

**Cooperative Collections Care:  
The Case of Estonian American Archival Materials at the IHRC**

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In 2003-2006, the Immigration History Research Center acquired the major portion of the archival collections of the Estonian Archives in the U.S.A. based in Lakewood, New Jersey. The relatively small (if measured by budget and staff resources) Center at the University of Minnesota thus became a repository with arguably the largest holdings of documentation on the post-WWII Estonian exile accumulated in one location. All the collecting work had, of course, been done by the enthusiastic community of archivally-minded people in Lakewood. Without their enthusiasm and generosity, the IHRC would not be able to play its current role in the task of preserving Estonian immigrant experiences.

This was an unprecedented acquisition – never before had the Center acquired within such a short period of time a collection of a comparable volume comprising almost the entire holdings of another archival institution. (It should be noted here that the institution, the Estonian Archives in the U.S. still continues to operate.) An event like that could hardly go unnoticed in the Estonian American circles as well as in Estonia, the country of birth for the majority of the individual collections originators. The IHRC and the Estonian Archives in the USA cooperate closely in joint archival operations. The IHRC has been grateful for the continuing involvement and interest of both the Estonian Americans and the National Archives in Estonia in improving the accessibility of the archival materials (which are largely in the Estonian language) to the wide range of users world-wide.

While the IHRC previously had a long history of active involvement in and productive relationships with multiple immigrant and refugee groups, the situation following the recent Estonian acquisition has been a great learning experience. This is due to the extraordinarily large volume, the broad scope, the comprehensive representation of the many different segments of the Estonian exile population and its activities, and also the fact that the materials are for the most part relatively recent. They cover roughly the last 65 years and document lives and events still

fairly fresh in the memories of their protagonists, many of whom are still among us. The materials from Lakewood present an excellent opportunity to develop effective approaches for making them widely available. These approaches could be viewed as models for processing similar collections in the future, Baltic and others as well.

In the past year, the IHRC was fortunate to benefit from two successful cooperative projects aimed at a more detailed processing and description of the archival collections received from Lakewood. First, it was a week-long project conducted by two volunteers from the Estonian Archives in Lakewood, Toomas and Ellen Tehve, who provided a listing of individual collection titles for a set of small volume collections previously recorded in the IHRC's internal collections database as "The Estonian American Subject and Personal File". Having recently received an electronic version of the data resulting from the work of Toomas and Ellen Tehve, the Center will be adding the new descriptive information for ca. 35 linear feet of existing material to its collection level records.

Then in March 2009, Gristel Ramler and Birgit Nurme from the National Archives of Estonia evaluated over 100 individual collections – large and small – of personal papers from the Lakewood material. This is another valuable addition to the IHRC's descriptive information available for its Estonian American holdings.

Cooperation with other archival institutions is especially welcome in the case of the Estonian American holdings since the majority of the material is in Estonian. Having native Estonian speakers assists the IHRC with the assessment of the collections is obviously the best way to approach the task. Additionally, such cooperation offers numerous opportunities for the development of relationships between the Center, the Estonian American community and the international archival circles. The IHRC has always been extremely grateful for these opportunities. Many thanks to the Estonian Archives in Lakewood, the local Estonian American community in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, and also to the National Archives in Tallinn.

One example can serve to illustrate how beneficial a close cooperation among the various players in the workings of archival preservation can be. As part of the shipment from Lakewood, the Center received 4 linear feet of the Papers of Edmund Valtman (1914-2005), a renowned artist who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1962 for his editorial cartoons. Following Edmund Valtman's

death in 2005, his remaining papers (7 linear feet) were donated to the IHRC by the estate executors, thanks to the involvement of the Lakewood archives.

The life cycle of the Valtman Papers will be the focus of this presentation, providing material for demonstrating how varied provenance paths have fortunately resulted in the collection being reunited in one place, for the most part. The Valtman Papers also show possibilities for archival processing and creating different access points available via the internet, including digital reproductions of selected items. Addressing digitization will also facilitate an excursion into copyright issues potentially associated with similar materials. Discussing the specific questions arising from accessioning, processing, digitizing and interpreting the Papers of Edmund Valtman will undoubtedly open opportunities to think about general issues of preserving the cultural heritage of exile communities in relationship to the cultures of their origin, and beyond.

The collection of Edmund Valtman's papers arrived at the IHRC in two major installments. First came with the shipments of materials from Lakewood in September of 2005. This segment contained mainly correspondence of Edmund Valtman, some photographs and copies of his cartoons. These items had originally been deposited at the Estonian Archives in the USA. Edmund Valtman died in January 2005 at the age of 90. At the suggestion of Enda Mai Holland of the Lakewood Estonian Archives, the family and the estate executor contacted the IHRC to arrange for a transfer of the remaining personal papers of Edmund Valtman to the Center in Minneapolis. Those materials arrived at the end of November 2005. Thanks to open communication between the Center and the EAU in Lakewood, with its close connection to the Estonian American community, it was possible to re-unite the two segments of the Valtman's Papers under one roof, even at a time when the original repository's archival holdings were in their majority being transferred across the eastern half of the United States. It happens fairly frequently that two or more parts of a person's archival papers become available for donation to an archival institution at different points in time, end up in more than one archival institution. The decisions about where to send such archival materials are often made depending on the latest personal connections, friendships and favorable or strained relationships of the donor or family members. This sometimes creates a difficulty in access for future interested researchers. In some cases, however, dispersing archival materials from one donor to multiple archival institutions may be beneficial and justified. In 1984, Edmund Valtman donated 52 original drawings of his cartoons to the Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. This institution used to have what

was called "The Literary Manuscripts and Editorial Cartoons collection". Today, it has been absorbed into the Special Collections of the Wichita State University Libraries. At the time of Valtman's original donation, it certainly made sense to deposit a representative sample of his cartoons to an institution specializing in editorial cartoons.

Valtman's original drawings and other artwork can naturally be found at other institutions and also in private hands. The Library of Congress has a collection of Valtman's cartoons in its Prints and Photographs Division. Another batch of repositories and collections containing Valtman material would be presidential libraries and papers of politicians whom Valtman depicted in his cartoons. The correspondence files in the collection at the IHRC contain numerous letters from United States presidents, congressmen and other politicians requesting the original drawings for the cartoons featuring their personalities after the cartoons had been published in various newspapers around the country. Apparently, most of them had no hard feelings toward the artist, despite his rather critical and ridiculing drawings and comments. Valtman's critical portrayals and their humorous annotations were appreciated and welcomed in the concerned politicians collections. Edmund Valtman accumulated a large collection of heartfelt letters thanking him for his drawings from the likes of Lyndon B. Johnson, Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger. So today, a researcher who would attempt to write a monograph about Edmund Valtman would have the opportunity to travel extensively in the United States and also Estonia where he published some of his cartoons prior to 1944 and after 1991.

Edmund Valtman was born on May 31, 1914 in Tallinn, Estonia. He attended the gymnasium in Tallinn, later he studied at the Tallinn Art School. His first published cartoon appeared in a children's magazine when he was 15. In an autobiographical manuscript sketch found in the IHRC's archival collection, he describes the beginnings of his desire to become a cartoonist:

“When I look back to my early years and try to remember what actually got me interested in cartooning, the first thing that comes to my mind is father sending me to the corner newsstand to buy the morning newspaper.

It was the daily newspaper that quite regularly carried a political cartoon 3-4 days a week. The cartoon was by the most famous and popular Estonian cartoonist – Gori, whose work strongly influenced the younger

generation of Estonian cartoonists. When some days the cartoon wasn't there I was very disappointed.

Several years later, still in my teens, I happened to see the well-known German satirical magazine 'Simplicissimus', which carried several full-page cartoons often in color. These were masterful cartoons, creations by famous cartoonists like Olaf Gulbranson, Arnold T.T. Heine, George Grosz and many others. Through the 1920s and early 1930s till Hitler's rise to power it was the best well-known satirical magazine in Europe.

These cartoons left the deepest impression on me. Besides being excellent cartoons I considered these as creation [sic!] of art. Whenever I saw these cartoons I wished I could draw as well sometimes – my unconscious dream to be a cartoonist.

About that time I became interested in reading the newspapers, particularly about foreign events, because at that time there were countless conferences continuously taking place in many cities in Europe – peace conferences after the end of the war, disarmaments, reparations and the creation of the League of Nations.

The names of the cities like Paris, Versailles, London, Geneva, Locarno, Rappollo, Brest-Litevsk, where all this took place and the names of statesmen like Wilson, Clemenceau, Poincare, Briand, Lloyd George, Chamberlain, whose photos appearing daily in the papers and magazines created in my mind a continuous flow of lively impressions of stately figures in top hats, striped pants and cutaways which to this day has stayed in my mind as an imprint of the times.

Regrettably, at the time I was not ready yet – I was still absorbing.

But my older brother, while still in the gymnasium, had started drawing cartoons and sending these to the papers and magazines till he started getting some published. The summer after he had graduated he started drawing cartoons for a weekly paper. As the paper didn't have the

facilities for making line clichés or because it was too expensive, my brother had to draw his cartoon on a piece of linoleum and cut it himself. He cut the linear part out himself while I had to cut out the larger flat areas. That was my first actual apprenticeship in cartooning.” (Edmund Valtman Papers, IHRC3763, Box 1, Folder 1)

During his last year in the gymnasium, his cartoons began to appear regularly in the newspapers and magazines to which he submitted his works. Shortly before the start of World War II and the first Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940, Valtman accepted a job as a draftsman in Viljandi, southern Estonia, while continuing to have his cartoons printed in Estonian newspapers and magazines. It was in Viljandi where he experienced the arrival of the German army pushing the Soviets out of Estonia in 1941. This is what Valtman says about the following years: “The German occupation lasted for three years. It was bad as all occupations are, but never as devastating as the Soviet occupation with the communist regime.” (Edmund Valtman Papers, IHRC3763, Box 1, Folder 1)

Valtman now worked as a cartoonist for the newspaper “Eesti Sõna” until September 21, 1944, when he left Tallinn by ship on the morning of the day when Soviet tanks returned to Tallinn. During the following 5 years in displaced persons camps in Germany, he contributed to various Estonian publications produced in the camps. In 1949, he immigrated to the United States, an event recalled in these words:

“Approaching New York, the sight of the Statue of Liberty aroused in me emotions of lost freedom of our country and found here again. The sight of New York skyscrapers symbolized the New World while the long line of uninterrupted cars on the Long Island highway seemed like an endless train in perpetual movement.” (Edmund Valtman Papers, IHRC3763, Box 1, Folder 1)

For two years, the Valtmans worked for their sponsor in Little Silver, New Jersey, as a gardener and housemaid. In 1951, they relocated to Hartford, Connecticut, where Edmund Valtman would finally find a cartoonist job with the “Hartford Times” where he remained until his retirement in 1975. In 1962, he received a Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning.

The collection of Valtman’s papers at the IHRC provides not only many examples of his artwork, either originals or reproductions, but also, and perhaps that is its most important aspect for the Immigration History Research Center, a rich resource documenting his immigrant experience. Through his letters, diaries, the photographs found in the collection, one can learn more about this artist who left his homeland at the age of 30 to try his luck in a new cultural environment. For a political cartoonist, it took a special effort to learn and “absorb” (as he would say) enough about American political life. In the distilled form of expression that a cartoon is, a vast knowledge and keen observation are necessary pre-requisites to being able to quickly evoke the correct associations in the minds of the readers, based only on a small detail of the caricature and a few words accompanying the drawing.

The materials in the collection span the time period of 1945-2004, the bulk of it dating from the 1960s and 1970s. Correspondence comprises the majority of the materials, both personal and work-related.

The letters from the years 1949-1951 tell us about the difficult beginnings so familiar to most immigrants. The collection contains a large number of rejection letters Edmund Valtman received in response to his submissions of sample cartoons for consideration by various newspapers, magazines, advertising agencies, etc. One of the respondents recommended Edmund Valtman that “quite frankly, however, it appears that your greatest degree of success from an art viewpoint – and a monetary one too – would be in the field of children’s books” (Vladimir Trei, “The Business Stimulator” publication of the Carr Speirs Corporation of Stamford, Connecticut, November 15, 1949, Edmund Valtman Papers, IHRC3763, Box 6, Folder 1)).

In addition to the correspondence, the richest source material for studying the way Edmund Valtman thought about his immigrant experience is constituted by his diaries covering many years between 1946 and 2004. Two quotations may serve as examples of such thoughts: The first one depicts an event in Edmund Valtman’s life that took place in May 1951:

“If my memory is correct, on a beautiful May day I took the train from Hartford to Washington, DC. For me it was an exhilarating experience. For the whole length of the trip, I looked out the window observing the passing landscape while at the same time absorbing the new dimensions of the unending landscape and its variety. For me it was the New World.” (Manuscript text entitled "Remembrance" Edmund Valtman Papers, IHRC3763, Box 1, Folder 1)

The second quotation is from his autobiographical sketch mentioned already once before, written in the 1990s:

“Over the years I have learned things in many ways that I can’t possibly mention all – some from my editors, some from my colleagues in cartooning, from people of daily life. All this and some of what I have brought with me, deep in me – to join with something new and invigorating has made me what I am today and what, I hope, I’m able to give back to America. “(Edmund Valtman Papers, IHRC3763, Box 6, Folder 1)

Family photographs document Edmund Valtman’s time outside his employment and offer a glimpse of the way the family spent their leisure time, often connected to activities of the Estonian American community.

The economic side of the Valtman household can be studied in the financial records included in the collection.

Lastly, there are the many folders containing reproductions of Valtman’s cartoons, copies of publications with articles and interviews featuring the artist, and also some original drawings. This is the segment of the collection which holds the most obvious candidates for digitization projects. A more thorough processing of the collection will hopefully uncover initial sketches that were later used for published cartoons. In addition to memos and correspondence surrounding these cartoons, they would constitute a rich and visually attractive content for digital

interpretive exhibits and features accessible on-line. This would make it possible to utilize potential contributions from multiple repositories in an universally accessible virtual location. (The Print and Photograph division of the Library of Congress has already completed an on-line exhibit of 31 cartoons of Edmund Valtman from its holdings. Each cartoon is accompanied by a brief historical and political, contextual note which helps viewers to better understand the cartoon's message and sub-texts. However, it lacks the information about the genesis of the cartoon, its author's thoughts about it or the responses of the portrayed individuals. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/swann/valtman/>)

The Papers of Edmund Valtman open up numerous ways for using their contents to reach to interested audiences, stimulate further interpretation of his artwork, and encourage research of the Estonian American immigrant experience as reflected upon by an artist who was also able to record his reflections in writing as well as in his drawings. At the same time, all these activities would mediate the development of closer relationships among multiple archival repositories and their users. The Immigration History Research Center is deeply committed to all of the above.