

Estonian Archives in the U.S., Inc. in the Time of “Googlization”

Enda-Mai Michelson-Holland

Estonian Archives in the U.S., Inc.

Where we are, where we came from and where we are going

It is a great day to be at this conference in Estonia, the roots and stem of the greater archives produced by each of us, as heirs. We thank the efforts of so many to have made this opportunity a reality. It is a very much needed and hoped for gathering which has brought us from so many parts of the world. It is our hope that the direction of our presentations and discussions would help document today's status quo of the diaspora's archive problems, the future plans and to put in place a foundation for a global index formation readable and usable by all.

The Estonian Archives in the U.S., Inc. has flourished in a multicultural, supportive society. The preservation and introduction of Estonian history in America follows its motto: *E pluribus unum!* From many, one. The United States is a heterogeneous country. It is the only real multicultural success story in the world. Cultures of many backgrounds were welcomed and eventually molded into one entity. It has been a success since cultural integration was not forced. Though this restless country operates under the oldest constitution of its kind, it is always looking with avid interest for the new.

In this atmosphere of freedom, it is essential that the many cultures which created our country, the U.S., have a chance to preserve their ethnic heritage. The main premise and goal, for us, continues to be the deposition and preservation of everything which has to do with Estonians the world over, now and in ages past, and Estonia as sovereign among nations.

We as immigrants and Estonian Americans, consider it essential that what we have brought to America, on a firm foundation, layer by layer, is preserved and studied. It would then be for the next generations that the whispers of the past in the form of personal and specialized archives, general and specialized collections from all possibilities, would achieve some sense of survival.

Preservation and protection then allows for the introduction of Estonian history, traditions, and language to future generations as well as to scholars. This is our aim at the Estonian Archives in the United States of America. It is an effort to honor the heritage of work done by the Estonian diaspora to supplement that which is being carried out in Estonia.

Among our tasks, the first priority should be the compilation of a usable global index for archival documentation in different types of collections.

In this global age of 'Googlization' (i.e. Google & Amazon.com), with online Wikipedia next to the scholarly Encyclopedia Britannica, we come to the age-old lesson: “don't believe everything you read online, no matter where you read it.” The definition of an archive is changing, not only due to the digital age but equally in placement and handling. We need not

overreact to these changes in global understanding or use of culture. However, this is the time to pull together as a community.

Though I was born in the independent Republic of Estonia, the Second World War compromised our freedom. In the U.S., I was fortunate to witness the success of those who stood on the ramparts for half a century, to keep alive and in global focus the sovereign right of Estonia and the Baltic States to exist as free and independent nations.

In addition to my remarks for this presentation I will also summarize from the publication “A Short History of the Estonian Archives in the U.S., Inc.” by Evald Rink and from “Eestlaste pärandi säilitamine välismaades” (“Preserving the Estonian Heritage in Other Lands”) by Juhan Simonson, presented at the VIII Estonian National Congress (*Eesti Rahvuskongress*), during ESTO 2000 in Toronto, Canada.

The Estonian Archives in the U.S. take us back to Colonial Times in the USA. Often the Estonian immigrants coincided with those of other Northern European groups during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These settlements, though numerous, have left a fragmented record. As an example, a sizable Lutheran Church still stands in the Midwest to attest the presence of these pioneers. There are more publications and documentation from the 1920's. However, it was the arrival of a large group of refugees from the Displaced Persons Camps in Germany following WWII who had had distinctly different experiences from these previous immigrants. These survivors persevered to bring about a valuable contribution for the whole Estonian American community.

Subsequent articles in the New York Estonian paper “Vaba Eesti Sõna” continued to inform the Estonian American community about the existence of other Estonian refugee archives in Australia, Canada and Sweden, while there was none in the USA. However, a very valuable and unique collection of archival materials with roots reaching the period directly after WWII from the D.P. Camps in Germany was already in the USA. The first shipment of this material to the EWC, approximately 40 linear feet of documents, periodicals, books and pamphlets, arrived in 1948. An additional 33 archival boxes of materials were sent to the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C.

After continual revisions, the Estonian American National Council (EANC, *Eesti Rahvuskomitee Ühendriikides*) assumed in 1964 the coordination of all previous directives and appointed Ferdinand Kool to categorize and register these various shipments as well as the earlier collections of documents. F. Kool cleaned, put in approximate order and indexed the extant collection, sent these lists as informative documentation to the legal owner, the EANC with a request, in 1966, to found and build an archive under the present name.

The creation of an organizational structure and its lawful registration was concurrent with a wider audience which accepted this progress for appropriate housing and maintenance needs. The membership of the EA in U.S. consists of Estonian American organizations, each having a certified representative on the EA's governing council. The EA Council elects the governing board. The member organization pays an annual membership fee, to which are added voluntary donations from the Estonian American community at large, along with commemorative donations, wills and final testaments specifying sums for EA cultural heritage maintenance. Some larger sums have been donated by various organizations for specific undertakings, like shipments

and the setup of a computer network. No salaries have been paid to anyone helping with the work of these archives. It is noteworthy that tens of thousands of hours of volunteer work have been donated for the building and successful operation of the EA. All the funding for building, utilities and furnishings of the structure as well as its subsequent operation and upkeep has come directly as contributions from the Estonian American community in the USA.

The location for the building took different directions until the final destination in Lakewood, N.J. on the property of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lakewood. The initial building was erected by volunteers with materials and machinery donated by the Estonian American community, especially from the greater Lakewood, N.J. area.

As the generation of the WWII refugees waned, these possibilities changed as well. Nevertheless, for over 40 years the continual helpers' handling and caring for these precious archival materials has been totally done through the volunteering of time and knowledge. This noteworthy tradition continues.

Globally, the tradition of leaving the archival materials as close as possible to the place they were created has generally been the norm. Towns have their own archives, while states and countries have theirs. These traditions have to be examined periodically as the community which the archive represents changes. We are well aware of contacts between these various archives; these could for example include their country of origin, the group they represent as well as other archives in different areas and/or countries.

We could enumerate pages full of formats; nevertheless the concrete example is the classic archive. From the age of print, historical monographs, periodicals, history books and memoirs seem the most useful for the general user.

The EA in U.S. has sent duplicates of numerous items and/or made copies of others to archives, to museums, libraries and institutes in Estonia. Thousands of books printed in the countries of the diaspora have been sent, most in Estonian, others in languages of the country of origin. There exists a sizeable amount of periodical as well as book format publications on the developments and activities of the Estonian communities. The large gatherings of the past ESTOS have been well documented. Additionally, there are microfilms, slides, films, VCR, CD and DVD formats presented both in pictorial as well as word format. Small community gatherings as well as larger ones such as the annual Girl and Boy Scout summer camps have left large archival collections.

To look at the list of publications from either an earlier period, before WWII, or afterwards, the amount available is varied and informative. Most are available in the country of origin as well as in Estonia.

Books about the history of these displaced people have been published on several continents. For example, in USA 1975 the "Ethnic Chronology Series" in English included "The Estonians in America, 1627-1975" by J. Pennar, T. Parming, & P. Rebane. "DP Kroonika – Eesti Pagulased Saksamaal, 1944-1951" by Ferdinand Kool, in Estonian, about the Displaced Persons Camps in Germany following WWII. The EA in U.S. has given gratis 250 copies to the various Estonian gymnasium history teachers in Estonia. These were delivered to the schools and handed over personally. An important sector has been the numerous memoirs and pictorial albums.

Besides the materials archived by the diaspora of Estonians on their own, a great deal can also be found in various countries' archives, museums, as well as specialized institutes. Very often our own community is unaware of these depositions. From the USA just a few examples would include the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Kent State University in Ohio, Hoover Institute at Stanford University in California, University of Washington in Seattle, Wash., Rutgers University in New Jersey, and University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

In 1996 a conference held at the University of Minnesota discussed these problems and drew up a preliminary plan to implement some of these questions of documentation. The question of funding remained. We are pleased to have with us today Kalju Kubits, an Estonian American from Minneapolis, Minn., who decided to attend every State of Minnesota legislative hearing and help in every possible way to move this project along. We are deeply grateful that K. Kubits exercised his 'right as a voting citizen in a democratic society'. Many citizens agreed with him and together all helped to push the IHRC to become a reality. Joel Wurl, Assit. Director and the Curator at the IHRC, as well as our direct contact to the EA in Lakewood, has since become a partner in stewardship of this one example of *e pluribus unum* about the USA.

In 2003 the Estonian Archives in the U.S. became a partner with the IHRC, located on the campus and the Elmer Anderson Library of the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. A large portion of the EA archival collection is now deposited there along with the sizeable Gustav and Hildegard Must Estonian Studies Fund. In addition a deposition in 2006 from Erik Aule was made directly to the IHRC for the maintenance and use of the Estonian collection.

The bibliographic list of social history is arguably miles long. However, from the viewpoint of the Estonian people a great deal more warrants publication. We are well aware of the potential of those precious pieces of paper compiled in archival boxes, the photographs and firsthand stories of participants.

We are gathered here to stimulate and keep on prompting the heritage of Estonians and that of all the Baltic nations. It would behoove us all that this attainment of factual information be a responsible act by all involved.

The VIII Estonian National Congress presentation, by Mr. Juhan Simonson in 2000, gives a wonderful synopsis of that which has been done as well as a list of recommendations for the coming years. With commentary, I will list some of these:

1. The number one item on the list is "the documentation of the archival materials status in the Estonian diaspora" along with an enumeration of problems and outlines for the future. Six years ago the attainment of a global Estonian archival materials index seemed more of a wish list item. Today and tomorrow's quick development of digital technological possibilities makes this type of information databank quite possible.
2. The identification of all possible sources about Estonia or Estonians in the various archives, museums, institutes of where the diaspora has spread.
3. Continue to archive materials about Estonia and Estonians wherever they might be.
4. To subsidize, train, publish and help activities already mentioned.

5. In order to have a larger audience of readers as well as possibilities of grants, publish the initial work in the language of the country, it is being published in concurrently with an Estonian translation.
6. Contact and lobby the Estonian Education Ministry for inclusion of more history based information about the Estonian diaspora, which would include aid to those scholars preparing such information.
7. Digitalize and/or microfilm, all periodicals and newspapers printed in the West, to aid scholarship about Estonians in Estonia as well as the diaspora. The EA has recently been able to complete this process for its one weekly newspaper, The Free Estonian Word (Vaba Eesti Sõna) 1949-2004. It is currently available, as is, in CD format for sale from the EA in the U.S. (despite some technical glitches).
8. Continue to publish in word and picture about the existence of this greater reach of the Estonians and their culture and language on the world forum.

Our hope is that the Archive preserves the heritage of Estonians abroad alongside those living in the homeland.

References

- Evald Rink, 2004. Ameerika Eestlaste Kultuuripärandi Hoidja - Eesti Arhiiv Ühendriikides. Lühiajalugu 1964-2004. Lakewood: Eesti Arhiivi Ühendriikides.
- Juhan Simonson, 2000. "Eesti Pärandi Säilitamine Välismaades". VIII Eesti Rahvuskongressil ESTO 2000. Toronto, Kanada.