On Campus

With New Acquisitions, Library to Open Human Rights Documentation Center

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For more than four decades, Amnesty International has been the world's eyes on political oppression and human rights abuse. The organization's American affiliate, Amnesty International USA, now wants Columbia to preserve all it has witnessed.

Earlier this year, Amnesty International USA sent its archive to Columbia to be housed at the new Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research (CHRDR). The collection consists of research reports, case files, and oral histories, as well as photographs, videos, DVDs, posters, banners, T-shirts, and newspaper clippings dating back to Amnesty International USA's founding in New York City in the early 1960s. The organization plans to add material to the collection on an ongoing basis.

Scholars who dig into the archive can discover "how international human rights advocacy works, and when and why it does not," says J. Paul Martin, executive director of Columbia's Center for the Study of Human Rights.

The Amnesty acquisition adds to a rapidly growing archive at CHRDR, which will make its collections partially open to researchers this fall. Human Rights Watch, the largest organization of its type based in the United States, selected Columbia as its depository two years ago; that donation effectively launched CHRDR, which was established last summer and is administered by Columbia's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library. The University is now in conversation with Human Rights First, Physicians for Human Rights, and the Committee of Concerned Scientists to acquire those organizations' papers. News about the archive has also prompted former Human Rights Watch advocates to send their personal collections.

Csaba Szilagyi, a curator at CHRDR, hopes that the archive will prompt more activists to hold onto materials. "Until recently, I think, most human rights workers

didn’t realize that their documentation was important,” he says.

The holdings, in fact, demonstrate that today’s advocacy is tomorrow’s history. Consider one faded photograph of a bearded man seated with a young boy, perhaps his son, standing over his shoulder. On the back of the photo is scribbled “Zisels.” A quick search on a Columbia database identifies him as Joseph Samuilovich Zissels, a Ukrainian man imprisoned several times for political activism under the Soviets and now a prominent leader in his country’s Jewish community. The photo was shot around 1980 and brought to the United States by Jeri Laber, a founder of Human Rights Watch. Such photos were often smuggled out of the Soviet Union by friends of dissidents, Laber says, in order to bring attention to their plight, if only by attaching a face to a name.

“It’s wonderful to think that these documents will be kept alive,” she says. “Each one of those people is a story unto himself.” (Columbia has agreed that some material in its archive, such as correspondence with dissidents who may still face retribution, will remain off-limits for viewing indefinitely.)

The Amnesty and Human Rights Watch collections have been moved to Columbia from the University of Colorado, Boulder, where they had remained unsorted since 1994. The University of Colorado discontinued its human rights documentation program in 1999. Amnesty and Human Rights Watch chose Columbia as the home for their collections because of the University’s academic strengths in human rights and its libraries’ strong programs in archive preservation, digital library development, and electronic publishing.

The collections could take more than a decade to catalog. The Human Rights Watch archive alone includes 1300 boxes the size of filing cabinet drawers, stuffed with field notes, interviews with alleged victims of human rights violations, videotapes and audiotapes, posters, and photographs. The first materials that are to be cataloged — those documenting the Human Rights Watch’s founding, as Helsinki Watch, in 1978 — should be available in the fall semester. Columbia researchers and members of the public can then access the materials, upon request, at CHRDR, located temporarily at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library on the sixth floor of Butler Library. Library administrators are currently searching for a permanent campus home for the Center.

Eventually, CHRDR will host public events such as film screenings and exhibitions and make its archive catalog available online.

“We don’t want this to become a dead place with dusty papers,” says Szilagyi.



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