

The International Council on Archives: Its First Quarter Century

MORRIS RIEGER

ALTHOUGH ACTUALLY FOUNDED IN 1948 in Paris at a preliminary meeting that was the culmination of at least two years of preparatory effort, the International Council on Archives (ICA) did not become truly operational until the first International Archives Congress of 1950, also held in Paris. During the ensuing quarter century, ICA has functioned in close affiliation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as the world organization of the archival profession. From the outset its membership has been composed of public archival authorities on the international, national, and subnational levels; private archival institutions of every description; professional associations; and individual archivists. Symbolic of the organization's growth since its establishment is the increase in its Category A membership (i.e., national archival authorities) from fourteen in 1950, centered overwhelmingly in Europe, to just over one hundred in 1976, distributed throughout the world.

Regardless of many changes in its constitution over the years, ICA's several constitutional objectives have remained the same and have amounted essentially to one: the worldwide elevation of standards of archival administration and practice. According to the constitution, this fundamental objective was to be achieved, on the international level with which ICA is primarily concerned, by a wide variety of methods including the maintenance of close professional relations between archivists and archival institutions everywhere; the encouragement of a continuing interchange of ideas and information bearing on the solution of archival problems; the support of archival development and training in all countries; the promotion of measures necessary to insure the physical preservation of mankind's archival heritage; the facilitation of user access to archival sources; the undertaking of professionally useful projects; and, finally, the fostering of cooperative working relationships with other organizations concerned with cognate forms of documentation.

In its early years ICA sought to accomplish its objectives by means conventional to organizations of its kind. It held open international congresses (beginning in 1950), at first triennially and later quadrennially, which provided a forum for the interchange of professional information. These were soon supplemented (from 1953), annually in the years between the congresses, by the International Archival Round Table Conferences where substantial professional questions were discussed by the world's archival leaders. In 1951 ICA began publication of its annual journal, *Archivum*, in which have since appeared regularly the proceedings of the congresses as well as articles, documents, bibliography, and other reference matter of

The author retired after thirty-one years of service with the National Archives, in 1972. He presently serves as deputy secretary general of the International Council on Archives, and is secretary of its Committee on Archival Development.

international archival relevance. The proceedings of the Round Tables were published as a separate series exclusively in French for many years, but in English as well beginning in 1971. In its first decade, ICA maintained no standing committees other than its Executive Committee and a Committee on Sigillography which attested to the special interest in seals of European archivists working with documents deriving from the medieval and early modern periods. In addition, a small number of ad hoc working groups were set up to deal with particular projects, such as, for example, the terminological group which compiled and published a multilingual glossary of archival terms.

Since about 1960 there has been a radical change in the relatively modest level of activity characteristic of ICA's earlier period. As the organization matured, as its small, originally Europe-oriented membership grew to encompass most of the world, as it became more fully aware of the archival needs of that world, there occurred gradually a manifold expansion of the range of ICA's substantive activities—far beyond those in which it was originally engaged and continued to be engaged—in an effort to discharge more adequately the council's responsibilities to the world archival profession as a whole. The more important of these new activities are discussed below in the approximate order of their emergence.

Archival Finding Aids on the International Level

In collaboration with concerned national members and with the financial backing of UNESCO, ICA undertook, beginning in 1959, the compilation of a tripartite series of *Guides to the Sources of the History of Nations*. The three subseries comprising the whole provide comprehensive descriptions of the European and United States archival and manuscript sources bearing on the history, respectively, of Latin America, Africa south of the Sahara, and Asia-North Africa-Oceania, each subseries consisting of several national or regional volumes. The work, which is still in progress at this writing, has been coordinated over the years by an international technical committee established within the ICA framework and representing the participating national authorities. To date, the great majority of the Latin American and African volumes have been published, as well as the first (Belgian) volume of the Asian subseries; and, in addition, a microfiche edition of the already published volumes in the African subseries has appeared.

This innovative program is of double value: first, it brings to the attention of those studying the history of the developing regions and nations of the world, whether the students are based in the developing world itself or in the developed countries, a large number of source collections that were previously either unknown or imperfectly known; and, second, for archival authorities in developing countries it facilitates the task of identifying essential sources abroad pertaining to those countries and of adding such sources to their holdings by means of microcopying campaigns.

When the original *Guide* program has been completed, probably by 1980, ICA hopes to embark on a complementary project of related scholarly value: a series of comprehensive guides to archival sources to be found in the developing regions themselves. From preliminary soundings the prospects of UNESCO assistance in this connection are hopeful. Also promising are the prospects of early UNESCO support for the preparation under ICA auspices of a series of guides to the archival holdings of international organizations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and UNESCO itself.

Much of the detailed planning for this trailbreaking project, financed by UNESCO, has already been accomplished by an ICA working group.

Archival Access

In an effort to encourage worldwide action for the expansion of scholarly access to archival holdings, primarily those on the national level, ICA held an extraordinary congress devoted to this theme in Washington in 1966. Working groups brought into being by the congress proposed specific international standards for the liberalization of access policy in general (notably by means of a reduction of the then-prevalent fifty-year restriction period to thirty years) and for the liberalization of microcopying and microreproduction policy in particular (principally by the elimination of long-standing obstacles to the microfilming of complete archival series). Adopted at the Madrid Congress of 1968, these international standards have since had considerable impact among the developed countries (e.g., in France and the United Kingdom which have both accepted the thirty-year rule) and in many of the nations of the developing world as well. To measure and appraise the progress that has been made in facilitating scholarly access to archives during the decade since the Extraordinary Congress of 1966, and to stimulate continued progress, ICA has arranged to devote one of the four plenary sessions at the 1976 Congress to a full-dress review of the subject.

Archival Technology

Conscious of the continuing evolution of archival technology and techniques in such older areas as preservation-restoration and reprography (particularly microreproduction) and in the accelerating new area of automation, ICA has established standing committees of experts on microfilming (1968), automation (1972), and preservation (1975). It is the purpose of these bodies to keep abreast of progress in their respective fields, to develop and to promote appropriate equipment and operational standards for optional international application, and, by means of newsletters, articles, monographs, and other publications as well as by instructional meetings at different levels of sophistication, to inform the ICA membership and the archival profession generally of current advances. The microfilm and automation committees have both proved to be very active and productive, while the recently created preservation committee promises to be equally so.

Examples of the work of the committees (and, in some cases, of experts commissioned by ICA prior to the establishment of the committees) include: the periodic microfilm and automation committee newsletters; monographs and handbooks on such subjects as archival buildings and equipment, conservation and restoration of archival materials, basic standards, methods, and equipment for preservation and restoration workshops and for reprographic laboratories in developing countries, and archival microphotography generally; and a seminar reviewing the then-current status of archival automation held in England in 1974. From all indications the work produced by the technical committees has met with a very favorable reception throughout the international archival community.

Archival Development in the Third World

It became apparent at the 1966 Washington Extraordinary Congress, at which the developing countries were more numerous than ever before and where they properly made full use of their opportunity to sound the alarm, that the

most urgent task facing the international archival community was that of mobilizing assistance for these countries in an attempt to solve, or at least to ameliorate, the fundamental structural, operational, and staffing problems confronting them.

Even before establishing in 1970 a standing Committee on Archival Development to cope with this whole range of problems, ICA demonstrated its concern in various ways. Its first action, apart from the above-mentioned series of *Guides to the Sources of the History of Nations*, was to join in sponsoring the publication in 1966 of a manual dealing with selected aspects of archives administration in the tropics. Beginning in 1967 it launched a campaign that has continued to this day to obtain financial support to underwrite the foundation of regional professional and technical training centers in each of the developing regions. Such centers have long been regarded as the most efficient and economical way of dealing with the single greatest problem of archival institutions in the world's emergent nations: namely, the severe shortage of competent personnel that so seriously threatens the fulfillment by these institutions of their essential role in national cultural, social, and economic development.¹ Several categories of potential donors, in both the public and private spheres, were approached over a period of years but without success, until in 1971 the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) agreed to fund the planned center in Dakar intended to serve the francophone countries of tropical Africa. Now in very successful operation for five years, it has been unable to keep up with the demand for admission. Also with UNDP support an analogous center was opened in Accra in 1975 to train students from the anglophone countries of tropical Africa. It is hoped that a similar center in Kuala Lumpur for the nations of Southeast Asia, on which ICA's campaign is now focusing, will be approved by UNDP in due course.

Concurrently, ICA worked to extend the UNESCO concept of "pilot" projects from the library and other fields to that of archives. In effect, a pilot project seeks to establish, in a host country willing and able to carry it forward, a model structure and operation in a given field of activity that will not only benefit that country but will also serve to demonstrate the concepts, policies, and techniques involved to neighboring countries in the region that have similar problems. It was ICA that performed the necessary preliminary work of fact-finding and planning that eventually resulted in UNESCO's prototypical archival pilot project in the Ivory Coast which has brought into being there a modern national archival institution. ICA has also sought UNESCO's support for archival pilot projects in East Africa, the Arab lands, and Latin America. While the decision to set up a pilot project in Lebanon has been aborted by the current civil war there, the one simultaneously approved for Costa Rica was successfully launched in 1975.

Against this background the Committee on Archival Development soon recognized that rigorous planning was an essential prerequisite for successful development action and accordingly has sought to stimulate its use within the developing nations themselves, and also to apply its principles in the formulation of its own program of archival technical assistance on behalf of the Third World. The committee is in the process of drafting its Third World Archival Development Plan, a four-year medium-term plan comprising regional and national projects consid-

¹ For a definition of this role, see Morris Rieger, "The Function of Archives in Public Administration," in *UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January-February 1973): 40-42. See also W.I. Smith's article in this journal, pp. 343-51 below.

members who represent the seven main developing regions of the world, the so-called regional rapporteurs, in collaboration with the national archival authorities of these regions. The plan as finally adopted will also take into account the recommendations made by the participants in the International Conference on the Planning of Archival Development in the Third World held in Dakar under ICA auspices in 1975. It is hoped that support will be found for the plan's constituent projects from a wide variety of concerned intergovernmental, governmental, and nongovernmental sources.

The Dakar Conference served also to inaugurate ICA's International Archival Development Fund, an account within the organization's treasury, for which an international appeal for contributions has been made. Controlled by the professional specialists from both the developed and developing worlds who make up the Committee on Archival Development, and administered by the ICA secretariat, the fund is being employed to supplement the usually limited efforts of the conventional donor agencies in the archival technical assistance field, and, in particular, to cope with emergency situations.

By making provision in its constitution for the affiliation with it of regional branches, ICA has encouraged the practice of self-help in archival development. Composed of the organization's members, particularly the national archival authorities, in a given region, the regional branch endeavors to solve, by all appropriate means, the whole range of intraregional problems of archival underdevelopment. The five branches that have been founded since 1968, those for Southeast Asia, East and Central Africa, the Arab lands, the Caribbean, and Latin America, have concerned themselves primarily with problems of personnel shortages, training, legal and administrative status of staff, physical preservation, access, and the microreproduction of foreign sources relevant to the histories of their members.

The struggle against archival underdevelopment in the Third World is a gigantic task which has increasingly occupied ICA's energies during the past decade. In this work the council conceives of itself primarily as a catalytic agent seeking to stimulate responsible action on a worldwide basis in a hitherto neglected field. It has already helped to accomplish much, but much more remains to be done.

Publications Activity

ICA has always been involved in publication activity of some sort, although this was limited in its early years to *Archivum* and the Round Table proceedings. Since 1960, publication has increased markedly as an outgrowth of the program for the *Guides to the Sources of the History of Nations*, committee operations, and occasional contracts with UNESCO for the preparation of studies on archival themes. In some cases, ICA has itself published work arising from its activities, but more often this has been done instead by UNESCO (e.g., a monograph it commissioned on archival legislation), by other organizations, or by national archival authorities. Moreover, except for *Archivum* and the Round Table proceedings, ICA's publication efforts have always been carried out on an ad hoc basis. In reaction to this, sentiment has grown in recent years in favor of the conception of a planned, coherent, and balanced program of publication which, it is felt, would more effectively contribute to the exchange of professional ideas and information on the international level.

As a result, a working group was formed in 1973 to study the matter and to make specific proposals. Its report recommended, essentially, that, in addition to *Archi-*

vum and the Round Table proceedings, three new series should be introduced: (1) *ICA Archival Handbooks*: basic presentations of various aspects of archival practice designed primarily for instructional purposes; (2) *ICA Studies in Archival Science*: advanced studies, reports, and monographs embodying the results of current research on aspects of archival theory and practice; and (3) reprints in microfiche form under ICA auspices of out-of-print or otherwise unavailable archival finding aids of whatever origin that have special value and significance for scholars.

Immediately following the adoption of these recommendations in 1974 a Publications Committee was created to implement them and an official publisher was designated. With the subsequent commissioning of several archival handbooks, ICA has embarked on what promises to be a far-reaching program for the systematic production of an internationally useful professional literature.

Cooperation with Functionally Related International Organizations

From its inception, ICA has naturally collaborated closely with UNESCO, the intergovernmental organization in the United Nations system having primary jurisdiction in the information (i.e., documentation, libraries, and archives) field. Indeed the council has played an increasingly important part in helping to shape UNESCO's archival programs in the areas of professional planning and research, developmental and technical assistance to member states, and instruments supporting historical research.

In recent years, in recognition of their common interests and concerns in such substantive professional areas as training, preservation, reprography, and automation, ICA has built similarly close links with its sister information-oriented nongovernmental organizations, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and the International Federation for Documentation (FID). These links were further strengthened by the coordinated efforts of the three organizations in helping UNESCO to prepare its landmark Intergovernmental Conference on the Planning of National Documentation, Library and Archives Infrastructures in 1974, and in supporting UNESCO's "NATIS" program of assistance to national information systems, particularly in the Third World, which grew out of the Intergovernmental Conference. The association between ICA, IFLA, and FID, now formalized by the establishment of a joint liaison committee, shows every promise of becoming a permanent exercise in mutually beneficial professional cooperation.

The varied activities outlined above serve to illustrate the dimensions of ICA's transformation since 1960. That transformation was not planned; rather it resulted pragmatically from the changing perceptions on the part of the members, based upon their real needs, of the organization's emerging obligations to the international archival profession and community. That ICA was able to respond as flexibly as it did demonstrated its vitality and its lasting dedication to the objectives it was originally founded to achieve. It is a reasonable projection that the council, recently endowed with a strengthened secretariat, will continue to respond effectively to the new needs of its membership as they evolve in future years within the context of "The Archival Revolution of Our Time."