

## Ten years of Baltic Studies at the UW: Glancing back, and gazing forward.

Ten years! A decade of Baltic Studies at the University of Washington is now history. So much about this program makes us proud. Thinking back to 1994, when the program opened its doors, it almost seems as if we were actors in that classic American film, "Field of Dreams," where a voice echoes in the dreamer's head, "If you build it, they will come!". Except we weren't actors, and the story is real. We did build the Baltic program, and students have come: More than 200 persons have studied Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian language to date, and another two hundred besides these language students have taken courses taught in English about the Baltic countries. A continuous series of lectures, conferences and concerts at the UW have ensured that knowledge about Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia continues to grow, on campus and off.

We are particularly proud that so many people worked together to make this program a success. There continue to be two main partners behind the UW Baltic Studies Program: The University on the one hand, and the off-campus community on the other hand. The University has funded the "startup costs" and day-to-day operations of the program, while the community donated money to ensure a permanent source of funds for the program.

The UW's total contribution is difficult to quantify, but a portion of the picture develops if we count dollars that the University spent on Baltic courses, students and books. Since 1994, for example, the UW has spent about \$405,000 on instructors for the Baltic languages, history and culture. Another \$140,000 went toward fellowships for outstanding graduate students who studied Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian language. The UW Library spent about \$140,000 to maintain its growing collection of new books from the Baltic. The Baltic Studies Summer Institute (BALSSI), a national project also founded by the UW in 1994, has cost an additional \$228,000. The money used by the UW to start up the program, totaling a bit under one million dollars over ten years, came from sources that are not permanent. Federal grants and "soft" money in the UW's budget could be allotted from year to year, but not forever.

This is where the community (or more precisely the three Baltic communities and their friends) stepped in. In 1996, a committee of community representatives was established to begin raising money for an Endowed Fund for Baltic Studies at the University of Washington. Endowments are a permanent source of money, because the donations are not spent but invested. A portion of the earnings is then available for the program each year; the rest is reinvested to make sure the endowment grows to keep up with inflation.

The minimum amount needed to start a UW endowment back in 1996 was \$25,000, but in the first round of donations the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian communities responded with over \$50,000! "We want to ensure that our children's children will have a place where they can study their heritage; we want our cultures and languages to be equal to others taught at American universities; we want to ensure that Americans don't confuse 'Baltic' and 'Balkan'." – Such were some of the ideas expressed in 1996 by Professor Vidmantas Raišys, who signed the endowment agreement on behalf of the Baltic communities. The ideas are as current today as they were back then.

The Baltic communities rolled their sleeves up and set to work, and have since been organizing a continuous series of auctions, benefit dances, dinners, book club meetings and other fundraising events. The Baltic Program's total endowment today is nearing one million dollars!

The Baltic communities inspired Seattle Swedes, Norwegians, Finns, Icelanders and Danes. Scandinavians and Balts soon began meeting to discuss how together they could help raise the UW Scandinavian and Baltic programs to “the next level.” Their answer—A super-endowment of thirteen million dollars that would enhance and expand the Scandinavian and Baltic presence in the university, in the Pacific Northwest region, and in the nation as a whole (the Baltic portion of this target is three million, of which we already have almost one million). We are already national leaders in the study of Scandinavia and the Baltic, but we want to do even better. Please watch for updates on the future “Scandinavian and Baltic Center” at the University of Washington.

As we glance back at all that we have accomplished in the UW Baltic Studies Program’s first ten years, we build confidence to look into the future. What is in the works? I’ll mention three specific projects and three big goals (“projects” are nearing completion in the coming months, while “goals” are open-ended activities that will continue to grow and expand).

### Project Number 1: Textbooks

The online edition of “Basic Latvian I,” a book written by the late Joseph Lelis, has been a work in progress for the past year. It is nearing completion. I like this book better than any other Latvian language textbook, because its goals are simple and easy to understand (a) learn the 850 most commonly used Latvian words; and (b) learn basic grammar needed to communicate, and (c) make it as simple as possible for American English speakers. Thanks to a team of persons who worked hard to make sound recordings, type, reformat and edit, this book will soon be available online for free, at [http://courses.washington.edu/latvian/Basic\\_Latvian/](http://courses.washington.edu/latvian/Basic_Latvian/). Combined with [online worksheets and answer keys](#) also used in the Basic Latvian courses at the UW, this is the first complete introduction to Latvian on the Internet.

Mall Pesti is currently the Estonian language instructor at the UW. She is author of the bestselling introductory Estonian language textbook, *E nagu Eesti*, and is writing a continuation of this book which is due out in the near future. Pesti has been testing portions of her yet-unpublished book in the Second-Year Estonian courses she teaches at the UW. For information, write to [pestim@u.washington.edu](mailto:pestim@u.washington.edu).

Over the past two years, Rimas Žilinskas, currently the Lithuanian language instructor at the UW, has been developing an online course for Lithuanian language learners. Plans are to have the course posted on the Lithuanian language website in the summer of 2004. For information, write to [rimas@u.washington.edu](mailto:rimas@u.washington.edu).

### Project Number 2: TV broadcast, “Baltic in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”

Four leading specialists on the Baltic States met last summer to discuss their visions of where the Baltic is headed in the coming century. We filmed this panel in the UW TV studio. The result was edited down to fit a one-hour broadcast slot on the Research Channel, and will be aired in April 2004. Please watch for announcements to learn when you can watch it (the Research Channel here in Seattle is Comcast Cable channel 76). The film will also be broadcast online and available in the Research Channel Video Library, <http://www.researchchannel.org/program/displayevent.asp?rid=2127>

## Project Number 3: The Baltic Studies Summer Institute (BALSSI)

Intensive Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian language courses will again bring students of all ages and backgrounds to Seattle this summer, June 19 to August 20. For the first time in its eleven-year history, BALSSI will offer intensive Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian language courses on two levels: Basic and Intermediate. "Basic" is for anybody, but "Intermediate" is particularly well suited for persons who have some skills, but need to review grammar, reading and writing, and practice conversation (somebody like YOU?). A series of cultural events and guest lectures will add cultural enhancement for the language students; these events will also be open to the public. Please watch for announcements, or visit the BALSSI website for updates: <http://depts.washington.edu/baltic/balssi/>.

As much as we'd like to keep BALSSI here forever, this is our last summer to host it for a while. In 2005-2006, it will move on to Indiana University, which is one of the ten American universities that sponsor the annual event. UW will continue to contribute money to BALSSI when it moves to Indiana, then to UCLA after that, and we plan to host it again in 2013!

### Goal Number 1: A leader in teaching about Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

Ours is the only American university to regularly teach all three languages: Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian. This will always be the core of our program. We feel very strongly that language is critical for a student to gain a complete picture of a Baltic country "from the insider's point of view". Results of this training for students are gradually emerging: The UW Baltic Studies Program's students have already written four dissertations on Baltic topics and four more are currently in process. Our students have produced fifteen Masters Theses and fifteen undergraduate theses. Student by student, research project by research project, we are building up American knowledge of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

### Goal Number 2. The UW library: A national resource for knowledge about the Baltic

We believe that we have a responsibility, not only to our own students, but to all Americans who want information about the Baltic. The UW Library already boasts the largest American university collection of new Baltic books; these books are made available to thousands of libraries nationwide through the Interlibrary Loan program. The past year has seen expansion into two new areas: film and music. In the summer of 2003, the library acquired 25 recent Estonian and Latvian films, with plans to expand and build a Lithuanian collection, too. No other American library is collecting Baltic films. Choral music is another frontier. Although Baltic composers and choirs are world leaders in their field, their works are difficult to find in American libraries. We plan to change that.

### Goal Number 3. A bridge to the Baltic

The year 2000 saw our first experiment in bringing a group of students to experience the Baltic firsthand, as the 40-member UW Chamber Singers toured and performed in six Baltic cities. The Singers plan to return to the Baltic in 2005. Soon after that, a class of UW students will spend a semester of study there. The UW Office of International Exchanges is working on plans to start bringing more students to Seattle from Baltic universities, too.

"What is / what can be"

The University of Washington College of Arts and Sciences recently adopted a new logo and motto: “Understanding what is / Imagining what can be.” Ten years ago, when we “imagined” that there could and should be a Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington, we did not foresee all that has now become a reality. There was no comparable program anywhere in the world to show us what we needed to do. Today, this program “is” here. There also “is” an Endowed Fund that was donated by many people who imagined that the program could and should be permanent. The endowment will support the core of the program – Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian language courses—in perpetuity.

Many of the projects and goals I discussed in this article go beyond the core of language courses. They are current examples of the University of Washington “imagining” what can be, and then mobilizing as many resources as possible to see if it can be done. But it is the Baltic Studies Endowed Fund which will ensure that all aspects of the program continue permanently. As the endowment grows, it will be able to support parts of the program that currently depend on non-permanent money: Courses taught in English about the Baltic; scholarships for students studying Baltic languages; library acquisitions; the Baltic Studies Summer Institute; and much more.

As I glance back into ten years of history, I feel proud of what we—the University and the community—have accomplished. But I can’t look back too long, because my gaze is continually drawn to the possibilities of the future. Won’t you join us? Let’s all imagine where we want the UW Baltic Studies Program to go, and then let’s all work together to make our dreams become reality!

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