The Challenge of Preservation in a Pluralistic Society

A Report on the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota

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A CRISIS MENTALITY was the driving force behind the establishment of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota almost fifteen years ago.[1] Over the years, prophetic voices, such as those of Louis Adamic, Marcus Lee Hanson, Joseph Roucek, and other ethnic spokesmen, had warned that the written record of the vast exodus from Europe during the period 1880 to 1924 would disappear if the custodians of our archival heritage did not redefine the task of preservation in a democratic and pluralistic society. Their voices were largely unheeded, and probably unnoticed, during a period when class bias and what has been called the blight of the assimilationist ideology reigned supreme. The result was that as a generation of pioneer settlers of urban America passed from the scene, their written records often vanished with them. The Center thus began to till soil that had only rarely been cultivated before. We approached our task during the early years with missionary fervor. If a new generation of historians was interested in writing a history from the bottom up, we were interested in building a collection from the bottom up, from union hall and parish hall, from fraternal lodge and foreign language press, from theatre hall and settlement house.

We take, I think, justifiable pride in our accomplishments during these years. A number of our ethnic collections, e.g. the Finnish, Italian, Polish, Slovak, and Ukranian, are unsurpassed in size and quality. The Center is now a major repository for records of ethnic fraternal societies, as well as for records of immigrant service agencies such as the International Institutes and the various refugee resettlement organizations. Since 1964, IHRC has microfilmed files of more than two hundred foreign language newspapers published in America; the level of university support has risen steadily, as has outside financial assistance; and the Center has become a hub of research, with a steady stream of articles and books attesting to the value of its collections.

We have now, however, reached the point in our history when the feverish activity of the past, prompted by our concern to rescue records threatened with destruction, must give way to a more deliberate, service-oriented, and promo-

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[1] See Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Immigration Studies Collection of the University of Minnesota," *American Archivist* 32 (April 1969): 139–45; see also Robert M. Warner and Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "Documenting the Great Migrations and a Century of Ethnicity in America," *American Archivist* 39 (July 1976): 319–28.

tional approach. The problems involved in collecting and managing certain types of materials tax the resources of a single institution and cry out for collective effort. Moreover, a welcome change has taken place in the policies of many repositories. Archivists in recent years, responding to the reawakening of ethnic consciousness and the growing interest of historians in the experience of those heretofore considered inarticulate, have made strenuous efforts to locate and preserve basic source materials for the study of American immigration and ethnicity. It was with these considerations in mind that the Center developed two projects which, we feel, break new ground in the search for contemporary historical sources and which have broad implications for the archival profession as a whole. I would like to report on both projects, and at the same time offer some comments on the significance of the records in question.

The Ethnic Fraternal Project

From the very first moments that immigrants set foot on American shores they sought the companionship and assistance of those from the same village, locality, province, or country. The common languages, memories, and cultures of immigrants were powerful binding forces that led to the creation of thousands of fraternal benefit societies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The societies were very often the core institutions within their respective ethnic communities. Other organized expressions of those communities, such as the churches and labor unions, often grew out of the fraternal association. The societies served a variety of purposes, the most important being that of guaranteeing a measure of security against the uncertainties and hardships of life in America. By paying monthly dues, immigrants—who often worked in the hazardous environment of mill and mine—were assured of financial assistance in the event of sickness or disability, and a dignified burial at the time of death. The fraternals also engaged in a wide variety of educational, humanitarian, and political activities. They organized language classes or all-day schools for the American-born generation; they published newspapers and almanacs; they championed the struggle of oppressed minorities in Europe for civil, linguistic, or territorial rights; and they solicited contributions from their members to aid in postwar reconstruction, disaster relief, and alleviation of poverty in the old country.[2] The fraternals also encouraged their members to become citizens, and provided English language instruction to new arrivals.

The passing of the immigrant generation has not signalled the collapse of these organizations. The Croatian Fraternal Union, for example, is now largely composed of American-born Croatians and reports that its singing societies, tamburitsa orchestras, and kolo groups are flourishing as never before.[3] The Polish National Alliance of the United States, one of the largest ethnic fraternals, today sponsors forty-two choral groups and forty folk dancing groups.[4] Several

[2] Margaret E. Galey, "Ethnicity, Fraternalism, Social and Mental Health," *Ethnicity* 4 (March 1977): 29.

[3] George J. Prpic, *The Croatian Immigrants in America* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), p. 417.

[4] *The Fraternal Monitor* 87 (November 1977): 25.

fraternals, such as the First Catholic Slovak Ladies Association and the Polish Women's Alliance "rank among the largest autonomous women's cultural and business organizations in twentieth-century America."[5] In a very real sense, ethnic fraternals are the bone and marrow of ethnic communities in America.

The records of ethnic fraternal societies have been described as the "largest single source of ethnic documentation which has not been systematically gathered and utilized for historical research."[6] Despite the wealth of information contained in these records, very few archives have bothered to collect ethnic fraternal records. It is safe to say that virtually every city in the country, with the possible exception of some cities in the South, has its complement of fraternal societies representing the principal ethnic groups in the community.[7] The societies can be local, regional, or national in scope. As a result of mergers and consolidations over the years, the larger societies have numerous local affiliates. The Croatian Fraternal Union, with headquarters in Pittsburgh, has 801 lodges in 26 states. The Catholic Workman, a Czech society with headquarters in New Prague, Minnesota, has 118 lodges in 15 states. In 1975, the combined membership of the thirty-two largest ethnic fraternals stood at nearly 2 million in some 14,000 lodges.

Ethnic fraternal records are of various types and lend themselves to a variety of research purposes. The administrative and program records of fraternal societies shed light on such matters as linguistic changes within ethnic communities, class and generational conflict, attitudes toward public schooling, efforts to influence American foreign policy, and attitudes toward assimilation. The individual records of the fraternals, i.e. membership and insurance applications, as well as death benefit claims, offer a fresh perspective on the lives of many thousands of ordinary human beings. Such records contain data on place of birth (including village in the old country), spouse and family members, changes in residence, occupation, and date and cause of death. They are a veritable feast for devotees of quantification.[8]

The preservation of fraternal records presents technical and logistical problems of larger proportions. The societies are prolific in number, many collec-

[5] Frank Renkiewicz, "Project to Survey Ethnic Fraternals," *The Fraternal Monitor,* 87 (January 1977).

[6] Immigration History Research Center (University of Minnesota), "A Program to Survey and Preserve the Records of American Ethnic Voluntary Associations," Research Grant Application to the National Endowment for the Humanities, August 29, 1977, p. 1.

[7] Pioneering explorations by such institutions as the Archives of Industrial Society at the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum (for the greater Lawrence area) raise the prospect of rich deposits of fraternal records all across the country.

[8] Ethnic fraternal records have already been consulted by a number of scholars. Using the records of the Polish National Alliance of Chicago, Victor Greene examined the bitter conflict between Slavic-American "Religionists" and "Nationalists" around the turn of the century (Victor Greene, *For God and Country: the Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Ethnic Consciousness in America, 1869–1910* [Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1975]). Using the records of the Cleveland lodges of the First Catholic Slovak Union, Josef Barton was able to observe patterns of occupational and educational mobility within the Slovak community of Cleveland (Josef J. Barton, *Peasants and Strangers: Italians, Rumanians, and Slovaks in an American Society, 1890–1950* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975]). Other studies currently in progress are examining: the process of capital formation within ethnic communities, the history of nationality groups within certain communities, and the role of the second generation in the process of cultural maintenance.

tions are massive in size, and records are exposed to numerous hazards. The situation seemed made-to-order for a basic survey of the field. The survey technique offers a number of advantages: it helps to chart a largely unexplored terrain, it opens up channels of communication among archivists interested in the collection and management of certain types of records, and it acts as a catalyst for preservation. With these advantages in mind, the Center applied for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in late 1976 to conduct a survey of ethnic fraternal records. A one-year grant was allocated in July of 1977 with the possibility of renewal for two additional years. Based on results achieved during the first year, a two-year continuation grant was just recently approved by NEH. I will attempt to summarize the work plan and goals of the project for the entire three-year period.

The project has prepared a list of some 106 national fraternal organizations. Through the use of mailed surveys, telephone inquiries, and, when necessary, personal visitations, information will be compiled about the character, quantity, condition, and current accessibility of ethnic fraternal records. A Directory of Ethnic Fraternals will be published and distributed by the project. The Center will also conduct on-site surveys and prepare detailed guides for a select number of organizations (roughly 25). In this task, we plan to concentrate upon the larger fraternals and those representing eastern and southern European ethnic groups. Our survey is limited to national office records and does not cover local lodge records, except insofar as defunct lodge records may be housed with national office records. The ultimate goal of the project is to ensure the long-range preservation of fraternal records, both through securing their deposit in appropriate repositories and by improving the records-management capabilities of fraternal staff members. In this later connection, the Center will prepare for distribution to the fraternals a manual on techniques of records management and will invite fraternal officers to attend a conference on the subject to be held next year. We will also endeavor to publicize the project among fellow archivists. A conference will be held in March of 1979 to which archivists from all over the country will be invited. The conference will investigate acquisition opportunities in the field, the problem of accessioning large quantities of quantifiable data, the relative advantages of various sampling procedures, and the problem of confidentiality involved in individual data. The project relies heavily on the support and collaboration of our colleagues in the archival profession. We feel that we are exploring the tip of an iceberg of records. To achieve the goals of the project, we need a truly concerted, nation-wide effort, involving local and state historical societies, college and university archives, and subject area national repositories. The project aims to put ethnic fraternal records "on the map" for archivists across the country.

The International Institutes Project

Closely paralleling the ethnic fraternal project in method and goal is another nationwide search and rescue operation called the International Institutes Project. The Institutes were immigrant service agencies set up by the YWCA in more than sixty American cities during the period 1910 to 1923. The Institutes were the outgrowth of the concern and philosophy of a remarkable group of female social reformers, most of whom were the products of the training in leadership

and social consciousness provided by the YWCA. The chief architect of the Institute Movement was Edith Terry Bremer, head of the YWCA national board's Department of Immigration and Foreign Communities. Bremer was a tireless advocate of the immigrant cause. She saw the promise of cultural diversity and was not, as so many of her contemporaries were, obsessed with its dangers; she fought for the acceptance of immigrants as equal partners in the building of American civilization. Bremer translated these noble ideals into a brilliant and effective program. Only those individuals, she believed, rooted in the cultures of the immigrants and fluent in their languages could render effective service to immigrant communities. Thus, the Institutes would have to reach down into those communities to recruit, and if necessary train, indigenous personnel. As a result of this policy, carefully implemented by each agency, the International Institutes became, in Bremer's words, "possessed by the people they served." The Institutes were also less tainted by the kind of condescending attitudes and subtle racism that have been associated with the earlier charity and settlement house workers.[9]

The agencies specialized in the manifold problems of transplanted peoples: helping to reunite families, obtaining visas and citizenship papers, counselling those who had run afoul of the law, finding jobs, teaching English, and serving as interpreters. But they also went beyond these functions to affirm the value of immigrant cultures and assist with the integration of immigrant groups into their local communities. The many "Festivals of Nations" which have become great civic celebrations in cities such as Duluth, Milwaukee, St. Paul, Toledo, Reading, and many others were started by the institutes during the twenties and thirties. During this same period, a time when the fever of nativism ran high, the Institutes tried to instill in the second generation (the children of the immigrants) a "sense of continuity" with their past—what we call today an appreciation for roots. In order to achieve this goal, the Institutes organized special classes for young people in the history, cultures, and languages of the immigrants. One could, for example, study Arabic at the Boston Institute, Italian at the Brooklyn Institute, Greek at the McKeesport Institute, and Czech at the Trenton Institute. From 1932 to 1945 most of the Institutes withdrew from the YWCA and joined a new national organization called the American Federation of International Institutes (today called The American Council for Nationalities Service).

Over more than half a century of service to ethnic communities, International Institutes have accumulated files of great interest to researchers. Institute-sponsored studies of the various nationality communities within their respective domains are valuable research aids. The administrative files of the institutes throw light on the measures taken by local corporate elites to counter the appeal of subversive ideologies. Institute case files give us a glimpse into the lives of many thousands of individuals. Institute records document the impact on America of major upheavals in European history: World War I, the rise of Fascism, World War II, the Cold War, and the Hungarian Revolution. By helping the "forgotten women" (a term used to describe the clientele of the Institutes during the early years), the Institutes have helped to create a record of "herstory," not only

[9] The contrast between the approach of the Settlement House workers and Institute workers is explored in: Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten "Paternalism and Pluralism: Immigrants and Social Welfare in Gary, Indiana, 1906–1940," *American Studies* 15 (Spring 1974): 5–30.

the saga of those millions of women who followed their men-folk into the urban villages of America, but also the story of those gallant American-born women who protected and befriended the immigrant.

Funded for fifteen months by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the International Institutes Project has attempted to locate, survey, and preserve the records of fifty-seven agencies identified by the project—twenty-seven of which are still active today. Initial data was gathered through the use of a mailed survey form. This approach was followed up by on-site surveys of extant collections. The search for records of defunct agencies, so often a frustrating and unrewarding task, was facilitated by the cooperation of the parent organizations, the various local associations of the YWCA. Most of these associations have retained institute records and their directors have permitted us to examine them. We have also secured permission to microfilm the institute records of a select number of associations. We have not limited our survey to organizational records only. The project has attempted also to locate the personal papers of those individuals, both American and foreign-born, who played key roles in the development of the Institute Movement. One of the most rewarding aspects of the project has been the opportunity to meet and interview dozens of these veterans of that movement. The results of our survey will be reported in a Guide, soon to be published and distributed by the project.

As with the Ethnic Fraternal Project, the Center is pressing for a national preservation effort aimed at International Institute records. The storage areas of the active Institutes, after more than half century of continuous operations, are overflowing with records. The non-current records of many local YWCA's are also straining storage capacities. Organizations such as these, with limited financial resources, must rely on the assistance of outside archivists. We appeal for cooperation from our colleagues in the profession and offer our assistance in arranging the transfer of collections to appropriate repositories.

The story of the International Institutes, as well as that of the ethnic fraternals, is a little-known one of human initiative and endeavor. Such efforts do not often capture the attention of the media, nor have they until recently been deemed worthy enough for consideration by professional archivists. Yet perhaps in ways of which we are still not fully aware, these efforts have wrought fundamental changes in our perceptions of ourselves as a people and in our resolve to derive strength from our differences. That archivists are becoming more sensitive to these particular stirrings of the human spirit is an encouraging development. The formation of the Committee on Ethnic Archives by the Society of American Archivists is evidence of this changing attitude, as well as of the growing cooperation among specialists in this area. It is our hope that the two projects described in this paper will arouse greater interest in preserving the documentary record of our social and cultural diversity. We like to think that we are involved in important undertakings: an effort to document the experience of the poor and the powerless, to recapture the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of millions of ordinary folk, and to make the archives a creative and community-centered institution meeting a new and expanded set of social needs. The ethnic stereotypes that still abound in our society, e.g. the "white ethnic" viewed as hard-hat or racist, buffoon or hedonist, are continuing reminders of the unfinished agenda of archival work and ethnic scholarship. In the final analysis, each project is but a small beginning, a tree planted that, we hope, will bear fruit in years to come.