Challenges for initiating digital public history projects in heritage institutions. The online exhibition 'Belgian refugees in England during World War One': a case study.

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Amsab Institute of Social History (Amsab ISH), the cultural archive and heritage centre for social, ecological and humanitarian heritage, organised the digital exhibition 'Belgian refugees in England during World War One'.[i] This public history project was one of the initiatives in the World War One centenary commemorations. Amsab ISH explored its collection for relevant documents and came across the archive of the socialist Belgian Federation of Metal Workers (CMB). Most of the CMB members were Belgian refugees who worked in the British munitions factories as the British army had experienced shortages of ammunition during the First World War. The union provided sickness and unemployment benefits, but also helped the refugees with the problems that they were facing.

About 250,000 Belgians fled to the UK during World War One. This is still the largest flow of refugees in British history. [ii] We felt that their forgotten stories deserved more attention. It was clear from the outset that we would opt for a lively and participative approach.[iii] Together with our project partners (Flanders Fields Museum, and genealogical and local history societies among others), we launched a call for personal testimonies encouraging the descendants of Belgian refugees, as well as the English families who had housed them, to share their stories with us. We opted for a bilingual (Dutch and English) virtual, online exhibition in order to attract a wider audience and also to appeal to a British audience.

The online exhibition covers different aspects of the life story of Belgian refugees: their escape to England, the emergency accommodation, education, work, daily life, culture and their return home. One can navigate easily through the site, selecting and exploring topics, themes and sub-themes of interest via the tree-like structure of the exhibition. Topics are illustrated with photographs, short films and documents, and are linked to testimonies. Links at the bottom of the page provide access to the full story of a particular refugee throughout the exhibition.

From the outset, we had an ambitious goal for the project. We wanted to construct an online exhibition which could be re-used for other exhibitions hosted by Amsab or by other heritage organisations. In the search for an appropriate developer, we were helped by the multimedia department of the West Flanders Higher Education Institute (HoWest). Two lecturers carried out a preliminary analysis on the basis of a proposal outlined by Amsab, with the assistance of the creative design company Pièce Montée, who took care of the graphic design of the exhibition. The final development of the platform was undertaken by Lunar Gravity. In the first phase of the project, HoWest was particularly important as they provided us with feedback and served as a test user group. PACKED, a digital heritage expertise centre which supports heritage and arts organisations in Flanders in the production, sharing and preservation of digital cultural content, regularly provided us with feedback and advice. Our experience showed that our own IT colleagues at Amsab were essential for the project, not only to translate our wishes to the developers, but also to develop the infrastructure together with Lunar Gravity so that they were familiar with the technology they would need to continue to use and maintain. Their involvement really has to be there from the start, which

is not easy as the entire IT staff is engaged full-time in managing the digital collection. Moreover, commercial IT companies are often unwilling to pass on their full knowledge.

Tamar Cachet, a former member of staff at the State Archives of Belgium and now part of the Ghent Centre for Digital Humanities (GhentCDH) team evaluated both her own online platform 'Belgium WWII'[iv](as a co-developer), and the Amsab-ISH project, noted that: "New digital media are a promising development for the heritage sector, though not so promising as one would expect, in my experience. Therefore, we should be willing to redefine the role of the project coordinator, and turn him or her into a 'digital curator'. The digital curator is a key figure, a creative person who combines historical and digital expertise in order to ensure close cooperation with the digital developers. Although pilot projects such as 'Belgium WWII' and the Amsab-ISH online exhibition are still facing (teething) problems, public historians are eventually offered the opportunity to become digital curators themselves."[v]

Initially, the aim was for the exhibition to be accessed through various devices (smartphones, tablets, etc). However, the tablet, the laptop and the desktop computer turned out to be the best options, as the quality of the images and the navigation work much better on a larger screen.

The exhibition has been evaluated by a variety of test users. For example, it was found that a large number of users expected to scroll rather than to zoom. To help these users, we created a short introductory film to show them how to navigate[vi]. Some users observed that the images open too slowly and that the system does not provide an overview of the tree structure. Other test users responded positively. Navigation was easy in their opinion and they were particularly enthusiastic about the possibility of zooming in, resulting in improved readability of the documents and better quality images revealing more details. Users also praised the richness of the content.

The underlying source code of the online exhibition is open source and published in Gitlab together with the developer documentation.[vii] This means that, in principle, both Amsab and other heritage organisations can develop new virtual exhibitions on other topics. However, we discovered that this is not a straightforward process. The challenge is to establish an open source development community based on the scarce IT expertise within heritage institutions. The aim of this poster is to demonstrate both the challenges and opportunities that historians in heritage institutions face when embarking on such digital public history projects.

[i] http://tour.belgianrefugees14-18.be/en

[ii] De Vuyst, Jolien (2019). Refugee relief during the First World War: Belgian refugees in Birmingham (1914-1919). Ghent: Ghent University.

[iii] Ridge, Mia ed. (2014). Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage. Farnham: Ashgate.
Danniau, Fien (2013). Public History in a Digital Context. Back to the Future or Back to Basics? in: BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review | Volume 128(4), pp. 118-144.

[iv] https://www.belgiumwwii.be

[v] Cachet, Tamar. (2018) Belgische vluchtelingen in Engeland tijdens WOI: van crowdsourcing naar virtuele tentoonstelling in: Contemporane 38(2). Zie: https://www.contemporanea.be/nl/article/20182-geschiedenis-online-tamar-cachet

[vi] Unfortunately, extensive re-design of the exhibition navigation at this stage in the project was not possible within the project budget.

[vii] http://git.lunargravity.be/project/amsab-fork