

CLAIMING ETHNICITY IN OVERLAPPING DIASPORIC CONDITIONS: ESTONIAN AMERICANS AND ACADEMIC MOBILITY DURING THE COLD WAR¹

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Estonian history is saturated with episodes of both voluntary and forced migration that have brought about the emergence of a rather substantial global diaspora with diverse levels of attachment to the present day Estonia. When observing their mentality and its representations, the plurality of remembrance becomes evident on a number of levels – the expatriate communities' directedness towards Estonia-proper on the one hand and Estonia's openness to its expatriate communities on the other. A slightly more evasive subject matter is the relationship between various memory cultures within the diaspora communities. Investigating educational aspects of Estonian refugee diaspora culture opens up a rare vista onto the lived reality of crossing these political and mental borderlines. From the emergence of supplemental schools in America to the creation of the study-in-Finland grant by the Estonian Students Fund in the US, this article explores implications of academic mobility (or in some cases academic nomadism) with regard to ethnicity. It provides insight into the very real tensions that emerged from the overlapping of diasporic conditions during students' short-term migration.

INTRODUCTION

The approximately 12 000 Estonians who made their way from postwar Europe to the United States of America with the help of the 1948 Displaced Persons Act were very keen to maintain their culture and language in this new setting. One of the most obvious manifestations of this is the fact that they established a number of supplementary schools all over North America. To be sure, American Estonian children had gotten instruction in their mother tongue before the refugees came, but in a much less organized and more relaxed manner. In contrast, the new

¹ This article is written based on the research conducted while I was a visiting Fulbright scholar at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and is part of the Estonian Research Council project ETF9066 Ethnic and National in Estonian Diaspora Communities.

populace was in dire need of a structured learning environment. They were adamant in making sure that their younger generation who had little or no exposure to Estonia-proper would know enough to either be successful in the native land after the end of occupation or would have the necessary skills to carry on Estonian culture in exile. In essence, the supplementary schools² were responsible for teaching everything that the young ones would have been taught back home about Estonia which the American school was naturally not focusing on. East Coast refugee Estonians were quick to establish several schools during the time when DP-immigration (1948–1952) was still taking place – Seabrook was first in 1949. Later, others followed suit all over the US.³ It is difficult to create a unified chronology of this process, since there was a tendency on the part of parents and activists to put ambition and good will ahead of practical matters and sustainability. This means there were numerous false starts taking place simultaneously all over the country. On occasion, these initiatives grew into larger establishments. This happened for instance when educators who had been gathering children in their home for learning purposes at one point moved the whole endeavor to a communal space, increased administration and registered as an association. Other times the educational relationship never formalized as a school but rather faded away without a significant trace.

In Kersti Luhaäär Linask's 1978 research about Estonian supplemental schools, she estimates that during the academic year 1950/51 there had been 112 pupils attending the select supplemental schools in the US that she studied. By 1965/66, that number had almost doubled. A similar peak in enrollment is also visible among the Estonians in Canada.⁴ More comprehensive data collected by the ÜEÜ Koolitoimikond suggests that during the academic year 1951/52 there were 388 students in 12 supplemental schools: Baltimore, Boston, Seabrook, Chicago, Cleveland-Ohio, Lakewood, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Portland, Willimantic and Wisconsin.⁵ According to statistics gathered by the

² The term “supplemental” was officially dropped with the decision by some 70 participants of the Teachers Day held in New York in April of 1970. Since the name change did not have an effect on how schools were run or participated in, this text will not differentiate between pre- and post-1970, but will use “Estonian schools” and “Estonian supplemental schools” interchangeably, if not otherwise noted. Various documents and letters from the Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools to managers and patrons of Estonian schools. Box 1, Folder 6. The Albany-Schenectady Eesti Ühing (Estonian Association in Albany and Schenectady, New York) Records. Immigration History Research Center and Archives, University of Minnesota.

³ Documentation about supplemental schools. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴ **Luhaäär Linask, K.** An Historical Study of Selected Estonian Supplementary Schools in the United States and Canada from 1950 to the Present. PhD dissertation. University of Connecticut, UMI Dissertation Services, 1978, 70. Printed in 1993.

⁵ There was also a school in Woodstock, Illinois, but it was not included in the statistics because it never made it through the school year. USA-s asuvate Eesti Täienduskoolide aruanne 1950/51. õ.-a. kohta. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records.

previously mentioned organizations' successor, Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools, during the academic year 1968/69 there were 450 students attending 17 schools: Albany-Schenectady, Baltimore, Buffalo, Chicago, Cleveland, Connecticut, Lakewood, Los Angeles, Long Island, Minneapolis, New York, North Illinois, Portland, San Francisco, Seabrook, Seattle, Wilmington.⁶ Thus, the volume of the surge in overall enrollment figures might not be as dramatic as would seem at first glance. In addition, it seems to reflect not so much the growing number of adolescents but rather the capacity of adults to organize more schools and get kids involved. Migration within the United States plays an important part in the fluctuating school-scene. For example, Seabrook farms in New Jersey were the first place of stable employment for many DPs. This reality somewhat explains why the first supplemental school was established there. Not only was it the first, for a while it was also the largest. As people emancipated from the labor and life-style rural Seabrook offered, the school withered. By the academic year 1968/69, the area only had a church school with eight attendees⁷ and in the following year it did not open its doors at all and morphed into a home school like those found in other areas with scarce Estonian population, such as North and South Carolina.⁸ Another hidden aspect of the headcount was the increasingly younger student body, which included children as young as two years of age.⁹

Even though participating in the Estonian school was a matter of principle for many¹⁰, academic success in the wider society was also coveted and celebrated. That is why in addition to moral support, there were also practical ways in

⁶ Documentation about supplemental schools. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁷ Meie täienduskoolid USA-s. Gaston Randvee. Box 1, Folder 2. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records.

⁸ Eesti koolide USA-s õpilaste arv. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti koolid USA-s ja nende õpilaste koosseis 1968/69 õppeaastast alates. Box 1, Folder 2. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records.

⁹ Documentation about supplemental schools. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁰ All statistics of course only reflect the trends for the Estonians in America who were eager to make an effort to maintain ethnicity while at the same time being able and willing to sacrifice money and time to have their offspring educated at the supplemental schools. There were many who for logistical, financial, personal or other reasons were not able to get involved with supplemental schools as well as those who did not want to. It is very difficult to ascertain the exact number of these persons and their ratio within the Estonian populace. Educated contemporary guesses deemed them to comprise of approximately one thousand or slightly more persons with half of them involved with other structured Estonian activities one way or another. Meie täienduskoolid USA-s. Gaston Randvee. Box 1, Folder 2. Eesti Koolide Keskus (Coordinating Center for Estonian Supplemental Schools) Records; **Luhaäär Linask, K.** An Historical Study of Selected Estonian Supplementary Schools in the United States and Canada from 1950 to the Present, 79.

which the community got behind its best and brightest. One of the most noteworthy of these initiatives was the Estonian Students Fund in the United States. The organization later to become known as EstfUSA traces its history back to the years immediately following World War II when it became instrumental in delivering loans to struggling Estonian students under the auspices of the New York Estonian Educational Society.¹¹ In the late 1950s it started giving out scholarships, and that quickly became its main objective. The organization still exists today and operates in a very wide spectrum providing scholarships to Estonians in Estonia¹² and abroad, giving incentives for diaspora Estonians to study in Estonia and helping Estonian professionals attend courses and conferences abroad.¹³ In fact, this scenario of accepting applications from students in Estonia-proper was written into the original certificate of incorporation, with a clause that this shall come to pass only when Estonia is once more

an independent self-governing state and there will be in effect a non-totalitarian democratic government.¹⁴

STUDENT EVOCATIONS OF ETHNICITY

Speaking on a very general level, scholarship applications tend to be rather rigid and quite tedious with an inherent power structure that gives a voice to the ones who write the questions rather than those who end up penning the responses. This is to ensure that the capital getting redistributed will serve the ends of the donor and become an extension of their program. In theory the success of an applicant is determined by the level of proximity her manifested intellectual potential and mentality correspond to that of the donor. Thus, I find it plausible that the autobiographical utterances examined in the EstfUSA scholarship applications were conceived and conveyed with the intention of demonstrating the writers' compatibility with the overarching program of the EstfUSA as well as showcasing their exceptional suitability to use funds in such a way as to

¹¹ Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond USA-s. Põhikord. Vastu võetud asutamiskoosolekul 8. jaanuar 1950. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹² During all stages of my postsecondary education, I too have been the recipient of several EstfUSA scholarships, which have significantly widened my horizons in terms of research and given me the opportunity to engage with archival materials as well as conduct oral history work in Canada and the United States. I will always be indebted and grateful for that. My personal history with the foundation is part of the reason why exploring scholarship applications seemed a particularly inviting exercise. In a way, I share this institutional space with my unsuspecting informants who were born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and wrote the applications in question in the 1960s and 1970s.

¹³ <http://www.esfusa.org/ajalugu.html> (search conducted: July 18, 2015).

¹⁴ Certificate of incorporation of Estonian Students Fund in USA, inc. p. 4. May 1, 1961. Box 1, Folder 1. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

reach for the stars on a more personal level. In other words – not only can the applications and their supporting materials be read as declarations of achievement and aspiration, but also as more or less consciously targeted texts that seek to adhere to what must have been perceived as the established discourse on Estonianness. The following is based on a careful reading of applications written in the 1960s and 1970s by Estonian American students born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

Making the case for eligibility

It is important to note that the extent and frequency of pathos in the applications vary greatly. There are a number of students who place heavy emphasis on rational economic aspects in either a thoughtful and detailed manner or simply by stating the obvious – the need for money. Granted, in such cases a certain undulating reference to Estonianism is sometimes written in between the lines – for example, when the family is in dire straits due to the loss of a breadwinner during the war or complications pertaining to the DP experience. Those seemingly objective reasons have a backdrop of suffering directly linked to the grand narrative of exile itself. One of the more drastic examples on this menu stated the applicant's father's war injuries and subsequent (unspecified) amputation as a reason why she herself is requesting financial assistance:

...he gave his health fighting for Estonia /.../ this scholarship would be of great economic help in return for the sacrifice he made.¹⁵

On the other (not too distant) corner of the economic rationale lies a cluster of explanations that can be said to have only one reference point – the somewhat ethereal notion of a good Estonian and what constitutes such a person. On occasion, this appeal can be rather blunt;

I feel I am more Estonian than anything else. I wish to pass on Estonianness to future generations and I think this was one idea Jüri Lellep had when he gave the scholarship.¹⁶

Ironically, this rather particular example of strong wording is in fact misconstrued. It would be reasonable to assume that Jüri Lellep, having been a nineteenth century national awakening activist would have approved of the expressed notions. However, since he passed away in Estonia in 1908, he could by no means have been instrumental in setting up the endowment. It was in fact his son Otto G. Lellep, the inventive engineer and venerable representative of old American Estonians within the largely DP-dominated Estonian community in Milwaukee,¹⁷

¹⁵ Scholarship application of L. O. Folder Lellep Fond 1976. Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁶ Scholarship application of L. P. Folder Lellep Fond 1977. The Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁷ Milwaukee Eesti Rahvusgrupp (Estonian Society of Milwaukee) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

who donated the money and suggested the name in 1968.¹⁸ Even before this grand gesture Otto G. Lellep had been a generous donor for years and had taken the initiative of paving the legal path towards a major contribution already before the EstfUSA's incorporation.¹⁹ Due to various legal obstacles he wasn't at first able to give as much as he had wanted to, but the "little" that he did give was still hugely influential. In 1965 his donation was the single largest amount among gifts from both individuals and organizations.²⁰ With the Jüri Lellep Memorial Fund's emergence in 1968, a whole new era in the work of the EstfUSA began and one can also claim that to be true about the young Estonians it was directed towards.

As was shown, it also gave new life to the long gone Jüri Lellep, as his name came to be associated with providing opportunities and nurture for the youth. Numerous instances of uninformed flattery at his address can be found in the applications, including one where the writer claims to personally know and respect him. According to Otto G. Lellep's memoirs, in real life his father Jüri had been a rather stern figure with not much love or tenderness to share with young ones out of fear of spoiling them. In modern terms, Otto's childhood can be seen as rather traumatic. Otto didn't have much handed to him in life and can be said to have been quite the self-made man. Granted, he was able to get an education, but the source of his wealth was ultimately his ingenuity, which he himself in turn seemed to at least partially attribute to his unique upbringing.²¹

This back-story was not lost on all applicants²² and some were more successful than others in weaving it into their narratives. A New York-born young man even went so far as to come out and say that in his view Lellep's scholarships exist for young people precisely like himself –

who will always stay Estonian and work for Estonia and Estonians.

Moreover, he sees the act of granting scholarships as an investment which places a moral obligation on those who benefit from them.²³ There are also applicants

¹⁸ <http://www.esfusa.org/ajalugu.html> (search conducted: July 18, 2015); Lellep, Otto G. Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

¹⁹ Letter from a lawyer to Otto G. Lellep regarding his prospects of creating a fund within EstfUSA. Dec. 7, 1960. Box 1, Folder 5. Otto G. Lellep's correspondence with Helmo Raag and others 1960–1974. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²⁰ Box 1, Folder 5. Otto G. Lellep's correspondence with Helmo Raag and others 1960–1974. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²¹ Memoirs of Otto G. Lellep. Manuscript. Lellep, Otto G. Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²² A young woman from Milwaukee states the fact that she is currently reading the unpublished memoirs of Otto G. Lellep which she received through a family connection as part of her rationale for nominating herself. L. K. Scholarship application. Box 3, Folder 43. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²³ K. R. scholarship application. Folder Lellep Fond 1978. Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

who seek to place the moral obligation from themselves solely on the deciders by emphasizing that if organizations want to attract young leaders to carry on their mission in the future, they must support the worthy ones now. A sense of entitlement is also sometimes present in these more forceful appeals, for instance:

In the end I believe that as I am already searching for help elsewhere, I should not fail to ask help from the Jüri Lellep Memorial Foundation, seeing as it has been established by a compatriot and ought to thus be not my last, but first hope.²⁴

Another common feature in the narratives aspiring to woo the deciders comes in the form of pledges for future action. They come in all shapes and sizes – from the very generic and concise to original and elaborate.

One might assume that when explaining their particular suitability for the scholarship, these young people might also raise the question of Estonia's situation and indeed many do. What is surprising is that most slide over the topic in a very laconic matter and very few make specific reference to the Communist regime. A rather lonesome example of an openly engaged political rationale was penned by a man born in Woodstock in 1959 for an application submitted in 1978:

When among Americans, I always try to introduce Estonia and its dire straits under the Communist regime. To fight against Communism, wherever possible, the true nature of which I have learned to know because of my parents, Estonian events and the Estonian Supplementary School.²⁵

The underlying statement here might be something in the lines of – I want you to know that I have accepted and internalized what I've been taught.

Stemming from the way that the scholarship application requires students to list their experiences and affiliations within the framework of what can very broadly be determined as the American Estonian experience, it ends up producing a kind of *curriculum vitae* basking in the light of ethnicity, patriotism and the diasporic project. In fact, being Estonian is sometimes referred to as a career where one could become objectively better and advance. Not surprisingly, representatives of the older generation who are present in this body of sources mainly as authors of recommendation letters do indeed seem to understand it in this perspective. The well-known scouting activist Linold Milles shows support for one of his young colleagues in 1977 by stating that he has

observed his development since birth.

Anu-Irja Parming goes all the way and points out in a recommendation letter for an inspiring young gymnast that although she is a rather recent addition to the activists, her

career within the Estonian community intensified in a rapid manner.

²⁴ T. L. scholarship application. Folder Lellep Fond 1980. Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²⁵ I. H. scholarship application. Folder Lellep Fond 1978. Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

In this line of reasoning, getting a scholarship from EstfUSA can be understood as a kind of promotion in that it enables a moment of external institutional validation that comes bearing gifts of social and monetary capital. An aspect that ought not to be overlooked is that the American academic realm is highly award-driven and this intramural recognition would prove valuable in the wider context as well.

It can also be argued that even without receiving the scholarship award, at least making an effort to be a good candidate was something of an education in itself. The highly organized civil society of American Estonians indeed had its impact on youth in general as they were able and expected to start carrying their weight in these ventures as soon as possible. The specific roles and functions depended on the nature, structure and composition of the community. It is worth pointing out that this tendency was not limited to only Estonians in America, but is quite a common feature of Estonian communities all over the free world. The reflection of this aspect of global Estonianism can also be detected in the cluster of sources dealt with here. For instance, one of the overseas applicants in 1969 was Jaan Männik, a young man living in Sweden. The list of his extracurricular organizational activities includes being treasurer for the Estonian Student Association in Lund. Young Mr. Männik's application was successful,²⁶ and he went on to have a meaningful career which culminated in 2008 when he began his service as Chairman of the Supervisory Board at Eesti Pank (Bank of Estonia), or in other words – he became the treasurer of his whole nation.

The function of the E-word: noun or adjective?

When reading the applications in bulk, it becomes obvious that they seem to encompass a whole range of values which can in this context be argued to constitute Estonianness and Estonianism. Both of these words can be used as translations of *eestlus*, which is a very common word in the scholarship applications. Patterns with which these notions are utilized hint at the fact that the applicants themselves were well versed on these notions and could navigate among them successfully. Also, the fact that they are seemingly used with ease and occasional eloquence, but never overtly explained, provides evidence that the writers might have felt they were operating in a mental space shared by everyone involved. Obviously, there is no universal definition that would determine Estonianism or Estonianness down to a tee but explorations into the realm can nevertheless be illuminating. The following is an effort to bring out some trends

²⁶ Various documents. Box 2, Folder 27. Applications for scholarships and additional correspondence A-M, 1969. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

pertaining to the use of Esto-words in the scholarship applications, treated here as collective discourse.

Estonianism as a noun is quite significant in this context. The applications are full of declarations and promises of maintaining it as well as carrying it on and making sure it does not wither. There are expressions of pride in possessing it and calls for helping each other achieve it – reciprocal assistance in this rhetoric usually involves the fund giving money and the student using it wisely. On occasion Estonianism can also be referred to as a hobby alongside singing and dancing, or more passionately in a discourse of love, life and blessings. There are some who state that it is something that can be seen and that can be emphasized, but more than anything, the applications and supporting materials seem to hint that youngsters see Estonianism as an ontological category which they believe exists, can feel exist, but can't really succeed in pinning down in a discrete fashion.²⁷

Estonian as an adjective is most often utilized in conjunction with various events – small and large, periodically occurring and once-in-a-lifetime ones. Also, it seems to rhyme well with the institutionalized aspects of community affairs, being often present in discourse about organizations both for young people and the wider constituency. Examples of the former are scouts, guides, camps, and supplementary schools. Examples of the latter are local and regional associations, umbrella-organizations and churches. It also seemed to be commonplace to evoke the notion of Estonian in liaison with overarching concepts such as community, society and culture with its many expressive manifestations like literature, poetry and song.

The language and the flag which can be tagged national symbols, representing in this context rather grounded and tangible reference-points to what can be perceived as constituting Estonianness. Notions of history, mentality and spirit were also present, but as part of more abstract constructs. Topics of origins and singularity were touched on in an equally fleeting manner.²⁸

A frequent category to emerge in connection to the notion “*Estonian*” was kinship and its many forms – Estonian children, youth, parents, grandparents, men and women were actively present in the discourse. They were depicted both as specific people and generic agents who influence either the writers themselves or the wider (local and/or global) Estonian society. Since political freedom and action, as well as the issue of the lost Republic were not raised nearly as often indicates that for the people under a magnifying glass here, Estonia began at home. The formal public sphere was not a system that seemed inviting as a scene for demonstrating one's Estonianness in rhetoric.

²⁷ Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

²⁸ Ibid.

DESTINATION FINLAND: CONNECTING PEOPLE

EstfUSA played an integral role in the academic mobility of American Estonians. In 1959 a program was launched to educate high school graduates, college students and college graduates in Finland with successful applicants getting the opportunity to study free of charge in either Helsinki or Turku, obtain financial aid for living expenses, get a discount on the transatlantic voyage and live *sans* rent in a dormitory, courtesy of the National Union of Students of Finland. The idea was first conceived when the EstfUSA Chairman Helmo Raag's brother got a scholarship from an academic fraternity to study in Helsinki after graduating from Brown University. His overwhelmingly positive feedback gave EstfUSA the impetus to consider starting to give out scholarships of their own. Young Mr. Raag facilitated communications with Helsinki University Student Association which became instrumental in setting up the program from the European end.²⁹

In the first years, the organization struggled for good applicants, which is why there is evidence in the archives that on occasion they initiated correspondence with people whom they believed to know somebody who might be interested in the opportunity to

draw strength for their national self-consciousness and validate their search of self³⁰

by spending an academic year in Finland. Judging by the sheer amount of applications and correspondence that have become a part of the EstfUSA archival heritage, it is obvious that after a few rotations had taken place, there was an abundance of candidates, meaning not everyone who applied got the opportunity to go.

As an Estonian among Finns

The mission in Finland was not a very structured one. In fact, just like the supplementary schools in the US, it was more aimed at educating the spirit than the mind. Successful candidates were expected to bolster academic excellence as well as have a good track record in terms of engagement with Estonian activities and overall social skills, but once they got to Finland, the atmosphere became more relaxed. Sure, everybody was supposed to learn about the Finnish culture and explore Estonian studies. However, they saw fit as well to become an ambassador of Estonia and the diaspora should the opportunity present itself, but all of this was to be held in high value on an intentional level. In practice,

²⁹ Letter from Helmo Raag to P. R. March 2, 1959. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³⁰ Draft of Helmo Raag's letter to Helsinki University Student Association. Box 1, Folder 2. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

the only real obligations that scholarship holders had, was sending a letter to the EstfUSA once a month and reporting back about one's classes and other activities, valuable experience, day-to-day life, interesting occurrences and state of mind.

A unifying feature in a lot of the first letters people sent back is an explanation of what a moving experience it is to hear a language so similar to Estonian everywhere one goes. This becomes a recurring theme that is elaborated on again and again. Another welcome phenomenon is how Finns have seemingly innate knowledge about Estonia seeing as it is their neighboring country. H.S. reports back in 1968:

It feels so good when people ask "Where are you from?" and one can simply answer "From Estonia!" or "From Tallinn" without having to draw a map of Europe in the air, and then after answering one can smile as the person who asked says how happy she is to meet an Estonian and calls out "Tere tulemast!" ["Welcome!" in Estonian].³¹

Scholarship holder M. P. happily admits that she finds being an Estonian in Finland to be very pleasant since she constantly feels like everyone understands the issues and takes an interest giving her plenty of opportunities to educate people about the diaspora and their politics. She even goes so far as to state that this kind of grass roots level international contact may end up serving Estonia's cause much better than any intramural exercises of

patriotic speeches – to Estonians from Estonians
ever could.³²

Letters also depict signs of culture shock – the ways of conduct and rules of civility in Finland differed from those that young people were accustomed to in America or attributed to Finland before arriving. For instance, it was surprising that handshakes happened only upon first meeting someone and were replaced by a short brief waving motion for all further encounters. Table manners spoke of individualism and self-sufficiency – people sat and ate quietly without salutations in the beginning or words of gratitude at the end of the meal, nobody asked for salt or bread, but helped themselves to what they needed. The tongue-tied modes of public conduct were also noticed and frowned upon and accused of inhibiting progress in learning the Finnish language. A correspondent reported that even in a rush hour tram, packed with people, a person standing in the rear could hear someone in the front taking a deep breath since nobody ever talks to anybody else so as not to disturb the others' peace. This mixture of strange and familiar is succinctly present in a sentence written by H. S stating that

³¹ Letter from H. S. to the EstfUSA. December 5, 1968. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³² P. to R. 24 March 1969. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

Albeit Finns eat the same pea soup as Estonians do, our social habits are rather different.³³

Openly critical statements are more of an exception than a rule and many letters from Finland depict admiration and a positive attitude towards its native inhabitants' inner peace and civility. When A. P. writes back in December 1968 about a protest organized by "normal" students which was hijacked by left-wing activists and turned awry, she makes a note of how Finnish the behavior of the "rebels" was – when the event was over, people stayed and cleared the venue of any debris and paper from the event.³⁴

Judging by the often apologetic letters that have been kept on file, in practice, this once a month reporting principle was also more of a goal than reality. In fact, when a guilt-ridden scholarship holder writes the Chairman of EstfUSA to confess that she feels she is not doing enough to justify her status, including the fact that she has not taken the time to write as often as she should have, Helmo Raag replies that by living in Finland and being an active participant in student life there satisfies 90% of what the Fund is hoping for.³⁵ Clearly the deciders believed that just being an Estonian among Finns would bear enough fruit in long term ethnic identity to justify spending money and resources on making it happen.

Controversial travels

The linguistic and cultural proximity of Finland to Estonia was why it seemed important to send youngsters there to receive some of their *Bildung*. It was generally regarded as a positive and rewarding experience not just because of the obvious virtues that its proponents attach to academic mobility, but also because experiencing Finland was perceived almost like experiencing Estonia by proxy. To the disgruntlement of many, the people who had gotten this honor and privilege felt curious and adventurous about the geographical proximity as well. One can only imagine what it must have felt like for the students, especially those living in Helsinki, to be so close to *the* Estonia and imagine the mere 80-kilometer distance.³⁶ That being said, it should come as no big surprise that there were those

³³ Letter from H. S. to EstfUSA. December 5, 1968. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³⁴ Letter from A. P. to EstfUSA. December 28, 1968. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³⁵ Letter from E. O. to Helmo Raag. December 12, 1961; letter from Helmo Raag to E. O. January 1, 1962. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³⁶ See for example: letter from H. S. to EstfUSA. December 5, 1968. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

who went ahead and paid a visit to the homeland. This was not without consequences for EstfUSA. For instance in 1966 it lost part of its funding due to these frowned upon trips.³⁷ The controversy started with the very first scholarship recipient, H. M.

It's quite safe to assume that the EstfUSA did not see this coming. When the scholarship program was launched, there was considerable mistrust regarding Finland and whether exile Estonians could feel safe there. To throw the Soviets off track and prevent them from making efforts to influence the Finnish partners to drop the program at first it was advertised not as something providing means and opportunity to study in Finland, but in Europe more generally. Another clear indicator of a concerned atmosphere is the fact that before sealing the deal with H. M., Helmo Raag took the time to explain Finland's political situation in some detail and offer personal assurance that the likelihood of becoming subject to Soviet repressions was not considerable, unless there would be another big war.³⁸

Young Mr. M. seemed like an ideologically trustworthy person – in his application he chose to commence his biography by stating that his family had escaped Estonia to

get away from communist terror.

Moreover, upon receiving word of his success, H. M. penned a letter of gratitude to EstfUSA in which he vowed:

By accepting this scholarship I will try to do my utmost – in word, thought and action – to prove myself worthy of this honor and not disappoint the board.³⁹

Ironically, he ended up doing just that by being part of what was referred to in this context as the first ever international tourist group from Finland to visit Soviet Estonia.

Even though H. M.'s move left the American Estonians opposing visits to Soviet Estonia completely baffled, what he did made a lot of sense to those in his new immediate surroundings. In fact, other scholarship holders reported in their letters that one topic the Finns didn't see eye to eye with exile Estonians was on visitation. In fact, people seemed to expect that getting an opportunity to see the homeland would be a priority for the diasporans.⁴⁰ At the same time, they assumed

³⁷ Various documents and correspondence. Box 1, folder 2. Correspondence with donors 1951–1965. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³⁸ Letter from Helmo Raag to H. M. March 31, 1959. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

³⁹ Letter from H. M. to the board of EstfUSA. April 14, 1959. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁰ See for example: Letter from M. R. to Helmo Raag. November 30, 1960. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

that the young would identify more with their new homeland America instead of the long gone Republic of Estonia and were sincerely surprised to find out that was not the case. These preconceptions grew out of the Finns' relationship with their own compatriots abroad who in a sociological perspective most resembled a labor diaspora and in the overwhelming majority of cases had left their homeland in a fairly voluntary and organized manner.⁴¹ The Estonian story was very different and made drawing analogies complicated.

Needless to say, the EstfUSA was obliged to consider the sentiments of sponsors and did all it could to discourage homeland visits short of banning them altogether. One of the reasons for this rather lenient policy was that in a wider context the US was keen on having eyes and ears behind the Iron Curtain. To the disgruntlement of many Estonians and other former DPs a number of cultural exchange programs were sponsored throughout the Cold War.⁴² There is also circumstantial evidence that H. M. might have been invited and encouraged to take his trip by Americans. In any case the EstfUSA official organizational policy was to soothe any conflicts regarding these transgressions and side with those who aspired to alleviate the resulting repercussions and ideological tensions within the community.⁴³

It is also worthwhile mentioning that in the mid-1960s, EstfUSA Chairman Helmo Raag moved his whole family to Finland and began working for a company that would later become the telecommunications giant Nokia. His first trip back to Estonia took place already in 1967.⁴⁴ Interestingly, it seems that albeit the issue of visiting Soviet-occupied Estonia was to some degree contested all the way until its re-establishment as an independent country in 1991, not only did some of the young people sent to Finland decide to hop over for a visit, but starting from the 1970s, students applying for the Lellep scholarship for studies within the US started to openly confess to either having been back to the homeland with family or harboring hopes of going there in the not so distant future. Judging by the context of these statements, they seem to be designed not as disclaimers, but as proof of the applicants' Estonianness.⁴⁵ H. M was also rehabilitated and in 1977 his experience in Finland was featured in a letter soliciting donations as evidence of the great work EstfUSA is doing.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See for example: **Raento, P.** (guest ed.). Finnishness in Finland and North America: constituents, changes, and challenges. – *Journal of Finnish Studies*, 2005, 9, 2.

⁴² **Zake, I.** *American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community*. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2010.

⁴³ Various documents and correspondence. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁴ **Grabbi, H.** Helmo Raag – IN MEMORIAM. July 4, 2004. <http://www.eesti.ca/helmo-raag-151-in-memoriam/article20316> (search conducted: July 18, 2015).

⁴⁵ Various applications. See for example L. P. application in Lellepi fond 1981. Lellep, Jüri Papers, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁶ Letter from EstfUSA to possible donors 1978. Box 3, Folder 51. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

Contested alliances

For those young American Estonians who made their way to Finland, experiencing a change in discourse was surprising and on occasion quite bewildering. They came to realize that the views and opinions as well as the counterarguments that they knew well and had become accustomed to were rather hard to find in Finland. The palette they believed to encompass all possibilities of thinking and talking about their compatriots was in fact rather selective and culturally grounded. This realization can even be diagnosed as a paradigmatic change for these young people. A young woman reporting from Helsinki in 1961 admits that it was strange

hearing people talk about Estonians and realizing they were referring to the ones living in Estonia, also that they regarded them as people who are living and evolving.⁴⁷

This turning of the tables was especially intense when the scholars came into contact with these very same living, breathing and evolving persons from behind the Iron Curtain who were in Helsinki on similar terms – temporarily, for enrichment and popular diplomacy. Therefore, it's only natural that this interaction was one of the topics that received much attention in correspondence. On occasion, the descriptions are rather detailed and contain general observations as well as bits of dialogue and analysis; thus, in a way they resemble diplomatic reports. Two extremes can be delineated as far as attitude is concerned – repulsion and fascination. There were scholars who wanted nothing to do with Estonians from the Soviet Union – saying “Hello” in the hallway of the dormitory was more than enough for one of them.⁴⁸ There were those, who actively sought out Soviet Estonian tourists and visitors, tried to make contact, offered them help, services and company as temporary but savvy dwellers of Finland and were eager to share their local knowledge and on occasion even money. For one it didn't seem to pose any moral dilemma to fill in as a date for a ball when the Finnish girlfriend of a very “religious”⁴⁹ Soviet Estonian had fallen ill.⁵⁰

The topics of reported conversation range from everyday observations to hard-core issues. Soviet Estonians didn't seem to know much about the refugees and considered them a small group of emigrants who left for suspicious reasons. At the ball which the mixed couple of exile and Soviet Estonian went to, he came out and opined that her lot might as well have stayed in Estonia. She

⁴⁷ Letter from E. O. to Helmo Raag. December 12, 1961. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁸ Letter from A. P. to EstfUSA. December 28, 1968. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁴⁹ In this context: pro-Soviet.

⁵⁰ Letter from M. R. to Helmo Raag. November 30, 1960. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

reports replying that if that had been the case they might have been sent to Siberia. According to the testimony, this didn't shake him much as he considered a certain purge rather natural in the context of any big social upheaval. The same young woman found more rapport with another Estonian from behind the Iron Curtain. So much so that at one point he rejected the frame of confrontation altogether by blurting out:

you are no capitalist nor am I a communist.

Correspondence also reveals that some of the scholars were deeply touched when attending to recitals by Soviet Estonian musicians and competitions where the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic was represented.⁵¹

It's possible that one significant factor why the letters were so detailed regarding interaction with Soviet Estonians was because they were intended to avert any harmful rumors on this very sensitive issue. Indeed, there were occasions when meaning got lost in transatlantic communication. For instance, in the excitement of their pending adventures, three young women decided to use humor in the postcards that they sent back from their journey to Finland. Upon reaching Norway they declared that they have decided to stay and enjoy the local men. When in Finland, other postcards were sent, one signed by a scholar and her fictional Finnish fiancée Mauno, another one talked of taking mixed saunas and building a great bridge between the nations. Word of these unreal developments reached the parents and raised issues.⁵²

Another surprisingly sensitive topic was communication with Estonian exiles in Sweden who were occasionally depicted as hostile, untrusting and unfair. One of the underlying issues here might be a question of allegiance. The young and impressionable American Estonians embraced the cultural immersion in Finland and learned to know and respect the Finns on a much more intimate level than the Estonians in Sweden ever had the chance to do. In their letters, the views of Swedish Estonians on their neighboring country Finland are tagged as outdated in the case of the older generation and attuned to mainstream Swedish prejudice in the case of the young ones. Hence, to their surprise the EstfUSA scholars found themselves serving as ambassadors for Finland – explaining that Finns were not snobbish or full of bravado over the reality that they had managed to hold on to their independence while Estonians had lost theirs and that the notion of Finno-Ugric kinship had in fact very practical implications.⁵³ Some Estonians

⁵¹ Letter from E. O. to Helmo Raag. March 3, 1962 and others. Box 4, Folder 58; letter from E. M. to Helmo and Tiina Raag. October 8, 1963. Box 4, Folder 52; letter from M. S. to EstfUSA. April 1, 1970. Box 4, Folder 53; letter from M. R. to Helmo Raag. November 30, 1960. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁵² Correspondence between scholarship holders and EstfUSA. Box 4, Folder 53. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁵³ Letter from K. N. to Helmo Raag. January 21, 1963. Box 4, Folder 52. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

in Sweden were rather puzzled as to why American Estonian students “run to Finland” in the first place only to “start saying strange things” after spending some time there.⁵⁴ The young visitors were also sometimes patronized – after giving speeches in Estonian they were accused of having an American and even a Finnish accent.⁵⁵ Although in all likelihood that was the case, such remarks were perceived as unnecessary and demeaning.

On at least one occasion, an EstfUSA scholar E. O. was appalled on behalf of the Soviet Estonians as well. The renowned Estonian Academic Male Choir came to Finland and put on two concerts, both of which were attended by E. O. According to her, the performance was superb and very well received. She also had a chance to meet the singers on February 24th – Independence Day of the original Estonian Republic and in her letter characterized the men as nice, friendly and open-minded. She had shared her family’s escape story, they had complimented her language skills and asked her to send their best to other diaspora Estonians and tell them that people think of them back home. She felt that the Estonian newspaper *Eesti Post* published in Malmö had been downright mean in its politically engaged mocking article about the performances.⁵⁶

When the Helsinki University Student Association decided not to invite representatives of Estonian Students in Sweden to an international event in 1964 and started making moves to establish an exchange program with Soviet Estonian universities, the American Estonian EstfUSA scholars found themselves in the middle of controversy. Estonians in Sweden presumed that the current program would come to a halt and some went so far as to make a point to those currently studying in Finland that they should enjoy their experience as the last to be sent over. Helmo Raag diagnosed this as envy about the fact that Finland was free to make such choices and jealousy that far-away American Estonians were doing well enough to sustain such a sizable program. Contrary to the rumors EstfUSA was by no means considering making an ultimatum to its Finnish partners. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that Helmo Raag wrote letters of support about plans to get more Estonians to study in Finland from the behind the Iron Curtain.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Letter from Helmo Raag to E. M. January 22, 1964. Box 4, Folder 52. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁵⁵ Letter from M. R. to Helmo Raag. November 30, 1960. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁵⁶ Letter from E. O. to Helmo Raag. March 3, 1962. Box 4, Folder 58. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

⁵⁷ Letter from E. M. to Helmo Raag. January 13, 1964; letter from Helmo Raag to E. M. January 22, 1964. Box 4, Folder 52. Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond (Estonian Students Fund in USA, Inc) Records, Estonian American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota.

CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that during the Cold War the Estonian diaspora in the free world was feverishly active in several regards with politics informing most, if not all, communal enterprises. This is also true about the realm of scholarships and academic mobility. As the archival material utilized for the purpose of this article demonstrates, scholarship applications can reveal details about how ethnicity is perceived and rationalized in an institutional setting. Correspondence between students who have been granted the opportunity for academic mobility and the people responsible for the privilege can in turn yield valuable information regarding the tensions that emerge when young people are faced with overlapping diasporic conditions. By this construct I am referring to the situation where the young people who were part of the American Estonian diaspora temporarily became part of Finland's Estonians and had a chance to experience the Swedish Estonian diaspora as well, not to mention have direct contact with Estonians from Estonia-proper, and in some cases even visit the homeland. These multifaceted interactions place young people in different diasporic conditions, which at times – depending on their geographical location and mental space – could overlap and create fascinating tensions which brought about contested alliances.

Of course, it needs to be stated that the Estonian community with the opportunities it presented did not constitute the only scene of ethnic ponderings and declarations for second generation American Estonians. In fact, their coming of age was exceptionally well-timed as it coincided with a large-scale frenzy of searching and finding rootedness in ethnicity. It is important to add, that whilst many other minorities in America experienced a revival of interest and activity, Estonians – just like other late arrivals – had what can be referred to as a continuity of that disposition.⁵⁸

With regards to the young EstfUSA scholars' experience that has been reflected upon in this article, it needs to be added that there were also many Estonians in Sweden who had nothing whatsoever to do with the negative occurrences which were described above. In fact, there is ample evidence to show that there were other views and sentiments that were much friendlier towards young American Estonians, Finns and Soviet Estonians. However, even in a supportive environment providing positive feedback, for the young people studying and living in Finland as EstfUSA scholars, there was no escaping from questioning various aspects of their identity and allegiance. For some, it was a good time and place for soul searching and finding out what they wanted out of life both within and beyond categories such as ethnicity and diaspora. Most became avid enthusiasts of the program, and some even got directly involved with its activities once they got back to America. The conflicts and confrontations as well as harmonies and conciliations scholars experienced in Finland made them more aware of the global Estonian community they were a part of.

⁵⁸ **Walko, M. A.** *Rejecting the Second Generation Hypothesis: Maintaining Estonian Ethnicity in Lakewood, New Jersey.* AMS Press, New York, 1989.

**ETNILISUS JA KATTUVAD DIASPORAASEISUNDID:
AMEERIKA EESTLASTE AKADEEMILINE MOBILISUS
KÜLMA SÕJA AJAL**

Maarja MERIVOO-PARRO

Käesoleva artikli pärusmaaks on noorte Ameerika pagulaseestlaste vaimne maailm külma sõja ajal. Täpsema lähenemisnurga funktsioonis on stipendiume jagava organisatsiooni Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfond USA-s institutsionaalne ruum. Kirjutis baseerub ulatuslikul arhiivimaterjalil, mida säilitatakse Minnesota Ülikooli juures tegutsevas Immigratsiooni Ajaloo Uuringute Keskuses.

Artikli esimeses osas on vaatluse all stipendiumitaotlustes ilmnevad eestluse diskursused. Eraldi on esile toodud noorte kirjutistest väljaloetav motivatsioon ja oma kandidatuuri õigustus, mis kokku moodustavad huvitava veenmisnarratiivi. Avatud on ka Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfondi loomise tagamaid ja rahasse puutuvat. Artikli teises osas on põhjalikult käsitletud Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfondi missiooni saata noori väliseestlasi Soome õppima. Ehkki algselt oldi selle perspektiivikuse osas erinevatel põhjustel kahtleval positsioonil, kujunes ettevõtmine populaarseks ja sai kogukondliku heakskiidu kui võitlusliku pagulasdiasporaa *raison d'être*'ile hästi kaasa aitav kogukondlike ressursside kasutus.

Omapärane vaade avaneb, kui uurida Eesti Üliõpilaste Toetusfondi ja stipendiaatide omavahelist võrdlemisi usalduslikku kirjavahetust. Huvitaval kombel kujunes Soome-missioon enamikule osalistele üsnagi vabameelseks ja loomingu- liseks ajaks. Etnilise ja rahvusliku tunnetuse osas toimus aga kirjeldatud sättumusest hoolimata vaimseid murranguid eelkõige kattuvate diasporaaseisundite tõttu, mis aktualiseerusid noorte otsekontaktides soomlaste, Rootsi eestlaste ning kodueestlastega. Kogetu mõtestamise tulemusena langetatud otsustel oli ka laiemat pagulaseestlaskonda puudutavaid tagajärgi.