

Mapping the Estonian Exile Sports in the Estonian Sports Museum

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Although Estonia is a small state and there is just one million of Estonians in the world, we can proudly call us a sports nation. True, it is difficult to verify the statement, but an average Estonian seems to respect and know more of sports than an “average citizen of the world” in general.

And it is not the guilt of Estonians that a considerable part of their sports activities have been conducted outside the borders of their homeland. Certainly, it is the tragedy of small nations that they often remain in the way of the big and become toys of the world politics. Of course, Estonians have left their historical homeland for various reasons but the greatest and the most tragic leave of World War II took at least 70,000 Estonians as political refugees to Germany and Sweden.

Today the number of foreign Estonians – i.e., Estonians living permanently outside Estonia – is much more than 100,000, while the biggest communities are in Russia, the USA, Canada, Sweden and Finland. Considerable Estonian communities are in more than ten states all over the world (http://www.vm.ee/est/kat_194/883.html).

Estonian sports activities in the world

Although existent to some extent before, the organizational and social life became livelier after World War II. There were issued Estonian publications, there were established schools and clubs. These developments concerned also the sports life. First organizations emerged in Europe, later also in the New World where Estonians actively moved to in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Getting organized on the national principle was first definitely influenced by the expectation and hope of the sportsmen to still represent Estonia on the international arena. Aarand Roos who has studied the history of Estonian exile sports has pinpointed the situation Estonians found themselves in their new countries of residence as that of a Flying Dutchman or of an outlaw (Roos 1996). Those who have no real homeland in their background cannot go to the international arena!

Estonian sportsmen in exile tried to compete as representatives of Estonia on many occasions – like in the 1947 Stockholm shooting world cup or the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. Unfortunately it turned out to be impossible and soon they realized that the only solution would be to adopt the citizenship of their new homeland and participate in the international sports life this way. So the skier Juku-Johannes Pent, representing Germany, is the first Estonian to take part in the Olympic Games after World War II – in 1952 in Oslo. However, many talented sportsmen did not have a chance in those confusing times just because they did not have a citizenship.

To express their national feelings, the national sports societies were formed. There were competitions with refugees from other countries – among others the Baltic exile championships, numerous protest Olympics, etc. (Roos 1996). In many places (like in North America) there had been Estonian sports societies already before, and after World War II these were added by new ones. Bigger and stronger clubs were and are, for example, the

Toronto *ESS Kalev* (led by Elmar Hermann, the last chairman Ilmar Vaikla), gymnastics clubs *Ritmika* (Anneli Riga, Siina Kasekamp) and *Kalev-Estienne* (Evelyn Koop) et al in Canada; the Idla-Center established by the legendary gymnastics teacher Ernst Idla in Stockholm and the Stockholm *Eesti Kalev* (Aleksander Paluvere) in Sweden; sports club Estonia (Ants Holland) in Australia, etc. Besides, there were sports clubs attached to many national societies and unions of a wider field of action.

To coordinate their activities, blanket sports unions were formed: the Estonian Sports Union in Sweden was established in 1950, in Australia in 1953, and in the US in 1954. The fields practiced by Estonians were (are) numerous and the choices multiple: beginning with track and field, basketball, volleyball, and ending with yachting, chess, golf, motor sport and tennis. In many cases Estonians have been the pioneers of the country in the field: like with rhythmic gymnastics in Canada (Helene Tiidus and Evelyn Koop; Lääne 2000: 121), or in New Zealand (Emmy Tökke-Belwood; Lääne 2000: 75), or orienteering in Canada (Aleksander Peepre; Lääne 2000: 174).

Sports periodicals in Estonian were published too. The journal “Sporditeel” issued by the sports union of Australian Estonians came out in 1960, being for years the only Estonian international sports magazine in the world (Selge 1988).

Traces of Estonian exile sport

The peak of the sport life, initiated in the 1940s-1950s with momentum, was reached in 1960s-1970s. What followed was a quiet retreat and fade. It is but natural – with time many enthusiastic pioneers have passed away. The new generation, however, is often integrated better in the local life and the societies formed on the national principle have to close down.

Here comes the question: what to do with the material reflecting the busy exile activities and the archives of these societies? True, we know well that there are many Estonian archives in the world (in Australia, in the US, etc), but these have no direct sports’ departments. Sometimes, the conditions for preservation are not the best either. Or, it happens that the material stays just loose because there is no good place to keep it.

In the homeland the exile sports has always been topical, earlier in secret, but since the restoration of Estonia’s independence it is public. At first, however, little was known about what had been going on outside. The window was opened by and large by the book “The Estonian Exile Sports” (“Välis-Eesti spordielu”) by Tiit Lääne published in 2000. The man of letters Vaapo Vaher reviewed it as follows: “The sports historian Tiit Lääne has performed a tiny miracle – with one stroke he has opened quite a new world for us. The effect is like that in the late 1980s when we here, at home, discovered all of a sudden the Estonian exile literature. The monograph “The Estonian Exile Sports in 1940–1991” by Tiit Lääne makes one first gulp for air and ask: why did I not know about it all before? (Vaher 2000).

The tasks mentioned here are the functions of the Estonian Sports Museum (ESM). The statute of the Estonian Sports Museum in Tartu establishes it as the Estonian central museum of sports, sports culture and sports history that is to collect, preserve, analyze and make public the materials related to the physical culture and sports of Estonia and its people.

In addition, the sports museum today serves as a multifunctional centre of culture with its permanent exhibition “Hortus Athleticus” supplemented by various exhibitions, conferences, seminars, meetings, etc, publishing activities, a library with a reading hall open for the public, and activities where children can get not only informed but also participate.

The museum functioning on societal basis was established in Tartu in 1963; the ESM became a state museum in 1967, its first permanent exhibition was opened in 1971. By today the collections of the sport museum have almost 120,000 items of sport history while about 4,000 of them are related to the exile sports.

The sports museum, of course, looked for contacts with people behind the iron curtain also earlier and had them. As a result the material – documents, photos but also objects – has gradually reached the museum. Among the first were the records and photos of the trainers Helene and Arvo Tiidus from Canada, and the material sent by the swimming coach Mai Kreem, also from Canada. We also have the objects and cups of the well-known sportsmen Alfred Maasik, Hans Moks, Eduard Pütsepp, Ago Neo, Anton Raadik et al. And last but not least – perhaps the material of greatest value so far is in the archives of Ernst Idla and Reino Sepp.

We developed slowly the conviction that the subject and the field is topical and necessary, waiting to be studied. In 1996, at the 9th regular conference of the museum, one of the topics was the Estonian exile sports. We had papers from both homeland and abroad.

The same year we opened for the public the exhibition “Moments of Estonian Exile Sports Life” displaying the material and the knowledge we had by the time. These projects helped the museum understand how little we know of the field, making us aware of the need for a systematic approach.

The renovation of the new home of the Estonian Sports Museum (Tartu, Rütli Street 15) was completed in 2001, facilitating the task. In 2004 there was launched the project “Mapping the Estonian Exile Sports” conducted in collaboration with the Society of the Estonian Sports History (ESAS).

The ESAS, established in 1989, is the organization uniting people interested in the history of sport in Estonia. By today it has over 100 members, including Estonians living abroad. The major goal of the society is to promote the research of sports history in Estonia and to help the sports museum in its work.

Mapping the Estonian Exile Sports

The goal of the project is to collect material on the sports and sports history of Estonians in exile, and to compile the corresponding database. The material is collected in accordance with the principles valid in the ESM, i.e. of primary importance are the materials of international competitions, sports equipment, sportswear, cups, materials related to celebrities, and the sports publications.

The database mentioned includes the people and organizations from all over the world that have demonstrated the vitality of Estonians in the field of sports. Right now the database is in our computers and correspondence but the further plans are greater. In future we hope to make it a part of the database of the museum collections. On the one hand, it is meant to be used by researchers and people interested in sports, on the other hand, it will be accessible via the Internet. Of course, it has to correspond to KVIS, the information system of cultural heritage, and its updated version, the information system of museums that aims at making the museum heritage accessible for a wide range of users maintaining at the same time the safety of the information. In other words: it is important to realize that we want to be part of a greater system and have no plans to build an isolated database.

The project includes field trips to the major settlements of Estonians all over the world, contacts with sports veterans and their relatives, and Estonian sports organizations; we collect memoirs, interview sportspeople, try to have new records for our collection and the database.

There have been numerous seminars and exhibitions, like the days to commemorate the exile sport historians Reet Howell-Nurmburg and Reino Sepp, an exhibition of sports trophies of Canadian Estonians, etc. The greatest steps of major importance were the trips to Canada (Toronto) in summer 2004 and to Sweden (Stockholm) in autumn 2005.

The first stage of the voluminous project will be summed up by a conference at the Estonian Sports Museum; we will also issue publications and have a big exhibition on the Estonian sports in exile.

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