

NETWORKING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE ESTONIAN DIASPORA: ATTEMPTS AND EXPERIENCES

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After leaving the homeland at times of World War II Estonians started collecting their cultural heritage. Special archives and libraries were organized in Australia, Sweden, USA and Canada, some of them, still active. Since the end of 1980s memory institutions in Estonia also have been collecting the cultural heritage of expatriates. Large collections have been formed and a lot of research has been done by them. Numerous contacts and cooperation projects have been developed between the archivists, librarians and museologist in Estonia and world wide Estonian communities. The article gives an account of our experience and discusses the further possibilities for networking the cultural heritage of both the Estonian and the Baltic Diasporas

Key words: Estonian diaspora, archives, libraries, museums, cultural heritage

At the end of the World War II 70,000–90,000 people fled from the Soviet occupation and left Estonia. Their decades' long cultural engagement has produced voluminous collections of records. In many places even independent archives were founded, working mostly on voluntary principles, and maintained primarily by the Estonian community. These archives are:

- The Estonian Central Archives in Canada (Toronto);
- The Library and Archives of the Tartu Institute in Toronto;

- The Estonian Archives in the US (Lakewood, New Jersey);
- The Estonian Archives in Australia (Sidney);
- The Baltic Archives (Stockholm).

Material on Estonia/Estonians can be found also in the archives, libraries and museums of the countries of residence. A lot of material has not reached the preserving institutions as yet. These are possessed by associations, organizations or individuals and decisions on their fate have to be made. Scattered geographically, the work

with these collections is especially complicated.

In March 2005 a group of representatives of the Estonian central memory institutions gathered to promote future cooperation. A special working group for the Estonian archives abroad was established. Up to the present this group has initiated different events and projects. Those activities have been supported not only by the memory institutions involved but also by the Compatriot Program of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

The archives mentioned contain a remarkable amount of publications and archival documents but also photos and audiovisual material. All these collections have turned out to have numerous separate problems that have to be solved. The general trouble is that a lot of material has not been systematized, arranged nor described. Or, even if it has been done, the information or the material itself is unavailable. Because, as it has been said, the archives work on the voluntary basis and as a rule they are open just once a week – the day the voluntary staff comes to do their archival work. Often the repositories do not meet the requirements for an archive. The staff is not professional and their qualifications insufficient.

A big problem is the books brought to the libraries in great quantities. These take a lot of space and the time otherwise meant for the archives. Since 1980s the Estonian archives abroad have done a lot of invaluable work, sending the exile book production to

the libraries in Estonia. By now, however, the libraries need mostly a few missing copies. Home libraries that have lost their owners are a problem for the other Baltic communities abroad too. Visiting in June the Lithuanian Museum and Archives in Mississauga, Canada, I witnessed that the Lithuanians wrestle with the same problem. At the same time the material collected earlier, be it publications or archival records, waits to be arranged.

Although the problems are numerous, the enterprising spirit of the Estonians in exile has to be acknowledged – the amount of the material stored strikes with awe, a lot of invaluable work has been done. All the archives strive to describe and arrange their collections. Many of them have had their data stored in computers but none of them is using the Internet. As far as I know, nowhere backup copies for either research or preservation are being made. In some places the photos are being digitalized. Sound and film collections are waiting for their turn. With one bold exception: the Club of Cultural Heritage in Toronto declared recently in a newspaper that their collection of video interviews is *all digital*. The club mentioned is engaged in recording the Estonian life story interviews. On my last trip to Toronto this summer I tried, with my Canadian Latvian colleague Andris Kesteris, to find a solution to the fate of the World War II newsreels kept for years in an Estonian archives in Toronto.

After Estonia regained independence the interest in collecting historical records

in the Estonian diaspora has been growing. In 1990s there was launched a project in Estonia collecting the Estonian life stories and biographical memoirs. The action has been coordinated by the Estonian Life Stories Association organizing annual competitions to collect the material. The life stories are preserved in the Estonian Cultural History Archives in the Literary Museum in Tartu. The Estonian National Museum has used its questionnaires to interview Estonians abroad. A few years ago a life history group was established in Toronto. The initiator of the project, Professor Tiina Kirss, worked then for the Estonian Chair of Toronto University. Although by now she is the professor of Tartu University, the life story group in Toronto is continuing its work. Life stories have been published in the collection "Torches of Memory I–III" (*Mälutunglad I–III*. Tartu College, 2002, 2003, 2004) and in a bulky volume of expatriates' life stories "The Nests of the Birds of Passage" (*Rändlindude pesad. Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, Toronto Ülikooli Eesti õppetool, 2006*).

I've already referred to the Toronto Club of Cultural Heritage (*Kultuuripärandi Klubi*) engaged also in video-recording the life stories and biographical memoirs. Sound and video records of interviews are being made in other Estonian communities too.

THE COLLECTION OF EXILE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ESTONIA

As soon as it was politically possible, since the late 1980s, the memory institutions in

Estonia have been actively involved in collecting, arranging, researching and publishing the cultural heritage of the Estonians in exile, collecting at the same time any information on the subject. Estonian memory institutions have also tried to help the archives in exile with their might and know-how, going on longer and shorter research and archival trips to the bigger Estonian communities in exile.

The central institution assembling the archival records of exile cultural heritage is the Estonian Cultural History Archives in the Tartu Literary Museum. At the moment it has 32 systematized manuscript collections of exile provenance listed in registers (23,768 items), and 27 photo collections (24,372 photos and negatives) – mostly personal archives, a few archives of organizations, miscellanea collections. The Estonian Cultural History Archives has also pieces of art, sound and video tapes donated by expatriates. It has to be stressed that these figures reflect only the material that has been systematized and arranged already. A significant part of the material is still waiting to be arranged.

Exile archival records are also preserved in the Estonian Folklore Archives of the Literary Museum, the Estonian State Archives, the Historical Archives, the Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts of the Tartu University Library, etc.

The central institution to store the exile publications is the Academic Library of Tallinn University but the collections of the Archival Library of the Estonian Literary

Museum and those of the National Library are fairly complete as well.

The Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Art Museum, the Estonian Sports Museum and the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music – they all collect the exile cultural heritage, each from their specific angle. Separate mention has to be made of one regional museum, the Hiiumaa Museum that has been productive in collecting the material on the islanders living abroad establishing fruitful contacts with the associations of the islanders worldwide.

A thorough survey of the memory institutions in Estonia and abroad is available on the web publication “International Conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad: Articles and Presentations” (Tartu, 2007, http://www.kirmus.ee/baltic_archives_abroad_2006/kogumik/eng/index/html).

COOPERATION

In order to improve co-operation in March 2005 an expert team on the exile archives was convened with the aim to elaborate the action plan for how to map the Estonian archives in exile, to spread relevant information, to appraise the conditions and the needs of the archives in exile, to determine the possibilities to help the archives, and take them, if necessary, to Estonia, to make the archival collections accessible for the public, to develop the research in the field, and to make proposals to fund all the mentioned activities. The team includes experts from all major institutions collecting and researching the Estonian material

abroad: the Estonian Literary Museum, the National Archives, the Academic Library of Tallinn University, the Estonian National Museum, and Tartu University. The team has close contacts with the bigger Estonian communities.

We would like to hope that it was namely the interest and pressure from the part of the team that helped to obtain for the projects on the exile archives state funding through the Compatriot Program established to support the Estonian diaspora.

The first earmarked support came in 2006. It was used to organize the following. On March 19 the archival information day was conducted in the Stockholm Estonian House. The workers for the Estonian memory institutions talked about their specifics and strategies of collection. The joint discussion concerned the preservation problems of the cultural heritage of Swedish Estonians looking for possible solutions.

From June 27 to July 1, 2006 the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu hosted the International Conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad. There were 120 participants from 10 countries: Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Russia, the USA and Estonia. The Conference listened to 30 papers, there were excursions, national round tables and the panel discussion the led to the memorandum fixing our tasks and cooperation principles for the years to come (see http://www.kirmus.ee/baltic_archives_abroad_2006).

The possibilities for such meetings are especially important for nations scattered

all over the world: an immediate contact is needed not only for the exchange of information but also to have trust without which there cannot be cooperation. So it was decided that although the next bigger conference will be in 2009 only, there will be annual smaller summer schools in Estonia and information days/seminars in the different countries of residence.

This summer the 2006 conference papers were issued on the Internet in Estonian, English and Latvian. "International Conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad: Articles and Presentations" can be read on the page http://www.kirmus.ee/baltic_archives_abroad_2006/kogumik/eng/index/html). It gives a broad survey of the fate of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian cultural heritage in those countries that were represented in the conference. We are very grateful to Digna Bērze and Jolanta Feldmane our good colleagues from the Latvian National Archives, who organized the translation of the material into Latvian. In case our Lithuanian colleagues find it reasonable and possible to translated the texts, we are ready to include in the site also the material in Lithuanian.

In 2007 the Compatriot Program dispensed already almost 5 million kroons to support different projects of archives abroad. This is the first substantial state support ever in the field.

The public competition got all in all 44 applications and 33 of them were funded. There were projects for archives both at home and abroad. Most of the projects

supported either collecting or arrangement of the material, field trips included. The extra support enables the institutions to be more intensive in their work launching new projects. Some funding went for IT projects, functions or publications.

On November 12–13 this year the Ministry of Education and Research will have a conference summing up the results of the Compatriot Program, including the work done in the field of exile archives.

A grant for its activities got also the team for the Estonian archives abroad. A short survey of our ventures. On March 17, 2007 there was the Language Day in St. Petersburg organized together with the Ministry of Education and Research. It gave the Estonians living in St. Petersburg information on archives, libraries and museums. There were about 70 participants, and papers were delivered by people from the National Archives, the Estonian Literary Museum, the Estonian National Museum, Tartu University and the Institute of the Estonian Language.

On August 21–25, 2007 there was the summer school "The Estonian Cultural Heritage Abroad" in Koke, Võrumaa. The summer school included lectures, refresher courses and practical training, discussions and seminars. The subjects were collecting, description of collections, their arrangement, preservation and the use in various IT possibilities. There were more than 40 participants from 10 countries: Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Russia, Sweden, the US, Canada, Australia, Great Britain and Ger-

many. The participants were the voluntary staff of the exile archives and the members of the exile community interested in the preservation of their cultural heritage. They were trained by specialists from the Estonian memory institutions. The summer school made plans for coming years. The participants gave us ideas about the subjects we should cover in the 2008 summer school.

We are also planning to continue with the information days in the Estonian communities. Just now we are preparing for the event in Hamburg, Germany in January 2008.

Under the supervision of the team there are being compiled the homepages for the Estonian archives in the US and Canada as well as the Baltic Heritage Network (www.balther.net). BaltHerNet is an multilingual electronic gateway to information on the Baltic /Estonian archival collections abroad, with the aim of ensuring access to relevant information; develop an international cooperation network on Baltic/Estonian archives abroad, covering the memory institutions, research institutions, diplomatic and other institutions in the homelands and abroad, as well as the worldwide Baltic ethnic communities, societies, organizations and individuals.

The ICBAA 2006 memorandum lists as one of its major tasks the creation of the gateway. The need to draw together information on the Estonian and Baltic cultural heritage abroad is clear to all the parties. We began elaborating the concept for the gate-

way in spring 2007. Now the portal is being designed. While developing it we hope to cooperate with the interested parties in the Baltic States as well as abroad, in the countries with the Baltic exile communities. The portal has been planned to be in Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and English that can be possible, of course, only with the help of our Latvian and Lithuanian colleagues.

In summer 2007 the expert team sent to the exile archives the questionnaires adapted to their specifics. We used as a pattern the questionnaire all the collections of the humanities and science under the Ministry of Education and Research got in late 2006. The project was launched by the expert team attached to the state program "The Collections of the Humanities and Science". We hope to get answers by October to make the information later available in the information portal.

TO SUM UP

In 1993 as I happened to visit the Estonian Archives in Lakewood, New Jersey, I could not imagine that the exile archives could be of key interest in my occupation. My later longer and shorter visits have taken me to Canada, the USA, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The deeper I've gone in the field of expatriate archives and cultural history, the more intriguing I've found the subject but I've also realized that a lot of work has to be done.

In January 2007 Estonians observed the 100th anniversary of the death of Jakob Hurt.

Jakob Hurt was the man who launched the large-scale collection of the Estonian folk poetry using for the purpose special actions and the network of correspondents. The collections of Hurt were the foundation for the Estonian National Museum that gave birth to the Archival Library, the Estonian Folklore Archives and the Estonian Cultural History Archives now a part of the Estonian Literary Museum. Having visited the Estonian communities all over the world I've developed the impression as if we were all possessed by the spirit of Hurt. Or is the weird obsession a trait of all the small nations? Isn't it the fear to get lost in history that makes us collect and preserve as much as we can of our history and cultural heritage? With the exile communities it is clear that by preserving their culture they preserve also their identity. And an active engagement in the cultural heritage at the same time reproduces it.

The situation in the exile communities is undergoing changes: as the older generations disappear, the preservation of the nation, the language and the culture are endangered. Therefore it is important to think about the future of these collections right now. We can succeed in preserving the exile cultural heritage only on the condition that the memory institutions in Estonia and abroad cooperate. Efficient cooperation relies on information about what is being done and planned. This, in its turn, asks for trust.

The Estonian experience shows that cooperation is possible. And trust is possible. The growing trust is possible, and indeed, just natural in cooperation. The Estonian memory institutions are ready to cooperate and support if they can. It applies to even highly daring enterprises like the establishment of the Estonian Exile Museum, *Väliseesti Muuseum, VEMU*. Namely, an Estonian in Canada, the architect and entrepreneur and the sponsor of Estonian culture Elmar Tampõld is planning to enlarge the building of the Tartu College in the centre of Toronto. The College, built in 1970s, is a profit-earning student hostel. The money is used, for example, to maintain the Estonian Chair at Toronto University. As a successful business the Tartu College can accommodate Estonian organizations and the archives. Now they plan to enlarge the building to have more space for the archival depositories, the research and show halls. Right now there are negotiations with the Toronto city government to obtain the permission for the construction but the Estonians are optimistic. Mr Tampõld is sure that his plans will come true. This is what we also hope because the Estonian Exile Museum would be a fresh breeze in the sizable Estonian community of the Toronto region that would improve the present archival situation. We are especially happy that the Toronto Estonians have ideas. These are the ideas that are the sign of vitality. To have Estonians as vital as ever is our common wish.

ESTŲ DIASPOROS KULTŪRINIO PAVELDO TINKLAI: PASTANGOS IR PATIRTIS

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Santrauka

Tuoj po Antrojo pasaulinio karo palikę tėvynę estai pradėjo rinkti kultūrinį palikimą. Specialūs archyvai ir bibliotekos buvo įkurti Australijoje, Švedijoje, JAV ir Kanadoje. Kai kurie iš jų veikia ir dabar.

Nuo devintojo XX a. dešimtmečio Estijos institucijos pradėjo kaupti emigrantų kultūros palikimą. Suformuotos didelės kolekcijos, atliekami jų tyrimai. Estijos archyvarai, bibliotekininkai ir muziejininkai užmezgė daug bendradarbiavimo ryšių su estų bendruomenėmis visame pasaulyje.

Nuo 2005 m. kovo pagrindinių Estijos atminties institucijų atstovai susirinko aptarti būsimo bendradarbiavimo. Buvo įkurta Estijos

archyvų užsienyje speciali darbo grupė, kuri vykdo kelis reikšmingus projektus. Ji sukūrė interneto svetaines Estijos archyvams užsienyje ir BaltHerNet – daugiakalbį Baltijos šalių (Estijos) archyvų kolekcijų portalą.

2008 m. sausį įkurta ne pelno organizacija BaltHerNet. Jos tikslas – plėtoti ir administruoti portalą, puoselėti bendradarbiavimą tarp valstybinių ir privačių archyvų, muziejų, bibliotekų ir kitų institucijų, kaupiančių ir studijuojančių Baltijos valstybių diasporų kultūrinį palikimą. Šią veiklą remia ne tik atminties institucijos, bet ir Estijos švietimo ir mokslo ministerijos Tėvynainių programa.

Įteikta 2007 m. gruodžio mėn.