

Who uses the cultural-historical collections of the Baltic Diaspora, and to what purpose?

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How to answer such a complex topic? To make a list of the types of specific questions generally asked at the Estonian Archives in the U.S., Inc. (*Eesti Arhiiv Ühendriikides*, EAU) would hardly identify the deeper meaning of the proposed question. All are directed at learning. The methodology has been and is being discussed by scholars along with technological experts and all types of organizations globally for many years and will so continue.

It is the time of global virtual archival libraries, with avatars, and the continuous development of the next technological resource formats. All these and more are, or will be, here to stay. It behooves us to adapt. The retrieval of knowledge, along with some understanding of that which is found in these various formats, requires education and guidance of the global users. The potential of digitization is changing on how best to use, diffuse, and understand various viewpoints for each representative heritage. We are in an internet world.

The 2006 International Conference of Baltic Archives Abroad (ICBAA) laid down a cornerstone from which developed our common Baltic Heritage Network in January of 2008. Today we applaud as we celebrate this step standing on the next. The tracks which have been laid for optimal usage are now available via technological resources for three distinct language and cultural peoples' archives within these perimeters.

Cultural heritage can and does have various connotations. For example, owing to historical circumstances, vast majority of Sami cultural heritage is outside the traditional Sami area. No access, but at least the ability for knowledge of Sami cultural heritage is opened up by these formats.¹

¹ Harlin, Eeva-Kristiina, Project manager, Sami Museum Siida, Finland; "Recalling Ancestral Voices- Repatriating the Material Culture of the Sami People" presenting a joint initiative by the Sami museums in Sweden, Norway and Finland.

The old fashioned bricks & mortar type archival holdings, based mostly on the written word, photographs, film or tape as opposed to museum collections of tangible items, will be the references of my remarks.

The Estonians have covered the globe by water and land for a long time, settled in many countries, among varied cultures but, until recently, left few cultural heritage collections globally.

Today, I stand here not so much as a scholar, rather as just a practical part-time volunteer who has worked with the EAU since 1973. Our mission has been, continues to be that of serving the Estonian-American community, our diaspora and thus Estonia as well. The communicational role of the EAU necessitates the conceptualization of its relationship with distinct groups of specific peoples and communities, which it aims to reach.

The EAU is small in comparison to many but because of its location and outreach has been able to achieve more than might have been expected of it. Of course, the Estonian cultural heritage collection (CHC) has a primary position in the context of Estonian-Americans giving them meanings for themselves – their identity, place in the world, meaning of their lives – i.e. their “roots”. The EAU collection and its depiction of the social world from many viewpoints, as found in personal as well as organizational holdings, gives the possibilities of its interpretation globally. As contextualized information becomes available it must include aspects of the often emarginated, such as the ethic, the moral and the aesthetic.

All of this rich treasure trove articulates the substantial changes in the Estonian CHC in our contemporary society. Over the past years, inquiries to the EAU have come from many parts of the globe. Genealogy, specific events, organizational events, dates, photographs, specific biographic or statistical books or articles in periodicals or as essays lead the types of questions. To present possibilities for a response, short or longer, or directional idea of what is in our CHC.

Our location in the United States of America does allow “freedom of speech & assembly, the right to depart from the country, to distribute ones opinion and to move freely about the country”. For the some 200 plus different ethnic peoples’ archival collections represented in the USA, these freedoms have played a pivotal role in the ability to retrieve information and use it ethically for their own as well as all other cultural needs and expressions.

In 2006 the EAU transferred about two-thirds of its demographic, organizational and personal archives to the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Concurrently we instituted the Gustav & Hildegard Must Fellowship for graduate study at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, to facilitate the Estonian diasporal research and care of the sent documentation along with the Erik Aule Fund specifically for use on any level at the IHRC (www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/vitrage/index.htm).

In addition there are sometimes small or large but very important Estonian archival materials and books in at least fourteen libraries in the USA. Nine are libraries of universities: Chicago, Harvard, Indiana, Kent State, Pennsylvania, Rutgers, Stanford, Washington, Yale. The other libraries are Boston Public Library, the Hoover Institute, Library of Congress, Newberry Library of Chicago and the New York Public Library.

Among these, the New York Public Library needs special mention as it has an unusually interesting collection. The best summary and bibliography of these holdings that I have come across is Jānis Krēsliņš', 2002 article, "Collections of Baltic Vernacular- Language Publications at some North American Libraries: An Attempt at a Survey".²

The book collection at the EAUS in Lakewood, N.J. currently holds 11,385 titles, mostly in Estonian but also in English, French, German, Finnish, Swedish, and Russian. All have substantial information on Estonia or are totally about Estonia, their culture, history and activities. The collection concentrates on considerable research materials in reference form along with fiction & non-fiction. Numerous self publications from across the ages, especially from the refugee camps following WWII, the Siberian Gulag *et al* found along with rare, antique titles from before 1900's. The precious collection has recently been put in shelf list order by two trained, retired librarians along with their helpers. Slowly also some new titles are being added as the whole is being digitally catalogued.

There are 273 titles in the periodical collection at the EAU, but, as is often the case there are missing issues. The great majority of these periodicals are in Estonian, with a few in English. The collection includes Estonian language newspapers from quite a few countries. The "*Vaba*

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Eesti Sõna” (Free Estonian Word) – complete for 1949-2008, has been microfilmed and is available for sale. A marvelous little handbook type calendar – “*Väliseestlase kalender*” (Calendar for Estonians Outside of Estonia) – which was first printed in Sweden, 1945, continued its publication until 1982 in New York, USA under the auspices of “*Vaba Eesti Sõna*” is also available for sale in CD format. It was an example of how a diasporal people could annually keep in contact globally, each year enriching themselves with goings on, addresses of Estonian organizations etc. but even more important were the short, informational writings on events of near history.

The EAU extensive photography collection is close to being digitized. Most of it has been catalogued by general subject areas, organizations as well as some personal names. All of these major as well as a large number of minor collections are being added to via ongoing donations from Estonian Americans.

Referring back to our lead question, we can see that the resources, in each diasporal area, are quite varied as are the users.

Our engine, the Baltic Heritage Network, thanks to its engineers, started remarkably well. As in the classic children's story, “Little Engine that Could, the Little Caboose” it behooves each involved to be their own “little caboose”³ to keep it going as it is known in the American Vernacular: “I think I can. I think I can...”

To take our lead question one step further, I would like to refer to a positive article by Donna R. Gabaccia, PhD, “The Minnesota School of Immigration and Refugee Studies” in which the author explores some little known facts about the University of Minnesota, from 2005, referring to the 100 plus faculty who researched and taught about race, ethnicity, migration or refugee life as well as the founder of the “Minnesota School” Theodore Blegen (1891-1969). They were not all in predictable departments such as History, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, or Sociology nor were all of them Americans. Some were in foreign language departments, some in professional schools, including medicine, Public Health, Education and Public Affairs...in 2005.⁴

³ Paul Wing, *The little engine that could* [sound recording] / Mabel C. Bragg, adapted by Paul Wing; as told by Paul Wing with sound effects. [United States] : RCA Victor, [1945?]

⁴ Gabaccia, Donna R., *The Minnesota School of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, <http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/publications/pdf/MinnesotaSchool-.pdf>

She explains quite specifically how the research of this Minnesota School persisted for 9 decades, yet changed over three generations.

Lucidly and precisely she presents interdisciplinary *and* international scholarly collaboration, keeping the everyday lives, experiences and subjectivities of immigrants and refugees at the heart of their studies. Materials on forced migrations and on refugee resettlement after 1945 soon constituted a third of IHRC holdings. As international as well as U.S. – based researchers flocked to the IHRC in the 1970s and 1980s, the IHRC publication “Spectrum”, also pointed community – and library based researchers – to large interdisciplinary themes – language, autobiography, refugees, the performing arts. Independently, in 1988, a Human Rights Center in Minnesota's Law School began developing materials on refugees and asylum internationally.⁵

We hope for a continuation of the emphasis IHRC has placed on documentation, privileged immigrants’ and refugees’ viewpoints over theorizing ways to link scholarship and the wider public.

We are pleased that a large portion from the EAU cultural historical collection is presently housed at the IHRC.

We do not know how all these trends and possibilities, here mentioned, will continue. Many, I have talked to, wonder as well. Much can be achieved by digital outreach. Yet we know there is no substitute for the “real thing”, where even the watermark on a paper has significance.

The Estonians, against great odds, despite a relatively small population, have persevered, to retain and enrich their language and cultural heritage.

The retention of the beauty and extent of the languages in the “Baltics” are sources of history in themselves. Along with all our stories, songs, dances, art and memories which are essential to the very existence of our cultural identity and dignity, in Estonia, in Latvia and in Lithuania, their global diasporas, now and for the future. We cannot undo the past but we can shape the future. The world knows us as the Baltic Nations, let us all be strengthened by outreach and unity of our Baltic Heritage Network, www.balther.net.

⁵ Same.