

Geschichte Wie Es Eigentlich Gewesen

or

The Necessity of Having Ethnic Archives Programmes

by WALTER NEUTEL*

In 1972 the Public Archives of Canada established a National Ethnic Archives Programme and, in the opinion of some, fell for a fad as part of a government ploy to garner votes. Not unnaturally, questions such as: what is it? why should we have it? who uses it? have repeatedly been asked.

Until the 1970s, historians largely neglected the implications of the fact that Canada is a nation of immigrants. Our history books emphasize nation-building. They proudly describe the way Canadians defeated geographic barriers to construct a transcontinental transportation system and extol the wealth which has been extracted from the soil and the mines. A few courageous men are hailed for their fortitude and foresight in exploring the land and claiming its riches—largely for themselves. Past politicians are paraded before us as heroes for securing liberty under the Crown in spite of the economic reality of the stars and stripes. However, the back-breaking effort and indomitable persistence of the masses of immigrants and their descendants who tilled the soil, harvested the forests, and mined for ore is taken for granted. The way these people lived, their hopes and achievements, disappointments and misfortunes are recorded in few history books. A high school graduate was almost as ignorant about the life-style of Canadians in the 1920s as he was about that of Genoans in the seventeenth century.

Canada is also a polyglot nation where scores of languages are in daily use. Many Canadians obtain all the services and amenities of modern life without ever using a word of English or French after they leave school. Radio and television programmes, newspapers and movies, medical, legal and other services are available in the language of one's choice. Yet, the nation's archival repositories have little evidence of this fact; indeed, some universities award advanced degrees to "scholars" who know only one language—English or French. The society described in text books differs from that which the elderly remember. Anglophones and Francophones may appear to be the two nations, solitudes or power groups that existed in the party back-rooms, business boardrooms and ivory towers—perhaps also in some towns and villages—but

* The quotation used in the title is taken from the German historian Leopold von Ranke who made extensive use of archives because he wished to write "history as it actually happened".

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 EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION OF PROGRESSIVE FINNISH-CANADIANS

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**Associations of Finnish Democrats
 Sudbury Regional Committee**
 Box 354

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June 20th, 1941

Social-Democratic Party of Canada
 Affiliated with International Bureau
 Dominion Executive Committee

Toronto, Ont., July 9th, 1941

Comrades --

It is now five years since the Social-Democratic Party held a convention. And the call for a convention has now become so important by the party members. The Ukrainians have especially requested this convention, as well as a number of Polish and English locals, working together with general war conditions, is made more imperative.



NATIONAL FESTIVAL COMMITTEE
 Finnish Canadian Amateur Sports Federation
 Finnish Organization of Canada
SPORTS AND MUSIC FESTIVAL.



Collage of letterheads of ethno-cultural associations. (Public Archives of Canada)

for many Canadians, reality has been different. Although they are third, fourth or more generation Canadians, their mother tongue is Cree, German, Italian or Ukrainian and they may even be Jewish, Hindu or Bhuddist. Some children had learned several languages before going to school only to be confronted by a teacher who spoke a "foreign" language, English or French.

Researchers at the nation's archives did not face such linguistic problems. They might be frustrated at not finding the collection of papers being sought, but seldom were they confronted with a collection in a language unknown to them. Historians in Canada have ignored most areas of social history, and archivists—who admittedly had too few resources for the task at hand—were content to take their cue from historians. Thus archives failed to acquire documentation on the daily life of Canadians while accumulating the evidence that once every few years a large percentage went to the polls to elect politicians whose forgettable and notable utterances alike are recorded faithfully and indiscriminately.

Canadian society rests chiefly on the Judeo-Christian tradition, which accepts the decree of Moses that no one should be convicted except upon the evidence of two or three trustworthy witnesses, and we proclaim the right of a criminal to be judged by a jury of his peers. Yet, before the tribunal of their readers, historians were content to present as evidence the records of any witness who wrote in English or French, even where it concerned German-speaking Amish, Russian-speaking Doukhobors or Japanese Canadians. We intuitively accept that no two persons give the same report of a traffic accident, but if our physical location and mental frame of reference govern observations of simple events, how much more would this be so in complex situations. For too long we have avoided the facts that perceptions of events and their influence on future developments differ according to cultural perspective.

In the late 1960s, as the public in general and historians in particular became more interested in the various social aspects of our history, the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) recognized that its resources were woefully inadequate to meet the changing needs of researchers. Fortunately, increased financial allocations enabled the PAC to enlarge its staff and greatly increase its holdings. This was done by collecting material in media which had received insufficient attention, especially still and motion photography and sound recordings, and by focussing upon such neglected themes as literature, labour, business, science, and sports. The increasing interest in the study of ethno-cultural communities, their retention of distinctive cultural and social traditions, and their integration into society at large, was a major aspect of this new undocumented social history. Both the Centennial Commission and the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism indicated to the government that something should be done to rectify the dearth of available ethnic source material. Not surprisingly, therefore, the National Archives used the opportunity offered by the government to accelerate its efforts in this area through the government's programme on multiculturalism.

Persons of French descent constitute the largest ethnic group in Canada, approximately one third of the population. The English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh, popularly lumped together as British, compose another third. Persons

who trace their roots to other European countries, to Africa and to Asia make up the remaining third of our population. To ensure that its holdings better reflect this situation, the PAC established the National Ethnic Archives (NEA)—a programme to which it directly applies less than one and a half percent of its staff and budget. Although by focussing upon groups other than the “British”, French, and native North Americans, the term “ethnic archives” is something of a misnomer, few other terms have the merit of being so descriptive and brief.

Since its inception, the aim of the NEA has been two-fold: to alert ethno-cultural communities to the nature of archival material and the importance of its preservation, and to collect and make available to researchers at the PAC archival material of national significance pertaining to these communities. As a result, the holdings of the PAC and of other repositories should come to reflect more fully the diversity of Canadian society and eventually Canadians might have a better understanding of themselves.

To measure the degree of success in respect of the first objective is difficult, if not futile, and to claim all the credit for what has been achieved in this regard would be presumptuous. Nevertheless, during the past six years there has been a discernable increase in public awareness of the types of documents which may be of historical interest and of the difficulty of safeguarding them against loss or destruction at the hands of man or through natural deterioration. A number of ethno-cultural communities have established active history societies, archives committees and archival repositories. Others have augmented their efforts to promote community utilization of existing archival institutions in federal and provincial governments, and in universities. Provincial archives have taken an interest in building up their ethnic collections, and in Ontario the government has supported the establishment of the Multicultural History Society (with an annual budget that exceeds the total expenditures on ethnic archives by the PAC and all other Canadian repositories combined, and larger than the total budget of most provincial archives). Much of this activity was stimulated by the National Ethnic Archives programme.

The second part of the NEA programme—collecting and making available archival materials has, of course, received the greatest attention by its staff which has contacted virtually all national organizations and newspapers, the former leaders of many defunct organizations, and many major figures (or their children) within the ethno-cultural communities to offer the services of the PAC as the custodian of their records. The response has been one of great interest, though frequently accompanied by a reluctance to entrust to strangers such personal papers as private correspondence and diaries, and organizational records such as minutes, reports, correspondence, and financial records. Once NEA personnel has approached and clearly outlined service to prospective donors, whether individuals or organizations, time is allowed to pass permitting them to examine and weigh the available options. In some cases this process has taken several years during which there was little or no contact. Once an organization's or a person's trust is earned, however, they become allied in encouraging others to entrust their collections to the NEA. Often the decisive factors are in being a permanent institution with good facilities for preservation and reference, and in preserving a neutrality outside the disagreements and rivalries which may exist even within a community.

The thrust of NEA activities has been to acquire the original documents, although copies are accepted if the owners themselves are committed to preserving the originals. Some effort is also expended in identifying materials already held in Canadian or foreign repositories, and in a few instances copies have been acquired. Much more of this copying may be required in the future.

The response certainly justified continuing the effort of the National Ethnic Archives programme and, resources permitting, warrants expansion. Material in some thirty languages has been acquired, including hundreds of linear feet of manuscript records, several hundred thousand feet of motion film, thousands of booklets and other publications (many in the near-print category and not available in libraries, while others are the only issues of newspapers and magazines known to exist), many photographs and sound recordings as well as maps, medals, heraldic and other pictorial items. So far the NEA has but skimmed the surface of some communities and in many has not yet accomplished that much. Numerous collections of national significance remain in private hands as do a far greater number of local or provincial interest.

The rate at which the NEA can acquire material is limited, and the credibility of the acquisition programme can only be maintained by demonstrating to prospective donors that the material entrusted will be carefully preserved and fully processed. Therefore, like archivists everywhere, the ethnic programme staff must devote more of its time and resources to sorting, arrangement, and description of material than to additional acquisition. This must hold in spite of the fact that the services of outsiders are contracted to assist the NEA. Furthermore, providing reference services to visiting and corresponding researchers requires a great deal of time so that, overall, less than fifteen percent the staff's attention may be devoted to acquiring further documentation. Human resource limitations and a processing backlog have conspired to deflect attention from some groups.

What benefits have the public received through the NEA programme? Many collections have been made available in one place with unsurpassed facilities for research. The PAC also has the records of many government departments and agencies (for example, immigration, citizenship, labour, agriculture, mines, and so forth) which complement the private collections. However, listing what has not been acquired does not tell the whole story: in some cases the NEA has been able literally to rescue a collection from garbage disposal and prevent a permanent loss. In the case of one large collection, the timing of contact was fortuitous, just before it was to be dispersed to half a dozen places. In another case, several parts of a collection which had been "lost" for years were rediscovered as part of another collection. The NEA can often direct researchers to source material still in private hands, and at times can advise them to suspend search because of the destruction—wilful as well as accidental—of major collections. In addition, the records of many organizations and persons are housed which are useful for the study of a community and inter-group relations; for examples, the Young Men's Christian Association and the Canadian Citizenship Council.

Researchers not engaged in ethnic studies also benefit from the NEA programme. Often the ethnic element is only one of the useful aspects of a collec-

tion, indeed, sometimes only a minor part. Few people are totally oriented toward their community. Slovak Canadians *per se*; they are also businessmen, academics, railway workers, farmers, clergymen, and so forth. To preserve the integrity of a donor's collection, the NEA also acquires and arranges papers which document participation in Canadian economic and social life. The collections received through the NEA programme will prove to be of critical importance for the study of business development, labour history, and of political movements both on the left and right, mutual benefit associations, the predecessors of medicare, and international relations.

The papers of the late Professor Tadeusz Romer of McGill include, for example, not only his correspondence and notes gathered during his thirty years in Canada, but also his reports and correspondence accumulated during nearly thirty years in the diplomatic service of Poland. His letters and dispatches as Ambassador to Japan in the late 1930s and as Ambassador to Russia during the early 1940s, as well as his records as Minister for Foreign Affairs of the government-in-exile, will especially interest students of international relations. The records of the Finnish Organization of Canada, for instance, will be important to all students of the political left in Canada during the first half of this century. This collection and the papers of Maxwell Cohen are essential to persons interested in the history of labour. The records of the Jewish Labour Committee are probably more important for the study of labour and human rights than for that of the Jewish community, yet they document a vital aspect of the Jewish Community's life and consciousness. The records of some other Jewish organizations focus on the provision of political and economic support for the State of Israel: the papers of Rabbi Samuel Cass and the records of the Central Organization of Sudeten Germans in Canada help us to understand the effect of World War II on Europeans, although their major focus is Canadian. The latter also explain reasons for some post-war agreements between Canada and West Germany. The records of the Kelen Travel Agency are useful, not only for studying the relationships between the Hungarian Canadian community and Hungary, but also the interest of other Canadian businessmen and tourists (including the present Prime Minister) in Hungary.

Thus the National Ethnic Archives programme and similar efforts in other repositories will preserve the records of a vital part of Canadian history, document our past as it was experienced by the non-British, non-French communities, explain the stimuli for and the context of decisions and events which cannot be understood without full cognizance of the pluricultural character of Canadian society. If we seek progress toward national and international brotherhood, toward social and economic security, it is not an optional programme but is an essential endeavour.

Résumé

L'auteur justifie l'existence des archives des groupes ethniques au Canada et révèle, en résumé, jusqu'à quel point elles peuvent être valides et riches dans un pays officiellement bilingue.