

Preserving Hungarian Unitarian Church Archives Through Digitization

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This chapter provides a brief account of an ongoing collaborative project to digitize unique and historically significant materials held by the Hungarian Unitarian Church Archives in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca, Romania). Kolozsvár is the Hungarian name of a city located in the historical region of Transylvania, which is currently encompassed by Romania. In the 16th century, the population was very receptive to ideas generated by the Reformation, and documents held by the Archives date from that period to the present. The project described here commenced in 1999 as an effort both to preserve these documents through digitization and, by doing so, to make them more accessible to researchers around the world. I will outline the tools and methodology we used, taking into consideration the constraints imposed by our modest financial resources. I hope that our work can serve as a model for others with limited resources who want to digitize their own archival materials. Before turning to

the project itself, however, it may be useful to provide a little more background explaining the significance of the materials themselves.

Hungarian Unitarianism

In 1517 the Catholic monk Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenberg in Germany, marking the advent of the Protestant Reformation. The seeds of reformation found a fertile field in Transylvania, then still a part of Hungary. Many Transylvanian students went to Wittenberg as academic pilgrims to prepare for the Protestant ministry, returning with Luther's books and an evangelical Protestant enthusiasm for the idea of reformation. A majority of Transylvanians consequently became Lutherans, with only a small percentage electing to remain Catholic. The ideas of the Swiss reformers, Calvin among them, also subsequently took hold in the region, eventually dividing the Protestant faithful into two parts. Most of the Hungarians in Transylvania became Calvinists, while their Saxon neighbors retained their Lutheran affiliation.

The most influential of the Transylvanian theologians of the time was Francis David, whose personal religious development—beginning in Catholicism and embracing, in turn, both Lutheranism and Calvinism—paralleled that of a majority of the region's population. David's collective teaching, later to be called "unitarianism" because he came to reject the doctrine of the Trinity, conquered not only the subjects of Transylvania but their monarch as well. The ruling Prince of Transylvania and King of Hungary, John Sigismund, is remarkable for being the only Unitarian king in history—and a sagacious one at that. In 1568 Prince Sigismund convened a diet (assembly). This Diet of 1568 issued the Toleration Act, which affirmed the principle of religious freedom and so legalized Unitarianism (Molnár and Youngman 2003, 83-84).

The Hungarian Unitarian Church Archives in Kolozsvár traces its history to the first half of the 18th century when the germ of the present leadership structure for the Church came into existence. A board of leaders, the Consistory of the Unitarian Church, was given broad responsibility. In addition to overseeing all church affairs, it was also responsible for education (founding a Unitarian college at Kolozsvár) and for the broader needs of the community (Bodrogi and Molnár 2001, 51).

During the Counter-Reformation in Transylvania, the Unitarian Church was repressed. Many lands, properties, and church buildings—including the church (1716) and the college (1718) at Kolozsvár—were expropriated by Catholic authorities. Efforts to survive led to a reorganization of the Church, which left the Consistory in charge only of church affairs. Papers documenting these efforts to form a viable structure for the Church, along with other important historical documents, needed to be preserved and protected. Information about storing documents is available from the end of the 18th century. Documents were stored at first in boxes at the house of the “superintendent” (bishop) and were later transferred to the old Unitarian College. After a new college (now John Sigismund Unitarian College) had been built, these archives and the Church’s headquarters found a permanent home in this building (Molnár 2017, 34).

The oldest document in the collection, the “Partial Synodal Minutes,” dates from 1587, less than twenty years after King Sigismund recognized Unitarianism as a legitimate religion with national standing equivalent to that of the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed Trinitarians. Current holdings include architectural plans, artifacts (wax seals, stamps, and other three-dimensional objects), audiovisual records (audiotapes, photographs, photographic slides, and videotapes), parish records, personal papers (sermons, correspondence, and manuscripts) of bishops, historians, theologians, and teachers, records generated by ancillary organizations (for ministers, women, and youth), financial records of the denomination, synod minutes, religious education materials, royal dispensations, and Unitarian denominational publications. Holdings also include an extensive collection of correspondence attesting to the historical relationship among English, American, and Transylvanian Unitarians, dating back to the early 19th century. Of notable importance is an original handwritten sermon by William Ellery Channing, a prominent figure in American Unitarian history. This sermon was found among the personal belongings of Bishop Görgy Boros (1855–1941), who was awarded an honorary doctorate by Harvard University in 1900 (Molnár and Youngman 2003, 86).

Origins of our Digitization Project

The effort to digitize records of the Hungarian Unitarian Church Archives can be traced to 1999 when George M. Williams, a professor of Comparative Religion at the University of California, conceived the idea. Williams had successfully digitized deteriorating Sanskrit texts in India and, motivated by his affiliation with the Unitarian faith, envisioned similarly enhancing accessibility to the cultural heritage of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. Recognizing the value of this heritage for researchers and all individuals interested in the subject, Williams generously donated a digital camera and taught us how to use it.

Two other former professors from the United States, Deborah J. Youngman (Boston University) and Kathleen Dunlap (Tufts University Medical School), established in 2000 the Unitarian Transylvanian Archives Project (UTAP) under my direction and with the support of the Hungarian Unitarian Bishop Árpád Szabó (Molnár and Youngman 2001). The UTAP project enabled us to renovate our facility and to purchase more advanced equipment for digitization. I attended various courses to learn the methodology of digitization, including a month-long training course in 2002 at the International Summer School on Electronic Publishing for Cultural Heritage Studies, which was organized by the Institute of Mathematics and Informatics of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

The Right Tools for the Job

Digitization denotes the conversion of a pre-existing work, be it textual, visual, or auditory in nature, from its original medium into a format that can be interpreted and processed by a computer system. The purpose is to ensure the searchability of the works, to expand access to them, and to safeguard the physical integrity of the originals. It is important that the process of digitization does not harm or compromise the condition of the original work and that the creation and use of digital files adhere strictly to respect for property rights, personal rights, copyright regulations, and other relevant legal considerations.

Protecting the integrity of the original works requires selecting appropriate tools for their digitization. *Document scanners* are one popular option for this work and come in various types to accommodate specific needs (flatbed, sheet-fed, portable, etc.). *Document cameras*, designed to capture high-quality digital images of documents, books, or manuscripts, are another common choice. High-resolution digital cameras are particularly advantageous for digitizing large or delicate documents that may present challenges for scanning processes. In the initial stages of our project, we employed a 3.3 megapixel Canon S20 camera and later upgraded to a 5 megapixel Olympus E20N camera. In 2010 we transitioned to an 18 megapixel Canon EOS 7D digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera.

With the continuous advancements in the mobile phone industry, the built-in cameras of smartphones have progressively improved to a level that rivals that of a DSLR camera. I have found the iPhone XS Max to be a viable alternative, but smartphones with similarly good cameras are also available from Samsung and other manufacturers. The ubiquity of mobile phones in today's society means that almost everyone possesses one. In smaller archives or libraries, where it may not be feasible to acquire more sophisticated digitization equipment, a mobile phone can be used to capture respectable images of documents, manuscripts, and books.

We found that, when employing a large camera for digitization, certain additional equipment becomes necessary to ensure optimal results. A *tripod* or *stand* is indispensable to provide stability and minimize camera shake during image capture. Overhead lighting plays a crucial role in minimizing shadows or uneven lighting across the document. Using a *cable release* or *remote control* allows the photographer to trigger the camera without touching it, thus reducing the likelihood of unintended movement or vibration that can affect image quality. Because smartphones are lightweight, handheld capture can produce good images without this additional equipment, but there are low-cost stands for these as well.

To ensure good image quality, the camera should be configured for a resolution of at least 300 dpi for standard documents. Higher resolutions may be required for documents with fine details or small text. The camera mode should be set to AV (or A on certain models), indicating Aperture Priority Mode. This allows the user to select manually the desired aperture value while the camera automatically adjusts the shutter speed for each image captured. To enhance the depth of field, it is advisable to set the aperture to a minimum of f/11

or f/16, as this expands the range within which the captured image remains in sharp focus. We learned that images should be captured in the highest bit-depth available (e.g., 24-bit color) to preserve details and colors.

Methodology

In contemporary professional literature, there are many descriptions of recommended processes for digitization. In this last section, I delineate the method we implemented at the Unitarian Archives, emphasizing its cost-effectiveness and versatility. The workflow we use is a series of sequential steps and tasks, including procedures for document preparation, image capture, post-processing, quality assurance, metadata creation, and backup and storage. I present it here as a set of recommendations based on our experience in the hope that others will find it useful.

Document Preparation

Proper handling and preparation help preserve the integrity of the documents during the digitization process. Wash your hands with soap and water before handling materials to prevent transferring the oils from your skin onto the materials. Sort and arrange the documents you want to digitize. Remove any staples, paper clips, or other removable binding materials, and flatten folded or creased pages. Clean the documents, removing dust or dirt with a soft brush or cloth. If necessary, use weights or document holders to keep the document flat and prevent pages from curling. I often use river-washed stones as weights. Putting sand in bags of different sizes can also create variable weights and costs little.

Image Capture

Use the chosen tools and equipment to capture high-quality digital images of the documents. Prepare the setup by placing a piece of white or black paper or cloth on the reproduction table. This serves as a consistent background against which the document to be digitized

will be positioned. By ensuring a uniform and even background, you can minimize potential distractions or variations in the background, enhancing the overall visual clarity of the digitized document. Align the camera or phone on a tripod or stand directly above the document, ensuring that it is exactly parallel to the document's surface. Fill the camera frame with the image, making sure the entire page is captured, and snap the photo. The first capture should use color control patches, enabling adjustments to color settings such as white balance, color temperature, and saturation. This facilitates precise and consistent color representation, ensuring accuracy throughout the digitization process.

Post-Processing

After the images have been created, it is essential to save the digital files in formats that are widely supported and non-proprietary to ensure their long-term accessibility and usability. In the context of archival digitization, you should create master files without compression, if possible, to minimize loss of data. User copies, intended for regular use, can be created in smaller and more efficient compressed formats. Archival guidelines endorse the use of the Tagged Image File Format (TIFF) for master files. TIFF is renowned for its capacity to maintain image integrity and fidelity over time. Formats such as JPEG, which are known to involve data loss through compression, can be employed to create user copies.

Quality Assurance

The next step is to conduct a comprehensive quality check. Reviewing samples of the digital images you have created is important for identifying and rectifying any photography errors and addressing any problems with image quality. Assess the overall image quality—resolution, clarity, color accuracy, and legibility—to ensure that the images meet the required standards. The easiest way to correct errors is to digitize the page or pages in question again.

Metadata Creation

To ensure effective management of digitized documents, it is vital to establish a consistent and meaningful file naming convention and to create descriptive metadata. This metadata should include essential details, such as title, author, date, keywords, and copyright information. By recording and preserving this information, the digitized documents become more discoverable and comprehensively documented. It is also advisable to arrange the files into logical folder structures based on relevant categories or subjects. This facilitates efficient retrieval and navigation of the digitized documents.

Backup and Storage

To safeguard digitized documents from potential loss or damage, it is imperative to implement robust backup systems. Store copies of the digitized files on external hard drives, use cloud storage services, or combine these approaches. Redundancy ensures that, even in the event of computer failure or data loss, the digitized documents remain protected and accessible. In the course of our project, we developed a relationship with the Harvard Divinity School Library and reached a formal agreement that they would deposit our images in the Harvard Library Digital Repository Service. This collaborative solution will ensure the images' perpetual preservation and accessibility to a worldwide audience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described a successful project to safeguard a valuable cultural heritage and to broaden scholarly access to it through digitization. Even small organizations with limited resources can achieve this success through collaboration. My hope is that this chapter will inspire theological librarians and archivists in similar circumstances to consider digitization as a way to preserve and expand access to their own valuable historical resources for future generations.

References

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