

**Report For The Film Archives For Africa on
Film Preservation, Restoration and Conservation
Training at the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in
Germany, Hoppegarten**

By

Bright Joshua

[March 18 – April 7, 2013]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to start by acknowledging and thanking all the parties involved that made my training in preservation of audio-visual materials at the Bundesarchiv possible and a success. I thank the curator of special projects Eva Orbanz for inviting me and sourcing the resources for the training to be a success.

A lot of thanks to the Film Archives for Africa Project for funding and sponsoring the whole training programme. It has helped me and the National Archives of Malawi as a whole to gain knowledge on how best can we preserve our audio-visual collections in particular the film collection.

I recognize the support given by the Director of the National Archives of Malawi Dr. Paul Lihoma for his financial and moral support in making sure that I attend the training.

Last but not least I wish to thank Mr. Egbert Koppe, Marlo Boelens and all the staff at the Bundesarchiv in Hoppegarten for making my training a success and worthwhile attending but also for providing the national archives of Malawi with film repairing equipment. I also thank Ms Werth-Mühl, Peter Mänz, the staff of Deutsche Kinemathek-Museum for Film and Television, and Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv headquarters for their tours and insight on how their institutions operate in preserving audiovisual archives.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the National Archives of Malawi and the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) developed in 2011 when FIAF sponsored two officers from our institution to attend FIAF Summer School in Johannesburg, South Africa. Attending the Summer School proved to be very important because upon return the National Archives of Malawi adopted the standards set aside by FIAF on the preservation of its audio-visual collection. In its proposal for the construction of a purpose built infrastructure to be built by the year 2015 to the Government of Malawi, the necessary equipment and building design for housing films were included using the knowledge gained from the Summer School.

VISITS TO FILM ARCHIVE INSTITUTIONS IN BERLIN, GERMANY

The programme commenced on the 18th of March with a visit to the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv headquarters in Berlin where we had a meeting with the deputy director Ms Werth-Mühl. We had a discussion on the structures of their institution and that of National Archives of Malawi, how they operate and how can they strategise to become even more efficient. She then took us on a tour of the different departments at the headquarters explaining how they operate and the processes involved from the point a film and its related documentation is identified, what channels the archive follows to obtain it, how is it handled and processed up to when it is put in their repository. The Headquarters mainly deals with documents and philatelic collections related to films and have a library too. We went to observe on how these materials are kept and preserved. What impressed me was the security on the accessioning process of the paper based and philatelic collections in that before a researcher is given a file for access, everything in it is counted and recorded. After accessioning, the researcher signs on a document which is put in that file and before it is put back in the repository the items are re-counted for verification. Also, the pictures were put in special plastic bags to avoid exposing them to dust and other unfavourable conditions.

On the second day, we went to the Deutsche Kinemathek-Museum for Film and Television where we had a meeting with the head of exhibitions Peter Mänz. We had a discussion on the background and structures for both of our institutions and how accessioning of their film collection was done. A lot about how to plan and hold exhibitions including their importance was discussed. We then were given a tour of their institution where we visited their library, repositories and the exhibition hall, and were given an explanation of their overall functions. Their repositories were very impressive because they have a cooling and heating system whereby temperatures and humidity are always controlled and balanced. The film documentation was stored in special plastic boxes and wrapped in special paper for preservation.

WORKING AT THE BUNDESARCHIV IN HOPPEGARTEN

On the third day I reported for work at the Bundesarchiv in Hoppegarten where I was given a tour of the facility and had a meeting with the senior technician Mr. Egbert Koppe and Marlo Boelens. For them to determine what should be included in the programme and would be suitable for me learn in relation to the state of film at the National Archives in Malawi, I was questioned on my knowledge of film preservation and that of my institution as a whole. They also inquired

on what film preservation equipment we have, quantities, condition and type of film we have in our collection so that they could have a clear understanding of our position and how the training could be structured so as to make it as beneficial as possible. At the end of the meeting a draft training plan was produced.

METHODOLOGY

The training was conducted from 19th of March to 5th April. I was assigned to different sections of the technical department so that I should have knowledge of what these sections do and learn from the personnel manning them. Training was commencing at 9:00am to 12:00pm, then we would break for a one hour lunch then finish at 16:00p.m. I would then have a brief meeting with Mr Klaue and Mr Boelens.

During the first week I was attached to film restoration section where I was taught on how to identify forms of film on different Gauges of 35mm, 16mm, 8mm and 65/70mm and how to distinguish between nitrate, polyester and acetate film together with their characteristics. I was also introduced to the basic structure of film stock which consists of a thinner layer called the emulsion that carries photosensitive materials using gelatin and the base that is thicker, transparent and provides support. The trainee learnt that the acetate, nitrate and polyester film have the same basic structure only that nitrate film is flammable thus needs to be handled with care, polyester film is strong, less vulnerable to physical damage and not easy to break or splice and, acetate film is fragile, not chemically stable and susceptible to physical damage. I was introduced to the usage of film restoration equipment such as the film editing table, splicer's, film rewinding tables, chemicals such as film cement, glue and their use, basic concepts on splicing and how it is done. I was provided with a number of books to use as study guides.

During the second week, I was involved in film restoration practicals where I was presented with film that was damaged, had tears, damaged splices, and broken sprocket holes and was told to fix it. I was then observed throughout the sessions when fixing the film and when a mistake was made I was corrected and taught on how I should have done it. This was very educative because I was then told to re-do it. Film rewinding, cleaning, handling and storage was also learnt during this week. A session on what are the main causes of film decay and damage, how to avoid these and treating them was also tackled. It was established that film mishandling is a big problem. Archivists usually handle film without gloves and carelessly unspool them on unclean worktables. Another cause was the storage of film in unfavourable conditions where temperatures and humidity are not controlled which eventually leads to the growth of fungus, mold and mildew. This also causes nitrate decay. The trainee observed that this was exactly the case at his home archive thus was very interested to learn more on dealing with this problem. Vinegar syndrome caused by water, high humidity and heat was the third agent to film decay. This makes the film weaker making it lose flexibility, it shrinks, curls and warps. The main solution given was to store the film in a controlled environment with low temperature and low humidity.

In the final week, I worked with the sound restoration department where I learned about the different types of film sound and how to identify them. I was involved in the restoration of sound, was taught how to digitize it and on the way it is added onto a film. The trainee was also involved in checking the synchronization of the sound and film images after digitization is done. Production of positive film was another interesting topic I learnt. I was also taken through the whole process of film digitization where we worked on an old nitrate film material and digitized it to DVD.

On the final day of the training I was given packs of film handling gloves, splicer's for 16mm and 35mm film, bottles of film glue and cement, special knives for working on film with, perforated and press tape. This was in view that as we are waiting to get other equipment like the working table which the Bundesarchiv is willing to donate to us, I can still be able to train my colleagues on the film handling, preservation and repairing basics for them to have a picture of the processes involved. At the moment the theoretical part has been done and what is remaining is the practical part.

Throughout the training I was involved in evaluation meetings with Mr. Koppe and Mr. Boelens on the progress of the training and what I felt should be included in the program.

BENEFITS FROM THE TRAINING

First and foremost I would like to thank Eva Orbanz and FIAF again for inviting me to train with professionals at the Bundesarchiv through the Film Archives for Africa project.

I benefited a lot from the training and have been imparting the knowledge I gained to my fellow employees on film preservation. The reference materials I was provided with have also been shared to them for study.

As a way forward, we are now in the process of labeling our film collection so that soon we may be able to catalogue it. The film size, type and condition is also being checked and included in the Meta data. Film with vinegar syndrome, mould and mildew is being separated from uninfected film. We would not have been able to do this if it wasn't for the training I underwent at the Bundesarchiv. We have also noted that film in plastic cans looks more stable than that in metal cans which is a vital aspect that will help us determine the type of cans to use for storage of our film.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The training through attachments to other institutions is very vital and should be continued. The time allocated should also be extended from 3 weeks to at least 12 weeks to provide ample time for study and for the learner to gain more experience. Most archivists at our institution do not have prior experience in the preservation of AV materials thus a provision for them to attend

similar training, summer schools and provision of scholarships for further graduate studies would be very beneficial not only to the institution but to Malawi as a nation.

The National Archives of Malawi seeks to have a closer contact with FIAF and become a member of the organization so that it may be kept up to date on AV material archiving and benefit from interacting with professionals from different backgrounds and institutions in order to exchange ideas and learn from them.

Apart from the equipment donated to us by the Bundesarchiv, the institution does not have any other equipment to ensure that its AV collection is preserved and conserved. Therefore the National Archives of Malawi through FIAF seeks to ask for help in acquiring such equipment to ensure that our documentary AV heritage is preserved.

CONCLUSION

I wish to state that the training was very vital and successful. I gained a lot of practical skills on the handling of film, its conservation and preservation methods. I feel participation in similar trainings would help our institution to be able to preserve our film collection and equip us with the highest levels of knowledge on film preservation. Lastly, I would like to thank Eva Orbanz, FIAF, all the Bundesarchiv technical staff and the Film Archives for Africa project for making this training possible and a success.

[received: May 3, 2013]