

Archives and Manuscripts in Latvia

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Baiba Berzins was born in Latvia but left with her parents in 1944. She became an archivist in 1973 and positions held include Mitchell Librarian (1980–87) and Principal Archivist, NT Archives Service (1987–90). During her archival career she has never before met Latvian archivists or had the opportunity to talk about archival matters in Latvian.

Since Latvian independence in 1991, archivists and manuscript curators there have had to deal with the legacy of Soviet methods and practices and the challenges of a society undergoing political and economic change. During a visit to the Latvian State Archives and the Academic Library in March 1996 the author was able to see how these two institutions are dealing with the issues facing them.

IN 1991 LATVIA REGAINED THE INDEPENDENT status which it had enjoyed from 1918 until Soviet occupation in 1940. After many years of political agitation for greater freedom the Latvian Supreme Soviet adopted a declaration of sovereignty in July 1989 and in May 1990 Latvia declared its 1940 incorporation into the Soviet Union illegal. In March 1991 Latvians voted in favour of independence by referendum and the collapse of the Soviet Union later that year meant Russian recognition of Latvia's independent nationhood. Along with all the other countries previously under Soviet rule or with Communist governments, Latvia is now undergoing a period of reform with the implementation of democratic political processes and the introduction of a capitalist market economy. Such massive change inevitably impacts on all institutions and individuals within a society. During a visit to Latvia in March

1996 I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the Latvian State Archives and the Academy Library and to gain some insight into how archive and manuscript collections are faring in the new order.

During the Soviet period all major archival decisions were made in Moscow or required approval from there. During the years of *glasnost* Baltic archivists sought greater autonomy¹ but it was not until independence that they won the right to control their own institutions. Archival legislation was passed in Latvia on March 26 1991 and implemented on May 1 of the same year. Organisationally the national archives system consists of a State Archives Directorate which oversees the functioning of the Latvian State Archives, the Latvian State Historical Archives, the Film, Photograph and Audio Archives and eleven regional archives. In December 1992 the responsibilities of the regional archives were extended to include the collection of personal archives.

The Latvian State Archives took over the collection of the Central State Archive of the October Revolution and Socialist Development of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was created in 1962 to be responsible for post-1940 archival records. These had previously been housed in the Central State Historical Archive. This in turn was the successor agency in the Soviet period to the State Archives of independent Latvia, founded in 1919. Its records, now located in the Latvian State Historical Archives, date from the thirteenth century to 1940. Audiovisual holdings were removed from the Central State Archive in 1964 and a separate Central State Archive of Film, Photo and Phonographic Documents was created. This is now the Film, Photograph and Audio Archives.²

The responsibilities of the Latvian State Archives include the records of the Saeima (Parliament), Cabinet (whose members do not necessarily have to be elected parliamentarians) and judicial institutions, as well as the archival records of government agencies and enterprises. This reflects the European practice of regarding the legislature and the courts as government agencies rather than as arms of government with separate powers, as in Anglo-Saxon countries. Even during the Soviet period the Latvian State Archives had responsibility for the archival records of all Soviet governmental agencies including the Latvian SSR Council of Ministers, judicial institutions and some ministries. The powers and responsibilities of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary are now of course significantly different from those which Latvian institutions were allowed to exercise during the years of Soviet occupation.

During the Soviet period there was a separate archive for the records of the Communist Party of Latvia which, for most of those years, was the effective government of the country. In August 1991 the Party (which lost power in Latvia in January 1990) was declared unconstitutional and its property taken over. The Latvian State Archives acquired the Party archive as well as all the current records of the Party organisation. The latter consisted of 994 bags, 335 kg and 38 cartons of documents, mostly dating from 1989 to 1991. These records were unappraised and contain much not previously retained permanently in the Party archive but all except duplicated records will be kept; it is also obvious that there are many gaps through the removal or destruction of records. Since the acquisition of the Communist Party archive, the records have been extensively used by governmental agencies because establishing the truth of what occurred during the Soviet period and correcting the injustices which were perpetrated is part of the reform process.³ For example, the Commission to Investigate the Consequences of Totalitarianism has established a database which the general public can consult to find out what information the secret police held about them.

The Cultural Division of the Latvian State Archives has responsibility for the records of government cultural agencies as well as for the manuscript records, photographs and artefacts of individuals associated with cultural activities, including pre-1940 records. The division had its genesis in 1973 and has been collecting private records since that time. In addition to cultural records the division also collects private records from organisations and individuals in Latvia and overseas. The Archives is especially interested in any records relating to expatriate Latvians and aims to establish a collection which will enable the émigré experience to be studied in Latvia. Little is known in Latvia about the overseas communities because during the Soviet period few Latvians were allowed to travel to the West and, until the last years of Soviet domination, émigré visitors were under surveillance and letters and publications were strictly censored.

Private records received to date include several collections from Australia and the Archives hopes to acquire the archives of the Latvian Association of Australia, an extensive collection dating from the 1950s but also including material relating to Latvians who came to Australia from the early nineteenth century onwards.⁴ Collections are solicited through personal contacts and through publicity in émigré newspapers. In the first years of independence émigrés were reluctant to entrust such records to Latvian institutions but the response is rapidly improving. The Archives justifies such collecting on the grounds that it is Latvians who are primarily interested in Latvian history

and that collections in the archives of countries which accepted émigrés appear to receive little use. Given the current interest of Australian archives in documenting the 'cultural diversity' of this country, the issue of where émigré records should reside needs to be addressed and strategies should be developed to ensure that both parties with an interest in such documents, the country of origin and the host country, can have access to them. Copying schemes would seem an obvious solution.

The difficulties experienced by the Latvian State Archives are similar in nature to those of archives everywhere although Latvia's particular circumstances make many of them very acute. There are no government approved recordkeeping standards and it is hard to get agencies to adopt uniform practices, especially any costing money. In an age of rapid administrative change, agencies come and go and the Archives, if it manages to get the records at all, often inherits unappraised and unsorted records. There is a formal disposal and appraisal process but compliance is difficult to achieve: fines can be imposed for non-compliance but the present Director regards these as ineffective and prefers to use persuasive methods rather than the repressive approach associated with the past. Electronic records pose the problems we all know so well and are an issue the Archives proposes to



The Academic Library in Riga. The building was planned to house the Archives of the Communist Party of Latvia.

address this year since the establishment of a State Information Centre raises the possibility of introducing a uniform approach to the creation and use of electronic information.

Arrangement and description are particular problems for the Latvian State Archives because everything was previously done according to Soviet methodology, with its specific historical and ideological basis. Now the Archives is trying to develop descriptive standards which will be able to accommodate the Soviet practice (so that they do not have to re-describe records treated according to that) while also conforming to their own particular needs and to the ICA's *General International Standard Archival Description*. An in-house computer system has been developed using ORACLE which lists records at the *fonds* level; 'apraksts' or contents lists with series and items identified are compiled manually for agencies or other *sub-fonds* units. Terminology is likewise a problem because previously all archival concepts were expressed in Russian. The Archives is now developing its own glossary of terms in Latvian.

Archival training is another issue for the Latvian State Archives. Previously archivists were trained at the Archives Institute in Moscow but none are sent there now. Archivists are trying to establish a course at the University of Latvia but the bad image which the profession has inherited from the Soviet period (and which now has a different dimension because of the low rates of pay), the lack of interest from historians and the few students such a course is likely to attract annually are proving obstacles. The possibility of cooperation between the three Baltic countries in mounting a course has been considered but the differences between their languages are so great (especially between Estonian and the other two) that the course would have to be conducted in a foreign language. The only one likely to be known by all potential students is Russian; German, English and French were and are taught in schools but proficiency in these languages is not common and people with such ability are likely to go into more lucrative professions. The other option is to improve the skills of the current archival workforce through interaction with Western archivists, whose methods and ideas Latvian archivists are very keen to learn about. While they have access to much of the current Western literature they feel that it often reflects an end-product rather than a description of problem and process which they feel would be more useful in helping them to deal with the very problems they are grappling with.

The Latvian State Archives has three repositories and hopes to acquire a former factory for a fourth since all are now nearly full. The central repository is a twelve year old purpose built archive building, one of the few erected in

the former USSR. The building has temperature and humidity controls installed but was shoddily built and is much less appropriate for storage than the Latvian Historical State Archive next door, which since 1930 has been located in a former commercial building. Protection against fire is provided by smoke detectors and internal fire-proofing; vermin are obviously a problem. Mould affected records are not permitted into the storage area until the mould is killed off by exposure to the sun in summer. All records are located in folders and boxes, housed on static shelving. Map cabinets and index card drawers are used for records requiring such storage.

In the search room users are given access to the 'apraksti' lists to identify the records they wish to search. The users are predominantly administrative agencies, individuals wishing to realise confiscated assets or otherwise requiring information about the Soviet period, and researchers beginning the long task of re-examining and re-writing Latvian history. The Archives does not have an exhibition area but seeks to publicise its services and its holdings through an active publication program. This includes the production of the journal *Latvijas arhivi* (1994+), the compilation of information about the Soviet era (such as the first archivally verified lists of everyone taken away to Russia in the mass deportations of 1940, 1941 and 1949) and the compilation of publications about particular topics likely to appeal to the general public (e.g. the National Opera in the 1920s and the 1930s).

Like most other cultural agencies, including academic institutions, the Archives is resource poor and can only pay its employees minimal wages. Financial assistance is not likely from the business sector which currently is not much interested in cultural activities and is largely in the hands of Russian interests. Sponsorship and financial support from émigrés, from international agencies and from archives overseas (especially Sweden and Germany) is greatly appreciated but the Archives acknowledges the need to be self-sufficient. In addition to its public programs, it is seeking to boost its credibility with the government not only by assisting administrative agencies involved in the reform process but also by undertaking specific tasks such as checking the credentials of all candidates at the last elections (former members of the Communist Party are not eligible to stand for the Saeima), undertaking investigative work to establish whether individuals and organisations had Party, secret service or other unconstitutional involvements, and compiling indexes to many of the Soviet period records which it holds.

While the Latvian State Archives has been given responsibility for the Communist Party archives it was not successful in acquiring the building where it was planned to house them. A purpose built repository for the

Communist Party archives was being constructed when Latvia became independent and this is now the home of the Academy Library. The building has some faults but it is solidly constructed and the nuclear bomb shelter in the courtyard, intended for the secret service, provides an excellent storage area. This research library is the oldest library in the Baltic area and its history dates back to the sixteenth century.⁵ During the Soviet period it was the one library in Latvia which received acquisition funds and its collection of foreign literature in both the sciences and the humanities is very comprehensive. Like all other cultural institutions the Academy Library is suffering financial cutbacks but despite these it has developed the best access to electronic information of any library in Latvia. While it no longer subscribes to any overseas journals it can provide access to bibliographical and documentary information through the Internet, CD-ROMs and an interlibrary loan arrangement with the British Library.

The Academy Library houses a manuscript and rare books collection where the oldest item dates from the tenth century and which includes such treasures as the first book printed in Latvia (1588), the first calendar in Latvian (1766) and the first Latvian alphabet (1796). All of the earliest manuscripts are religious documents but the collection also includes rare historical material from later centuries. Of particular interest are 110 volumes compiled by Johann Brotze (1742–1823), a teacher and bibliophile with an interest in ethnography. Ten of these volumes contain meticulous drawings of Riga and other parts of Latvia and, together with accompanying notes, these provide an invaluable source of information about the buildings, costumes and cultural mores of his time.

The Misins collection is a separate component of the Library's manuscript and rare book holdings. It was begun in 1885 during the period of 'national awakening' by Janis Misins, a private collector with a passion for Latvian culture. It is the most comprehensive archive of Latvian literature and folklore and its manuscript and printed book holdings continue to be developed. Émigré literature has been acquired since the late 1950s and donations from overseas in recent years have boosted this aspect of the collection. Like the Latvian State Archives the Academy Library does not have the acquisition funds to buy private records and it relies heavily on donations to augment its holdings.

The Academy Library has the only in-house on-line library catalogue in Latvia but the need for original data entry for the manuscripts and rare books means that they are only gradually being entered and access is still primarily through manual finding aids. A more immediate problem is the fact that

whereas during the Soviet period such items were under lock and key and inaccessible, the freeing up of access has rendered them vulnerable to damage through more frequent handling. The Academy is currently contemplating using electronic means to make valuable items available but the cost of video imaging or of digitisation is proving prohibitive.

Latvian society is currently going through massive reorganisation and re-evaluation. 'Cultural workers' are one of the most poorly paid sectors of the economy (their counterparts in Estonia have even gone on strike to protest against a similar situation in their country⁶) and their institutions have to struggle for funds and resources. In the circumstances it was very heartening to see the enthusiasm and dedication of the custodians of archives and manuscripts in Latvia.

When I last visited Riga in 1985 I went to the Latvian Historical Museum which consisted of several rooms containing a chronological account, illustrated with artefacts and documents, of the history of Latvia. The narrative presented that history from a Communist viewpoint and the exhibition came to an abrupt halt at the Russian Revolution of 1917. I was not able to visit the Museum this time but I understand that the display has been greatly changed. There is also now a museum devoted to presenting the history of the years of Soviet occupation. It is a validation of the significance of archive keeping that records can survive to tell the truth which has been suppressed and knowledge of which is so important to shaping the future.

Endnotes

1. Peep Pillak, 'Reforms in Estonian Archives', *American Archivist*, vol. 53, Fall 1990, pp. 576–81.
2. The history of archive keeping in Latvia is detailed in Patricia Grimsted, *Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the USSR, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Belorussia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1981.
3. Daina Klavina, 'Komunistiskas partijas dokumentu ieklausana valsts arhivu sistema', *Latvijas arhivi*, 3/1995, pp. 3–5.
4. Aldis Putnins, 'The Latvians in Australia' in Betty Birsks et al., *The Baltic Peoples in Australia*, AE Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 55–107; M. Garlick and B. Berzins, 'Case studies on selected ethnic groups in Australia: German and Latvians' in *National Conference on Multiculturalism and Libraries, Proceedings*, eds Derek Whitehead et al., The Conference Committee, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 95–110.
5. *Latvijas Akademiska Biblioteka*, Latvijas Akademiska biblioteka, Riga, 1995; Grimsted, op. cit., pp. 259–61.
6. *Baltic Observer*, 29 February 1996.