

The Centre for the Social History of Limburg: 'private' archives in the public sphere

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The Centre for the Social History of Limburg: 'private' archives in the public sphere

di Nico Randeraad

Il Centro per la Storia Sociale del Limburgo: archivi «privati» nella sfera pubblica
Il Centro per la Storia Sociale del Limburgo (Maastricht), fondato nel 1949, è un istituto regionale di documentazione per la storia sociale ed economica, soprattutto dell'800 e del '900. Le sue collezioni comprendono archivi di imprese, associazioni e privati e una biblioteca di storia regionale, per un complesso di quattro chilometri di documenti. Le fonti archivistiche e a stampa conservano fra l'altro tracce significative della storia dell'immigrazione italiana nella regione nel corso del '900.

Keywords: archivi privati; storia sociale; documentazione; Paesi Bassi; Limburgo.

The connections between events and experiences in different phases of one's life often only emerge in retrospect. When 35 years ago I embarked on a comparative study of prefectures in liberal Italy, primarily based on sources preserved in various *Archivi di stato* spread over the country, I could not foresee I would one day become director of a documentation and research centre for the social and economic history of Limburg, a province in the South of the Netherlands. I did not know then that the 'gaze from the province' would become a constant factor in my work as an historian. Not infrequently, this view from the middle and from within generates insights that do not immediately emerge when starting out 'from above' or 'from below'.¹ To be sure, provinces in present-day Italy and the Netherlands are, despite their common French-Napoleonic roots, rather different administrative entities, and there is little direct connection between my current responsibilities in Limburg and Italian archives functioning at a provincial level.

It would nevertheless be interesting for a mainly Italian readership to explain the nature and functioning of the centre I am managing, if only to satisfy my own eagerness to create a novel relationship at a provincial level. Perhaps the notes at the end containing a few references to Italian connections in our collection are the beginning of the development of new joint interests. The Centre for the Social History of Limburg (SHCL) is an independent heritage institution associated with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University. The centre provides a research infrastructure for comparative regional history by providing access to historical archives, managing a library collection, and conducting research. The archival collection contains approximately 4 km of files, while the library includes books, periodicals and 'grey literature' extending over roughly 3.5 km. The archival holdings mainly include records of businesses, societal organizations, trade unions,

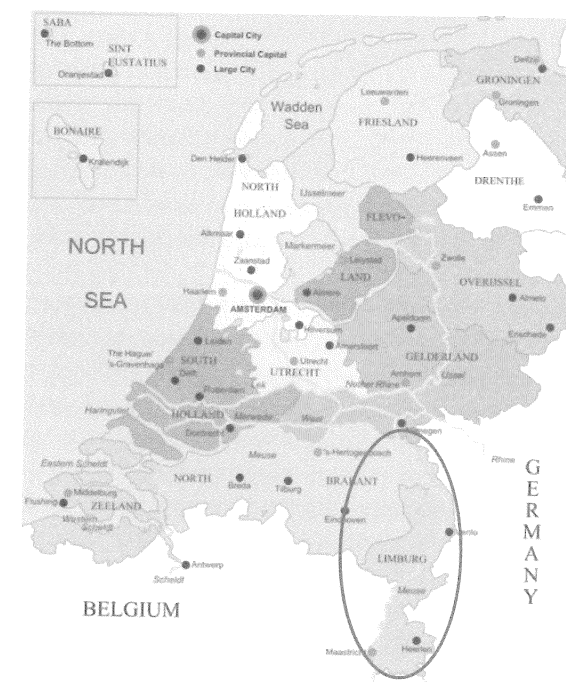
and individuals. As a result of its acquisition policy, largely based on direct contacts with societal organizations, the Centre also holds a collection of about 200 flags and banners, available online <www.limburgsevaandels.nl>.

Since its foundation in 1949, the Centre has conducted and stimulated research into the socio-economic history of the province of Limburg from the late eighteenth century onwards. The research focuses on domains such as labor and business history, demographic history and the social history of the landscape, more specifically on agricultural history, mining history, migration, public health, and large spatial infrastructures. The position of Limburg as a border region serves as a focal point, with studies both on cross-border contacts and interactions, and on regional developments in a comparative perspective. Limburg's integration into the Kingdom of the Netherlands has been a slow process. It did not exist as a province before the French Revolution, such as Holland or Utrecht, was split in two after Belgian independence, and formally remained a member of the German Confederation until 1869. Its population was almost entirely Catholic, which underlined its distinct, 'peripheral' character in relation to the Low Countries north of the Rhine. The growth of the mining industry in the first half of the 20th century accelerated the socio-economic modernization of Limburg. At the same time, if there is something that can be defined as a Dutch cultural identity, Limburg retained a degree of particularity, both in the view of its own inhabitants and in that of the rest of the country. In that sense, there is some similarity with regard to ascribed differences between 'Nord' and 'Mezzogiorno' in Italy.

The Centre's yearbook, published since 1955, has become a benchmark for solid contributions about Limburg's history in the past two centuries. In collaboration with Maastricht University, the director of SHCL holds the chair of 'Comparative regional history, in particular that of Limburg and neighboring regions'.

SHCL employs a staff of 15 people, and regularly hosts research fellows, interns and volunteers. It is subsidized by the Province of Limburg and Maastricht University, and on average raises 10% of its yearly income from external funding.

The centre was founded in 1949 by a group of like-minded intellectuals who strongly believed in the urgency of keeping the memory of a thriving Catholic civil society alive². They dreaded the idea of a new political and societal order that progressive circles propagated in the wake of the Second World War. This new order, they feared, would mean the end of the system of pillarization that had taken



1. Limburg's location

shape between the end of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries. The pillarized organization of society, with its clear-cut boundaries between Protestant, Catholic and Socialist spheres, had strongly favored the emancipation of Catholicism, especially in the two southern Dutch provinces Noord-Brabant and Limburg, where the vast part of the population was Catholic. Although it would take another two to three decades before pillarization eventually collapsed, the sense of impending doom among Catholic elites in the late 1940s was highly concrete, and led them to pursue an activist agenda in political, social and cultural domains.

SHCL was meant to become an information hub for sources regarding social life in the province of Limburg. The archives of trade unions, housing corporations, cultural societies, which the Centre wanted to collect, would facilitate the study of pressing societal issues and help maintaining social and religious cohesion along Catholic lines. Whereas the archival collection was quite slow to get off the ground, the Centre assisted prolific authors such as Remigius Dieteren, one of the Centre's founding fathers, collecting data and compiling statistics. Dieteren was particularly keen on writing the recent history of the coalmine region in the south of the province, which had experienced a dramatic transition since massive exploitation had begun around the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Never failing to underline his indebtedness to the Centre's staff, he wrote quantitative studies on migration, housing, health care and trade unions. He drew his inspiration from the idea that it should be possible to maintain a society based on Christian principles, despite the profound changes that industrialization had brought about. Statutorily, however, SHCL has never been a Catholic institution and, as secularization progressed, gradually cast off its ideological feathers.

The closure of the mines and the general restructuring of the economy from the end of the 1960s onward led to a larger inflow of business archives. Similarly, reorganizations in the domain of social care and education resulted in the dissolution of quite a few organizations in these fields, with their archives often ending up in the SHCL storage rooms. The political and social changes of the 1960s also left their mark on the mission and goals of SHCL, even though with some delay. In 1968 the Centre acquired para-academic status and when Maastricht University was founded in 1976, the Centre sought alliance with the university, which resulted in the establishment of a special chair in 1983, to be occupied by the director. The current director and the head of research are both part-time employed by Maastricht University, thereby underlining the importance the Centre attaches to academic teaching and research.

Unlike Italian legislation the Dutch archival law mainly provides a juridical framework for archives of governmental institutions and those private services that execute public tasks, such as universities, public schools, notaries and bailiffs. This does not mean of course that state archives do not preserve records of private institutions and persons. The law also states that those collections, if they have come into possession of a state archive (either at national, provincial or local level), are subject to the same rules as governmental documentation. For a long time, nevertheless, there has been a certain reluctance on the part of state archives to acquire private archives, which has led – already since the beginning of the 20th century – to the establishment of separate institutions for business archives, social history, women's history, war documentation, et cetera. The reserve towards private archives that has characterized Dutch archival legislation throughout the 20th century, is one of the reasons why the founding fathers of SHCL were so adamant that records of civil society organiza-

tions in Limburg be preserved by what we would now call a non-governmental organization. The new archival law, now under scrutiny by Parliament, foreseen to take effect on 1 January 2024, will take a more active stance towards the incorporation of private archives in public record offices.

Transnational history 'takes place' at different levels between the local and the international. In the wake of new historical insights, the Centre is discovering transnational traces in its collections, including relations with Italy. Maastricht and South Limburg were important hubs in the early days of Dutch industrialization. The archives of *De Sphinx*, the earliest large steam power-driven factory in the Netherlands, contain a wealth of material related to its international labor force, foreign markets, and expertise deriving from abroad. The percentage of immigrant workers from Italy at *De Sphinx* was relatively low, in contrast with the coal mines, which attracted higher numbers of Italians. Especially after the Second World War the mines actively recruited laborers in Italy³.



2. Leaflet distributed in Italy in the 1950s to recruit miners

Individual craftsmen found their way to Limburg too. Giuseppe / Joseph Lizier (1874 – 1967), a mosaic and terrazzo worker from Travesio (Pordenone) came to Maastricht in the beginning of the 20th century, after having worked several years in Paris. Lizier's company was active in the market for private houses, but made his name as subcontractor of the highly prolific architects Pierre and Joseph Cuypers for mosaic work, such as various floor medallions of the abbey church of Rolduc.

The Centre holds copies of letters sent by Lizier to his family, architects, and clients.

SHCL is gradually digitizing parts of its collection, in particular imagery, such as historical photographs and the earthenware decoration designs from *De Sphinx* and the *Société Céramique*, see the complete set on the site of 'The Memory'⁴. Through the digital collections it will no doubt become easier to encourage interaction and exchange related to topics with an Italo-Dutch dimension.



3 (left). Giuseppe (Joseph) Lizier's office in Maastricht (HCL-Fotocollectie GAM 1479)

4 (right). Details of mosaic medallions executed by Giuseppe Lizier in the Abbey Church of Rolduc

NOTE

1. We have elaborated on this perspective in relation to the history of Dutch provinces in S. Couperus, H. Kaal, N. Randeraad and P. van Trigt, *Provincializing the Kingdom of the Netherlands: South-Holland in the Nineteenth Century*, in «Administory. Zeitschrift für Verwaltungsgeschichte», 2, 2017, pp. 172-190.

2. The history of the Centre for the Social History of Limburg has more extensively been recorded by W. Rutten, *Vijftig jaar Sociaal Historisch Centrum voor Limburg: hoofdlijnen en keerpunten*, in «Studies over de sociaaleconomische geschiedenis van Limburg / Jaarboek van het Sociaal Historisch Centrum voor Limburg», XLV, 2000, pp. 8-26; and F. Hovens, *Het Sociaal Historisch Centrum voor Limburg: zijn missie en zijn collecties*, ivi, LXVI, 2021, pp. 11-41.

3. S. Langeweg, *Mijnbouw en arbeidsmarkt in Nederlands-Limburg: herkomst, werving, mobiliteit en binding van mijnwerkers tussen 1900 en 1965*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2011.

4. <<https://geheugen.delpher.nl/en/geheugen/pages/collectie/Decoraties+Maastrichts+aardewerk,+1836-1969>>.