

The Main Tasks and Problems in Preservation of Lithuanian Diaspora Archives in the Lithuanian Emigration Institute

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Lithuanian Emigration Institute

The Lithuanian Emigration Institute is a public non-profit organization established in March, 2000. Its founders were Vytautas Magnus University and the municipality of Kaunas. The main functions of the Institute are the following: research focused on the Lithuanian diaspora, its cultural, political, and social activities; collecting of historical material and books from diaspora organizations and institutions or individuals actively involved in diaspora activities; safeguarding of manuscripts and publications, cataloging and preparing them for the use of researchers; collecting information about other centers which research the Lithuanian diaspora, as well as collecting of manuscripts and publications and producing a general catalogue of diaspora publications. It was an act with a great symbolic meaning that the Institute was founded at Vytautas Magnus University. The university was closed in 1950 under the pressure of the Soviet authorities who decided that it was too much for the hostile Lithuania to have two universities and only Vilnius University was left. The situation was different in Estonia where university was a prerogative of Tartu, whereas the capital city Tallinn did not have any regular university. Vytautas Magnus University was reopened only in 1989 thanks to the strong influence of the Lithuanian émigrés who expressed warm sentiments to their university and provisional capital Kaunas. Some emigrants who decided to return to their homeland brought their valuable collections and archives with them.

The Lithuanian Emigration Institute collects and researches archival materials of the Lithuanian diaspora. Research is one of the main tasks of the Institute and it is unique in Lithuania in this sense. Being an integral part of the university in the process of studies, the Institute is interesting for students of history, literature and politology. Both, students and professional researchers are the most common visitors of the archives. Every year some students prepare their bachelor or master's thesis on the Lithuanian emigration problems. Some PhD theses have been written and successfully defended using the archival files kept at the Lithuanian Emigration Institute. In general, the studies are more or less related to the so-called DP generation, as almost all archival files have been collected after World War II. It is clear that this generation was highly educated and their life was more active politically and culturally in comparison with the previous generations before and after World War I. Thus, cultural and historical heritage was extremely abundant and important. Regrettably, the lack of material on the situation before World War I gives less opportunity to study the difficult life of the generation which left Lithuania at that time. The worst problem is that a lot of material was lost forever in the USA, Canada and especially in the countries of South America, where some of the most valuable documents were thrown away as rubbish. Of course, not everything was lost - some documents were preserved in the archives of the USA and other countries and are still waiting for the attention of researchers. However, time shortage and financial problems with going overseas interfere with the research. The very rich library of the Institute helps students and researches to prepare their theses and articles. Many rare books of politology, law, history and other sciences can be found in the Aleksandras Stromas and Bronius Kviklys library collections.

As it has been mentioned, the Lithuanian Emigration Institute is proud of mostly post-World War II collections. It holds valuable archival materials collected and donated to the Institute by the President of the Republic of Lithuania Valdas Adamkus, famous journalist Bronius Kviklys, former chairman of World Lithuanian Community Vytautas Kamantas, world-famous politologist Aleksandras Stromas, famous historian Alfred Erich Senn, sociologist Vytautas Kavolis, the French Lithuanian Community and by other individuals and organizations. The Institute was the first Lithuanian archival institution which started preparing the electronic catalogue of manuscripts ten years ago. At present, it has more than 25 thousand items of records and their amount is increasing every day. The future plans are to make the catalogue accessible to everybody around the world via the Internet.

On the other hand, problems are also met while collecting archives. Some of the so-called world-Lithuanians are afraid to bring their collections to Lithuania till now; some of them donate their archives to various local museums of Lithuania. Almost every area of Lithuania has its own ethnographical museums which, of course, are all proud of getting new archival collections or books from one or another emigrant who was born in the respective region. However, this creates a lot of problems for the researchers. It is not so easy to visit all Lithuanian ethnographical museums, looking for a certain book or newspaper or document, especially, if united catalogues of archival collections do not exist. The Lithuanian Emigration Institute does not pretend to all diaspora collections, but their concentration in the biggest libraries and museums would be more useful for the researchers and would help to extend research on the Lithuanian emigration.

Lithuanian libraries and archives also work in foreign countries. The biggest and the most important of such institutions are the World Lithuanian Archive in Chicago, the American Lithuanians Archive of Culture in Putnam, Connecticut and the Archive of the Institute of Culture in Germany. They used to be the most important places in which the Lithuanian diaspora archives were preserved for a long time. At present, the situation is changing because of the new economic emigrants coming from Lithuania as a wide wave not interested in the cultural heritage very much. For some of them the only task is to earn as much as possible and to return to Lithuania, or to create their welfare in the USA. In such conditions, some Lithuanian archives abroad are in a danger of disappearing due to the lack of preservation capacity and researchers interested in them. So, the decision to bring the archives to Lithuania in future is clear. On the other hand, some psychological barriers of the elder generation of American Lithuanians are also to be dealt with. The Lithuanian Emigration Institute has already met with such problems while bringing important collections to Lithuania.

The Lithuanian Emigration Institute also organizes public meetings with émigrés – both individuals and organizations. At least once a month the Institute organizes special meetings and discussions with the representatives of the Lithuanian Communities of various countries for professionals, students and for everybody interested in such matters. Together with other departments of the university, the Institute organizes thematic conferences and seminars focused on special questions of the history and literature of the Lithuanian diaspora. The Institute pays great attention to the history of public work of Lithuanian émigrés which was especially wide. Nobody can deny the importance of Lithuanian political wings abroad in their fight for the Lithuanian independence, which was possible only in the free world. All political wings, with the exception of communists, developed their political work towards the Lithuanian freedom in their own way and the main problem was humiliation of their political opponents. The echoes of such struggles reach the Lithuanian Emigration Institute till now. Keeping a balance among the past political opponents is sometimes very difficult but a necessary position of the Institute. For instance, organizing a conference to research one or another political stream, another conference

dedicated to other political wing has to be organized as well. The same political struggle is met in getting new collections. Sometimes Lithuanian emigrants come to the Institute to check not only the common order or regulations of the archival collections but also other donators' political orientation.

The Lithuanian Emigration Institute is closely connected to the old traditions of two political wings. Every summer, the legendary conferences of the liberal organization "Santara – Sviesa" are partly organized by the Institute and meet a great popularity. In collaboration with the Lithuanian Community in Germany, week of the studies of Europe Lithuanians, an old European-Lithuanian tradition of the Christian wing, was organized. This had a great importance not only in the fight for the Lithuanian independence but declared the idea of democratic and united Europe as well for 50 years. Moreover, it helped to popularize the Institute as a democratic and open institution for collections and ideas of various political wings.

The researchers of the Institute are also active in the field of publishing. Their aim is to make all important heritage of the Lithuanian diaspora that is preserved at the Institute accessible to the readers not only in Lithuania but also to the Lithuanians around the globe. The special series "The Archive of Exodus" was founded to reach the task. The first volume consisted of the correspondence of the pre-war Lithuanian President Antanas Smetona compiled after leaving Lithuania in 1940. Other volumes, consisting of some other important materials, were published in Lithuanian and English.

To conclude, the Lithuanian Emigration Institute became an important part of the network of the Lithuanian diaspora archives. It is a unique institution in Lithuania integrating archival materials into university study process and aiming to become one of the central bases of research not only in the history of Lithuanian emigration, but also in a new massive economic emigration. The latter problem raises new challenges and requires new works analyzing tendencies and seeking possible solutions.