

# Why Do We (Researchers) Need Archives, Memory Institutions?<sup>1</sup>

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‘We begin to notice more things later.’

Karl Ristikivi

## **Introduction**

I have been studying the Estonian and Baltic diasporas for some ten years now. My research focuses on the Baltic peoples’ flight to the West during the Second World War, the different flight waves and their causes, and the refugees’ lives in Germany and German-occupied territory (Denmark, Austria) between 1945-1952 in particular.

Since my research mainly relies on archival sources I have had an excellent opportunity to acquaint myself with archival records in different countries. My work has taken me to the Estonian National Archives in Tallinn, the League of Nations’ Archives in Geneva, the U.S. National Archives in Maryland and the Hoover Institution Archives in California. I have been to look at records at the Estonian Archives in Lakewood, U.S.A. I have done more intensive research in the Baltic Archives in Stockholm on numerous occasions. Having researched the Estonian diaspora in different countries and under very different conditions has made me think more broadly about archives and memory institutions relating to diasporas. Since the Estonian émigré communities often have joined their archives, museums and libraries together, it would be more appropriate to talk about them as ‘memory institutions’ in this presentation.

In the academic year of 2008/2009 I was once again given an opportunity to do research at the Swedish National Archives among the fonds known as the Baltic Archives. I spent a longer time in Stockholm and took part in the work of the Estonian Archives in Sweden, which also made it possible for me to do some hands-on work arranging archival fonds, enjoy the company of the working group and experience the joys and problems of an archival working group in the

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diaspora. I cannot speak for our compatriots in Eastern Europe since my observations are limited to memory institutions in Western Europe and the diaspora there. However, if one takes into account the presentations held at the international conference ‘Accessing the History of the Baltic Diaspora’ which was held in Tartu on July 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> 2009, it becomes clear that the problems facing the memory institutions in the diaspora of the East as well as the West are rather similar, and so are the experiences of researchers visiting the émigré communities.

### **Archives as historical sources**

Émigré Estonian as well as Latvian and Lithuanian history is a very interesting, very complex and emotional topic. During the course of my research I have spoken with refugees and their descendants, read refugees’ memory accounts and submerged myself in archival records. As time has gone by, it has become clear that archival records have been my preferred source material. Why? When one talks with refugees or their descendants or reads their memories, one gets the impression that there are things left unsaid and stories never written down. Due to this, an important aspect remains unknown to us. It is this aspect, this ‘something’ containing questions unanswered and completions of memories that I have found in the archives – put into words as well as hidden between the lines. I have tried, and am still trying, to put forward these ‘somethings’ in my research.

‘Dear brother!

So I finally managed to curtail my activities and calm down my restless spirit. It took several weeks before I was able to dissolve all the adventure, energy and dynamics brought from Finland. Now, I too am one of those vegetating beings who neither thinks nor feels, nor longs nor grieves. I lie in my bunk, sit staring on a bench and await the evening, only to do it all over again the next morning.’<sup>2</sup>

‘The Estonians who’ve made it here are generally all out to make money and hence are on a "developmental level" where big politics is of no interest to them. For the time being

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<sup>2</sup> Vello Pekomäe’s letter to Karl Ristikivi 23.11.1944. BARA Ristikivi, archives box 34.

they get by just bickering in smaller circles. For some reason, those who've come from Sweden distinguish themselves in this manner. They think themselves better than others and try to play boss. And – since they have a bit of money and the types of jobs which allow for spare time – there's really no surprise that the others look down on them. However, this "Swedish aristocracy" have begun fighting among themselves here for some reason or other. Apparently, they have taken after the old aristocracy – there is money, but definitely no sense!'<sup>3</sup>

‘So we are really just resting here, in the country where everyone 's out to make a buck. When they have made enough, they quickly exchange it for cars and then drive them into each other on the highway. Every weekend there is a summary in the newspapers telling us how many souls have passed on this week, and the results are compared with those from the week before and the year before, etc’.<sup>4</sup>

‘The Estonian society here is like a mutual admiration society – those who go there have all made it, all moved upwards in life – they all sport the mandatory furs and diamond rings – and not many among them would be silly enough to waste their money on things like books.’<sup>5</sup>

With the above examples I have tried to illustrate what this ‘something’ is which has captivated me and inspired me to do research based on archival sources. Memories recorded in the forms of books and interviews hold great value for historical researchers, but they seldom attempt to pass on those direct emotions which are conveyed in correspondence.

Tiina Kirss mentioned this in her presentation, and I too have noticed that when memories are written down later, the chronology, people and place names tend to be mixed up, which at times can cause confusion when they have been presented as definite truth. I have also noticed that the local community and the passing of time sometimes help to fashion universally acceptable stories – like that of the flight with all its pain, beauty, happenings and opportunities.

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<sup>3</sup> Evald Ring's letter to Karl Ristikivi 21.02.1950. BARA Ristikivi , archives box 36.

<sup>4</sup> Evald Ring's letter to Karl Ristikivi 21.02.1950. BARA Ristikivi , archives box 36.

<sup>5</sup> Salme Reiman's letter from Buenos Aires to Karl Ristikivi 30.10.1947. BARA Ristikivi , archives box 36.

Unfortunately, at times this makes the narrator leave out certain small but very important details, since their mentioning wouldn't be met with approval by other members of the community.

Similar situations were described by Anu Korb in her presentation about Estonians in Russia<sup>6</sup>, where a researcher was criticised because they interviewed or communicated with individuals not looked upon favourably the community. This happens among Estonians in the West as well: opinions were promptly voiced regarding individuals from the community whom the researcher had previously met with, and whether or not they remembered things 'correctly'. The community quickly forms its own opinion about the researcher on the basis of the circles they move in and their informants. If the researcher's viewpoints do not coincide with the informant's personal experiences or with the experiences of the community, this is put forward in one way or another. I have noticed that topics and events that aren't looked upon favourably by the local community or the host country are either hushed up or glossed over with apologetic reasons and explanations. The aforementioned circumstances must be considered by researchers.

### **Why and for whom do we collect archival records?**

The versatile archival records that over time have come into being in the diaspora are valuable because they offer valuable information for researchers of different academic fields: history, literary studies, cultural studies, ethnography, demography, psychology and others. The versatility of the archival material and its potential for interdisciplinary researchers is confirmed by the aforementioned quotes from different letters. The materials that can be found in diaspora communities contain important knowledge and interesting stories about the history of the new country as well as the old, and bring forth new perspectives on the development of the community. Secondly, my involvement in the work of the Estonian Archives in Sweden confirms the view that memory institutions in the diasporas are of great importance to the local community as well, for their identity. It is a part of 'their' life. It also provides a reason to get together at least once a week, talk to each other, walk down memory lane and contemplate what has happened. Such social activities ought definitely not be undervalued, but rather appreciated.

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<sup>6</sup> Anu Korb's presentation 'Can Collected Lore Be Returned to the Community?' at the conference *Accessing the History of the Baltic Diaspora* held in Tartu on July 7<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> 2009.

The question ‘why and for whom do we collect archival records?’ is mainly directed to archival working groups within communities and those who come in contact with them, which is why the following might sound trite. All the same, the value of these archival records and their need for preservation isn’t necessarily always understood by other members of the community or the community as a whole – which is why situations can arise where valuable records do not end up in an archive but at best in a cellar or in a shed somewhere, and in the worst case at the rubbish tip.

The reason for the loss of archival records is not always the dispersed state of Estonians (not all Estonians abroad are bunched together in the centres) or the lack of heirs, albeit that these circumstances can prove problematic; there are other reasons as well. Archival records getting lost and ending up at rubbish tips could be avoided if the questions of ‘why and for whom’ would be brought to the attention of the communities to a higher degree. Since exhibitions compiled by local archival working groups seem to be appreciated in the communities<sup>7</sup> it could prove useful to start arranging viewings of old films and photographs where individuals in the films or photographs are identified during the course of the viewing and socialising.

It might also help to have reports on the work of the archival group published in the local papers more often. It would also be good if the archival materials held in storage can be looked through when events are planned. This way, the records in urgent need of arrangement, copying and restoration are brought to their attention – text on fax paper from the 1980s and 1990s might be disappearing, photographs cracking, and VHS-tapes deteriorated and unusable.

The activities mentioned above might make people think and look around in their own homes, ask their acquaintances what old archival records they might have, or to try and find out what has happened to the archival records accumulated by their organisations. The local community knows of individuals and organisations who have materials of importance to the local community, as well as to others. One should definitely try to avoid the widespread way of thinking which says that ‘oh, well, they probably already have those records’ and ‘but I am not

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<sup>7</sup> Maie Barrow’s presentation ‘Who? What? Why? Researchers in the Estonian Archives in Australia’ at the conference *Accessing the History of the Baltic Diaspora*, which was held in Tartu on July 7<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> 2009. The Estonian Archives in Sweden’s exhibition for the celebration in Sweden of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. The exhibition also went on display in various places in Estonia, such as the Estonian National Museum from November 2008 to January 2009.

an important person, so what use is there in my things?' Each and every individual is an important and valuable part of Estonia's history, and so are their archival records.

Below I will give examples of unique documents found in archives.

### Examples of types of records

In the Baltic Archives, among the archival records of several less famous individuals, I found boat tickets to Sweden from September 1944, an evacuation certificate to Germany, permits needed for leaving the camps and soldiers' march routes from one camp to the next. These documents are very rare and add much new and important information to the research around this topic. In interviews people do not always remember what kind of identification documents they had with them in the camps or where they were valid, on what documents they travelled from one country to the next after the war, or when they were granted citizenship in their new countries, etc.

nur gültig in Verbindung mit dem Personenausweis der Eisenbahn und dem polizeilichen Personenausweis für Familienangehörige mit dem polizeilichen Personenausweis. Für Kinder unter 15 Jahren auch ohne Personalausweis gültig.  
 Kehtiv ainult koos raudtee-isikutõendiga ja politsei-isikutunnistusega, perekonnaliikmetele — politsei-isikutunnistusega. Laste jaoks alla 15 aastat on pilet kehtiv ka ilma isikutunnistusega.

|   |  |   |                              |                               |
|---|--|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Beliebige Fahrkarte<br>Hinfahrt — Sinnasõit<br>Rückfahrt — Tagasisõit | Deutsch — Estnisch<br>Saksa — Eesti              | <b>Reichsverkehrsdirektion Riga</b>           | 30 kg                        | Freigepäck<br>Maksuta pagasit |
|   | <b>N<sup>o</sup> 57002 Fahrschein-Sõidupilet</b> |   | <b>3. Klasse</b><br>3. klass |                               |
| Gültig bis <i>25. September 1944</i>                                  |  | zur einmaligen Fahrt<br>ühekordseks sõiduks   |                              |                               |
| Maksev kuni<br>Herr—härrale<br>für Frau—prouale<br>Fräulein—preilile  |  | (Vor- und Zurückname — nimi ja perekonnanimi) |                              |                               |
| <b>Hinfahrt — Sinnasõit</b>   |  | <b>Rückfahrt — Tagasisõit</b>                 |                              |                               |
| von - kust <i>Tallinn</i>   |  | von - kust <i>Rovaniemi</i>                   |                              |                               |
| nach - kuhu <i>Rovaniemi</i>  |  | nach - kuhu <i>Rovaniemi</i>                  |                              |                               |
| über - kust kaudu   |  | über - kust kaudu                             |                              |                               |

Der Schein ist nicht übertragbar und nach Benutzung oder bei Nichtbenutzung sofort an die ausfertigende Stelle zurückzugeben. Verlust ist sofort anzuzeigen.  
 Sõidupilet ei ole edasiantav. Pärast kasutamist või mittekasutamise puhul tuleb pilet anda kohe tagasi väljaandjale. Kaotamisest tuleb kohe teatada.

Ticket from Tallinn to Sweden. Valid until the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1944. Third class.

Gebühr: frei

**Durchlassschein-Ersatz** № 3052

Vorname, Familienname: [redacted] (Beruf) Künstler

geb. am 31. 1. 1907 in Reval Kreis Harrien

wohnhaft in Reval, Suurtõki 22-4  
(Gemeinde, Strasse oder Platz, Hausnummer, Gebäudeteil)

ist berechtigt, unter Vorlage  
des Personalausweises  
(Bezeichnung des amtlichen Lichtbildausweises)

Nr. 126321

ausgestellt von dem T. Polizeirevier  
(Ausstellungsbehörde)

in Reval am 19. 11. 44 in der Zeit  
vom 21. Sept. 1944 bis zum 1944  
(Monatsangabe in Worten)

ein\* mal\* und zurück\* widerholt über die amtlich  
zugelassenen Grenzübergangsstellen nach [redacted]  
(Angabe des Zielgebiets oder der Zielgebiete in roter Schrift)

zu reisen. Reisezweck: Evakuierung 21. Sep 1944  
den 1944

 (Unterschrift) [Signature]

\* Nichtzutreffendes streichen.

TKL 3000-10000 814 7135

An evacuation certificate to Germany on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, 1944.

**Der Reichsminister  
für die besetzten Ostgebiete**

Nr. 123 A. /44 EM/P.

Estnische Leitstelle

Es wird gebeten, diese Geschäftsreise und den  
Gegenstand bei weiteren Schreiben anzugeben.

Berlin W 35, den 11.12.1944  
Kursnummer: 134 Prinz-Louis-Ferdinandstr.  
Fernsprecher: 164361 2  
Drahtanschrift: Reichsministerost  
Neue Drahtanschrift: Ostministerium  
Prinz-Louis-Ferdinandstr.2

**B e s c h e i n i g u n g**

Der Este Herr [redacted] 1902,  
hat sich bei der Estnischen Leitstelle als Flüchtling aus Estland  
gemeldet und ist in der betreffenden Kartei eingetragen.  
Nach den geltenden Bestimmungen sind alle Esten betreu-  
ungsmässig den Reichsdeutschen gleichgestellt.

 I.A. [Signature]  
/Hennig/  
Dienststellenleiter.

Certificate.

Der Reichsminister  
für die besetzten Ostgebiete

Berlin, den 5. 3. 1945  
Fernsprecher: 2100 51  
Postanschrift: Berlin W 35,  
Kurfürstenstraße 134  
Drahtanschrift: Ostministerium

Nr. ~~Estonische Leitstelle~~

Es wird gebeten, dieses Geschäftszeichen und den  
Gegenstand bei weiteren Schreiben anzugeben.

Nr. 626 / 45

Bescheinigung

Die Listen

ab 30.1.1945

geb. . . . .  
geb. . . . .  
geb. . . . .

haben sich als Flüchtling aus Letland gemeldet  
und wurden bei der Estonischen Leitstelle in die  
entsprechende Liste aufgenommen.

Alle estnischen Flüchtlinge sind betreuungsmäßig  
den Reichsdeutschen gleichgestellt zu behandeln.

J.A.  
*[Signature]*  
(Hornig)  
Dienststellenleiter

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In the case of this particular document (certificate), it is important to note that this Estonian citizen had registered themselves as a refugee in Germany on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1945.

This is closely related to the following topic:

**how do archival records reach the archives?**

There are those who make conscious efforts to collect and arrange or even hand over their archives in their lifetime. However, there are also plenty of people who are not that well-organised, who do not think that far ahead or do not think it important, all while the contents of

their drawers and cupboards are of high value to the local community as well as historical research.

All information regarding the activities of archival working groups and what kinds of records are of historical value can be of help in making people understand the value of the records held in their drawers and cupboards. It just might lead to someone getting in contact with their local memory institution. We know that attempts have been made at gathering considerable amounts of Estonian émigré archival records together. This immediately brings up the following question: are the collected archival records available to researchers?

Émigré Estonian memory institutions are often small. The reasons for this vary, but taking care of an archive is a big undertaking. They don't always have a lot of storage space, and it would be very sad indeed if the saving of archival records would have to stop due to this. When thinking about the future, it would be wise for both individual as well as community memory institutions to consider giving their archival collections over to archival institutions in Estonia or in their country of residence. In order to avoid problems and misunderstandings it is very important to acquaint oneself with the deposition conditions. It should definitely be explained to the local community why the decision has been made to handle the archival records in this or that manner, since lack of information and the obscurity which follows often gives rise to misunderstandings and miscommunication. One example of this is the transfer of the holdings of the Estonian Archives in the U.S. to the Immigration History Research Center – IHRC – in Minnesota and the discontent and unawareness of a group of local Estonians as to why this was done. Personally, I have tried to disprove misleading information outside of Estonia about supposed bad preservation conditions in Estonian archives.

The home of an archive is where its creator wants it to be. A mass transfer of archival records to Estonia would surely leave painful wounds in the local community. From the researcher's perspective, the Baltic Archives in Sweden and the Estonian Archives in the U.S. are positive examples; they handed their archival records over to large archival institutions in their country of residence – archival institutions where researchers can access the archival records at any time. The Estonian Archives in the U.S are only open for a couple of hours one day a week, which created problems for researchers from afar. Researchers had to consider what to do with their time in Lakewood, how to get to the archives and how to arrange their accommodation. However,

their archival records are now in an archival institution open on working days and they are in a more accessible location. Researchers can comfortably plan their trips from there and do not have to depend upon the schedules of volunteer-based community archives.

### **How and where does one find information on how to find research materials?**

For the researcher, this issue is just as complicated as the previous one. If the research topic is narrow, it can be very difficult to find all the places in the world with related source material. So far, I have mainly received information through personal contacts. Piret Noorhani and the BaltHerNet have together done laudable work and taken the situation a step forward – the information portal on émigré archives [www.balther.net](http://www.balther.net) is a brilliant idea. It gives researchers an opportunity to share information on what can be found in different memory institutions as well as enabling local communities to share information on their materials. However, we lack or have very little knowledge about the location of the archival records generated by Estonians in Germany and England. Help from the local communities in finding this information would surely be very welcome and appreciated.

### **Are trips to the archives always necessary, or are there other options for retrieving information?**

Everyone who has been involved in diaspora research knows how time-consuming it is to find the location of archival records. The Baltic Heritage Network creates a very good environment for communication with fellow researchers as well as the memory institutions. I would like to urge people here to talk with each other and share information. A small message to another researcher could save them time as well as money.

Before the visit, the researcher must communicate with the archive in order to confirm that the information on hand is correct, find out about the availability of the records, etc. It sometimes happens that archival collections are being arranged or are unavailable for researchers due to some other reason. Communicating with archives has its pitfalls, acquiring information often depends on the size of the archival institution and how detailed a reply one expects. Archival staff do not always possess detailed knowledge of all fonds; they might be overburdened with

other enquiries, and due to this simply reply in the negative. In the case of large archival institutions, it is persistence that moves the researcher ahead – definite answers only appear when the researcher sits down and reads through the records. Staff at smaller archives tend to be more compliant and helpful; you are more likely to receive positive help with questions or problems that arise there.

### **What can community memory institutions do to arrange archival records?**

Arranging archives can be straight-forward and performed by anyone with basic archival knowledge. However, background information provides insight into how to arrange the records easier and faster, how to find a home for undated documents etc. This means that the first arrangement of archives in the local community is of much help for any later work at large archival institutions. However, I see a big and burning problem in regard to photographs and films without descriptions of what they depict and when they were taken. It is very sad to find these empty photographs in archives as the individuals, places and events in them are very difficult to ascertain for researchers from outside that community.



The first church service in Los Angeles 28.08.1949.



Example of a photograph lacking metadata: When and where was this taken? Who is in the photograph?



Everyday life in a refugee camp. Where? When? Who?

Marcus Kolga spoke on this theme in his presentation.<sup>8</sup> I would like to emphasise the importance of involving the people who still remember the decades just after the Second World War. A way to attain this information needs to be thought of.

## Summary

I gave the answer to the question of 'why do we need archives and memory institutions?' in the header with a quote from Karl Ristikivi: 'we begin to notice more things later'. I believe that in time, we also begin to value things of the past much more. Archives are very important in the preservation of a nation's memory and should therefore be highly valued, appreciated and preserved! An archive is alive and functioning only when it is properly arranged, accessible and continuously receiving new collections and materials. An archive does not only gaze into the future, but also into the distant past. We ought to – connected with memory institutions as we are – let this view guide us into the distant future.

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus Kolga's presentation 'Researching Private and Archival Footage in the Estonian Diaspora in Canada', held at the conference *Accessing the History of the Baltic Diaspora*, in Tartu July 7<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Ringi, Evald. *Letter to Karl Ristikivi 21.02.1950*. BARA Ristikivi, archives box 36.

## **Documents**

*Ticket Tallinn – Sweden. Valid until the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 1944. Third class*. BARA Karl Liivola, archives box 1.

*Certificate. Evacuee from Tallinn leaving for Germany on the 21<sup>st</sup> of september 1944*  
*Evacuation certificate/substitute N 3052*. BARA Different smaller archives, archives box 1.

*Certificate*. BARA Different smaller archives, archives box 1.

*Certificate*. BARA Different smaller archives, archives box 1.

## **Photos**

*The first church service in Los Angeles 28.08.1949* BARA Veera Poska Grüntahl archives box 8.

*Example of a photograph lacking metadata: When and where was this taken? Who is in the photograph?* BARA, Karl Liivola, archives box 9.

*Everyday life in a refugee camp. Where? When? Who?* BARA Karl Liivola, archives box 9.