

Association archives

Interview: Charlotte Spindler talks to Andrea Voellmin, historian and head of the Staatsarchiv Aargau cantonal archive

An association without paper is no more likely than an office without paper. But what should and must be kept? And how do you even set up an association archive?

You run a cantonal archive. Do you deal a lot with association archives in your job?

Yes. Our cantonal archive receives files from cantonal associations for storage and use; that's part and parcel of our job. Sometimes we receive documents from associations that have disbanded as a "present"; sometimes we receive other archive files for storage in a safe place. We make these files publicly accessible. We are visited by people, for example, who are conducting research into local history or for a commemorative publication; for them, association files are an important source of day-to-day history.

What should and must be archived?

The foundation of an association is a historical act; the first things to go into the archive are therefore the minutes of the first general meeting, the articles of association and any amendments thereto. The articles of association also reveal the objects of the association. For each association year, an annual report, annual accounts and the minutes of the general meeting are added, followed by member lists, executive committee minutes and association programmes. Other important documents include photos, films and possibly newspaper excerpts, if the association organises public events and thus appears in the media. Pursuant to Article 962 of the Swiss Code of Obligations, annual accounts, balance sheets and other documents related to the association's finances must be stored for 10 years. Beyond that, there are only a few provisions pertaining to document retention in Switzerland.

How do experts go about archiving?

If you're looking to set up or order an archive, you need to develop an appropriate classification system. This will make it easier for people to find their way around the archive, for example when handing over the association files to a new executive committee. Material can be organised by keyword or main group, such as basic information, general meeting, association management, finances, member administration, tasks, contacts and documents; the cantonal association or the umbrella association at the national level may also be a keyword. We call this an archiving and filing plan.

How do you do this in practical terms?

After being reviewed and ordered, the material is organised into labelled folders. These are kept in boxes of archives. Boxes require less space than folders and are easy to transport. Anything not regarded as worthy of archiving is disposed of. It doesn't make sense to keep two or three copies of anything. A good organisational system will save space. On computers, a catalogue can be created in which the individual documents can be organised in accordance with the archiving plan; this could be a simple Word document. If the association has already been in existence for years or even decades, the archiving material may first need to be dusted off, with any rusty staples removed. An important question is where the archive will be located. It must be secure; the documents should not be stored in damp cellars or dusty attics. Local museums, the association premises or larger archives could be options.

How much work is involved if someone wants to organise an unordered collection of documents into a real archive? And how much paper is involved?

In our experience, associations that have been active for 25 years have metres and metres of material. To view these documents and order them in a manageable way, you will need to dedicate anything from a few days to around a week, depending on the starting situation. This is doable. Things become challenging if you want to then supplement the association archive, for example by creating a complete collection of annual reports, or if you want to document the pre-history of the association leading up to its foundation. The person responsible for the archive files all new documents in accordance with the classification system and may also archive them on the computer at the same time.

Who manages the association archive?

In principle, the association's executive committee or chair appoints someone to be responsible for the archive. There are also freelance archivists that could take on the task of overhauling an association archive.

What about data protection?

Generally, there are no problems with making most association documents publicly accessible. Data protection laws must be taken into account when handling personal data such as member lists. It's recommended to draw up an archiving regulation governing access to the files for third parties.

The Staatsarchiv Aargau promotes archiving activities by organising courses, and has also developed documentation on how to set up an association archive. It's a big commitment for associations!

Associations reflect social developments. They are important for historical research because they have always been active in areas in which the state has been less involved. I'm thinking specifically of some non-profit organisations that have been around since the 19th century, such as the Aargauische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft, as well as some environmental movements more recently. Associations undertake activities related to educational issues, sports, culture and social policy; they cover key areas politically. Over time, some associations also become irrelevant, such as cremation associations or associations focused on voting rights for women, because they have already fulfilled their objects. Others merge because of dwindling member numbers, such as confessional associations; such developments are exciting. Archiving association files is a lot of work, but it also shines a spotlight on what has been achieved through voluntary work.

What should be stored?

- Minutes of the first general meeting
- Articles of association
- Amendments to the articles of association
- Annual report
- Annual accounts (obligation to store annual accounts for 10 years)
- Minutes of general meetings
- Member lists
- Minutes of executive committee meetings
- Association programmes.

If available:

- Photos
- Films
- Excerpts from newspapers

How should documents be stored?

Create an archiving plan, create keywords or main groups such as

- Basic information
- General meeting
- Association management
- Finances
- Member administration
- Activities
- Contacts
- Documentation

Important:

Place documents in labelled folders and pack these into archiving boxes.

Store everything safely, not in damp (cellar) or dusty (attic) places.