

The conservation of archival documents and books

Nine years in Beirut – Polish expertise in the conservation of archival documents and books helping to safeguard Lebanon's heritage.

The National Library of Lebanon was founded in 1921 and until the outbreak of civil war in 1975 was located inside the Parliament building, which went on to incur serious damage during the first few years of this conflict. The library collections housed there were left in rooms with damaged roofs and windows, where they gradually deteriorated. In 1993 the National Archives Centre requested technical assistance from the UN in the renovation of their archival collections and historic manuscripts salvaged from the National Library. In response to this request, in 1994 Anna Czajka, a conservator from the National Library in Warsaw, came to Beirut as a volunteer (UNV) under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme. Her task was to assist the National Archives in their efforts to secure and treat their collections and to set up a conservation laboratory for archival materials. Work began by carrying out a review of the manuscript collection and of the first ever books printed in the Near East in Arabic at the end of the 18th century. Assessments were made of the damage to the collection and of the condition of the archival materials, with the most valuable documents being identified into groups which required conservation treatment as a priority. Subsequently, steps were taken to stabilise the collection – manuscripts and printed texts were cleaned and secured in temporary packaging. Items exhibiting traces of mould were set aside for further observation. After years of preparation, in 1997 resources allotted by the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development (an organisation supporting the rebuilding of the Lebanese state administration's infrastructure) allowed a modern conservation unit to be equipped.



Staff training workshops at the National Library, Beirut 2003.

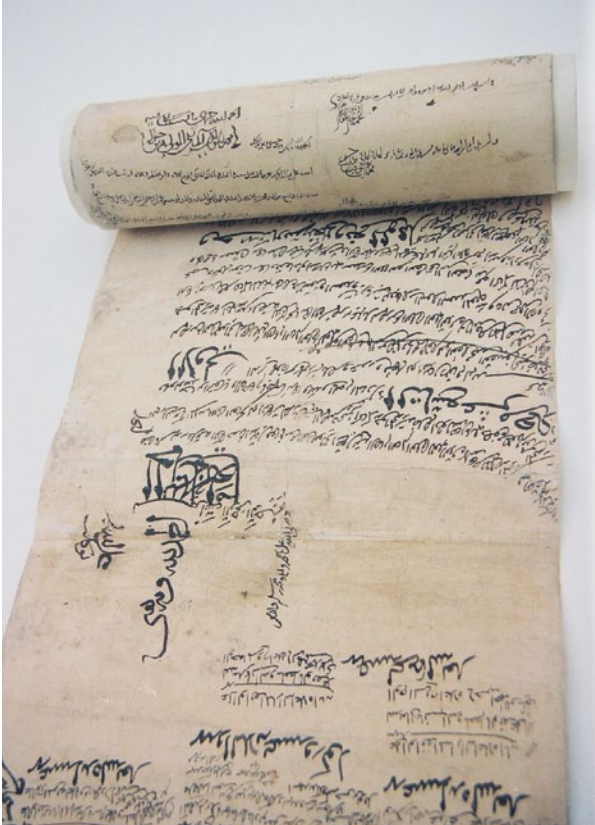


Filling losses in the pages of a printed text dating from 1797. National Archives Centre.



Analysing the acidity of paper in a historic book. National Archives Centre.

In 1998–2003, in her capacity as a consultant at OMSAR (Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform), Anna Czajka was responsible for training Lebanese colleagues in the skills of securing and treating archival materials and books. She initiated the systematic securing of archival materials in acid-free packaging and the conservation of the collection. As the main aim was to train Lebanese conservators, all of the projects undertaken were subordinate to teaching objectives. Laboratory staff were familiarised with the principals of carrying out conservation measures and protecting archival materials, and taught the basics of book binding as well as the earlier techniques used in this process – both in Europe and the Near East. They were also introduced to the history and technology of paper production. Furthermore, they learned how to identify and counteract damage to documents. As part of this training programme Anna Czajka and her Lebanese colleagues conserved numerous printed texts and manuscripts. In cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Mrs Czajka conducted the first technical workshops for staff of the National Library at the storerooms in Beirut’s port where, thanks to the efforts of the National Library Foundation, the renovation and cataloguing of books recovered from the sores of the UNESCO building was undertaken. At the behest of OMSAR she analysed and produced a report on the condition of the DGA photographic collection, detailing the essential measures needed to salvage this invaluable collection of photographs recording archaeological excavations carried out in Lebanon since the early 20th century. She also took part in the work of a committee created by OMSAR to draft a “Citizens Charter for Heritage”.



17th-century Waqf document after conservation. AUB. ▲

Waqf documents of the 16th and 17th centuries before conservation. AUB. ▲



Mrs Czajka also conducted a series of conservation projects for the Archive of the American University: conservation of Waqf manuscripts of the 16th and 17th centuries, conservation and securing of letters written by George Washington and William Penn, conservation of historic AUB diplomas and others.

▲ Archival materials conservation unit built at the National Archives Centre, Beirut-Hamra, Piccadilly Building.