

Book review

A Moth on the Fence:

Memoirs of Russia, Estonia, Czechoslovakia and Western Europe

by Nikolay Andreyev

Introduction, Notes and Afterword by Catherine Andreyev

Translation (from Russian) by Patrick Miles

Hodgson Press, Kingston-upon-Thames, 2009

ISBN: 978-1-906164-02-7

Reviewed by the Editor

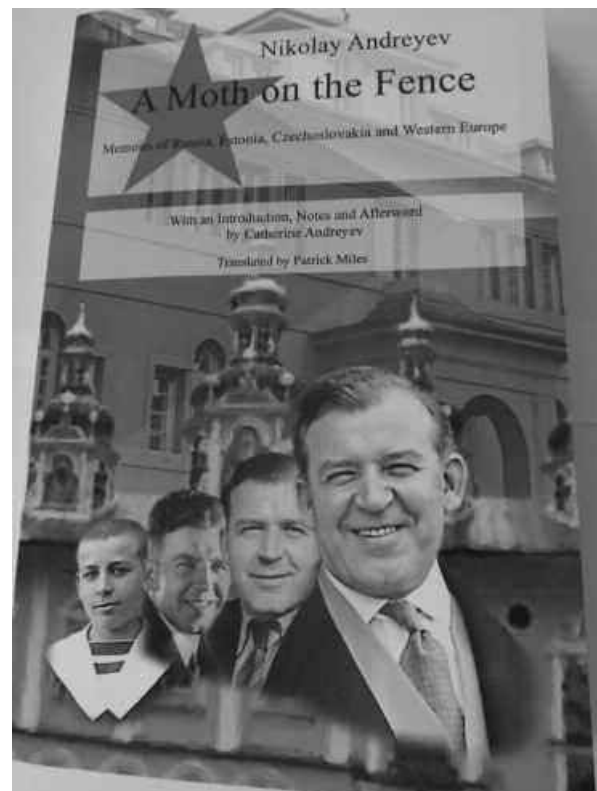
A Moth on the Fence is a most remarkable and a very readable autobiography.

Its author, Nikolaj Andreyev (1908-1982) was a distinguished scholar, highly ranked mediaevalist, and expert on Russian literature. Educated at the Russian High School in Tallinn, he took his doctorate at Charles University in Prague, a city where he remained for 22 years, becoming researcher then director of its Kondakov (Archaeological and Historical) Institute. After the turmoil of war and his release from incarceration at the hands of SMERSH, he was persuaded to take a post in the Department of Slavonic Studies at the University of Cambridge. From 1949 until his retirement in 1975, he enjoyed a distinguished teaching career being appointed to a Readership in Russian Studies in 1973.

Becoming visually impaired following unsuccessful eye surgery in 1978, he began to record his reminiscences on audio tape. Following his death, in 1982, the Russian language recordings were transcribed to create a 730 page transcript. These were edited by his widow, Gill, and his daughter Dr Catherine Andreyev, now a Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Oxford, with the help of Professor Irina Belobrovsteva, of the (then) Tallinn Pedagogical University.

Published in 1996 by Avenarius, a Russian language publishing house in Tallinn, it was described by one reviewer as “a thrilling narration of outstanding historical value”. After a delay of 13 years, its English translation, by Patrick Miles, has recently been published, under the title ‘*A Moth on the Fence*’. In her Foreword, Catherine Andreyev explains how, for English readers, the text has been shortened (to 245 printed pages) without detracting from the human story line and the impact of political events during the period covered, (from 1908 to 1949).

Born near to St Petersburg in 1908, both of Nikolaj’s parents were teachers. From middle class



backgrounds in Tver province, their views were those of the liberal intelligentsia. In 1916, two years after the outbreak of war, the young offender institution in which his father taught was moved to Volosovo, about 85 km southwest of St Petersburg, on the railway line to Tallinn. It was there that they learned of the Tsar’s abdication and the October Revolution.

By 1918, after the Constituent Assembly had been dissolved and the Cheka had been formed as the Bolshevik’s military and security arm, ‘proletarian terror’ spread into the provinces as the Civil War began. By May 1919, Volosovo was occupied by the Whites. A month later, however, the Reds counter-attacked and the Andreyev family fled, firstly to Yamburg (now Kingisepp), then to Gdov on the line from Narva to Pskov, a mere 2km

from Lake Peipsi. Their stay in Gdov was but a brief respite. In the chaos and confusion of war, keeping ahead of the Reds, along with thousands of others, they fled North, (luckily in their case by horse and cart), eventually arriving outside Narva on a bitterly cold November evening. Two days later, a 600 strong column of refugees from Gdov crossed the bridge over the Narva river into Narva town proper. It took them another three days to trudge to Yevve (Jõhvi) where they turned south to Kurtna, their home for the next six months.

Penniless, tired, hungry, cold and ill, their problems were far from over. Nikolay's ten year old sister and their devoted Nanny, who had accompanied them into exile, died within a few days of each other; (a younger brother had also died in infancy). Nikolay and his parents each caught typhus. To make matters worse, their personal, identity documents were stolen, the consequences of which "bedevilled the whole Estonian period of his parents' life". Without these documents it proved impossible for his father to return to the teaching profession. He had to take whatever employment was offered, and there was little available. (Later, when Nikolay travelled abroad he did so using a 'Nansen' passport).

The autobiography provides a rare, first hand, account in English of the trials and tribulations that faced the many thousands of Russian refugees who arrived in Estonia as a result of the Civil War. It also reveals the resilience of those refugees and sheds light on the relationship between the refugees and the local, Estonian population. This appears to have been at least 'workmanlike' and often warm.

He and his parents survived and adjusted to their new situation, eventually moving to the Kadriorg area of Tallinn, where they lived in a small, basement flat on Poska street. Though a non-smoker, his father had found employment in a local tobacco factory, (owned by a 'Russified Englishman' called Lange).

Nikolay first attended the Russian émigré boarding school in Narva before joining his parents in Tallinn and transferring to the Russian High School on Narva street, where he was a top student. (Unaware of the attempted coup he was one of the very few pupils who turned up for lessons on 1st December 1924).

Completing High School in 1927, and having decided to study the history of (primarily) Russian literature, he chose not to go to Tartu, Moscow or Leningrad Universities. Instead, he opted to study in Czechoslovakia where President Masaryk had earlier taken a 'Russian Action'

initiative to help students exiled by the Russian Civil War complete their studies. (This benevolent attitude and supportive funds had ebbed somewhat by the time Nikolay arrived in Prague, however).

About half of the book is devoted to the 22 years he spent in Prague. The large, active Russian diaspora living there enjoyed its fair share of intrigue in the inter-war years; the autobiography describes it in detail and at length. Nikolay prospered, gaining his doctorate from Charles University and becoming director of the Kondakov Institute. After September 1938, however, when the Munich agreement was signed, March 1939 when Nazi Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, and after Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR, the "blossoming of Czechoslovak freedom" rapidly drew to an end.


Under increasingly difficult conditions, Nikolay remained in Prague during WWII. He paid his last visit home to Tallinn in 1938, the last time he was to see his father.

In May 1945, Prague was liberated by the Red Army. Within a few weeks the prominent members of the Russian émigré community were arrested. Nikolaj suffered the same fate at the hands of SMERSH, the counter-intelligence arm of the Red Army. Never put on trial, he was moved between transit jails in Czechoslovakia and the eastern part of Germany, before being summarily released in Dresden and making his way to a displaced persons' camp in Berlin. It was whilst he was seeking the documentation needed to survive in occupied Berlin that a member of the French Administration likened his position to that of "a moth on a fence", emphasising the fragility of his situation.

Though the autobiography does not cover his life in Cambridge, after his 1948 departure from Berlin, Nikolay's daughter Catherine sheds light on this period in her Afterword.

His mother, who had joined him in Prague, after his father's death in 1942, was deported back to Estonia. In 1958, the bedridden old lady was allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Cambridge where she lived out the last two years of her life with her son and his family. She died on February 25th, as did Nikolay.

Nikolay Andreyev's captivating narrative is remarkable, revealing his unfailing and detailed memory of people and events. Despite the horrors which he witnessed and the pain which he must have suffered during his life, his autobiography reveals true humanity and even a sense of humour.

Make certain that you put it on your reading list! 

Book review

Mary Tamm: First Generation

The Autobiography

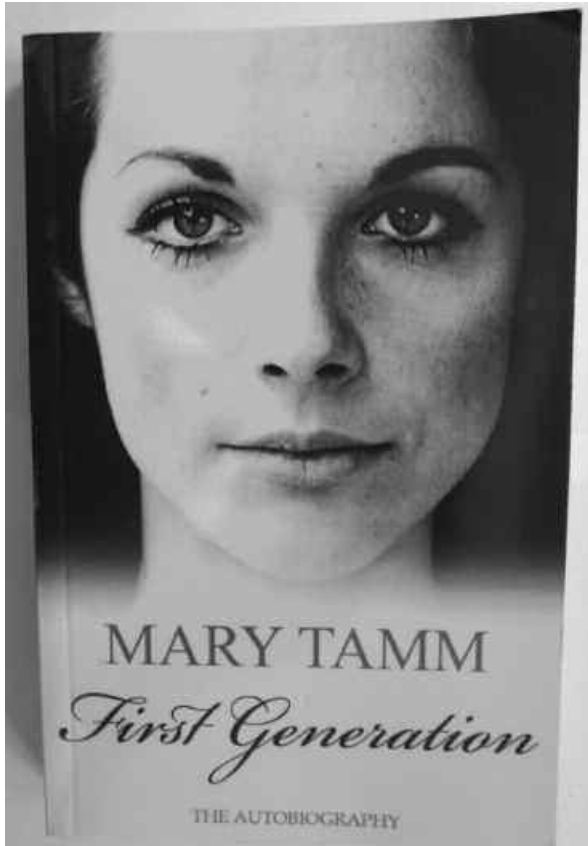
Foreword by Colin Baker

Published in 2009 by Fantom Films <fantomfilms.co.uk>

Paperback edition ISBN: 978-1-906263-39-3

Hardback edition ISBN: 978-1- 906263-38-6

Reviewed by the Editor



As Romanadvoratrelundar the Time Lady, Romana to you and me, Mary Tamm travelled the universe aboard TARDIS in the company of the Fourth Doctor Who, Tom Baker.

This may have been the actress's best-known role, other thespian achievements being overshadowed by her appearance in 26 episodes of the world's longest running science fiction television show, episodes which were shown during late 1978 and early 1979.

Her autobiography gives a rather more balanced view of her distinguished career on stage, screen and television., (at least until the early 1980s).

Born in Dewsbury on 22nd March 1950, the second daughter of Raissa and Endel Tamm, 1944-era émigrés from Estonia, she was brought up in Bradford amongst a large and closely-knit Estonian émigré community. Her father hailed from Rõngu in

Tartumaa, about 40km south west of Tartu, where his family were farmers and landowners. In the 1940s, four of his brothers were deported to Siberia by the KGB, only one of them surviving.

Mary's mother Raissa, née Kisseliev was born in Omsk to a military family; her father, a colonel in the tsarist army, was lost in action in Turkey. After Raissa's mother died of typhoid, she and her sister were taken to Estonia by Russian relatives who already lived there. Over 30 years later, living in exile in Bradford, Raissa was deeply committed to upholding the cultural traditions of Estonia, where she spent her formative years.

As a youngster, Mary spent some of each weekend at the Bradford Eesti maja, "the club", the Saturday night gathering point for Bradford's Estonian community. A very active organisation, it boasted male and ladies' choirs as well as a dance troupe. Mary recalls the choirs' melodies and close harmonies as 'sublime'. (Nevertheless, another recollection is that singing was the number 2 past time after drinking vodka!)

An Estonian school was held there on Saturday afternoons, when children who spoke fluent Estonian at home, were taught Estonian grammar; (not an easy task at the best of times and particularly so for someone with such a rebellious streak as Mary). In her autobiography, Mary also claims that her parents spoke 13 languages, between them, but does not list them.

Endel Tamm worked long, laborious hours at Listers Mill, once the largest silk mill in the world, (which ceased operation in 1992). Fellow Estonian émigrés who first settled in Bradford and also worked in the local mills included mathematicians, surgeons and scientists: "Estonia's finest brains packing wool", Mary poignantly observes.

Unsurprisingly, Mary seldom mentions her father's influence during her early years; he must have been at work or in the Eesti maja! It was Raissa, her indefatigable mother who imbued in her rebellious daughter the will to succeed. The first step in

mother's strategy was for Mary to gain a scholarship entry to the prestigious Bradford Girls Grammar School, a goal which she achieved in 1961.

It was then that her interest in drama really began; she took part in school drama activities and joined a number of local theatre groups gaining awards along the way.

By the age of 16, she had firmly set her sights on studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), in London. Entering RADA in January 1969, she graduated in the spring of 1971, winning two, end-of-course prizes, one for excellence the other for dialect. Though opportunities for new graduates were hard to come by she landed a nine month contract with the new Birmingham Repertory theatre, whose renowned Artistic Director was Peter Dews, a fellow Tyke from down the road in Wakefield. (Her earlier theatrical achievements in Bradford had not gone unnoticed!)

The autobiography has a curious structure that, nonetheless, seems to work. Primarily chronological, the thread is broken by the insertion within the text of a two-part "Interlude", the account of her first visit to Estonia in 1990. The first part of the "Interlude" follows after her graduation from RADA in 1971, whilst the second appears after the record of her life in 1976, when she met her husband-to-be, and experienced a memorable trip to Sri Lanka. Interestingly, her Dr Who days of 1978/79 are recalled in less than 30 pages of the 200+ page paperback!


Much of it is a racy account of the very many famous actors, actresses, sportsmen and 'personalities' whose paths crossed hers. The list is as impressive and unlikely as it is long. Those readers interested in the affairs of thespian luvvies will have a field day! For readers of LENNUK, however, most interest will probably derive from the story of her early years and of her visit to Estonia in 1990.

It was only after her mother's death that she contemplated such a visit and meeting long lost family. It was renowned documentary film maker (and BEST member) Kersti Uibo, who persuaded her to go. Resident in London and Estonia, and married to an Anglican priest, Kersti also assumed the role of Mary's guide during the trip.

The autobiography provides a moving, personal 'travelogue' at a crucial but uncertain time in Estonia's recent history. Many other descendants of Estonian émigrés living in the West must have had similar experiences during their first journey 'home'. Waiting for her in Tallinn was her cousin Jaan and his family, and during her visit she visited her father's former home in Rõngu and met her father's sister-in-law, Linda. She put on a magnificent spread to welcome her despite the difficult economic conditions which then prevailed. (How times have changed!)

A memorable side trip which Mary recalls with pleasure was that which she and Kersti made to the island of Kihnu, where Kersti's parents were then staying.

On the boat from Stockholm to Tallinn, (Mary travelled on the ill-fated 'Estonia'), hearing Estonian being spoken around her, she momentarily felt that for the first time in her life, "she belonged", even though in England she had never consciously felt herself to be an outsider. Later, she seemingly revised her view: "they are strangers the common bonding of any race is strongest in exile ... I have superimposed the camaraderie of the Estonian communities back home on the people around me on the boat". At the end of the visit she "was suddenly overcome with ... what? Pain, grief, survivors' guilt " and began to sob. The sense of identity in second generation émigré communities can sometimes be a very confusing matter!

The book is fun to read if, unsurprisingly and unashamedly self promoting, It deserves an audience beyond the Dr Who faithful. As a 'light' read, I can recommend it. 

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Outside in

Estonia through foreign eyes

Book reviews by
Neil Taylor
Chairman of BEST

Back in 1992, a lot of 'odd-balls' landed up in Estonia for the first time, myself included! Each of us needed a new focus either in our private life or in our business; maybe even in both. Our hope was that Estonia would quickly improve our personal and professional balance sheets. Ideally, this would be achieved with the minimum of effort on our part. We could then put behind us the inadequacies that had become apparent at home.

At the time we were united by our ignorance of Estonia; it was genuinely hard to find any useful books on the country in English. But, our paths would soon diverge as we headed off in many different directions.

Some made money quickly, perhaps deviously, before moving on to pastures new. Others failed to make money yet stayed; of course, they always blamed the Estonians for their failure, never themselves. The third (and to my mind the best) group accepted the frustrations of working in Estonia, settled down to a lifetime of commitment to their host country, and regarded occasional monetary rewards as a bonus; a very small number have even managed to learn Estonian!

Not only may we now cast our minds back to those heady days of almost two decades ago but, perchance, several recently published books can also help us do just that.

That a book with the title "*Back on the Map, Adventures in Newly Independent Estonia*" (by Marc Hyman), should be published in 2009 seems odd. Sadly, it does not live up to its title in other ways. In fact it appears that the author did not have a single adventure during his time in Estonia. This might be interpreted as a compliment to Estonia, but it makes for a very boring read.

The author taught students, all of whom were 'normal', he ate regularly at the Eeslitall (Guest House on Dunkri in Tallinn) and failed to start an affair on every occasion he went to a discotheque. He arrived with a bundle of dollars, though not quite as many as he had hoped since some were needed for a Belarusian transit visa, which he had not allowed for. Predictably, a trip to St Petersburg provided a break in his Estonian sojourn

As the author spent a year in Estonia, it is strange that he often assumed that throwing around dollars and marks would still be appreciated, despite the introduction of the kroon. He never seemed to realise that what might have been appropriate for a street-trader in Moscow was the complete opposite for a serious restaurateur in Tallinn. Kroons may have been an irritant to him, but they played a crucial role in Estonian nation-building.

A reader may conclude that the author never really got to know any Estonians (or Russians). He exchanged small talk with them but seldom progressed any further.

A postscript, written in 2009, suggests that he maintained little contact with Estonia after he left. We are given no updates on those he taught, those he despised or even those with whom he danced.

To shed light on life in Estonia from 1991 to 1994, during its unexpected transition from a Soviet backwater to a vibrant independent republic, needs a lively diarist. Let's hope one still emerges!

Vello Vikerkaar is the pen-name of an American journalist who has been based in Tallinn for many years; a number of BEST readers will probably know his real name. But, as he has not yet decided to 'come out' we will continue to use his pen name in discussing the book "*Inherit The Family*", which he authored.

It is a compendium of articles, published over many years, in *Eesti Ekspress*. These have won

him great acclaim except from a tiny number of lost souls who would prefer a rigid Estonia in the hands either of a new VAPS or a revived Soviet régime. (The VAPS were members of an anti-Socialist and anti-parliamentary movement established in 1929 by veterans of the Estonian War of Independence).

Estonians can rarely laugh at themselves so it takes an American to laugh at and with them. Vello has an Estonian wife, a Siberian husky, and has lived in the country with both of them for several years; he therefore has an entitlement to hold forth. Both lead him along amusing paths that Marc Hyman totally failed to find.

The constant theme of the book is the frustrating lack of commercialism in Estonia. Whilst it is a relief never having to face an Indian or Middle Eastern scenario of constant street approaches, the writer's surprise at failed attempts to spend money will certainly strike a cord with many BEST members. Whether he wants to rent an expensive flat in central Tallinn, or find a modest room for the night on Prangli Island, the indifferent reception he gets is identical. His worst experience has been trying to order vegetarian meals; the treatment he receives is more appropriate for a paedophile or somebody whom it is impossible to understand and who is best kept at a distance. Such treatment also betrays a lack of commercial sense. How easy it would be for the meat or fish to be removed from an offending dish and substituted by more vegetables. The client would be happy and the providers' profit would be even greater.

Justin Petrone was lucky too; soon after his arrival he met the right Estonian to marry. In his book *"My Estonia"* he shares with readers his initial concern that his matrimonial decision might have been taken too quickly but, by the end of the book, all is sweetness and light. He demonstrates an early devotion to his future wife by following her to Karksi-Nuia and Suure-Jaani, where he met her relatives!

The bulk of the book is about Estonia and not about him. It is a narrative, so more difficult merely to 'dip into'; it is worth reading over one or two sessions, as much for the scenic (and very non-scenic) descriptions of his

surroundings as for his encounters. He mentions interludes abroad which help to place Estonia in a wider context.

Critical of Eesti Maja, fortunately not in Britain but in New York, he rather unkindly describes it as "a bunch of old farts toasting President Päts until some post-1991 blood comes along to dilute it"!

He is more patient with Estonia than the other two writers; perhaps he is fortunate to be working on a weekly paper, the *Baltic Times*, rather than on a daily one, as this allows time for reflection or relaxation.

Those who want to learn more of the author's opinions can turn to his blog: www.palun.blogspot.com.

Reading these books has reminded me of the great gap that still exists in foreigners' knowledge of Estonia in Soviet times. Maybe, only Estonians can be entrusted with filling this void. If so, let us hope that several of them will rise to the challenge, whilst memories still remain clear yet not as painful as they once were.

Younger Estonians might also describe their experience of 'plunging' into the West after a Soviet upbringing. A critical analysis of the West by an Estonian 'newcomer' would be of great interest to a wide readership. I am reminded that Chiang Yee's *"Silent Traveller in London"* first published in 1938, is still in print, having entertained and informed several generations of British readers. Hopefully an Estonian will write a sequel. 🌅

Back on the Map: Adventures in Newly Independent Estonia

Marc Hyman

Published by CreateSpace

September 2009

ISBN 1449503144

Inherit the Family: Marrying into Eastern Europe

Vello Vikerkaar

BookSurge Publishing

October 2009

ISBN 1439256039

My Estonia: Passport Forgery, Meat Jelly Eaters and Other Stories

Justin Petrone

Petrone Print (Estonia)

November 2009

ISBN 9949901545

Book reviews

Many uncomfortable parallels

Neil Taylor *Chairman of BEST*

The Great Northern War and Estonia: The Trial of Dorpat 1700-1708

Margus Laidre

Argo Publishers, 2010. EEK265. ISBN 978-9949-438-94-5

For tourists visiting Tartu since 1990, usually in balmy summer weather, it is difficult to imagine the many previous years in which it was a battle-ground. Tartu seems to offer the same architectural stability that Tallinn Old Town does, so visitors cannot believe that the gardens at the river-side are the result of clearing bomb-damaged houses or that a major bridge across the river, named after Catherine the Great, was destroyed by her Russian successors two centuries later.

This book of course deals with an earlier tragedy, but what stands out is the amount of detail the author has tracked down and the diversity of subjects which it covers. Readers would expect a military synopsis of the various campaigns undertaken by Peter I's forces to drive out the Swedes and we certainly get this; however what really enhances the book are the many vignettes we are given of life both upstairs and downstairs, as it were. We hear how the governor of Riga gave lectures to the town council on baking rusks and deboning meat, how the wife of Commandant Skytte took 12 litres of Muscat wine with her when she was evacuated to Sweden and why it was thought necessary to build a private kitchen for Charles XII. Equally we hear how townspeople prepared for sieges and kept their trading links outside for as long as possible.

There are many uncomfortable parallels that can be drawn between the early 18th century described here and what would happen in the mid 20th. Once the Russians had seized control, every letter in and out of the city had to be censored, foreigners had to wait three miles from the city boundary for a pass and then had to register at their address. The death penalty was a real threat for violators. The town council was forced into the role that a Judenrat would play in all too many Baltic towns in the Second World War in trying to reduce slaughter and destruction. They even had to host Peter I out of their own pockets as the town hall treasury had run out of funds.

Some readers might like to look at the last chapter first, since it compares Charles XII and Peter I so provides a general background to the Northern War. Whilst the book concentrates of course on what happened in Tartu, it should not be forgotten over

how wide a territory the war was fought. Had the Swedes won, Catherine the Great might never have considered her plans for expansion and perhaps a Soviet Union would never have come to pass.

BEST members will not need to be told where Ingria or Karelia are and can probably identify Lake Onega but newcomers to Estonian history do need further guidance. The book assumes, perhaps unwisely, that readers have the detailed knowledge of the layout of Tartu useful for following the battle descriptions. Hopefully future editions can have maps of the campaigns, a map of Tartu and a timeline. The index needs to be expanded to include place names; it currently only lists people. However we must be grateful for the inclusion of paintings and drawings from that time which survived the battles described in this book and the all too many that followed. Maybe these can be supplemented in the future with contemporary photographs of where the fighting took place.

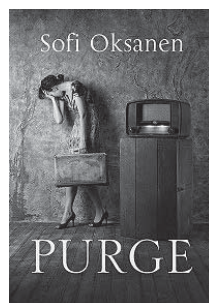
Non-Estonians suffer from the minimal number of books available on the history of the country prior to independence in 1918. Hopefully Margus Laidre will be encouraged by his recent appointment in Britain to cover other periods of Estonian history in future books, and above all, perhaps, to write a history of Tartu University. For twenty years now, the history published in 1985 has sat on my shelves waiting to be replaced!

Without shedding of blood is no remission

Purge

Sofi Oksanen (translated into English by Lola Rogers)
Atlantic Books, 2010, 400 pp.

Post-apartheid South Africa set up a committee for truth and reconciliation that held public hearings, called witnesses and published a report condemning atrocities on both sides of the divide. Estonia, whose problems are probably less well known abroad, opted for law courts to mete out justice, although this



method seems lengthier and messier because the alleged criminals are old and ailing and hearings have often been postponed.

Fiction, by contrast, allows for much quicker solutions. A Finnish writer, Sofi Oksanen, caused a stir in Estonia last year when her novel *Purge* was published in translation. Her story was already familiar to some because of a stage play in Tallinn. A tale of the nation's suffering in the 20th century would strike a chord in any Estonian, even if

told by a foreigner. Oksanen's mother, however, is Estonian (her father is Finnish and Oksanen herself lives in Finland) and that is why the novel that has won Scandinavian literary prizes was instantly acclaimed in Estonia as well. The Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves awarded high honours to the author earlier this year.

Purge is essentially the story of two contrasting pairs of women told in a confident thriller-ish style. The central pair are Aliide and Zara, one old, the other young, suspicious of each other but forced to share a roof over their heads for a while. The other pair takes time to emerge: flashbacks tell the story of Aliide and her sister Ingel, two country girls who in the late 1930s fell in love with the same man, Hans. The Soviet occupation of Estonia brought political change which drove the sisters further apart, Aliide choosing loyalty to the new regime while Ingel was deported to Siberia.

The author has woven these lives together with great skill and attention to detail; her descriptions are a particular delight. The end result, however, is grim and messy. Alongside human betrayal there is a lot of cruelty and graphic sexual detail. Without wanting to give the plot away, the novel contains a number of murders that do not bring a neat ending, and not even the purge the title seems to promise.

It is, however, a novel set in Estonia about the difficult events of the 20th century and there is nothing comparable written by local authors. A well-known Estonian journalist, Kaarel Tarand, has argued that the country's own historians could and should have done more to explain the consequences of Soviet occupation to the world.¹ In his review he admits that *Purge* is a jolly good read that includes novel insights, but it is not the long-awaited vehicle that would explain Estonian suffering to the outside world.

The novel has meanwhile been published in an English translation, with the words 'European bestseller' proudly across the front. It will be translated into 28 languages.

As if to compensate for the Estonian historians' shortcomings, a non-historian (working at the Tallinn City Government's environment department) has attempted to plug the gap by publishing a slim volume of his own. What would have happened to Estonia if its leaders had in 1939 refused to sign a mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union and fought a war instead, Hanno Ojalo has asked. He deserves a star for courage alone; the book's merit is also to list the many consequences (like the deportations pivotal for *Purge* and the influx of thousands of Russians) that in Ojalo's opinion would have been avoided if there had been war. In the long run, however, the book disappoints. Having posed the question and concluded that Estonia would have been defeated and become a

Soviet satellite, the author's interest flags: a chronology of his shows the past few decades' history almost unaltered by the events of 1939-40.



Puhastus

Sofi Oksanen (translated into Estonian by Jan Kaus)
Varrak, 2009, 318 pp.

1939. Kui me valinuks sõja... (1939. If we had chosen war...)

Hanno Ojalo
Grenader, 2010, 222 pp.

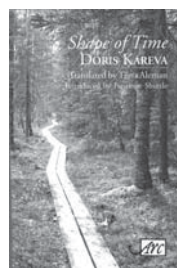
To translate or not to translate

Tina Tamman

Shape of Time

Doris Kareva (translated by Tiina Aleman)
Arc Publications, 2010, 140 pp.

No doubt you have seen these books that have words in a foreign language on one side and an English



translation on the other. They can be fascinating to peruse, even if you know not a word of the language in question. There is always the visual pleasure, so important in poetry.

This slim volume by Doris Kareva includes a remarkable number of poems about language - perhaps not unexpected because the well-known poetess is also a translator. There is, for example, a poem (pp. 88-9) that hints at a deeper meaning than language allows, another (pp. 116-7) makes language our "house of being", yet another (pp. 92-3) speaks of words to be captured, then released.

Tiina Aleman's preface also draws attention to language and translation. It is quite daring of her to recall how an unnamed Estonian poet once spoke up against poetry translations, saying that not many people read poetry, let alone in translation. Aleman's own point is that we would be poorer without translations if we cannot read the originals.

This is a book that is very easy to enjoy because of Kareva's interesting and thought-provoking, often melancholy images, but particular enjoyment can be derived by those who know both Estonian and English.

¹ Kaarel Tarand, "Tuumapommiks kujutletud meelelahutus" (Entertainment projected as a nuclear bomb) in *Sirp*, 18.12.2009

BOOK REVIEWS

With a smile and a song

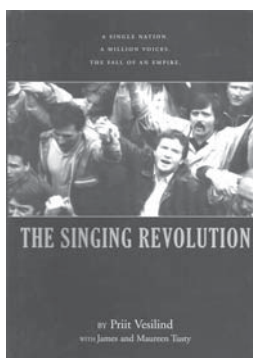


John Kelday

The Singing Revolution: How Culture Saved a Nation

Priit Vesilind with James and Maureen Tusty

Varrak Publishers, 2009 ISBN 978-9985-3-1623-8



When the Noise Had Ended: Geislingen's DP Children Remember

Mai Maddisson (compiler), Priit Vesilind (editor and designer)

Lakeshore Press 2009 ISBN 978-1-61539-531-6



In the history of the collapse of the Soviet empire there have been "velvet", "orange" and "tulip" revolutions, but no "cornflower" revolution. The term Singing Revolution was coined by the cartoonist Heinz Valk, to describe song festival euphoria: "I sat down and wrote an article about the Singing Revolution to convey this energy, this mood," he said. "We started our revolution with a smile and a song." By then "deliberate brutality was no longer possible in a world filled with international news cameras". The Singing Revolution

had emerged from the Night Song Protests of June 1988, at which Valk struck the keynote, "One day, no matter what, we will win!"

Estonia's first song festival was organized in 1869 by Johann Jannsen, a former village schoolmaster, publisher in 1857 of the first Estonian national newspaper, *Perno Postimees*. If the Singing Revolution was baptised by Valk, it was born in 1969, at the centennial festival, when Gustav Ernesaks's song *Mu isamaa on minu arm* ("Land of my fathers") became the unofficial national anthem. "As a source of pride and solidarity, the importance of the song festivals among Estonians cannot be overestimated," the authors of *The Singing Revolution: How Culture Saved a Nation* emphasise.

This is the companion book of the award-winning documentary film "The Singing Revolution" made for Sky Films Inc by James and Maureen Tusty (www.singingrevolution.com). They went to Tallinn to teach film-making in the summers of 1999 and 2001 and, inspired by "a single nation, a million voices, the fall of an empire," began work on the film in 2003 and production in 2004. They then joined forces with Priit Vesilind to create a permanent written document about Estonia's Singing Revolution. Intended for the lay public, the Tustys say in their Foreword, this picture-rich book of Estonian history tells "a story that happens to take place in Estonia, but is really a universal story ... of humankind's indomitable drive for freedom and self-determination."

James Tusty's father, son of a piano-maker, was born in Estonia and taken by his parents to New York in 1924. Priit Vesilind fled Estonia in 1944, and after three years in a displaced persons' camp in Germany went to the U.S. in 1949. After graduation he found employment as a correspondent of *National Geographic* magazine, rising to the position of Senior Assistant Editor. His April 1980 article in *National Geographic*, "Return to Estonia", was seen at the time as "a major breakthrough, enabling the world to learn about the aspirations of a nation that had been practically wiped off the map".

Vesilind is also the editor of a collection of childhood reminiscences of the Estonian DP camp in the German town of Geislingen, between Stuttgart and Ulm. Geislingen was a "gentle purgatory, a way-stop between the hell of war and the hope of tomorrow", Vesilind says. He was evacuated with his mother by ship from Tallinn to Gdansk and found temporary refuge in Czechoslovakia, until the Soviet advance forced them into Germany and eventually to the American Zone. They arrived at Geislingen in May 1946, and stayed there until August 1949.

Mai Maddisson, compiler of the book, and the "inspiration for this entire project", says that "despite endless prevailing privations, I had met humanity at its best" in Geislingen. She was seven when she left the camp for Australia, where she trained as a psychotherapist and lived in Melbourne for 40 years. These and other personal accounts are very moving, not only as stories of physical survival, but of determination to preserve the Estonian spirit, and in some cases to return home.

There are some curious discrepancies in the photograph captions in the two books. For example, in *The Singing Revolution* (page 6) "Estonians boarded German evacuation ships to Western Europe", while in the Geislingen book (page 24) the same picture is captioned "Refugees and German officers and wounded file onto one of the ... ships from Tallinn port to Gdynia". In *The Singing Revolution* (page 66) "Soviet bombs savage Tallinn", while in Geislingen (page 15) the same picture is captioned "Port of Tallinn burns from oil fires set by the departing Nazis".

Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who had visited Tallinn in January 1991 and endorsed the right of the Baltic peoples to self-determination, in Moscow on 19 August denounced the coup against Mikhail Gorbachev and declared Russia's secession from the Soviet Union. On 20 August the Estonian members of the Estonian Supreme Soviet voted for restoration of the Republic of Estonia, and on 24 August Russia recognized Estonia. If the walls of the Kremlin had not been shaken by dissent, would the Singing Revolution have ended the Soviet occupation of Estonia? Both of these books in their own way are part of the proud new Estonian historical narrative, in which the refugees and their descendants fought for freedom too.

Bone-dry Estonian humour



James Oates *member of BEST*

Xenophobes Guide to the Estonians

Hilary Bird, Lembit Öpik and Ulvi Mustmaa

Oval Books 2010

Estonian Jokes

Peep Arne Vesilind

Lakeshore Press,
Punkt & Koma 2009

It is said that you can tell a great deal about a country from its people's sense of humour. An Estonian extrovert, for example, is one who stares at YOUR shoes instead of his own.

Now we have two new, though rather slim, volumes to help English speakers gain a window on the more "unique" corners of the Estonian psyche. The first is Peep Arne Vesilind's piece, *Estonian Jokes*, published jointly by Lakeshore press in the US



and Punkt & Koma in Estonia. The second is the latest in the Xenophobe's Guide series, *Xenophobes Guide to the Estonians*, by our very own Hilary Bird and Lembit Öpik, together with Ulvi Mustmaa.

Both books shed little sidelights on Estonia and the Estonians as this anecdote from *Estonian Jokes* shows all too well:

"An American, a Russian and an Estonian were in the jungle looking for elephants. Finally they found one.

"Wow!" thought the American, "it's so big. I could get a lot of money for it."

"Oho!" thought the Russian, "it's so big I could get a lot of meat off this elephant."

"Hmm...", thought the Estonian, "I wonder what this elephant thinks of me."

The Xenophobes guide explains this nervousness as being the result of the idea that "Most Estonians would like not to be seen at all. The attention of others has usually led to Big Trouble." The Estonian character is not extreme in anything: things, both good and bad, are usually "normal" (*normaalne*); nonetheless Estonians do not always shun the limelight – as Lembit shows all too well!

There is an element of the fantastical about the Estonians – the gigantism of the mythical Kalevipoeg being a case in point. That the national hero does not have his own name – being only "Son of Kalev" – may reflect Estonian reticence, but his deeds are anything but reticent. Kalevipoeg may not be exactly romantic, but he is brave and he is stubborn as *Estonian Jokes* makes clear:

"Liisu could see that something was troubling Villem, but he would not share anything with her. She begged him to tell her. She tried shedding tears and then she tried using her charms, but nothing she could do would get him to open up to her.

Finally, one day when she was crying into her apron, Villem said, "Look, Liisu, can you keep a secret and not tell another soul?"

"Yes!" she said. "Yes, of course, on my honour, I can keep a secret."

"So can I," said Villem, and not another word was said."

So, melancholic, stubborn and not particularly romantic – all characteristics that certainly seem familiar to those who live and work with Estonians, though the *Xenophobes Guide* disputes whether or not the bone-dry Estonian sense of humour rightly qualifies as humour at all: "If you are looking for an evening of sparkling wit, it is probably best to give Estonian comedy a miss."

Yet, in fact, virtually every line of the *Xenophobes Guide* crackles with humour, affection and insight. "Despite 700 years of Christian missionary work, statistics do not reveal any

significant progress" was one of my favourites, and those familiar with Hilary's musings in her "Bird Droppings" blog should know what to expect.

Even though it is said: "two Estonians, five opinions", I expect that those who know the country will like these books – the *Xenophobes Guide* for witty deconstructions of the Estonian national character, *Estonian Jokes* for some nicely black anecdotes.

"There's this Russian Estonian guy from Tallinn who died and went to heaven.

He knocked on the gate and Martin Luther opened it.

"Are you sure you've come to the right place?" Luther asked.

"Sure I am," he said.

"But you're a *Russian* Estonian, aren't you?" asked Luther.

"Absolutely," the Russian Estonian guy said.

"But this is *Lutheran* heaven," Martin Luther said. "For *Estonian* Estonians. Russian Orthodox heaven is next door."

"You don't understand," said the Russian Estonian. "The Lord God called me!"

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry", said Luther, turning to call behind him:

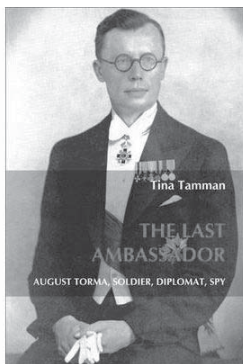
"Jesus – your taxi's here!"

The volumes may be thin, but they can be recommended – particularly the *Xenophobe's Guide* – for at least giving a flavour of the fascinating country and its – often very humorous – people.

BOOK REVIEWS

Ambassador without a country

Reet Järvik editor of *Eesti Hää*



The Last Ambassador: August Torma, Soldier, Diplomat, Spy

by Tina Tamman

Published by Rodopi (Amsterdam and New York), 2011, 251 pp. £49 from Amazon.co.uk

Tina Tamman's recently published book about the life of August Torma, Estonian ambassador to the UK from 1934, is a fascinating study of the man and his work which has been very thoroughly researched. Ms Tamman (or should I say, Dr Tamman) has been awarded a well-deserved PhD for her research on Torma from the University of Glasgow.

The man who emerges from the book is a highly cultured if somewhat aloof individual perhaps more suited to the military where his career began. He was also a skilled musician, a proficient linguist and a prolific and competent correspondent. It seems that Torma was a man who could function very well whilst taking his lead from the pre-war Estonian government but who floundered somewhat when confronted with a new role demanding initiative i.e. the situation of becoming a 'stateless' representative of an officially non-existent Estonia both during and after World War II. He is accused of inaction by several individuals (including Villibald Raud, his consul at the legation until the outbreak of war, Col Alfons Rebane and Arnold Ojasoo) in the face of dealings with Estonian refugees to the UK and also with regard to counter-intelligence attempts to infiltrate Soviet Estonia during the 1950s.

Torma and his wife, Alice, are described as living frugally at the Estonian legation at 167 Queen's Gate during the post-war years in an ever-decaying and draughty abode of decadent lost grandeur to which they made no visible improvements. On the other hand, the couple were welcoming and generous hosts

who provided their guests with plentiful refreshments.

The book poses three very interesting questions in conclusion: where are Torma's personal archives which appear to have been 'lost'; what happened to Torma's only son, Einar (born in 1924), who was rumoured to be disabled and 'disappeared' after the age of 5; what became of the contents of the legation when it was finally sold in 1989.

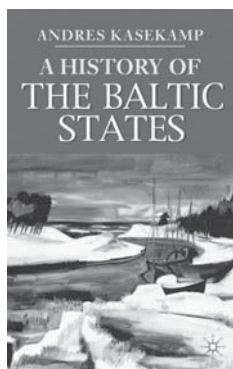
Many of our readers will remember August Torma and his wife, who attended many Estonian functions in the UK and will also recall attending receptions at the legation. Dr Tamman's book provides a valuable insight into what made this somewhat reserved man 'tick'. Although Torma may be considered by some as simply a 'pen pusher', there is no doubt that his diplomatic skills did ensure that the voice of Estonia continued to be heard by the British government both during the war and afterwards. Due credit must be given to Torma for maintaining a significant diplomatic role in the UK for so many years after Estonia had been annexed to the Soviet Union. This achievement in itself deserves recognition and respect.

A version of the book in Estonian under the title *August Torma – sõdur, saadik, salaagent* (which differs slightly from the original) will be published in Tallinn in October and will probably cost in the region of 20 euros.

(This review was originally published in *Eesti Hää* on 16 July 2011, p.6 at a slightly greater length.)

Crying out for a book on Estonian history

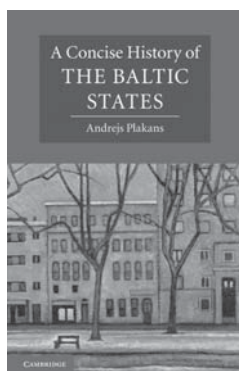
Neil Taylor author of *Bradt Guide to Estonia* and *Bradt Guide to Baltic Cities*



A History of the Baltic States

by Andres Kasekamp

Published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 251 pp. £16.99 publisher's listed price



A Concise History of the Baltic States

by Andrejs Plakans

Published by Cambridge University Press, 2011, 472 pp.
\$27.99 publisher's listed price

Many BEST members will abhor the idea that 1000 or even 100 years of Estonian history can be combined with that of its two southern neighbours; however we have to accept the reality that for many potential readers it is simply one of three similar 'Baltic states'. I face this problem all the time in the world of travel; I have probably escorted over 50 tours to 'the Baltics' since 1992 but only two to Estonia on its own. There is no reason why the academic world should be any different.

Both authors will be known as respected historians of their own countries who have not previously ventured further afield in their writing. BEST members may well know Andres Kasekamp's previous book *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia* which remains the definitive work in English on the political history of the 1930s in Estonia. Andrejs Plakans has both *The Latvians, A Short History* and *A Historical Dictionary of Latvia* to his credit. His 'short' history is in fact 250 pages long, so it is perhaps not surprising that his 'concise' Baltic one is 450 pages, whereas Kasekamp who makes no claims for his length, completes his book in 225 pages. Kasekamp concentrates on the last 200 years so those more interested in the earlier periods should turn to Plakans.

Perhaps because both authors might fear accusations that they concentrate on their home bases to the detriment of the other two countries, they seem determined to show throughout their respective books how unbiased they are and that their knowledge of all three countries is equal. Plakans takes this to absurd lengths by showing three pictures of hillocks, one of course from each country and by trying to list three sets of statistics on every possible occasion. Kasekamp tackles this issue more effectively by devoting totally different chapters to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and only bringing it together with the northern area from 1795. This was the date when much of what is now Lithuanian territory was absorbed into the Russian Empire so some generalisations about the three countries can start to be made.

Kasekamp does not use photographs but has a detailed and, for the general reader, very necessary timeline. The photographs Plakans uses add little to the text, either because they are portraits or because the size of the original picture or map cannot really be reduced to the size needed in a book of this size. Both have insufficient maps and all are static, whereas readers do need a picture of the ebb and flow that characterised so many wars across this area, in particular to cover the battles between Charles XII and Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century and then those of the independence movements in 1918-20.

In their desire to be accurate, it is a pity that neither author ever shows any passion in what they write and we are denied any personal stories that could so enhance the statistics and the flow of facts. My interest in Estonia started when I read Madli Puhvel's *Symbol of Dawn*, the biography of Lydia Koidula which gave me a clear picture of 19th century Estonia, even though that was not the main aim of the book. Real Estonians and Baltic Germans come to life on every page. Can one really write about Estonia (even if in conjunction with its neighbours) and not tell a Lennart Meri joke, give Jaan Kross just one line and ignore Konrad Mägi altogether? I suppose there is at least consistency here in that Lithuania's most famous artist/composer Mikalojus Čiurlionis just gets a listing in Kasekamp and is ignored totally by Plakans. The Latvian artist Jānis Rozentāls suffers a similar fate. The arts deserve better than this from both authors, particularly given their role in undermining Tsarist and then Soviet authorities.

Academics in the Baltics aged 40 or less will have been spared a university education under Soviet rule. Let us hope that they can retain the rigour of traditional scholarship whilst accepting that a light touch and even humour are necessary adjuncts when addressing a wider audience; such an audience is just what Baltic scholarship now needs if the achievements of 1918-1920 and 1989-1991 are to be remembered and if the horrors of 1940-1991 are never to be forgotten. Kasekamp at least offers a joke in the very last sentence of his book but earlier on readers are expected to know the phrase *status quo ante bellum*. Plakans sadly finishes in the ponderous style which burdens the whole book, taking about "the interaction of europeanization, globalization and sociocultural efforts".

Both books will be read by those already committed to the area; they are hardened to this sort of text and the books can be recommended on this basis. It must therefore sadly be left to others to inspire interest elsewhere. This new generation must also produce a history just of Estonia. Many BEST members will have Hampden Jackson's *Estonia* on their shelves which was published in 1948, but is it not time for a successor? Latvia had Uldis Gērmanis whose *The Latvian Saga* provides descriptions of Bishop Albert in Riga as vivid as those of Karlis Ulmanis seven centuries later. Who can play a similar role for Estonia?

