

Estonian Archives in Vancouver (EAV)

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The Library of the Vancouver Estonian Society

A Look Back

The first library of the Vancouver Estonian Society was established in October 1952 when the chairman of the Society was L. Sööt. The librarian was Johannes Sikkal who had given the library a room in his house. Evald Ummelas built a suitable bookcase. The first books were donated by Mr. Sikkal. The initial collection was complemented by a number of compatriots, and a few books were bought by the Society.

Later a committee for the library was founded that conducted negotiations with the board of the Church Foundation to obtain a special room on the ground floor of "Meie Kodu" that was being built. In early December 1965 the Church Foundation informed that "a most beautiful room has been reserved for bookshelves on the ground floor".

Before the books were put on shelves they were all classified by Herta Laanela and Adele Unt ("little young lady Kaljur" helped also).

The official opening ceremony was in October 1966. Evald Sõerd writes about it in "Läänekaare Postipoiss" (No 28, October 1966):

"On October 2, after the Sunday service, quite a numerous company of compatriots gathered in the downstairs hall of the Estonian Church to take part in the opening ceremony of the library of the Society. To mark the occasion, a silk band had been diagonally drawn across the library door. The Chairman of the VES, K. Pae, standing at the door, welcomed the people and gave a brief survey of the history of the library. Its stocks have been books donated by the members of the Society, especially by the families Tambek, Siider, Noor, Kalbus and Past. In addition, the board of the Society has bought additional literature. Expressing his hope that the Estonian book in exile carries on our national culture as the Estonian book will be read also by our youth, and wishing the library a lively use, he cut the band attached to the door, declaring this way the library open.

Next Mr Kusto Pikker, the local representative of the publishing house *Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv*, took the floor stressing the importance of reading the Estonian book in exile. The survival of the Estonian community in exile depends largely on the publication and reading of literature in the mother tongue. Other peoples have been impressed by the rich variety of books published by Estonians, especially if compared to our small numbers. But Estonians themselves have become passive in subscribing to Estonian books and reading them. The excuse given is the pressure of time, and the promise is that it will be done once retired. But will there be Estonian books then if the situation stays as it is? The speaker asked his audience to ponder on it, and be more serious about subscribing to Estonian books.

A short address was delivered by the librarian Mrs H. Laanela expressing her thanks to everybody who had been arranging the library, and she also explained the regulations of its work. As the speeches were over, people could see the rooms of the library and their furnishing that, with the pictures on the walls, left a general pleasant impression. All there is to be wished is that

more books will be donated with every enthusiasm. Now there is a place to give away your books once you do not need them anymore.”

The Library in 1965–2006

The librarians have been: 1965–1983 Herta Laanela, 1984–1987 Helma Joasalu, 1988–1991 Imbi Weemees, 1992–1996 Herta Laanela, 1996–2002 Lembit Jõemägi, 2002–2006 Vello Püss and Mare Tutti.

By March 2006, the library has 2,180 books. About three fourths of them have been donated, the rest have been bought by the Vancouver Estonian Society. The library has its own modest cash-in-hand filled by fines and sales of books. The fines are charged as the timeframe of the loan has been violated (the regular timeframe is four weeks). Superfluous books (more than two copies of a title) are sold. The cash is used to buy the needed supplies, and we have also bought a few books.

Within the last five years we have sent 80 boxes of books to libraries in Estonia. These have been obtained while liquidating the libraries of elderly people or of the dead. The postage has been covered by the local Rotary Clubs.

The only newspaper the library subscribes to is “Eesti Elu”. Other papers and journals have been donated on irregular basis.

The books have been registered on catalogue cards. Most of the books are in Estonian (there are 120 English books). The majority of them are fiction, 20% of the collection is reference literature.

The library is open on Sundays from 12:00–13:30; on Mondays from 20:00–21.30; and on every other Wednesday from 11:30–13.30. There are two librarians working on the voluntary basis.

Why the archives?

The idea of establishing our own archives for the gathering of data about the life of Estonians in Vancouver arose first time about twenty years ago, i.e. in the mid-nineteen eighties, when the once 2,500-people-strong post-WWII Estonian refugee/immigrant community on the west coast of Canada was beginning to show definite signs of aging and began to decrease in numbers, as the younger generations started to identify more and more with the greater Canadian society.

Thus gradually, starting in the late-nineties, the idea of setting up an archival organization for the West Coast Estonian Community took hold.

In 2000 the Society for the Advancement of Estonian Studies in Canada (SAESC) undertook, in agreement with the Vancouver Estonian Society (VES), to set up the Estonian Archives in Vancouver (EAV) as a non-profit organization to be run by volunteers. The job of writing the Constitution and By-laws for it was completed in the Fall of 2005. The procedures manual for receiving materials is scheduled for completion in 2006. The EAV is therefore still very much in the formative stages.

Mandate and aim

The mandate of the EAV was set to collect, to store and to preserve archival materials of and about persons of Estonian heritage and their heirs and of Estonian organizations and businesses in British Columbia locally, so that these materials would not be lost but preserved and available for future researchers. It is the aim of the EAV to try to accomplish this as much as

possible in accordance with the archival principles laid out in the “Manual for Small Archives, c1999”, of the Archives Association of British Columbia.

Location and facility

The SAESC arranged with the Estonian Church Foundation in Vancouver (ECFV) for the Archives to be housed at “Meie Kodu”, owned and built by the Vancouver Estonian community in the early 1970s, which did evolve into the principal meeting place for Estonians in Vancouver. The annual rental cost for the use of the archival space is covered by SAESC.

At “Meie Kodu” we have the use of a windowless room of thirteen square meters (143 square feet), with automatic air exchange but without direct heat. The room is furnished with a large fireproof vault and three glass-fronted cabinets donated by the estate of an Estonian community member, a worktable and with about 30 m (96 feet) of metal shelving for archival storage boxes, all purchased with funds from SAESC.

Content

The materials collected to-date by the EAV (Archives) are those, which pertain to the life of all Estonians in British Columbia. For example, our collection holds items such as “Meie Kodu” construction drawings, movie footage of its construction and its cornerstone laying and opening ceremony; a private collection of black-and-white and colour films and slides of various social functions in the Estonian community; audio tapes of interviews with our elders done prior to Estonia regaining its independence; private photo albums, paintings and trophies; the files of past documents of a number of local Estonian organizations such as VES, SAESC and the Estonian Senior Citizen Association of Vancouver (ESCAV); and a complete set of the local Estonian newsletter “Läänekaare Postipoiss”.

It should be noted at this point that so far the EAV collection contains no items at all about pre-WWII Estonians in British Columbia, not even about Rear Admiral Sir John Pitka.

Future concerns

The basic question facing us is: in our situation, are we to be an archive or a museum or more pointedly, what is the difference and where should we draw the line? And thus, our quandary has been: what should we accept into the archives?

So far we have not managed to define this for ourselves and therefore, we have accepted pretty well everything brought to us – from person specific documents and family photo albums to heirlooms like a great-great grandmother’s spinning wheel from Estonia, typewriters with Estonian alphabet and a cither brought to Vancouver by its owner from her days in Siberia.

It follows clearly, therefore, that in Vancouver we are in need of professional archival and administrative guidance - firstly, for setting up the archive and secondly, for ensuring easy future access to the collection for users, including those off-site. This is why we are here today – to learn from **y o u r** experiences!

Our active Estonian community has by now shrunk to about 350 people and because of our distant location on the Pacific Coast of Canada we find ourselves somewhat “isolated”. Consequently, we feel that there is a need for the development of a “global” communication network (perhaps, electronic) both for ready access and assistance as well as for the exchange of archival ideas.

I think this Conference is a good step in that direction.

Translated by Anne Lange