

Archival Treasures from the Researcher's Perspective

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I am drawing close to finishing my doctoral thesis. During the past four years, archives have been of great importance to me, since the subject of my thesis is August Torma, a forgotten Estonian diplomat. I will draw from my own experiences, since what constitutes an archival treasure is in the eye of the beholder. One person's invaluable treasure might be completely useless to someone else.

In general, I like archives no matter their location. You usually find nice people who are knowledgeable in their field there. If there is one archive that shouldn't be left unmentioned it is the Hans Tasiemka Archive in London, as it is rather unique for our times: an entire house full of clippings from newspapers and different magazines, collected as a private initiative out of sheer enthusiasm over many long years. When I first read about this archive not even an address was mentioned. Now, only one of the married couple is with us, and 90 years of age at that, so the archive – which was on offer four years ago – might simply vanish one day. On the other hand, the same material is accessible at the Newspaper Library – the difference being that in the Tasiemka archives the queries are researched for the enquirer, while at the Newspaper Library (also located in London), the enquirer has to leaf through many newspapers before they find what they are looking for – if they do at all.

Of course, there is a certain charm to searching for an answer. I will mainly describe my search for photographs, which began at the British Foreign Office. In 1934, August Torma was appointed Estonia's envoy to London and surely attended diplomatic events where photographers were present to record the moment. So I wrote to the Foreign Office. No, they didn't have any such photos – they had probably all been handed over to the British National Archives. They recommended the Royal Archives, since diplomats regularly attended royal receptions. So I wrote to the Royal Photograph Collection, but they said that they weren't likely to have any material on Torma. The tone of the letter was amiable, yet clearly in the negative – I wasn't even invited to come and look at their existant records. Meanwhile, I researched the possibility of group photos, like the type you find in magazine publications. During this time, I started to correspond with the British Association of Picture Libraries and Agencies. They have an excellent archive, which operates electronically, but searches can only be performed through members of the association, who are the owners of the

photographic collections. But there are hundreds, if not thousands of them, and Torma was no major celebrity who could be searched for by name.

I went to the British National Archives as directed by the Foreign Office, but was greatly disappointed to find that the photographic collection mostly contained photos depicting visits from British officials to the Commonwealth countries. Even the conference photos were either from the beginning of the 20th century or from the years following the Second World War, when Torma was no longer summoned to such events. But – as sometimes happens in archival research – a nice person recommended me to take a closer look at the League of Nations’ website and also provided me with the website address. In the 1930s, Torma was Estonia’s representative in Geneva; and lo and behold! there was a small photo collection on the website. Sifting through it, I found two photographs where Torma was completely recognizable, albeit officially unidentified. To me, this was a big and rather delightful discovery!

Torma was injured in the First World War. It is known that in the summer of 1917, he was wounded as a Tsarist soldier and left on the battlefield for dead. He was then brought to a hospital in Austria. If one looks out for them there are also ample photos of the POWs and their camps, but I found no direct photographs of Torma. I very much wanted to know in which hospital Torma was treated and why he was sent on to Denmark for follow-up treatments. The Red Cross was the intermediary at that time, so it would have been logical to conclude that the International Red Cross Archives in Geneva might have some records relating to his imprisonment, his time in Austria and his transfer to Denmark. The Red Cross does offer electronic information on those taken prisoner – meaning, that it is possible to get additional information in exchange for money. The archive is paid by the hour to perform these searches, and there is no knowing beforehand just how many hours a particular search will take. I agreed to pay. The reply arrived nicely and on time, but all it said was that there is no information about such a man at all in the archives. The archive doesn’t charge for searches that come up empty – all well and good in that respect, but I had not gotten any wiser.

I then proceeded to the Danish Red Cross and started electronic correspondence with them. From this, I found out that although the prison camp was officially under the Red Cross, it was really administered by the Danish government, which meant that all records relating to the camp were held in the Danish National Archives. I couldn’t find anything of interest electronically, and my enquiries were replied to in a very laconic manner. I then

decided to ask the Danish National Archives for a copy of one concrete letter: nurse Vera Maslennikova's report to the Danish Red Cross from 1917. I had heard of this letter from a completely different source, namely printed matter, from which I also learned of Maslennikova's involvement with the Russian Tsar family, the Red Cross and the prison camps' supervision. Thanks to the London embassy's archives held in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tallinn I know that Maslennikova and Torma met Denmark in 1918 and later in London in 1958. Why not assume, then, that they could have met in Austria in 1917 during the inspections of the prison camps there, and that there might be a reference to this in the letter?

Correspondence with the Danish archives was difficult. It felt too complicated that the Danish Red Cross must give their written approval before the Danish National Archives begin to look for the letter, make a copy of it and then charge a very stiff fee. The letter itself is likely in Danish, so it would need to be translated, which would bring about even more additional costs. In the end, the letter might not even contain anything about Torma.

So the whole thing came to a standstill. I am still interested enough in Maslennikova's and Torma's acquaintanceship to have planned a trip to Copenhagen next year. The Red Cross and National Archives there have material relating to Maslennikova, and perhaps about Torma himself. I also plan to visit the small museum that has been opened in the prison camp Horserødi where Torma spent seven months in 1918.

I found much valuable material in the Estonian National Archives in Tallinn; for instance, Torma's correspondence with his future wife Alice during the years 1920-22 and letters from the time when the spouses were apart from each other – 1924 and 1926. All that is known from the mysterious material about those archival fonds is that it appeared out of nowhere in 1952. The total weight is described – 11.6 kilos, but where and how these kilos appeared from is not clear. It is amazing that we have so much material from the time of the Estonian Republic left after such a long time under Moscow's boot!

In England, I have mainly sat in the British National Archives and I have found much information there. I have tried many other archives. One of the most difficult ones to gain access to is the Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge. It would have been available to me as a PhD student, but I haven't had any reason to try to make my way in there. I have investigated whether or not I would be likely to find some correspondence between Torma and some famous British person, but have found no real leads. I have also tried to find

information regarding Torma's membership of different clubs – he was for instance an honorary member of the London branch of the Royal Automobile Club and often used the club's sauna; he would sometimes bring along an acquaintance from the British Foreign Office – and yet all records in the archive were said to be about famous car owners or minutes from board meetings, and Torma wasn't on the board. Neither did I visit the Archives of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Cambridge, as I wasn't able to even ascertain – neither by telephone nor e-mail – that Torma even was the Society's vice president. This information could only be confirmed by records in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tallinn. Initially, a notice about Torma having been the vice president of the Bible Society appeared in his obituary in "The Times". It is in some respect quite strange that the British and Foreign Bible Society hasn't been able to confirm this fact.

The National Archives in London is a large and powerful institution, which lately has found commercial success in genealogical research. What this means is that the archives favour searches for families' roots and diligently publishes material about this subject matter. For a researcher like myself it is a rather nice place, where the finding of archival treasures only depends upon my own perseverance and flipping of pages – it's not quite that way, since British governmental records aren't accessible to the public for 30 years. However, some records fall out of the system. During the course of my research I once found that a whole row of specific records from 1946 were missing from an archives box – 1946 is 63 years ago, and in another instance from 1963 – which is 46 years ago. According to the Freedom of Information Act, a researcher has the right to ask to be granted access to these records, but the reality is that you can ask all you want with no result. They are likely to be security records, which may still be too sensitive in nature to be shown to anyone. Sometimes there are little substitutes that even carry the number of the missing documents; the archival unit itself is accessible to the researcher, but the missing document isn't. I have stubbornly corresponded with the British Foreign Office about being granted access to these records, but to no avail.

The Baltic Archives in Sweden are a downright mystery to me. After Torma passed away in London in 1971, attempts were made to bring his archive there. I don't know whether it is good or bad that this didn't happen. Torma's archive has indeed gone missing, but the different fonds in the Baltic Archives are very difficult to be granted access to. I received the inventory of the different archives therein through an acquaintance and in that way I also

learned about who to turn to if I wanted to see these records. I do not know the reason for this air of secrecy.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to finish with an appeal: since one of the themes of our conference is availability and increased accessibility, we could make a start here in this room. I imagine that most of us have had experience of archives, knowledge that we store somewhere within ourselves but don't really share with anyone. Isn't that wasteful for such a small people? I think our Baltic Heritage Network could do well to open a little corner on the website where we could all jot down our impressions. It would be completely subjective. Something along the lines of "I visited the Archives of the Polish Institute in London on this and that date and found that they have lots of material on the Baltic countries", and what I noticed about it. It could be of use to someone else. Three years ago, historian Aadu Must mentioned that there is supposed to be material concerning Estonia in the Vatican archives, but he didn't say if anyone had been to look at them or, more specifically, what kind of archival material it was. I haven't heard that Prime Minister Andrus Ansip shared his impressions after he visited the archives of the Hoover Institution in the U.S and was shown Kaarel Pusta's correspondence. We are but a small people, even if the Latvians and Lithuanians are taken into account. We need to collect these experiences so we can help pave the way for other researchers.