

Following in the Footsteps of the Diaspora: Building an International Framework for Documenting Communities in Exile

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I want to begin with a note of sincere appreciation to the organizers of this conference, not only for giving me the opportunity to participate but for bringing about the extraordinary achievement that this event represents. It is important to acknowledge that this symposium could not have taken place even as recently as a decade ago. In fact, when the Immigration History Research Center attempted to organize a somewhat similar program in 1996, it could only be done on a very small scale.¹ What we discovered at that time was that the number of archival institutions and research specialists in the North American academic community who were actively engaged in documenting the experiences of the Baltic diaspora could almost be counted on the fingers of two hands. At the same time, we were aware that interest was developing in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and elsewhere outside of the Baltic region, but it was extremely difficult in the still-emerging World Wide Web era to know clearly what work was being done and by whom. It simply was not easy to determine who the key persons were in this field and how to construct a viable cooperative network.

However, there was, in fact one “place” at that time where interest in historical preservation and interpretation was widespread and where the task of overcoming challenges in nurturing an international network had long been overcome: the Diaspora itself. These considerations were, in fact, core elements of the life of Baltic communities outside of the homelands, and it should have been more obvious to us then to bind together the newly evolving energies of the “mainstream” research institutions with the long-practiced, deeply dedicated efforts of émigrés in many parts of the world. As we confer today, with the goal of forming clearer understandings of how to improve the archival landscape on Baltic peoples abroad, the main lesson I would urge us to embrace is this: the principles and processes we need to employ can be found in the inner workings of the very phenomenon we are attempting to document. The Baltic diaspora is not only a part of history that merits greater research attention, it constitutes a social system that points the way to how we must function in order to reach our objective.

Although the history of the post-World War II Displaced Persons migration is at least as familiar to many at this symposium as it is to me, I want to provide a general overview here as a means of underscoring my point about the infrastructure of the diaspora.² Many aspects of the period of time following the War are still not fully understood, not the least of which is the international migration of hundreds of thousands of homeless and stateless people. From the standard perspective of *American* history, the summer of 1945 is associated with the conclusion

¹ “Baltic Diaspora Guide Project,” a two-day planning symposium sponsored by the University of Minnesota’s Immigration History Research Center and underwritten by the International Research Exchange (IREX) Program, April, 1996, Minneapolis, MN

² A more extensive summary is contained in Joel Wurl, *Documenting Displacement: The Migration of Archival Sources from Post-WWII East European Émigré Groups*. - *Archival Science*: vol. 5, no. 1, March, 2005, pp.79-92.

of hostility and the advent of stability. In parts of the world that most witnessed the clash of armies, however, a far different reality prevailed. There, the halting of military conflict gave way to the chaos of social disorder and human dislocation on an unprecedented scale. In Europe alone, the number of people separated from their homes was staggering. Estimates vary and are, by nature, crude. But it seems reasonable to accept the claims by one historian that about 60 million people were forced to move during the years of conflict, while up to 20 million remained homeless in the war's immediate aftermath.³

The world community, such as it was at that time, was ill equipped to address the plight of such a massive refugee crisis. The occupied zones of German territory became the epicenter for this challenge as some seven million migrants who had fled westward from the advance of the Soviet army joined millions more uprooted and expelled Germans and the far-smaller surviving remnant of the Holocaust. It became increasingly clear that a huge number of these dispossessed Europeans either could not or would not return to their homes.⁴ The consequences of World War II included not only military devastation but the annexation and control of lands overtaken by the Soviet army in rolling back the eastern regions of the Third Reich. Refugees from these areas had spent the war years caught between the crush of the continent's two most powerful and destructive military machines. When during the last months of the conflict, Soviet divisions broke through German lines in territories such as Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic nations, large numbers of people knew what fate awaited their homelands and their personal destinies should they stay. Some of these had already experienced Soviet domination prior to German conquest and were especially fearful of the certain reprisals that would ensue against the local population. They fled literally amid the hail of bullets and bomb blasts in places like Riga, Tallinn, Lviv, and Vilnius. Others escaped soon thereafter, as the loss of national autonomy to Soviet-controlled governments loomed inevitable.⁵

This so-called "last million" resisted forced repatriation by both the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and Allied military officials, resulting in the need to house them on a longer term basis.⁶ Encampments were established in various parts of Central

³Michael R. Marrus, *Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p.4.

⁴See Marrus, *Unwanted*, pp.317-24 for a thorough discussion of the accomplishments and failures of UNRRA. Also, Haim Genizi *America's Fair Share: The Admission and Resettlement of Displaced Persons, 1945 – 1952*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993, p. 22 reminds us that the vast majority of refugees were repatriated voluntarily.

⁵The most extensive scholarly synthesis of the post-WII Displaced Persons migration is Mark Wyman, *DP: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945 – 1951*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; 2nd ed. For discussion of the precipitating forces in this population movement, emphasizing particular ethnic/nationality experiences, see also Marrus, *Unwanted*; Anna D. Jaroszynska-Kirchmann, *The Exile Mission: The Polish Political Diaspora and Polish Americans, 1939 – 1956*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004; Milda Danys, *DP: Lithuanian Immigration to Canada After the Second World War*. Toronto; Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986; Wsevolod Isajiw, Yury Boshyk, and Roman Senkus, eds., *The Refugee Experience: Ukrainian Displaced Persons After World War II*. Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1992.

⁶Marrus, *Unwanted*, p.316 discusses the harsh consequences of repatriation for many of the escapees, often

Europe, the vast majority in Germany. These makeshift “assembly centers,” numbered over 750 by 1947, when UNRRA was superseded by the International Refugee Organization (IRO), an agency of the United Nations whose creation became an instrument of incipient Cold War wrangling between Eastern and Western powers. For the “non-repatriables,” the DP camps became much more than transitional facilities. They were, first and foremost, havens for survival. People of various nationalities and all backgrounds – war-time innocents as well as perpetrators – all suffering some level of physical or emotional deficit intermingled there, with nowhere else to go, no resources, and no idea of what lay ahead.

But as months stretched into years, the camps were gradually transformed by their residents into incubators of exile societies. A key ingredient in this extraordinary process of community building was the leadership of an exceptional number of educators, writers, artists, political activists, clergy, and others – a disproportionate percentage of Eastern Europe’s intelligentsia, for whom life at home, if not impossible, would have been intolerable. They recognized that displacement and exile meant not the end of their social productivity but that in fact it *magnified* the importance of the talents and knowledge they carried. The outcome was the development of an astonishing number of institutions in most every camp: schools, from elementary to university level; churches of several faiths; musical ensembles and theater troupes; political parties and self-government units; athletic teams and scouting programs; and of course publishing operations and literary groups.⁷ These organizations and activities were occasionally inter-cultural, but overwhelmingly they were nationalistic, yet they shared one overarching objective: to preserve what was deemed to be in danger of being extinguished in the DPs’ homelands.

The majority of the “last million,” through the services of the IRO and an array of other international organizations (prominently religious-affiliated), were ultimately resettled, mainly outside of Europe. This process unfolded over a period of several years during which the institution-building efforts of the DP communities solidified to the point where much of it would be transplanted abroad and form the nucleus of transcontinental diaspora communities among dispersed Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Estonians, Poles, and others.⁸

What did these new arrivals bring to their new host countries? In terms of material possessions, refugees, by definition, find themselves abruptly separated from most of their personal and communal belongings. Few things from the nations of original flight -- including books and documents -- made their way to the DP camps. The scarcity of books, for example, explains some of the feverish publishing activity in the camps, as hundreds of classics of national literature were reprinted via mimeograph machines and other crude printing devices scrounged

including execution.

⁷Wyman, *DP*, Chapter 5, “Camps Become Communities,” pp. 106-130.

⁸The significance of the DP migration episode on U.S. immigration and foreign policy is discussed in Gil Loescher and John Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America’s Half-Open Door*. New York: The Free Press, 1986; Norman L. Zucker and Naomi Flink Zucker, *The Guarded Gate: The Reality of American Refugee Policy*. New York: Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, 1987; Zucker and Zucker, *Desperate Crossings: Seeking Refuge in America*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1996; Joel Wurl, *From Exiles to Ethnic?: The Post-World War II Diaspora Program at the Immigration History Research Center*. - *Spectrum*, 1994, pp.1-4.

up by camp residents and relief workers. Much of the immediate impetus for this was the need for teaching materials for DP children, but the larger purpose – that of circulating and transmitting cultural touchstones – was a pervasive force. This manifested itself not only in the reproduction of past content but the widespread creation of new literature, journalism, musical and theatrical productions, polemic writing, works of art, and more. And while most of the material productivity of DPs prior to 1944-45 did not make its way to the camps, a large amount of their creative and collective yield during the camp years did follow them to their new homes abroad.

The experience of the East European exiles during the DP camp era as well as their resettlement remains a relatively under-explored dimension of migration history. That this is so cannot be attributed to a lack of primary source material. The documentation that has made its way to archival repositories in the U.S. and elsewhere includes a rich assortment of publications, personal papers, and organizational records.⁹ These sources reflect the uninterrupted nature of the exile experience. A prime illustration is the extraordinary number of newspapers and serials established in camp locations such as Augsburg, Belsen, Berchtesgaden, and Geislingen during the 40s and 50s and resumed in New York, Chicago, Toronto, Kalamazoo, MI, and Kennebunkport, ME, among many others. I have not yet encountered a full listing and count of the periodicals produced in the camps, but I have personally seen many dozens of them. What immediately strikes the observer from an archival vantage point are the preservation challenges they pose, owing to their makeshift production and dissemination under duress. Given the voracious appetites of the DPs for reading material, there's little doubt that the only real impediment to even larger scale print production during the camp years was the constant lack of equipment and paper. Camp officials and residents were at a severe disadvantage from the very start. As one historian noted, in the closing months of the war, "it was as though the Nazi bureaucracy had consumed all the paper along with itself."¹⁰ Some serial publications were even produced on re-used paper, and several were handwritten, as were school text books and other printed materials.

The DP communities not only generated publications, they also accumulated written records of their activities. Files of numerous exile organizations were transported out of camps with the help of relief agencies and government officials or often carried away by the DPs themselves. As with the case of publications, the transplantation of documents supported the continuation of organizational activity upon resettlement. Various exile organizations established during the camp years not only resumed their activities but expanded their profile. Prominent examples among these are the Lithuanian World Community, the Latvian Welfare Association (Daugavas Vanagi), and the Central Representation of Ukrainian Émigrés in Germany. Following resettlement, the impulse to organize around political, cultural, and social interests accelerated, and the number of record-producing entities grew dramatically.

⁹The central role of the political mindset of the post-war migrants is fully depicted in Jaroszynska-Kirchmann, *The Exile Mission*. The impact of the breakdown of the Soviet Union on the émigré communities is described in Thaddeus Radzilowski, "With a Whimper, Not a Bang: The Fall of Communism and U.S. Ethnic Groups," *Spectrum*, 1994, pp.11-15.

¹⁰Danys, *DP*, p.59.

In the U.S., the records and papers of such organizations and their leaders are among the most extensive and well cared for body of documentation of any epoch of American immigration, a direct result of the commitment and agency of the émigré communities themselves. In a step that is fairly unusual for immigrant populations, post-WWII refugee groups not only were careful to document their institutions and experiences, some established freestanding archival repositories within a couple of decades of their transplantation in America. Notable among these special collection enterprises were the Latvian Studies Center in Kalamazoo, MI and the Estonian Archives in the U.S. in Lakewood, NJ, each formed during the 1960s. Both amassed an extensive assortment of publications, personal papers, organizational files, audiovisual sources, and artifactual materials in a relatively short period of time, staffed chiefly by part-time employees and/or community volunteers. Both made conscientious efforts to apply fundamental standards of archival arrangement, description, and preservation, making the most of limited funding resources.

Within the past several years, both institutions have established agreements with the Immigration History Research Center to house the majority of their holdings in the Center's repository, a new archival facility on the University of Minnesota campus. These holdings, which are identified in the IHRC's searchable database via its website, include over 1,000 linear feet of records and papers from the Estonian Archives in Lakewood and some 250 feet of material from the former Latvian Studies Center. These sources have attracted research attention from various parts of the U.S. and Europe. Much work remains to be done in fully processing the records, but as indicated below, the IHRC is working cooperatively with Estonian and Latvian communities in the U.S. and representatives in the two countries to help meet this staffing demand in an ongoing way.¹¹

The fidelity of the post-War émigré groups to the task of archival documentation can be traced to the prevailing DP mission of maintaining the national culture in exile. This mission was deeply ingrained and almost universally shared among the refugees from early on in their camp years. It was the overriding motivation for so much of the heightened educational, artistic, political, and folkloric efforts that emerged at that time and continued after resettlement. Their lives were to be devoted in every way possible to the cause of protecting the defining elements and expressions of their national identities. Many had experienced firsthand under more than one foreign ruler the kind of suppression that not only involved personal deprivation or death but the assault on the soul of a people – its language, its faith, its heritage.¹² Historian Mark Wyman summarizes this compulsion and its genesis in these words:

“Much had died with the war. That was gone forever. But much survived. It survived in memories as well as in the dusty, battered suitcases that came into the refugee camps. To

¹¹ The IHRC's searchable web interface, “VITRAGE,” is located at:
http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/vitrage/search_all.htm

¹² Danys, *DP*, p. 13 recounts that cultural devastation accompanied not only Soviet domination but occupation by the Nazis, such as the destruction of a Lithuanian language dictionary 40 year in the making along with numerous recordings of folk music.

protect and build on these enduring fragments was to be the major task for many DPs.”¹³

From this brief overview, several distinctive characteristics emerge as embodying the fabric of the post-War DP communities. Of course it is always problematic to frame such characteristics in too general a fashion; the various nationalities encompassed within the diasporic experience were by no means monolithic, nor were the interactions with their host environments identical.¹⁴ But there are certain traits that can be seen as more or less universal and that offer those of us in the international archival community some indicators of how we might construct a viable agenda in the aftermath of this conference.

First, and perhaps most obvious, the diaspora was and continues to be deeply committed to the cause of cultural preservation. As noted above, this has taken many forms, notably including the establishment and maintenance of archives. For the post-War émigrés, archival sources were not only a window to their pasts, they were a tool for ensuring the continued vitality and fortitude of a community struggling against both the forces of cultural repression in Europe and assimilation in its new home. As such, their existence and development fulfilled a role much like Saturday schools for refugee youth, native language publications, anti-Communist, pro-liberation political activism, participation in national churches, the establishment of linguistic and area studies programs in universities, and more. For cultures at risk, archives can be seen as a vital haven for what is and was and the building blocks for what will be.

The basic importance of archives in preserving and supporting the ongoing functions of society is already clear to those of us participating in this conference. But it is too easy for us to fall into patterns of dealing with the everyday demands of our under-staffed institutions and forgetting to keep attuned to the truly critical, organic role that archives have played in cultural survival. The cost of losing sight of this factor is aptly stated by archivist Jeanette Bastian: “A community without its records is a community under siege, defending itself, its identity, and its version of history without a firm foundation on which to stand.”¹⁵ Observations such as this can and should be a continual inspiration to us to be proactive and creative in our work.

Along with their fervent dedication to cultural preservation, diaspora communities exhibited a steadfast belief in the necessity of freedom of expression and open access to information. These core rights and privileges, which they saw being extracted from their homelands, became precious commodities in exile. Nurturing them in new societies took the form of vast quantities of literature, artistic works, intellectual studies, educational pursuits, and more. In short, the power of the arts and humanities was embraced as central to the free flow of ideas and the continuing evolution and vitality of the culture in exile. It must be noted, too, that diaspora communities have not been immune to guarded behavior in reaction to questions raised about their past lives during the War or in dealing with potentially dubious contacts from former homeland representatives. Still, the predominant value system, as evidenced by the extraordinary

¹³Wyman, *DP*, p. 157.

¹⁴Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, *The Exile Mission*, p.231.

¹⁵Bastian, *Owning Memory*, p.87.

output of available published and unpublished documentation, has favored openness.

Archivists, likewise, are ethically bound to providing free and widespread access to information whenever possible. Here, too, rare but necessary restrictions must occasionally be employed to honor the intentions of the originator of material or to ensure that information will be usable for the future as well as the present. But the prevailing mode of policy and conduct must be that of facilitating use of the sources entrusted to us. Of course, this entails not only permitting use, but providing methods and tools to assist in the discovery of sources. Just as diaspora communities have been tireless in their efforts to produce, publish, and display the content of their creative and intellectual efforts, archival institutions need to persevere in conveying the content of their holdings, concentrating on the Internet as the primary platform for this work.

This calls attention to another essential characteristic of diaspora communities: their heightened awareness of the importance of communication. All migrating populations have historically displayed a pronounced tendency to circulate newspapers, pamphlets, bulletins, and other published and quasi-published materials to maintain close contact across sometimes distant spaces. For diaspora communities, however, sustainable communication channels represent the very lifeblood of group cohesiveness. Being detached from their homeland and fellow compatriots intensified the significance of printed news and letters shared by the DPs. As alluded to above, abundant evidence exists testifying to the tenacity with which these refugees produced and disseminated information, not only in DP camps but in their communities scattered worldwide in the decades following resettlement.

For archivists and researchers, communication plays an equally vital role in successful work. But it's surprising how inattentive we can be to this task sometimes. The Internet, of course, now provides us with an unprecedented tool for expanding our communication networks; we no longer need to rely on newsletters, scholarly citations, and word of mouth to distribute information about what archival resources exist and where. But the habits of broad communication and the belief in its importance for enriching our mission are not as firmly established as they need to be. One of the outcomes of a symposium such as this could be the initiation of an international listserv open to any and all who wish to contribute updates on archival holdings and progress reports on research activities. This, it seems to me, would be a minimal effort but highly valuable means of continuing the momentum of interchange being fostered by this conference.

Among diaspora groups, communication has taken forms other than mass distribution, and again there are lessons to be learned. In particular, sustained individual contacts and interchanges have been a hallmark of binding these communities together over time. As one scholar recently noted, "Any conversation with a member of the diaspora always reveals examples of staying in touch through letter writing, occasional visits, exchanges of gifts, or extending help to others in need." In many cases, individuals maintained meaningful relationships through this type of one-on-one interaction in several different countries worldwide.¹⁶

¹⁶ Jaroszynska-Kirchman, p.231

Again, archivists and researchers do understand this intuitively and through experience, but are we persistent enough in finding ways to build the kind collegial and collaborative relationships that can truly advance the cause of improving documentation of émigré communities? This kind of approach to communication requires structures and resources as well as an earnest commitment to partnership. An important opportunity for this type of contact has recently emerged with the establishment of the Hildegaard and Gustav Must Graduate Fellowship in Estonian American Studies and the American Latvian Association Graduate Fellowship in Latvian American Studies at the Immigration History Research Center. These programs, which are supported through substantial contributions from the North American diaspora communities (and in the case of the ALA Fellowship, the Latvian government), are designed to provide major annual financial support for students pursuing advanced studies in Estonian and Latvian migration who wish to enroll at the University of Minnesota, where they would have direct access to the extensive source materials contained in the IHRC.¹⁷ The IHRC has also recently sponsored internships from Latvia to enable persons to gain archival experience in helping to arrange and describe materials on Latvian migration, and a similar program for our Estonian collections may be emerging in the near future. Such formal exchange and financial award programs have the potential of transforming casual connections to full inter-institutional partnerships and can create a mechanism for nurturing new scholarly talent as well as enhancing information access. There are certainly many other such creative arrangements that could be explored to solidify our emerging network.

Diaspora groups, of course, devoted much attention to the formation of organizations. As described above, a vast number of political, social, and religious societies arose from the context of displacement, for the direct purpose of fostering community and preserving key aspects of culture outside of the homeland. As the émigrés dispersed to various parts of the world, the importance of these organizational systems became even more crucial in providing structural glue for the diaspora as a whole. Does our archival and research group similarly need some kind of concrete and lasting organization? I am still not certain about that, but we may want to give this careful consideration in determining what could happen after this symposium. Good intentions without a definable framework often do wither away in the press of other business.

In conclusion, though, the one overarching characteristic of the diaspora that we can and must emulate is its unequivocal understanding that physical dispersal does not prevent cohesiveness. Spread out across several continents over decades of time, diaspora populations from the Baltic region and elsewhere in Eastern Europe continue to retain an international group consciousness and identity that does not require being contained within one geographic space. These communities have demonstrated for us that a collective system and purpose can be effectively achieved and nurtured even when particular segments occupy a multitude of locations.

For archives, the implications are clear. A fundamental question that looms for this conference and for the ongoing work of our institutions is: where do the archives of the émigré communities belong? What the diaspora experience itself teaches us is that this is a fruitless and unnecessary question to be asking. Most of this material will undoubtedly remain in the host societies of the exile groups (often involving cooperative arrangements with leading “mainstream” repositories

¹⁷ These programs are regularly featured on the Center’s web site home page at: <http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/>

such as the IHRC the Hoover Institution, or the Public Archives of Canada); some will “return” to the homeland of the émigrés. This will mirror the sentiments of the individuals and organizations of the diaspora itself, and that is how it should be. The essential thing is to pay heed to what the diaspora has done in constructing a viable whole among the sum of its widely separated parts. We must strengthen our commitment to cultural preservation as well as to widespread, open access to the sources we hold; we must expand our means of communication on both a large-scale level and in an individual and inter-institutional manner; and we must build structures and programs that keep our shared mission moving forward productively. In short, we must not only *document* the experiences of diaspora groups, we must learn better to *behave* like them.