
Republic of Estonia 90
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The exhibition "Republic of Estonia" was compiled and
produced by the Estonian Institute, 2008.

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Text of the catalogue: Lauri Vahtre

ISBN 978-9985-9698-5-4

The First World War shattered Europe. Austria-Hungary and Russia disintegrated. A number of new nation states emerged, including the Republic of Estonia – the smallest and northernmost of the three Baltic countries.

From the end of the Great Northern War (1721) Estonia had belonged to Russia. Within the Russian Empire the tiny Baltic-German upper class, the real rulers of the Baltic region, enjoyed various legal and economic privileges. The 19th century, however, witnessed the so-called national awakening of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which all then embraced the 20th century as self-conscious European nations. They had already achieved a remarkable standard of education and an independent cultural life. It was only natural that these nations would soon demand political independence as well.

In 1917 the Russian monarchy collapsed and democracy was briefly established. The Estonians took advantage of this period to work towards national autonomy. Previously belonging to several provinces, Estonia now formed one administrative unit with its own representative body (the Provisional Diet of the Province of Estonia) and a government structure. Estonian became the official language.

In 1917 the power in Russia was seized by the Bolsheviks who were clearly not interested in the aspirations of the Baltic countries. The Estonian national leadership thus decided to go for full independence. The Republic of Estonia was proclaimed on 24 February 1918. However, it was still largely occupied by the German forces.

Estonia was next attacked from the east. On 28 November 1918 the Red Army crossed the Narva River in order to destroy the Republic of Estonia and forcefully, against the people's wishes, incorporate it into Soviet Russia.

Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Great Britain helped Estonians in their endeavour to repel the enemy. By the end of 1919 Estonia had won the war and on 2 February 1920 a peace treaty with Soviet Russia was signed in Tartu. Russia relinquished, 'voluntarily and forever', any claims on Estonia.

1917 – 1920

Patriotically-minded Estonian soldiers in Tartu express their support to the first Estonian democratically elected representative body, the National Diet. One of the first steps taken by the Bolsheviks after coming to power was to dissolve the Diet.

1917

Soldiers in the War of Independence. The Republic of Estonia is proclaimed in February. The Red Army attacks in November. Estonians have to make an extreme effort to repel the attack. Among the soldiers are schoolboys, many of whom are killed.

Elections for the Constituent Assembly of the Republic of Estonia taking place on the front line during the War of Independence. The determination of the Estonian leadership is to build up a democratic state. Soldiers can naturally cast their vote as well.

1918

1919

Post-war Western Europe was understandably dominated by a strong mood of disappointment, whereas in the three young republics the situation was quite different. For these countries the outcome of the First World War was definitely positive, bringing independence and democracy.

Estonians began to build up their state. Numerous institutions needed to be established and the economy, formerly part of Russian economy, had to be totally reorganised in order to achieve a balance between production and transportation, industry and agriculture.

Much was achieved within a short period of time. The constitution was adopted and the land reform carried out. A network of various business and vocational, as well as cultural associations was developed; the economy thrived. Estonian-language university education and science were established. Remarkable results were achieved in sport. A liberal law of cultural autonomy was passed in 1925, which was a great benefit to the minorities in Estonia such as the Jews, Russians, etc.

There were setbacks as well. For example the initial hopes of Estonia successfully trading and furthering economic ties with Russia came to nothing. The country had to look west.

Communist Russia had not become reconciled to Estonian independence. Brutally violating the Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920, the leadership of the Soviet Union organised a communist uprising in Estonia in 1924, hoping to destroy the new republic. The uprising was luckily suppressed within a few hours. This event shocked the nation and reminded them that the independence of a small nation was always in danger. The patriotic mood strengthened.

The political system of the 1920s was firmly parliamentarian (e.g. there was no position of president), which meant that political parties possessed great power. As a result, governments changed quite rapidly although not more so than in many other Central and Eastern European countries at the time.

The monetary system was rearranged in 1928 and the kroon replaced the former national currency the mark. The kroon was a safe and reliable currency.

The repercussions of the worldwide economic crisis of 1929 unfortunately reached Estonia as well, although its impact became clearer during the 1930s.

The 1920s

Estonian delegation at the Antwerp Olympic Games. Having signed the Tartu Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia in February, the Estonian people have enough energy and will to send their sportsmen to the Games. Three medals are won: one gold and two silver.

1920

Exhibition of industry and technology in Tallinn.
The organisational skills of Estonians in building up their country are remarkable. National industrial exhibitions boost the economy suited to a small country.

1921

World championship in weightlifting in the Estonia Theatre in Tallinn. The sporting life of small Estonia is on world level and organising the first official world championship in weightlifting is entrusted to Tallinn. The Estonians win three championship titles.

1922

The Estonian Orthodox community who formerly served under the Moscow patriarch establish an independent Estonian Apostolic-Orthodox Church, which is canonically subordinated to the patriarch of Constantinople. 80 per cent of Estonians are Lutherans.

1923

On 1 December 1924 a communist revolt prepared in the Soviet Union takes place in Estonia; it is quickly suppressed. The photograph shows the Head of State Jaan Tõnisson in 1928, unveiling a monument in memory of the cadets of the military school killed in the shoot-out with the communist insurgents.

1924

The Estonian cultural autonomy law for ethnic minorities is acclaimed internationally. The Germans and Jews living in Estonia elected their own culture councils. The historical Swedish minority in the West-Estonian coastal area and islands (Vormsi in the picture) used other opportunities offered by this law. During WW II all the coastal Swedes fled to Sweden to escape the red terror.

1925

A file of students in front of the University of Tartu. Influenced by the student traditions at German universities, Estonian students formed similar fraternities and sororities as well. The oldest, the Estonian Students' Society, was founded in 1870 and gave the nation its blue-black-and-white flag.

1926

The War of Independence inspired the civic society to the extent that almost every parish and small town erected a monument to the approximately 5,000 people killed in the war. The monuments, paid for by the public, were lovingly maintained.

1927

The first original Estonian opera, Evald Aava's Vikings, is staged. This national-romantic work tells about the ancient fight for freedom. Estonian professional music culture in the 19th century was focused on choir singing.

1928

Border guards with confiscated canisters of spirits. During the prohibition period in Finland (1919-1932), the Estonian police and border guards wage a ruthless war against smugglers who were crossing the Gulf of Finland with their speedboats.

1929

The early thirties were quite strenuous. Parliamentary disputes and the economic crisis had wearied the population which was now coming to expect a stronger and more stable state administration. These expectations were met by a new political power, the League of Freedom Fighters.

Several referendums were organised to change the constitution. A new constitution was adopted in 1933 that introduced the institution of the head of state. The League seemed about to come to power when they were beaten to it by the veteran politician Konstantin Päts (1874-1956). The organisations of the League of Freedom Fighters were closed down and the Parliament was forced into a 'silent state' as well. An authoritarian state order was established that could not, however, be called a dictatorship. This was a mild form of authoritarianism, quite widely spread in Eastern Europe at the time. In the late 1930s Estonia again began moving towards parliamentarianism.

The unpopular decision of 1933 to devalue the kroon helped Estonian economy to overcome the difficulties caused by the economic crisis. This decision saved the economy, but cost its author Jaan Tõnisson (1868-1941?), the other grand old man of Estonian politics, his position as head of state.

After that the Estonian economy thrived. Many agricultural products (butter, bacon, etc.) found a profitable market in Western Europe where their quality was highly appreciated. Energy and chemical industries based on local raw material developed rapidly as well.

In foreign policy, Estonia sought support in both Great Britain and Germany but in the Europe preparing for a new war, no big power really wanted to tie itself to any small states. An attempt was made to create a union of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), plus Poland and Finland, but this plan did not bear any fruit either.

The 1930s was a period of brisk construction activity; much was going on also in the arts and culture. Many sportsmen brought fame to Estonia. Estonian shots were among the best in the world, and the same can be said of the young chess player Paul Keres who attracted international interest in 1938 at the AVRO tournament in Holland.

On the eve of the Second World War Estonia was a small successful European country with strong democratic traditions.

The 1930s

A day of singing in the small town of Lihula in West-Estonia. The famous Estonian tradition of song festivals dates from the 19th century and is going strong even today. Besides big song festivals, smaller local days of singing have always been organised as well.

1930

Estonian scouts. The scout movement in Estonia starts in 1912 and quickly became hugely popular. Like all scouts in the world, Estonian scouts and girl guides focused on backpacking in order to get to know their native land. They were abolished by the Soviets in 1940.

1931

Professors at the 300th anniversary of the University of Tartu. The University was founded by the Swedish King Gustav II Adolf and at first operated in Swedish and Latin, then in German and Russian. Teaching in Estonian started in 1919.

1932

7th song festival in Tallinn. The national song festivals every fifth year are not only impressive cultural events but they also bind the nation together – even today choirs and visitors come from every corner of the country to participate in the three-day event.

1933

Gymnasts of the sports club Kalev at the first Estonian Games. This is the beginning of the tradition of mass displays of gymnastics and folk dancing, which has survived to this day.

1934

Gustav Vilbaste at the limestone cliffs on the northern coast of Estonia. The law on nature protection comes into force that year. It could be a model even today, because it arranged for the protection of the natural environment as a whole. Gustav Vilbaste was appointed the first Inspector of Nature Protection of Estonia.

1935

The heavyweight wrestler Kristjan Palusalu wins two gold medals at the Berlin Olympic Games. Thousands of people have gathered at the Tallinn Central Station to welcome the return of the World Champion. Five years later Palusalu narrowly escapes being shot by the Soviet authorities, but lives on under a cloud until his death from natural causes in 1987.

1936

Two state-of-the-art Baltic Sea submarines Kalev and Lembit have arrived at their base in Tallinn. They were built in the Armstrong-Vickers factories in Britain according to a special design. Lembit is currently a museum boat in Tallinn.

1937

The 1930s: this decade is remembered as buoyant and sunny. Estonia had achieved success in all fields of life, a free and strong country had been built up, and the standard of living of the population improved considerably.

1938

The team of Estonian marksmen returns from Lucerne (Switzerland), having won the prestigious *Copa Argentina*. They had previously been equally successful in Helsinki in 1937.

1939

The 1940s was the most terrible decade in the history of the Republic of Estonia. A real threat had already emerged in 1939 when the Soviet Union and Germany divided up Central Europe according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The same year Estonia was forced to allow Soviet military bases to be set up in the country. Hopes that this would satisfy the Russians' demands proved disastrously wrong.

In June 1940 when the world watched France being crushed by Germany, the Soviet Union annexed all three Baltic countries, thus violating the international law and all the treaties which it had signed. It deceitfully claimed that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the Soviet Union voluntarily. In the course of the subsequent year, the Estonian economy and society were systematically destroyed, and people were arbitrarily arrested and shot. The first mass deportation of Estonians took place in 1941, when 10 000 innocent people, mostly intellectuals and state officials were taken to Siberia together with their families. The majority did not survive.

In June 1941 Hitler started war against the Soviet Union and through the autumn seized Estonia as well. After the Stalinist horrors this offered a respite for Estonians. However, they soon realised that Germany was not planning to restore the country's independence. One occupation had simply replaced the other.

In 1944 the front again approached Estonia. Stalin did not need to occupy Estonia in order to successfully fight with Germany, but in order to annex the country again. Realising that, tens of thousands of Estonians joined the German troops to prevent the Red Army from invading. The general hope was that after the war the big Western countries would restore Estonian independence according to the Atlantic Charter.

Despite fierce resistance the Red Army conquered Estonia and re-established the communist regime. About 70, 000 Estonians fled from the red terror across the Baltic Sea to the West where an entire exile Estonian society emerged. According to the Yalta Agreement, the western countries were compelled to leave the Baltic countries to the Soviet Union.

Guerrilla war then broke out all over Estonia: thousands of men hiding in the forests refused to surrender to the communists. In order to crush the Estonians' desire for freedom the Kremlin organised another mass deportation in 1949 – 20, 000 innocent people, mostly farmers unwilling to join collectives, were taken to Siberian prison camps.

The 1940s

The last school year in free Estonia. The children look worried – boredom with school or a premonition of the troubles to come? In June Estonia is occupied by the Soviet troops on the basis of the Hitler-Stalin pact. Some of these children were probably deported to Siberia on June 14th the following year.

1940

The Summer War. During the short period between the retreat of the Red Army and the onslaught of the German forces Estonian voluntary troops attempt to restore Estonian statehood. However communist terror is replaced by the Nazi-German occupation. In the picture the Estonian fighters are entering Tallinn on 28 August 1941 at the same time as Wehrmacht troops.

1941

In 1941 Estonia lost over 60,000 people – killed by the Soviet security forces, arrested, deported, conscripted to the Red Army and evacuated to the Soviet rear, most of them men. The wish for revenge took thousands of men to the Eastern front in 1941 and 1942. Due to the lack of men at home, underage boys volunteered to maintain law and order.

1942

Estonians in the Finnish army. Thousands of Estonians who want to fight against Bolsheviks, but not in the German uniform, flee across the water and join the Finnish army to avoid the German mobilisations in 1943 and 1944. They form a separate unit, the 200th infantry regiment.

1943

Monument titled Boy commemorating the War of Independence in the bomb-ravaged Tallinn. In 1944 the Red Army again invades Estonia. Attempts by the Estonian resistance movement to restore independence on the basis of the Atlantic Charter fail. About ten per cent of Estonians feel forced to flee to the West from the new terror.

1944

Sorting through the ruins in Narva Road in Tallinn. Many Estonian towns are destroyed. In years to come the ruins are demolished and replaced by squares of lawn. In some cases the demolition has a political agenda – to make people forget the past events and buildings associated with them.

1945

Estonian guard company 4221 in Nuremberg. The US administration trusts Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Poles who escaped to the West from communism. Within the US army, nine Estonian auxiliary service companies operate under the Estonian national flag until the end of 1949. The Estonian company guarding the Nuremberg prison during the trial of the Nazi war criminals.

1946

The Estonian publishing house Orto, founded by exiles in Sweden, published the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*. About 80,000 Estonians had fled to the free world in 1944-45. The exile society was quite active; until the 1960s, for instance, more original literature was published abroad than in Estonia.

1947

Heino Lipp shot putting. Lipp (1922–2006) was the world's best decathlon athlete. For political reasons, the Soviet regime never allowed him to compete abroad, and he could not take part in the Olympic Games. In 1992, when Estonia had newly restored its independence, he carried the flag of the Olympic team in Barcelona.

1948

Timber-floating in Siberia. During the night of 25 March, 20,700 Estonians are allowed two hours before being taken from their homes. The deportation destination is Siberia. The aim of the Soviet regime is to shatter the Estonian social network both in towns and in the countryside.

1949

The early 1950s proceeded under intense Stalinist conditions, instilling an atmosphere of fear and continuing the destruction of the civic society in the name of the communist doctrine. Estonian agriculture, which had successfully relied on medium-sized farms and intensive cooperative activity, was eliminated and replaced by the system of collective farms. This had a catastrophic impact on agricultural production, bringing the country almost to the verge of hunger. At the same time, huge numbers of people were imported into Estonia who had to establish various industrial enterprises for the whole Soviet Union (energy industry, shipyards, machine and military factories). Large-scale Russification started as well. This was the politics of classical colonisation.

No-one, not even members of the communist party, was safe from political persecution. Several leading Estonian communists were persecuted in the early 1950s as Moscow regarded them as 'nationalist'.

In 1953 Stalin died and the atmosphere of terror receded all over the Soviet Union, including in Estonia. People deported to Siberian camps in 1949 who had not died of starvation and suffering, could now return. It was possible, to some extent, to follow Estonian national interests, especially in the cultural sphere. Various cultural institutions were founded, and the opportunities to express more varied ideas in art and literature increased as well.

The second half of the 1950s, generally considered as a relatively liberal decade, nevertheless witnessed a tragic event – the brutal suppression of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 by the Soviet Union. This was a clear message the Estonians could not afford to ignore. They had to accept that the Soviet regime, so far seen as a temporary aberration, was there to stay.

At the same time the Estonian society in exile developed and strengthened. The largest communities emerged in Sweden, Canada and USA, also in Australia. The well-educated and ambitious Estonians gained respect and economic success in their adopted countries. Cultural life was brisk too, and for example the exile Estonian literature far exceeded, both in quality and quantity that produced in Estonia. It was essentially thanks to the effort of exiled Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians that the major Western European countries never acknowledged the annexation of the Baltic countries as lawful.

The 1950s

One of the strongest Estonian communities takes shape in Sweden. In addition to keeping the Estonian spirit alive, it also actively promotes Estonian culture and customs. In their heyday, over five hundred Estonian organisations were operating in Sweden.

1950

Despite the tragic-comic nature of Stalinist culture policy, the audience welcomed the dramatisations of Estonian literary classics. The picture shows a moment in the play based on A.H. Tammsaare's novel *Truth and Justice* directed by Andres Särev.

1951

The wrestler Johannes Kotkas returns from the Helsinki Olympic Games with a gold medal. People see Kotkas as one of the most outstanding representatives of the long and successful history of Estonian heavy athletics.

1952

Estonian resistance fighters known as the Forest Brothers cleaning their weapons. When the Soviet regime returned in 1944 thousands of Estonian men hid in the forests to continue their fight until Western countries would arrive to help the Baltic countries restore democracy. This did not happen.

1953

Session of the Estonian Central Council in Canada. The organisation was founded in 1951 to bond Canadian Estonians and to continue political fighting, with the aim of restoring Estonian independence.

1954

The first programme broadcast by the Estonian Television. 238 TV sets had been bought in Estonia by that day. 18 months later the percentage of viewers was about one per cent of the total population.

1955

A deported Estonian family in Siberia. The worst horrors – starvation, illnesses, lack of accommodation – are over. Stalin is dead and people are waiting for permission to return to Estonia. The return of the deportees reinvigorated Estonian social and cultural life once again.

1956

Establishing the Matsalu nature reserve in Western Estonia. Ties with nature have always been important to Estonian identity with its roots in peasant society. Nature preservation was often perceived as a cover for protecting Estonian culture and landscapes to counterbalance the Soviet colonial economy.

1957

Basketball team of prisoners-schoolboys who had expressed support to Hungary in 1956, with the later well-known freedom-fighter Enn Tarto in the middle. The players' shirts are adorned with the coat-of-arms of Estonia. It was strictly forbidden, but people running the far-away prison camp in Russia obviously did not recognise it. Later, the fact of wearing the shirt and photographing it earned the men a further prison sentence.

1958

Building of a residential house. As the economic situation improved in the late 1950s, many Estonians built their own house – a family home always contrasted in people's mind with Soviet blocks of flats, reflecting the dream that one day "my home would be my castle" again.

1959

The communist regime in Estonia achieved some economic success in the Sixties, which instilled cautious optimism. There were more things in the shops, new blocks of flats were constructed on a massive scale, and many families were able to have their own house. Some collective farms were also slowly recovering from the initial setbacks: a small number became remarkably wealthy. The guerrilla groups known as the Forest Brothers had been largely eliminated, with only a few still resisting.

Agricultural production, however, in general remained dismally ineffective, and the same can be said of the entire economy, governed by orders from afar and not enjoying the mechanisms of a market-economy. Private enterprise and the concept of ownership had been destroyed.

All this meant that despite the slightly improving material situation, the essential Sovietisation of Estonia intensified. The organised importing of Russian-language workers which had somewhat lessened in the late 1950s, now intensified again. Whole Russian areas emerged in north-east Estonia and in parts of Tallinn. There were additionally about 100, 000 Soviet soldiers in the country, equipped with nuclear weapons, and based at strategic airfields. Much of the countryside was converted to enormous shooting ranges for them. Estonians and even the trusted local communist leadership had increasingly little say in deciding important matters, especially in the economy. The cultural sphere was a bit more relaxed, although that too was subjected to constant ideological control and censorship. Theatres were putting on plays, papers were published, Estonian-language education, including at university level, survived and much was going on in both pop and classical music. The cultural life culminated every five years in national song festivals that became a legal format in which the Estonians could express their patriotic feelings.

The era of relative liberalism ended together with the Sixties. In late 1968 Tartu students had almost openly protested against the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring and the Brezhnev doctrine, but that kind of opposition was quickly stifled. The period of great expectations came to an end – the Soviet Union turned out to be unreformable.

The 1960s

15th Song Festival in Tallinn. A remarkable architectural achievement was completed by that event – the arch at the Song Festival Grounds. Although the singing had to be done under the red flags, it is still remembered by spontaneous singing of patriotic songs after the official end of the festival.

1960

Estonia, orchestra of Canadian Estonians. The concert takes place in the Estonia House in Toronto. An Estonian proverb on the wall reads: „In my house I make my own rules."

1961

Formula Estonia. The building of racing cars began in Estonia in 1958. Car and motorcycle racing became extremely popular – bigger competitions in Pirita near Tallinn attracted about one hundred thousand spectators.

1962

A literary meeting in the legendary black-ceiling hall in the recently completed Writers' House in Tallinn. Estonian writers had to work in conditions of censorship and ideological surveillance, often hiding the truth 'between the lines'. The public quickly learned how to read in that way.

1963

The visit to Estonia of the Finnish president Urho Kaleva Kekkonen. The president's speech, which he gave in fluent Estonian, in the Great Hall of the University of Tartu gave a clear message: Finland on the other side of the Iron Curtain had not forgotten Estonia. President Kekkonen managed to extract a permission from Moscow to open the Helsinki-Tallinn line.

1964

Student days in Tartu. In the somewhat more liberal atmosphere of the 1960s, Estonian students revived customs of the late 19th and early 20th century. The three-colour caps were a symbol of earlier Estonian student movements.

1965

Estonian-Finnish quiz show in Helsinki, broadcast on television by both countries. Cooperation with Finland – although strictly controlled – was almost the only legal contact with the free world, 'a window to the West'. Estonians living near the coast were greatly helped by watching the Finnish television.

1966

Jazz festival in Tallinn – Charles Lloyd quartet. This was a highly exceptional, almost a dissident undertaking in the Soviet Union. It clearly showed that, despite the Sovietisation policy, Estonians were trying to be culturally part of the western world.

1967

Poet Paul-Eerik Rummo reciting his poetry to his young fans. Quite a number of young talented writers emerge in the course of this decade. Many start out in poetry that is written, read and widely discussed.

1968

Friedebert Tuglas (1886-1971), the 'pope of Estonian literature', accepting the K. J. Peterson award that was not totally approved by the authorities. Tuglas was famous already before WW II in free Estonia. He was persecuted in the 1950s, but no longer in the 1960s, when it was again allowed to respect him. The award, however, was discontinued.

1969

This decade proved very difficult in Estonia. The situation was hopeless: the colonialist economy destroyed and contaminated the environment, an additional alien workforce was imported so Estonians were in danger of becoming a minority nation in their own country; the all-powerful Soviet military behaved like masters. The Soviet Union seemed at the peak of its power. According to the 1975 Helsinki agreements the European borders established during the Cold War were to remain unchanged forever.

At the same time the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union was already disintegrating internally. In addition to economic mismanagement, the topic of human rights also began to undermine the empire. Forces in the West demanding democratic rights for Soviet citizens strengthened.

As everywhere else in the Soviet Union, a dissident movement emerged in Estonia. There were a remarkable number of selfless people who fought for basic human rights at the risk of long years in prison and the destruction of their own future.

Creative Estonians focused their energy mostly on culture where it was still possible to do something. Under continuing censorship, artists and writers developed the skill of expressing their ideas between the lines. The prominent writer Jaan Kross (1920-2007), who would be nominated for the Nobel prize several times in the 1990s, in fact produced his best work during the 1970s. Several decades of the Soviet regime had still not managed to uproot Estonians' mental ties with Western civilisation. Estonia was thus a 'Soviet West' where people arriving from Russia felt like being abroad. This was enhanced by the proximity of Finland and its television therefore being available to viewers in North-Estonia. In 1972 the Hotel Viru in Tallinn was completed. It became a sort of an embassy of the free world within the Soviet environment.

Relative material well-being (although infinitely inferior to the western standard of living) slowly worsened towards the end of the 1970s. The future was unclear and expectations were low. At the same time there was constant opposition against the Brezhnevist regime which by then was being regarded with total contempt.

The 1970s

Estonia – USA basketball game in Tallinn, which Estonia wins. The American team was naturally not their best, consisting of students, but the victory was nevertheless remarkable and caused a lot of talk. Basketball in Estonia was sport number one at that time.

1970

Students in the Lahemaa National Park established the same year. The establishment of the park preserving both nature and the cultural landscape had been a nationwide undertaking, part of the passive resistance to the Sovietisation process.

1971

The worldwide Estonian Days in Toronto. As it was not possible to demand freedom for Estonia in Estonia, the exile communities did that instead. The regularly and efficiently organised Estonian Days or ESTO Festivals in various countries reminded the west of the Baltic peoples and their rights.

1972

Popular children's television programme *Mõmmi and the ABC Book*. Children's programmes were not subjected to ideological control and were watched by generations of young viewers.

1973

Rock-band Ruja. Criticism of the stagnant society and addressing questions of identity characterised the pop culture that emerged in Estonia despite the opposition of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy.

1974

The youth movement Hometown. Inspired by the history and their roots, young people started cleaning out the neglected courtyards and cellars in the Old Town of Tallinn. Doing something useful without any association with communist youth unions and their ideology was barely tolerated by the Soviet authorities.

1975

Avo Pikkuus on his way to the gold medal at the Olympic Games in Montreal. Although Estonian sportsmen had to wear the colours of the Soviet Union, each victory instilled strength and self-confidence in their fellow Estonians.

1976

Lennart Meri (1929–2006), future president of the Republic of Estonia in Tallinn. Meri was a prominent cultural anthropologist whose work – books and films – examined the ancient cultural contacts of Eurasian peoples and encouraged Estonians to think about their roots. His *The Winds of the Milky Way* received a silver medal in 1977 at the New York Film Festival.

1977

August Sabbe (left), one of the last Forest Brothers in Estonia, a few minutes before his death. He had been in hiding for decades before the KGB tracked him down. On the right a KGB officer disguised as fisherman, about to arrest Sabbe. Sabbe chose suicide, rather than capture and probably execution.

1978

Poet Hando Runnel. Many of his insightful and at the same time simple poems were turned into popular songs, which made him the voice of conscience of Estonian people in the final decade of the fading Soviet power. Runnels' poetry narrowly got through the gates of censorship and immediately became the treasure of the whole nation.

1979

In autumn 1980 schoolchildren in Tallinn openly protested against the Russification policy that had sharply intensified. Estonian intellectuals and the artistic community publicly defended them. The ice seemed to have started moving.

However, Brezhnevism persisted and this brief period of elation in Estonia passed. A few years later the state of stagnation in the Soviet Union showed its first cracks. Several heads of state followed one another in rapid succession, until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. This was the start of perestroika.

Initially, Estonians watched Gorbachev's undertakings with reserve as there was no reason to trust the Kremlin. Still, in 1987 the people fiercely protested against the new phosphorite mines planned by Moscow, which would have destroyed the natural environment and brought tens of thousands of new migrants into the country. The Phosphorite War was indeed won – Moscow withdrew its plans.

The desire for freedom had been rekindled. In August 1987, the first post-war legal political protest meeting was organised in Hirvepark, Tallinn. People demanded that the 1939 secret Hitler-Stalin pact be made public, and its results annulled. Essentially, this meant restoring Estonian independence.

In 1988, the Singing Revolution took place in Estonia – thousands, even hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the Song Festival Grounds in the capital city to sing together and to demand freedom, using the language of music. Estonian blue-black-and-white flags were brought out of hiding. The authorities, neither in Moscow nor in Tallinn, had the strength to prevent this. An extensive Peoples Front was established in order to defend the democratisation process.

The desire for independence was so overwhelming that some Estonian communists decided to support it as well. On 24 February 1989 the national flag was hoisted at the most significant site of all, Tall Hermann Tower in Tallinn, where it had last been hoisted for four days in September 1944 between the German and the Soviet occupations. However, this still did not mean freedom from the Soviet Union. Moscow kept obstructing everything and the West, too, warned the Estonians that reckless actions might easily 'rock the boat'.

However by that time such warnings were too late. Estonians were convinced that nothing less than the restoration of the Republic of Estonia would suffice.

The 1980s

Youth unrest in Tallinn. The concert of the rock band Propeller was interrupted by the authorities. The real cause of the ensuing turmoil was protest against increasing Russification. The unrest was brutally suppressed, and was followed by a public letter from the Estonian intellectuals, known as The Letter of the Forty. The forty signatories were subsequently persecuted.

1980

Ernst Jaakson (1905–1998), Consul General of the Republic of Estonia in the duties of an envoy, greeting Ronald and Nancy Reagan. In 1940 Jaakson served as an Estonian diplomat in Washington. The USA – and most other Western countries – never recognised the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union and accepted Jaakson as a fully authorised representative of Estonia. His diplomatic career lasted 79 years.

1981

Estonian mountaineers on the summit of the University Mountain in the Pamirs. Their 6350 m high ascent marks the 350th anniversary of the University of Tartu.

1982

Unveiling the monument to the poet Kristjan Jaak Peterson on Toome Hill in Tartu. Peterson (1801-1822) was among the first Estonian poets. Trouble arises from reciting a poem, a eulogy to the Estonian language.

1983

Young Estonians celebrating the anniversary of the Estonian flag in secret. One hundred years had passed since the consecration of the flag in Otepää in South-Estonia, but marking this would have been a political crime. The future Prime Minister Mart Laar (in the middle). Note the flag in the centre.

1984

A punk and a girl in Estonian national costume. A strange situation emerged in the second half of the 1980s – the punks who rebelled against traditional values, found a common language with those who maintained national traditions. They were united by their opposition to the Soviet regime.

1985

21st Tartu ski marathon. This large-scale sporting event has become hugely popular and draws nearly 10,000 participants that year. Estonia has always been a skiing country. Besides, it is not possible to ideologically check skiing.

1986

The Phosphorite War. Estonians protest unanimously against Moscow's plans to start new mines in North-Estonia that would have caused an ecological catastrophe and an intensifying Russification. Nature protection soon develops into the Singing Revolution.

1987

National colours at national heritage days in Tartu represented in three separate flags. By popular demand, the strictly banned colour combination blue-black-and-white was legalised in 1988 during the Singing Revolution. It essentially meant a demand to restore the Republic of Estonia.

1988

The Baltic Chain at Estonian–Latvian border. The Hitler-Stalin secret pact of 1939 left the Baltic countries to the Soviet Union. On the 50th anniversary of this pact, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians form a huge human chain reaching from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius.

1989

A decade of incredible, amazing events took Estonia from the crumbling Soviet empire into freedom.

In the spring 1991 referendum, 78% of the voters were in favour of the restoration of the republic, but it was not quite clear how to actually achieve that. A reactionary coup d'état took place in Moscow in August, fortunately creating a power vacuum. Seizing the opportunity, the Estonians declared their independent state restored.

In 1992 Estonia abandoned the rouble that had been reduced worthless by inflation, and replaced it with the Estonian kroon, which was tied to the German mark at the fixed rate of DM1 = EEK8. The monetary reform created the necessary preconditions for developing a normal economy. A new, modern constitution was adopted the same year, and both a president and parliament were elected. Lennart Meri (1929-2006) became the first post-war president.

Under the leadership of the young energetic Prime Minister Mart Laar (b. in 1960), a market economy, including extensive privatisation and liberal access to Western Europe, was rapidly introduced. These processes were not entirely painless. Getting used to democratic freedoms took no time at all, but a free market economy was more difficult to accept. However, the reforms were successful and showed positive results by the mid 1990s. All Estonian governments protected economic freedom and followed the principle of operating a balanced budget.

A long-awaited dream finally came true in 1994 – the last Russian troops left Estonia.

In 1996 President Meri announced the so-called Tiger Leap – a forced advancement of Estonian information technology.

In 1997 Estonia was invited to start membership talks with the European Union. At the end of the same year Estonia, like all neighbouring countries, suffered difficulties caused by the overheating of the economy and by the Russian economic crisis, a problem that lasted until 1999. This did not deliver a fatal blow to the Estonian economy, but rather made it healthier and further intensified connections with the West.

The 1990s

Opening session of the Estonian Congress, elected by the citizens of the Republic of Estonia and their descendants as a representative body, authorised to restore the lawfully existing, but annexed and 'halted' Estonian republic also in reality.

1990

Barricades on Toompea Hill in Tallinn. On the eve of the final collapse of the Soviet Union the communist hardliners in Moscow make their final attempt to rescue the Soviet empire. There is danger that the Soviet tanks would attack the significant points of the capital city. People are ready to protect them. Luckily no bloodshed ensues.

1991

Monetary reform. In 1992 the referendum in Estonia accepts a new constitution, a president and the parliament (Riigikogu) are elected and a successful monetary reform is carried out. Roubles are replaced by the Estonian kroon.

1992

Pope John Paul II conducting mass in Tallinn. After the restoration of the Republic of Estonia, the relations with the world leaders are restored as well. Despite Estonia being predominantly Lutheran, the Pope is received by a vast crowd.

1993

In 1994 the Second World War ends in Estonia, as the Russian army finally leaves. The flag of the Estonian Navy is once again hoisted on the submarine Lembit bought from Britain in 1937 that was seized and kept by the Soviet navy for a long time.

1994

Estonian Air gets its first Boeing. It was felt at the time that a newly-independent country should have its own national airline. As soon as possible the dated Soviet airplanes were replaced by modern ones.

1995

Launching the Tiger Leap programme. IT systems are vigorously developed in Estonia and peoples' computer skills improve rapidly. The foundation for @stonia is laid.

1996

Village movement Kodukant. After the mass movements that led to independence and the radical changes in economy in the early 1990s, broad-based civic society gradually builds up. The village movement tries to revitalise life in rural areas.

1997

The Black Nights' Film Festival. It is perfectly possible to organise an internationally recognised film festival in a small country. Not quite like Cannes or Berlin, but still original and interesting.

1998

Military parade on the occasion of the 81st anniversary of the founding of the Republic. The parade cannot be hindered by a storm, but only by biting frost. This has happened twice – once before WW II and once during the restored Republic.

1999

Estonia entered the new century and millennium like a busy ant, overcoming difficulties and building a home. A nice surprise came from the cultural field – in 2001 the Estonian entry won the Eurovision Song Contest. The Tiger Leap was also bearing fruit – Estonia now occupied the 14th place in the world for internet usage.

Estonians are increasingly confident that their country belongs among the free countries of the world, and that the world's problems are equally those of Estonia. This realisation was intensified by the tragedy of 9/11 and subsequent events. Estonia had been at the receiving end for a long time. It was time to start giving to others and taking on responsibilities.

The logical outcome of these developments was full membership of the EU and NATO in 2004. The latter was especially popular as only a decade ago this had seemed a hopelessly distant dream. Security is a sensitive issue with all nations, especially the tiny Estonian nation with its historical experience of aggressive neighbours.

People were rather more reserved concerning the European Union, although the 2003 referendum showed there were twice as many supporters as there were opponents. The latter claimed that the EU would rob Estonia of its precious independence, language and culture. The first years of membership have demonstrated how groundless these fears are.

Estonians have chosen their way – to be free people in a free country, a free nation amongst other free nations. Estonia is and will be an open society that protects its values without closing itself to the world, instead wishing to live in the same rhythm with the world, help create this rhythm.

Or we could say – it was not a choice to be free. It was a dream of centuries, perhaps of millennia, come true, which Estonians will now not relinquish to anyone. Estonians know that freedom is not the end of development, but the beginning. There is much to be done still, and it will be done.

The first decade of the 21st century

Census of people and accommodation. In order to plan its development sensibly, the state must have reliable statistics about its population.

2000

An Estonian song has won the Eurovision Song Contest. Performers: duet Tanel Padar – Dave Benton, author Ivar Must. This achievement was a worthy recognition of the Estonian long-time tradition of singing.

2001

Cinema bus. The slightly retro old bus is actually a moving film studio that rattles every summer along Estonian roads and has visited Sweden and Finland as well. The Cinema bus also teaches children animated film making, thus being a kind of hotbed of the world famous Estonian animation.

2002

Referendum on joining the European Union. 67% vote yes. Next year Estonia becomes a full member of the European Union and also of NATO.

2003

24th Song Festival in Tallinn. The song festivals will last as long as the Estonian nation.

Estonian soldier in Afghanistan. To be a free nation among other free nations is a great fortune but it also involves obligations, in for instance helping to guarantee peace and to fight against terrorism.

Kristina Šmigun – double gold medallist in skiing at the Turin Olympic Games. Estonians are 'a skiing nation' and this has been proved by numerous medals at significant competitions.

2004

2005

2006

Estonia joins the Schengen Treaty. Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Latvian President Valdis Zatlers remove the border barrier in the border town of Valga-Valka. The world is open to Estonia and Estonia is open to the world.

2007

The Estonian Institute wish to express their gratitude to all the archives, museums, organisations, collectors, and photographers who have provided us with photos for the exhibition.

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