

Estonian Archives in Australia – a Treasure Chest for Everyone

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Estonian Archives in Australia

Estonians have been arriving in Australia since the late 19th century but prior to World War II the numbers were small, about 1000 people. After World War II more than 6,000 Estonians migrated to Australia. When they had finished their two-year work contract with the government, a condition of the free fares, they started to congregate in the larger centres. They set up Estonian Societies, folk-dancing groups, choirs, church congregations, sports clubs and scouts and guides.

The Estonian community needed a central organisation that could speak on behalf of all the small organisations scattered across Australia in their struggle to regain independence for their homeland. The Council of Estonian Societies in Australia was formed in 1952. One of the Council's first decisions was to establish an Archive. We, the Estonian Archives in Australia (EAA) are therefore the oldest of the Estonian Archives in exile. Initially the aim of the Archives was modest – to collect material relating to the cultural activities of the Estonians in Australia. Soon however, the Archives started to collect material from all over the world. Then the goal was to preserve the Estonian cultural heritage and to collect material relating to the activities of the Estonians worldwide.



Estonian House, Sydney, New South Wales, 1940

The policy of the Archives became to collect

- material written in Estonian
- material created by Estonians and
- material about or relating to Estonia, irrespective of language and authorship

Dr Hugo Salasoo, the second and longest serving archivist, collected written material published in Estonia prior to 1940 or that published in the West at any time. The collection grew at a rapid rate and soon had to move out of the Sydney Estonian House into Dr Salasoo's home. Eventually he had purpose-built a repository for the archives on his own land. At that time the emphasis was on collecting published material rather than personal archives and organisational records. Nowadays it is the reverse.

When Estonia regained its independence, the aims of the EAA changed. Estonian archives and libraries held, collected and preserved Estonia's cultural heritage. EAA concentrated on collecting and preserving the history of the Estonians in Australia. Although we welcome material sent to us from overseas communities, we no longer actively seek it as did Dr Salasoo.

I became the honorary archivist in 1994 when the Archives moved back to Estonian House. In 1994 the holdings, amounting to about 100,000 items, comprised

- printed material
- manuscripts
- personal archives
- records of organisations
- scholarly reprints
- news cuttings and ephemera
- audiotapes, cassettes and records
- videos and films
- photographs, slides and negatives .



A family reunited, the SS Oxfordshire arriving at Outer Harbour, South Australia, May 1949

To date we have sorted about 75% of the holdings excluding photographs, news cutting and ephemera. We have sorted and arranged 320 shelf metres of books and archives boxes. We are one of the biggest expatriate Estonian archives and certainly the biggest ethnic archive in Australia.

Our work is supported by the Council of Estonian Societies in Australia through its annual fundraising appeal. With the financial support of Estonians from all over Australia we are truly the Estonian Archives in Australia. We have also received financial support from the Australian Government through the Community Heritage Grant Scheme and from private benefactors. Conservation materials and proper packaging is expensive and there are substantial expenses involved with exhibitions.

We have mounted large exhibitions in conjunction with the biennial Estonian Festivals and have small exhibitions several times a year in the Estonian House in Sydney. Our most ambitious exhibition to date was the “Happily Estonian but Australian too” exhibition which was held in

- The Migration Museum, Adelaide, South Australia, 4 December 2003 to 21 February 2004,
- Estonian House, Sydney, New South Wales, June-July 2004,
- The Heritage Library, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, 7 December 2004 -21 January 2005.

Our exhibitions are visited not only by Estonians but by many Australians too.

The Archives are staffed by seven volunteers from diverse backgrounds and between us we cover a broad range of skills and knowledge about Estonian culture and history, past and present. The Archives comprises a library, an archives and a museum. We have arranged the library according to the Dewey system which is in common usage in Australia. We have not yet catalogued the books but the newspapers and journals have been done. The museum is as yet uncatalogued but since the collection is small, we have no difficulty in finding the objects.

We are working steadily at sorting and arranging the archival material from the personal collections and organisations. Bearing in mind the principle of provenance and using the Australian series system we are sorting, arranging, describing and boxing the material. We are preparing finding aids and hope to have them available on our webpage <http://archives.eesti.org.au> so that they will be easily accessible to those interested in our collection.

We have based our databases on the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts (RAAM), used by the National Library of Australia. The information can be entered using Microsoft Excel. We chose this program because it suits the skills of our volunteers and is compatible with the databases used in Australian libraries and archives. We have created an additional field which allows us to indicate whether the material is from Australia or overseas thereby allowing us to sort by place of origin. We use the same format for the museum and library finding aids because it can be converted into a database and also placed on our Web page.

When we have finished these databases we will make them available to all archives and libraries which are interested in our holdings. The archives and libraries in Australia are only

interested in the material that relates to Australia and have indicated that they will add them to their catalogues and accept the collections when the time comes.

I am certain that the history of the Estonians in Australia belongs in Australia. Our descendants need to know

- who we were
- from whence and why we came
- how we got here and
- what we have achieved.

To that end we collect memoirs, documents and memories from the days in the Displaced Persons camps, migration records, personal documents and the records of organisations. We record oral history interviews both on audio and video tape. We arrange exhibitions, hold seminars, give lectures to help our young people and our Australian neighbours to know us better and appreciate our culture.

We have a good working relationship with the local archives and libraries. The other migrant groups have taken us as an example and are planning to establish archives of their own. They often turn to us for help and advice. The creation of these archives is to be applauded because the history of Australia, especially after the Second World War, encompassed the history of all those migrant groups who together have made Australia the multicultural country that it is today.

Australia is a nation of immigrants. In 1947 the population of Australia was about 7 million, the bulk of them of British descent. Today the population is around 20 million and at least half of the increase is due to post war migrants and their descendants.

Our archives are used by many people, Estonians, Australians of Estonian heritage and Australians who have an interest in Estonian migrants and Estonia itself.

People are searching for relatives, information about the “old Estonians” (we call those who migrated here before World War II “old Estonians”) information about the migration process and even about tourism in Estonia. We are delighted to have so many users because what is the point of having an archive if no-one uses it?

We are short of room like all other repositories. Currently we are undertaking a huge program to sort out which publications and newspapers we will keep and which we will offer to other institutions. We have a large collection of Estonian newspapers from other countries, especially Sweden, from where we hold the daily as well as the later weekly papers. No-one has looked at these papers for many years. The question is, should we continue to hold these newspapers or not?

We happily read the current newspapers from abroad because it is interesting to keep up with events in other centres but we do not plan to preserve them forever. We think that Sweden, Canada, and USA are quite capable of preserving their own newspapers as we do with our own “Meie Kodu” which we hold in paper and microfilm format.

So we sort, discuss, decide and prepare lists of those publications that we will no longer keep. We hope to offer them to other libraries and archives in Estonia because, I am certain, there are enough copies of them in their land of origin. It would be a great help to us if we

knew what areas Estonian archives and libraries specialise in and what they each collect. I hope that by the end of this conference I will know what to offer to whom.

We have to make similar decisions about our books. Certainly we will keep the ones in English and those in Estonian but there is not much call for books in other languages in Australia. I think they will be appreciated more in archives and libraries in Estonia.

Today it is not important where the Archives exist physically. What matters more is knowing where to find the material. Modern technology is so powerful that we can share our treasures with everyone who is interested in them. Databases on the Internet will allow researchers to discover what we have. If needed the documents can easily be scanned, photocopied or photographed. And of course, if the researcher wants to see the originals, then visitors are always welcome in Sydney.



EAA volunteers 2006

1st row (l-r) Raivo Kalamäe (Chairman EAA Board), Maie Barrow,
Reet Simmul, Ann Tündern-Smith

2nd row (l-r) Jüri Woan, Eili Annuk, Elvi Suviste, Mara Piira, August Kangro

Please visit the website of the Estonian community in Australia www.eesti.org.au. There you will find a link to EAA with all our details and those of many other Estonian organisations.