Video Tutorials

1. OuSArchiv – Background and Basics

Welcome to this video tutorial! This is part 1 in a series on conducting research in OuSArchiv, the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution.

The Arolsen Archives hold the world's most extensive collection of documents on victims of Nazi persecution. The collection was established through decades of work by the International Tracing Service, the ITS. The Allies founded the ITS after the end of World War II to search for missing persons and clarify their fate.

The collection of the Arolsen Archives is listed on UNESCO's Memory of the World register. It comprises over 30 million documents with information on more than 17 million people. A remarkable number of these documents have been digitized: over 85 percent of the collection has been scanned and can be viewed with the OuSArchiv program.

You can use OuSArchiv in the reading room of the Arolsen Archives and at the sites of seven copyholders worldwide. A list of copyholders can be found at this link.

This series will introduce you to the collections and explain how to use OuSArchiv for research. We will look at the different areas and functions of the program interface, explain how the collections are structured and organized, discuss the various search masks, show how to navigate through digital folders and files and how to save documents, explain how to search for people using the Central Name Index, and share tips on finding materials about specific groups, such as Jewish victims and survivors.

Some of the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives are freely accessible online, and we offer an online guide to help users understand the documents.

Back to OuSArchiv. The program requires a user name and password to log in. You can get these in the reading room of each copyholder institution. OuSArchiv was developed several years ago, specifically for the needs of the ITS by the software provider Ossenberg und Schneider.

It may look like an old version of the operating systems Windows, but the program is a powerful tool for searching and retrieving many millions of documents and pieces of data.

The main page is divided into three windows. On the left is a hierarchical folder structure known as the archive tree. In the middle is the search mask and a search results panel. And on the right we have so-called sub windows with an image preview and various indexing information.

The program also has a menu bar like that found in other applications. "View" and "Settings" are the only items in this menu that are relevant to us now.

"View" gives you the option of choosing alternative views of the archive tree (we explain this in the second video) and turning various sub windows on and off (we explain them in the third video).

Under "Settings" you can modify your "Preferences". This is primarily for changing the language of the program interface and the database contents.

All windows can be resized as needed.

2. Program Interface and Functions

Welcome to this video tutorial! This is part 2 in a series on conducting research in OuSArchiv, the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution. The Arolsen Archives hold the world's most extensive collection of documents on victims of Nazi persecution. In this video, we look at the archive tree to explain the structure and organization of the collections, and we show you two ways of navigating through the archive tree.

Let's start with the archive tree itself, which helps us understand the structure of our collections. The tree shows various finding aids as well as a total of seven groups of holdings. The first three groups form the heart of the collections. Group 1 contains documents relating to concentration camps, ghettos, prisons and deportations, which are internally sorted by places of detention and various subjects.

Group 2, with its somewhat unwieldy name, generally comprises lists, files and index cards on foreign forced laborers and other foreigners who lived in Nazi Germany during the war.

Group 3 includes all documents on liberated survivors and the registration and emigration of Displaced Persons, as well as tracing documents, particularly those relating to children.

We also want to highlight group 6, comprising the records of the ITS and Arolsen Archives themselves, including nearly 3 million case files – known as tracing/documentation files – which hold all correspondence since 1946 pertaining to victims of Nazi persecution.

The structure of an archive usually follows that of the institutions from which the documents have come, such as ministries. But as the case of Buchenwald concentration camp shows, this "provenance principle" has been broken here. Instead, the holdings are organized following a pertinence or subject matter principle, which helped the ITS fulfill its goal of finding information about specific people as quickly as possible. The original file structures, known as provenances, were dissolved in Arolsen. A wide variety of documents on individual people were sorted in large alphabetical card files. Lists containing the names of multiple people, as well as so-called "general documents" without names, were sorted in series of folders based on their subject matter. Different provenances were sometimes combined, as were originals and copies of documents from other archives. It is important to understand this aspect when researching in OuSArchiv.

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As we have seen, we can navigate through the archive tree by double-clicking or by clicking the plus sign to open the next level down. This is similar to the way files are stored on a PC. It also somewhat imitates the process of walking through the physical archives to reach the individual holdings and folders.

When a yellow card box icon appears in place of the folder icon, it means we have reached the lowest level of the individual sub-collections. Double-clicking a sub-collection will open it in a new window. But navigating through the archive tree like this only makes sense if you either want to browse or go to a very specific part of the archive – such as when searching for a name, as we will see in video 5.

The "Description view" is an alternative to viewing the archive tree as a hierarchical folder structure. We can easily switch to this by choosing the respective option under "View" in the menu.

Instead of hierarchical folders, the description view shows the archival descriptions of the underlying holdings and sub-collections. This view is therefore similar to using holding overviews and finding aids in a traditional archive. This kind of descriptive indexing played no role in the tracing activities of the ITS – the predecessor to the Arolsen Archives. The holdings have only begun to be described in this way in recent years. This means there is still a large backlog of documents to be processed this way.

Nonetheless, this view provides both a better overview of the content of individual holdings and the ability to start searching the archival descriptions. The results are highlighted in color, and the holdings can also be opened directly from here.

This leads us to the topic of the next video: thematic searches, using the search mask, and an explanation of the different levels of cataloguing.

3. Thematic Search

Welcome to this video tutorial! This is part 3 in a series on conducting research in OuSArchiv, the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution. The Arolsen Archives hold the world's most extensive collection of documents on victims of Nazi persecution. In this video, we use the example of a simple search to explain the search mask, search results and three ways that documents are indexed in the Arolsen Archives.

In the previous video, we saw how to search through the descriptions of the holdings in the archive tree by choosing the description view.

But the actual search function is in the middle window of OuSArchiv. You can choose from four search masks here. The first is the "simple search," which is also the most comprehensive.

For instance, imagine we are looking for material about the city of Kassel. We would enter the term here and press "Enter" or click the green arrow.

You can find out more about the search mask and using search operators by clicking the help button to view a PDF with explanations.

Next we'll look at the search results, which brings us to the three ways that documents have been indexed in the Arolsen Archives: through the assignment of attributes at document level, through OCR scanning, and through archival descriptions on the level of holdings and file folders. The results in these three areas are displayed in separate tabs. The corresponding information can be found in the sub windows.

The "Matches within attributes" include information that was recorded about individual documents in the archive database. For a long time, this was the most important indexing method for the ITS as a tracing service. Attributes include names, places, details about a person such as their nationality or religion, notes about old archival reference numbers, and other information that is sometimes very specific to a particular holding.

The "matches within associated notes" include results from OCR scans which were not post-edited and are therefore full of errors. OCR scans were only carried out on some documents in the collections, specifically, those that did not primarily contain names. The respective results are highlighted in the text in the sub window "text".

The third method of indexing involves the archival description of the holdings and files. The holdings of the Arolsen Archives are described in accordance with the ISAD-G international archive standard. The entire descriptive text is searched, and the results are highlighted. The Arolsen Archives are working intensively to describe all of their collections. But since this indexing method was unimportant to the ITS as a tracing service for decades, there are still major gaps in the descriptions.

The basic search also covers various aids and holdings that have not yet been digitized. If you have any questions about these or would like to view the holdings, please let the reading room staff know.

In addition to the basic search, OuSArchiv offers three other search masks that can be opened with a right-click. The "special search in attributes" is helpful if you want to search for a certain attribute across all holdings or want to filter a holding even further.

The "special search for archival descriptions" offers a similar function on the level of holdings and files.

Finally, searching by "object ID" will retrieve every single document via its identification number. This ID is always shown at the bottom left in OuSArchiv. This is helpful if you want to see a document that was cited in a research paper, for example.

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The size of the Arolsen Archives means that a very large number of results can be returned for some searches, so you can restrict the search in advance using the option button.

This will limit the search to certain parts of the collection or to individual indexing methods.

As we have seen, any documents that are found will appear in the image viewer beneath the results list. You can look through the documents either directly in this viewer or in the context of the respective collection. To do this, right-click on the search result in the list and choose "Display result in a new archive window". The next video in this series will explain how to navigate through the holdings and view and save documents.

4. Navigating the Collections

Welcome to this video tutorial! This is part 4 in a series on conducting research in OuSArchiv, the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution. The Arolsen Archives hold the world's most extensive collection of documents on victims of Nazi persecution. In this video, we show you how to navigate through the holdings and view and save individual file content and documents.

To open a sub-collection, either double-click the collection in the archive tree on the left, or right-click one of the results in the search results list, then choose "Display result in a new archive window."

When navigating through the holdings, it is important to remember the difference between folder series on the one hand and collections with index cards and case files on the other. The latter, which include individual prisoner documents from the concentration camps, are sorted alphabetically by name, and when the collection is opened, a name input field appears. After entering a partial or full name, a list of search results will appear. The sub-window "preview" provides an overview of the content. The other sub windows with the index information that we have already discussed are also available here.

When collections with folder series are opened with a double-click, you will see a structure similar to that of the archive tree. You can click through to the place you are looking for, such as a file folder, and then view a single image within it.

However, to get a better overview of a folder and to save content later on, we recommend loading the entire content of the folder straight into the preview window. To do this, right-click on the folder and then select "Display Thumbnails of this folder."

It takes just one click to select a document from the image preview. In the image viewer, the selected document can be made larger or smaller using a mouse wheel or the buttons in the header.

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The document can also be turned if necessary, and the back can be viewed. Additionally, the colors of the document can be inverted, which can greatly improve readibility.

You can save documents in OuSArchiv by clicking the printer button, which generates a PDF. To do this, first select the pages you want in the image preview.

You can either click one or multiple checkboxes under the documents in the preview window, or you can select all pages or a specific range of pages at the top of the window.

When the PDF is generated, you have the option of adding text if this is helpful. The text will appear in the footer of the PDF. You can however also leave the text field empty. Then you can save the PDF to your PC. If you visit the reading room of the Arolsen Archives, a personal folder will be set up for you on the PC, and you can copy the contents of this folder to a USB stick at the end of your visit.

The collection number and document ID are automatically generated in the footer of the PDF so that the document can be easily attributed later on and correctly cited in publications.

You now have the basic knowledge needed to explore the collections of the Arolsen Archives and search in OuSArchiv using keywords. The next video will build on this to explain how to search for people in the Central Name Index.

5. Searching for Individual Persons

Welcome to this video tutorial! This is part 5 in a series on conducting research in OuSArchiv, the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution. The Arolsen Archives hold the world's most extensive collection of documents on victims of Nazi persecution. In this video, we show you how to search for a person with the help of the Central Name Index.

The Central Name Index, referred to hereafter as the CNI, was established shortly after the end of the war when information from tracing inquiries was transferred to index cards. When the cards were filed, inquiry cards from missing persons and from the people seeking them would ideally collide in a *meeting of cards.* But often there was no such *meeting* because many missing persons had not submitted an inquiry or were no longer alive.

For this reason, information from documents was also soon transferred to cards which were filed in the index. The CNI thus became the key to the archive. It comprises over 50 million index cards with information on more than 17.5 million people. Due to the alphabetic-phonetic system, all information about a person is filed together in the index – regardless of how the person's name is spelled or where the documents are stored in the archive. The CNI was scanned back in 1998 and 1999.

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In OuSArchiv, we find the CNI under collection number 0.1 in the archive tree.

The search starts here by entering a person's first and last name. The birth date can be left blank. After hitting the start button, the system will ask which of the stored phonetic systems should be used. Usually you would select the entry with the addition "DB" for database. This is often the only option available. If there are several options, it is safest to check them all.

After hitting "start" we see two search result areas. In the upper section we have the so-called "Objects in sequence order" These are scans of the index cards as they were in the CNI in the late 90s. But because there were so many cards, not every card was indexed. Instead, single cards were indexed at certain intervals to serve as jump marks when conducting a search. We have to navigate manually in between jump marks using the keyboard.

The index cards are alphabetically-phonetically sorted by last name, then in ascending order by first name, and then in ascending order by birth date. Cards without a birth date are always filed at the start of a first-name.

In most cases, the index cards that can be viewed here are not the actual documents about a person, but rather references to where the documents are stored in the archive.

Another list of results appears in the bottom section. Collection number 0.1 includes references that were only created digitally after 1999. But this section also directly incorporates all documents – again in alphabetic-phonetic order – which contain personal details that have already been recorded in the archival database. Due to the ongoing indexing of the documents themselves, this section is growing all the time and makes many of the reference cards in the upper section superfluous. This is because here the documents can be found and saved directly without having to search through the reference cards.

Therefore, if you want to find all available documents about a person, we recommend that you always review and work your way through the lower section first.

For our example, Andor Abrahamovicz, we find the prisoner documents from Buchenwald that have been directly incorporated here. But we also find a purely digital reference to a search result in the Buchenwald holdings in the attributes.

Once this information has been established, you can switch to the upper section of the CNI reference cards and click or browse until you reach the right place. In the case of documents without a birth date, a prisoner number may help identify the individual.

This card also points to a document in the Buchenwald holdings. It must be manually retrieved from the digital archive using the signature, folder and page.

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The next reference card points to the individual prisoner documents on Andor Abrahamovicz that are already directly incorporated in the lower section of the CNI. Thanks to the indexing that has already taken place, this card is super-fluous and can be ignored.

Other reference cards point to other search results in the very extensive collection of Buchenwald documents, which also holds material on the satellite camps. The last reference points to a document showing that Andor Abrahamovicz was transported from Buchenwald to Bergen-Belsen in January 1945. There are no further indications of his fate.

There is a special feature in the CNI for the around 3 million people for whom a tracing/documentation file, or T/D file for short, exists in the archive – identifiable here by the sub-collection number 6.3.3.2. When the ITS first received an inquiry about a person, a T/D file was created to hold all subsequent correspondence about this person. All reference cards relating to the person were also taken from the CNI and placed in this file. All that was left behind in the CNI was an inquiry card which referred to the number of the T/D file.

Later on, when the T/D files were scanned, the reference cards originally located in the CNI and pointing to docu-ments about the person were incorporated into a dataset in the lower section as a reference. This dataset is identified by the sub-collection number 0.1. The reference cards are located under the "Archival References" tab.

The most difficult part of working with the CNI is using the information on the reference cards to find documents that have not yet been indexed. This is tricky not only because there are dozens of different types of reference cards that were used in different periods, but also because the reference system of the ITS changed many times, and old infor-mation about a document's location often no longer corresponds to the current structure of the archive.

There is a guide in OuSArchiv that will help you decode the different cards based on what they look like and then find the respective collections and documents within them. But despite this aid, searching for individuals using the CNI is complicated – after all, the index was an internal tool that evolved over decades at the ITS.

Therefore, do not hesitate to ask for help from the experienced staff members in the reading room of the Arolsen Archives or the copyholders. The same applies if you are missing some personal details. Besides using the CNI, there are other ways of searching that the reading room staff will be happy to explain to you.

6. Jewish Victims and Survivors

Welcome to this video tutorial! This is part 6 and the final video in a series on conducting research in OuSArchiv, the digital collections of the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution. The Arolsen Archives hold the world's most extensive collection of documents on victims of Nazi persecution. In this video, we show you how to search for material on Jewish victims and survivors across the entire archive.

As the previous videos have explained, the collections of the Arolsen Archives are organized thematically into various main groups. Additionally, not all documents have been cataloged to the same extent. If you are not looking for material about a specific person or someone with a specific name using the Central Name Index, you can find material on Jewish victims and survivors throughout the archive using other methods.

The first method leads from the archive tree to the holdings that almost exclusively contain material on Jewish individuals. Not all of these holdings have been cataloged yet, so using the search mask will not necessarily return complete results.

Some of the most important holdings can be found in group 1.2.1, which contains various sources relating to deportations.

Another example are the holdings in group 1.2.4, namely, the card file of the "Reich Association of Jews in Germany" and a large collection of index cards from the Jewish Council in Amsterdam.

The material in group 1.2.5.1 was only compiled after the war and comprises lists of Jewish residents of German cities and communities in the 1930s and 1940s which, based on resident registration documents, were produced by these communities at the request of the ITS in the 1950s.

Group 1.2.7.1 mainly consists of copies of documents from senior "Reich" officials and other persecution authorities from other archives.

Group 1.1. Camps and Ghettos holds various sub-collections of documents on places of imprisonment that exclusively or almost exclusively held Jewish inmates, from where they were deported or where they were murdered.

Material exclusively on Jewish survivors can also be found in some of the holdings on Displaced Persons after the end of the war, such as in group 3.1.3.1 – the emigration card file of the AJDC office in Paris, or the extensive collection of medical files from the Föhrenwald Jewish DP camp in group 3.1.2.12.

Another method involves using the basic search by entering partial strings such as "Jüd*". This will search all catalogued information in all collections, so the search result lists will be large: over 520,000 results in attributes, more than 27,000 results directly in the document texts, and over 2,600 results in the archival descriptions.

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But even this does not cover all of the holdings with information on Jews. For example, searching for variations such as "Israelit*" or by places associated with the persecution of Jews or the history of Jewish DPs will bring up additional material.

To navigate through the archive in a targeted way, we recommend restricting your search. You can do this by conducting a special search in attributes. This search mask can be used to search either the entire collection or just individual holdings. These holdings can be filtered further if necessary.

One example is the collection of Care and Maintenance files of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) from Germany, group 3.2.1.1. We recommend first checking how information about Jews was recorded in the archive. This search leads to over 19,000 case files on Jews.

Another example are the holdings with material on the Allies' large-scale foreigner tracing campaigns after the war. In these campaigns, the US authorities in particular were also looking for clues about the fate of German Jews. The search here can be carried out using the nationality field. It returns more than 45,000 results.

The third and by far most extensive example are the correspondence files of the ITS, known as tracing and documentation files, which can be searched via the associated inquiry datasets in the Central Name Index. To do this, set the religion attribute as well as a placeholder symbol in the T/D number field in order to restrict the search to these specific files. The result is over 314,000 datasets pointing to a T/D file for a Jewish victim of persecution.

Additional attributes can be applied to further limit the number of results. The "Information on persecution and fate" field offers an important filter option. If we filter the files using the partial string %Buchenw%, the search returns over 11,000 correspondence files on Jews with a connection to the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Despite these search options and large numbers of results, the current level of cataloging means that, in many cases, there is no way to avoid manually sifting through the scanned holdings. For example, only personal details have been recorded from most of the collections of prisoner documents from concentration camps such as Buchenwald, which likely contain tens of thousands of records on Jewish prisoners.

To manually browse the documents in a somewhat more targeted way, we recommend starting with the lists of results from previous searches.

The Arolsen Archives is striving not only to catalogue all of its holdings in more detail, but also to develop an interface for exporting data. This will enable users to automatically match the data between two holdings instead of using the manual process explained here – or to match the archive data with their own lists of names in order to find material specifically on Jewish victims and survivors or on other groups of victims.

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