

Estonia Today

Estonian culture and language abroad

Currently nearly 160 000 Estonians live outside Estonia, which makes up about 13% of all Estonians. Approximately 40 000 of them reside in Russia; in the USA, Sweden and Canada there are about 20 000 Estonians each. These four countries are home to some 80% of expatriate Estonians. Estonian communities larger than 1000 people can be found in 11 countries.

Estonians abroad

The first extensive emigration of Estonians took place in the second half of the 19th century. Many Estonians left their home country in the hope of acquiring land. Most of them settled in farmland in Russia and North America but many went also to big cities. For example in 1917, St. Petersburg with its Estonian community of nearly 50 000 was second only to Tallinn in the number of Estonian residents.

Estonians carried on with their cultural and educational life everywhere they settled. In all centres with an Estonian community of considerable size, Estonian societies, schools and other organisations were founded. For example, two Estonian primary schools in St. Petersburg and one in Estonka village in Abhasia were founded back in 1887. Ten years later first Estonian school and Estonian newspaper were established in the USA.

During and after World War II the second extensive out-migration of Estonians occurred. During the German occupation (1941 – 1944), about 5000 young Estonian men escaped to Finland to avoid German military service. Altogether, some 70 000 – 75 000 Estonians fled both the Soviet and German occupations in the period 1939 to 1945; at the end of the war, most of them settled in Sweden and Germany.

In the early 1950's, the majority of Estonians emigrated further to Great Britain, Canada, the United States and Australia, where new Estonian societies and schools were established.

Estonian culture abroad

In general, the centres of Estonian exile activities until the end of 1930's were in Russia and after World War II in Sweden and North America. In 1944, about 1/3 of the members of Estonian Writers' Union fled to Sweden and Germany (some of them subsequently emigrated to North America). Among them were such famous Estonian authors as Marie Under, Gustav Suits, Karl Ristikivi who were also among the founding members of the Estonian Exile Writers' Union, established in Stockholm in 1945. Estonian authors abroad between 1944 and 1986 published some 2,600 works, including more than 800 original new works (fiction, poetry, essays, and memoirs).

Estonian musical life abroad has been diverse as well. The Stockholm Estonian Male Chorus was established back in 1944 and since 1948, Estonian Song Festivals have been conducted regularly in Sweden.

The best known Estonian choir in the USA is the New York Estonian Male Chorus, founded in 1950. In 1956, the Estonian Centre of Musical Art was established in New York.

In Canada, the Toronto Estonian National Theatre and the Montreal Estonian Theatre have staged several Estonian musicals. The Toronto Estonian Male Chorus and the Toronto Estonian Mixed Chorus are also well known to Estonians in Canada.

Estonian language theatre troupes operate and perform in Stockholm and New York as well.

Ernst Idla, the renowned Estonian gymnastics educator, lived and worked during his last 36 years in Stockholm, achieving world fame with his gymnastics school and the performances of his gymnastics teams. In Stockholm in 1977, the IDLA Centre for Women's Gymnastics was opened.

A number of Estonians living abroad today are world famous. Composer Arvo Pärt and professor of linguistics Els Oksaar live and work in Germany. In the USA, there is Kalev Mark Kostabi, a renowned painter with his art centre in New York; as well as orchestral conductor Neeme Järvi and his two sons; not to mention top-ranked model Carmen Kass. In Sweden, pianist Käbi Laretei is widely popular.

Schools in Europe, Northern America and Australia

Most of Estonian schools abroad are supplementary schools aimed at teaching the Estonian language and culture to young Estonians living abroad. In some countries (e.g. in Sweden, Canada and Australia) state funds are allocated to Estonian schools and for language acquisition.

In 1988, 24 Estonian schools worked in Sweden whereas 7 schools operated in the USA and Canada, taken together. The restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991 sparked new interest among young people in learning Estonian.

In Canada, many schools have been operating for a number of years. For example, the Montreal Estonian School and the Estonian Supplementary Primary School in Toronto recently celebrated their 40th anniversaries. The Estonian Secondary School in Toronto has been working for more than 25 years.

Since 1979, the Estonian language has been included in the national educational system in Australia, where minority language schools work in Sydney and Melbourne.

Schools in Russia

After the Revolution of 1917, there was a period during which Estonian schools were actively being established in Russia. However, a number of them soon closed their doors. One reason was economic hardship, another was a shortage of teachers. Many schools were forced to close because of the Soviet Union's hostile policies towards ethnic minorities.

From 1940's to 1990, more than 40 000 Estonians lived in Russia. They did not, however, have their own schools, cultural societies or newspapers.

Liberalisation within the Soviet Union, starting in 1988, made the establishment of national cultural societies and schools possible once again. For instance, an Estonian Primary School was established in Moscow in 1990. Because of a lack of students, it was closed in 1995. At present, the Estonian Society in Moscow and in St. Petersburg, with financial support of the Estonian Ministry of Education conduct regular multi-level courses of Estonian.

The Estonian Societies also conduct regular so-called Sunday Schools for Estonian children living in Moscow and St. Petersburg. During the 1999/2000 session, only one Estonian school was operating in Russia: the 2nd Secondary School of Petseri (a small town close to the Estonian border) with an enrolment of 30 pupils.

The village of Upper-Suetuk in the Krasnojarsk region was, at the end of the 19th century, one of many Russian villages, which became a new home for emigrated Estonians. For more than 100 years, this village has maintained its Estonian identity: in 2000, the Estonian Ministry of Education sent a teacher of Estonian to a secondary school of Upper-Suetuk, as Estonian is the home language of almost all of the 40 pupils who attend this school.

Estonian schools working abroad in 1999:

- **Canada.** The Estonian schools in Toronto (where more than 2000 pupils have graduated over the past 50 years, either at primary or secondary levels) and the Estonian Supplementary School in Hamilton.
- **USA.** The Centre of Estonian Schools and the Estonian Schools in Baltimore; Connecticut; Lakewood, New Jersey; Los Angeles and New York. In the USA, approximately the same number of pupils have attended Estonian schools as have in Canada.
- **Sweden.** The Stockholm Estonian School (where currently 171 children are studying in 9 classes and which has taught about 1 500 children since 1944) and the Estonian Supplementary School in Lund. The Institute of Estonian Language and Literature (founded in 1959) conducts regular multi-level courses of Estonian in Stockholm. Another important

Estonian school in Sweden was the Göteborg Estonian School, which operated between 1960 and 1994.

- **Latvia.** The Estonian primary school in Riga was functional in the periods 1908-1914 and 1921-1940. It was re-established in 1989 as an independent school called the Riga Estonian School. It enjoys the status of a secondary school, and 130 students altogether attend. The language of instruction is mostly Latvian, but Estonian is taught as the primary foreign language. The school operates under the jurisdiction of and with financial support from the Latvian Ministry of Education.
- **Russia.** The Estonian Secondary School in Petseri, where 30 pupils attend.

Teaching of Estonian in higher educational institutions abroad

Estonian is taught at higher educational institutions in several countries, most comprehensively in the following:

- **Finland.** The Estonian language is taught most extensively at the following Finnish universities: Helsinki, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Oulu, Tampere and Turku, where it is compulsory for all those studying the Finnish language. The instructors are mainly visiting Estonian lecturers.
- **Sweden.** The curricula of the universities of Lund and Uppsala include Estonian at three different levels. Academic degrees also may be conferred in the Estonian language.
- **Canada.** The Chair of Estonian Studies was founded at the University of Toronto in 1986. It offers 4 Estonian-related courses annually. For more information visit <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/estonian/index.htm>
- **Germany.** Estonian is taught at the following universities: Greifswald, Hamburg, Kiel, Munich, Münster.
- **Russian Federation.** Most of the following universities have separate faculties or departments of Finno-Ugric languages: Mari El State University, Mordva State University, Petrozavodsk State University, Söktövkär State University and Udmurt State University.
- **Hungary.** The Estonian language is taught as an academic major at the University of Budapest. It is also taught at the Universities of Debrecen, Miskolc and Szombathely.
- **Austria.** At the University of Vienna, there is a separate department of Finno-Ugric languages.

Estonian societies and the Estonian World Council

Estonians living abroad have formed communities in many countries. These communities include relief organisations, sports clubs, various cultural and scientific societies and youth activities. For example, in Sweden, about 100 Estonian organisations are currently active, including the Estonian Committee, the Union of Estonians in Sweden, the Estonian Cultural Society and the Estonian Institute in Stockholm (a branch of the Estonian Institute in Estonia). Estonian Houses, which

function as important centres for preserving and developing the Estonian heritage, operate in a number of cities in several countries. Estonian language newspapers and other periodicals are published in many countries as well.

Estonian communities around the world elect central councils, which, in turn, send representatives to the Estonian World Council. The Estonian World Council was founded in 1952 to co-ordinate the political activities of the exile Estonian community. At present, the organisation consists of eleven members: the Estonian central councils in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Russian Federation, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States.

World Conferences of Estonians

At the end of 1960's, Robert Kreem of Toronto initiated the idea of organising a World Conference of Estonians. In 1972, the first World Conference of Estonians, or ESTO-festival, was held in Toronto. After that, the ESTO-festivals have been held every 4th year in various cities in the USA, Canada, Australia and Sweden.

The ESTO of 1996 was the first held concurrently in Tallinn and in Stockholm. The latest ESTO was held in Toronto in the summer of 2000. The ESTO-festivals typically include concerts, theatre performances, art

exhibitions, literary evenings, academic and other seminars, and so forth.

More information on Estonian culture and language teaching abroad:

- A list of Estonian societies around the world can be found at http://www.eestimaja.ee/eesti_majad.html
 - The Educational Research Centre of Tallinn Technical University: <http://www.haridusuuringud.ttu.ee/>
 - Estonians in North America 1954-1991: <http://www.estemb.org/namerica.html>
 - From A to Z about Estonia: <http://estonica.einst.ee>
Comprehensive source of information about Estonia, its nature, state and society, economy, education, language and history.
 - The Estonian Central Council in Canada: <http://www.ekn.ca/>
 - Estonians in Sweden: <http://www.estemb.se/eng/Sweden/estonia.htm>
 - Estonians in Ukraine: <http://www.estemb.kiev.ua/eng/index.htm>
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