

# ETHNIC ARCHIVES

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In his book, *A Nation of Immigrants*, first published in 1958, President J. F. Kennedy quoted the noted Harvard historian, Oscar Handlin, as saying: 'Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history'. Immigration has been the historic *raison d'être* of the United States. The same can be said of Australia.

How do Australia, the United States and Canada, these three great immigrant nations of modern history, look after their past? For a long time I have been concerned with the idea of the multicultural society and, firmly committed to the fact that this is the only path for our country, I have been interested in the establishment of ethnic archives.

Before detailing some of the developments in the United States and Canada, aspects of which I studied as a 1977 Churchill Fellow concerned with the integration of ethnic groups into the host society, I shall try to present an outline of what is happening in Australia.

Ethnic archives in Australia have generally had scant attention paid to them although the situation is changing, perhaps as part of the awareness of ethnic groupings that is a result of the great increase in the Australian immigrant population since 1947 and Arthur Calwell's 'Populate or Perish' migration program.

People have started at last to realize that we have very little record of this massive immigration programme which changed considerably our population and our way of living. Our immigrants brought with them a diversity of languages, cultures, customs and ideas. They represent our post war history of immigration, but the study of immigration and ethnicity has been neglected and because of this neglect we have failed to fully understand ourselves.

The most important recent development in this area has been the establishment of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, which is headed by the man who urged its establishment — Melbourne lawyer Mr. Frank Galbally. The Institute has been established by legislation following a government decision based on the recommendations of the Galbally Report. The Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Mr. Ian McPhee, has described the Institute 'as one which would have a role of major research and community education'. It will also be a repository

for historical and cultural information on Australia's diverse ethnic groups. It is in its early days yet but there are great hopes for the Institute.

In Wollongong, where there was strong lobbying for the siting of the Institute, there is the Centre for Multicultural Studies which was started a little over a year ago by the University of Wollongong. It is funded partly by the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. The Centre provides research material and information and has a collection of tapes, papers and photographs from the major ethnic groups.

The National Library in Canberra has 'Ausintel' which is basically a collection of published foreign material. They have told me that no comprehensive effort has been made in the past to collect ethnic archival material. The great majority of libraries in Australia have local history collections with some of their material concerning the ethnic communities in their areas. But the collections are generally small and it is hard to get an overall picture of what is available.

Professor Michael Clyne and Mrs. Radha Rasmussen of Monash University recently started an Ethnic Heritage Collection and have written to various ethnic organizations asking for archival material for their collection.

There are furthermore in Australia a few private collections of ethnic archival material, generally relating to Eastern and Northern European ethnic groups, such as Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, etc. It appears that Eastern and Northern European groups all over the world are particularly concerned with preserving their cultural heritage, more so than any other ethnic groups, possibly because their languages and cultures are seen as under greater threat.

However, it is not only organisations, universities and government bodies that are vital to the success of any archival program: it is the individuals who have recorded their own and their family's experiences, and those who collect and preserve the documents and the objects. I think that a great deal more publicity should be given to the need for individuals to do their bit in preserving our past. One recent episode that should inspire us all is how the efforts of the Italian-Australian historian Gianfranco Cresciani have brought back a bit of it.

Cresciani will publish shortly in Australia the English version of his book, *Fascism, anti-fascism and Italians in Australia, 1922-1945*, first published in Italy in 1979 by Bonacci Editore Roma. During his research, Cresciani needed to refer to the Italian newspaper, *La Riscossa*, produced by Italian anarchists in Australia from 1929 to 1932. No copies were available in Australia. He wrote to libraries all over the world and discovered that the New York State Public Library had an almost complete set of *La Riscossa* which was posted regularly to Italian anarchists in America by their counterparts in Australia. (He also has a unique collection, believed to be the only one in the world, of Italian political leaflets from 1920 to 1945).

A coordinated effort must be made in Australia to preserve our ethnic heritage. It is essential that precious treasures now hiding in people's closets be collected and preserved for future generations. I hope that organizations and people concerned with the preservation of our past take up the challenge and that more consistent and coordinated efforts are made in this country to preserve our valuable ethnic heritage as is being done in our sister nation of immigrants.

And now the situation as I saw it in the United States and Canada during my Churchill Fellowship in the early part of 1977.

In the United States I firstly visited the Center for Migration Studies at Staten Island. The Center is run by the Scalabrinians, a religious community of priests and brothers dedicated to the social and spiritual care of migrants. The centre was created in 1964 to meet the need for information and research on immigration and ethnicity. It started its activities when the traditional understanding of immigration, as only a geographic, linguistic and cultural adjustment to a host society, was giving way to a new awareness of group identity and the interdependence of manpower and world resources.

In the early stages, the main activities of C.M.S. focussed on the preparation of a publication, *The International Migration Digest*. In 1960, the Center for Migration Studies was incorporated as a non-profit educational institute and moved into new quarters at 209 Flagg Place, Staten Island, New York. From this new base, the center expanded its services through publications and projects and started its library and archives. With a multilingual staff, the center opened its doors, encouraged students and researchers to use its resources and provide various services not only to the academic community but to the community at large. C.M.S. also houses the offices of the American-Italian Historical Society, a group of approximately 400 university and college teachers and others, interested in the Italian-American experience.

The Center has a specialized library of over 5,000 volumes in the field of migration and ethnicity and a growing microfilm collection. The archives of the C.M.S. are an important primary source for the study of the immigrant experience in America. Though the collection pertains primarily to the Italian-American experience, it also documents extensively the role of the Catholic Church in the immigration and assimilation process. The archives also house a most interesting ethnic press collection consisting of current ethnic newspapers as well as defunct ones. The center produces an excellent scientific quarterly on immigration and ethnicity, *The International Migration Review*.

Another important center is the Immigration History and Research Center at the University of St. Paul, Minnesota. The center offers unique research facilities for the study of American immigration and ethnicity during the last century. The center's resources fall within two broad areas: voluntary agencies concerned with immigration and ethnicity, and ethnic groups, particularly those originating in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe, and the Middle East.

A statistical profile of the IHRC collection may best indicate its dimension and character: a library of over 25,000 volumes (1977 figures), over 2,500 microfilm reels and approximately 2,000 linear feet (2 million items) of manuscripts. While most of the publications and manuscripts are in the languages of the immigrants (some 25 linguistic groups are represented) a considerable quantity of the holding is in English. The 'General Collections' of the Centre consist of records of voluntary agencies and of individuals working in such diverse areas as refugee settlement, intercultural education, immigration policy reform, and Americanization. The records of the American Council for Nationalities Service, the archives of which constitute the largest single collection, document all these kinds of activities. The ethnic collection at the Center contains a wide variety of records of typical ethnic institutions e.g. churches, fraternal organizations, newspapers, cooperative, labour and socialist groups, dramatic and literary societies, as well as the correspondence, diaries and miscellaneous writings of ethnic leaders, journalists, clergy and artists. The resources of IHRC lend themselves to a variety of research projects and are greatly used by anthropologists, folklorists, historians, linguists, political scientists and sociologists.

Another center is the National Center for Urban and Ethnic Affairs on 16th Street, Washington D.C. Its Director, Monsignor Geno Baroni, is a well known activist in the ethnic cause in the United States. Their library and archives are still small. The Center, apart from ethnic studies, also concerns itself in areas such as urban planning, housing, education and neighbourhood newspapers.

All the above Centers are funded by private grants from bodies such as the Rockefeller Foundation and by U.S. Government grants under the Ethnic Heritage Act of 1973.

In Canada, the Public Archives in Ottawa has established the National Ethnic Archives to encourage Canada's ethnic groups to record their heritage and to preserve all types of archival documents. The collection of diaries, photographs, documents and newspapers is available to the public 24 hours a day, seven days a week. People who cannot journey to Ottawa to research the holdings in person are able to make use of an extensive reference service which will answer written requests for information.

In 1976, in Toronto, Professor R. F. Harney formed the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, which is situated at 5 Hoskin Ave., Toronto. Its purpose is: 'to collect, preserve and copy all material that forms a part of the history of the province's many ethnocultural groups and their immigrant experience'. Prof Harney agreed that the society does to a certain extent duplicate the Ethnic Archives in Ottawa and that the two bodies are in competition to solicit from the general public material suitable for collection. The Society, which is a non-profit organization, is supported by Wintario, a state-run lottery.

All the organizations I have mentioned solicit material from the general public by means of advertisements in various ethnic papers.

Letters are sent regularly to ethnic organizations, churches and clubs. Fetes and bazaars are also organized where older members of the ethnic communities bring material and record their memories. The newest development in these archival collections is the tape recording of interviews with people from such ethnic communities. These oral history interviews are done in English, dialects and ethnic languages.

It is up to all of us who are interested in the future of our country to urge the protection and preservation of our migrant records. People need to know their roots. To know the past is to be armed for the future.