Brief history of the archives of the
Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine

To chart the history of the safekeeping of the Mannheim Convention and its instruments of ratification is to retrace the adventurous life of the archives of the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR): shunted from one headquarters to another, criss-crossing roads, railways and, of course, waterways, it was not until 1996 that part of this prestigious trove found its way into the departmental archives of the Lower-Rhine after many a journey. It is this turbulent history that these few pages set out to revisit, by reference to the CCNR’s archives, but also those of its close partners, the Independent Port of Strasbourg and the French Foreign Ministry.

I 1816-1920: from Mainz to Strasbourg

Under the provisions of the Congress of Vienna, the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine met in Mainz, after a short delay, on 5 August 1816. There is no time to waste in setting to work and recruiting the staff who will be essential to the proper functioning of the Commission. The CCNR organises its chancellery and, at its second meeting, on 9 August, promptly proceeds to nominate a secretary-archivist, Henri Hermann, who had occupied the same post “under the first Octroi administration [and had] acquired an honourable reputation both for his ethics and for the talents required for the aforementioned post”. Heading up the Chancellery and supported in his duties by a translator, two employees and an office boy, his particular responsibility is the organisation and custody of the archives held on the Commission’s premises, situated from 1816 onwards in the Grand-Rue in Mainz.

There is no shortage of work: the archives generated by the Commission are quickly joined by the archives of the former General Administration of the Octroi era, which the CCNR calls upon the French government to return to Mainz. These documents, held in Paris, are returned to the fledgling Commission between 1816 and 1870 by Mr. de Hirsinger, the French commissioner, against a receipt and after checking and stocktaking in situ. More or less adopting the remit of the former ‘Octroi’ General Administration, the transfer of powers decided at the Congress of Vienna is thus accompanied by a transfer of documents.

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1 A reading of Jonkheer W. J. M. van Eysinga and Henri Walther, The Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, Strasbourg, 1974 (henceforth abbreviated to Van Eysinga-Walther, 1974), yields important information about the history of the CCNR archives; it was a useful addition and aid to a study of the documentary archives. The first part of this work, dedicated to the history of the Commission from 1816 to 1934 and written by Van Eysinga, was first printed in 1936.

2 Departmental archives of the Lower Rhine (hereafter abbreviated to DALR) 212 J 129.

3 For the various premises occupied by the CCNR in Mainz and Mannheim since 1816, see DALR 86 J 10 “premises” file where you will find the various leases entered into by the Commission.

4 The General Administration Octroi archives are handed over to the Commission in a two-stage process: Hermann and Wilhelm, Mr. de Hirsinger’s private secretary, having noted that the first consignment was missing certain documents (cf. DALR 212 J 129: minutes 6, under III, dated 27 August 1816). The documents itemised as being missing in the inventory submitted to the Commission on 27 August 1816, are the subject of a second consignment in October 1817 (cf. DALR 212 J 132: minutes 74, under IV, dated 4 November 1817). See also Diplomatic archives (Paris site), 297 QO 1: letters exchanged between the Duke of Richelieu, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Mr. de Hirsinger, on 19 April and 18 May 1816.
The signing of the Mainz Convention, on 31 March 1831, directly affects the CCNR’s documents. Article 92 of the Convention requires custody of the archives to be entrusted to the new Chief Inspector, Mr von Auer. The latter offers to let quarters in his own home to the Commission for its meetings and documents. The Commission’s President endorses this proposal on 17 December 1831:

“If more suitable premises for accommodating the archives of the Central Commission, the provisional administrative Commission and of the previous administrations [...] as well as for premises for sessions during the annual meetings, [...] it would not be adjudged consistent with the normal course of affairs to bestow on him [...] an appropriate grant for the purpose of hiring a mansion that would combine the two objectives by serving both as his private residence and in which he would hold at the central commission’s disposal suitable premises simultaneously accommodating the archives.”

The Commission accedes to this request, terminates the lease on the property in the Grand Rue and sets up in Mr von Auer’s mansion, in the Kaiser Friedrichstrasse.

In 1860 the Member States agree to the relocation of the Commission’s headquarters to Mannheim. It is then a matter of “a minimalist move” and not burdening oneself with documents the administrative relevance of which is no longer evident. The CCNR then sells, by weight, for 600 florins, items that seem to be of no further interest. These “meagre profits at the expense of future historians”, in the General Secretary’s damning characterisation in a letter addressed to J. M. von Eysinga, the former Dutch Commissioner to the Commission, on 24 July 1934, nevertheless testifies to the existence of a deliberate and rational archival policy: following a report by the Chief Inspector on the archives the CCNR decides to retain only four files from the General Administration Octroi era and three files generated by the provisional subdelegated and administrative Commissions.

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5 The Commission will debate whether all the documents are to be handed over to the Inspector or only general administrative records. It is the latter solution that prevails, the Commission retaining custody of the archives relating to the negotiations on the new Convention for Navigation on the Rhine until such times as its work has concluded. This intellectual, even physical separation of the documents, does not appear to challenge these two entities being held in custody on the same site, in Mr. von Auer’s residence, all the more so as it is stipulated that the Chief Inspector will be able “to consult the Commission’s archives and draw upon all the documents therein” at his leisure. However, no trace has been found in the records of documents arising from the commissioners’ activities being handed over to the Chief Inspector. It is assumed that this distinction faded of its own accord over time. For more information see DALR 212 J 170: minutes 550 dated 17 December 1831 and DALR 212 J 171: minutes 557 dated 30 December 1831 and minutes 560 dated 20 January 1831.

6 DALR 212 J 170: minutes 550 dated 17 December 1831.

7 One must at this juncture acknowledge the work performed in 1934 on the vexed fate of the documents between Mainz and Mannheim by Henri Walther, at that time a young CCNR secretary-archivist: this paragraph owes much, if not everything, to the research by Van Eysinga, preserved under reference DALR 212 J 454. The research states that “these seven files are not to be found in [the CCNR’s archives], which [...] provide no further clues as to their fate”; nothing has changed to this day. The original documents that enabled Walther to pen his response have for the most part been preserved under reference DALR 86 J 10 (“premises” file).
The Commission meets for the first time in Mannheim on 16 August 1861, where the government of Baden places three halls and a side room at its disposal, situated on the first floor of the left wing of the Grand-Ducal Palace, close to the chapel and giving onto the garden. It is assumed this is where the CCNR archives are held. On 16 October 1869, it is allocated new rooms within the same palace, which it will occupy until 1920, the date of its departure for Strasbourg.

II 1920 to the present day: from Strasbourg to ... Strasbourg!

The Commission meets for the first time in Strasbourg on 21 June 1920, occupying the former Imperial Palace to which it gives its name, the Palais du Rhin. Its archives catch up with it a little later. Far from being a mere collection of antique documents, this trove proves to be not just an indispensable working tool, added to each day by new documents generated by the CCNR, but also a marvellous communication tool: in the 1920s the Commission has everything to prove!

The Commission’s participation in the International Exhibition of Inland Navigation and Utilization of HydroPower in Basel, inaugurated on 9 July 1926, is an eye-opener; let us examine it, courtesy of the Commission’s Deputy General Secretary, P. Charguéraud-Hartmann, who takes it upon himself to describe it in detail in the review “The Navigation of the Rhine” in July 1926.

Acting simultaneously as visitor guide, Commission history and pro domo advocacy, this article draws the visitor’s attention to each of the archives on show, each intended to illuminate successive phases in the CCNR’s life. Here is “the first volume of minutes, [...] carefully bound, French texts succeeded by German texts, handwritten on superb paper” and let us not forget that the Commission retains “44 similar volumes, certain of them three times the thickness of the first”; here is the original text of the first Convention for navigation on the Rhine, signed in Mainz on 31 March 1831, accompanied by its ratification by the King of the Netherlands and adorned with a superb hanging seal; there is the revised Convention for Navigation on the Rhine of 17 October 1868 and, a little further on, the Convention on the system of Rhine boatmaster’s licences of 1922 with letters of ratification by all the represented powers, a collection not without interest “to autograph hunters [since] one sees juxtaposed for the past four years within a peaceful agreement, the signatures of, inter alia, Queen Wilhelmina, Kings Albert, Georges V and Victor-Emmanuel III, Messrs Chuard, Hymans, van Karnebeek, Millerand, Mussolini, Poincaré, Simons and Stresemann.”

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8 212 J 202: special session 1860, minutes XX. It should also be explained that prior to arriving in Mannheim, the Commission’s archives and furniture were temporarily stored in Mainz “in a building belonging to the state [...]. Owing to the sale of the Chief Inspector’s house, these archives and this furniture, which had been stored there until that point, had to be relocated, before Christmas 1859, to the premises they currently occupy, where they are able to remain until they are transported to Mannheim” (cf. DALR 212 J 202: special session 1860, minutes 4).

9 Van Eysinga-Walther, 1974, p. 66 : Van Eysinga, who had occupied these premises, doesn’t trouble himself to identify their whereabouts: “The Commission then occupied the apartments in which it remained until 1920”; admittedly, memories of the CCNR’s meetings in Mannheim were still vivid when he wrote his history, in 1935.

10 DALR 212 J 324, minutes 1920-I no. 4 “Concerning the transfer of the Mannheim archives”.

11 All the quotations in this paragraph and the one following it are taken from this review.
The choice of archives on display was no coincidence. Chosen from among the most beautiful and prestigious in the Commission’s possession, they contain documents both old and new. It is no new commission showcasing its activities but the very same one which met in Mainz and Mannheim, the one which painstakingly laboured for freedom of navigation on the Rhine (let us not forget the 44 volumes of minutes between 1816 and 1832, each more voluminous than the last!) for the greater good off of their peoples; it is a commission endowed with a prestigious past, dating back more than a century, entrusted with a major role and which “is still called upon to play one on the Rhine”, with the approval and under the benevolent gaze of Europe’s leading powers.

This exhibition is an extraordinary communication coup. Continuity, legitimacy, independence at the peoples’ service: this is the Strasbourg Commission’s reasoned response to all those, many, individuals who consider it to be a puppet whose strings are pulled by France. Let us not forget that scarcely a year earlier, in 1925, the CCNR was compelled to give its judgement on the occupation of the Ruhr and found itself in a very uncomfortable position: indeed it was somewhat hastily that Charguéraud-Hartmann states, at the end of his article, that the CCNR “has examined the situation carefully [...], independently of the political turmoil assailing it from all sides [...]. A fine example [...] of dispassionate impartiality [...] to be reflected on by all those with an interest in the life of the Rhine.”

Consistent with this extremely controlled communication policy, bordering on control freakery, it will come as no surprise that access to the CCNR’s archives is extremely complicated.

Custodianship of the documents is entrusted to a burgeoning general Secretariat but one which, to its great regret, is bound to restrict access to the archives, even the historical ones, to delegation members only. It is not until 1929 that permission is granted for “communication in situ of minutes prior to 1872 to individuals requesting the same and furnishing guarantees as to their use”. These words, borrowed from Van Eysinga in his letter to the President of the Commission dated 1st July 1929, do not fail to raise a smile with the archivist when in the summer of 1934 this same Commissioner announces that he is having his librarian Van Doesburg in Leyden return the original minutes from 1832, 1837, 1838, 1839 and 1840, and secret minutes, to the CCNR while thanking the General Secretary for having given him oral permission to keep the aforementioned documents somewhat longer than anticipated...Despite the CCNR acknowledging receipt of the documents some time later “which have been returned [to it] in good condition”, it will point out, somewhat perfidiously, that this former Dutch Commissioner, still putting the final touches to his paper on the history of the CCNR, does in fact live in the Netherlands12.

Hitler’s accession to power in 1933 disturbs the CCNR’s tranquil existence and that of its documents: Germany, which withdrew from the Commission in November 1936, annexes Austria in March 1938. International tensions reach fever pitch in September 1938. Germany, France, Great Britain and Italy meet in Munich on 28 September to discuss the annexation of the Sudetenland. Anticipating a declaration of war, the CCNR leaves the Palais du Rhin that same day and departs for Chalon-sur-Saône, taking with it the files essential for its proper functioning and its most precious archives. Including ratified conventions and Member State ratifications since 1815. Let us hear what Henri Walther, the head of the CCNR Secretariat, has to say on what will prove to be this very brief expedition, in a letter addressed to the President of the Commission on 10 October 1938:

12 DALR 212 J 454
“In the first week of September, Mr Charguéraud informed me that he preferred me to withdraw our offices to Chalon sur Saône where the Independent Port of Strasbourg was also thinking of establishing itself and where some premises had been made available. [...] By great good fortune, the very same morning the decision was made, I came by a lorry heading for Lyons, allowing me to transport our essential files. The lorry left Strasbourg at midday on Wednesday 28 September and I myself left by car in the late afternoon, arriving in Chalon at 1 o’clock in the morning. [...] This was when we heard the news about the four-power conference [...] On Monday, 3 October, I started looking for a lorry in Chalon and on Wednesday, 5 October, the Commission’s effects return to Strasbourg.

This escapade proved unnecessary, fortunately; but it was difficult, on 28 September, to foresee the change in fortunes which subsequently took place, and it was better to take precautionary measures when it was still possible to do so rather than to be caught napping and be obliged to abandon everything at the Palais du Rhin.”

The respite is but brief. Less than a year later, pre-empting the declaration of war by France and Great Britain by a few days, the CCNR leaves Strasbourg at the end of August 1939 and sets up in Chalon with effect from 1st September. It takes with it the same documents as in September 1938, transported this time by waterway thanks to the good offices of the Independent Port of Strasbourg. On Tuesday, 29 August 1939, at midday, at the pont du Théâtre, 12 crates of documents stamped “Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine” are loaded aboard the launch “Paris”, there especially to evacuate the archives of the Independent Port and navigation service, and leave Strasbourg. So it is, at slow speed, that the CCNR’s archives reach the 35th lock of the Canal du Centre, the Commission’s provisional headquarters in Chalon, via the Marne-Rhine Canal as far as Varangéville, then via the Canal de l’Est to the Saône. The less important documents remain at the Palais du Rhin, awaiting better times.

In February 1940, the CCNR’s entire document trove reaches Grenoble by railway, be they documents held in Chalon or Strasbourg. All the documents are quickly reunited in the Grenoble suburbs at the Commission’s new headquarters, at the villa Roche-Fleurie, situated on the route de Chapareillan, in La Tronche.

Here they will remain throughout the war, even after the Secretariat’s activities have ceased and Henri Walther’s departure for Switzerland on 19 November 1940. Walther, placed on leave and allowed to settle in his country of origin, nevertheless continues, with the member countries’ consent, to be responsible for the Commission’s assets, and above all its archives, stored, in his words “in a cellar, which is quite damp”. In his absence, it is one of his acquaintances, Mr Fischer, managing director of the purchasing cooperative for pharmacies in the Dauphiné-Savoie region, who for almost five years will ensure they are properly cared for and take it upon himself to provide Walther with regular reassurance. All their exchanges are by diplomatic bag, courtesy of the Swiss consul in Grenoble. Indeed, it is a question of being discreet and avoiding unnecessarily alerting the occupying authorities to the presence of the CCNR’s archives in the vicinity of Grenoble: let us not forget that from as early as 1940, the German Armistice Commission was demanding in vain that they be returned immediately to Strasbourg; this demand will be repeated regularly between October 1941 and February 1942 to a French government refusing to organise the movement of the

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13 Author’s note: i.e. the conclusion of the Munich agreement endorsing the annexation of the Sudetenland by Hitler and delaying the declaration of war by Czechoslovakia’s allies, namely France and Great Britain.
14 DALR 212 J 388
15 DALR 212 J 388 and 59 J 308.
16 In addition to the references quoted elsewhere, the forensic examination of invoices received by the CCNR between 1939 and 1945 provided useful information on the documents’ whereabouts(cf. 212 J 429-430). On the villa Roche-Fleurie, cf. DALR 212 J 390.
documents at its own initiative: are the archives not “in the custody of an international official, not a Frenchman, appointed by the Commission, from which alone he can receive his instructions”?

With the war over, the CCNR’s archives will return to Strasbourg for good in October 1945 thanks to Henri Walther’s wife, dispatched to Strasbourg and tasked with organising the documents’ return. Let us turn once again to her husband who, in a letter to Claude Bonet-Maury, the General Secretary of the Independent Port of Strasbourg, dated 26 October 1945, touching on his wife’s role, in a tone of both frustration and admiration, wrote:

“My wife, with no conception of the administrative channels and, consequently, no respect for them, fortunately succeeded, at her own initiative, in obtaining a railway wagon and bringing about the archives’ departure from Grenoble.”

Preserved since then at the Palais du Rhin, in 1996 a small portion of them was lodged with the Departmental Archives of the Lower Rhine (deposit 86 J). In 2014 they are joined by more than 64 linear metres of documents (deposit 212 J). This second lodging of documents marks the arrival of the Mannheim Convention and its ratifications in their new, and who knows, final home.

Conclusion

What an odyssey from Mainz to Strasbourg! How many twists and turns before arriving at the Departmental Archives of the Lower Rhine! Freedom for everyone henceforth to navigate the historic meanders of the CCNR “from the point at which they become navigable as far as the sea”, to embark on the Central Commission’s archives to ascend or descend the course of a river which, formerly a frontier, is now both a place and subject of economic, diplomatic, behavioural and even cultural exchanges between peoples. The return to Mannheim of the revised Convention for Rhine Navigation of 1868 and of its ratifications to mark its 150th anniversary is a fine example of this.

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17 Diplomatic archives (Paris), 17 GMII 63: letter from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Charles Rochat sent on 6 March 1942 to Fernand de Brinon, the French government’s delegate-general in the occupied territories.

18 DALR 212 J 885

19 Cf. resolution 2013-I-29 of the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine and the final Convention on the lodging of archives between the CCNR and the Department of the Lower Rhine, submitted to the Standing Committee of the Department of the Lower Rhine: this convention records the systematic lodging of the final archives, both present and future, by the Commission with the Departmental Archives of the Lower Rhine.