

Who? What? Why? Researchers in the Estonian Archives in Australia

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Estonian Archives in Australia

Each week we gather in Estonian House, Sydney to work in the archive. We sort, describe, catalogue and carefully pack the material into folders and archive boxes. Why do we do this, is anyone interested in our work and our collections? Does anyone use the material that we have prepared so carefully? If the answer is “No” then we have wasted our time and effort. One major problem with small archives is to get their collection known and used, otherwise they are just repositories, not true archives.

When a collection already exists then the question arises, is anyone truly interested in those records? In the past few years the answer as far as the Estonian Archives in Australia (EAA) is concerned has been a resounding “Yes”. People from many different backgrounds are interested in our collection. Writers, journalists, film makers, academics, students, people researching family history or those just seeking information about their parents lives or their own childhood visit our archive. More and more Australians who work with Estonians in a professional capacity or those who have visited Estonia and want to know more about Estonia are finding their way to our door. What are they looking for and why? I will give you some examples.

We hold the archive of Friedrich Lustig, a Buddhist monk who was well known in Estonia before World War II. The archive comprises a 600 page typewritten manuscript of *The Mahatma of the Baltics*, Lustig’s biography of the monk Karlis Tennisons, as well as correspondence, photographs and publications of his poetry. Initially the main interest came from journalists in Estonia, later we were approached by a film maker who wanted to make a film about the two men. Earlier this year we had a visit from a playwright, Katrin Saukas who used our archive to research material for her new play *Tuult Tiibadesse!* Lately a Buddhist community in Melbourne, Australia has shown great interest in the collection since Lustig and Tennisons belonged to the same branch of Buddhism as the Melbourne community. A journalist from Melbourne has been to Sydney to research the lives of these two monks, especially that of Tennisons, with a view to writing about them.

The arrival of Estonians in Australia is another much researched area. We hold quite a lot of material about the “Old Estonians”, that is the ones who arrived between the late 19th century and the Second World War.



Sydney Estonian Society “Linda”, blessing of the flag, 1927

We have many enquiries from researchers from overseas who are looking for information about family members who left Estonia in the 1920s. However, the greatest interest is in the history of the Estonians in exile, starting with the escape from Estonia in 1944, life in the Displaced Persons camps in Germany, the journey to and the early years in Australia.

Ann Tünder Smith who was talking at the conference about her research into the history of Baltic migration to Australia is a regular visitor to our archive. She is a great source of information about accessing Australian archives and government records.

Ann Tünder Smith wrote a book *Bonegilla Beginnings* which covers the history of the Bonegilla transit camp from its early days as an army camp to its post-war usage as a migrant camp. Bonegilla was the biggest post-war migrant camp in Australia. Ann Tünder Smith found much useful information from the records held in our archive. Currently she is writing a book about a group of migrants who, in 1947, came to Australia from Displaced Persons camps in Germany on the ship *General Stuart Heintzelman*. These migrants were the first to arrive in Australia on two year Government work contracts. We hold much information about these migrants in many separate collections. We are fortunate to hold ship’s passenger lists, daily newspapers, photographs, diaries and personal memoirs.

The Walter Pöder archive is the most comprehensive comprising a diary and five hand-written exercise books with newspaper cuttings of the time in German, Estonian and English.

The diary starts in 1947 on the day it was announced that Australia would take refugees from the Displaced Persons camps and ends in 1952. The diary describes in detail the long journey from applying for immigration, the medical check ups, the transit camps, the journey on the ship, the arrival in Australia and the early years in a strange new country.



Walter Pöder's diary and exercise books, 1944-1952

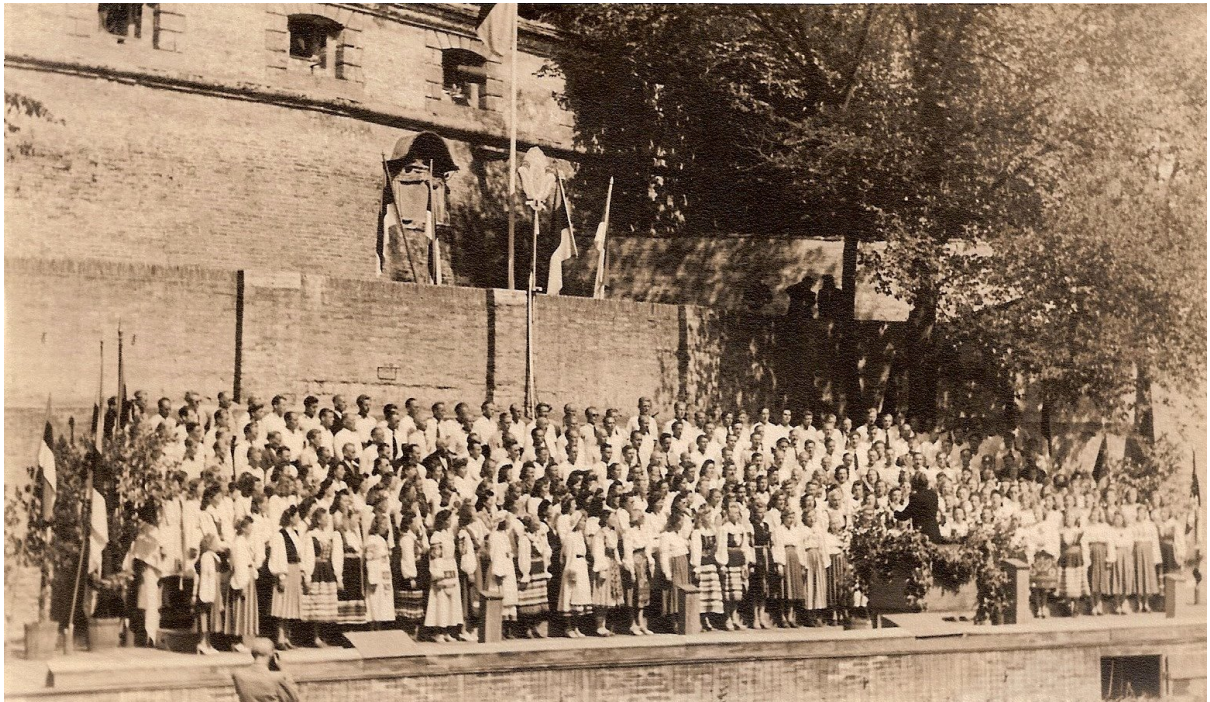
The exercise books start in 1944 in Denmark and finish after his arrival in Australia. The most interest is shown in books 4 and 5, which describe the arrival and early days in Australia. Of interest are the cuttings of the local Australian newspapers, which show quite clearly the attitude of the Australian government and the people towards the newcomers. This collection is of great interest to people in Estonia, Germany and Australia.

Rex Rattur has translated and expanded his father's diary and has published it as a book *Eyewitness: Estonia 1909-1949: Memoirs of an Estonian Sea Captain*. Much of the research was done in our archive and some photographs used in the book came from the set of photo albums we hold entitled *Estonian Peoples Escape from the Homeland-life in Exile in Sweden in Word and Picture, 1944-1946*. Rex Rattur's father was one of the sea captains who took the refugees to Sweden.

The museums in Australia hold exhibitions that show many aspects of life in multicultural Australia. In 2005 the Powerhouse Museum, one of the biggest museums in Sydney, contacted us and asked for our cooperation in curating an exhibition about the Estonian community. The curator visited the archive every couple of weeks to research the topic and to learn more about the history of the Estonians in Australia. They wanted to know when and why we came to Australia and were especially interested in post war migration. The whole process took two years. Initially the exhibition was to run for one year but actually it ran for two years. The exhibition *Our New Home / Meie uus kodu* www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/ournewhome was very popular. In conjunction with the exhibition I gave a lecture on the history of the Estonians in Australia and the Sydney Estonian Arts and Crafts circle held an open day at the museum introducing our national costumes and handicrafts. This was a great honour for our small community because compared to the other migrant communities such as the Italians, Greeks, Chinese etc we are one of the smallest migrant groups.

The National Maritime Museum has asked us to hold an Estonian Day in September 2009. There will be three lectures, one by Terry Kass who will talk about Alfred Julius Sickler, the first Estonian to become a citizen in Australia, Külliki Poole, with the members of the Arts and Craft circle, will introduce Estonian national costumes and jewellery and I will talk about Estonian history and the history of Estonian migration to Australia.

Other researchers come from the academic world. Dr Ramona Holmes, from Seattle Pacific University visited our archive to research Song Festivals in the Displaced Persons camps in Germany. We hold much material from the camps. Dr Holmes was able to find concert programmes, photographs, newspaper articles and many song books and sheet music that she had not seen before. Researchers have written about the Song Festivals in Estonia and about the Estonian Festivals and choirs in exile but not much work has been done on the Song Festivals and choirs in the Displaced Persons camps.



Estonian Song Festival, Augsburg 1947

The Displaced Persons collection is frequently used by people who are researching their family history. Many people come to find out more about the lives of their parents or even about their own childhood in the camps.

University students, many with Estonian heritage use the archive as a resource in their studies. They often choose to base their assignments on Estonian art, architecture or music. Brad Ruting, whose grandfather was Estonian, chose to write his Honours thesis at the University of Sydney about the interaction of Australian-Estonians and Estonia. His thesis entitled *Travel to the Old Country-transnational Engagements and the Estonian Diaspora* earned him a First Class Honours degree and the University Medal in Geography. Much of his thesis was based on his visits to the archive.

Roger Donnelly, an army officer, who is doing research for a PhD about the Scheyville army camp that later became a migrant camp, used the archive's resources to find out about camp life and the people who passed through there. Army camps were often used as migrant camps. Again we had the resources to be able to help him with his research.

We have even had a group of Korean students from Macquarie University, Sydney, seek our help with an assignment. They had been given Estonia as the country to study and they knew nothing about it at all. EAA is the best known source of information about Estonia in Sydney and they came to Estonian House for information. We helped them find what they

were looking for. A few weeks later they returned with a copy of their report and cakes. They were very happy because they received an excellent mark for their project.

Candice Lau who is also at this conference today has chosen to create an interactive virtual exhibition for her Masters degree at the University of Technology, Sydney. The inspiration for this work was the *Our New Home / Meie uus kodu* exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum. Candice has based the exhibition on material from our archive.

A fast growing aspect of research in the archive is family history. We are contacted regularly, either in person or by email asking for help. Fortunately we have a large collection of material about DP camps, post war migration, a large collection of personal papers, records of organisations and all the copies of the newspaper *Meie Kodu* from 1949. *Meie Kodu* is indexed and we have created a database of the obituaries and *in memoriam* notices. Sometime, however, we have no information at all. Then we direct them to sources in the Australian archives and government agencies. Ann Tündern Smith will be speaking about such resources tomorrow.

And of course we use the resources of the archive when we curate exhibitions ourselves. At the last Estonian Festival in Adelaide we curated an exhibition *Happily Australian But Estonian Too* in the Migration Museum in Adelaide. The exhibition lasted three months over the summer and attracted many visitors, not only those with an Estonian background. The exhibition came to Sydney for one month and later travelled to the Heritage Library in Canberra for six weeks.

We welcome visitors who are interested in learning more about Estonia and the Estonians. We have arranged open days in Estonian House for groups of visitors from various organisations including the evening colleges and the Museum of Sydney. Once we collaborated with other Estonian organisations to give a complete overview of the activities, past and present, of the post war migrants. At other times we arrange lectures and small exhibitions in the archive.

We have two exhibitions a year at Estonian House, usually linked to anniversaries of our organisations or special events such as Estonian Independence Day, Mother's Day, Estonian Book Year or Estonian Festivals.

So who are the people who visit us and use our resources? Academics, writers, journalists, film makers, students, and family historians come with a specific purpose. But we also have visitors who just want to learn more about Estonia, people who plan to visit Estonia because

Tallinn features regularly in our travel shows on television and people who have just been to Estonia and are keen to learn more. We definitely do our bit for Estonian tourism!

People who come to the archive come for many different reasons. Each one feels that their questions are important, be they academic or just curiosity. All have one thing in common, they are interested in Estonia or Estonians and EAA is often the only source of information that they have.

We are open on Wednesdays from 10am to 3pm and we welcome anyone who is interested in Estonian history and culture and in the lives of Estonians in Australia. In special cases we will even open the archive more often. I invite you all to visit our archive when you are in Sydney. To find out more about us and our activities, please visit our webpage <http://archives.eesti.org.au>