Pull-out supplement

theFocus

Swiss photographic collections on Asia

Switzerland – a land-locked country and a nation without a colonial past – holds a surprising number of early visual documents on Asia. This Focus section of *The Newsletter* provides a selective overview of collections to be found in the Swiss archives, commenting on their significance to research and cultural heritage, and reflecting on the technical and methodological aspects of building and maintaining such collections.

Paul Bucherer-Dietschi and Anke Schürer-Ries

Afghan Day of Independence 1 August 1944 (jashen-e esteqlal) at Baghlan in Northern Afghanistan, showing the traditional Afghan national dance 'Attan' performed by Pashtun men, belonging to the Zadran and Mangal tribes. Photograph by Swiss Architect Rudolf Stuckert. © Phototheca Afghanica.

Photographic collections on Asia in Swiss archives
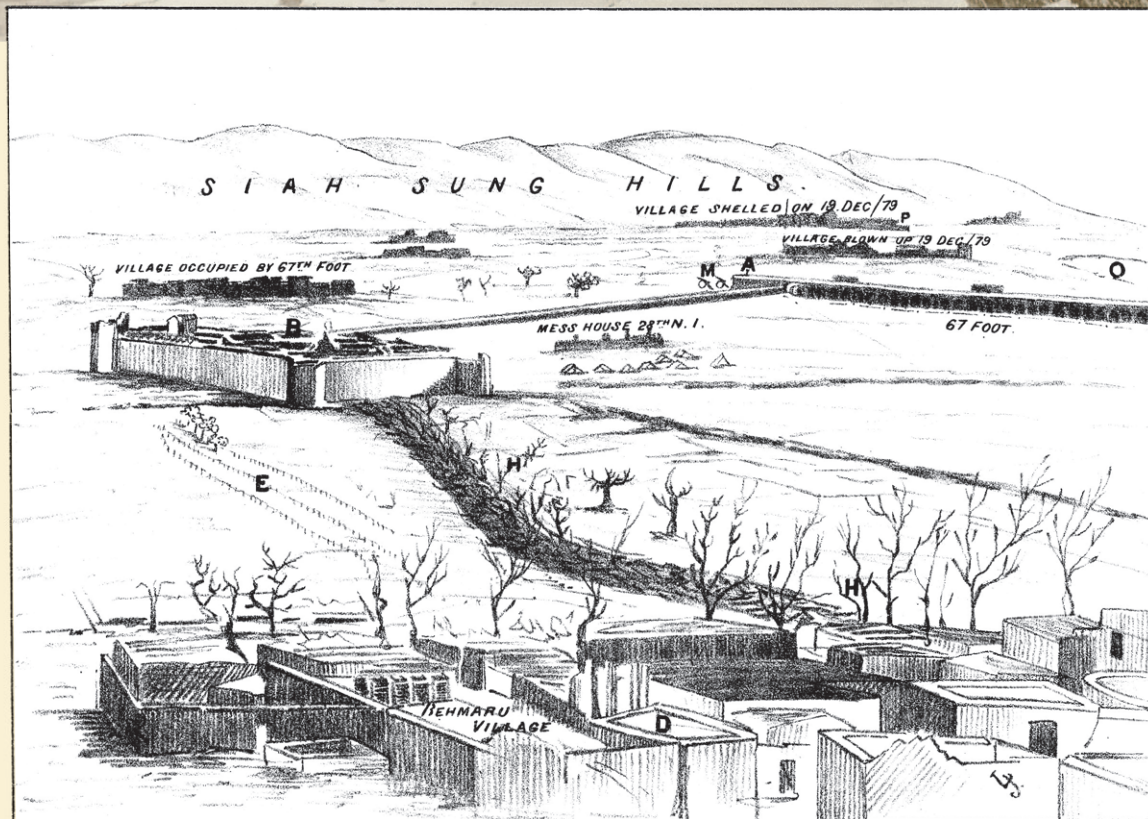
Preservation and technical development

The preservation of early photographs in Europe was in many cases coincidental and should not be taken for granted. All images fade over the years, but even more often they were lost in times of war; others were disposed of on the occasion of a move or the clearing out of a flat or house after the owner had passed away. Luckily, the awareness of the historical and cultural importance of photographic collections depicting long past times has been growing, and many such collections now find their way into archives of institutions and museums.

In the last 25 years the knowledge concerning necessities and possibilities of preservation of historical photographs has grown considerably. There is, on the one hand, the issue of preserving the original print. On the other hand, and perhaps even more importantly, the advancing technology over the past decade provides possibilities to digitise and digitally improve faded and discoloured pictures.

In Switzerland a group of specialists jointly dedicate themselves to such issues in the framework of the institution 'Memoriav' (en.memoriav.ch). Its aims include:

- Preservation of and accessibility to Switzerland's photographic heritage.
- Initiation and support of projects: restoration and digitisation of collections, improvement of the accessibility of photographic records.
- Description of the state of Switzerland's photographic archives, in order to formulate a policy for their preservation.
- Heightening of public awareness at special events and exhibitions of collections that have been saved.
- Creation of a competence network, in which restoration and archiving experts tackle the preservation of the photographic cultural heritage of Switzerland.

Photography as cultural documentation

In addition to the historical and technical aspects, photography is increasingly gaining cultural and ethnic meaning and importance. Not only has a growing self-awareness and an improved feeling of national identity among the people of former colonial countries emerged, but so too an increasing interest in the sources of pictorial documents of the past. This is especially the case in our current era of globalisation, in which a growing fear of loss of ethnic and local identity is at hand.

However, this search for identity through historical images needs an additional element: the identification of the historical content of the photograph. Without the knowledge of the circumstances, the place, date and occasion of the taking of the photograph, much of its historical value is lost. These facts need a preservation similar to the conservation of the picture itself.

Furthermore, most photographs contain details that were included merely by chance, as they were the most natural things in the world at the time of taking the picture. Nowadays, it is often exactly such an unintended detail, visible only by enlargement, that becomes a very valuable historic or cultural piece of information.

Foundation Bibliotheca Afghanica

The initiative to put together such a focus on photographic collections on Asia in Swiss archives came from the Foundation Bibliotheca Afghanica, which has been documenting nature, culture and history of Afghanistan since the early 1970s. The recent Afghan history is one of almost 40 years of uninterrupted struggle and warfare. More than 80% of all the Afghans living today were born or brought up in this period. Photographic 'losses' are not only the collateral damages of war, but also the result of two waves of politically and religiously motivated iconoclasms, which saw the destruction of this specific part of Afghan cultural heritage. The project 'Phototheca Afghanica', which is supported by the Swiss, Liechtenstein and German governments, tries to revive a feeling of cultural identity to the Afghan youth in providing access to historic images through exhibitions and via the internet. The events in Afghanistan show that the collection of historical photographs at a safe haven in Europe could also be an important contribution to the future maintenance of cultural heritage in other regions of the world.

Paul Bucherer-Dietschi is the founder of Bibliotheca Afghanica and Director of the Swiss Afghanistan Institute. www.phototheca-afghanica.ch (info@afghanistan-institut.ch)
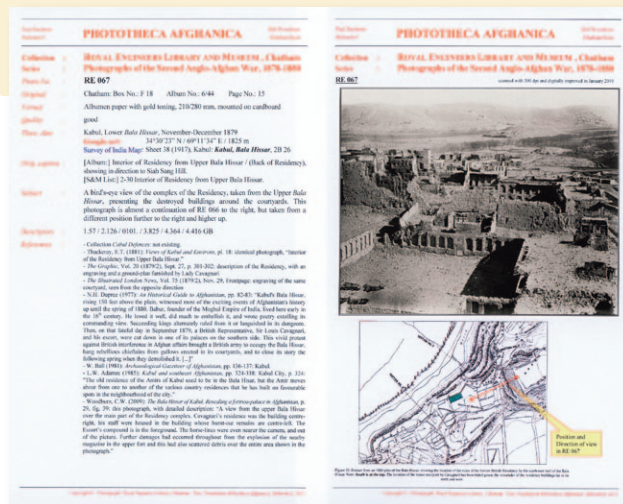
Anke Schürer-Ries is a volunteer at the Afghanistan Institute and Research Assistant Special Collections at Basel Mission Archives. (anke.schuerer-ries@gmx.net)

1a (top):
Bemaru village,
1879 (RE 077)
1b (middle):
Annotated sketch,
based on fig 1a.

2 (below):
A sample of a
photo-description
as it is done for the
project 'Phototheca
Afghanica'.

Photography as a tool of information

Early photographs – approximately up till World War II – are either portraits of people (often taken in studios) or they provide extraordinary views of landscapes or objects, which the photographer intended to document and to make known to a limited or broader public. Few photographers merely wanted to create a work of art. Due to the costs and necessary efforts needed to take a photograph, at a time when you had to place your heavy camera on a tripod and to carry delicate glass-plates, one hesitated to take everyday views – as is common practice today, either with a handy digital camera or even a mobile phone. It was, however, a technical development that provided everybody with the possibility to produce an accurate image within a short period of time, without being a trained artist. This resulted in a loss of artistic expression as early photographs were rarely spontaneous and allowed for very little interpretation. It also omitted the possibility to highlight specific features.

This limitation to extraordinary objects or events is one of the reasons why collections of old photographs have a high historical and cultural value. In the case of photographs taken at that time, a further significant point needs to be made: only a small number of people had the means, the equipment and knowledge to take high quality photographs. In most cases they were European foreigners or visitors, sometimes members of the local ruling elite, but almost never ordinary people – except for some few professional photographers.

In the case of photographic collections on Asia in Swiss archives, the photographers were either missionaries, Swiss or German diplomats, owners or representatives of trading companies or early development workers, like experts for road and bridge construction, etc. All of them took photographs in order to show the results of their work – or to demonstrate the difficulties they had to face.

If these Europeans remained in the same area for a while, and got into closer contact with the local population, they also documented outstanding objects, people and events to illustrate their diaries and reports. When departing their exotic fields, the original negatives as well as the prints were, in most cases, brought back to Europe. Few prints remained on the spot, but if they did, then even fewer survived the tropical climatic conditions and inadequate handling.

Kobul
Palais Royal de Babur

Queen's Palace in
Bagh-e Babur, Kabul.
3a (above):
In the 1920s (GV 64).
3b (middle):
After destruction,
2002 (PB 2002-631).
3c (below):
After reconstruction,
2008 (PB 2008-10).

Securing the past for the future

Benno Widmer

WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND where you come from and the environment around *you*, you can take the future into your hands and contribute to a better destiny. This environment and its value systems are decisively influenced by the cultural heritage of a particular society. For this reason, the Swiss Federal Office of Culture (FOC) supports the preservation and disseminating of cultural heritage in all its forms as testimonials of human experiences and pursuits for future generations.

To FOC, cultural heritage comprises not only monuments and works of art. This heritage also includes mobile cultural assets, such as the findings of archaeological excavations, objects of ethnological or scientific value, rare manuscripts, rare books, furniture, coins, as well as archives that include audio, photo and film collections. Alongside these tangible objects, the FOC also advocates the preservation of intangible cultural heritage; for example, forms of expression of living cultures, such as legends, dance and theatre, music, rituals, festivities, craftsmanship, knowledge and others. Switzerland boasts a stunning example for a multi-facetted institution for the protection of cultural heritage of one specific country: the Swiss Afghanistan Institute. It has been making a significant contribution to preservation of cultural heritage in different fields. The 'Afghanistan Museum in Exile' in Bubendorf, initiated on the request of several Afghan groups in 1998, was a temporal safe deposit for archaeological and ethnographic cultural assets. In 2007, at the behest of the Afghan authorities and with the approval of UNESCO, 1423 objects, which had been entrusted to and held in trust by the institute, were repatriated to Kabul. The FOC as well as many other institutions and private persons supported this initiative.

Increased awareness for the importance of photographic documentation in the past decade brought about the need to understand its cultural importance. It became obvious that not only the physical preservation to avoid decay and loss of the original photograph itself is important. However, an in-depth understanding and description of its content is necessary in order to transmit contexts and relationships depicted in the photograph to future generations.

Based on this conclusion, the FOC supports the project 'Phototheca Afghanica', of which a first selection will be accessible online from July 2012. The images presented and extensively described are a treasure trove for the mediation of the cultural heritage of the war-torn country and society of Afghanistan. Subsequently, the project can serve as a vessel for the advancement of cultural identity and self-awareness of all Afghans, today and in the future.

Thanks to the incredible development in digital recording and communication during the last decade, it becomes possible today to provide such images of cultural and historic value not only to the visitors of such collections, but also to the general public, which creates an additional possibility of exchange of cultural assets. Switzerland harbours a number of photographic collections of historical importance concerning Asia. These collections are partially well-preserved, but not yet fully identified and described. Up till now, scientific research of photographs focussed mainly on technical aspects and/or photography as a work of art. Further research on its cultural values and context is a necessity and has still to be developed.

**Benno Widmer, Swiss Federal Office
of Culture, Head Specialised Service for the
international transfer of Cultural Property.
(benno.widmer@bak.admin.ch)**