

# The creation of the Husserl Archives at the KU Leuven

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## 1. Introduction

This article is based on Toon Horsten's book *De pater en de filosoof. De avontuurlijke redding van het Husserl-archief* ('The father and the philosopher. Saving the Husserl archives'),<sup>1</sup> which was first published in 2021.

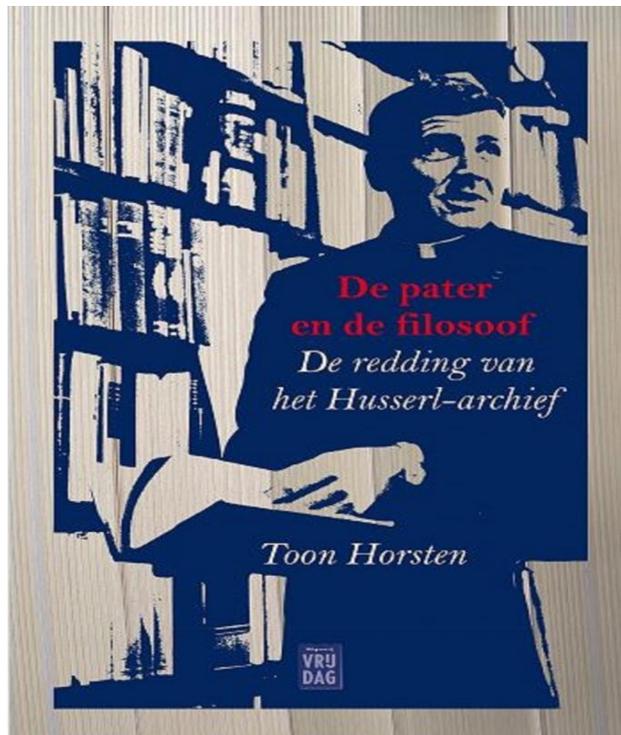


Figure 1. Cover of *De pater en de filosoof*. This image is shared under the fair dealing exception of the Canadian Copyright Act.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.flandersliterature.be/book/pdf/1283/The-Father-and-the-Philosopher-Saving-the-Husserl-archives.pdf>

One day, Toon Horsten, a Belgian journalist, came upon the photograph of a distant relative, a Franciscan friar, and asked his father for more details about him. He gave him a vague answer but then Horsten did some research and found out that Herman Leo Van Breda was famous for having rescued the Husserl archives from the Nazis and had been a philosophy professor at the KU Leuven, a Catholic research university in Flanders. In *De pater en de filosoof. De avontuurlijke redding van het Husserl-archief* ('The father and the philosopher. Saving the Husserl archives'), Toon Horsten has provided us with a detailed account of the creation of the Husserl Archives at Leuven. However, since not everybody knows a great deal about Husserl or the KU Leuven, I will first provide some historical facts about both.

Edmund Husserl was born in 1859 in Moravia which was then part of the Austrian Empire and is now part of the Czech Republic. He was a professor of philosophy at Freiburg University, Germany, and died in 1938. When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, they soon began to enact a series of racial laws; hence, on April 6 of 1933, Husserl, who was Jewish, but had already retired as a professor, was banned from using the library, or any other academic library. Yet, Husserl, who had already published a dozen works, continued to be a highly productive scholar, and continued to take copious notes which he hoped would be of future use to scholars. At the time of his death, he left behind some 40,000 manuscripts which were kept by his widow Malvine.

Let us now turn to the KU Leuven which, ever since its foundation in 1425, has been one of Belgium's foremost universities and which was until 1968 a bilingual (Dutch and French) institution: the *Katholieke Universiteit van Leuven* ('Catholic University of Leuven') and the *Université catholique de Louvain* ('Catholic University of Leuven'). For a long time, the university had been a bastion of neo-scholastic Thomism and, not only that, the thought of Thomas Aquinas had also become the corner stone philosophy of many other Catholic universities.<sup>2</sup> Catholic institutions particularly favoured the Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas in contrast to the thought of Emmanuel Kant as well as other 'modern' forms of thought, including the thought of Descartes, since these were seen as flawed in comparison to Thomism. Of particular importance was the establishment at Leuven by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 of the *Institut supérieur de philosophie* ('Higher

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<sup>2</sup> Up until the 1950s, at Catholic universities in North America, neo-Thomism was also very much part of the curriculum, and its best-known proponents were Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson, who were regularly invited as guest speakers to such Catholic institutions as St. Michael's College in Toronto and Assumption University in Windsor, which I attended. The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies at St. Michael's, which Étienne Gilson established, continues its activities until today.

institute of philosophy') for the specific purpose of teaching the doctrine of Aquinas together with history and the natural sciences.<sup>3</sup>

If you have ever visited Leuven and looked at the KU Leuven's library, you will have noticed that its outer columns are inscribed with the names of American colleges and universities. When the Germans occupied Leuven in World War I they burned down the library and after the war it was rebuilt with the financial assistance of these institutions. At the start of WWII, the same library was bombed by the German *Luftwaffe* ('airforce') and once again it was these colleges and universities which paid for the restoration of the library after the war.

My links to Leuven go back to 1967 when I received a grant to study there and, later, when I returned to complete my doctoral dissertation in Comparative Literature on *Jean-Paul Sartre and the American novel*, I spent many hours in the KU Leuven library doing research and writing. At that time, the two sections – the Dutch-speaking *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* ('Catholic University of Leuven') and the francophone *Université catholique de Louvain* ('Catholic University of Leuven') – still co-existed, but the cries of *Leuven Vlaams* ('Leuven Flemish') were becoming louder and louder. Everything came to a head on May 13, 1966, when the Belgian bishops decreed that the university was 'one and indivisible' (Horsten 2021, 241-242). This resulted in the fall of the Vanden Boeynants government and, subsequently, in July 1968 the bishops relented and declared that the French section, now UCLouvain, would be moved to Louvain-la-Neuve, about 30 km from Leuven, but situated in French-speaking Wallonia.

## 2. Herman Leo Van Breda and the Husserl Archives

Let us now focus on Herman Leo Van Breda, who was born in 1917 in Lier. He became a Franciscan friar and began to study Husserl's philosophy at the KU Leuven in 1936. One of his professors was Léon Noël who had published the first article in French on Husserl in 1910 (Horsten 2021, 24-25) and it was this professor who urged the Franciscan friar to go to Freiburg, Germany, and consult Husserl's archives. Edmund Husserl had died on April 27, 1938, but both were aware that his widow Malvine had preserved his manuscripts and allowed scholars to consult them.

It should be noted that Husserl's phenomenology was far removed from neo-scholastic Thomism, dominant at Leuven at the time, something which had already become clear in 1929 when Husserl gave a series of lectures in Paris entitled *The Cartesian meditations*.

In August 1938, Van Breda took the train to Freiburg, and he was shown the archives by Malvine. There were 40,000 manuscripts and an additional 10,000

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<sup>3</sup> <https://hiw.kuleuven.be/en/about-us/history-hiw>

handwritten transcriptions made by his assistants Edith Stein, Eugen Fink, and Ludwig Landgrebe who were all capable of deciphering the Gabelsberger stenography<sup>4</sup> which Husserl used in a modified form. Malvine also showed Van Breda Husserl's library which contained some 2,700 volumes.

After multiple discussions with Husserl's widow, Van Breda made the following proposal: he would attempt to smuggle the manuscripts to the KU Leuven in Belgium, so that his legacy would be safe from the Nazis. When she agreed, he had to solve another problem: how he would be able to do so without being intercepted by the Nazi police in Germany. And, also, he needed to obtain the permission of Professor Léon Noël who was the Director at the time of Leuven's *Institut supérieur de philosophie* ('Higher institute of philosophy'). When the latter agreed, he contacted the Belgian embassy in Berlin and inquired if they would allow him to deposit the manuscripts at the embassy so that they could send them to Leuven by diplomatic post. They replied that only possessions of Belgian nationals could be transported in that manner and, therefore, he had to persuade Malvine to sign over the ownership to him; when she finally agreed to his request, he provided her with a statement indicating that she remained the rightful owner of the documents. Now that he was the legal owner, he took the train to Berlin on September 24, 1938, lugging with him three hefty suitcases and deposited them for safekeeping at the embassy. At the end of November, the suitcases arrived in Leuven, where they were stored at the university library.

A few months later, on March 28, 1939, the first meeting took place of the *Comité pour la préparation de l'édition des manuscrits d'Edmund Husserl* ('Committee for the preparation of Edmund Husserl's manuscripts for publication') and the Husserl Archives was officially inaugurated at Leuven.

When, in the early days of 1940, it became clear that a German invasion might soon become a reality, new worries began to cloud Van Breda's horizon. Consequently, he decided to move the manuscripts to the home of the Director of the *Institut supérieur de philosophie* ('Higher institute of philosophy'), Professor Léon Noël. This was a prescient move because the library was bombed by the German *Luftwaffe* ('airforce') when the invasion took place. Unfortunately, in the same period, Van Breda also began to experience the first symptoms of diabetes; a disease that would eventually lead to his early demise.

In April 1940, just a few weeks before the invasion, Van Breda returned to Freiburg and purchased Husserl's library, and these volumes were also stored in the home of Léon Noël. And when Malvine agreed to come to Leuven, the purchase price was used for her upkeep (Horsten 2021, 65). She was given a room in the old-age home operated by the Augustine nuns in Herent.

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<sup>4</sup> A type of shorthand, previously commonly used in Austria and Germany, and named after its inventor, Franz Xaver Gabelsberger (1789-1849).

In the meantime, Van Breda had already invited Eugen Fink and Ludwig Landgrebe to come to the KU Leuven, because they could decipher Husserl's particular version of the Gabelsberger shorthand.

To avoid the Husserl manuscripts from falling into the hands of the Nazis, Van Breda developed an elaborate system for hiding them and he kept that a secret from everybody. Even after the war was over, Van Breda never revealed where exactly he had found the various hiding places.

When on May 10, 1940, the Germans invaded Belgium, Fink and Landgrebe were arrested as enemy aliens. Both ended up in camps in the South of France. When the Germans overran France, they were set free and moved back to Germany. After the war, they did not return to work at the Husserl Archives in Leuven but obtained posts at German universities; however, they did stay in touch with Van Breda.

Van Breda defended his doctoral thesis on August 1, 1941; it was entitled *The transcendental phenomenological reduction in Husserl's latest period (1930-1938)*. Not only did he obtain a doctorate *summa cum laude* ('with the highest distinction'), but he was also made professor, and he declared that day 'the best day in his life' (Horsten 2021, 90).

While the war was raging, he continued to look for qualified people who could help him transcribe the manuscripts and, for that reason, he decided to visit Edith Stein who had also been a pupil of Husserl. Both she and her sister Rosa were Jewish, but they had converted to Catholicism in the 1920s and had become Carmelite nuns in Echt, Limburg, the Netherlands. Van Breda tried very hard to convince them to come to Leuven where he promised to find hiding places for them, but they refused and in August 1942 they were transported to Auschwitz and did not survive.

Later, on a visit to Mechelen, he encountered Stephen Strasser whose mother-in-law knew the Gabelsberger stenography. While they were hiding from the Nazis, they spent two years transcribing Husserl's manuscripts.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, as Toon Horsten (2021) indicates, Van Breda was also involved in a multiplicity of other activities. Not only did he teach at Leuven, but he also travelled to Antwerp on a regular basis where he taught at a women's college. He also said mass at the monastery nearby as well as at the convent where Malvine was hiding and everybody agreed that he was an excellent preacher! On the other hand, the students at the KU Leuven considered him a mediocre professor. Toon Horsten (2021) surmises that this was most likely due to the fact

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Strasser and his family survived the war. He was later able to undertake studies in neo-Thomism and in phenomenology and became a professor at Nijmegen University in the Netherlands.

that most of his time and energy was dedicated to the Husserl Archives. He was not only regularly looking for replacements of his German speaking specialists who were familiar with the Gabelsberger stenography but, equally importantly, he constantly needed to find financial aid to keep the Husserl Archives functioning. When in 1942-1943 he successfully asked the *Francois Stichting* ('Francois Foundation')<sup>6</sup> for an annual subsidy, he also indicated that after the war he intended to make the Archives financially and organizationally independent from the *Institut supérieur de philosophie* ('Higher institute of philosophy'). This became a crucially important decision some 25 years later when in 1968 the university was split, with the French institution – UCLouvain – moving to Louvain-la-Neuve in Wallonia while the Dutch institution – KU Leuven – remained in Leuven, as did the Husserl Archives as an independent institution.

After the war was over, Van Breda was contacted by Husserl's son Gerhart, who had returned to Germany, and inquired about the rights for the publication of Husserl's works. When the two finally met in person in 1947, Gerhart was favorably impressed by Van Breda and allowed him to become the official publisher of Husserl's works (Horsten 2021, 165). However, it took until 1966 for a final settlement to be reached, and then Gerhart Husserl was paid 5,000 *Deutsch Marks* ('German currency') for the rights of his father's works. At that time, Van Breda also signed an agreement with Martinus Nijhoff in The Hague, and that publishing house then started to publish the *Husserliana*, the complete works of Edmund Husserl. In 1952, Rudolf Boehm was appointed Director of the Husserl Archives; he remained in that position for 15 years and became Van Breda's main collaborator. In 1958, a new publication titled *Phaenomenologica* was launched with contributions by such well-known researchers as Eugen Fink, Jan Patočka and Alphonse de Waelhens. In the meantime, other Husserl institutes were established at universities in Germany, France, and the United States.

In the 1970's, Van Breda's medical condition worsened, and he died in the hospital at age 63 of an embolism.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, what can we say about this Franciscan friar and the creation of the Husserl Archives at Leuven?

Obviously, one can only be impressed by his incredible foresight, his energy and his ability to complete his task so thoroughly. Today, the Husserl Archives continues to thrive. As an internationally recognized research institute, it attracts scholars from all over the world and contributes greatly to the renown of the KU Leuven.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.francoisfoundation.be/english/>

As for the university, it has changed significantly since the 1930s. Both the KU Leuven and UCLouvain have grown considerably and, even though some faculty members continue to cooperate with each other, in international terms, they draw on different *clientèles*. Leuven has opened itself to the Anglo-Saxon world and Louvain-la-Neuve to the francophone one.

We cannot forget that in the first half of the twentieth century the university was in a unique position as the bastion of Catholicism and neo-Thomism, and it was in this context that Van Breda and many other figures operated. That world has disappeared since then, and Belgium has transformed itself as well. From its independence in 1830, Belgium had been governed by a Flemish Catholic elite and a francophone economic and industrial powerhouse. For a long time, Wallonia was one of the major industrial hubs of Europe. But those industries have long since disappeared and a lot of Wallonia has turned into a rust belt just like parts of the English Midlands. Today, Flanders, no longer as steeped in Catholicism, is the more prosperous half of the country, and the Flemish outnumber the francophones. As well, Flemish nationalist parties such as the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA) ('New Flemish Alliance') are growing in strength. On February 3, 2025, the party's leader, Bart de Wever, became the first ever Flemish nationalist to hold the office of Prime Minister of Belgium! The N-VA aims to gradually transform Belgium into a confederal state. Hence, who knows what the future will bring...

But let us leave all that aside and have a final look at the significance of the creation of the Husserl Archives. Despite Hitler's claim that his *Third Reich* ('third empire') would last a thousand years, it lasted only from 1933 until 1945. During those twelve long years, the Nazis spread devastation in every direction. Hence, had Van Breda not had the foresight to smuggle Husserl's manuscripts out of Germany, they might have been lost forever.

But we should stress that before Hitler's rise to power, in the early years of the twentieth century, a great number of positive changes had been occurring in Europe. Since the emancipation of the Jews, many had found prominent positions in society and specifically at universities. As well, gentiles and Jews had begun to intermarry. In France, a typical example was the family of Marcel Proust. While his father was a prominent Catholic medical expert, his mother was Jewish, and Marcel was raised a Catholic. At the same time, conversions were also taking place. In Germany, the Husserls were born Jewish but became Lutherans after they married, and Malvine became a Catholic when she was living in the convent in Herent. Edith and Rosa Stein, who were also born Jewish, converted to Catholicism and became Carmelite nuns.

Be that as it may, anti-semitism also remained omni-present. A good example is Martin Heidegger, who was Husserl's most famous student, and

dedicated his 1927 opus *Sein und Zeit* ('Being and Time') to Husserl. That dedication, however, was removed when he became rector of Freiburg University in 1933 and joined the Nazi Party. After the war, he was investigated and not rehabilitated until 1949.

And then again, even though Husserl's works had already been studied in the 1930s by such French philosophers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both began to flirt with Marxism in the 1950s, until the Soviet repressive regime became repulsive to them. There are at least sixty references to Husserl in Sartre's *Being and nothingness* (translated from the original French by Sarah Richmond in 2018), while Merleau-Ponty was one of the first scholars to consult the Husserl Archives at Leuven.

Van Breda, however, never wavered in his religious and philosophical convictions; of course, he very much enjoyed the honours bestowed on him and, in his later life, he eagerly met with many of the great thinkers of his period. But when he did not like a prominent figure, whether it be Jean-Paul Sartre or Jacques Derrida, he demonstrated his annoyance publicly. When towards the end of his life his diabetes became a constant problem for him, he reduced his interests in the Husserl Archives but, essentially, he remained the same effervescent figure he had always been.

## References

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