

The Practical Results of Cooperation between the State Archives of Latvia and Latvian Diaspora

Māris Brancis

State Archives of Latvia

In the summer of 1992 the State Archives of Latvia received the first archives from exile – personal archives of the journalist and historian Viļis Skultāns. Many years V. Skultāns had worked in Munich for “The Voice of America” and later also in the editorial office of „Radio Liberty”. Besides that he was interested in the foreign policy of Latvia and the loss of Latvian national independence in 1940. For this purpose he travelled to almost all the archives of the world and took copies of everything related with this topic. The gathered information he summarized in his dissertation „The Last 15 months of Latvia”. V. Skultāns did not manage to complete the dissertation, but now we have plenty of material about this subject, as well as correspondence with the most prominent deskmen and historians of Latvian exile, who devoted a great part of their lives in order to regain Latvian national independence. As the result, we gained extremely valuable and diverse material which was impossible to get during the Soviet time in Latvia – all in all 649 items.

The collection of this archive was as a proposition to get seriously engaged in the gathering of Latvian exile archives. We started with the easiest task – articles in foreign Latvian newspapers. We were looking for any chance to make private contacts with fellow countrymen in foreign parts. A small amount of them responded – from Germany, the USA, Canada and later from Australia and Sweden, too, but it was enough to start approaching exiled Latvians, little by little.

Now, already more than 13 years have passed since we have been engaged in gathering materials about Latvians in exile. During this time the situation in Latvia, as well as in the Latvian diaspora has changed greatly. Within this time rather many exile organizations and associations have either stopped working or their work is no longer very intense. Of course, the situation in each country or continent is different. Especially remarkable is the decrease in the activity of Latvian associations in Europe, still active enough are Australian Latvians, although also there, as well as in other places the most active members of the Latvian society are getting old. The participation of younger generations in Latvian associations is going down.

Talking about exile, first of all, it is important to be aware of how complete the documentation about the first stage of exile is, about the second half of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s, it means about Latvians in German refugee camps till emigration.

It should be admitted that during the time of refugee camps, in many camps their life was carefully recorded. In 1948 these materials were gathered and as a result „The Archives of Refugees Life” was developed.

This material contains information about the central administrative body in the three western zones, as well as about each camp and its life. The most important material was delivered to the archives of the Hoover Institution in the USA. The rest of them were divided – certain amount of the documents was left in Germany, others taken to England and other places.

Currently the part of the Hoover Institution has been microfilmed and the microfilms are kept in our archives. The German part of the „Archives of Refugees' Life” has arrived at the State Archives of Latvia and its arrangement is about to be finished.

Part of the materials about the lives of German refugees was left to individuals. For example, Eslingen – the archives of the elder of the camp substantially complements the documentation of the time in a camp. Also in other private funds materials can be found. For example, the materials of the historian Ādolfs Šilde reveal the conditions of refugees as reflected in the materials of the Red Cross.

From 1948 to 1949 emigration to England, the USA, Canada and Australia started. The priest Jānis Laupmanis was one of those Latvians who had moved to the USA at the beginning of the 1940s and took active care about the emigration of his countrymen in one of the cities of the USA – Kalamazoo. It is interesting that the whole choir „Dziesmu vairog” moved there. The priest's correspondence with his countrymen now precisely reflects the process of emigration. Currently in the Latvian State Archives there are no other examples of such a patriotic behaviour, although it was not the only case.

As soon as Latvians had emigrated to their new countries of residence, they established Latvian associations, Latvian congregations, schools and other organizations. After some time they united into the central association that coordinated the activity of all separate associations for their common work. In 1956 the central organizations of different states established one centre – the World Federation of Free Latvians that purposively promoted the work of Latvian organizations in education and culture in their common goal to regain Latvia's independence.

It should be admitted that the archives of the central organizations have only partly reached the Latvian State.

For example, the Society of American Latvians (SAL) is the umbrella organization for all Latvian associations in the USA. Its materials – the rules of orders for the congress, records of the board meetings, correspondence – are already being kept with us. Unfortunately these materials are rather incomplete, there is a lack of particular congress records, the minutes of board meetings are rather incomplete. Judging from the conversations with SAL personnel, maybe those documents have not been even preserved.

The documentation of SAL's separate branches – Cultural fund, Education departments, the activities of Latvian Institute and others about SAL's expanded political, educational and cultural activity is as incomplete. There are no complete SAL activity plans, plans of the budget, finance surveys, etc.

It should be admitted that a similar situation is also with the documents of the „umbrella” of all the Latvian organizations, WWFL, that have arrived in the State Archives of Latvia. It should be added that WWFL has completely given to our disposal the materials of WWFL Information Office and Institution of Social Sciences. The archives of WWFL are substantially complemented with personal materials of WWFL former board chairmen – Ilgvars Spilners and Kārlis Ķuzulis.

Here it should be added that in the materials of the WWFL Information Office we will find a very precise survey of the activity of the exile community, gathered information about the situation in occupied Latvia and the Baltic countries, about political activities, for example, about the ship of the Baltic Freedom and Peace, tribunal of Copenhagen, political activities of the Baltic refugees during the European safety and cooperation conferences in Madrid, Vienna and in other places.

In personal archives of the WWFL board chairmen – in notes, outlines of the letters, preparation materials of the articles, in notes of the confidential conversations and in other materials – there can be found many political and all sorts of procedural nuances, not reflected in

board records and correspondence. That is why the archives of private persons are valuable, because they substantially complement the official documents of different organizations.

The archives of the central Latvian associations in Canada, Australia, South America and Europe are still being kept at those organizations, or, as it is in Canada, part of them has been given to be temporarily preserved in the National Archives.

Local Latvian associations were established in almost every city where a bigger amount of Latvians settled to live. Especially many of them were and still are in the United States of America. Unfortunately, we do not have precise information about the number of the people. Nobody knows it. Nobody has dealt with that in the countries of residence. Accordingly, it is difficult for us to say the percentage which is represented in the State Archives of Latvia. However, it cannot be big. Rather complete archives of Latvian associations are from Columbus, Connecticut, Pittsburgh and Syracuse, as complete as the ravage of time has preserved them. Also the archives of Latvian associations in Denmark, Wellington (New Zealand) and Uppsala (Sweden) are complete.

The information about the activity of particular Latvian associations can be found in several private archives, for example in collections of Viļis Miķelsons, Aleksandrs Dzirne, Daiņis Rudzītis and other collections of documents.

If we look at the wide map of America and the places where the biggest amounts of Latvians live, then we can discover areas about which we cannot find practically anything in the Latvian State Archives. Those are such big centres as Chicago, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Oregon, Washington, Boston, New York and others.

On this score Europe is rather irresponsible, but we know that very important archives of Swedish Latvians have been given to be preserved in the National Archives in Stockholm. We have very little material about Latvian associations in South America. On their part, Australians keep their archives to themselves. Besides, Australia is the only place to have its own Latvian Central Archives.

The condition is not better in different professional and interest associations and unions.

The Union of Latvian Choirs in the USA and Latvian choir „Rota” in Connecticut have provided that their documentation would be preserved in Riga, in the Latvia State Archive, as well as the Academic Union in Indianapolis, Latvian Monument Foundation, Latvian Popular Front, Support Team in San Francisco, also scouts and guides. Could it be possible that there have been so few cultural and interest associations in the USA and other places?

Latvian soldier care association „Daugavas Vanagi” is very active. It should be said that this global association with many organizations in all the countries and cities, at first were reserved to gain contacts with the State Archives of Latvia, but during the last years the situation has changed greatly. The whole bulky archives of the Central board of „Daugavas Vanagi”, which includes documentation from its establishment in 1945 to the middle of the 1990s, has been handed over to us. Also the boards of “Daugavas Vanagi” in Australia and Canada, separate Australian regional groups (Brisbane, Adelaide) have entrusted their archives to us. About “Daugavas Vanagi” in America we can judge only from the rich personal archives of Andrejs Spārniņš. The cooperation with “Daugavas Vanagi” continues and we feel that it is going to be expanded.

The church has had and still has a serious role in uniting Latvians in exile. By not submitting to lodging countries' church, it helped to maintain national identity and self-confidence. Usually it replaced social organizations. It has promoted the outspread of Latvian education in exile, helped to develop the culture of choirs, theatre art, etc.

But if we talk about the documentation of different confessions in the State Archives of Latvia, then here we almost should tone down.

American Latvian catholic union and Canadian Latvian catholic union have given part of their documentation. We can be proud that at our disposal is the archive of the Roman Catholic Church bishop's Jāzeps Rancāns, which rather well reflects the period of German refugee camps as well as the time of emigration. In several personal archives we can find materials about the life of catholic churches and congregations.

As to the Lutheran Evangelic Church, it should be said that there are materials of three congregations at our disposal – microfilmed archives of Minneapolis Christ congregation, also Edmonton St. John's congregation from Canada and Exile congregation's materials from Denmark.

We have received personal archives of several priests, from "Daugavas Vanagi" foundation store „Straumeni" of cultural value.

We have almost nothing about Baptists, as well as about national religion practitioners. We have no information on whether orthodox churches still exist or not.

In different archives quite fragmentary information can be found about the United Baltic Committee, Baltic American Freedom League, American Latvian Help Foundation and other organizations where alongside Latvians also Lithuanians and Estonians worked.

Just now we have got to know that the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS) office in Riga has stopped existing. Its documentation will be delivered to the State Archives of Latvia.

Among exile archives there is a noticeable place for personal archives of famous social, cultural and art figures. Especially, we are interested in these materials, particularly of those persons' documents who have actively participated and who still take part in different social organizations and associations.

At their disposal usually there are materials which substantially supplement the archives of organizations and associations.

Material about life in exile we can find in the documentary heritage of the historian Edgars Dunsdorfs, rich in statistics and card files. The archives of Latvian envoy Kārlis Zariņš, including his carefully written diaries started in 1919 and written till the end of his life, have a special place and this archive is considered to be a great treasure. There we can find all the history of Latvian diplomacy, often reasoned Baltic questions.

There are archives gained from the world's very important cultural figures – artists, singers, writers et al. At this conference I will mention only one name – the painter Pauls Puzinas, whom Latvians as well as Lithuanians consider as their own person. It should be added that last year, after the will was implemented, we received all the creative and documentary heritage of the Swedish painter Sofija Samsone.

One thing is to study archives, another to preserve them. Currently the process of Latvian associations' liquidation can be observed. Therefore we considered that at this moment the main thing is to prevent their materials from loss. For this purpose now Latvian State Archive takes possession of the delivered archives from the diaspora, writes acceptance lists, which facilitates the work of researchers before scientific processing of these materials. It means that the number of exile documents that has to be described piles up. The process of arranging is slow also due to the fact that the received archives are very big, which demands prolonged processing.

The next problem is related to the question of funds. As it is known, the archives of Latvian organizations are being kept by their managers, secretaries or other persons. The preserver of the archives delivers them to us, but there are also documents of other organizations

or personal documents of the donor. Pretty often one and the same person works for three, four, even five or six organizations and all the documents of these associations and organizations can be found in this parcel. The following question arises – what to do? To divide this donation into many tiny archival funds or name it after the name of the donator? We cannot give a certain answer. Every time we act in a different way.

Currently we are receiving documents of big organizations that facilitate the expertise of the documents, so the same documents or their copies (as it is known many organizations prepared circulars, records, and other materials multiplied in many copies and sent to our most active social figures) would not duplicate in several archival funds. And still the problem remains – there is no confidence that the archives of root organizations will be completely delivered.

It also should be added that the collection of exile archives is very time- and work-consuming, but is also a very delicate question. The delivery of a document collection to archives does not depend on the State Archives of Latvia or a prestige of an archivist (which is also a very important question), but on the general state of affairs – on how much has the Latvian government gained the overall trust of its countrymen.

It is also essential to whom our fellow countrymen consider themselves to be belonging to – to their country of residence or motherland. „It is our duty for the country where we have lived for so long,” Latvians in foreign parts excuse themselves. We have nothing to object. Only the question remains how important the Latvian materials are for the lodging country and researchers; if the documents are in the language which is not understandable to those who do not speak Latvian. Would not that be more proper if we deposited the materials and made microfilms and delivered them to the archives interested?

We are truly happy that Estonian colleagues have organized such a conference about the problems of exile archives. I hope that it is going to be fruitful and help us exchange information, opinions, practical problems and their solution. We all do the same work – preserve significant testimony of our country's history.