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Newsletter from the EABH

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European Association  
for Banking History e.V.

## BANCA D'ITALIA

### **A Banking Archivist: A truly Universal Archivist**

In Italy, the typical education of an archivist implies a university degree followed by a post-graduate specialisation. The job is therefore based on a deep and extensive personal background, covering at the same time humanities and law studies. A sound knowledge in history and literature, together with an up-to-date understanding of the laws in force, is undoubtedly crucial for managing any type of documentation.

Other skills may certainly help: one or two foreign languages, a certain sensitivity for art in general, information technology applied to classical studies. History, diplomacy and palaeography might be useful even for those working on more modern archives.

However, the most important aspect of the background of a professional archivist comes from the knowledge of the provenance history, which in fact represents the archivist's main instrument when accepting to manage an archive. Such a specific know-how is acquired only in time, after a gradual process of understanding the corporate organisation, its evolution and culture, the mentality of top executives, the atmosphere of its offices, and other elements which documents have yet to reveal.

Little by little all these pieces of information collectively create a small heritage that deserves to be transmitted to future generations. That is why the archivist's activity is rightfully included in the area of scientific research, given the hard work of study, arrangement, and cataloguing that it entails.

The banking archivist is characterised by a wider and deeper knowledge in the field of activity of the originating agency, while expressing a common professional expertise. In the banking sector, the specific competence is obviously acquired through the knowledge of other areas: national and international economic history, business management, banking, national accounting, budgeting.

However, the banking archivist must also be prepared to deal with present-day documents that are more and more based on information technology. Electronic documents, spreadsheets, and multi-media technologies are only a few examples; the increasing tendency in favour of such non-paper instruments makes this specific competence crucial to perform the archival job successfully.

Twenty years ago, when the Bank of Italy launched a programme to celebrate its first centenary, including the upgrading of its historical archives, six professional archivists were hired. The choice of specialised staff was perfectly coherent with existing archival regulations that envisage the employment of professionals for the management of historical archives.

As is well-known, the Bank of Italy's archive represents a mine of unprecedented importance as regards economic subjects, probably the most important source for scholars conducting researches on national and international economic history in the last 150 years - ranging from economic and monetary policy and the banking system evolution to industrial history.

However, it is less well known that it hosts a great deal of documents that have little or nothing to do with economic topics. Many researches deal with biographies of politicians, artists and economists; others are based on the life of important cultural organisations or specific social categories. In addition, the Bank's archive is more and more consulted in relation to completely different disciplines and not only for his-

torical purposes. History of art, building, and architecture are only a few examples. For instance, architectural papers are often required in order to restore the original details of a building.

Often enough, administrative enquiries are also requested within the banking organisation. They may concern different areas that are incidental to the normal functioning of the Bank: staff, organisational structure, buildings, rules, or other matters.

Frequently, it is the archivists themselves who are the first to recognise the particular challenges associated with a specific research and its possible outcome. And yet the archivist is the only one who can meet all these different demands.

It is true that some banks, and smaller banks in particular, have often decided to manage their archives following a different approach. Unlike the Bank of Italy, they have not hired specialised staff, instead designating to regular employees all the functions connected to the management of the archives. In some cases, these people have been identified for their personal background; in others, employees have been obliged to fill any gaps in their own cultural knowledge autonomously, investing time and money for external training.

In short, there is no significant difference between the knowledge and the education necessary for a banking archivist and for a universal archivist, except for the higher degree of specialisation.

Once it is clear that the banking archivist is, in every respect, a universal archivist characterised only by a specific and additional know-how (whether acquired in advance or in the course of the job is of no importance), it is not appropriate to base our analysis on gaps in knowledge and experience.

A more appropriate and successful approach could be the implementation of periodical updating programmes on a continuous basis, following the example of other cultural initiatives undertaken within the European Union.

Such an updating programme should be directed to those who are already working in banking archives. In fact, universities and archival schools in Italy already effectively provide basic archival training.

The main objectives of the programme should be the following: archival staff retraining, new legal and management tools, the identification of a new profession, the European banking archivist. In this respect, it is important to stress that the skills and knowledge of the new profile would be recognised within all the member countries and, at the same time, could represent an important point of reference for those countries that are about to enter the European Union.

The EABH e.V. is a very important forum for the exchange of knowledge among banking archivists. However, an increasing need for thorough discussion and for a higher degree of standardisation is also emerging in this sector.

The EABH e.V. is undoubtedly in the right position to carry out, on a regular basis, the above-mentioned training in the banking field, taking advantage of the concentration of expertise already available.

This objective may appear less ambitious when we consider the possibilities provided by non-traditional communication and training techniques. For example, specific videoconferences could be organised before regular meetings. Such occasions could be introduced by an appropriate expert thus giving the possibility of studying any particular subject in advance, from the broad scope of subjects central to banking archivists.

First of all, in an era of radical changes and increasing integration, our efforts should focus on understanding, from a multinational point of view, the issues challenging modern banks. In this respect, the crucial elements are represented by the evolution of banking, and by archival management and procedures.

Particular attention is to be given to the history of European integration, European Directives on archives, their enforcement in member countries; and their practical application in private and public banks.

The different moments of the archival activity also deserve to be jointly investigated with a training purpose in mind. In Italy, some studies on these topics are already under way and the possibility of extending them at a European level could be evaluated.

Meanwhile, the starting point could be an understanding of the key element of the archival task, the document itself and, in particular, the documents that characterise banking activities. In fact, these documents - whether on paper or not - make it possible for us to reconstruct the history of the originating agency.

The study of the evolution of the banking document could take the form of a special list, a detailed inventory of all possible documents or groups of documents. The creation of such a list would not only facilitate those starting to work in banking archives but would also increase the importance of documents that have been neglected up to now, thus identifying new areas to be investigated with the purpose of historical research.

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