

Business Archives: An Assessment of the Last Twenty Tears

by Paola Carucci

In 1984 the “Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato”¹ was published as a single issue entirely dedicated to business archives. It summarised what had been accomplished² in this field during the previous decade. The “Rassegna” of 1984 included the minutes of two important meetings held in Genoa in 1982, one promoted by Ansaldo (www.ansaldo.it), and the other by Azienda municipalizzata trasporti (AMT) - the municipal transport company of Genoa (www.amt.genova.it). This issue also provided an overview of the international situation and a list of business archives and economic public corporations preserved in the State Archives, and in business archives that had been officially declared “of remarkable historical interest”. Some of the published contributions came from the companies themselves, which was an important innovation. A more precise definition of the activity of the archival superintence offices emerged: more than 180 business archives - some of which contained the records of a large number of other companies - were declared to be “of notable historical interest”. Among the sources preserved in the State Archives, those related to public corporations were even more numerous. The achievement of the Archival Superintence offices of Tuscany (<http://archivi.beniculturali.it/SAFI/index.html>), that had carried out a first census of all the business archives on the territory, was of particular relevance.

The following years saw an increase in the number of publications and a growing commitment of the Associazione nazionale archivistica italiana (ANAI) - the Italian National Archival Association (www.anai.org), in which there are currently registered, not only the state archivists, but also all those who work in the field of the documentary sources both public and private, as well as freelance professionals. In addition to a wide range of inventories of single companies, publications include: a census of Lazio’s business archives by the Archival Superintence offices (<http://archivi.beniculturali.it/SARM/attivita.html>), a census of the

¹ “Gli archivi di impresa”, by Paola Carucci, in “Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato”, XLIV (1984), 2-3.

² This refers to the round table of 1972 organized by the “Rassegna degli archivi di stato” itself, where, for the first time, an attempt was made to bring together economic historians who supported the initiative, and entrepreneurs who did not accept the invitation. Previous to that occasion, there was only limited interest in bank archives: the publication of two volumes on historical archives of credit companies by the Italian banker association dates back to 1956, while work on archives of manufacturing businesses was sporadic.

business archives of the Milan area by the Lombardy Region (www.regione.lombardia.it), a review of business fonds (also called “record groups”) by the Istituto milanese per la storia della Resistenza e del movimento operaio (Milan Institute for the History of the Resistance Movement and of the Workers’ Movement), a review of the municipal companies in the Veneto region, a review of the sources for the history of Catholic credit cooperatives in Bergamo, a guide of the sources for economic history in Como, a survey on cotton manufacturing in the south of Italy, a review of the sources for the history of emergency and reconstruction in Reggio Calabria, a review of the sources for the history of agriculture in Lombardy after Italy’s unification, and another one of the fonds regarding agriculture in Sardinia, an inventory of the unpublished sources for the history of contemporary Roman industry, while a panorama of the archives of the Chambers of Commerce is included in the documents of the second national seminar on business archives held in Perugia in 1988. Some inventories of single Chambers of Commerce had already been published and finally a brief general guide was published. An essay on “Archivi e Imprese” in 1995 showed the archives of the public corporations given to the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Central State Archive) (www.archiviocentraledestato.it) by the Ufficio liquidazioni del Ministero del tesoro (Liquidation Office of the Department of the Treasury)(www.tesoro.it). The bibliographical references related to the above mentioned publications and of the documents related to the conferences listed in the following paragraph can be found in the Direzione Generale degli Archivi, *Catalogo delle guide e degli inventari editi (1861-1998)*, edited by M. T. Piano Mortari and I. Scandaliato Ciciani with an introduction and a list of the fonds by P. Carucci, volume 2, MBAC-DGA, Rome 1995 and 2002; Direzione generale degli Archivi, *Cinquant’anni di attività editoriale. Le pubblicazioni dell’Amministrazione archivistica (1951-2000)*. *Catalogo*, edited by Antonio Dentoni-Litta, Elena Lume, Maria Teresa Piano Mortari, Mauro Tosti Croce, MBCA-DGA, Rome 2003.

During the Nineties, a number of conferences and seminars took place that usually concentrated, not only on business archives, but also on labor archives. A conference on the archives of the credit companies and on the sources for the history of Italian banks was held in Rome in 1989 and provided, apart from general information, the census of the bank archives of local interest in Umbria. In 1993 in Rome a study-day on economic archives was held. An important conference in Turin in 1994 hosted by the Piedmont Region (www.regione.piemonte.it) in association with the Gramsci Foundation (www.gramsci.it) and with the Associazione nazionale archivistica italiana (ANAI) (Italian National Archival Association) provided a great deal of information on the archival sources of the trade unions, the entrepreneurial associations and of the companies in Italy and in Europe. Among these initiatives, it is worth remembering at least three other important conferences organized by the Sezione Friuli-Venezia Giulia of the Associazione nazionale archivistica italiana (Section Friuli-Venezia Giulia of the Italian National Archival Association) (<http://anaifvg.altervista.org>) dealing with bank archives in 1997, insurances archives in 1999 and business archives in 2002, whose documents were published by ANAI (www.anai.org), and the study-day on archives and banks organized in Naples in 2000. Along with this intense activity and exchange of information, important work regarding the methodologies to adopt in the archival field was completed: in 1998 the “Manuale di Archivistica per l’impresa” was published by Paola Carucci and Marina Messina. The manual grew out of the experience of the

courses on business archival work organized in Milan by the Centro per la Cultura d'impresa and, in 2003, this publication was followed by "Archivi d'Impresa" by Giorgetta Bonfiglio Dosio.

The fonds preserved in the State Archives underwent a census in 1984, which showed an increase in the acquisition of business archives. For example, the general property company Sogene, acquired by the Central State Archive (www.archiviocentrale dello stato.it), contains around twenty significant archives of public corporations. These include: the Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale (IRI) (Institute for Industrial reconstruction) (www.iri.it), the Ente gestione e liquidazione immobiliare (EGELI) (Bureau for the management and liquidation of real-estate) (www.olokaustos.org/archivio/documenti/italia/441230-1036.htm) which, in collaboration with some banks, managed all assets taken from the Jews in the period following Italy's racial laws under the Fascist regime, a part of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (the bank for the south of Italy), the Istituto nazionale cambi con l'estero (INCE) (National Institute for Foreign Exchanges). Equally relevant is a trend towards the concentration of various business archives: for example in the State Archives of Turin (www.multix.it/asto), Biella and Varallo (www.asbi.it), Trieste (<http://archivi.beniculturali.it/ASTS>), Florence (www.archiviodistatofirenze.it) and Terni (<http://archivi.beniculturali.it/ASTR>). Information regarding these new acquisitions are published every year in "Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato". On the contrary, there is no precise information on which or how many business archives have been declared "of notable historical interest" after 1984. In the future, there will be the communication of the data owned by the archival superintendence offices on the Internet; however, to have all the information online with continuous updating, more time is needed.

The Centro per la Cultura d'Impresa (Center for the Business Culture) in Milan (www.culturadimpresa.org), created in 1991 by a group of business historians in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce of Milan (www.mi.camcom.it) has generated an intense period of activity, but only one other center was created after that: Centro studi sull'industria e sul patrimonio archeologico e industriale (Study Center on industry and on the archeological and industrial wealth) organized in Veneto by the Chamber of Commerce of Vicenza (www.vi.camcom.it) in 1986. The Center of Milan, through its Director, during the first national conference of archives held in the central State Archive in 1998, brought to light the need to create territorial economic archives, similar to institutions already existing in Germany, with the collaboration of local bodies (regional governments, private companies and representative bodies): that conference particularly underlined the situation of risk for a business archives when the agency or office that generates it undergoes a period of radical change. The archives of bankrupt companies, when bankruptcy proceedings are concluded, do not have a referent: many companies cease their activity and medium and small companies simply cannot afford to manage a historical archive. Business archives have very few possibilities: either preserving their files in the State Archives, already overloaded with the preservation of their own state sources; or entrusting them to some local offices or cultural institutions who have a particular interest in the preservation and valorization of the documentary sources. In fact, business archives, a proven well-spring of valuable historical relevance, are exposed to the highest risk of dispersion and destruction.

In 2001, the Center organized a conference in Milan on “preserving memory of economic agents”, promoted the development of territorial economic archives within the national archival system. However, the only concrete result of this promotion has been (up to now) the development of Ansaldo historical archives, which in 2000 became Fondazione Ansaldo-Archivio economico delle imprese liguri-Onlus (Ansaldo Foundation-Economic Archives of the Ligurian Companies-no profit) (www.fondazioneansaldo.it) with the institutional aim of finding, preserving and enhancing the archival wealth produced by companies, especially those in Liguria. This shows a particular attention not only to the single, even if important, business archives, but also to the local entrepreneurial system from all aspects. Over the last few years, some prestigious companies have created business museums, which also house historical archives (for example, Ginori in Florence). We should not forget that these are rarified situations that cannot replace the need for institutional action in the field.

Speaking from the legal point of view, the new Codice dei beni culturali (Code for the Preservation of Cultural Assets) (www.governo.it/GovernoInforma/Dossier/beni_culturali_paesaggistici/), which was passed in 2004 and permanently repealed the archival law of 1963, was a missed opportunity. Nothing concerning territorial economic archives was legislated. In the incongruous list of cultural assets in article 10, there are no references either to business archives (which, despite being at risk, are still classified in the general case history of private archives for which a declaration of cultural interests is necessary, provided that they have a “particularly important historical interest”) or to the economic history. While the Code mentions mining sites and rural architecture, it says nothing about industrial architecture. Photographs, films, audio-visual aids are considered as cultural heritage only when they are rare and valuable, even though article 11 states that they are considered “cultural heritage” (and therefore cannot leave national territory) if they are at least 25 years old. For ships and other water-born assets, a simple declaration of artistic or anthropologic interest is sufficient; while cars and planes must be more than 75 years old; assets and instruments concerning science and technology must be more than 50 years old.

In Italy, the term for filing documents in their respective historical archives in this continues to be 40 years after the depletion of the business, while in Europe the usual term is 30, or even as little as 20 years after. The term of 40 years should be reduced, not only for historiographic purposes, but also for the records’ physical preservation, especially for sensitive media and electronic documents. Indeed, assets belonging to public organizations are always safeguarded even if their structure changes. This has been clearly established. It is interesting to note that various archival superintence offices were able to circumvent the previous inadequate legislation for archives of privatised corporations (that is, formerly public) by immediately issuing a declaration of high historical interest.

The Code, full of ambiguities and humiliating for the safeguarding of state sources, gives major powers to the archival superintence offices that take advantage of the extensions of existing powers historical, artistic, architectural and archeological goods.

At this point, it is not necessary to underline incongruencies or cases of obvious errors due to the fact that archival superintence offices are governed in the same way as those for fine arts. Nevertheless, we should note the difficulty in understanding how the new powers can be concretely exerted: article 21, paragraph 4, for example, subordinates “the execution of every

kind of action or works on cultural assets” to the authorization of the superintendence offices. What do we mean by “action” referred to documentary sources? Probably nothing, while when we talk about “works” an authorization is due if we consider interventions on the physical structure of archives such as breaking-up, elimination and relocation (actions explicitly indicated in the article), to which can be added the physical rearrangement of the files and the restoration.

Obviously, it is illogical to expect a permission instead of a simple courtesy communication when the intention is to make a review or a census of archival fonds, or to make an inventory based on a virtual rearrangement. If we consider article 21 in connection with article 169 that provides for penal sanctions for illegal works, we can clearly notice that the extension of sanctions to archival goods would have required a clearer configuration with respect to artistic, architectural and archeological goods. It is certainly necessary to establish a penal sanction for the destruction or the unauthorized removal of an archival fond, but sanctions are also provided for “changes and restoration” as well as for every kind of intervention, while there is no reference to “works of every kind”. If we suppose that the rearrangement of documents can be inserted in the concept of changes, is it logical to foresee a penal sanction for all the people who worry about the rearrangement and the restoration of their own archive only because they did not think of asking for an authorization to the appropriate superintendence offices?

In the past, common knowledge has demonstrated that, in order to preserve documents, a policy that offers incentives was more useful than one that imposes sanctions - which are also difficult to apply. Unfortunately, the law 512/1982 on the tax regime of the assets of notable cultural interest, allowing for deductions and other advantages, was not followed up. This prevented its application in the absence of enforcement legislation. Naturally, as it always happens when there are normative changes, a period time must pass in order to verify the concrete effects of the new Code for Cultural Assets.