

Sources of Mobility: Interventions Critical of Tradition (17th–20th Century)

Section of the 54th Deutscher Historikertag, Leipzig, September 21, 2023. Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Swen Steinberg (Queen's University, Kingston). Participants: Dagmar Freist (University of Oldenburg; in absentia), Ursula Lehmkuhl (University of Trier), Gabrielle Robilliard-Witt (University of Oldenburg), Joachim Schlör (University of Southampton).

Starting from the basic assumption that people have been on the move at all times but that the knowledge of these mobile groups has rarely lasted into the present, the section "Sources of Mobility: Interventions Critical of Tradition (17th–20th Century)" organized by Simone Lässig and Swen Steinberg argued for a new approach to migrant testimonies as sources at the intersection of migration and mobility history, the history of knowledge, and digital history, which can be analyzed with new digital methods for indexing and analysis. The section was aimed at both a specialist audience as well as students and teachers.

In the introduction, Simone Lässig emphasized that historiography, insofar as it has paid attention to the topic of migration at all in the past, has rarely focused on marginalized groups. While male intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and politicians are overrepresented, women and adolescents are barely mentioned. Lässig attributed this gap in part to the fact archival institutions are often state-run entities which rarely collect testimonies from "ordinary people" that could serve as a basis for academic research. In addition, women, children, or less educated people rarely wrote and if they did, their legacies were not considered particularly valuable.

The evaluation of previously neglected corpora could provide a starting point for addressing this issue. The comprehensive digitization of historical data opens up new perspectives on the history of migration, though these are often accompanied by new requirements. Digital tools can be an effective means of generating informative data sets from such collections, Lässig argued, but ought to be accompanied by sound digital source criticism. Lässig further noted that migration history is not only a history of people, but also a history of things: objects migrated with their owners and are therefore themselves evidence of mobility processes.

The first paper was presented by Gabrielle Robilliard-Witt, in lieu of Dagmar Freist who was unable to participate. Freist's paper discussed the innovative archiving concept developed by the "Prize Papers Project" she leads at the University of Oldenburg. The Prize Papers Project is an archive of early modern documents obtained from more than 35,000 ships impounded by the British Navy from the 1650s through the 1810s. This compendium of documents was inventoried by contemporaries for legal reasons and is now being researched, digitized, and made accessible in open-access formats. With regard to the context of this archive's origin, it can be noted that capture was legitimate in wartime under certain circumstances—for example, for ships of nations that were at war with the British.

As an example, Robilliard-Witt presented the letter book of a Jewish merchant from the Moroccan port city of Salé dating back to the time of the Thirty Years' War. The merchant's correspondence with his patrons in Amsterdam, originally written in Portuguese, reveals various aspects of Jewish-Muslim coexistence in Morocco: the sender reports on acquaintances and political contacts who supported him in his search for accommodation and personal care. However, business activities and shipped goods were also meticulously

documented to provide legal protection against harm. A central, recurring figure in the letters is the Portuguese merchant Jacob Curiel (also known as Duarte Nunes da Costa), with whom the author stayed. This name and others reveal a correspondence and trade network stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to North Africa and Brazil. At the same time, the letter book provides a fragmentary insight into the everyday life and knowledge culture of the early modern Jewish diaspora.

Migration correspondence was also the focus of the second talk by Ursula Lehmkuhl, who characterized the exchange between mobile and immobile groups as the (im)material cultural heritage of sending and receiving societies. Lehmkuhl argued the decades-long exchange of letters between nineteenth-century transatlantic migrants has the potential to reveal continuities and ruptures in a *longue durée* context, for example, citing material collected by the “Auswandererbriefe” project she directs (www.auswandererbriefe.de/) and the GHI’s Migrant Connections project (www.migrantconnections.org). Recovering these “hidden histories” from correspondents’ lifeworlds and everyday actions, however, requires unconventional research and analysis practices: new approaches must be developed toward collecting material, as the sources are often not found in archives, but instead places such as private family collections or for sale at flea markets. In addition, authorship is not always clear, which requires close cooperation between academic researchers and citizens who may be able to provide biographical contextual information through personal knowledge or genealogical research. Using citizen science projects for this work is already showing some success, for example to transcribe 19th-century *Kurrentschrift* into machine-readable text.

Lehmkuhl cited the digital humanities as a second important cooperation partner. On the one hand, digital anonymization

strategies can help manage the private and intimate information revealed by the sources. On the other hand, the nonstandardized orthography and syntax of the migrant correspondents pose challenges for handwritten text recognition (HTR) platforms. Consequently, the development of software tools at the interface between digital history, digital humanities, and citizen science should be promoted to obtain interpretable information. Finally, Lehmkuhl discussed shifts in scholarly evaluation of the usefulness of these everyday historical testimonies, changing from a critical attitude on the part of social historians in the 1980s and 1990s to a new appreciation of micro-historical perspectives in the 2010s.

In the subsequent discussion, the possible disadvantages of dealing with digital sources on migration history were addressed. A distinction was noted here between researching political history and the everyday history of migrants' lives. In the case of political documents, personal contact and exchange with archivists remains indispensable. In the field of political and administrative history, their expertise cannot be replaced by the search function in digital collections. In addition, attention was drawn to the challenges of digital source criticism, which would also require a modification of preliminary graduate training in historical studies.

The second part of the section was opened by Swen Steinberg. At the center of his presentation was the concept of "transit," whereby migration is understood not only as a process of departure and arrival but also encompassing the intermediate phase of transition as an object of historical analysis. Steinberg was particularly concerned with the experiences of unaccompanied minors experiencing transit as an unplanned and highly contingent phase of their lives. As people in transit were often excluded from many processes which leave traces in state archives, the question of the source basis arose once again. To meet this challenge,

Steinberg focused on a case study of Alfred Bader, who as a Austrian Jewish teenager fled National Socialism in the 1930s via a *Kindertransport* to England and eventually arrived in Canada, where he was placed in an internment camp.

Bader's diary from his internment period melds discussions of the uncertainties of everyday life in transit with his reflections on the process of growing up. Bader's diary entries were often framed as letters written to others he knew and constituted one of his few opportunities to conceptualize contact with the outside world, which was in fact impossible due to strict postal censorship in the camp. Bader also described his encounters with violence during his travels, which served to outline the foreign and hostile milieu of living in transit. Bader's emotional and physical experiences continued to burden him even years after his release; he tended to suppress discussion of his experiences in transit and in internment, but the memory evidently remained present in his mind: Bader likely added "In Memoriam" to the cover page of his internment diary years later, in 1949.

Although individual cases remain difficult to research, Bader's experience is representative of a marginalized group of actors with little agency and decision-making power who had to deal with questions of identity, origin, and gender in an unplanned life situation. Steinberg's paper gave particular insight into the relationship between his experiences of transit and of adolescence, and how these reinforced each other and sharply revealed the feelings of uprootedness which often accompany migration.

Finally, Joachim Schlör reported on his research into Jewish family archives on the Internet, which are maintained by private individuals and use open-source principles to share family finds and heirlooms. Autonomous collecting and preserving has been an integral part of Jewish agency since the

Holocaust. Schlör interpreted the emergence of virtual platforms for mutual exchange as part of a transitional phase in which the family archives currently find themselves which is also linked to generational change. Due to expulsion, migration, and diaspora, Schlör argued, Jewish cultures of remembrance are rarely tied to a specific house or location. Rather, the archives and their objects have shifted over time—a situation which Schlör argues illustrates the concept of the representation of displaced *persons* by their displaced *things*, as Lässig had postulated. Schlör saw the popularization of digital archiving as an opportunity to meet the challenges of source-based research on Jewish migration.

As an example, Schlör presented the Facebook group “JEWS—Jekkes Engaged Worldwide in Social Networking,” whose members can upload and comment on private photographs and documents from their family archives. The group currently has 2,400 members, most of whom identify as “Jekkes”—Jews of German origin—and communicate in German. The group is also open to researchers, who can gain insight into previously untapped source material and learn about details mentioned in documents or shown in photographs of archival objects (or archival photographs). They can also contribute their specialist expertise to deciphering or translating posted documents. Whether the Facebook group can actually be understood as an archive is difficult to assess, as the shared documents have not been formally inventoried or turned over to an official body. Nevertheless, it offers a forum for German-Jewish migrants to pursue a communal project through the practice of collaborative collecting and using digital networking to create a “virtual compatriot community” for uprooted members of the Jewish community.

The ensuing discussion returned to Steinberg’s concept of transit and the question of when the underlying phase of transition actually begins. The discussants emphasized that

the onset of contingency can be an indicator for the beginning of this unplanned phase of life. In addition, with reference to the family archives presented by Schlör, educational barriers to access were discussed, which can influence the opportunities for development and participation in such collaborative communities.

In her concluding summary, Lässig noted the phenomenon of “migrating archives” as the section’s common thread and a theme which calls traditional notions of “the archive” into question, to a certain extent. At the same time, she reemphasized the challenges associated with the great linguistic and orthography variety found in such sources. To make the “hidden histories” in private sources speak for themselves, not only epistemic virtues and understanding of legal nuances are required, but also an ethical approach to data to meet the scholar’s responsibility towards the sources and their personal content.

Aron Schulze
(Technical University Dresden)