

Honourable Secretary General of the Ministry of Education and Research, Excellencies, our foreign guests, archive users, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

The National Archives of Estonia is one hundred years old, congratulations to everyone!

National Archives was born directly after the end of Estonian War of Independence on 3 March 1920 when seven gentlemen met at the library of the University of Tartu to discuss the future. In particular, how to handle the past in the future. Formation of our own state's archives was on the agenda and this was the first meeting of the Archives Committee. The Committee was chaired by the 34-year old Finnish historian Arno Rafael Cederberg who had recently been appointed professor of Estonian and Nordic history. The university was also represented by the associate professor of law Jüri Uluots who later became Prime Minister. Middle-aged Kristjan Raud from the Ministry of Education attended committee meetings, having temporarily quit making a living as a freelance artist. Only the fourth man, Otto Greiffenhagen, archivist of the city of Tallinn, had archival management experience. The three remaining committee members were affiliated with the Estonian National Museum: the well-known cultural figure Matthias Johann Eisen, Edgar Eisenschmidt and Jakob Muide.

The composition of the Archives Committee underwent some changes later, some members were newly appointed and some left, the committee itself transformed into Archives Board the following year but the symbolic importance of the first meeting remains high to this day, a hundred years later. It is worth celebrating as an anniversary of the National Archives or the Estonian national archives more broadly. This is the view of today's archivists but the opinion was also held in 1936 by the manager of the then National Central Archives Otto Liiv who labelled that meeting a milestone for Estonian national archives administration.

From one perspective, a hundred years is a sufficiently long period to look back on, analyse and come up with some thoughts on the events. On the other hand, it is only three generations and half of that languishing under foreign occupation. Therefore, Estonia could consider its national archives administration as both having a long and storied history but also something new. It all depends on the context and point of view.

Archives as a concept emerged along with literacy thousands of years ago. On this scale, our national archives barely have a history, they seem recent, challenges seem new, customs and conventions seem unestablished.

Nevertheless, from another angle, Estonian Association of Archivists recently celebrated its 80th anniversary – a very solid milestone. Indeed, the creation of our society in 1939 was an early step compared to the birth of professional associations of archivists elsewhere in Europe and around the world. Actually, very few professional associations of archivists were established before World War II, the oldest of course being the Dutch association of archivists founded in 1891. The same could be said about archives law. Estonia's first Archives Act from 1935 was quite early out compared to its neighbours. Therefore, despite the relative young age of the Estonian state, the foundation of our archives was laid early during the brief period between world wars.

Let's reflect on the development of Estonia's archives over the hundred years. Development is frequently only seen as a rising trend line, progress, upward movement, from easier to more complex.

Such a development has not been the case in Eastern Europe. The National Archives' hundred years have also been varied: ups and downs, change and stagnation, collapse and rise from the ashes. Ladies and gentlemen, let's briefly touch upon the eight development phases of the archives.

The first development phase of the National Archives was around the time between two world wars in the Republic of Estonia. The years 1920–39 were a period when the national archives were established, archives as a field matured and became professional and where the milestones were the passing of the Archives Act, publishing of archives handbooks and formation of a professional association. Estonia's own archives administration was created almost from scratch while based on various experiences. It was somewhat created from a Baltic-German archives tradition whose bastion was the Tallinn City Archives. It must also be emphasised that various elements of Russian archives administration were adopted (mostly via Friedrich Nineve) and learned from the then modern approaches in the Netherlands, Great Britain and Scandinavia through visits, acquisition of literature and translation. Professor A. R. Cederberg can be deemed the chief architect of our archives administration and his Estonian students (Otto Liiv, Arnold Soom, Rudolf Kenkmaa, Adolf Perandi, Erik Tender, Nigolas Loone, etc.) were subsequently creators of the national archives tradition.

The second period in the history of archives here began at the end of 1939 with the relocation of the Baltic-Germans and ended in the autumn of 1944 with a large-scale fleeing of Estonians as Soviet Russia's troops invaded the country, replacing one occupation with another. Understandably, these years were some of the direst in Estonian history in general, but archival collections fortunately escaped major destruction. The most tragic event was in March 1944 when Tallinn was bombed and several shelf-kilometers of historical legacy burned into ashes.

On the other hand, this short period was a time of remarkable growth for archival collections. As the Baltic-Germans left, a large volume of historical, mainly family archives, were brought to the archives here. Following the 1940 coup, almost the entire written heritage of the state and society was contributed to the archives. Hence, it can be concluded that the older part of the National Archives collection was formed in these difficult times.

While the collections grew, the domestic professional archives administration was becoming fractured. The coup of 1940 and subsequent Sovietization severed the progress that the archives had made so far, both in terms of archival theory and in practice, in terms of day-to-day archival operations. In August 1940, a security sergeant with a seventh grade education was dispatched from Moscow to Tallinn to transform Estonian archival administration. The foundations of archival administration employed by the Republic of Estonia, including the principle of provenance, were outlawed. The Soviet view was adopted that archival records are secret in nature. In 1941, genealogical research was banned in the archives of Estonia.

Various renowned specialists left the field of archives either by fleeing the country (Paul Johansen in 1939, Gottlieb Ney in 1941, Arnold Soom, Erik Tender and Adolf Perandi in 1944) or due to repression (August Sildnik in 1941, Richard Övel in 1945). The main authors of the Archives Act died: Otto Liiv (1942) and Jüri Uluots, who had arrived in Sweden (1945). Estonian archival administration was virtually left in tatters.

In its third phase from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, the archival administration here operated as an extension of the Soviet bodies of repression. The nature of archives changed. Archives became

primarily tasked with serving security authorities and contributing to repression of citizens. Aside from responding to KGB inquiries, day-to-day work was comprised of systemic review of archival content to identify so-called enemies of the people and counter-revolutionaries.

This post-war decade is also characterised by a second unusual assignment. Archivists were supposed to contribute to the reconstruction efforts of the socialist homeland, using the language of that era, through the methodical collection of waste paper from archives storage facilities. Literature has subsequently referred to these efforts as a campaign of destruction, which it mostly was. Campaigns, particularly in ideologically fanatical societies, breed damage. On the other hand, in many cases, Estonian archivists attempted to direct the least valuable archival content to re-processing, saving the more valuable and unique content from destruction. Therefore, even in these most difficult conditions, there was evidence of archivists guided by professional values and willingness to stand up for the preservation of cultural heritage.

The fourth phase of Estonian archival administration lasted from 1956 to 1968. The era could be characterised as a time of remission and recovery that allowed for the restoration of more or less normal operations and the archives were detached from the system of identifying enemies of the Soviet regime. The year 1956 brought about a change of course in this sector, due to which the publishing of source guides and archives guides was allowed; in addition, it was referred to the necessity of partial de-classification of documents.

The furthest that attempts for a more liberal archival environment reached was in May 1968 as various standpoints of research interest were formulated in a joint meeting between Estonian historians and archivists. The implementation of such ideas would have returned the archives to normalcy. Events of the same months in Czechoslovakia, however, crushed many dreams and brought about another encapsulation.

The fifth period in Estonian archives were the 1970s and 1980s up to the Singing Revolution. It is also known as the stagnation period. Stagnation in the society meant the same in archival administration. Undoubtedly even in those circumstances, it is possible to note certain progress, positive changes in some aspects (e.g. growth in the number of source publications) but these remained mostly irrelevant. It was not possible to stop the degradation of the archives in a stifling ideological and declining economic situation.

The year 1988 is the end of this period and the start of the next. The perestroika initiated by Moscow's national government brought about disclosures that reached Estonia's archives with a certain delay. The complete restriction of access to archival content ceased.

The sixth phase of development in Estonian archives from 1988 to 1998 can be called the de-Sovietization era. Already in 1989, Peep Pillak led the re-establishment of the Estonian Association of Archivists. In this period, control was assumed over the archives of the Estonian Communist Party, including the archives of the Interior Ministry of Estonian SSR and the National Security Committee. Admittedly, the majority of content of the repression bodies had already been removed from Estonia or destroyed.

In the first half of the 1990s, the archives issued hundreds of thousands of archival notices on subjects of real estate and citizenship. Therefore, without the archival content the Republic of Estonia would not have been born as it was based on the principle of legal continuity.

The archives buildings were in a terrible condition and technical infrastructure up to the mid-1990s was basic. The management of archival administration as a field suffered from poor quality and community distrust. Its reputation only began slowly improving in the final years of the decade.

After years of passionate disputes, the parliament in 1998 passed Estonia's second Archives Act, the drafting of which was led by National Archivist Jaak Rand. This finally de-Sovietized domestic archival administration – both in terms of archival theory and organisationally. The National Archives was born as the central archives agency of the state. An educational system for the archivist's profession was also established. Connections to the international community of archivists were restored and several local archivists had the opportunity to obtain training at the National Archives of Sweden and the National Archives of Finland. All of this provides sufficient basis to discuss a positive transformation that concluded the sixth phase of development.

Paradoxically, it is often more difficult to analyse and reflect on recent history as opposed to more distant periods. However, the seventh period in archival administration could be defined as 1999–2011, characterising it as a period of organisational development and consolidation for the National Archives, as well as, more importantly, a phase for transitioning to online archival services and establishment of digital archival administration. The first decade of the 21st century completely transformed archival administration and use of archives.

Several events merit particular highlighting in this period. Since 2005, it became possible to use archival sources from home computers due to the respective launches of the digital images system, Saaga, and the electronic catalogue of archives, AIS. This constituted transformational change that instantaneously grew the number of archives visits ten-fold. By the period end, the usage of National Archives services had grown hundred-fold compared to the pre-internet era. In 2008, online access was opened for historical films and audio tapes (FIS), photos were added in 2010 (FOTIS), historical maps were added in 2011.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the National Archives began receiving born-digital records that mainly comprised information contained in national databases. A special unit was formed to respond to challenges involving handling of digital data. Efforts began to develop related to infrastructure and competencies. The period was concluded by the passing of Estonia's third Archives Act in 2011 that also marked the beginning of the eighth and currently ongoing developmental phase.

The key objective of the 2011 Act was to establish optimal legal conditions for the final transition to digital record and archival management. The archival management of the current decade is perhaps most characterised by the digital transformation – the constantly growing digitization of analogue media and acceptance of born-digital content. The National Archives is visited 1.5 million times a year and 99.5% of those visits occur online. The following statement prevails in the eighth phase of development of Estonian archival administration: if the archival source is not online then it doesn't exist at all.

Besides digital transformation, the field of archives today is characterised by the consolidation of a single image of the National Archives, the use of the macro appraisal methodology for determination of content of archival value, the shift of various archives workflows to an electronic environment (customer service, collaboration with creators of archival records), infrastructure development for digitization of audio-visual heritage, crowdsourcing projects for volunteer involvement in archival source descriptions, the addition of archival education as a core function, the use of social media opportunities and the widening domestic and international cooperation. The opening of Noora, the main building of the National Archives in 2017 was a historical event – 96 years after the first meeting of the Archives Committee the oldest archival records of our country and people were moved into proper facilities.

Ladies and gentlemen, maybe we should draw the line marking the end of the eighth developmental phase on the year 2017 in order to discuss new developmental goals and the archives of the future. This may have some benefits since discussions over changes are mostly conducive to innovation. Therefore, I would like to conclude with some questions that may affect the development of 100-year old National Archives in the near future, no matter how such periods are enumerated, if at all.

So, what will happen to the archivist's profession in a world of digital information? The number of archivists handling paper records has been on a decline that will continue further. Will this change eventually result in the emerging of a new profession or perhaps a merging of existing professions handling information management (archivist, record manager, bibliographer)?

The same question applies to the memory institutions' landscape. Will all institutions handling cultural heritage continue in the same organisational framework as before? How will digitization affect the sector engaged in the intermediation of culture and heritage?

Further, how will the use of archives and consumption of past heritage develop in an environment where transmission of information is continually becoming more audio-visual? Will words become images and, if so, what will this lead to?

What will the involvement of artificial intelligence opportunities entail for archival administration? How far (or near?) are we from the capability to fully understand handwritten text using a computer? What are the prospects of facial and more broadly photographic recognition capabilities? What will happen to traditional archival description on the application of automatic keywords or even the involvement of artificial intelligence in determining archival value?

Tackling these and many other developmental challenges is unavoidable. Change makes life interesting and will continue to create opportunities for the field of archives as it always has. In this context, the 100th anniversary of the National Archives in 2020 is just one moment, a more than average festive instant, a brief respite between the day before yesterday and tomorrow.

For this reason, please allow me to thank everybody who has contributed to Estonia's archives over the years: archivists, domestic and foreign partner institutions, the academic community, archives enthusiasts and users, decision-makers at the Ministry and at government level. Thanks to our collective efforts, we are able to provide the best archival services to the society. In spite of challenges in the past, we have built National Archives that we can be proud of with good reason. The National

Archives preserves the memory of the Estonian land and people, our collective memory, and this memory is fully functional.

Long live the National Archives of Estonia!

Priit Pirsko
National Archivist

On 2 March 2020 in the Kadriorg Palace, Tallinn