A blog from SPA's spring meeting in Poland
by SPA member Vilde Ronge
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Global archivist
Yes, okay, maybe that’s taking it a bit too far, but I’m almost a global archivist. I’m well over halfway in my four-year term as a Bureau (steering committee) member of the Section of Professional Associations, also known as SPA, and this blog post is a report from our annual spring meeting. This time held in Warsaw, Poland, the homeland of the committee’s always-so-positive Piotr, or Peter if you will, the State Archivist of the city of Lodz. SPA is one of the sections under the major international archive organization, International Council on Archives, or ICA. Our Bureau meets twice a year and I feel so fortunate to be a part of SPA. I’m tempted to get all “Miss Universe” on you, but international work does that to me. My faith in humanity and world peace gets restored. It is so rewarding to sit with people from around the world and talk about subjects like capture and advocacy and files and family. And notice that we are all basically just people, no matter what cultural background, upbringing or education. With largely the same challenges and therefore great potential between us to find clever solutions together. Like always, I’ve had great discussions about all sorts of topics. Digital archives and the possibilities of continuous transmission of documents from organizations to an archival institution with Fred from the Netherlands. Advocacy for archives with Claude from Canada. The challenges of capturing email with Michal from Israel. And ethics in records management with Bernhard from Germany. It’s so great! And I’m so happy to be representing the Norwegian Society of Records Managers and Archivist in the ICA. It is incredibly important that we, in the archive and records management field of expertise in Norway, take part in what is going on internationally. And at this meeting, SPA really got credited for our voice and opinion and that on very important issue, hooray! I’ll let it be a cliffhanger for later.

Poland
I’ve never been to Poland before, but I’d go again now! Warsaw, the capital, is a surprisingly green city, lots of parks and wide avenues. Old-fashioned and modern at the same time. The occasional skyscraper. And an incredibly nice old town, Stare Miasto, which is on the UNESCO Heritage List. Not because of its age, but because it is a complete reconstruction of a historical city that was devastated. During World War II, the city was totally leveled, which is almost impossible to imagine when strolling around the idyllic old town. Each house is rebuilt, brick by brick, just as it was before the destruction. One is filled with awe and respect for this bird “phoenix” that has risen from the ashes. And that applies not only to the city but also several of the archives we visited. What happens when history is set on fire or bombed, and heritage simply disappears, and you have to start from scratch – if not mentally, then at least physically? It does something to people, of course it does. When we visited the department of archival studies at the University of Warsaw, one of the students pointed this out. He said that already at the start of the course, students are made aware of the huge responsibility that rests on archivists to ensure the continuous history of Poland. They are constantly thinking about how to ensure that the documents’ content and meaning can be recreated if they were to disappear. Talk about appraisal!
Agenda
When we have our spring meetings, we always have a tight schedule, although we usually are together for a whole week. We need to review and follow up on the committee’s action plan, get information about what is happening centrally in the ICA and making sure we have plenty of time to have the discussions we need to have. In addition, we have to include sufficient time for the various archival visits that our host has planned. After all, the point is ensuring a mutual cultural and information exchange. The past two years we have also participated in an archival professional conference in the country we visit and the spring meeting is placed geographically to fit with these. I will not go through the entire committee agenda for this year’s meeting but focus on a few highlights:

- ICA’s Expert Group on Advocacy has just completed a strategy for archives in social media and it will be sent around for comments shortly.
- As part of UNESCO’s Persist project – an initiative for a digital roadmap for archives, libraries and museums – ICA is working with IFLA (the international library organization) on guidelines for preservation and disposal of digital content.
- As part of SPAs focus on advocacy, the committee is planning a film festival with archives as a theme at the ICA conference in Seoul 2016. We will be doing a teaser at the annual meeting in Reykjavik in September to make people aware and register their own films for next year’s competition. The films must have an archival or records management aspect in one form or another, whether it’s about the profession, capturing e-mail, genealogy with the help of digital sources, or whatever else.
- Marta from Catalonia, who was deputy for Joan, said she thinks SPA and ICA are too invisible to archivists and records managers and that it is important in the future to pursue visibility of all the useful and important work we do, also on new platforms. Good web sites with networking opportunities, Twitter/Facebook/Instagram profiles and so forth.
- The Norwegian Society of Records Managers and Archivists had asked if the SPA could discuss whether we could make a kind of digital pamphlet on the challenges of capturing e-mail. The pamphlet could be used by all the associations as a hand-out to members to raise awareness in their own organizations on the issue of e-mail and the importance of making sure relevant e-mail is filed and stored correctly. There was quite a heated discussion in the group originating in the different standpoints and roles among the committee members, and is basically the same discussion we are right in the middle of in Norway. How far into records management should archive authorities play a role? I argued hard for what eventually has become my mantra, loss of e-mail is happening in every organization each and every day, both in the public and private sector, and this will lead to huge gaps in archives of the future. We should rather look upon e-mail as a golden opportunity for the archives to make themselves relevant, since everyone uses e-mail and can relate to the issue! Back to the pamphlet, the conclusion is I am to make a first draft together with Michal. Hopefully we have something ready for the ICA conference in Iceland in September.
• We have decided to write blog posts from our SPA meetings and post them on our SPA webpage. This in addition to minutes of course. The blog posts will be more informal and personalized.

The Cliffhanger
Then there was the cliffhanger that I mentioned in the introduction. The ICA Human Rights Working Group has just presented a final version of Basic Principles on the Role of Archivists in Support of Human Rights. These principles SPA had on the agenda at the spring meeting last year too, and we gave a unison feedback that the principles were good, but it was a major flaw that there was no mention of the role of the Records Managers in such issues. ICA is supposed to be an organization advocating the importance of the entire life cycle of documents, from records to archival documents, and we think that this view should be visible throughout all ICA work and documents, including the Principles. During our spring meetings, our group always has a telephone meeting with David Leitch, the ICA Secretary General. When we reported back SPA’s view on this matter during last year’s call with David, the response was rather wooly. This year, however, David informed us that there had been unanimous agreement in Executive Board that the role of Records Managers had to be worked into the principles before they could be considered as completed to reflect ICA’s overall scope. This means the voice of SPA has had an impact. That feels great! New revised principles will be presented to the general assembly at next year’s ICA conference in Seoul, this time including the role of Records Managers. Stay tuned!

Visits
Piotr had planned several interesting visits. The Polish archives organization which he represents, SAP, is Poland’s largest with 1,800 members. It’s a bit unusual, but SAP has for many years been offering archives services, similar to those offered by commercial operators such as Iron Mountain and Recall. The first visit was therefore to the newest of their buildings, far out on the Polish countryside. The building has 60 shelf kilometers of archive material and space for 40 km more. They have three such depots for paper scattered throughout Poland, as well as the Secretariat which is housed in a nice apartment in the center of Warsaw. The organization was, until a few years ago, the biggest expert on archives. Now they are challenged by the market with lots of new vendors within the same field, offering training, consulting and depository services. We also visited the State Archives in Radom, a few hours outside the capital. The General Director in Radom is Kazimierz Jaroszek who is also the chairman of SAP. The State Archives in Radom is the first purpose-built archives in Poland and was finished in 2013. We got a tour and they were clearly very proud of their building, with good reason. The most fascinating, I think, was that the offices of the employees are painted in colors that are supposed to reflect their personalities. I had been looking forward to jealousy green, cool blue and aggression red walls, but really, there were just a lot of shades of white, I think. Lots of innocent archivists in Radom perhaps?

The National Archives in Poland consists of three central offices and we visited two of them, Modern Archives and Digital Archives. The latter I had personally been looking forward to the most, also because we were having a workshop on digital archives with them. Turned out, however, that they thought of digital archives in the traditional archival sense, digitizing analog material. But they have begun to think about how they are to receive digitally created archives.
University of Warsaw department of Archival studies was the venue for our last site visit. We were greeted by Professor Alicja Kulecka and three of her master's degree students and had an interesting talk with them. The students were all interested in history and dreamed of working in the National Archives or a State Archives, but thought more realistically that they were going to end up with records management, since that’s where the jobs are.

Archives in the Social Environment of the 21st Century
The last two days in Warsaw, we attended the above mentioned conference. It was the 15th annual conference for archivists from Eastern and Central Europe. I only got to attend the first day and it was packed full from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. There were lots of languages and simultaneous translations which is always an added challenge. And to be frank, I found it more like a report on how different countries had resolved to be out on social media, and it was very much the same all over, more than a venue to launch innovative ideas and have constructive discussions. Puzzling was the fact that although the main topic was social media, there were no profiled hashtags for Twitter for example. The highlights for me were the talk from Jussi Nuorteva, National Archivist of Finland, who talked about minorities in the archives, and Dagmar Hovestadt from the Stasi Archives in Germany who explained how story-telling was the clue to getting any message across. And how the Stasi Archives are the result of the people’s desire to reclaim control the state had over their lives and data.

Summary
Each spring meeting, we are in the homeland of one of SPAs members. And it's so much fun to be visiting someone at “home”, it is always well planned and we get to see the country a little from the inside. This time we took the metro, tram, minibus, taxi. And walked of course. Walked and walked and walked. And Piotr, the host, had an ordeal making sure no one got lost and making sure everyone had a good experience. There is always someone who is thirsty, hungry, tired or have to use the restroom. Or who cannot find his/her ticket. Or do not realize how the ticket should be validated and inserted inside the machine. Piotr told me during a break that he had just been involved in a review of personality types. He himself had been categorized as a type 7 personality (of 9): the eternal optimist. I do not doubt that for a second. For those who know me, know that I have special dietary needs that makes me need to have a refrigerator in the room when I’m traveling. They didn’t have one at our hotel in Warsaw, but what does that matter when I had a Piotr! He brought a refrigerator from the archives in his hometown and drove it across the Polish countryside and back again, no stress!

Thanks for the ride Piotr and Poland and SAP and SPA (I hope the first mentioned is relaxing with his feet up high, he deserves it)! Cheerio until next time!