

Networking Estonian Diasporic Heritage Communities

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Abstract

Most of the large Estonian diaspora communities that developed after the Second World War have been careful collectors of their document and print heritage. Special community archives and libraries were established for these purposes and were maintained by community resources and volunteers. As a result of the circumstances of the Cold War during the Soviet times, Estonian professionals knew the largest collections abroad existed, but knew little about their content.

As the Soviet Union collapsed and Estonia regained independence in 1991, Estonian memory institutions were able to start collaborating with diaspora communities openly. Estonian archives, museums and libraries began collecting information about the heritage of their compatriots living abroad. A number of diaspora communities began sending their collections to Estonia for preservation, while other communities were against this and believed their heritage should remain in the new country of residence.

At first, uncoordinated activity took place between institutions in Estonia and people abroad. The 1990s were a time when Estonian memory institutions, as well as the entire Estonian Republic, went through fast times of change and were focused on themselves. Thus, multilateral collaboration did not take place between the homeland and the heritage collectors and researchers abroad until the 2000s when a focused network was assembled. In 2008 the not-for-profit organization, Baltic Heritage Network, was established to foster collaboration between national and private archives, museums, libraries, institutions of research, public associations, and organizations that collect and study the cultural heritage of not only Estonian but also Latvian and Lithuanian Diaspora.

Today, BaltHerNet has become a unique network connecting professional and amateur memory workers with a diverse program of activities leading to many respectable outcomes. This paper will analyze the different facets, problems and opportunities associated with this type of collaborative work.