

Baltic Archives in Exile: A Point of View from Canada

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The question of Baltic archives has become quite topical in recent years. Created by the “Baltic Community in Exile”, will these historical materials be recognized for their significance and intrinsic value?

What is the state of their organization, storage and how will they be disposed of, if necessary to do so?

Whether in Canada, or on a global scale, **there must be a vision for the preservation of the heritage of the Baltic Community.** We are faced with political motivations, logical management of resources for preservation, and most importantly, democratic access, while still respecting the rights of individuals and organizations.

A new generation must be trained and prepared for undertaking the task of preserving this rich cultural heritage.

Diaspora or Exile?

The Baltic Community struggled to survive the post-war pressures of integration and assimilation in foreign lands, in the occupied homelands, and in the Gulag. The sense of “exile” was always present during a long battle to preserve identity, language and culture. Despite the brutal occupation of the Baltic States, ethnic cleansing and cynical russification, implemented over a period of half a century, the instinct for cultural survival persisted. The entire Community, regardless of adverse circumstances, was dedicated to a powerful cause – the freedom of the Baltic peoples.

Baltic Archives in Exile

Over the years, many organizations were formed to meet the needs of the Baltic Community, some very formal, others less so. Their *raison d’être* was political, social or economic. The record keeping reflected the order required to organize cultural activities such as exhibits, spring dances, and school plays, or to create influential national and international advocacy groups.

For the most part, community structures have been based on volunteerism, non-profit, and charity. Often, organizers contribute from their own pockets. This tradition continues today.

Some individuals are fortunate to apply their profession to the needs of the community. For example, it is most satisfying to carry out archival research in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, which supports an environment for the study and analysis of the Baltic-Canadian Community. This also provides an opportunity to preserve elements of the Baltic experience as it relates to the building of a nation, in this case Canada.

As an example, we can mention the work of Mr. Jānis Mežaks. As a professional archivist of many years, Mr. Mežaks was instrumental in organizing the records of the Latvian National Federation in Canada, which then became part of the holdings of the Provincial Archives of Ontario. The Latvian National Federation in Canada is an umbrella organization. The membership of its Council includes almost every major, active, Latvian-Canadian organization in the country.

The local communities in each region can have any number of representative chapters of national and local groups, including church congregations of various denominations, relief societies, heritage societies, sororities, fraternities, choirs and theatre enthusiasts.

Each may have a small collection of archival records such as statutes, clippings, even audio and video documentation. Small in the local sense, when pieced together in context, all are parts of the greater mosaic.

However, **society ages**, and upon aging, begins to appreciate its own history. In retrospect, there is **a true sense of accomplishment** – but also, a new sense of urgency to protect its past for **future generations**.

New technology can assist preservation and access. It can, however, work for or against the preservation of a community's vast memory.

Smaller collections of traditional and media archives are in danger of disappearing simply because there is no longer room to store them in community basements or halls. Sometimes, there is haste in designating documents as irrelevant. One level higher than destruction is to send them off to the first “taker”. A third homegrown approach, which is making an appearance, is the well-intentioned use of existing technology to “digitize” the originals in order to make space. The question is, what happens to the original?

The fact that a conference on Baltic Archives Abroad has been created, speaks for itself. It is very timely and necessary. Congratulations to the organizers.

Much work is yet to be done and must commence without delay.

The approach to saving the memory of any group demands an array of multifaceted expertise.

Archivists play a critical role in this formidable task. New approaches must be devised to deal with resource, technical and ethical questions.

The **Community** itself has an obligation to identify, select, catalogue and preserve its history.

We, as **individuals**, have a vital role to play.

Examples of Baltic-Canadian social and archivally significant activity:

- Web site of Lithuanian Museum-Archives of Canada, in Mississauga, Ontario.
- Latvian-Canadian documents: maps, films, papers in Canadian provincial and federal depositories.
- Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian language TV programming on OMNI-TV Toronto.

What will be the process?

A number of individual initiatives exist to locate, identify and collect the archives of the Baltic Community “Abroad”. This is an important initial step. These commendable efforts will encourage the multitude of organizations around the world to look at their situation and carry out their own inventory.

Provenance

The important principle of “provenance” comes into play. Canada, as an example, provided a relatively safe, hospitable and nurturing environment to post-war Baltic refugees. The Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, in their turn, have made a valuable contribution to nation building in Canada. They are a vital and integral part of its history. The argument may also be made that they have preserved the best values, the ideals, of their homelands. Books have been

published, the ethnocultural press has evolved, films made, and radio and television programs produced. Canada has a responsibility to protect these aspects of its own documentary heritage. This is the best of both worlds which demands support.

In comparison, we must sadly refer to Baltic materials held in Russia. The fact of the Soviet Occupation cannot be avoided or denied. For understandable, but not entirely justified reasons, the archival community has been rather passive in demanding the return of materials, which should, by rights, be in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Here, we are dealing with records, which were in fact created in the Baltic States. Once again, this is a question of “provenance”. In a totally democratic world, there would be no problem for nations and archives to cooperate in exchanging high quality copies. It is a simple matter of reasonable access – perhaps a theme for the next conference.

Resources

It is understandable that any cultural group, from a purely emotional point of view, might feel that sending everything to the homeland is the best comprehensive solution. After all, the Baltic States are now free, independent, part of NATO and the European Union, and all is well with the world. It is an assumption that the home country is “the” place where materials from abroad will get special attention, special care and be researched in the interests of the global Baltic Community. This is a very big assumption.

Shipping boxes of documents without selection, without research, without consultation with archives of the creating region, and without respecting “provenance”, could be disastrous to historical evidence created during more than a half century.

It is a fact of archive life, any archive, anywhere in the world, that an influx of new materials **requires new resources**, technical and storage facilities and expertise. The funding needs would be considerable, if not overwhelming, for any one institution.

There is a powerful argument for gathering and organizing the Baltic archives abroad within the countries where they were created. With an efficient database and use of modern copying technology, access and research would be much more **cost efficient**.

Another solution to the resource question, which would also take care of access and research, is the creation of a unified “*Archive of the Baltics*”, implying worldwide coverage, under the auspices of the United Nations. A very serious proposal. You heard it here first!

Library and Archives Canada

In Canada, archival work is carried out at various levels. There are municipal, provincial, university and independent archives. After a recent merger of the National Library and National Archives, the new federal institution, with a mandate to acquire, preserve and make accessible Canada’s documented history, is now called Library and Archives Canada (LAC). The emphasis at the federal level is on “national significance”.

The Library and Archives Canada has accelerated its outreach program in order to provide greater access to its collections by a wider audience. With the use of innovative web design and digitization, its holdings are increasingly open to a wider public. As stated recently by the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, Ian E. Wilson, the number of Internet inquiries on the LAC web site has reached nine per second.

The institution also works cooperatively with groups, and forms partnerships with the ethnocultural community. As an example, this year saw the screening of the 6th Baltic Film Festival at the Library and Archives Canada. Another popular partnership agreement involves the donation to the LAC of selected programming by OMNI TV which produces multilingual and

multicultural television programming. OMNI TV has donated two years of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian programming to the LAC.

Trust

In asking for public support, an institution must win the respect of its audience. It must keep up with demand, recognize the changes it must make, and honestly and sincerely implement policies which serve the public.

After 16 years, the Baltic archival, library and museum system is rapidly evolving. It is amazing to see some of the younger generation taking a lead, a courageous lead, in formulating new policies and modern, less encumbered, working methods. These, in themselves, help **to open up and democratize access**.

It is a challenge to take those final brave steps, to introduce modern management, and do away with the last vestiges of an archaic Soviet structure, which unfortunately, still lingers in too many corners.

Conclusions and recommendations:

1. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian archives in Canada contain a rich collection of historically significant materials.
2. There is a natural link to the countries which Baltic-Canadians left as refugees. Among the many countries of their refuge, Canada has an interest in documenting and preserving this valuable history.
3. The worldwide Baltic archives collections should be funded, organized, preserved and made accessible while respecting donor rights and limitations.
4. In respect of provenance, originals should be kept in the country or region of creation.
5. By use of modern copying and distribution technology, the rich contents of Baltic archives abroad can be easily shared.
6. The three Baltic communities must work together with a unified approach in presenting a credible case for funding.
7. Create a unified and centralized institution for gathering Baltic archives from around the world. This should come under the auspices of the United Nations.
8. The structure of the various library, archival and museum institutions in the Baltic States and abroad should be reviewed. Such a review, and subsequent improvements, will lead to improved trust in the existing establishments.
9. Training a new generation of young archivists must begin immediately. They must develop modern management techniques and be fully conversant with new technology.

10. The next generation of archivists will know their Baltic history in depth. They will be willing to interpret and share. They will be able to relate the history of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the world, and represent in context, the experiences of the Community in its “other home countries”, such as Canada.