

## Swiss Archives

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THE POPULATION OF SWITZERLAND, which, according to the last census, numbers around six million, lives on an area of little more than 40,000 square kilometers (about 15,950 square miles). With respect to politics, culture, and economics, a rich and varied life pulses through this small country; and the same goes for the Swiss archives, which surprise the outsider by their bewildering complexity. Only as one recalls the main historical developments in the nation will the various facets form an understandable whole.

The basis for the independence of the Swiss state was the Eternal Alliance signed in 1291 by the so-called drei Waldstätte [Three forest cantons], Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden. By 1353 they had become an eight-canton confederation through the addition of Lucerne, Zurich, Zug, Glarus, and Bern. In 1481 Fribourg and Solothurn followed as new members of the confederation; in 1501 Basel and Schaffhausen; and in 1513 Appenzell closed the circle of the thirteen cantons. At approximately the same time Switzerland lost the position as a great power it had acquired forty years before. With the successful struggle against the Habsburgs and Charles the Bold of Burgundy, the confederates had proved their military strength; but for further expansion the unified political will was lacking. The possibility of developing it was soon prevented by the Reformation, which separated the cantons into two different camps, the new and the old faith, but failed to sever the union completely.

The Federation remained basically unchanged until about the end of the eighteenth century—a complicated mass of alliances between autonomous peasant republics and city states which were loosely affiliated with some “like-minded” territories (*Zugewandte Orte*) and which governed together various areas, some of them French and Italian speaking. Actually, the Confederation had left the German Empire after the Swabian War (1499), but only after the Westphalian Peace (1648) was the departure formally recognized. The Swiss Confederation succeeded in staying clear of the strifes of its neighbors, and not until 1798, in the wake of the French Revolution, did a complete reorganization take place.

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The unified state of the Republic of Helvetia, established under pressure from France, survived in this extreme form for only five years. As early as 1803, with the mediation constitution given by Napoleon, Switzerland returned to a moderate form of federalism which was more compatible with its traditions. But even when after 1815 there followed a closer approximation of the "Ancien régime," the signs of change could not be obliterated completely. Through the liberation of former vassal territories and the final joining of heretofore "like-minded" states, the cantons multiplied until there were twenty-two, which is their number today. At first they formed a rather loose league; but after further decades, old conflicting interests were finally overcome.

The Sonderbundskrieg of 1847—which was not only the last Swiss civil war but fortunately also the very last war of any kind for Switzerland—opened the door for the Swiss Federal State. The new constitution of 1848 left a great measure of sovereignty to the cantons and gave the federal government, particularly in cultural matters, only very modest powers. The development up to now, despite the natural tendency toward strengthening of federal power, has so far changed very little in this respect; especially in regulating and administering their archives, the cantons still have the final say.

Accordingly, the federal government has authority over only the Federal Archives in Bern, which contain the documents of the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803), and those of the federal government since 1848. All older records—even those of common interest for the whole federation—remain in the twenty-five government archives of the individual cantons.<sup>1</sup> There is no federal law that interferes with the administration of these archives or demands the transfer of cantonal archives to the Federal Archives. In the same manner in which the cantons jealously guard their sovereignty in this respect, so they, in turn, respect the autonomy of the approximately three thousand communities of the country. As a rule these communities do not give up any of their records either, but administer them independently; usually the supervision carried out by the cantonal archives is predominantly of an advisory nature.

It goes wholly without saying that state courts—be it those of confederation, of canton, or of community—do not interfere with the affairs of private archives. The records of families, associations and clubs, businesses, parties and unions, and the like, are free from any kind of government control; and, similarly, the archives of all still existing and flourishing religious institutions (bishoprics, monasteries, and cloisters) have their individual and independent administrations.

The consistent structure from the bottom up and the abstention from all unnecessary centralization prevents a great deal of red tape and results generally in the problems of the archives being handled

<sup>1</sup> Three of the twenty-two cantons—Unterwalden, Appenzell, and Basel—are divided into two half-cantons, each of which has its own state archives.

predominantly by people who are close to the subject matter and therefore most capable of coping properly. Furthermore, the archivist will appreciate one other advantage which is of no little importance in this connection, and that is the fact that the historically evolved conditions have remained largely untouched. The records of the individual archives usually reflect quite faithfully the past of the bodies which supported them and the offices from which they developed. There are only isolated incidents in which the otherwise unbroken continuity of tradition in Swiss archives was disrupted by catastrophes with an ensuing loss of records. The fire in the Urner community of Altdorf in 1799 is such an example.

Let us examine one case: the state archives of Canton Zurich contain as rootstock all documents, records, minutes and registers, invoices, plans, and other official papers of the City-State Zurich from its beginnings in the early thirteenth century to its collapse in 1798. In addition are the archives of all monasteries and cloisters under the Zurich jurisdiction, which were secularized during and after the Reformation, with records that go back as far as the middle of the ninth century. Of exceptional historical value also are the records of the Zurich Protestant State Church. Heinrich Bullinger, outstanding successor of the reformer Ulrich Zwingli, had an immense correspondence with members of the Protestant faith in all European countries; even later, Zurich's place in the reform world could be compared to that of Calvin's Geneva. Within the Swiss Confederation and in the political field, Zurich played an important role, and correspondence with foreign powers, in great part, came to the Zurich offices. Such records make the Zurich archives a focal point of research into Swiss history.

At the same time, one must by no means neglect Lucerne, for example, as the main power of the Roman Catholic segment of the federation, or the powerful Bern with the weight of its extensive holdings of estates. And even former vassal territories like the present cantons of Aargau and Thurgau keep in their cantonal archives central parts of the federal past, because inside their boundaries, in Baden and Frauenfeld, the "Tagsatzungen" used to convene and the representatives of the confederates discussed current affairs of general interest.

When in 1798 the city of Zurich, having been required to liberate its vassal territory, joined (as the largest community, but in principle without any special prerogatives) the ranks of the approximately 170 communities which presently make up the canton, there was fortunately no long argument about the older records between the newly appointed cantonal authorities and the city council. While in other Swiss city-cantons a time-consuming separation of records sometimes took place, which in the end held no real satisfaction for either side, in Zurich the canton took over the archives of the old city-state almost completely intact. The canton has been increasing them since then through continuous transfers of records from its agencies, whereas the young City Archives receives its materials from municipal departments

and offices. In Zurich and also in various other Swiss archives during the nineteenth century, stocks of records developed which find important consideration in modern research. A contributing factor in the growth of these records is that Switzerland gave asylum in the past to refugees from religious persecution and is now repeatedly the haven and meeting place of political dissidents or refugees from numerous countries. On the other hand, many Swiss have left their country, most of them for economic reasons, to find a new existence in foreign countries. From all over the world their descendants frequently search Swiss archives for documents concerning their ancestors.

When such an abundance of archives of varying types exists within a limited area without any central agency supervising and guiding them according to uniform regulations of organization and operation, there are, of course, some disadvantages. Under such circumstances, wide, sweeping ideas can only be realized with great difficulty or not at all; and doubtless it happens that considerable initiative, talent, and financial means are swallowed up by trifles without ever really bearing any fruit. Standardization (as far as it is desirable), coordination, and cooperation between the individual archives cannot be forced here, but must be achieved by mutual free understanding that doubtless takes more time and is more laborious but in the long run may be more effective than commands. There is evidence that some goals have been reached. Large-scale finding aids have been compiled. For example, the multivolume "Amtliche Sammlung der ältern Eidgenössischen Abschiede"<sup>2</sup> [Minutes of the Tagsatzung, 1245-1798] was prepared under the guidance of the Federal Archives. The Federal Archives, furthermore, are preparing, by copies or microfilms, extensive collections of foreign archival materials that have a bearing on Swiss history and thus simplify historical work considerably.<sup>3</sup>

Another fact to be counted among the disadvantages of our many-faceted, decentralized archives is that their basis is too narrow to support a national archives school. The fairly modest demand for well-trained young personnel has to be met in other ways. Candidates for executive positions in larger archives are usually required to have finished their studies in history, in the course of which the auxiliary subjects should have found adequate consideration. Several Swiss universities—those, for example, in Basel, Bern, Geneva, and Zurich—now and then offer courses on archival work, and there are training possibilities in the respective state archives. Further experience usually comes through actual work in the archives. It is very rare that a candidate goes abroad to study at the specialized institutes like the *École des Chartes* in Paris, the *Österreichisches Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften* in Vienna, or the German archive schools in Marburg and Munich.

<sup>2</sup> Official collection of the older federal resolutions (Abschiede), 8 volumes, 1856-86.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Meyrat gives a summary in "Die Manuskripten- und Abschriftensammlung des Bundesarchivs" [The manuscripts and copies collection of the federal archives], in *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* [Swiss periodical for history] 9(1959):214-37.

The lack of standardized schooling is somewhat remedied in that, since 1922, most directors and higher officials of the Federal Archives and of the cantonal archives, as well as of the most important city archives and of church archives and some archives of business associations, belong to the *Vereinigung Schweizerischer Archivare* (Association of Swiss Archivists). This professional association presently has about one hundred individual and thirty-two institutional members. During their annual meetings and during business meetings, professional knowledge is expanded by lectures, discussion, and visits, and contact between colleagues is fostered. A newsletter, published at various intervals since 1947, tells about the main events within the association and contains also shorter professional contributions. However, this newsletter is not to compete, nor can it, with actual scientific journals. Professional publications on archives available, in addition to the relevant journals of the neighboring countries, are the *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*<sup>4</sup> [Swiss periodical for history], which is published by the *Allgemeine Geschichtsforschenden Gesellschaft* [General society for historic research], and a large number of regional historical periodicals.

The problems of Swiss archivists probably do not differ much from those of their colleagues in other countries, and the ways and means by which they try to solve them are presumably more or less within the general framework. We are concerned now—and surely we are not alone—about the questions regarding the rapidly growing modern mass-records, the proliferation of the technical sciences with their punchcards and computer systems within an ever-increasing number of branches of public administration, and the still indistinct outlook of a time when the archives, too, will have to use such methods. Almost everywhere we are hampered by lack of space. Particularly in the urban centers with their skyrocketing real estate prices, this problem will become increasingly difficult to resolve. Not only is the amount of records growing, but also is the number of users, and that in itself is heartening. On the other hand, unfortunately, the number of available personnel cannot be augmented in the same ratio. Because of the greater utilization of archives and also for other reasons (e.g., air pollution in the urban areas, use of inferior materials in modern offices), questions of conservation and restoration of endangered or damaged documents arise more frequently than before. Moreover, even in a neutral country, people in responsible positions cannot be spared today from making provisions for the protection of cultural

<sup>4</sup> Volume 1 was published in 1951. Formerly the title was *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Geschichte* [Periodical for Swiss history] (volumes 1–30, 1921–50). The periodical publishes also, at five-year intervals, the results of the “Rundfragen über wichtigen Zuwachs und grössere Erschliessungsarbeiten der schweizerischen Archive” [Survey of the most important additions and finding aids of Swiss archives], which is conducted by the Association of Swiss Archivists. The most recent one is the eighth survey, conducted for the period 1965–69, in the *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 21(1972):461–95 and 714–47.

treasures in case of war or other catastrophe. Microfilming of especially valuable materials, which is the most efficient method, has the priority. Very rarely does an archive have actual shelter areas in which the records could be stored when necessary.

It may be seen as a Swiss peculiarity that our archives, more than any others, are not entirely dependent on the understanding of a few politicians and administrators. The Swiss voter does not simply cast his vote every few years for his representatives in the cantonal and federal parliaments, trusting everything else to them. Rather, the voter himself continually decides with his vote various matters and credit demands. The construction of an archive building, for instance, requires funds which in most of the cantons can be obtained only through a referendum. Therefore, it may not be an easy task for our archivists, but it is a necessary and gratifying one, that through publications, exhibits, lectures, guided tours, and any other conceivable measures, their work, which by its nature has little in it of the spectacular, becomes known beyond narrow professional circles, and the public realizes its usefulness. In this manner they provide for themselves the prerequisites for prosperous activity and at the same time contribute to keeping alert the historical consciousness of the Swiss people, on which the very existence of our Federation depends.

In conclusion, let us note some important resources which the foreign researcher may use to his advantage when he comes into contact with any form of Swiss history and archives.

The *Historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Schweiz* (seven volumes and one supplement) appeared from 1921 until 1934 and gives dependable information about localities, families, persons, and establishments of the nation from a historical viewpoint. Special attention must be called to the article "Archivwesen" by the then Federal Archivist Türlér. A useful summary can be found in Anton Largiadèr's study, "Schweizerisches Archivwesen."<sup>5</sup> All fairly important public and private archives, together with such useful information as addresses, materials, and availability, are listed in the guidebook *Archive, Bibliotheken und Dokumentationsstellen der Schweiz*,<sup>6</sup> of which a new edition is expected soon. For research concerning individual persons or families, the *Repertorium der handschriftlichen Nachlässe in den Bibliotheken und Archiven der Schweiz*<sup>7</sup> will be very helpful.

With the help of these titles it should at least be possible to find the Swiss archive that would be most competent to answer a particular question. If this literature is not available or if the result remains in

<sup>5</sup> *Festschrift zur Feier des 200jährigen Bestandes des Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchivs* [Miscellany of studies for the bicentennial of the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv], Vienna, 1949. A more concise version by the same author, under the title "Die Archive der Schweiz" [The archives of Switzerland] can be found in *Der Archivar* 6(1953):cols. 7-19.

<sup>6</sup> Bern, 1958. Compare further section 8, "Confédération Helvétique," in "Annuaire international des Archives," *Archivum* 5(1956):30-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Quellen zur Schweizer Geschichte* [Sources for Swiss history], new series, 4th section, volume 8 (Bern 1967).

doubt, then it is best to contact the Eidgenössisches Bundesarchiv in Bern or the Schweizerische Landesbibliothek, also in Bern, or one of the larger government archives; from there the questioner will get satisfactory answers or will be referred to the proper source.

Within the framework of their admittedly modest resources, archivists of small but open-to-the-world Switzerland will be glad to participate in any significant international collaboration.

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