AN OVERVIEW OF LITHUANIAN ARCHIVES

WITH A FOCUS ON THE LITHUANIAN STATE HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

by
Laima Tautvaisaite

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
The emergence of archives in Lithuania is associated with the formation of the Lithuanian State in the first half of the thirteenth century.

However, the oldest Lithuanian archives did not survive, having been destroyed by numerous wars and fires.

The Grand Duke's chancery's archives were formed in the fifteenth century and then acquired the title of the "Lithuanian Metrica." Historians, who have studied the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, have long recognized the importance of the Lithuanian Metrica as a fundamental and unique collection of archival sources for the study of the society, economy, and history of the Lithuanian, Latvian, Byelorussian and Ukrainian lands from the fifteenth to the late the eighteenth century.

During the fourteenth/fifteenth centuries (in connection with the inauguration of Christianity [Catholicism] in Lithuania and privileges granted to the Bishop of Vilnius, Lithuanian Catholic nobility and the city of Vilnius by Jogaila the Grand Duke of Lithuania [in 1387]), archives of bishoprics, monasteries, magistrates of towns and feudal families were formed. Moreover, land and castle courts of justice in districts (established in the second half of the sixteenth century) and other institutions had archives of their own. The Third Lithuanian Statutes (medieval code of law, issued in 1588) gave careful consideration to the matter of archives protection.

The sixteenth century witnessed a number of wars against the strengthening Russian state over Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian lands ruled by Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The need for an ally in those wars, coupled with the desires of the middle and petty gentry to obtain more rights already granted to the Polish feudal lords, drew Lithuania closer to Poland. The Union of Lublin in 1569 united Poland and Lithuania into a commonwealth. In accordance with the Lublin Act, the united countries agreed to have a single ruler. He was to be elected in Poland and crowned in Cracow. The signing of new treaties with foreign countries was to be mutual agreement. Both countries agreed to a common currency.

Lithuania maintained the title "Magnus Ducatus Lithuania" (the Grand Duchy of Lithuania). It also maintained its separate administrative offices. The treasury and the army remained separate also. However, in general, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was greatly weakened by the Union, while Poland strengthened its position among Eastern European countries.

▌ *Street view in the "old town," Vilnius, 2000 (photo: Miriam Weiner)*

Until the nineteenth century, archive documents were usually kept in the places of their origin. However, frequent fires and wars, especially in the middle of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, swept away many archives documents of above mentioned institutions.

The rising domination of the big magnates, the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries wars against Russia and Sweden over Livonia, Byelorussia and Ukraine, weakened the Polish-Lithuanian Republic. The end of the eighteenth century saw three divisions of the Commonwealth by Russia, Prussia and Austria. In 1795, most of Lithuania became part of the Russian Empire. The most important Lithuanian archives were transferred to Russia. The Lithuanian Metrica, part of Crown (Polish) Metrica and all the state chancery records of the Commonwealth were transported to St. Petersburg and passed over to the disposal of the Imperial Cabinet.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the archives system was gradually growing more centralized. The Vilnius archives of Early Records Books were founded on April 2, 1852 according to the Tsar's personal decree. The governmental bodies responsible for the establishment of the archives were the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Popular Education. The archives was established for the purpose of providing access to and preservation of official files of the institutions of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Documents protection and registering was improved and in 1872, the first catalog of archives fonds (archival units), compiled by the first director, Nikita Gorbachewski, was issued. On the other hand, activities of the above-mentioned archives were closely connected with those of the Vilnius Archeografical Commission established in 1864. In the period between 1865-1915, the Commission published more than 50 volumes of historical sources and related reference works.

Documents belonging to the institutions of the Russian Empire were usually kept in their place of origin in the institution which created them. However, between 1872-1876, many records of gubernia (district, province) institutions were consolidated in a special repository, namely the Joint Archives of Vilnius' Institutions. In addition, archives of Vilnius City, M. Muravyov's Museum (since 1898) and others were functioning.

When war broke out between Russia and Germany in the summer of 1914, Lithuania literally turned into a vast battlefield. Quite soon, however, the Germans ousted the Russian army from their country and invaded Lithuania's territory. By the autumn of 1915, actually all Lithuania was occupied by the Germans and the country was severely ravaged by the invaders.

Both World War I and the devastation of the former Russian Empire caused great damage to Lithuanian archives. Much archival material was evacuated to Russia and scattered there, part of it was destroyed in 1914–1915.

In 1918, the restored independent Republic of Lithuania encountered great problems in the area of archives maintenance. In the period between 1919–1921, the State Archeological Comission was engaged in archives problems in Lithuania. Its purpose was to collect and preserve cultural and historical monuments and take care of the cultural heritage, among them archives. On the basis of the peace treaty concluded between Soviet Russia and the Lithuanian Republic on July 12, 1920, Lithuania managed to recover a part of evacuated archives fonds.

The Central State Archives was established in Kaunas by order of K. Bizauskas, Minister of Education on October 19, 1921. The purpose of these archives was to collect and preserve all records of former state and local government institutions, maintain archives belonging to private persons and accommodate archival documents recovered from Russia.

Among archives that existed in the Republic of Lithuania are the Kaunas City Municipal Archives and the Kaunas Archives of Archbishop's Curia and Consistorium which should be especially mentioned. Many unique documents of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania period were kept in the Manuscript's Department of Kaunas University.

In spite of some progress, achievements in the field of archives development were rather insignificant in the interwar period.

In Vilnius, the historic capital of Lithuania (occupied by Poland in 1920–1939), the main archives were the States Archives and Vilnius City Archives. They kept custody of the other part of the old holdings of Lithuania archives.

❚ *View of Jatkowa Street (ghetto), c. 1930 (source: Miriam Weiner Archives)*

The historically complicated years under the Soviet rules were difficult not only for the Lithuanian people, but also for Lithuanian archives. The occupation of Lithuania in June 1940 marked the beginning of the destruction of the country's political system and independence as well as an all-out sovietization of the archives and enforcement of the Soviet archival system. On August 5, 1940, the council of Ministers of Lithuania Soviet Socialist Republic, following suit of other Soviet republics, gave responsibility for archives management and preservation to the Ministry of the Interior.

Lithuanian archives were greatly damaged during World War II. Archives documents were transported to the USSR and Germany and some of them were destroyed.

In 1944, the occupying Nazi regime was replaced by a Communist one. Archival reorganization proceeded under the Soviet pattern. Its essential features were archives centralization, ideologization of their activities, classification of archives material as secret, restriction of access to documents and the formation of pro-Soviet archival staff. The system of Lithuanian archives came to be under the jurisdiction of corresponding Moscow departments and its activities were strictly controlled. The cultural heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Republic of Lithuania was actually neglected and relations with archives of foreign countries were not permitted for a long period of time.

In 1961, archives ceased to be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Restrictions in archival activities subsided somewhat. We managed to recover a great many archives formerly removed. On the other hand, many archival documents from Lithuania were transferred to other archives in the USSR and Poland. After several reorganizations in 1957-1968, the basis was laid for a network of archives consisting of seven state archives and ten regional archives. It should be mentioned, however, that during those years, Lithuanian archives made some notable progress as well, namely the recovery of a number of archival records from other countries, and the development of a sound state archival system.

On the very eve of the restoration of an Independent State during the period of our nations struggle for independence, Lithuanian archives established the Law on Archives and it was adopted by the Parliament on February 13, 1990. It was the first Law on Archives promulgated on the territory of the former Soviet Union and it proclaimed that public archives are the property of Lithuania, legalized private property in private archives, abolished parallel archival systems and placed archives of the communist party, KGB, Ministry of Interior under the jurisdiction of the national archival service.

Archival legislation in Lithuania is based upon the principle of provenance of records and so- called "life cycle" approach. The "life cycle" approach allows on one hand to put all kinds of records in the same legal framework and on the other hand to create the agency responsible for the preservation, arrangement and maintenance of records. When drafting the Law, it was considered vital that the national archives service must not only be regarded as a repository for non-current records, but also as a partner in the current administrative work.

A model of the "Schulhof," part of the great community center in Vilna, destroyed in the Holocaust (source: Beth Hatefutsoth)

LITHUANIAN STATE HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

The Lithuanian State Historical Archives is the largest and most important source for the investigation of Lithuanian history from ancient times till the foundation of independent Lithuania in 1918. The archive's documents may be divided into several groups:

- The archival units of the acts issued by central and local government institutions of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, fifteenth-eighteenth centuries (Microfilms of the Lithuanian Metrica are kept there);
- Documents of institutions established by the Russian Empire in the provinces of Vilnius, Kaunas and Suvalkai, 1792–1918; documents of the most prominent families, especially from the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Radziwill, Sapieha, Oginski, Tyszkiewicz and others), fifteenth to mid-twentieth centuries;
- Records of institutions that were established during the Kaizer German occupation, 1915–1918. The archives holds documents of ecclesiastical institutions and congregations, fifteenth-early twentieth centuries, including:
- Vital records (birth, marriage and death) of the different religion communities (Catholics, Protestants, Russian Orthodox, Jews and others) up to the year 1940
- Civil registration records up to the year 1995. On January 1, 2001 the former Lithuanian Archives of the Vital Statistics was combined with the Lithuanian State Historical Archives.

Some historians believe that the first Jews came to Lithuania in the twelfth century. The Grand Duke of Lithuania Gediminas (1316–1341) invited artisans and merchants from Western Europe to come to his country. Whether there were any Jews among those who came, we do not know. Many more Jews came to Lithuania in the fifteenth century. Some of them settled in ethnographical Lithuania (Kaunas, Suwalki provinces and part of Vilnius provinces) at that time . However, the majority of the Jews moved further and spread in the vast Slavic areas of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. At the end of the fourteenth century, there were several towns with Jewish communities. Vytautas the Great (1392–1430) took measures to speed the economic development of the country. Among other steps, he backed Jewish colonists

by granting them charters of privileges. The first ones were issued in 1388 and 1389. The Jewish communities in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were under the direct jurisdiction of the ruler. Actually, for some centuries, the rights of Jews differed but very slightly from those of the gentry. Therefore, in the course of time, the Jews of Lithuania formed a class or layer of freemen.

They managed to mold themselves into a closed, almost totally isolated religious and cultural community. Their religion was one of the most important reasons why they did not assimilate with the surrounding people. Succeeding generations of Jews continued in the same manner. In the course of time, the number of Jews increased. In the second part of the sixteenth century, there were 120,000 Jews in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Before the last partition of the Lithuanian-Polish state in 1795, the number of Jews was estimated to be 250,000, with only 10,000–15,000 Jews living in proper or ethnographical Lithuania.

In the course of the nineteenth century, when Lithuania was under Russian rule, a great number of Jews moved into genuinely Lithuanian areas from Eastern and Southern regions of the former Lithuania state. Consequently, the Jewish population in ethnographical Lithuania grew nearly 25 times larger by the end the nineteenth century, surpassing 300,000 at that time. Before 1795, the Jewish population in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, was 7,500. By the end of the nineteenth century, about 63,000 Jews in Vilnius, representing 45 percent of the general population. However, Vilnius was known not only for the great number of Jews living there. By the early seventeenth century, Vilnius was a major cultural center. Many famous rabbis and Jewish scholars lived and

Wooden synagogue in Olkienniki, undated (source: Polska Akademia Nauk Instytut Sztuki, Warsaw)

worked in Vilnius, making a significant contribution to Jewish theological literature, the golden age of which came at that particular time. Actually, Vilnius was for some time the main seat of Jewish culture in Europe in general.

Later, during the first half of the nineteenth century, Vilnius again became the center of Jewish enlightenment in Eastern Europe which is why Vilnius (or Vilna) was known among the Jews of the world as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania."

When World War I began, about 100,000 Jews left Lithuania. Many of them were forcibly evacuated by the Russians and stayed in Russia. When the war ended and Lithuania became independent, some of the Jews returned, but the majority never came back to Lithuania. While this general history is well-known, I wanted to re-state it since most (if not all) of this history is reflected on our archival records.

The Lithuanian State Historical archives preserves more than 1.5 million files (storage units) dating from the fifteenth century until 1918 (vital records up to 1940), occupying about sixteen kilometres of shelves.

Address: Gerosios Vilties g. 10, LT-2009 Vilnius, Lithuania
Tel. (370/2) 237-482   Fax (370/2) 237-612
E-mail: istorijos.archyvas@centras.lt

ARCHIVE STRUCTURE AND ACCESSIBILITY IN LITHUANIA

At present, the system of state archives is comprised of the Lithuanian Archives Department at the Government of the Lithuanian Republic, three state archives, three specialized archives and ten regional archives. The legal basis for the functioning of archives is the Law on archives promulgated by the Parliament on December 5, 1995, the Regulations on the Lithuanian State Archival Fonds, Regulations on Preservation, Management, Research, and Access to the Particular Part of the State Archival Fonds, Regulations on the Register of the Lithuanian Archival Fonds, Statute of the Lithuanian Archives Department, Regulations regarding the transfer abroad of documents of Lithuanian Archival Fonds, non- state institutions and private persons.

According to the regulations mentioned above, the State archives accumulate records of state and local government institutions, popular organizations and individuals; preserve, manage, restore, research and publish these records. The State Archives provide advice for institutions and organizations regarding the organization of records management and preservation of documents; they also handle inquiries from institutions and individuals.

▌ *View of the market place in Zhagare, c. 1935 (source: Miriam Weiner Archives)*

Lithuanian archives are open to the public. All archives have reference rooms where, observing the regulations, one can reseach archival records. Records of state institutions (except a few, access to which is restricted by law) are available for research. Documents transfered to the state archives by individuals and non-state institutions are accessible on the term set by the owner. Records of poor physical condition are not available for research and are substituted by microfilm copies. The reference room provides access to indexes, descriptions, catalogs and reference books; consultations with experienced archivists are available also. At the user's request, photocopies and microfilm copies of documents can be made.

There are ten regional archives which include the State Archives of Kaunas, Klaipeda, Siauliai, Alytus, Panevezys, Marijampole, Taurage, Telsiai, Utena and Vilnius. The regional archives (with the exception of Kaunas) generally keep records of local administrations dating from 1940 to the present.

As of January 1, 2001, archives under the jurisdiction of the Lithuanian Archives Department preserved more than 101 shelving kilometers (101,921.3 meters of documents dating from the fifteenth century to the present. The total staff of the state archives system includes almost 600 people/managers, specialists, clerks and workers among them.

Changes in the political, social and economic situation create complex tasks for the archival system. It is necessary to develop a conception for the Lithuanian archives, to give archives a character of scientific, cultural and information institutions. There is no computer-based retrieval system at the moment, but traditional finding aids such as inventories and indexes are available for all the records and are quite detailed. The project to creat a National Register of Archives is on-going, but has not been completed.

Participation in professional international cooperation is of great benefit for us and helps to overcome inherent problems, conform to international archival standards, solve emerging new problems such as management of electronic records, acquire information about records kept in different countries related to the history of Lithuania and to enrich our holdings with copies of documents. On the other hand, through professional cooperation, we can contribute our part in the culture and history of European people.

Laima Tautvaisaite was born in 1950 and she is a graduate of Vilnius University. She worked at the Lithuanian State Historical Archives from 1973–1986; in the Lithuanian Archives Department from 1987–1988; in the Lithuanian State Central Archives from 1988–1993. She was a lecturer at Vilnius Pedagogical University from 1985–1993; in the USA and London at Jewish Genealogy Conferences. She has lectured at Vilnius University since 1994 and has served as Director of Lithuanian State Historical Archives from 1993–present.

▌ *View of castle and fortress in Trakai, 2001 (photo: Miriam Weiner)*