Republic (1489-1571) and the Ottoman Turks (1571-1878). None of these rulers left on the island any collections of public records. Only a small number of Ottoman state documents survived, having been taken over in 1878 by the British authorities at the time of the island’s transfer from Turkey to England. Thus, public records in Cyprus means the surviving manuscript and other related records created by the British colonial authorities between 1878 and 1960, and such Republic of Cyprus records whose administrative use has ended and which are available for selection and permanent preservation.

The Cyprus Government has for a long time been conscious of the need to save its old records. It is generally acknowledged that many classes of dead public records retain a usefulness for the administrator, and for the economic and social planner, while also providing some of the vitally important sources needed by research scholars in many fields of study. Cyprus’s old colonial records furnish impartial testimony on conditions and affairs of the past. By facilitating the coming generations’ wish to study their history and to understand their culture, the records themselves form part of the national heritage.

The Cyprus Public Record Office was established in 1978 to provide for the preservation of public records. In 1991 it was renamed to State Archives under the new State Archives Law.

The State Archives of Cyprus, as a national and cultural authority of the Ministry of Justice and Public Order, with a vision and legal commitment to provide for the preservation of the original sources of history and the heritage of the people of Cyprus, collects and preserves invaluable historical testimonies, making them available to research. It is the people’s Memory.

The primary function of the State Archives as a place of deposit for public records is to receive from Government departments and other bodies subject to the State Archives Law those of their records that must be permanently kept, and to hold them for official use. It thus fills in relation to other departments the role of a “common service”. Its further function is to hold and make these records available for research by members of the public.

Some of the principal archival holdings now stored in the State Archives are the Governors’ Archives and the Secretariat Archives dating from 1878 to 1960. Other groups of records dating from before as well as after 1960 are now permanently preserved in the State Archives.

The State Archives in an effort to bring the citizen/researcher in touch with history, daily serves the public facilitating access. In the Reading room, the public has access to Cyprus contemporary history records through which they can pursue their research or simply advance their historical knowledge.

Archives acquire a rather different focal point and their importance is stressed for society when the fate of historical events is the cause of a people losing vital information regarding their identity and their past.

I will be presenting such incidences where archives served society to the utmost whereby through them people were able to rebuild their identity and regain the link to their roots.

Due to the 1974 Turkish invasion, scores of thousands of people were uprooted from their ancestral homes, being deprived of vital demographic personal data documentation. Essential personal data, such as names, surnames, place and date of births, parental history and proof of other professional and property information were left behind and lost in the non-accessible occupied areas.

A record in the State Archives which was created for a quite different administrative purpose came to salvage the outcome of this quagmire. The target of the 1960 Census of Population and Agriculture was to record with the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus demographic and agricultural proprietary data of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

Significant information sketching personal and family history of all households of the island along with facts concerning education level, employment status, religion and detailed agricultural statistics were there, ready to be recycled to overcome the urgent need that had arisen.

Ever since, to this day, Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees have resorted to this Census to reconstruct their Cypriot identity and, since 2004, their European one.

An important aspect of the State Archives’ contribution towards cultural awareness in society is the running of workshops addressed to various groups of people.

One such workshop activity considered as offering a great service to society are the workshops organised since 2005, welcoming enclaved children to visit the State Archives and get to know the history of their village and island.

In particular, groups of enclaved children of Rizokarpaso village, of the 12-17 age group, with no proper schooling opportunities in the occupied areas where they live, are introduced and guided through records relevant to their school syllabuses.

In addition, through the same workshops, the children have the opportunity of acquainting themselves with the archival profession and participate in mock conservation procedures.

The workshop experience serves to boost their knowledge and widen their horizons and options necessary, subsequent to their departure from the occupied areas when they reach the age of 18 to pursue higher education or work prospects.

Through the records documentation of the Department of Antiquities, a great service was rendered to the people of Cyprus and to world cultural heritage in general. Archives provided the Cyprus Government with sufficient evidence of ownership in the 1989 US trial in order to repatriate the famous wall mosaics of the Panagia Kanakaria church in Lythrangomi village which were removed and subsequently exported.

The church’s apse was adorned with 6th century mosaics, considered to be some of the few surviving masterpieces of Early Christian mosaics in the entire world. Their ichnographic uniqueness lies in the fact that they depict Virgin Mary with a bright “δόξα’’ (glory), a feature normally associated with Christ. Two archangels and a frieze depicting the 12 Apostles in medallions surround Jesus and the Virgin.

The lawsuit focused on four mosaic fragments which were looted in 1979 and were subsequently located in 1988 in the possession of an art dealer abroad. As a result of the invaluable service provided by records, the mosaics returned to Cyprus in 1991.

The three instances where archives served the Cypriot society show the multifaceted and versatile role archives play in our lives.

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