

Migration stories in a digital era. Participative and biographic collecting at the Red Star Line Museum Antwerp

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On September 27th 2013 the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp opened its doors in the restored buildings (control station) of the Red Star Line at the Rhine Quay. The Red Star Line was a shipping company operating from Antwerp to Philadelphia and New York between 1873 and 1934. An estimate of two million emigrants transited through Antwerp during this period on board of Red Star Line ships.

The Red Star Line Museum not only explains the process of the historical emigration through Antwerp to a wide and varied audience, but also makes the connection with actual migration to Belgium. It also wants to function as a collective memory of migration stories, both past and present. Migration is a universal phenomenon. We are all, in some way or another, the product of our own migration movements or those of our family members. And the reconstruction of personal migration stories is a good means of shedding light on all aspects of this fascinating subject. Migration stories therefore play an important role in the scenography and educational department, as well as in the presentation of our digital collections.

Over the past few years, the Red Star Line Museum has collected thousands of personal migration stories, today and in the past, through research of staff-members and participation of the public. The museum actively invites visitors to participate and share their own migration stories through different means. The resulting biographic collection of the Red Star Line comprises a wide range of migration stories, related objects and the context information needed to understand them. Being a museum we also have the responsibility to make our collections accessible to the public.

The collection of personal migration stories is accessible to the public in the digital 'Warehouse' (het Magazijn) of the museum. So far, access to the digital collections is restricted to visitors of the museum (i.e. free access within the museum walls), but in the near future we are considering to present this collection (as an open data set) on our website. In this session I will discuss the challenges we meet in the management, use and accessibility of our (digital and digitalized) collections, i.e. finding the right balance between our own needs and resources and meeting our public responsibilities as a (new) museum. I will also give an overview of the wide range of personal migration stories in our collection and give insight into the process of making these available for our visitors through our digital 'Warehouse' (content management system).