

Connecting People and Archives: The First Years of the Baltic Heritage Network

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The Estonians have a historical habit of looking northwards in search of models – toward Scandinavia, also toward Finland. Especially Finland. The two countries have had close and fruitful ties throughout times. In 'new' Estonia people often talk about the need to create Estonian own Nokia – to invent, like our Northern neighbours, an original, internationally successful business idea that would guarantee economic success and cultivate a feeling of national pride in the Estonians' hearts.

The well-known Nokia slogan “Connecting people” often comes to mind when working with the Baltic archives abroad. Connecting people and institutions (and their interests) has turned out to be one of the main functions of Baltic Heritage Network. How have we succeeded in this? Have we attained anything tangible?

International Conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad (2006)

To begin with, let me look back. In 2006 the International Conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad (ICBAA), held in Tartu, turned out to be a success. At first the organizers were not so sure of this as the East and the West, different mentalities and experiences, attitudes and prejudices met at the conference. The main aim of the 2006 conference was: 1) to bring together people professionally or otherwise involved in preserving the cultural heritage of the Estonian diaspora; 2) to learn more about Latvian and Lithuanian situation; 3) to find a common ground from which to move on and last but not least 4) to gather information on the location, present situation and future perspectives of the cultural heritage of the Baltic diaspora.

Issues related to exile archives and their future are very sensitive. In my work with these archives I have come across very different, even contradictory views about where they should be located (homeland or diaspora communities), how they should be attended to, who could use them and for what purpose. Estonians living at home and abroad have had their differences; there have been (and still are) differences within each group. However, these differences should not become an obstacle in the work with the cultural heritage of the Baltic

diaspora. Dialogue is a normal phenomenon in a democratic society; it is normal in the archival world as well. Despite our differences we share a common aim – to guarantee the preservation of the heritage of the three Baltic nations, regardless of its location.

We talked about all this in 2006 – in 30 presentations, in the workshops, in lobby conversations, and at the final round table. By the end of the conference we formulated our common principles in a memorandum that has become a base for our future activities. One of the most important articles of the memorandum is the first one: “to guarantee the preservation and open access to the Baltic/Estonian archives abroad regardless of their location and according to the legislation, regulations, and traditions of the host countries”. I’d like to emphasize it here again so that newcomers would understand our main principle. It is probably clear to everyone that research on Baltic-related disciplines is today concentrated mostly in their homelands - Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It is also clear that the diaspora communities have a continuous need to come to terms with their own history. The work with cultural heritage reproduces Estonian/Baltic spirit in the diaspora communities, as have done and still do choirs, folk dance groups, schools and summer camps. Archival work is one way of cooperation, connecting people and periods. Also, memory institutions in host countries are interested in the preservation of the history of various immigrant groups – especially in the countries that have large immigrant groups such as the USA, Canada, and Australia.

Ideally, all the above-mentioned parties – homeland, diaspora communities and host countries – should be taken into account and included in the process. The preservation of the Baltic cultural heritage becomes possible only through the successful cooperation of these three. We have kept this in mind when developing the network. The time after the 2006 conference has shown which contacts have lasted and proved fruitful. We have also got new cooperation partners. In order to keep up the ties and better organize joint activities a new organization, Baltic Heritage Network, was founded in Tartu in January 2008.

It has to be mentioned that the organization has more friends than official members. It is only natural that before joining an organization one would like to convince oneself that the organization is able to fulfil its tasks and that the membership is worthwhile. We are open to any cooperation. Many of our partners are non-members. It is the actual interest that counts.

By now Baltic Heritage Network has 36 members: 7 collective members and 29 individual members. We have usually got new members before and after BaltHerNet events, also before the present conference. We also hope that this conference inspires some of you to join us.

However, we are not so much interested in the increase of formal membership than in actual, active cooperation partners.

The portal and home pages

Articles 2 and 3 of the 2006 conference memorandum establish: “(2) be more effective in clarifying the location of Baltic/Estonian archives and cultural treasures abroad, both in exile communities and in the homeland; (3) create an electronic gateway to information on the Baltic/Estonian archival collections abroad, with the aim of ensuring access to relevant information.”

The portal www.balther.net was born in 2007. Its godfather is David Jacobs from the Hoover Institution Archives (Stanford University), who is familiar to all of you who participated in the previous conference. We'd like to thank David Jacobs most sincerely for the name and for his later contribution to the portal! The preparations for creating the portal started in the summer of 2007, the test version was completed by November of the same year. Next we involved our colleagues from Latvia and Lithuania in the process – we discussed together the structure, functions and other aspects of the portal. In January 2008 Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian working groups held a two-day seminar at the Estonian National Museum in Tartu. On the second day, the non-profit organization NPA Baltic Heritage Network was founded.

I'd like to emphasize that the portal is not a database (or its substitute) but a gateway to various kind of information on the Baltic heritage. There are links to the home pages of memory institutions, their databases, contacts etc as well as links to web editions, exhibitions etc. This information has been available on the web before, we have tried to gather it together in order to make it easier for researchers to find it. We have also produced new material: we have written or ordered from our colleagues short overviews introducing Estonian memory institutions collecting Estonian diaspora materials and their databases, compiled selected bibliographies etc.

We have also created Archival Guidelines section that serves the needs of non-professional archivists who work with the cultural treasures of diaspora communities. At Archival Guidelines one can find instructions for proper preservation, arrangement and management of archives and other collections.

Naturally, you'll find News, Chronicle and Forum on the portal. The News inform about upcoming activities, grant competitions etc. The portal is also a means of active communication. It has been used, for example, for describing historical photos (an archival fan from Toronto) and for discovering stories about "hidden treasures" (a researcher from Sweden). However, the forum is still waiting for its time. The fact, that the forum has not been used more widely, testifies that many potential users are not yet aware of its existence and that its editorial board has not yet found time to initiate and moderate discussions. The initiative of the users is also most welcome.

The main contributors to the development of the portal have been the members of the Estonian archives abroad working group from the Estonian Literary Museum, the Estonian National Museum, the National Archives, the Academic Library of Tallinn University and the Centre for Estonian Diaspora Studies of Tartu University. We obtained a great deal of information on the most relevant Estonian/Baltic diaspora collections from the articles in the ICBAAs proceedings

(http://www.kirmus.ee/baltic_archives_abroad_2006/kogumik/eng/index.html). We sent out a complementary questionnaire to some Estonian museums as information on their exile collections was missing. The answers were slow to come but, thanks to Tiiu Kravtsev's efforts, we finally got information from the Theatre and Music Museum, Hiiumaa Museum, the Art Museum of Estonia, the Estonian History Museum, the Museum of Estonian Architecture, O. Luts Palamuse Parish School Museum, and Harjumaa Museum. We also processed archival information on the diaspora collections preserved in the members' home institutions: the State, Historical and Film Archives, the Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu University Library, etc. The joint table listing the collections of exile Estonian provenance preserved in the above-mentioned institutions is now available on the portal. We would like to complement the table, adding information both on Estonian memory institutions and on exile collections located abroad.

Thus, the portal offers two alternative ways of accessing Estonian diaspora collections: a somewhat longer way via the home pages and databases of memory institutions, gathered on the portal, and a shorter way via the excel table. At the moment we do not intend to turn the table into a database, as we do not have enough information and resources for this purpose. However, we will not exclude the possibility that one day such a database is a reality.

What is still needed? To liven up the development and use of Latvian and Lithuanian pages. This is something we are unable to do without the interest and contribution of their communities. The Latvians have, for example, a printed catalogue listing diaspora collections that have been returned to Latvia. This catalogue should be translated into English and made available on the portal in both languages, in Latvian and English etc. The Estonian working group has received a considerable financial support from the Compatriots Program for developing the portal and for translating and editing the texts. However, the economic situation in all Baltic countries has worsened since we began our work with the portal. The Estonian working group is able to continue this work, thanks to the support of the Compatriots Program. We only wish that our Baltic partners would also be able to find more human and monetary resources to deal with these issues.

Simultaneously with the portal (that is in 2007-2008) several home pages were completed as well. Several archives such as the Estonian Archives in the U.S., Tartu Institute Dr. Endel Aruja Archives and Library (Toronto), Estonian Archives in Vancouver, Estonian Archives in Germany and the Estonian Archives in Sweden got their own home page. Persons connected with these archives could and should be in charge of the contents of the home pages. However, if it has been difficult to find someone locally, BaltHerNet has offered its help. We also organized the translating of the Australian Estonian Archives' home page into Estonian. The Australian archives were at the time the only one that had a home page – in English.

We have to admit a drawback as well. The Estonian Central Archives in Canada (Toronto) declined to cooperate with us in creating a home page, even after a long persuasion. The reason for this was a lack of a suitable person who would be able to develop a home page and later answer incoming inquiries. There are only few volunteers there and they have reached a venerable age. We have experienced such a lack of resources in case of other home pages as well: it takes time to add new information. Different generations have different attitudes toward information technology. One may fear or resent it but it is here to stay. Indeed, the advance of information technology is the main prerequisite for the existence of BaltHerNet – as an organization and as a portal.

Archival cooperation

Work with information is very important. Work with collections is as important. Thanks to the support of the Compatriots Program the Estonian working group has managed to launch projects with the aim of improving the condition and accessibility of collections. Thus our experts have helped and advised Estonian archives in Sydney, New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Stockholm, Hamburg and Cologne. In the spring of 2009 and 2010, four archivists from the State Archives visited the Immigration History Research Centre in Minneapolis in order to describe and database the collections of the Estonian Archives in the U.S. preserved at IHRC. This cooperation is continuing, as it is necessary to make information on all essential collections available on the Internet.

The archives of the Orto Estonian Publishing House were digitised at the Library and Archives Canada. The digital copies of Orto's correspondence and author agreements are now accessible in Estonia as well (the copies are preserved at the Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum).

The Estonian Archives in Sweden has started restoration and digitisation of historical newsreels in cooperation with the Estonian Film Archives. Etc.

Such cooperation projects have usually several partners and BaltHerNet is not, nor should it be, the central agent or coordinator in all these projects. We often act as mediators, bringing together people or institutions and provide them with necessary information: where to get finances from, how to write an application, where to send old books or where to find a renovator of historical flags. Sometimes we just generate ideas, trusting others to carry them out.

In the future there should be more projects that result in something concrete. True, such projects tend to be rather expensive and last longer than their sponsors would like. Archival work is time-consuming, not to mention eternal. There are things that need to be done or we will face an irretrievable loss one day. Naturally it is important to be able to prioritise – one should start with what is the most valuable, most endangered or most demanded by researchers.

Events

The “network feeling” has been clear to see at our events. The Estonian working group has organized information days for diaspora communities and at home: 2006 in Stockholm; 2007 in Stockholm and St. Petersburg; 2008 in Hamburg, Tartu and Toronto (the seminar “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of the Baltic Diaspora” was the first seminar arranged together with Latvians and Lithuanians); 2009 in Stockholm (the joint seminar “Mapping and Preserving the Audiovisual Heritage of the Baltic Diaspora” with the Baltic Audiovisual Archival Council and again including participants from Latvia and Lithuania), Petroskoi and Tartu (seminar for young researchers).

We have organized two summer schools for volunteers working with the Estonian archives abroad: 2007 at Koke and 2008 in Käsma.

At these gatherings of kindred spirits we have most clearly felt the necessity of keeping up and developing contacts and the importance of such gatherings to people who lead their daily lives in different corners of the world. In 2008 I took part in the ICME conference in Jerusalem titled “Migration, Diaspora, Pilgrimage”. At this conference a museum was referred to as a pilgrimage destination. In fact, any memory institution could serve this end as it represents the sacred values of a nation. Or, in the words of one participant, “a museum is a window into the sacred world”. Such sacred places and pilgrimages to these places have a special significance to the representatives of small nations living in the diaspora, dispersed among strangers.

To be sure, the main aim of our summer schools is to provide opportunities for professional self-improvement needed in the work with cultural collections and for the development of professional contacts. But it can also be said that these summer schools have become pilgrimages of sorts, pilgrimages to a source of national power where we all charge ourselves with new life energy. What is this source? Where does this power come from? Naturally, it comes from beautiful Estonian locations where the events are held - a journey to homeland alone is a pilgrimage. But it also comes from the people gathered together. When singing old songs and telling stories about bygone times in our evenings together we feel most strongly what we all irrefutably have in common, and this gives strength. Being together gives strength. Estonians living at home and abroad, in the East and in the West, have different songs and stories. Noticing, acknowledging, and sympathising with these differences we learn to understand and tolerate each other better. This is necessary as well.

Because history is complicated, just like the archival world is. This is why we need trust. We need it to be able to work together and preserve what we all are responsible for – memory and culture.

I have learned a lot doing BaltHerNet. I hope everybody involved has. Here I'd like to thank all who have accompanied us on this path. And surely we will learn more: “lifetime learning”, just like “networking”, is a buzzword of our time. Perhaps we do not need to invent a new Nokia after all in the near future; instead we should just dedicate ourselves to improving already existing – and functioning - BaltHerNet.

What do we need to attain this goal?

- Purposeful development of the portal (and the home pages of archives)
- More efficient work with wide public to better disseminate BaltHerNet's message to those interested
- New active cooperation partners and supporters
- More fruitful Baltic cooperation
- Quick reaction to situations
- Good will and optimism