

LIKE A SIGNAL THROUGH THE YEARS

Digitising the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre collection

Jordan Saltzman

Project Manager, Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre

Isabelle McGinn

Lecturer and conserator at the University of Pretoria

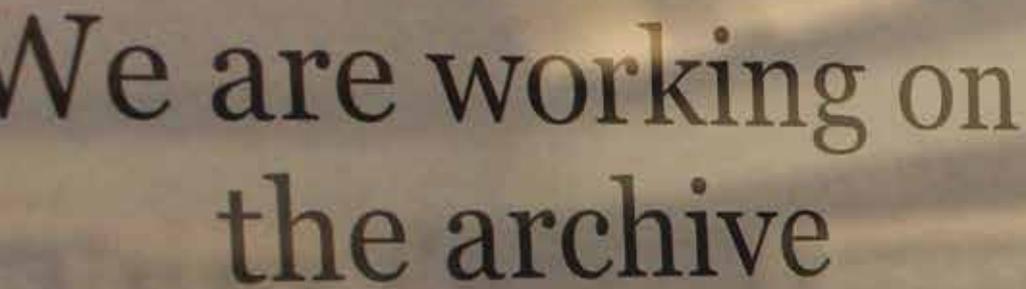
Heritage, Museum and Preservation Studies and Tangible Heritage Conservation

The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) is a place of memory which explores the history of genocide in the 20th century, with a particular focus on the case studies of the Holocaust and the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. It examines the connections between genocide and contemporary human rights issues, urging visitors to understand the consequences of prejudice, discrimination and othering, so as to prevent the recurrence of mass atrocities and genocide in all its forms.

The JHGC collection contains tangible items as well as recorded testimonies and videos related to the Holocaust and linked pre- and post- World War Two, including objects from death camps, bureaucratic and personal documents, books and photographs. There is a similar collection from the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, and also individual items related to other genocides and related themes. Whilst the collection is historic, it feeds into contemporary topics, and as most of it is personal in nature (memoirs, family donations, personal possessions), it has a hold on the present – several of our volunteers are descendants of Holocaust survivors or are genocide survivors themselves. This also means that the collection continues to increase and develop, and that there is an interest in contemporary collecting.

At the end of 2020, supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the JHGC began to catalogue, photograph and digitise its archival collection. Through an internship programme arranged by the University of Pretoria, eight postgraduate students took the opportunity to work at the JHGC to assist in creating and testing processes for the archive, as well as the practical work of sorting, cataloguing, documenting and repacking the archival material. The experience turned out to be an excellent case study of collaboration and mutually beneficial partnership. With paperwork and payments only coming through in mid-October, and a budget to be spent before year-end, this left around two months to complete the work. As much as we needed to plan a process and understand how things would implement in practise, we also needed to get started with the process as soon as possible... it was certainly an exercise in prioritising, decision making and flexible working!

It was clear that we would need many hands on board to get through the practical task of cataloguing so much cultural material in such a short time. Due to Covid-19 the few volunteers who had previously been working on the archive were unable to come to the Centre, and training new inexperienced volunteers would take up valuable time. A call was put out to Isabelle McGinn, course convenor at the University of Pretoria (UP), to see if there may be any interested students – people who were already versed in working with historical collections. Fortunately UP not only assisted in recruiting students, but took this as an internship opportunity and part of practical experience for the students.

A large, light-colored sign with a dark border is the central focus. It has two lines of text in a serif font. The top line reads 'We are working on' and the bottom line reads 'the archive'. The sign is slightly tilted and appears to be hanging from above, as indicated by some blurred light fixtures at the top of the frame. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a museum or archive, with a person sitting at a table in the distance.

We are working on
the archive

You are welcome to come
in and ask us questions

The University of Pretoria has two programmes that focus on cultural heritage, the first an Honours in Heritage, Museum and Preservation Studies, and the second a Masters in Tangible Heritage Conservation. The UP programme in Museum Studies includes a strong practical component which looks at the mechanisms of decay and deterioration of cultural material and at how to mitigate the effects, but also at being mindful of the often fragile nature of artefacts and handling them appropriately. Both of these courses also rely heavily on transmitting knowledge and practical skills in a real-life setting to challenge the students' communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic this practical component could not be carried out during the year, and the internship became the Honours students' first opportunity to work directly with heritage materials.

The students worked in pairs, having an Honours student paired with a Masters student to benefit from the hands-on conservation experience of the latter. The group of five first-year Masters students, of whom four had done the Honours, were well versed in this aspect of preventative conservation, and could not only advise the Honours

students on appropriate handling, but also found they could advise the JHGC on their purchases of appropriate packaging and storage materials. Working in pairs and having a team approach meant that there were two sets of eyes and minds to look at and describe each item, and a group unit to talk through challenges and questions and come up with solutions.

Tasks would be organised week to week: deciding which box or collection to catalogue, who would be involved where, and ensuring necessary administrative tasks or training were scheduled. This sometimes worked around which equipment deliveries were expected to arrive (or did not), although knowing conservation items would take weeks or months to arrive, we knew we needed to improvise some interim solutions.

The internship started off with an inventory, all the materials in the collection were recorded and a brief condition assessment was carried out and documented, highlighting those objects which appeared to be more at risk or actively deteriorating. Initial treatment suggestions were documented to advise the JHGC on

necessary future conservation interventions. The students also carried out a preventive assessment of proposed storage areas and made recommendations on how these could be improved. Following on from this they moved on with the main task, whereby all the objects were recorded in a database and photographed as part of the cataloguing and digitising process. As one of the students spoke German, she could assist with translating some of the letters and documents, so notes on content could be made as part of the cataloguing to make the material searchable

We mostly worked with letters written by different people that were holocaust victims, survivors or in some ways connected to the holocaust. The things we read were heart wrenching, to say the least. We also had the great honour of meeting and talking to survivors of the holocaust in person. I think we all had to take a breath and stand back, as Covid had a negative effect on most of us. These letters and the stories we read reminded us that if history taught us something, it's that the human spirit will always prevail.

Daniele Knoetze, THC Masters student

and to allow for cross-referencing. We would check in at the start of the week to discuss the schedule, and we would then check in at the end of each day to discuss progress, troubleshoot issues and share interesting findings and opinions. There would also be one person assigned each day to write a 'report' to comment on what was done and make a note of interesting things. The weekly schedule also included events at the Centre so that students could learn more about different aspects of heritage work while learning about our themes and narratives specific to the Holocaust and genocide.

By the end of December we had catalogued over 500 items and inventoried all additional items in the storeroom. Items were photographed, dozens of letters translated and objects relocated to a single location. While it was evident that we would not have a full archive and digitisation completed in this short time, we not only built a solid foundation for development, but also a working – and even tested – catalogue with aligning templates, processes and spaces. Over and above the practical objectives which were achieved, there were several other successes noted, many of which have been made evident in the student's feedback.

— This internship allowed the JHGC to engage with a young and diverse audience and get their responses and a different insight into our collection. This also opened opportunity for intergenerational conversation, opportunities to find connections across histories and cultures, and build empathy, thus keeping the histories alive, like a signal through the years.

— It offered a means for a next generation of heritage workers to not only get practical experience but to be exposed to a professional working environment and the implicit considerations and challenges. It was important that this group was included in discussions around decision-making and filled in on administrative and operational challenges to get a real-world perspective.

Overall, I would describe my internship experience at the JHGC as positive. I always viewed it as more of a cultural experience, and this was definitely the right perspective to hold. This internship has been such a growing experience for me. I've learned the value in both transactional experiences alongside relational experiences with mixed emotions, especially when listening to or reading about the testimonies of the genocide survivors.

Henry Nakale, THC Masters student

Volunteering at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) was a great experience. It gave me the opportunity to implement basic museum practices we had learned during the course and implement them. Doing so in an actual institution, and not just on paper, helped me to learn about the obstacles museum practitioners often meet, including storage space, delays because plans and orders have to be approved by committees, as well as communication with stakeholders, as we have to explain why certain measures need to be taken, which can often take some convincing.

Laura Esser, THC Masters student

Working with the sensitive material we dealt with at the JHGC and meeting some of the survivors and hearing their stories was something I will never forget. It is very rare that one gets to meet the people that are directly connected to the objects you are working with in a museum environment. This made the experience very special. Cataloguing three suitcases full of letters, postcards and other documents, and while doing so learning about the family, how they escaped Nazi Germany had us all rooting for the family whose materials we were handling, around 80 years after these events happened.

Laura Esser, THC Masters student



Digitising the Archive at the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre

We wanted the students to feel respected and comfortable participating and expressing their thoughts so that they would have a positive experience and be prepared and enthusiastic to continue in the sector. However, despite being interns, there was no doubt about the knowledge and skills they brought with them, and this contribution was invaluable to the project.

— The development of this project has boosted interest in the Centre and especially collections. Museum staff have been paying more attention to artefacts and the opportunities available to use them for education and programmes, and having better structures and accessibility to information means they're able to do this much more easily. It has boosted interest in archives, historical materials, and their care and importance in general, with several volunteers/descendants now looking at their items in a different light and motivated to start documenting them properly. Even the students started to think about their personal and community histories. Having the students present got people interested in knowing what they were doing, and in turn they became interested in the JHGC subject matter and what the Centre was doing. With the last Holocaust survivors being so advanced in age, and the additional challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, this work has become even more pressing and important.

— It formed what will hopefully be an ongoing connection with both the university and the individual students. Some students have joined our most recent volunteer training course, and have been continuing work with the JHGC. UP and the JHGC look forward to partnering on future projects and helping to mentor and develop future collections workers.

Having to plan, facilitate and finish this large task in less than three months was a complicated and challenging undertaking, but it was an opportunity that could not be missed. Besides having improved and tested processes, documents, and storage for the JHGC collections, we have garnered additional attention from internal and external stakeholders that will ensure the continued development of the archive. Having the University of Pretoria as partners, and the assistance of such capable students not only allowed the project to meet certain practical objectives, but uncovered several more unexpected intentions.

The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre houses objects and archival materials from the most heart breaking incidences history has to tell.

To have an opportunity to work with such materials was an honour for me.

This experience brought home few realities that history is not just something that we read about but a reality that needs to be understood and learnt from.

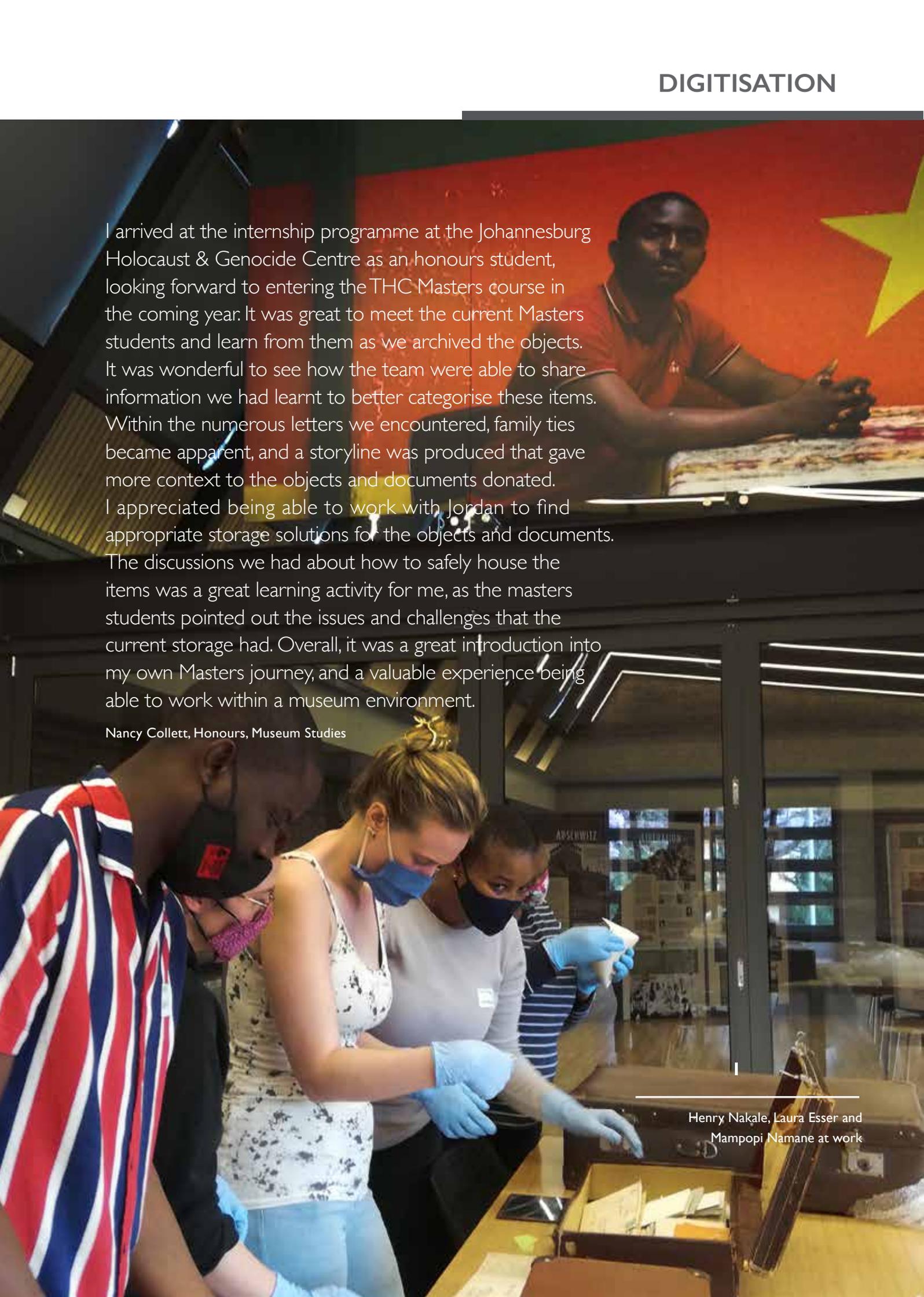
I have attended few educational tours scheduled for either adults or students, and I realised the importance of preserving the past for the purpose of educating the younger generations as it provides evidence of the said past. It also facilitates learning and understanding history.

JHGC has also acted as a networking space where I met professionals from different sectors and as we worked, we learned from one another.

Henry Nakale, THC Masters student

I arrived at the internship programme at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre as an honours student, looking forward to entering the THC Masters course in the coming year. It was great to meet the current Masters students and learn from them as we archived the objects. It was wonderful to see how the team were able to share information we had learnt to better categorise these items. Within the numerous letters we encountered, family ties became apparent, and a storyline was produced that gave more context to the objects and documents donated. I appreciated being able to work with Jordan to find appropriate storage solutions for the objects and documents. The discussions we had about how to safely house the items was a great learning activity for me, as the masters students pointed out the issues and challenges that the current storage had. Overall, it was a great introduction into my own Masters journey, and a valuable experience being able to work within a museum environment.

Nancy Collett, Honours, Museum Studies

A group of people, including Nancy Collett, are working on digitising historical documents in a museum setting. They are gathered around a table, looking at and handling documents. One person is wearing a blue glove and holding a document. The background shows a museum display with a red wall and a yellow star.

Henry Nakale, Laura Esser and Mampopi Namane at work