Reflections on AABS Conference

Maira Bundza

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/maira_bundza/58/
Baltic Studies at Stanford Libraries

By Liisi Eglit
Asst. Curator for Estonian & Baltic Studies
Stanford University Libraries

Until recently, the Baltic collection of Stanford University Libraries (SUL) formed a tiny fraction of its large Slavic and East European collection. This changed due to an endowment received from Kistler-Ritso Foundation, an organization founded by Dr. Olga Kistler-Ritso.

In Estonia, the foundation’s greatest achievement is building and supporting the Museum of Occupations, which was opened in Tallinn in 2003. The foundation’s endowment to SUL made it possible to hire a person who would specifically curate and enlarge the collections of three Baltic States at Stanford, and would also collaborate with the museum in Estonia. In 2013, Liisi Eglit started her work as assistant curator for Estonian and Baltic studies.

The current Baltic collection of SUL focuses on the 20th and 21st century history and culture of the Baltic states, and is represented by four main keywords: occupation, resistance, freedom, and recovery. The 20,000+ volume collection is growing fast due to acquisitions of newly published material, exchange programs with other libraries, and numerous donations received from other institutions (e.g. University of Washington Library, Estonian Museum Abroad) and members of the Baltic community. SUL is increasingly interested in enlarging its Baltic archival collections by focusing on memoirs, life stories, and documents of members of the Baltic diaspora in the United States.

SUL actively collaborates with other institutions and organizations in order to enhance the Baltic studies by conducting collaborative projects.

See BALTIC STUDIES AT SUL, pg. 7

Reflections on AABS Conference

By Maira Bundza
Western Michigan University

After returning from the AABS conference, I am again motivated to get back to work on my own research, so I think it is money well spent by me and my institution. This is the second time the Balts decided to have a combined conference with the Scandinavians, and though I see overlapping themes and some joint sessions, I am not sure this is the best for Baltic studies. There were close to 530 attendees from 22 countries and 39 percent were AABS members, so roughly 200 had interest in the Baltics. I don’t know how that compares with the last conference in Chicago, but there were a good number of graduate students attending, so I feel Baltic studies are alive and well.

As in all conferences, there were various tracks with presentations on minutiae that mostly interest specialists, but I found something interesting to attend in almost all the time slots. Only in the very first session I had no preference and chose a room, because it just looked cool with stained glass and had plenty of seats, so I could go through the program and choose what I was going to listen to throughout the conference. With one eye and ear I vaguely followed a session on Viking archeological digs. What I got out of it was that Vikings were buried with their horses, dogs and weapons, sometimes in boats. The keynote was also on Vikings, or more specifically – Beserkers – an especially crazy, violent form of Vikings. A renown Yale professor – Anders Winroth – started with the word “beserk” as used in newspapers and elsewhere in the last 100 years or so, went on to references of Beserkers in 12th century sagas, to various linguistic explanations of the word – weather it meant bare-skinned, or bear skin covered or chain mail covered. I enjoyed watching this man make his argument.

The reception was held in the Yale’s Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library. It was one of the few times where we could mingle with all of the conference attendees. I stood in a food line with a grad student who had always defined himself as The Viking, and was now disconcerted to be amongst so many Vikings. It was a pleasure to run into three delightful folks from the Herder Institute, who reminded me that the next European Baltic Studies conference will be held at their institution in September 2015. Wonder how I could get to that?

There was no bibliographic track and the only session I would categorize as being library focused was on émigré Baltic Press, where Andris Straumanis had again done solid research looking at how the word “veclatvieši” or “old Latvians” had come about and how that first wave of Latvian emigrants was described in Latvia and in the émigré press. His paper was full of useful facts and numbers. Erick Zen (he actually has a much longer full name) surprised me by being from Rio de Janeiro and talking about Lithuanians in Argentina and Brazil. Violeta Kaledai from Vytautas Magnus University discussed the publication Lituanus, one of the two scholarly publications on Lithuanian issues in English. My oldest acquaintance in the Lithuanian community, Ramune Kubilius, had a very nice overview of current Lithuanian publications in English.

I ran into Ivars Iļābs from the University of Latvia on the street and went to his presentation on the evolution of Latvian nationalist thought through maps. I had never seen the early maps of Latvia that did not contain the Latgale region and had no distinct border at the north dividing it from Estonia. The first map that included what we now consider Latvia was printed in 1890 and the use of the term “Latvia” started in the 1860’s. It was fun to watch the Lithuanians squirm, when some of the maps took a broad sweep of Latvia that included Lithuania.

There were many simultaneous sessions, but at least they were all in close proximity, and I would hop from one to the next, even within one session, so I only got to a part of the round table on BATUN, the Baltic Appeal to the United Nations. This session led to some of the most useful discussions for me. First,
Reflections on Conference Continued from Page 5

I heard them ask the presenters, if they would be willing to share their presentations, and it was left up to people emailing each other. I just thought, „Sheesh, if they were using our institutional repository platform, had the conference schedule up in that, they could just add their presentations, and they would be available to everybody.” The Administrative Executive Director of AABS, Irena Blekys, was there, so I started talking to her about this. Then it evolved into a conversation about how AABS and BATUN archives should be saved, organized, digitized, etc.

There was a whole series of sessions on the Singing Revolution theme. I wanted to hear Guntis Smidchens speak, so I went to one of those sessions and got to also hear Jānis Chakars, who will organize the next AABS conference in Philadelphia, and Bradley Woodworth, who heads the Baltic Studies program at Yale and was the main organizer of this conference. The Singing Revolution is an engaging topic raising questions on the role the Baltic States played in the fall of the Soviet Union, did they show how a David can slay Goliath, what role singing had in it, did the fact that choirs are inherently democratic have an effect, etc. At this session I also ran into Joseph Ellis from Wingate University in NC, who had taken his students to Estonia after teaching a class on the Singing Revolution. We presented at the same session in Chicago and he was recognized with a reward at the AABS meeting.

I heard Vilis Inde talk about translating a Latvian classic – Rainis’ Zelta zirgs into Golden Horse. Inde first discussed the importance of having quality English translations on Latvian websites. He had spent months trying to convince the organizers and Latvian government to clean up the Riga 2014 site, meant for tourists who will visit Riga during its year as the European Capital of Culture. I found it interesting that he had translated the book for his nephews, so that they would have a point of connection with their grandparents, as that generation often does not read contemporary Latvian fiction.

I stumbled into a great presentation on evaluating Lithuanian language skills through a natural context. I missed how she had set up these “interviews,” but she analyzed the language of Lithuanian residents whose first language was Italian, Russian, French, etc. She also asked them about their motivation to learn or not learn Lithuanian. Some were eager to learn so they would fit in better, others felt no reason to and had not learned anything besides very basic courtesies in over 15 years.

Iveta Grinberga, the Latvian instructor for UW had done a preliminary study with two students of different backgrounds. The non-heritage student had more difficulty with cases and tended to simplify the case system. The heritage student, who had at least heard the language in childhood, tended to do more code mixing – substituting English words for Latvian. Looking forward to more of her research.

Agita Misāne of the University of Latvia explained to us how the Namejs ring became a tradition. Namejs was a political and military leader in the late 13th century, but there is no historical basis to connect him with any ring. Archeologists found a plaited ring, but in a different part of the country and from about 100 years earlier. Writer Aleksandrs Grins wrote a book in 1928 titled Namejs Ring, though the ring he describes is different. Grins story was eventually performed on stage and later someone presented then President Ulmanis a ring they called a Namejs, and painter Liberts painted the archeological ring on the finger of his fantasy portrait of Namejs. Later Ulmanis’ connection to the ring was forgotten and it became a symbol of identity in the exile community and in Latvia, a symbol for supporters of Latvian independence.

Anna Romanovska talked about thinking of her past life in colors - dark ones for difficult parts of her life, bright yellow for shoes her mother had purchased for her abroad, etc. She had an amazing sketch where she had managed to display the lives of her family as intertwining colored timelines. I think this would be a fun way for displaying a family history. Mark Ian Jones from Australia talked about Swedish and Scandinavian design that was very popular 1950-70. Mark Svede talked about the Latvian artist Andris Vitoliņš, making sense of things I would not have understood on my own. The session ended with Zvīle Gimbutas talking about Lithuanian artists Ciurlionis, Vizgirda and Virkau. Mark suggested that we also listen to Alise Tifentale, who he considers the brightest new art historian for the Latvians. The title of her presentation had caught my eye: “Our Muddy Boots On Their Marble Floor...” She looked at artists Kaspars Podnieks and Kriiss Salamanis at the 55th Venice Biennale in the Latvian Pavilion in 2013. Podnieks has done portraits of farmers that look simple, until you realize they are suspended a few meters off the ground. Salamanis had a large tree swinging upside down from the ceiling of the hall.

All in all a good conference. It was fun to walk the hallowed halls of Yale. The conference was bigger than they expected, so some rooms were quite crowded and there wasn't much room to hang out, but Yale had nice simple WiFi access for guests. And there were plenty of restaurants to eat at close by.