

Revolutionizing Archival Internships: Unlocking Global Collaboration

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Abstract

Amidst the challenges of a global pandemic, Holocaust Museum LA redefined their traditional model of an internship in the Archive, creating a virtual program with lessons learned in remote collaboration. Beyond the hurdles of diverse time zones and required skill sets, this initiative significantly increased the team's capacity. With standardized processes and meticulous quality checks, interns worldwide contribute to processing and cataloging museum collections. Looking ahead, their work lays the foundation for a public-facing database for the collection, elevating accessibility and fulfilling our core archival mission.

Introduction

The year 2020 saw organizations face unprecedented times and uncharted challenges never seen before. Many institutions, like Holocaust Museum LA, were forced to close their doors to visitors, and had to devise new and creative ways to engage with the public. For the Museum's Archive, physical access to the collection was limited, with Museum staff, interns, and volunteers no longer able to be in person at the Museum. This paper will delve into the evolution of the Museum's archival internship program during this time, with a specific focus on the innovative strides made by Holocaust Museum LA during the transition to remote collaboration and hybrid work. This paper will explore how the Museum's commitment to preserving historical documents and artifacts, and increasing accessibility to the collection, led to the development of a virtual internship program that transcended geographical boundaries and is working to enhance the global accessibility of its extensive archival collection.

Archival Internships at Holocaust Museum LA

The preservation of historical documents and objects is foundational to understanding history, and Holocaust Museum LA is committed to this practice in both physical and digital formats. The Museum's archival internship program in its original form, recruited local college students in Los Angeles to work with the physical collection to organize, research, and catalog materials in conjunction with their studies for course credit. With the onset of a global pandemic in 2020, the Museum was forced to close its doors to visitors and shift staff to working remotely. The existing archival internship provided valuable manpower to the Archive department, which at that time was a team of just two, and so the need for it to undergo a paradigm shift to accommodate remote collaboration was clear. It was then that the team began to discuss the idea of a virtual internship, where interns from across the United States (and later internationally), could engage in the processing, digitization, and

cataloging of objects within the Museum's archival collection without having to physically be in the Museum.

In parallel to this initiative, the Museum had identified the need to implement a new Collections Management System (CMS), to better manage the collection. Historically, the Museum had used a manual system, relying on storage of digital assets related to the collection on a shared network drive within the Museum. This presented an opportunity to migrate the existing digital assets onto a new CMS, in the process creating a large-scale cataloging project for the department. Research, cataloging, and a significant amount of descriptive and administrative metadata needed to be created and added to the CMS at an object and collection level, in order to organize the collection, with a view to also increase its accessibility and discoverability in the long term.

The Museum elected to go with a cloud-based CMS, Collector Systems, which allowed for the system to be accessed from anywhere, lending itself to a virtual work set up. This meant staff could work on the project remotely while working from home, and also provided an opportunity to engage interns and volunteers in the project.

Processes and Standardization

Once the Museum commenced using the new CMS and data migration had begun (facilitated through Collector Systems), the Archive team began to discuss the best way to approach the task of organizing and more completely cataloging the collection, building on what already existed, but also creating a standardized methodology for how we cataloged and added information at an object and collection level in the system. We quickly identified the need for a standardized process, in the form of a metadata guideline, in order to establish standard procedures and allow for anyone involved in working with the collection to follow this same methodology. In conjunction with the newly established CMS, we developed a metadata guide, documenting the fields we wanted to capture and what information should be populated for each. This document underwent a review and approval process to ensure it was thorough and met with the Museum's needs. Though approved, the document continues to evolve as we gain more information, discovering unique situations and answering new questions about the process as they arise.

The metadata guideline listed each field to be captured in the CMS when cataloging an object, providing the name and definition of the field, a description of how it is to be formatted, as well as examples for commonly found artifacts in the collection (Figure 1).

15. CMS Field: Title

Definition: The name given to the item or object.

Required: Yes

Format: The title should be the name by which the item is formally known. The title should be brief but descriptive and cover the most important elements of the item, including what the item is and its significant features. The first word and proper names within the title should be capitalized.

Example:

Resource	Recommended Title	Comments
Photograph	Photograph of Grinzspan Family, Germany, 1934	The title includes what the item is (a photograph) who the subjects are (the Grinzspan family) as well as the country and the year the photograph was taken. (Note: Include whatever information is available in terms of the date, in this case the year).

Figure 1. Example of a field description in the Museum's metadata guideline.

Outreach and Recruitment

Our next phase was to begin outreach for the internship, to reach students whose studies fell in the areas of history, museum work, or collections, and who may be interested in pursuing the internship remotely. We set about updating the existing internship description to indicate we were offering a remote opportunity and posted this opportunity on the Museum's website and social media, as well as reaching out to any contacts we had that could share the internship with prospective applicants. We discovered quickly that there were many such students looking for remote opportunities, particularly in the face of COVID restrictions which had essentially halted other in person internship opportunities. We continued to see renewed interest in the virtual internship each time we opened applications, loosely timed with the beginning of a new college semester. Since the internship was entirely online, this opened it up to a greater pool of candidates from across the U.S., including students who otherwise would not have been able to apply as they were not physically in Los Angeles. This also meant flexibility was needed in terms of hours, in order to accommodate different time zones.

Onboarding, Training and Ongoing Support

Because of the virtual nature of the internship, we recognized that the need for flexibility in the internship was paramount. Since we as staff had experienced the shift to remote work ourselves, we understood the challenges of being completely virtual, and tried to be as flexible as possible with how the internship was structured. This included flexibility with the hours worked, taking into account different time zones as well as the need to combat zoom and screen fatigue, and scheduling regular check ins with interns in order to open lines of communication and avoid feelings of isolation. We also tried to mirror some of the in-person benefits of a museum internship in a virtual way. For example, interns were invited to take part in virtual programs the Museum was hosting, as well as encouraged to join talks with Holocaust survivors speaking to students about their experiences. Interns were also offered virtual object handling training, where we walked through processes of how to appropriately handle objects and best practice for collections care,

in an effort to share some of the hands-on knowledge the interns would have received had they been in person at the museum.

We also had to define what the onboarding and training process would look like. As we were unable to physically be in the archive with interns to demonstrate the organization of the collection, we focused on how the collection was organized and arranged digitally. This included the development of virtual training, where each new intern was walked through the process via a demonstration over zoom – including how to catalog an object in Collector Systems, an overview of the metadata guideline as a reference, and discussions around different research tools, methods and resources that could be useful to the process. With time and experience, we began to develop more resources to aid interns with this initial phase of training. An example of such a resource was an Intern Resource List that documents databases frequently used to research information helpful to the scope and subject of the Museum's collection.

Once interns had been onboarded and trained, a weekly check-in meeting was scheduled with all the interns working during a given period. This provided a weekly space for each intern to discuss a particular collection they were working on, and voice any questions, challenges, or feedback. Given the CMS was still new, the feedback we received from interns was invaluable, as it allowed us to modify and update our processes and address new considerations in our cataloging process and metadata guidelines as they came up.

The Project

With the existing digital data having been migrated across to Collector Systems, the CMS contained basic object records for much of the collection. This included an inventory or accession number, a title, the collection name, and an image for the object (Figure 2).

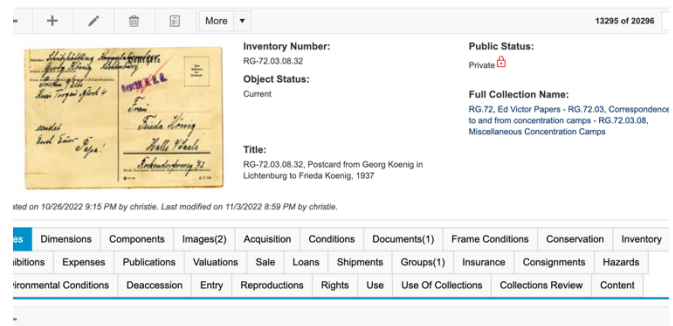


Figure 2. A basic object record in Collector Systems before work has commenced.

Armed with training and resources to guide them, each intern was assigned a collection to work on in Collector Systems as their primary project. To supplement this, any other background information related to the assigned collection was also shared. This information could include provenance details, information about the individual or family associated with the object or collection, such as information provided by the donor or any previous research that had been done. In some cases a collection may have had an old or outdated finding aid associated through the digitization effort that

began in 2008, which was also shared in case of any relevant information that could now be added to the CMS.

Because the Museum’s collection is largely made up of materials related to a particular family or individual, the project included an element of research, to document and contextualize the individual/s experience during the Holocaust. This research contributed to shaping descriptive metadata, including the object description and history. Administrative metadata was also captured, for example an inventory number, object type, date, and title, the country and/or city an object originates from, language, and material, ensuring this information follows the standardized format as laid out in the guideline. Information about the location of the collection, who is cataloging the object and when, relevant subject terms, and also provenance information regarding the donation of the object are also captured (Figure 3).

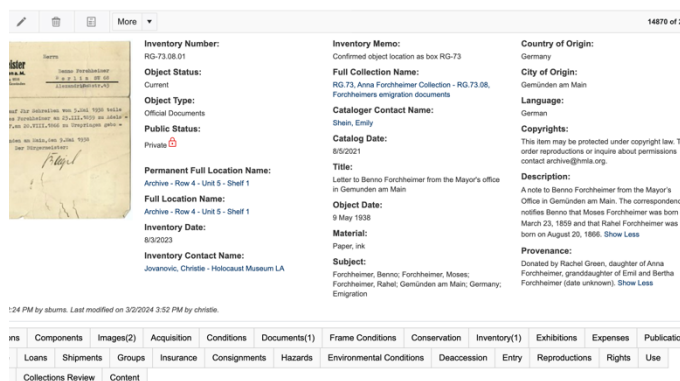


Figure 3. Example object record cataloged by an intern.

After an initial few objects were cataloged, the Archive team would then touch base with the intern, to allow for a preliminary check and confirmation they were on the right track. Upon completion of their assigned collection, the intern would then notify the Archive team, so that we could review the work completed to identify any feedback or revisions that were needed, which the intern was then able to make.

Expanding the Internship Globally

During the summer of 2021 two interns with proficiency in German joined the Museum’s virtual internship program. Given the scope and diverse range of the Museum’s collection, encompassing languages such as German, Polish, French, Hungarian, Czech, Russian, Italian, Ukrainian, Hebrew, and Yiddish, we recognized the potential value of leveraging their language skills. As such, we decided to experiment with assigning these interns the additional task of creating basic translations. We selected collections containing official documents in German, which predominantly consisted of typed text, for this initial trial. The interns were able to catalog the materials in their assigned collection, create and add metadata for each object, and additionally, translate materials in German to English, adding these translations to Collector Systems. This additional function added to the beneficial output of the internship, further enhancing the accessibility of these objects to a non-German speaking audience. This in turn prompted discussions about the possibility of expanding the internship program globally,

and whether we could look to recruit international students capable of both cataloging and translating materials, thereby creating greater accessibility to materials in the collection in a multitude of languages.

As a result of this potential new intern function, we further identified the need to develop a translation guide, so that there would also be a standardized process interns could follow when translating materials. The guide laid out the standard for how the translation document should be formatted, for example – the document is first to be transcribed in its original language, then translated, and how illegible words and common spelling and grammatical occurrences should be handled. We enlisted the help of the interns conducting the translating, in order to determine what additional information would be useful when beginning the translation process, for example, documents originating in Germany and Austria from the 19th and 20th century may have been written in specific scripts and where examples of these could be found. From here we also included helpful websites and tools that can be used as resources. We also began a glossary of terms, which documents certain terms common to Holocaust history and tables them in a variety of languages (this is still a work in progress, and we aim to continue to add to this). With each new intern translating documents, we invited them to utilize the translation guide and tools, but also to review and provide feedback on the guide so that we could continue to update and improve the document.

To date we have had a number of international interns join the virtual internship, so far with a focus on translating materials in German and Polish.

Lessons Learned

Since the Museum took the archival internship virtual in 2020, we have had a total of 20 students participate in the program, from across the U.S. – California, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Oklahoma, as well as 6 international students from countries such as Germany, Poland, and Israel. This group combined has cataloged a total of 1931 objects across 79 collections. The virtual internship has continued to grow and evolve with each new intake of students, with the lessons and feedback helping to shape the program for the future. Some of the key takeaways of lessons learned to date are:

Communication

Particularly in a virtual world, effective communication serves as the cornerstone of collaboration. Though the interns could not physically be in the Museum, it was important to provide a dedicated space for them to interact with the team. The value of this is multilayered - weekly check in meetings provided an opportunity for interns to seek guidance, share progress updates, and address any challenges they had encountered, while also providing access to Museum staff and exposure to various aspects of museum work. This aided in the internship not only being enriching in terms of skill development but also to provide a wider-ranging experience that all parties could benefit from. This open line of communication helped to cultivate an environment where interns felt comfortable expressing their ideas, seeking feedback, and engaging in dialogue with both Museum staff and their fellow interns. Through this we hoped to foster a sense of connection among the team, while also

sharing valuable insights into the internship experience and sharing ideas and questions that can be answered in real time. In addition to this, the Archive team made themselves available by phone and email should the interns have questions outside of this designated time.

Consistency

From the beginning of this endeavor, we recognized that a fundamental element of ensuring its success would be establishing consistency in the cataloging and description of materials from the collection. Given the internship's duration of eight to ten weeks and the regular intake of students coming onboard each semester, alongside several different staff and interns working concurrently on the collection, it was important to establish standards everyone could work towards. Moreover, it was essential that these procedures be documented for reference. This not only ensured consistency in cataloging and description of the collection but will also hopefully enhance discoverability for the future project of making the database publicly accessible.

Looking Forward and Future Plans

Looking forward, our future goal is to make the collection freely accessible to the public online. This objective is directly linked to the work of the Museum's archival interns, whose efforts to catalog objects will significantly improve the collection's discoverability and accessibility, creating a foundation for its eventual launch on a public facing platform. It is our hope that such a platform will provide access to the collection for a diverse audience of visitors, students, and researchers alike. Additionally, the interns that have engaged in translating materials from the collection are further contributing to the accessibility of the collection for the local audience once it is publicly available, thereby broadening its reach and impact.

Going forward for the Museum's virtual internship, we aim to build partnerships to collaborate with institutions both here in the U.S and internationally, whether this be colleges or other institutions with student networks, so that we can more firmly cement pathways to reach a broader array of students who are interested in taking part in the internship. We have experienced modest success with this locally but would like to extend our outreach efforts so that we can attract a diverse pool of international students, and also those who might further enrich the translation aspect of the program.

Author Biography

Christie Jovanovic joined Holocaust Museum LA in 2018 overseeing the Museum's archive. She received her Masters in History (2019), sparking a passion for storytelling and history. She completed a Graduate Certificate in Collections Care at George Washington University (2022) and became Chief Curator of Collection at Holocaust Museum LA, curating new exhibitions for the Museum, in addition to managing the archive.