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The Story of Pasko Rogulj and Dumitru Nistor – Digital Encounters from WWI Times

Cristina Ioana Roiu, Romanian Academy Library,
E-mail: cris@biblacad.com

Abstract

In the last years, all kind of institutions and associations worldwide have built up digital collections related to the topic of First World War, among them the *Europeana 1914-1918* being one of the most impressive WWI digital archive in the world.

The paper describes the story of the Croatian Pasko Rogulj and the Romanian Dumitru Nistor, both sailors on Kaiserin Elisabeth ship in WWI – a digital encounter after 100 years enabled by the *Europeana1914-1918* archive. It also emphasizes the importance of digital storytelling and community engagement for GLAMs in our times.

Keywords: digital archives, World War One, family and local history, (digital) storytelling

Introduction

One of the most important events in the last 8 years was certainly the marking of the centenary of the *Great War*, so that long before 2014 – the year that marked the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, lots of projects and activities associated with this topic have been planned and developed across the world and many times these took the form of a several years program.

Up until the end of 2018, official institutions, associations, communities, individuals of all ages, participated in a plethora of activities to properly commemorate, remember and mark this important event which deeply influenced the history of the entire world.

In this context, many cultural and memory institutions worldwide started to digitize their World War One related collections and build new digital archives.

Europeana – Europe’s digital archive, library and museum managed to build up an impressive WWI digital archive during its’ three First World War related projects: *Europeana 1914-1918*, *Europeana EFG* and *Europeana1914-1918 Collections*.

The *Europeana 1914-1918* project brought a different approach to the describing of the Great War times and to cultural history, illustrating “the simply people’s view “on the war by collecting personal stories and documents related to this topic.

So ,during this project the public was able to participate either directly on the established Community Collecting Days or by adding a picture of an item or type in a story online on the Europeana 1914-1918 website. The project proved to be the most successful among Europeana's projects in terms of public interest, usage (and re-usage) and geographical covering.

SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth Ship - Digital encounters after 100 years

How would it be for someone to discover some photos and unknown life facts about a beloved grandfather or other relatives, especially when the family has no photos about them?

Surely it would be a pleasant surprise to anyone and that has really happened to the family of Dumitru Nistor from Cluj County, Romania as they were able to discover searching the *Europeana 1914-1918* archive, unknown photos of their ancestor and many details about his life as a prisoner of war in WWI.

In fact, the contributions gathered during the Europeana 1914-1918 road shows and online, connected to the story of the Austro - Hungarian war cruiser *SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth* illustrate the opportunities offered by this kind of crowdsourced online archive. Three contributions from different parts of the world illustrating the famous Austrian war ship, three life stories from World War One time fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

The story of Dumitru Nistor

Dumitru Nistor's war diary and two poetry books compiled by himself in WWI times were contributed to the Europeana1914-1918 archive in October 2013 during the Collection day held at the county public library in Cluj Napoca.

Dumitru Nistor, a peasant from the village of Năsăud, was born in 1893. As he always dreamed to travel and see foreign countries, he enlisted the Austro-Hungarian navy in 1912 as the recruiting time came (Europeana blog, 2013).

After graduating from his Navy studies he embarked in 1914 as Geschützvormeister ('first cannon pointer') on the ship SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth, sailing to East Asia. The trip began from fleet headquarters at Pola (Pula) then moved towards the German treaty port at Tsingtau (Qingdao), China.

When the war broke up, Japan declared war on Germany and besieged Tsingtau, a harbour where Kaiserin Elisabeth battleship took refuge at that time. Several naval battles followed and on 2nd November 1914, the ship was scuttled. The following land battles were also lost by Dumitru and his comrades. The Japanese took then the German and Austrian defenders and removed them as prisoners of war (POWs) to Japan.

After a stage of ten months in a Buddhist monastery in Himeji Dumitru was moved to a prisoner of war (POW) camp in Aonogahara, where he remained until the end of 1919.

Dumitru- the peasant from Nasaud who desired to travel and meet foreign countries and people, had the chance of living in a multicultural environment in the POW's camps.

He decided to use his free time in a useful manner and compiled two volumes of poems composed by himself and gathered from his army colleagues: *The longing and misery chased away* and *Youth is life's flower*.

He describes them as 'international songs: Romanian, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Slavonic, Bohemian, German and Hungarian songs'.

But the most valuable contribution is Dumitru's personal diary where he gives a vivid account of these events and his time, offering precious details about the trip, the battles, the conditions in the war camp a.s.o.



*Figure 1. Drawing of the SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth Ship made by Dumitru Nistor
Europeana 1914-1918, [CC BY-SA](#)*

The story of Pasko Rogulj- the Croatian cook on SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth

Sixty two photos of the ship SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth, her crew, scenes from captivity in Japan; copies of a personal interview of Pasko Rogulj in 1973 but also an inspection report of Camp Aonagahara in 1915 and copies of personal documents of Rogulj were all contributed online to the *Europeana1914-1918* digital archive by his son-in-law, Gerald H. Davis from USA.

All these digital documents and photos describe the same events and war conditions as in Dumitru Nistor's case.

Pasko Rogulj was born 1891 in Propotnica near Trogir, Croatia and died 1973 in Statesboro, Georgia, USA. He enrolled in the Austro-Hungarian Navy in 1913 and trained as a cook. Pasko made the same trip as Dumitru in 1914 also aboard Seine Majestaetsschiff (SMS) Kaiserin Elisabeth and they both shared the POW's life in Japanese camps.

Camp activities like dramatic representations, exercises, sports, holiday celebrations (attended by Japanese officers) and funerals (all depicted in Pasko's photographs collection) suggest that treatment of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners was

humane, if not completely joyful as Davis states. Dumitru Nistor had also all he needed in order to keep a beautiful illustrated journal or even to compile two poetry volumes.

At the end of the war some of the prisoners returned to their homelands in a French vessel. As Austria-Hungary had collapsed in 1918 and ceased to exist legally at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and similarly the Austrian -Hungarian Fleet in its former structure, Rogulj and his comrades had to face the new situation and decide their future.



Figure 2. Photo of SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth Ship from Pasko Rogulj archive
Europeana 1914-1918. CC BY-SA

Rogulj decided to leave marine service and fled first to France and then to the United States, where he promptly became an American citizen. He worked as a cook, later ran his own restaurants in New York and Florida.

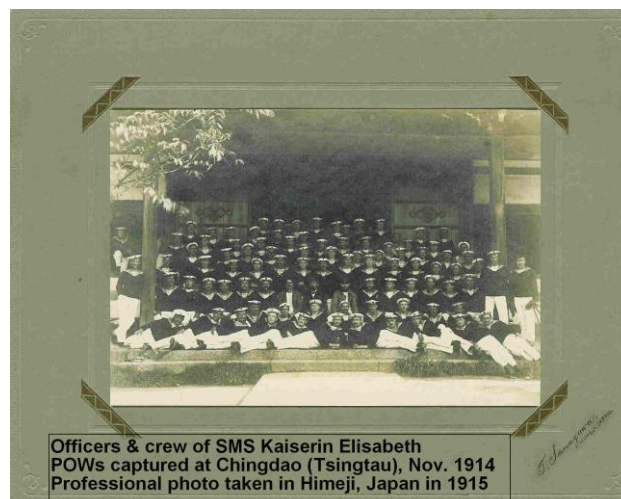


Figure 3. Dumitru Nistor and Pasko Rogulj with Kaiserin Elisabeth's crew -
from Pasko's private photo collection, **Europeana 1914-1918. CC BY-SA**

Melhior Katnik and Kaiserin Elisabeth Ship

The third contribution featuring SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth Ship, was made by Erich Katnik during the collection day in Nova Gorica, Slovenia. He contributed some photos and the story of Melhior Katnik -his grandfather, who served on the Austro-Hungarian battle ship before the Great War started.

Melhior Katnik, born in 1888, has lived most of his life in Trieste and spent his WWI time as a sailor in Devin (Duino in Italian).

Even though the outbreak of WWI has not found Melhior Katnik in Asia, as Dumitru and Pasko and he has not shared their fate in the Japanese POW camps, he spent valuable time on SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth ship prior to the war, enrolled as an engineer. His family kept some well-preserved photos with the ship featuring also some daily crew's activities.



Figure 4. SMS Kaiserin Elisabeth Ship and her crew prior to 1914 – from Melhior Katnik personal archive, [Europeana 1914-1918](#). [CC BY-SA](#)

The huge potential for digital archives

These interesting encounters of some life stories, characters, war situations after 100 years are not only happy events for their families, who were able to find out more details about their ancestors' lives after so much time.

This case illustrates the potential digital archives have, as one of the most fundamental benefits digitization has brought is the ability of archives to transcend geographical borders. Users located all over the globe can now view and research the multitude of collections digitized by GLAMs.

In such thematic digital archives, where people can contribute their own documents, the facts and events are completing each other offering a multifaceted and more complete

reality. In this specific case, documents and stories around the same object / events have the power to prove the accuracy of each other and of the related official documents offering at the same time 'the complete picture'.

Why do we need to tell stories

The huge success of *Europeana 1914-1918* roadshows and the big engagement shown by the contributors also online, illustrated the great desire of the public to share their family stories and documents with others. The participants mentioned a lot of reasons for contributing, ranging from 'the duty to remember their' ancestors sacrifice' in war', or the need to offer *life models* to the new generation to simply because their story is also an important piece of the entire puzzle. They felt their stories can complete the image of a war who so deeply influenced the lives of the 'simply people' all over the world, no matter which side they were on during the conflict.

A good illustration of the reasons behind telling stories is Dumitru Nistor's own testimony about his need to write a diary (Europeana blog, 2013):

'...seeing that I have so much time, I decided I shouldn't let it go unused. That would have been a horrible shame; (...) I then attempted to unload the weight and pain which tormented me and burdened my heart: but with whom? And to who? (...) Not having anyone to share my pain and ideas with, I thought it good to share them with the paper: it endures, it gives the right and allows everyone.'

Maybe this need to tell stories has been best described by Varga Llosa (1997): "Why does a man need to tell stories to others and himself? It is a way by which the mind uses fantasy to structure the chaos of the original experience. Complex and unpredictable, the vivid experience always lacks what fiction can provide: a closed time, a hierarchy of events, the value of people, effects and causes, the connections under the actions."

An improved stage – Digital storytelling

In the digital environment, storytelling becomes more attractive, as people can add to their personal narratives images, music, videos in order to create a unique and sometimes emotional snapshot into another person's experience.

For GLAMs it is extremely important to build and maintain such platforms for sharing and understanding these narratives, which in most of the cases can be associated with their own digital collections and projects.

Used effectively, they can engage the users and offer opportunity to reflect and consider the impact of their professional role on the storyteller.

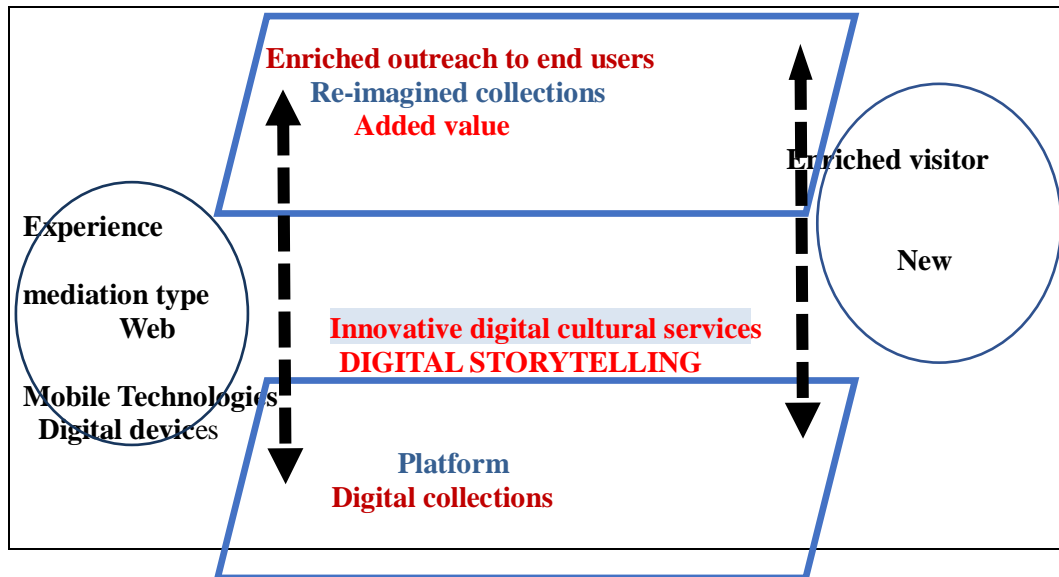


Figure 4. A new relationship with user and innovative outreach of digital collections

Conclusions

The *Europeana1914-1918* crowdsourcing campaigns, illustrates the benefits for GLAMs of building new relationships with their users, where they are encouraged to co-create, curate and add value to the digital archives. The new challenge for GLAMs besides the valorization of the cultural heritage and of their' own collections, is to build new mediation tools for the audience, new forms of relations and to develop new forms of "shared heritage and history".

And digital storytelling is in this case an important asset, as also Del Negro (2015) states : 'In all its permutations, from digital recordings to preschool story times to annual reports, storytelling can be integrated not only into library programming but also into management, training, and marketing. This cohesive approach allows libraries to offer a consistent, unified vision to their staff and their communities, from programming to outreach to advocacy. Storytelling as the driving philosophy behind library service can serve as a community creator and a focal point for activism'.

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