

ESTONIANS  
INSIDE  
AND OUT

LAURI  
VAHTRE

Original title: "Eestlane seest ja väljast"

by Lauri Vahre

Translated by Mai-Liis Napa

Edited by Chris Springer

Illustrated by Urmas Nemvalis

Designed by Lauri Tuulik

Copyright © Lauri Vahre, 2017

Copyright © Kirjastus Pilgrim, 2017

ISBN 978-9949-571-96-3

Tallinna Raamatuühikokoda

## WHO OR WHAT IS AN ESTONIAN?

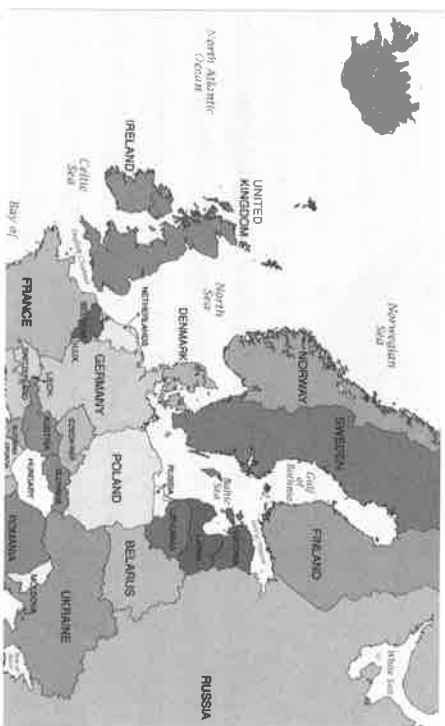
The question "Who or what is an Estonian?" might not be regarded as the most exciting one in the world. It might not rank among the truly fascinating questions such as "Who killed John F. Kennedy?" or "Does Bigfoot exist?" Most of the world's population does not even think to ask this question—let alone answer it—because most of the world has not heard anything about Estonians and probably never will until the day they die.

Philosophers have been arguing for centuries: if there is an object no one knows about—a rock, or a planet, or a rain-drop—does that object actually exist? And if it exists, then in what sense? When considering Estonians, we need not worry. People and even whole nations can be found who have touched Estonians with their own hands and heard them with their own ears. Or at least seen them from afar. So they do exist, as much as the other nations do.

To put it briefly, the average Estonian has fair skin, speaks

an unknown language, uses the Latin alphabet, and lives in the northeastern corner of Europe among one million other natives. They walk on two feet, put their garbage into plastic bags, and fill out their income tax returns in five minutes, because they live in an e-state (more on this later).

And if Estonians exist, so does Estonia—a swampy, wooded area in Northern Europe, on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea is cold and gray in summer and iced over in winter, so you can drive a car on it. (Anyone who doubts this can check past episodes of *Top Gear*.) To the east lies Russia, to the south, Latvia, and further south, Lithuania.



On this swampy area lies the country called the Republic of Estonia. It is no longer the eastern province of the Kingdom of Sweden, as it was in the 17th century, or the western province of the Russian Empire as in the 18th and 19th centuries, or the “Soviet West” as in the late 20th century.



The Estonian flag has horizontal stripes of blue, black, and white. Estonians consider it the most beautiful color combination in the world. Only one other country in the world has, for some mysterious reason, chosen the same colors: Botswana. What makes that even weirder is that Estonians think this color combination is especially crisp and Nordic—the black stripe of the forest between the snowy field and the blue sky.



The coat of arms of Estonia has three lions and goes all the way back to the 13th- or 14th-century Danes, who did both good and bad things in Estonia. It is a coat of arms like any other.

The Estonian national anthem has the same tune as the Finnish one, and this does not bother Estonians at all. The Finns repeat the fifth and the sixth line of the verse, but the Estonians do not. There are three verses, and at football (soccer) matches they sing all of them. No one expects a performance of that length—not even the Finns! When the Estonian national team plays abroad, the fans packed into the stadium listen politely to the first verse, impatiently to the second, and angrily to the third.

Estonia is not a big country—especially as cruel fate has placed enormous Russia beside it—but not microscopic either. Estonia does not have to compare itself to the Vatican but can boldly measure itself against Denmark or the Netherlands. When it comes to territory, that is. Let's not speak about population just yet. What is especially important is that, though it is small, there is plenty of space. This might be the first Estonian miracle. Afterwards, we will speak about the other ones.

One American who lived in Estonia for several years said that when driving around Estonia, there are only two possibilities: you are either driving into the forest or out of it. An Estonian would smile awkwardly at this comment, surprised to his very heart. Estonians find the size of their country, as well as the amount of forest, entirely satisfactory. If there is anything Estonians think they have an excess of, it is mosquitoes. And perhaps the outlanders brought to Estonia by the Soviet regime in the 20th century. To whom, to some extent, they have become accustomed. But there is definitely the right amount of all the other stuff.

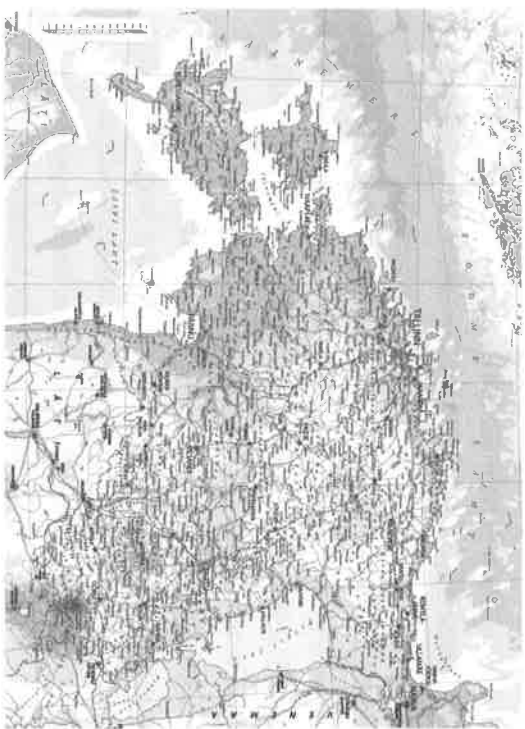
From a car window, you might not see that, apart from the forests, there are also many swamps and bogs. For a long time, Estonians thought there were too many of them and started to drain them eagerly. Nowadays they have found that swamps and bogs are of great value—there is plenty of peace and quiet there. In a sense, the Estonian nation is like the cartoon ogre Shrek. As we all know, he lived in a swamp and valued his privacy.

There are no mountains in Estonia—not a single one. There are hills. The tallest one in Estonia (the tallest, in fact, in all the Baltic States) is 318 meters above sea level. But Estonians do not care about the lack of real mountains and continue very happily to call their hills mountains. It is almost unbelievable.

As mentioned before, the traveler is either entering the forest or coming out of it when on the road in Estonia. But if he turns off the main road, he will end up in a bog. With a few exceptions. There are higher and drier places where fields spread out and villages have been built, and even some towns here and there. Estonia is actually an old sea bed, and fields lie where islands used to be. The bog between these islands was once the sea.

Estonian woods and bogs are full of bears, wolves, boars, and foxes. To ward them off, it is wise to carry a stick into the woods, or at least a bugle. The good news is that there are only a few snakes in Estonia. Three species of them can be found—one is not a snake at all, but more of a legless lizard, and the second one is not poisonous. The third one is dangerous in rare cases. There are also a lot of berries and mushrooms. Some of them can kill you, and some won't. Although Estonians have been farming for the past 2,000 years, they feel relatively confident in the forest as well. When hungry, they will catch a bear, cook it, and eat it with cranberries as a side dish. They can tell someone whom they don't like—or who annoys them—to "Go to the woods!" And when someone starts to babble, they say that he "went to the swamp and bog" with his talking. There is a double meaning when an Es-

tonian tells you to go to the woods; think again what is actually meant.



Though it is generally flat, boggy, and forested, Estonia's landscape is relatively diverse. True, there are no big mountains, but the small hills of southern Estonia can be rather charming. Vast, deserted, and foggy bogscapes. Islands on the west coast of Estonia, the sea, and coastal cliffs. And as a special treat—Tallinn's Old Town. During the Middle Ages, civilization ended here. North of Tallinn, there was nothing, except for a few Finns. Then came Lapland sorcerers, reindeer, and the end of the world.

There are other medieval towns—Tartu, Viljandi, Pärnu—but over the centuries they suffered more damage than Tallinn. Another old and beautiful town is Kuressaare, Saaremaa's

“capital.” And Narva was considered for many centuries to be the eastern frontier of civilization. From there started Russia, which no one in the West understood (and still does not understand). In Narva two towers face each other like Minas Tirith and Minas Morgul in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Let’s not start a dispute over which one is on Gondor’s side and which is on Mordor’s. The view is magnificent anyway, and surely a theory can be conjured that this is the place that inspired Tolkien’s two towers. For when creating his fictional elves’ language, he was inspired by Finnish.

As all this shows, Estonia is much more diverse than you might think by looking at the map. It is a border country in many ways. It is a land where the northern world of wizards and the aurora borealis meets Europe, but also where the current breeze brings in the sounds of the balalaika and the roaring of the ruling tsar.

The Lonely Planet guidebook series named Estonia its best-value destination for 2016 and described it as a “promised land.” You step off the boat from Helsinki or Stockholm, and you instantly understand why. The main reason given was not that you can buy cheap alcohol here, although this was mentioned, but that you can experience at a relatively reasonable price the best blend of Northern and Eastern Europe.

But this does not mean that Estonia is partly Eastern, although in some languages (such as French), “Estonia” sounds almost like “East.” Shame on those who think of Estonia as Russia or of Estonians as “almost” Russians. It is as tactless as to consider Robert Burns an English poet.

Or even more tactless. Most Scots use English as their everyday language, but the Estonian language has no connection with Russian whatsoever. Estonian is as far from Russian as English is from Sanskrit. This means that neither Russians nor Latvians understand Estonians without learning their language—and vice versa. The nearest kindred language is Finnish. Hungarians are also linguistic relatives, but this relationship is very distant and dates back to the times when Cain and Abel were best friends.

<b>Estonian</b>	üks	kaks	kolm	neli	viis	kuus	seitse	kaheksa	üheksa	kümme
<b>Finnish</b>	yksi	kaksi	kolme	neljä	viisi	kuusi	seitsemän	kahdeksan	yhdeksän	kymmenen
<b>Latvian</b>	viens	divi	trīs	četri	pieci	seši	septiņi	astoņi	deviņi	desmit
<b>Lithuanian</b>	vienas	du	trys	keturi	penki	šeši	septyni	astuoni	devyni	dešimt
<b>Russian</b>	odin	dva	tri	četyre	pyat	šest	sem	vosen	devjat	desjat
<b>English</b>	one	two	three	four	five	six	seven	eight	nine	ten
<b>German</b>	eins	zwei	drei	vier	fünf	sechs	sieben	acht	neun	zehn
<b>Hungarian</b>	egy	kettő	három	négy	öt	hat	hét	nyolc	kilenc	tíz

For those with thoughts of visiting Estonia, a short introduction to the Estonian language is in order. The Estonian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric family of languages and evolved so many years ago that it is hard to determine the exact timeframe. Vowels and consonants alternate smoothly, reminding one a bit of Japanese. Sometimes Estonians overdo it with the vowels. “Manager” in Estonian is *asjaajaja*, “edge of the ice” is *jäääär*, and “night” is *öö*. And when an Estonian understands something, he says “*aa*.” For Western Europeans the most difficult, and maybe even unpronounceable, sound is represented by the letter *õ* (a letter that does not exist in any other language); even the Finns cannot produce it. The same sound exists in Russian (marked by the letter *й*), but they cannot pronounce *й* or *ө*. However, Germans can, because their *ü*-s and *ö*-s are pronounced in exactly the same way. So there is something for everybody.

In Estonian, “cook” is *kokk* and “cock” is *kukk*. To simplify a bit: in Estonian, please call the cook a cock, and a cock a cook. In Estonian there are 14 cases—it is better not to think about it too much. But there are also advantages. There are no grammatical genders, and hence there aren’t any *he/she* problems. Second, there is no future tense. “I go to the cinema,” “I am going to the cinema,” and “I will go to the cinema” are all expressed in Estonian by the same three words: *ma lähen kinno*. Jokesters have been suggesting for the past 500 years that Estonians’ grim and hopeless situation is why their language has no future tense. According to another theory, Estonians are simply skeptics: we do not know what the future holds.

Yes, you plan to go to the cinema, but what if, on your way there, a terrorist comes and blows you up? Anything can happen. Thus it is much safer to talk about the past; even the Soviets could not change it. And that’s why Estonians typically give thanks after the meal, not before, as Christians do elsewhere in the world. There is always the possibility that someone will come and snatch your bowl of soup away.

And one more thing that makes Estonian simple—it is pronounced the same way as it is written. Just as Latin is. But while in Latin the emphasis lies on the second-to-last syllable, in Estonian it usually lies on the first one. As in Finnish and Hungarian and (because of Finno-Ugric influences) Latvian. Some people find the emphasis on the first syllable tiresome and inelegant—if not for that, they say, Estonian could sound like Italian. Estonians think the world of their mother tongue, and who would argue with them? Indeed, it has proved on several occasions to be the most suitable language for choral music.

It is important to note the linguistic differences between Estonia and its eastern and southern neighbors. Often the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—are thought of as triplets who, through some misunderstanding, have created borders between themselves. As stated before, the Estonian language is very different from the other two. And the Lithuanian and Latvian languages, although related to each other, are still so different that if you speak only one, you are unable to comprehend the other. The three Baltic nations are like Thumbelina, Cinderella, and Snow White—each from its own opera. Or, if you prefer, Spiderman, Iron Man, and the

Hulk. Besides languages, they also differ in religious background. It is true that they are all Christian, Western Christian, and in today's world, this alone sounds like a brotherhood. But Lithuanians' religious background is Catholic, Estonians' is Lutheran, and Latvians' is partly Catholic, partly Lutheran.

It is true that since the 13th century, Estonians and Latvians have mostly shared the same conquerors and oppressors. This bonds them. The Lithuanians had an altogether different history: they were once one of Europe's great powers, but in the 18th century, they ended up under the thumb of the Russian Empire along with the Latvians and the Estonians. And the rest of their history was similar to that of the Latvians and the Estonians. Maybe the mutual understanding and solidarity among these three nations was due to Soviet rule (1940–1941 and 1944–1991), which all three detested. Of course, in their populations there were collaborators as well.

All three Baltic States are small states and all three nations small nations, but there are actually three times as many Lithuanians as there are Estonians. Latvians, as always, are somewhere in between.

When Estonians are not lamenting their small population, they are making jokes about it. Or even feeling proud of it. Even they are surprised that, although their population is no larger than that of an average block in a Chinese metropolis, they still have their own country, government, and army; 10 parties; three state and two private TV channels; a zillion universities and theaters; and the one and only Arvo Pärt.

(A hint: Pärt is the most performed living composer in the world.) They also have a whole bunch of Olympic winners, a couple of Eurovision Song Contest winners, and one Oscar-nominated movie. One thing Estonians do not yet have is a Nobel Prize laureate, which saddens them immensely. But fortunately, neither do the Latvians or the Lithuanians. The Finns have a few, but they can be forgiven for that. After all, they are kinsfolk.

You can come to Estonia by plane, by boat, by car, by train, and of course, on foot. It all depends on where you are coming from and what you are coming for. British bachelors who come to kiss their bachelorhood goodbye come from London by plane or from Helsinki by ship. When they return to Britain, they normally have no clue what they did after arriving in Tallinn. Russians from St. Petersburg come by train. It has always been so, and so it will remain. Railways and Russians go together like bears and honey. After stepping off the train, Russian guests go to inspect the restaurants in Tallinn. What lures them is, in part, a little nostalgia for the Soviet era, when Estonia was considered "almost a foreign country." Now it is a foreign country, with the bonus that many waiters still speak fluent Russian. Latvians come by car or by bus. When they come by bus, they go to Tallinn; when they come by car, they go to Saaremaa, because Latvians do not have any islands, and it is very exciting for them to stay on a piece of land that is surrounded by the sea but does not rock. Finns come by ship and go beer shopping. To be fair, it must be said that a great many end up in museums and theaters too. In summer they



relocate to Pärnu. Maybe they love Pärnu because its name contains the letter *ä*, and of all the nations in the world, only Estonians and Finns can pronounce it correctly. Germans and Swedes are also familiar with the letter *ä* but pronounce it totally wrong. As for the Swedes, they arrive from Stockholm by boat. No one has been able to find out what they do next. And lest we forget, some Finnish people come by plane to Tartu. The reasons for this mysterious phenomenon still need to be investigated.

In addition to all these peoples, Germans, Americans, French, Lithuanians, Japanese, and Chinese have been seen in Estonia. And so have all the other nations of the world.