

Chapter 1

Peaceful Mountain

It was mid-summer 1982. The pilot boat was pulling away from the starboard side of the *Georg Ots* (named after a deceased Soviet-era popular Estonian singer) as it passed the last small rocky island some distance from the entrance of Helsinki harbor headed south towards Tallinn, Estonia. As the ship's engines revved up to full speed, I took a final look back towards the Finnish capital as its skyline disappeared into a rainy mist. For a fleeting moment I wondered if I would be allowed to return back to freedom in a week since the Soviet Government didn't officially recognize my United States citizenship. They could, if they wanted to, detain me indefinitely.

After three gorgeous sunny days in Finland, I couldn't help but speculate whether the change in weather was an omen of things to come as I was about to return to Tallinn after a hasty and emotional departure almost four decades ago. Only at that moment did it really dawn on me that I was actually on my way home. It had still been a dream only four days ago when my wife, Betty, and I departed Salt Lake City bound for Helsinki.

A stiff wind was blowing from the east and the ship began to sway in the ten foot swells as it got further and further out into the Bay of Finland. The motion of the ferry brought back memories of days shortly after World War II when, at the age of thirteen, I spent an adventurous year at sea as a deck boy on board an old freighter. It felt great to again smell the fresh salty air and feel the might of the ocean swaying the vessel beneath my feet.

Soon, however, I fell into a trance staring at the whitecaps and the seagulls flying effortlessly just above them. I remember thinking how

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lucky the waves and graceful birds were, being able to travel unhindered by mankind's politics. At the moment all that really mattered was the fact that shortly, I would at last be face-to-face with my sister Maimu, half-sister Laine (father's only child from his first marriage), and any other relatives that would be accessible to me. We would finally be able to share all our long pent-up emotions and experiences with each other. I didn't care what the risks were.

I was ready to fill a thirty-eight-year void in my life, and I only had seven days to accomplish that feat.

Even though it was still raining and the clouds hung low, I could clearly discern the majestic skyline of my place of birth and the ancient citadel overlooking the city as *Georg Ots* slowly eased into the Bay of Tallinn and closer and closer to the people who were anxiously awaiting our arrival at the passenger terminal. I had tears in my eyes and a big lump in my throat. This captivating view had eluded me before dawn on the morning of September 19, 1944, when my father and I fled from our homeland on board a German ship overcrowded with refugees, like us, frantically trying to avoid being captured by the advancing Soviet forces. Three days later the Red Army overran the city as we arrived in Gdansk (then Danzig) Poland. The only serious incident we encountered during the voyage was being strafed by a single Soviet fighter shortly after daybreak on the first day at sea. Luckily we suffered no casualties.

After a tedious one-and-a-half-hour wait following the ship's docking, it was finally our turn to have our documents and baggage checked by uniformed Soviet border guards. Besides the unexpectedly long wait, I was extremely disheartened for one other reason. Here at last I was back on my native soil, yet I was forced to have my first human encounter with agents of the conquerors from the East. In effect, I was to experience, first hand, the continuing distressing aftermath of the secret pact signed by Hitler's and Stalin's foreign ministers on August 23, 1939.

For several minutes one of the guards was quite fascinated with the plastic bag containing twenty-five rolls of unexposed film that Betty had in her carry-on. Betty was rather amused and kept pointing at the transparent bag and repeating, "film," "film," "film." Finally, the man

motioned her to move on and asked me to open my passport. Before I could pick-up my passport, which was resting on the counter in front of me, the officer in charge jumped up from his desk in the middle of the room and grabbed my passport. I had noticed from the corner of my eye that he had been keeping a keen eye on me as the film episode was taking place.

Now with a grin on his chubby face, the head commissar began to leaf casually through my passport. At last, he muttered in Russian, "Ah, Estonets" (Ah, Estonian) loud enough for all his underlings to hear. Not one to be easily intimidated, I instantly leaned towards him as far as I could over the counter, looked directly in his eyes, and asked in Estonian, "Do you speak Estonian?"

Startled, the man grunted, threw the passport back on the counter, turned his back to me and stomped angrily away. I smiled and thought to myself, "Score one for the good guys!"

Following my encounter with the officer, the two agents manning the counter didn't even bother inspecting my belongings. One of them simply asked, "Any printed materials — Time, Newsweek, Playboy?" I shook my head and he hurriedly waved me through.

Betty and I moved to the main part of the terminal, accessible to the public through a narrow green door that immediately closed behind us. It seemed as if we had emerged from a tunnel of horrors in an amusement park. The sudden open space and bright lights were mesmerizing. Instinctively, before looking at the crowd of people waiting for the disembarking passengers, I turned to see how Betty was faring with her suitcases. At that instant, I heard several feminine voices directly behind me caringly calling, "Kalev, Kalev!" As I turned I immediately spotted Maimu and Laine leaning over a rope barrier cordoning off the area near the infamous green door, still repeating my name and each waving a bouquet of flowers, frantically trying to gain our attention.

I dropped my bags, ran to them, and embraced both simultaneously. When our cheeks met, tears were already flowing down our faces. Betty joined us within seconds and the four of us kept hugging each other

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again and again. I was immersed in an indescribable emotional high that I'd never experienced before; pure feelings running free without any need for words. Also, Maimu's compassionate smile and general demeanor reminded me so much of my mother as I remembered her when I last saw her less than three months before my ninth birthday. The three of us had been very close.

Laine, on the other hand, noticeably exhibited many of my father's characteristics which were generally less even-tempered and caring. He had passed away in 1973. Maimu's and Laine's almost diametrically-opposed temperaments and mannerisms would become quite noticeable as I got to know them more and more on my later visits. For the moment, however, their different personalities were the least of my concerns.

Maimu finally managed to ask me, with a concerned look on her face, "Are you with a tour group?" When I replied "no!" both she and Laine jumped for joy. That meant we were free to pack as much into the next seven days together as we possibly could without interference from Intourist, the notorious travel agency exclusively responsible for handling foreign tourism in the Soviet Union (Intourist was also answerable to the KGB and, therefore, responsible for reporting all unusual or unauthorized activities that foreigners might engage in.)

After we had checked in at the Viru Hotel (one of only two hotels, at the time, in Tallinn, solely reserved for foreign travelers — we were not allowed to stay overnight with any of my relatives), Maimu asked me what we wanted to do. Without a second thought, I replied that I wanted to visit mother's grave. She smiled sympathetically and said, "Let's wait until tomorrow morning, little brother (she's six years older), when we'll have more time. It's already past four o'clock." I agreed that it was a much more sensible option.

As the four of us walked up the marble steps leading to the front entrance of the Viru Hotel, Maimu pointed left to a large parking lot adjacent to the hotel where a number of taxis were parked. "That's where you were born, Kalev," she said. "It's the spot where the old Children's Hospital once stood. The hospital was torn down when they built the hotel ten years ago. Mother became a nurse after the war and

worked there until shortly before her untimely death from leukemia in April, 1952. It was a place that was very dear to her since it reminded her so much of you, her beloved son who vanished without a trace before the end of the war." What a heartrending first encounter with my long-lost past, I thought to myself.



Mother became a nurse at the children's hospital.

Mother and Maimu had desperately searched for us after the war, not knowing that we had actually made it out of the country. They even circulated ads and posters inside Estonia. They knew that on the evening of September 19, 1944, my father and I had left for the harbor, with whatever we could comfortably carry with us, from Laine's apartment, which was not far from the docks. However, from that point on there was no documentation to verify that we'd actually boarded a ship or whether we were on one of the boats sunk by Russians. We could also have been refused passage and left Tallinn harbor fleeing westward in hopes of catching passage on a fishing vessel or any number of private sailboats and motorboats located on the West coast of Estonia headed for

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Sweden. Consequently, the first indication that Maimu and Laine had that my father and I had actually survived the war is when the first letter arrived from the United States in 1957.

Registering at the Viru Hotel was another bureaucratic annoyance, but was fortunately made bearable by two young Estonian ladies who were extremely cordial and even smiled. (This was very rare during Soviet times when even store clerks would turn their backs to customers as they chatted among themselves. Why care, if your wages are low and you can't be fired?) First, the hotel clerks couldn't verify our reservations. When we finally were assigned a room we had to surrender our passports for the duration of the stay. We could get our visas back in a day, however. It was an uneasy feeling being separated from my passport, my only lifeline to the West.

Maimu and Laine would shortly tell us an amusing story about the Viru Hotel. It went like this. "The Finns were responsible for all aspects of the hotel construction except for the floors. Why? Because that's where the Soviet authorities hid the listening devices." Most people, including my sister, knew that this was no joke but reality and when Estonia finally regained its independence in 1991 that fact was officially confirmed. Today the Viru Hotel has a small museum on the top floor showing the electronics that were used to listen to the guests.

Maimu had warned us not to discuss anything in our room or in the taxi cabs that we didn't want the authorities to hear. As a result, when Betty and I returned to our room in the wee hours of the morning every day that we were in Tallinn, we managed to say all sorts of bizarre and nasty things -- playfully speaking into the showerhead, table lamps, the radio speaker, and the small light on our headboard.

We finally got to our room on the eleventh floor, having first passed a document check by our floor monitor. (In addition to the screener at the front door of the hotel, each floor also had a floor monitor with a desk by the elevator checking everyone entering and leaving the floor. In effect, only people escorted by a registered guest were allowed anywhere inside the building.) Once in the room, we discovered that we had an incredible panoramic view of the harbor and much of the medieval city

(Old Tallinn). Suddenly the bureaucratic hassling that we'd endured all seemed to have been worth the agony, at least for the moment.

Minutes later Maimu disappeared. She reappeared with extra drinking glasses and then mysteriously pulled a bottle of Russian champagne from her oversized handbag. For the next seven days, she and Laine would keep pulling loaves of bread, other bottles, smoked fish, and all sorts of other goodies and presents from their large handbags, as if they were performing acts of magic in a circus. As for now, we were told to just accept what they had gathered and not to worry where the things came from or how scarce they were. This was the first indication to us of their resourcefulness, self-assuredness and "where there's a will, there's a way" attitude. We drank several toasts to this monumental occasion.

The air in the modest hotel room, with two small single beds (more like bunks) and a desk with a built-in radio, was overflowing with electricity. Even as Betty and I proceeded to quickly unpack our suitcases, in order to be able to give Maimu and Laine everything that we had brought along for both of them (The presents were actually divided among them later in Laine's apartment.) No one stopped talking. The level of joyfulness was incredible. Words were flying in all directions at once, interspersed by my short translations of what was being said to Betty as she took pictures with a wide-angle lens camera given to us for the trip by the Salt Lake Deseret News in exchange for story rights of our trip.

Occasionally, Betty would ask after some fairly lengthy exchanges between Maimu, Laine and me, "Are you sure that's all they said?" suggesting I hadn't told her every detail of our almost never-ending chatter. She was right. I was besieged with information and it was impossible for me to convey everything that was being said or intimated. I thought maybe I could fill some of the void on our trip home.

In the midst of all the excitement I slipped gold chains and heart necklaces (which, if discovered, would have been confiscated by the border guards) around Maimu's and Laine's necks. For a rare moment there was silence in the room as they both gently touched their new

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charms in disbelief. Finally, Maimu broke the deafening stillness and said, “Do you know, little brother, legally gold jewelry belongs to the Soviet State?” That was another gut-wrenching indication of the repressive regime that they had to put up with daily. Nevertheless, they wore their necklaces proudly for the rest of our stay in Tallinn and repeatedly showed them off to other relatives who we had a chance to meet.

Before long, we were on our way in a taxi to Laine’s apartment. Ironically, we had free transportation, including a chauffeur, on several days of our visit courtesy of the Soviet Government. Maimu worked in the personnel department of a hospital and the car and its driver, a good friend, were at the disposal of the hospital director who was out of town. Of course, we had to be quite discreet in order to avoid getting the driver in trouble. At other times when we did take a cab Maimu had forewarned us to watch what we were saying because the drivers were KGB agents or informers.

In about ten minutes we pulled up to an old, green three-story stucco dwelling fairly well hidden by tall shrubs and trees. As we climbed the stairs to Laine’s third-floor residence, she tugged on my sleeve and told me not to be too shocked over the appearance of her old and rundown abode. I replied that Betty and I came to visit her, not her apartment.

I soon discovered the reason for her concern. Although the place was spotless, it was suffocatingly small and in need of repair. It had a toilet but there was no shower or bathtub. It appeared that her living conditions weren’t much better than what my father and I had encountered in the displaced peoples’ camp in bombed out Hamburg, Germany immediately after World War II. This was our first real encounter with life (survival) under “The Golden System” — a label for the Communist Regime we heard frequently during our visit.

By comparison, Maimu’s fourth-floor apartment on the opposite side of the city, which we saw the following day, while also old and in need of renovation, was larger and had a bathroom. Yet, *it, too,* was considerably smaller and more rudimentary than even the most modest American one-bedroom residence. She, however, considered herself to

be extremely fortunate to have that space. Maimu even had a telephone, which on the average took ten years to get installed. Of course, one could bribe a few key people in order to shorten the process a bit.

We settled down for the evening in Laine's apartment around a small table in her cramped living room. First we divided up the presents that we had brought along for Maimu and Laine. Essentially, most of the space in our suitcases had been taken up by these gifts. One can't imagine how happy they were to receive what to them were luxury items such as ladies underwear and shampoo, not to mention clothing, shoes and other items not readily available in the Soviet Union.



With Maimu and Laine in Laine's apartment, 1982.

We then slowly began to recount the events that had taken place in our lives for the past four decades. The conversation never seemed to stop. At times the three of us seemed to be talking all at once. In the midst of all this I kept Betty in the loop and intermittently translated her questions directed at Maimu or Laine. We shared all sorts of experiences,

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looked at photographs, dusted off old mementos and, in the process, occasionally kept hugging each other and holding hands.

Laine placed food and drink on the table without interrupting our continuing dialogue. What was placed in front of us was all the food she had in her possession. The same was true as we subsequently visited Maimu's apartment daily. While we shared memorable events for hour upon hour, there was always something to eat and drink on the table.

The food usually consisted of different types of smoked or marinated fish, a few slices of mild sausage, some cheese, cucumbers, traditional black Estonian rye bread (a special treat for me since nothing like it was available in the US), and butter. That was accompanied by Fanta (yes, orange Fanta soda), Peipsi Cola (Pepsi, spelled Peipsi for the large lake that separates Estonia from Russia), coffee (our gift), and vodka.

On two separate occasions, Maimu prepared a special treat for dinner -- bacon and eggs, and Laine baked a small pork roast she'd managed to find somewhere that we consumed with our out-of-town relatives in the hotel room. These delicacies were acquired especially for us in all sorts of ingenious and mysterious ways. We felt guilty but appreciative of this special treatment. Most of all, we enjoyed sharing the food and drink with Maimu, Laine, and a handful of other relatives.

In those days meat was an extremely scarce commodity unless you knew somebody, had something valuable to trade, possessed illegal US dollars to traffic in the black market or you were a member of the Communist Party. Put another way, everybody had plenty of rubles but there was hardly anything worth buying with them.

Maimu and Laine, for instance, hadn't been able to buy pork for two months, and ham had been unavailable for at least a year. Even sausage, one of the primary meat products, was hard to come by. People tried to predict when shipments of meat would come to a particular food store and long lines would form in anticipation. Frequently, even when a delivery was made, if an individual wasn't in the front ranks of the queue, they left empty handed. As an example, the day before we departed, my cousin, Hans, stood in line for four hours trying to buy some sausage for our final nightly get-together at Maimu's place.

Unfortunately, by the time he got to the meat counter it was already empty.

Betty and I were continuously infuriated and depressed over the intolerable economic and repressive political systems that had been imposed on these proud, ancient people who ethnically, linguistically, and culturally had nothing in common with the Russians. Standing in the middle of Tallinn it was hard to visualize that this historic city had been the capital of a democracy and, economically, the country had been more advanced than Finland before World War II.

During the next seven days we were able to fill in much of the missing details of what had happened to our families in the years since my hasty departure with my father almost forty years earlier. I discovered that my mother had been in Tallinn when we fled. Maimu was at our maternal grandparents' farm about sixty miles directly south of the city. After discovering we had departed the country, mother could probably have caught another German ship and followed us, but she had no intentions of leaving without Maimu, who was fifteen years old at the time.

Laine, her husband, Lembit, and three-year-old daughter, Maiga, had hoped to flee to Sweden on board a small sailboat. Unfortunately, they were unable to get to the boat that was some distance from the city, as originally planned. Within three weeks after the Russians occupied Tallinn, Lembit was arrested and thrown into prison. Two years later he was sent to a forced labor camp in Siberia where he starved to death shortly before his thirtieth birthday.

It was not unusual that a person like Lembit would have been arrested. Any Estonian male was likely to be detained and interrogated by the KGB, particularly those who had held civil service jobs or who had served in the military. Lembit's crime was that he had worked for the Estonian Government and was part of an investigation that attempted to determine what had happened to thousands of people who had disappeared during the initial Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941.

My aging cousin, Hans, told me that his brother had served in the army and that he also was arrested shortly after the Russians occupied

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the country. His brother was first held in a prisoner of war camp and then transferred to a labor camp not far from the capital. Unexpectedly, Hans received a call from a stranger informing him that his brother was among prisoners on board a train stopped at the main railroad station on its way to the labor camp. He hurried to the station with some food. As he neared the train he saw that the prisoners were caged in guarded cattle cars. Bribing a guard, he was able to get close to the railcar where his brother was confined. To his horror he discovered that his brother was deathly ill. Two fellow prisoners had to help him to the door of the car so that he could whisper a few last words to Hans who was then chased away by the sentries.

Later, Hans heard that his brother had mysteriously vanished from the camp. Two guards in a vehicle had been seen supposedly taking him to a hospital for desperately needed medical treatment. Ten minutes later, however, they returned without their patient. Hans is certain that his brother was thrown into a thicket not far from camp never to be seen again. Apparently the soldiers didn't feel like driving him to Tallinn, thirty miles away. Hans tried for years afterwards to track down what had happened to his brother but he ran into dead ends everywhere he inquired.

Still another cousin's husband, Karl, had spent ten years in a Siberian gold mine after being arrested and interrogated by the KGB. He had been drafted into one of the Estonian border guard regiments shortly before the country was overrun by the Soviet Forces. Fortunately, soon after his arrival at the gulag, he was assigned to the motor pool because he had a little basic knowledge about automotive maintenance (his father had owned a car before the war). According to Karl, more than ninety percent of the prisoners who worked underground didn't survive very long due to both inadequate rations and the soot from the oil lamps that ravaged their lungs.

In addition to talking about past events, we visited the old houses where our family had lived over the years. We also thoroughly toured the ancient part of Tallinn including Toompea Castle, (built on the highest point in the middle of the city and overlooking the harbor), a

number of its many beautiful churches, and many sections of the huge stone walls with their towers that surround the medieval town below the castle. As we walked mile after mile Maimu would keep repeating, "You should have seen this place before the Soviet Government made an attempt to spruce it up for the Olympics." The sailing and rowing events of the 1980 Olympics, which the United States boycotted because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, were held in Tallinn.

On a sunny afternoon, grinning from ear-to-ear, foretelling that something devious was about to take place, some of our relatives and their friends managed to drive us about fifteen miles out of the city in a red minibus that belonged to the Tallinn Fire Department (At the time the wife of Maimu's son, Peeter, was a firefighter). That was quite a special event since officially Betty and I weren't permitted to leave the Tallinn city limits. In any case, we were treated to a remarkable three-course meal at a quaint seashore restaurant operated by a local collective farm.

As we arrived we were quickly ushered to the second floor of the establishment, away from the other guests, where we had our private dinner. Making the affair even more exciting, we were told nonchalantly that the restaurant was a favorite place for Communist Party bigwigs and wedding receptions. In fact, as we pulled up a Russian bride and groom were exiting their chauffeur-driven car and we had to let them enter before we casually made our way in. For obvious reasons, I was asked to tell Betty not to converse with me in English.

After our leisurely feast we walked the cliff-lined rocky shore of the Baltic Sea for several miles in the general direction of Tallinn. We hiked long enough for Betty to completely ruin a brand new pair of shoes on the wet sand and boulders before we made the daring decision to turn inland in an attempt to catch a bus on the road back to the city. We were fortunate. Before we could reach a bus stop and take the chance of boarding a bus, a nice young man stopped and asked if we needed a ride. About forty-five minutes later he let us off by the stairs leading to the front entrance of the Viru Hotel. To say the least, we were all quite relieved that our adventure had turned out so well.

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Our first reunion in Laine's apartment lasted until 4:30 the next morning and after about three hours of sleep we were up and running again. Essentially, that became our basic routine for the remainder of our visit. During the first part of the day we would sightsee and visit old familiar places or meet in our hotel room with relatives who had come to visit us from out of town. Then we would settle down in Maimu's apartment (it was larger and more convenient than Laine's) where we would talk with our extended families until the wee hours of the morning by the light of the northern hemisphere's midnight sun. Betty and I would then take a taxi back to the hotel. Hours later we would start all over again. It was amazing how little sleep everyone needed in order to stay fully coherent and energetic during that exhilarating week in Tallinn.

The second morning was rather cool and rainy. Maimu had arranged for her co-worker to drop us off at the back entrance of the Rahumäe (Peaceful Mountain) Cemetery, my mother's resting place. The cemetery is a remarkably quiet and awe-inspiring wooded area not far from where our family had lived at the beginning of World War II. At Rahumäe, well-established family plots abound. Some are portioned off with wrought-iron fencing; others with low stone walls. I felt it was fitting that it was raining. As Betty would confide in me later, her mother used to say that the heavens cry on sad and somber occasions, such was the case at the moment. We walked a short distance to a clearing where Maimu turned left, took a few more steps and stopped. With her hands clasped and her head bowed, as if in prayer, she stood still before a well-groomed plot with several headstones and low-growing plants. When I joined her, I wrapped my right arm over both her shoulders as she pulled me closer with her left hand around my waist. Mother had been so close to both of us.

As I began to read the inscription on the white marble gravestone, Maimu whispered to me, "Here rests our mother. She waited such a long, long time for you, with a broken heart. She missed you so much." The dedication on mother's headstone reads, "Nurse Salme Ehin, 23

March 1906 to 2 April 1952 — in remembrance, the Tallinn Children's Hospital."

For a long time we stood in silence, tears streaming down our faces. This was the culmination of years of searching, wondering and worrying for both of us. I recalled what Maimu had mentioned in her last letter when she knew that we were definitely coming. She had finally told me what mother had whispered to her minutes before she passed away, "Kalev will return!" I was finally in my mother's presence. It devastated me not having been able to tell her how much I loved her before she came to her permanent resting place on Peaceful Mountain. Now all I could do was to whisper under my breath, "Mother, I'm so sorry for not having been able to return earlier. I love you. Now please rest in peace."



With Maimu at Mother's grave

Before leaving the cemetery we visited the plot where Laine had erected a large black marble tombstone in memory of her husband, Lembit, whose remains are in some nameless grave in Siberia. Laine's name is also engraved on the marble. When her time comes, she'll be laid to rest under the gravestone.

Estonians have something unique that possibly no other country in the world has — the Üldlaulupidu (National Song Festival). Estonia has been a singing nation almost since its initial conquest in 1227 by the Danes and Germans after a war that lasted for twenty years. Singing became the nonviolent weapon of choice allowing the natives to demonstrate to their subjugators that, even though they weren't in control of their own lands, they hadn't lost their identity and pride. Even as late as 1989 Estonia conducted a "singing revolution" against the Soviet Regime that had occupied the country since the end of World War II. Finally, in 1991 the Estonians were able to regain their precious freedom and independence.

The Song Festival became a national event in 1869 in the university city of Tartu. That year singing groups from every region of the country gathered in Tartu for several days to sing together instead of holding localized festivals. Somehow the affair has since survived the regimes of Czarist Russia and two occupations by the Germans and the Soviet Union.

The festival now takes place every five years in Tallinn. The main event takes place in a huge outdoor concert shell that has been built especially for the event. Around 300,000 people (Estonia only has a million-and-a-half inhabitants and 30 percent of them are now Russian) gather at one end of Kadrioru Park on a hill overlooking the enormous stage while those unable to attend stay glued to their radios or television sets. When the runner carrying the festival torch (just like the Olympic Flame, the torch passes through every county in Estonia) runs up the tower situated next to the shell and lights the cauldron on top and the choir composed of 30,000 men, women and children (you have to be at least twelve years old in order to participate) begins to sing "Dawn," the traditional opening song; there isn't a dry eye anywhere in the park.

Although I had known about the song festival for many years, until I arrived in Tallinn I was had not been aware of another song festival. The

children's song and dance festival is held every four years at the same venue. The two-hour show by young dancers ranging in age from twelve to eighteen, in their colorful native dress performed in a sports stadium, was spectacular. Nevertheless, the "Fourth of July" (Yes, on the United States Independence Day) noon parade of more than 25,000 young singers and dancers (which we viewed from our eleventh floor hotel room), and the ensuing three-hour song festival later in the afternoon was simply stunning.



The Children's Song Festival, 1982.

We sat under trees on the right side of the hill overlooking the concert shell with a number of our relatives. Stretched before us were thousands of people, some of whom were fortunate enough to have found seats on benches closer to the stage. As the festival torch was lit, 25,000 young Estonians began to sing in splendid harmony. It was

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brehtaking. At last, after thirty eight long years of absence, I actually felt that I was home again. Undeniably, at least part of me does, and always will, belong here.



With Maimu at the Children's Song Festival, 1982.

About an hour into the concert, when it began to rain and a chilling wind picked up, most of the handful of Russians in attendance began to leave, but hardly an Estonian moved. Yet it wasn't until the conclusion of this monumental event that Betty and I had one of the most moving experiences of our lives. Upon our arrival at the festival grounds, Maimu immediately noticed a major change in the printed program from previous years. The unofficial Estonian anthem (it was forbidden to sing the real national anthem), "My Fatherland is My Love," was scheduled to be sung next to last instead of as the closing number as had been the case in the past. In its place was the dreaded Soviet Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization) hymn. Maimu commented that the reason for the change was obvious. The Communist Government

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apparently thought that this switch in songs would help disperse the singers and spectators more easily at the end of the festival. The tactic didn't work and actually produced the opposite results.

At the end of the concert when the young singers began to sing "My Fatherland is My Love," everyone in the audience stood up and proudly sang along with the combined choirs in the pouring rain. Maimu and Laine were singing with tears streaming down their faces as we stood proudly beside them. It was an incredibly moving experience, but what followed was even more stirring.

As the youngsters sang the Komsomol hymn, most of the spectators began to mill around and make cynical remarks. It appeared as if the people were gathering their belongings for a quick getaway. Then as the Komsomol hymn ended the singers instantly again broke into "My Fatherland is My Love" on their own. As if on cue, the audience stopped what they were doing, faced the choir and, now quite defiantly, started to move closer to the stage as they sang along with the "rebelling" kids. When the singers finished that song they continued with other traditional Estonian folk songs, interspersed with the unofficial national anthem. Betty and I were witnessing an enormous act of defiance against Soviet dominance of the country and it was exhilarating to be part of it.

Before long, an official on the conductor's stand attempted, with waving cross-armed gestures, to stop the young people from singing. When that didn't work, they used loudspeakers to tell them that their buses were boarding. Some of the kids left the shell but were quickly chanted back by the remaining singers with, "To the stage, to the stage!" When spectators tried to join the choir on stage, they were thwarted by a line of police who now had taken positions between the shell and the audience. There was then an effort to drown out the singers by several marching bands that were located on the apron in front of the stage. That also was unsuccessful in dispersing the singers or the spectators.

As we moved with the audience towards the shell we ended up standing on a bench fairly close to the performers. For a moment I looked behind me and there, in the cold driving rain sharing an umbrella, was a young father with his daughter, who was about eight,

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singing along with everybody. They were both in tears but with their heads held high. It was one of the most vivid outpouring of pure emotions I had witnessed in my life. Laine noticed my involvement with what was happening around me and contemptuously remarked, "Well, there's one thing the authorities won't do anymore and that is to machine gun the kids off the stage." The youngsters sang, chanted and even danced for almost another hour before leaving the shell.

Betty was as caught up in this momentous event, as was I, and made sure we wouldn't forget a minute of it by snapping one picture after another. She talked non-stop to me later as we walked through Kadriorg Park with Maimu and Laine to catch a streetcar back to the hotel. Groups of young people could be heard continuing their singing throughout the park. Betty and I were overwhelmed and exuberant over the inspiring show of patriotism that surrounded us, especially by the younger generation.

It clearly indicated to us that the yearning for independence and freedom hadn't diminished during the four decades of Russian occupation. Of course, the crucial question was, "How long could the flame keep burning under the current repressive conditions?" The answer to that fundamental question was on the minds of every single Estonian that we spoke with during our visit.

As we boarded the crowded tram, a group of teenagers from the festival immediately broke into song. A few more singers joined them at the next stop as did most of the passengers, including Maimu and Laine. Having forgotten most of the words to the songs a long time ago and since we don't live close to an Estonian community in the United States, all I could do was smile at them approvingly with pride and utter, "Bravo!"

It was hard to believe that the week had passed. Time had flown by so quickly. I could have used several more weeks just to "partially" quench my thirst for more knowledge about my family and relatives and the

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inhumane social conditions that they had to endure. I also longed to have a chance to visit (clandestinely, if necessary) ancient landmarks, towns where my family had lived after the outbreak of the war, and the fortifications behind the frontline in southeastern Estonia that my father and I had helped to build shortly before we fled.

For example, I'd first met my second cousin, Hans, on the day before our departure. I quickly discovered that this tall, pleasant man and retired physics professor, who looked almost like my father, had maintained close ties with most of our relatives on my father's side of the family. Indeed, Hans was considered by many to be the clan's patriarch. He instantly became a rich source of information for me. Unfortunately, with only one day remaining, I could access only a very limited amount of his knowledge and wisdom. He did, however, give me some genealogical records dating back to the 1700s.

Hans lived directly across the street from Maimu but he couldn't invite us into his apartment because the authorities had forbidden him to do so prior to our arrival. The reason? His place was in disrepair (among other things the roof was leaking) and the government hadn't yet found the time or materials to make the necessary repairs. Thus, it would have been an embarrassment to the "workers' paradise regime" if we had seen his shabby apartment.

On the day of our departure, Maimu and Hans were the first to arrive at the hotel. Laine came a little later and pulled from her magical handbag a small roasted chicken, a loaf of black bread, butter, and a bottle of champagne. I could feel the quiet tension building as more relatives arrived and time grew short. Conversation was now subdued and in spurts. I assumed that everyone present was silently rehashing what had transpired during the past seven action-packed days, as I was.

The attitudes of our relatives and friends never ceased to amaze us. Throughout the visit they continuously showed their dry humor and wit. It had become more and more apparent to us with each passing day that they had painstakingly mastered the system under which they had to live. Hence, they approached daily events with a steely self-assurance akin to a combat veteran that seldom failed to astound us. They were not

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hesitant to confide in us about any aspects of their lives and they had so much to tell us.

They had also given us an unforgettable lesson in world politics on our first day in Tallinn. At that time, dollars or any other currency couldn't be exchanged for rubles outside the Soviet Union. This was a deliberate scheme devised by the USSR in order to maintain outlandishly favorable exchange rates against foreign currencies. Being a clueless American, I asked Maimu and Laine to wait for me in the hotel lobby with Betty while I went downstairs to the bank in order to swap some dollars for rubles so we would at least have some cab fare. I put one hundred dollars on the counter for which I received seventy-three rubles.

When I came back up to the lobby Maimu asked me where I had been. I told her I had gone to the bank since we had no local currency. Instantly, my dear sister lost her typical composure (she is usually a very calm and gracious individual who seldom loses her temper) and proceeded to severely reprimand me. First, I was told that I had just committed an "act of treason" by providing the Soviets with desperately needed foreign currency. Next, I was advised that on the street one dollar was worth between fifteen to twenty rubles. We'd learned a valuable lesson and from that moment on our relatives supplied us with all the rubles we needed and we left them most of our dollars before we departed.

Communist rule in Estonia had transformed a former free enterprise economy into essentially a barter system where self-initiative was lacking because prices were set by the state. Even medical and dental care was abysmal if one was able to make an appointment without first bribing a doctor. In addition, officialdom and bureaucracy dominated all facets of life. Both young and old officials, especially Russians, seemed to derive tremendous enjoyment from whatever little power and authority they appeared to possess. They were exceedingly smug giving the impression that the more boisterous and crass they were, the more they thought they were fulfilling their assigned tasks.

As the final afternoon drew to a close, I noticed that everybody in our hotel room was glancing at their watches as often as I was. They

were all going to escort us to the ship terminal for our trip back to Helsinki. How I dreaded the thought of saying good-bye to these folks, especially Maimu, not knowing when or if I would be able to see her again.

I could feel the tears welling in my eyes as Betty and I neared the solitary customs' door leading to the ferry. I shook hands and then embraced cousin Hans. How I had grown to love and respect that proud, gentle man during the past twenty-four hours. I then held my nephew Peeter's (Maimu's son) hand in silence for a long time as I stared up at his tear-soaked face. Next, Rita (Maimu's daughter) held me tightly and whispered good-bye to me as our moist faces touched. I kissed and hugged Laine farewell. Finally, I had to part with Maimu. We kissed lightly on the lips, as we had on the opposite end of the passenger terminal, and we hugged each other as long as we could. Words weren't necessary — feelings said it all. It was gut-wrenching to leave her behind again.

I took a final look back as Betty was about to enter the customs' door. Everyone was weeping, and Peeter, his six-foot-three-inch frame towering above the crowd and with tears running down his face, was standing there with his right hand proudly extended above his head with a clenched fist. He symbolized the determination of the entire nation to again be free. Words that I had heard repeated over and over again during our visit echoed in my ears, "We will survive!"

Part of this ancient, beautiful land was leaving with me. Besides the memories, I also had a small bag of sand from the shores of historic Ülemiste Järv (Lake Ülemiste), situated above Tallinn, given to me by my relatives.

These events took place in 1982, but this is not the whole story. After the initial euphoria faded, too many pieces of the puzzle of my past were still missing. I knew that I'd only barely parted the curtains to much of my life's mysteries. There clearly had to be much more above and below the surface that needed to be explored and discovered. Come hell or high water, I would try to return again as often as possible.

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