An Interview with Aubrey Pomerance, archive director of the Jewish Museum Berlin, and Henriette Kolb, staff member of the media department of the Jewish Museum Berlin, conducted by Inés Matres, Institute for Museum Research, Berlin.

The thematic year “Diversity Destroyed. Berlin 1933-1938-1945. A City Remembers” was initiated by the Kulturprojekte Berlin GmbH in close collaboration with the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) and 200 other cultural institutions in Berlin. Within the context of the project a series of events and initiatives was realised to remember the consequences of the reign of terror by the National Socialist German Workers’ Party in Germany before and during World War II.

The Jewish Museum Berlin joined the thematic year in November 2011. In addition to planning several special exhibitions and events that took place in the museum during 2013 the museum also launched an online project called “1933. The beginning of the end of German Jewry” (http://www.jmberlin.de/1933/en/). This project focused on the online presentation of around 170 personal documents and photographs from the collections of both the Jewish Museum Berlin and the branch of the archives of the Leo Baeck Institute New York that was established at the museum in 2001.
In January 2014, Inés Matres, project and research assistant at the Institute for Museum Research, Berlin, met with the archive director Aubrey Pomerance and project manager Henriette Kolb of the media department of the Jewish Museum Berlin to talk about the project “1933. The beginning of the end of German Jewry”, its aims and achievements. The interviewees also addressed challenges that arose during the project.

The objects digitized in the course of the project contain personal and official letters, postcards, certificates, magazine articles, leaflets, and photographs that illustrate, from a personal perspective, the immediate consequences that the measures taken by the Nazi party had on the life of the Jewish population in 1933. The documents were digitized in high resolution and published gradually throughout the year 2013, each one exactly 80 years after being created, along with transcripts, translations, and references to related objects in the archives.

Aubrey Pomerance is surprised to hear that the project can be perceived as a [digital] exhibition, as it was never planned to be given the form of an exhibition: “[...] The idea of doing an online calendar came up very early in our discussions about this project, intended to be a progressive presentation”, he said, emphasising that this is very different from the concept of an exhibition which is “something that is put together as a whole and is presented within a closed space [also online]”. In addition, another thing that characterises exhibitions is that once they open, the curatorial work is complete, with other departments, such as marketing, events, and visitor research continuing to accompany the exhibit. This online project, in contrast, required constant work from curators and researchers in the museum: “We continually preoccupied ourselves with this project once it was actually happening, which does not happen in a physical exhibition. It would also have been very difficult to realize the project as a traditional exhibition. Even though there were very different types of documents, an exhibition based strictly on archival material would have been challenging for any visitor.”

On the differences between online projects and physical exhibitions Pomerance says “I can’t imagine showing all these objects in an exhibition, as compared with the possibility of leaning back in one’s chair and exploring the different documents (a total of 500,000 characters of text) [...] The legibility of the handwritten documents is particularly challenging. In the online project we have transcribed and translated all the texts and provided descriptions, contextualization, explanations, and further accompanying materials, something we could never have done in an exhibition, apart from the sheer amount of text”.

Regarding the choice of objects, the idea behind the calendar is a selection of 137 first-level items. This means that not all of the 365 calendar sheets could be illustrated with an image or a document. Sometimes it was also the case that some of the days were illustrated with more than one document. These first-level items “had to date from the year 1933” and had to “have a Jewish and
personal perspective”, Pomerance and Kolb explain. One of the first decisions the curators made was to restrict the sources. All first level items had to come from the two collections.

Starting from those primary sources and following the stories that they tell, the collaborators (ten specialists and up to 30 colleagues of the museum were involved during the year) could fill thematic gaps with other material. These materials were linked to the first-level items. Throughout the course of the project, further and new materials not foreseen in the preparatory stages were discovered and presented, some of these obtained over the course of 2013 from the descendants of the individuals named in the pre-selected documents.

Research also led to the discovery of some unexpected and interesting stories that went beyond the scope of the project. For example, a letter written by Sigmund Freud to a Zionist psychologist in 1914 (the father of a person named in one of the documents presented in the project) was donated to the archive of the Jewish Museum Berlin as a result of contact with the descendants. The letter, says Pomerance, “has nothing to do with the project, but it is certainly a very valuable and welcome addition to our collection”. 
Henriette Kolb gave insight into the organizational and technical aspects of the project. The publication of the calendar was preceded by a total of nine months of preparatory work since April 2012, in addition to the continuous work throughout 2013. A design company was engaged to develop a template for the calendar and a special plug-in for Wordpress (a content management system used by the museum). This calendar-feature was programmed to ‘jump’ to the current date, so that each time a visitor entered the website during 2013, one encountered the object from the same date in 1933. Regarding the technical aspect of this project, Kolb says: “You have to program for so many devices – iPhones, other mobile phones, tablets, and computers. It took a lot of testing and measures to fit the design to all digital formats. This we will take into account for the next projects”. “Throughout the year we had to keep track of the audience. We spread our content online […] That was very important.”

In addition to the research, transcription, and translation (every document is available in both German and English), all items that had been digitized for the online catalogue of the Jewish Museum’s archives had to be digitized anew for this project in order to provide high quality material. Other tasks that had to be fulfilled throughout the year were marketing and “keeping track

Postcard from the Zionist organization Hehalutz to Julius Brünn, Berlin, 26 May 1933.
Brünn (1913–2001), a young retail salesman living in Berlin, was a member of Hehalutz (Hebrew for “pioneer”), an international Zionist organization. Brünn wanted to immigrate as soon as possible to Palestine. The message he received with the postcard was: “On Saturday 27 May, 9 a.m. come with your passport to Lützowstrasse 16, front building, right-hand stairway, first floor, door to the left.”
© Jewish Museum Berlin, gift of Avi Brünn, photo: Jens Ziehe

Postcard from Meta Abramczyk to the Steinhardt family in Tel Aviv, Berlin, 11 September 1933.
Six months after the painter and graphic artist Jakob Steinhardt (1887–1968) and his family hastily left Berlin, they received this postcard in Tel Aviv bringing them news from their old homeland: “So much has changed since your departure!”
© Jewish Museum Berlin, gift of Josela Bar-On Steinhardt, Nahariya, Israel, photo: Jens Ziehe
of the audience, especially with use of social media, Twitter, and Facebook and the referral from the exhibition in the German Historical Museum and the online activities of 'Diversity Destroyed'. We spread our content, and that was very important,' says Kolb.

In order to estimate the size of their audience, people involved in the project compared the number of visits to the project website to the number of visits to mini-sites created for special in-house exhibitions. "Our numbers were higher; we know that our audience was quite loyal and visited the project regularly throughout the year"; says Pomerance, who has continued to send emails with a direct link to the project. "As the archive of a museum, we are not collecting for the depository. We strive to utilize as much of our material as possible, thereby making it accessible in multiple ways. The 1933 project allows us to show potential donors one of the significant manners in which we use materials that are donated to us."

Another valuable achievement of this digital project was a request by a professor at Darmstadt University to use the documents and photographs presented therein as a reader for a seminar on the history of the Jews in Germany in 1933.

Coming back to the essence of this kind of project, the makers of "1933. The beginning of the end of German Jewry" point out that, "for once, there were almost no conservational concerns about the materials used". Instead, there were aspects regarding copyright that had to be clarified. Kolb and Pomerance agreed that copyright issues are a much more sensitive question for online projects than for an in-house exhibition or a catalogue. For this reason, the copyright department of the museum was constantly involved: "You have to consider not only the ownership and authorship aspects, but also the personal rights of the people depicted. If there is a photograph of some children and you want to be accurate, you have to find proof that they or their descendants are still living and receive consent from them [...]" The museum's legal staff prepared a text to invite individuals that might find conflict with any objects and rights to contact the museum but there have been no objections so far.

On a final note, Pomerance emphasizes that the effort invested in the project has paid off by showing donors and potential donors how "these tools have provided a great opportunity to archives to present their collections". He also highlights how important such a project can be for the purposes of research and for people interested in finding material. "In many cases, a Google search will lead directly to an entry in the 1933 project. And once a user has encountered one of the documents, we are certain that they will explore others presented on the site."

"1933. The beginning of the end of German Jewry" is an original and extremely well-researched project that enables audiences to access valuable and for the most part unknown primary sources. Without disclosing any details, Aubrey Pomerance and Henriette Kolb admitted that they are already working on the next online project, putting into it all lessons learned during 2013.