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The circularity of Estonian (perhaps even Baltic) diaspora life in the 20th century¹

Several years ago, Riho Grünthal and Magdolna Kovács organised a symposium in Helsinki devoted to the diversity of Finno-Ugric minorities in various countries, societies, cultural and geographical environments. The texts of the presentations held at the symposium were soon published in the volume *Ethnic and linguistic context of identity: Finno-Ugric minorities* (Grünthal & Kovács 2011). One of the presentations was about Estonians in Finland, a topic that in consideration of Riho Grünthal's family background must have piqued his curiosity in a particular way. The title of the presentation was "The new Estonian community in Finland". As the word *new* in the title lets us understand, the contemporary group of Estonians living and working in Finland – the topic of the presentation – is not the first one, which the speaker was, of course, well aware of and wanted to point out to the audience (Praakli 2011: 218). The word *new* as a modifier of a phrase denoting Estonian communities abroad recurred not so long ago in connection with a conference in Tartu, "New beginnings of Baltic diaspora". Perhaps the organisers of the conference had in mind that the conference would be about three different diaspora groups, the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, and therefore chose to use the plural form of the word *beginning*, thus implying that each nation has its own new beginning. However, my thoughts also went in a different direction.

1. A slightly revised version of my speech at the conference "New Beginnings of Baltic Diaspora", 26.–29.06.2018, organised in Tartu, Estonia, by the NPA (non-profit association) Baltic Heritage Network in cooperation with the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Literary Museum, the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, and the National Archives of Estonia.

The plural form of the word *beginning* in combination with the word *new* in the conference title reminded me of a reflection that first occurred to me in the early 1990s, and that reappeared both in Helsinki and more recently in connection with a book about the history of Estonians abroad during the last hundred years (Raag 2018). The specific thought I had was about the circularity of Estonian, perhaps even Latvian and Lithuanian, diasporic life.

The word *circularity* implies repetition. In this case it is about how two groups of people give each other a specific name and how this naming reoccurs at intervals. This happened no later than some three decades ago when tens of thousands of Estonians moved from Estonia to countries of the Western world, either temporarily or permanently, and very often found compatriots already living in their new country of residence, i.e., refugees of the Second World War and their descendants. Members of the exile community started calling those who recently had arrived in the new country *uustulnukad* ‘newcomers’ or *uued eestlased* ‘New Estonians’, whereas the newcomers began to call those already living in the country *vanaolijad* ‘old residents’ or *vanad eestlased* ‘Old Estonians’.

History repeats itself. Half a century earlier when Estonian war refugees, that is to say the present “old residents”, had arrived in their new country, many of them found other Estonians already living there. What is more, in many places there were national societies, clubs, and other associations that promoted various social activities in the native language. Not quite unexpectedly, the Second World War refugees were referred to, by their compatriots who already lived in the country, as “newcomers” or “New Estonians”, whereas the war refugees called those who already lived in the country “old residents” or “Old Estonians”. This circumstance is also sometimes mentioned in the literature on the ethnic activities of Estonians abroad, for example in Peeter Lindsaar’s overview of the Estonians in Australia and New Zealand (Lindsaar 1961: 17) and in Siegfried Veidenbaum’s study of the Estonians in Canada in the post-Second World War decades (Veidenbaum 1975: 102). The circle was closed.

However, even this was not the first time the distinction of “old” and “new” Estonians in a specific country was made. The same thing had already happened in the years following 1918. Estonians who had emigrated to the Western world in Czarist times became “old residents” whereas the newly arrived Estonians were “newcomers”. This is the circularity of Estonian diasporic life I refer to in the title of my article. Every new emigration wave since the first years of the 20th century has transformed earlier “newcomers” into “old residents”.

It may be assumed that the specific features of every emigration wave have determined the relations between the “old residents” and the “newcomers”, and have also largely contributed to changes in the diaspora community. If so, one might ask oneself what specific features characterise the “old

residents” and the “newcomers” of every new wave of emigration. To find an answer to this question, we have to look somewhat more closely at the history of Estonian emigration during the late modern period, but I would also like to take the opportunity to point out some similarities and differences between the emigration history of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians that I think I have been able to notice.

The first “old” Estonians

The first significant wave of Estonian emigration in the late modern period took place mainly during the second half of the 19th century and was facilitated, perhaps even encouraged, by the abolition of serfdom in the Baltic governorates in 1861 and, especially, the new passport law in 1863 permitting settlement in any part of the Russian Empire. Many landless Estonian peasants moved eastwards where they sought agricultural land and established rural settlements. In the beginning, the colonists headed for the nearby governorates of St. Petersburg, Pskov, and Vitebsk; later they made for destinations considerably further away: the central Volga region, Crimea, the Caucasus, western Siberia, and the Russian Far East. A number of Estonians also became town-dwellers by moving especially to St. Petersburg and Riga. In 1897, about 120,000 Estonians lived outside the governorate of Estland, northern Livland, and the town of Narva. Half of the expatriates were located in St. Petersburg governorate. (Raun 2001: 72.) In a very short time, just a few decades, the capital city of the Russian Empire, St. Petersburg, had become the second city only to Tallinn in the size of its Estonian population (Pullat 1981: 53), Tartu being third.

Besides the extensive emigration to Russia, a smaller emigration from the governorate of Estland, and northern Livland, was taking place in the opposite direction, mainly to North America, but also to Australia, Brazil, Sweden, Finland, and southern Livland, i.e., to Latvian lands. The first Estonian immigrants to the United States have been characterised as ship-jumping seamen who settled in seaports on the east coast, such as New York and Baltimore. Some immigrants were individual professional men, others – fishermen who preferred to settle on the Pacific coast, mainly in California and Oregon. A much larger number, if not the bulk of Estonian immigrants to the United States, were rural settlers. At the turn of the century, a number of Estonian villages were established in Wisconsin and the Dakotas. Further settlements appeared in the Rocky Mountain states and the Pacific Northwest. Many Estonian farmers and their families came not directly from Estland or northern Livland, but from Crimea or other parts of Russia. (Pennar et al. 1975: viii.) In 1897, the first Estonian-language newspaper outside Estonia, *Eesti Amerika Postimees*

(The Estonian American Courier) was published by the enterprising clergyman Hans Rebane, who the following year (1898) also founded an Estonian Lutheran congregation in New York City, a congregation that still exists today (Pennar et al. 1975: viii; the first Estonian Lutheran congregation in America had been founded in 1897 at Fort Pierre in South Dakota). Reverend Rebane had come to the United States at the invitation of the German Missouri Lutheran Synod to be a pastor to immigrant Estonians and Latvians of Lutheran faith (Pennar et al. 1975: 4). In 1896, one year before he started publishing the Estonian-language newspaper, he had launched a newspaper in Latvian, *Amerikas Wehstnesis* (The American Courier). His achievements in the sphere of spiritual life in the United States are at least as important to Latvians as to Estonians.

Estonian immigration to Canada took place very much along the same lines as to the United States. The first immigrants seem to have settled in the southern part of Alberta province, where several Estonian villages were founded. The inhabitants of the villages consisted of immigrants from the Estonian-speaking Baltic governorates as well as from other parts of the Russian empire, among others the populous Nurmekunde settlement in Tver governorate. Nurmekunde consisted of six villages inhabited by around 2,000 Estonians. By comparison with the emigration to Russia, emigration to North America was insignificant: around 1900, the approximate number of Estonians in North America is estimated to have been approximately 10,000 (Aun 1985: 17), but we cannot be sure since Estonia as a country did not exist at the time, and the people who arrived were recorded as Russians.

Political refugees becoming the first “new” Estonians

A new wave of Estonian immigration began around 1906 after the failure of the Russian Revolution of 1905. Several thousand revolutionaries and their sympathisers emigrated to Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Americas. The number of persons registered by the Swedish police force in Stockholm as coming from the Baltic to Sweden in the years 1906–1914 was around 550, of which 233 were from Estonia, 172 from Latvia, and 145 from Lithuania, but this figure does not include persons who were not registered by the police in Stockholm and those who came to Sweden via some other city, thus, the total number of Balts arriving in Sweden during that time was about 800–1,000 (Loit 1990: 201). Evidently, the revolutionary currents reached as far as Australia. The members of the Estonian society in Melbourne, founded in 1914, one year later decided to break the habit of using the titles *härä* ‘mister’ and *isand* ‘master’ in front of their surnames in the minutes and began to use *seltsimees* ‘comrade’ instead (Neeme 1995: 3).

Many of the revolutionaries were more politically radical than the earlier immigrants. This increased serious friction not only among urban Estonian immigrants but also in a number of rural Estonian settlements in the United States and Canada. Reverend Rebane, for instance, feuded with Estonian socialists until his death in 1911. Even if some left-wing radicals went back to their native country in 1917 to work for the Bolshevik state, there were enough politically radical Estonians left in North America to continue to carry out political mischief. This was going to have far-reaching consequences.

Around the turn of the century, Estonian immigration had begun to change its character. Most earlier immigrants to North America were farmers who had settled primarily in rural areas, but new immigrants were increasingly becoming city dwellers. The first national Estonian city societies had been founded in St. Petersburg and Riga already in 1880, and were followed by Moscow in 1900, Helsinki in 1903, San Francisco in 1904, Stockholm in 1905, Berlin and Baku in 1910, Sydney in 1912, Melbourne and Boston in 1914, New York in 1916, Kiev and Harbin (in Manchuria) in 1917, and London in 1918. This trend was further strengthened after the end of the Great War when a new wave of immigrants from Estonia began to arrive. Estonian city societies of various kinds began to crop up here, there, and everywhere, e.g., in Shanghai in 1920, Copenhagen in 1922, Buenos Aires and Danzig in 1924, São Paulo, Cleveland, and Paris in 1925, Detroit in 1926, Kaunas, Los Angeles, and Vienna in 1928, Winnipeg and Brussels in 1929. (See, e.g., Raag 2018: 45–46, 53.)

The newcomers differed from the earlier Estonian immigrants: "... they were usually young and unmarried, many had secondary education, and some were university graduates or acquired higher degrees in Canada." (Aun 1985: 18). Accordingly, the aim and direction of the societies started to change. The early organisations were concerned with all areas of life in the rural settlement, or were agricultural co-operatives, cattle sale co-operatives, mutual fire insurance companies, savings and loan co-operative banks, Lutheran congregations, choirs, instrumental ensembles, amateur theatre groups, schools, and libraries. The activities of the new societies that came into being in the towns and cities maintained this general social orientation, but now often with a certain shade of ethnic or patriotic sentiment. According to the statutes of several newly established Estonian societies outside Estonia, the aims of the society were – and this is almost a direct quote from the statutes of several societies – to bring local Estonians together for social intercourse and entertainment, to preserve national traits, and to introduce Estonia and Estonian culture to the public of the country of residence (see quotes from statutes in, e.g., Neeme 1995: 3 (The Estonian Society in Melbourne, statutes from 1914); Hindo 1971: 9–10 (The Estonian Society in London, statutes from 1921); Piirvee 1975: 87 (The Estonian Society "Side" in Winnipeg, statutes from 1929); Piirvee 1975:

93–94 (The Estonian Society in Toronto, statutes from 1939); Keeleste 1955: 3 (The Estonian Society in Uppsala, statutes from 1944)).

This ethnic orientation must, I assume, be seen in light of the establishing of Estonia as an independent republic in 1918, a notable milestone in Estonian history that is likely to have increased Estonian national sentiment. On the one hand, during these times nationalism was, in addition to socialism, the system of thought that to the largest extent shaped political development. On the other hand, the increasing influence of socialist ideas manifested itself in the emergence of Estonian socialist organisations, a tendency that had already begun before the outbreak of the Great War. Estonian socialist clubs were established in New York, Boston, New London (in Connecticut), Baltimore, Elmont (on Long Island outside New York), Cleveland (Ohio), San Francisco, and Seattle. The only known Estonian socialist society in Canada appears to have been established in Bankhead, a small coal mining town near the town of Banff in the southern part of Alberta province. An attempt to create a socialist club in the Snake Lake rural settlement in the same province came to nothing, although there were radical socialist activists living there.

In the United States and Canada – perhaps also in other countries, although I have not found enough evidence to confirm this assumption – Estonian radical socialists did not confine themselves to creating separate organisations and athletic clubs, but endeavoured to dominate the existing Estonian organisations. This happened in New York and Portland (Oregon), perhaps also elsewhere. In Portland, the socialist-ruled Estonian Society joined the Estonian branch of the American Socialist Party. Thus, in many places in North America, particularly in the United States, there were two rival Estonian societies: one communist, the other non-communist. In small towns this was a serious problem, as the local community of both parties had to face the issue of the lack of members and the consequent issue of continuation. In larger centres like New York, where many Estonians lived, the situation was not quite so serious.

Further “new” Estonians

Estonia’s independence in 1918 raised tensions even higher, with the organised Estonians now definitely being divided. Some welcomed the independence of Estonia, oriented towards the independent state, and tried to further economic, commercial, and educational ties between their countries of residence and Estonia, whereas others – mainly communists – oriented towards the Soviet Union. The communists wanted to see Estonia as part of Bolshevik Russia and consequently also welcomed the annexation of Estonia by the

Soviet Union in 1940. They rallied round the newspaper *Uus Ilm* (The New World), established in New York in 1909 and with a weekly circulation of 550 as of 1925. At the end of the 1920s most of New York's and Philadelphia's Estonians were woodworkers, machine tool workers, locksmiths, tailors, masonry workers, and electricians (Tark 1929: 27). The social basis for the acceptance of left-wing ideas had therefore been rather favourable.

Although the Estonian communist associations were full of life in the 1920s and also still in the 1930s, especially in New York, they nevertheless had left the peak of their influence behind, and so in the course of time, the national, non-communist organisations managed to consolidate. The advance of the national organisations was most likely due to numerous "newcomers" arriving from Estonia as a result of the Second World War. As the "newcomers" were political refugees who had fled to the West from advancing Soviet troops, they were certainly not in sympathy with the Soviet Union. In addition, the number of Estonian refugees was large in comparison with previous Estonian migration waves to the West – approximately 70,000. This meant, metaphorically speaking, a shot in the arm, a much-needed stimulant for national Estonian organisations in the diaspora. Existing national societies were revitalised and the range of organised activities was widened, as was the geographical distribution of the network of Estonian national societies. In addition to existing and newly established local Estonian ethnic societies and clubs, umbrella organisations that represented several associations which had the same or a similar purpose were founded regionally as well as world-wide, a case in point being the Council of Estonian Societies in Australia, a member of the Estonian World Council residing in the United States. Another significant example is the Union of Estonian Scouts that united scouts and scout troops in Sweden, the United States, Canada, England, Denmark, Austria, Argentina, Brazil, and Australia – the scout movement became the most important form of organisation for young Estonians in the diaspora. The communist societies did not experience such an addition to their membership but began to fade away and ceased to exist completely during the early post-war decades.

An interval of fifty years, half a century, was to separate the arrival of the war refugees at the end of the Second World War and the emigration following the restoration of the independence of Estonia in 1991. Emigrants from Estonia now came primarily for socio-economic or personal reasons: to work, to study, or to broaden their horizons. Again, the new acquisition of manpower, if I may call it that, resulted in a remodelling of the existing diaspora society and in a redefinition of the self-image on part of the "old residents" who at once were transformed from political refugees to expatriates when Estonia regained its sovereignty. Now Estonia is no longer a closed society but is within easy reach for everybody, a development that has been facilitated

by the abolition of passport and other types of border control at the mutual borders of the Schengen Area in Europe as well as by the introduction of the Internet and social media.

Another repetitive property

In addition to the phenomenon that every new wave of migrants from Estonia has brought about a renaming of “old” and “new” residents in the new country, Estonian migration in the late modern period presents another repetitive property. The migrants of the late 19th century had sought an improvement in their living standards, that is to say that they were basically socio-economic migrants. In contrast, the following wave consisted of refugees who fled the political repression following the Revolution of 1905, whereas the migrants who left Estonia in the inter-war period were, again, people who did so principally for socio-economic, educational, or personal reasons. Then, in connection with the Second World War, it was time for new political refugees to leave their native country. They, in turn, were followed by people who half a century later, or even later, moved to the West basically for socio-economic, educational, or personal reasons.

This brings us back to the issue of circularity and raises the question of whether these properties of Estonian emigration have parallels in Latvian and Lithuanian migration history. Here I prefer, for obvious reasons, to express myself in guarded terms, but I cannot refrain from pointing out some similarities.

Significant numbers of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians seem to have moved from their native land starting in the second half of the 19th century, followed by post-1905 refugees, part of whom returned to their homeland in 1917, then the slow emigration in the 1920s and 1930s, the mass exodus in connection with the Second World War, and finally the westward emigration that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and intensified after Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became members of the European Union in 2004. This chronology, as well as the consequent circular alternation of the principal reasons for emigration – socio-economic or personal *versus* political motives by turns – is an evident manifestation of the shared political history of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians from 1795 onward.

The history of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian diaspora in the late modern era also presents some apparent differences. The great majority of emigrants from Estonian and Latvian lands in the 19th century was headed for Russia, whereas Lithuanians emigrated mainly to the United States. In this respect, Lithuanian emigrants followed international emigration patterns as

the Americas, notably the United States, at that time was the main destination for emigrants from Europe – in the 19th century some 50 million people left Europe for the Americas. During the most intensive period of emigration between 1899 and 1914, some 250,000 emigrants from Lithuania arrived in the United States, 81 per cent of whom were ethnic Lithuanians (Eidintas 2003: 56) – almost a quarter of all Lithuanians. The number of Estonians and Latvians in North America was considerably smaller, both in numbers as well as in proportion to the total number of ethnic Estonians and Latvians.

Lithuanians also preferred, to a greater extent than Estonians and Latvians, to migrate to South America – Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, and Uruguay, even if several Latvian agricultural colonies actually were established in Brazil around the turn of the century (see Gruber 1994). A major immigration of Estonians to South America did not occur until 1924–1926, when almost 2,000 Estonians left Estonia for Brazil, many to work in coffee plantations.

Another difference between early Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian emigrants is that a majority of Estonians at first chose to settle in rural areas in North America and only later tended to move to towns, or encouraged their American-born offspring to do so. In this respect Estonians were unlike Latvians and Lithuanians who immediately became city dwellers.

So even if we can point to some dissimilarities in the emigration history of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, the general impression remains that there are more significant similarities than striking differences: the chronology, the circularity, the reasons for emigration, and the countries of destination. If there is more that unites than separates the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian diaspora communities, one can wonder if the plural form *new beginnings* in the title of the Tartu conference is justified. This is what I thought when I first read about the conference. Is there *a new beginning* or *new beginnings* of the Baltic diaspora? Will each nation have its own new start different from that of the others? Will there be, at some point in the future, a new wave of Estonian emigration to Finland, in some way dissimilar to the present one as described in Kristiina Praakli's contribution to the symposium in Helsinki organised by Riho Grünthal and Magdolna Kovács? Only the stars know what the future holds.

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