

Cold War in the Baltics

First-Hand-Report on a Partnership

Part I

On Brotherhoods in the Woods and Occupying Forces

We owe it to a Dane that this Partnership came in to life. Johannes Rasmussen stood one day in the club office of the Politische Memoriale, telling us he was travelling the Baltics to document sights of the cold war, and to build a network. He invited the club members to participate and engage in an exchange on the history of the cold war in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. In the meantime, he has edited a book, and has established an internet platform. Simultaneously, new connections emerged, e-mails were exchanged, meetings organised and under the title 'Building a Foundation for Communication of the Cold War', the application for a GRUNDTVIG Learning Partnership was formulated, and granted by the EU. The main players in this partnership are from Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Norway and Poland. Just before christmas last year all was set: The partners met for the first time in Estonia. Kadri Viires and Jean-Loup Rousselot of the Occupation Museum in Tallinn welcomed our colourfully mixed group—ranging from historian to teacher to artist—, and guided us through three eventful days.

The Occupation Museum commemorates three phases of occupation in Estonia, which first gained independence as a republic in 1920. Already in 1940, the country was annexed by the USSR as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop-pact, and forced to join the soviet community. Within a year about 60,000 people were exposed to repression, deported for Siberia, and over 18,000 of them murdered.

One year later German forces in the name of Hitler replaced the soviet occupators and brought new suffering to the Estonian people. Fathers and sons of Estonia fought in the lines of the red army as well as among the German SS, or they fled into the woods.

As the Red Army advanced, Estonia fell back under Soviet rule in 1944. Any motion of resistance, like that of the Brotherhood of the Woods, any motion for independence, was repressed. The Brotherhood of the Woods had already formed in 1940. Men and women retreated into the hinterland, living in the woods under extremely simple conditions, and, from there, organized ambushes on prisoner transports among other military action. With increasing persecution, their groups were more and more diminished. In March 1949 alone, 20,000 Estonians were deported for Siberia. In the following years, almost all partisans were taken prisoner, and most of them killed.

A moving while at the same time disturbing collection of objects, such as everyday articles from this Brotherhood of the Woods, from prisoners and deportees. The range of objects covers prison cell doors, newspaper articles, video testimonies up to cars and consumer goods, and it presents

certain aspects, cracks and connections in the lives of Estonians, Russians and Germans during the three phases of occupation. The chronologically last part of the exhibition is dedicated to the struggle for freedom. Photographs document how, in early June 1988, thousands of young Estonians gather on the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, particularly singing the songs of young composer Alo Mattiisen. They initiated the 'singing revolution' in Estonia, which led to the country's independence in 1991. But, how could it be otherwise, even after more than twenty years, the ruptures, the wounds of violence, treason, silence, submission—however they may appear—have not healed in society, and they reach deeply into the families.

This museum was donated by Olga Kistler-Ritso, who fled Estonia for America during the Soviet occupation.

Kadri Viires has only just taken on as head of the house. And she wants to know which impression the exhibition makes on us. And so we devote a part of our time to an all-inspiring exchange on the presentation including possible changes and additions.

Also, we fix a set of rules by which we wish to collaborate in the future. Among them are the continuation of communication, involving all partners equally, transparency, mutual support in the organisation of conferences as well as a clear distribution of tasks.

The Polish delegation presents a concept for a collective touring exhibition, the creation of which is in focus for the next meeting in Borne Sulnowo. As theme of the exhibition we choose fear. Fear is one of our deepest emotions, one which everyone can relate to, even young people, who did not experience the cold war. Fear burned on both sides of the iron curtain, and has been raked on different stoves over the decades. To follow this feeling, and to question, how it has influenced our everyday life, is on our coming agenda.

Also, the piece of barbed wire, given to us by Kadri and Jean-Loup, and symbolizing years without freedom, it reminds us of fear. On our excursions we shall find repeated opportunity to perceive it.

Symbols of Soviet power show up everywhere in Tallinn, as for instance at the Viru-Hotel. Mainly foreign guests from non-socialist countries were accommodated here, while the KGB had installed a bugging system, which can be inspected today. More openly, Linnahall towers above the Baltic shores, once erected for the Olympic Games 1980 as the 'Lenin' Sports and Cultural Palace. This colossal concrete monster, resembling a fortress and featuring countless stairways and a helicopter pad of its own, quietly broods for itself. It appears rather intimidating than as a place of culture and of zest for life. Gloomier threats are only around the Patari Prison, built in 1840 as a fort for the varying occupiers, and up until 2004 as a detention centre. Beyond the gates of Tallinn we visit the remains of the once powerful Kirow-Kolchos for the fishing industry, seeing gray apartment blocks and empty storehouses, memories like canned fish, documents and photographs assembled in a small museum.

We return back to actuality, and beneath the grand tree among the European throng on Tallinn Christmas market with its woollen sweaters, linen cloths and different mulled wines.

The other day we travel with Riina Laanetu from the community Kuusalu onto the peninsula Juminda. Riina has self-fashioned her workplace, now working as a guide to the national park Lahemaa. In winter there is little for her to do. Instead, she will be busy day by day when spring comes. There are more and more tourists every year, and she manages to live off her income. Though nothing is left over.

The average monthly income currently lies at €800-€1,000, the busdriver adds.

On the old trade route to Narva we pass a former Soviet missile base. The forest has swallowed what was left of it. Upon an elevation, three rocks of granite, a memorial to the occupation 1939-1944. From here, our glances slip through birches onto the Baltic sea. The snow-whitened hills are covered with juniper bushes. Afar, small wooden cabins duck away, deciduous and coniferous woods alternate, whilst the bus rolls over a hardened snow cover up to the north peak of Juminda. Through high snow we tramp onward by foot to the Baltic shore. Kaarli Lambot, mayor of Juminda, moved back onto the peninsula in 1989. He was born here. The Russians declared the peninsula a prohibited area, and built a missile basis. The majority of inhabitants were resettled. As was the family of Kaarli Lambot. He grew up in the interior to become one of the best Soviet sport cyclists. Now he recounts the history of his peninsula to visitors like us.

There is a large sight for ship wrecks just off the coast. Among the 197 ships escaping the Germans in August 1941, 53 sank in the mine-ridden bay of Juminda. About 15,000, mainly women and children refugees drowned. To their memory, a monument was set up in 1972, which has been renovated and extended recently. Still there are mines being recovered, says Kaarli. He tells us of Andrei Sacharov, the physicist, who in the course of the Soviet nuclear weapons programme, performed a few tests here. Among other tests he is said to have launched two space probes, one of which sunk in the sea, the other landing in northern Norway. All three Norwegians in our group give sceptical looks. Not to be ruled out, they agree: Soviet espionage, whether by submarine or from the air was nothing exceptional.

The Baltic curls softly in the light of German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Light pink running into light blue. Somewhere over there lies Finland. Many have tried to escape there across the sea, much like from the GDR, only there with northwestern destination. The Baltic is filled with graveyards.

The busdriver starts the heating, and brings us to Tapurla. Hardly anyone is out on the streets. In winter most houses are uninhabited. The biggest among them, as Riina explains, used to be owned by the smugglers of

the thirties. Today, mostly medicine as well as tobacco and cigarettes would cross the border illegally, she adds. But the business would no longer appear as lucrative.

Ships with rusting sides lay in the waters of Tapurla harbour. Also in Virve, there remains only a mole to commemorate the harbour. Soviet submarines were demagnetized here so they would not get located that easily.

Many Estonians, as Riina explains, still fear Russian submarines. But living with those Russians who came during occupation, and remained after 1991, has meanwhile become peaceful. To prevent more Russians from populating the region or even occupying the beautiful Baltic beaches, the Estonian government, according to Riina, decided to set up the National Park Lahemaa in 1971. Besides the quickly changing coastal landscape and the omnipresent juniper, the area is defined by abundant forests, high moors and huge solitary blocks of granite. Last of which were dropped by the legendary folk hero Kalevipoeg. Not only moose, bear and lynx, also capercaillie and crane feel at home here. The beauty and wealth of this area is related by an exhibition of the National Park Centre on the estate of Palmse manor.

In Loksa, the biggest town in the region, apart from baroque-looking buildings, we once more encounter apartment blocks, empty stores of the former fishing industry and a medical center. The neighborhood features allotments for self-sustainment. There are no restaurants, just an ugly café. The town, says Riina, has seen better times. Three hundred years ago, there was a thriving brickworks, fishing developed, and gradually vacationers arrived in the area. Now there are 3,000 inhabitants left, mostly Russians.

In Viitna Kõetsis Tavern, formerly a post office, our tour through the National Park and the cold war period ends. Cheerfully, Norwegians, Polish, Germans, an Estonian, a Frenchman sit together, enjoying Estonian cuisine and hospitality.

Simone Labs [translation: Marc Steinbach]

Litterature/Internet: