

**Report on volunteer work by Shirley Sullivan for Blue Shield
Australia, July 2009**
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**City of Cologne Historical Archive:
Collapse of building on 3 March 2009.**

In response to the call for volunteers following the disaster at the Cologne Archives, I offered to work in Cologne as a volunteer archivist for four weeks. The offer was accepted and I travelled to Cologne on 11 May and returned to Australia on 10 June 2009.

My employer, the National Archives of Australia (NAA) actively supported my plan and I received advice from Detlev Lueth, NAA representative, Blue Shield Australia.

Support as a volunteer

The City of Cologne (the City) provided excellent support for volunteers from other countries. Before leaving I received information from the Mayor's Office in Cologne about the types of tasks I would undertake, my work roster with details of shuttle bus transport, contact details for accommodation, and advice that the City would provide insurance to cover my work as a volunteer and all equipment, for example, masks, protective clothing etc.

The City provided very good rooms in an apartment block (hostel) in a leafy suburb near the Rhine close to transport that was used to house citizens in emergency situations. Full catering was provided and this was excellent. Information about the shuttle bus transport, train timetables and Cologne was displayed in the common room that could seat 80 people at dinner, and provided television and tea/coffee/snacks at any time. The shuttle bus point was close by and the bus reliably transported volunteers to and from the work sites. If I worked on holidays when the shuttle bus did not operate, alternative transport was arranged.

Communication with the volunteer workforce was very good. At the beginning of each shift we would assemble as a group and receive instructions by the Archivist in Charge and Restorer in Charge about our tasks for the day. I was given special consideration I think because of the long journey from Australia and my four week commitment (most volunteers spent 3-5 days at a time perhaps returning at a later date), and little German language skills. For example, the first few days I appreciated being teamed with an English speaking archivist who worked at the Cologne Archives. Later I was able to help workers with the tasks involved. Regarding the language, I found that this was not such an obstacle when dealing with the records (or the people, as most spoke some English) as I was able to recognise record forms and types, and interpret some Latin. Most of the medieval records were written in Old German which also posed a problem for those with German language skills.

Security arrangements meant we had to sign in and out every day and report any accidents however minor so these could be attended to and documented. There was plenty of bottled water and other drinks available and a special room where you could retreat to take a five minute rest. Hot meals were served for lunch and dinner. I was treated with respect as a volunteer and recognised for my professional archival skills. Volunteers were kept advised about changes in shifts and occupational health and safety was paramount.

Description of work and tasks involved

There were different tasks for each stage of the salvage work. At a basic level the aim was to restore order to the records. I carried out most of these tasks over the time and developed a good understanding of the overall process. The work was physically demanding and included:

- sorting through tubs of rubble (very dusty work) brushing and cleaning, removal of rocks and gravel and listing of content of records, wrapping records, fragments, photos, film etc in viscose material.
- separating wet material, wrapping in plastic, listing and placing in special crates to be sent offsite for freezing.
- placing records on trolleys (with support) so they could be dried completely in the drying rooms or on airing racks. Working in this area was quite warm, and the air was less dusty.
- after the drying process the records were boxed and placed on palettes.
- washing records at a site adjacent to the collapsed Archive, listing, wrapping for freezing.

Remaining work

In July 2009 I understand that around 85% of the material has been recovered, with the salvage work scheduled to continue until late August at the same level of volunteer involvement.

The Director of the Cologne Archives, Schmidt-Czaia has publicly stated that she expects it will be a long time before the Archives reopens its doors, with the restoration of the archival collection after this event expected to take up to two to three decades.

Other volunteers include

- a large team of students from the Marburg Archival School arrived to assist one week after the disaster.
- a large team of archivists and restorers organised by the International Blue Shield Coordination Centre in the Hague for one week in late April.
- archives from all parts of Germany and Europe provided support from their workforces.
- National Archives of UK sent a small contingent for three days in early June.

- citizens, professionals, academics and students from Germany and other parts of Europe (Spain, Netherlands etc).



Solidarity among archivists

(Left to right) Christian Wermert, Joseph Wermert, City Archivist in Olpe, Shirley Sullivan, Australian Archivist, and Dieter Tops from the District Archives Olpe.

Photo: Courtesy Christian Wermert, Nottuln Community Archivist.

For more information about the Cologne Archive visit <http://www.stadt-koeln.de>

Summary

Although the circumstances were devastating, it was gratifying to be able to use my professional skills as an archivist to contribute to the recovery effort. I was also pleased to receive support and encouragement from the National Archives of Australia. I learned a lot and enjoyed working alongside fellow professionals who also learned about the activities of Blue Shield Australia and the role of the National Archives of Australia. It was a very positive experience and I would volunteer again.

Perhaps if this is not already in practice, Blue Shield Australia (BSA) may wish to consider the value of promoting and encouraging archivists and restorers to enlist on a national register for this volunteer work in Australia and overseas. This would mean there was a core of professionals who could be galvanised into action to respond to

local or overseas disaster work. Employers could also be involved and encouraged to support their staff in these endeavours. I would be pleased to be included on the register or assist the BSA office in any way.

As well as this report, I will be providing a presentation about what I've learned at an internal NAA Business Continuity Committee meeting this week. I will also talk about my experiences as a volunteer at a special lunchtime meeting of the Australian Capital Territory Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) on Friday 24 July and again at a session at the Australian Society of Archivists / Archives and Records Association of New Zealand / Pacific Regional Branch International Council on Archives Conference in Brisbane in October 2009.