Estonian Museums in Changing Times

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The Estonians are a small nation. Therefore, our relationship to our own culture is to a certain extent different from that of the big nations. The peculiarities of one's own culture are mainly perceived through comparison with others. The wave of national awakenings reached Estonia in the middle of the 19th century. By that time some Baltic-German organizations of an enlightening character had emerged, mainly focusing their attention on native people — the ones whose ethnic ancestors had lived in Estonia long before the Germans, Danes, Swedes, Poles, and finally, the Russians had reached here. The main policy of alien authorities was to occupy our strategically and commercially important territory. The best means for achieving this was war. In the course of these conquests, attention was mainly focused on towns and churches; the changing of the everyday lives of the local people was not particularly in anybody's sphere of interest. As a result, two relatively different kinds of living conditions and ways of life existed side by side — on the one hand, the traditional culture of Estonian peasants and town craftsmen, and on the other, the European culture characteristic mainly of Baltic-German nobility and bourgeoisie.

If we tried to describe these two different communities in museum categories, we could say that the first one represented a living open-air museum with its ethnographic look and folklore; the other a specimen of manor architecture with its art collections, and town architecture with the relics of a bourgeois way of life.

Specialized museums such as open-air farm museums, fine arts museums, town museums, literature museum, sea museum, etc., have been set up on the basis of collections of this kind. However, these two different communities could not exist independently from one another. They were in permanent touch and exerted mutual influences on each other. These interrelationships must also be reflected in museums. In Estonia, such complex museums of a generalizing character are the Estonian National Museum in Tartu and the Estonian History
Beheading sword of the Court of Tallin from 1525 (R 1683). The blade is inscribed near the hilt: «Gottes gnadt un trew ist alle morgen new. Wann ich das schwert auf thu heben. So helf dem sunder ins ewige leben».
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Museum in Tallinn; on a regional scale, it is the task of central county museums.

How has the role of these different museums developed in Estonia and how have different ideologies influenced museums? Being a part of the Russian Empire, Estonia was a state with a market economy, under the conditions of which the European Baltic guberniyas (provinces) were relatively prosperous. Historical memory was considered important both in families and in privileged organizations.
Therefore, up to the middle of the 19th century private collections were mainly represented by the art and memorabilia collections of the nobility and the bourgeoisie. Alongside these, the archives and various collections of Baltic-German knighthoods were very important and the share of humanitarian academic societies gradually increased. Although up to then everything had been carried by the Baltic-German spirit, the so-called Estoflic interest also became popular by the middle of the century. It was mainly on the initiative of the Tartu University professors that the research into the history, language, and culture of Estonians was started. The enlightened circles found it very exciting because of the abundance of ethnographical colours and ornaments as well as original folk songs. From the materials gathered collections were composed, and as a number of academic organizations became national in their orientation, Estonians also predominated in them. In addition Estonian became the official language. At the turn of the century, the Learned Estonian Society, the Estonian Students’ Society, and the Estonian Penmen’s Society were some examples of this kind of circle. A number of interesting ethnographical objects had been collected. On the initiative of Dr. Jakob Hurt, one of the most outstanding leaders of the National Awakening Movement, the collecting of folklore had been initiated, the scope of which was something Estonians could really be proud of. The organizations possessed libraries remarkable for their size and content. Dr. Jakob Hurt had been one of the leading figures of the most important national organizations as well as the initiator of collecting work. So it was only natural that after his death it was decided that everything collected up to that date should be assembled in the Estonian National Museum to symbolically commemorate his life work. This kind of joint museum was founded in Tartu in 1909. The official Russification policy of that period could not destroy initiatives like that as, in spite of official propaganda, the Russian cultural veneer remained negligible and various cultural initiatives from the Empire gained no impetus. The most valuable cultural treasures were preserved in the more vital Baltic-German organizations.

The Estonian War of Independence against Russia and the so-called Landeswehr War against Germany waged at the same time resulted in the proclamation of the first independent state in the history of Estonia. From the very beginning, the young Estonian Republic took a very serious attitude towards the preservation of its cultural heritage and the coordination of museum work as well as the work done for the preservation of national heritage. The independent state had risen out of cultural independence; therefore, cultural and educational work were to become the mainstays and guarantees of the independence of the state. It was Jakob Hurt who had pronounced the following idea: "If we are not able to become big in strength and number, we must become great in spirit."

In addition to the generally favourable attitude and financial support, state policy brought about essential changes in the life of museums. Larger museums were also academic establishments. An essential impetus to the supplementing of museum collections was provided by the land reform as well as the fact that under
changing circumstances, many families of German origin left Estonia. Parts of their collections were handed over to museums and the University of Tartu as donations, others were sold and later on still reached museums through private collections. All these changes were reflected, first and foremost, in the Estonian National Museum. The post of the director of the museum was linked to the professorship of ethnography at the university, which meant a higher academic status and recognition for the museum. It also ensured that from this time on, in the main qualified staff were employed at the museum. A young Finnish academic researcher Ilmari Manninen became the first director of the museum. On the basis of progressive museological experience acquired in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe, he was able to train a school of academic museum workers. This traditional school can even be traced down to the present day. Although during the years of occupation many well-known museum workers were repressed, the classical principle of systematizing collections and regulating museum work remained in force in our museums. The mingling of Baltic-German art collections with the ones preserved in state and later on also in county museums actually meant the interfusion of both essential facets of Estonian cultural heritage, enabling them to demonstrate national culture in its entirety. And again it was the Estonian National Museum - housed in Raadi Manor formerly belonging to the von Liphardt family - that became symbolic, associating Estonian peasant culture with the interior of Baltic-German manor architecture and other cultural-historically important objects and works of art. The heart of Estonian museum life had remained in the university town of Tartu. The Estonian Fine Arts Museum and the Provincial Museum (the Museum of History of Tallinn), mainly acting as German museums, became the most important ones in the capital, Tallinn. By 1940, the overall number of registered museums in the Republic of Estonia was 39.

The first period of Soviet occupation in Estonia lasted from midsummer 1940 to midsummer 1941. As the Soviet chauvinist ideology considered historical tradition and national state of mind very dangerous, the new authorities made thorough changes in the work of the museums. First of all, the property of all private museums was nationalized. A number of organizations engaged in preserving cultural heritage were closed down and their property was nationalized. The objects left behind by the people who had been deported to Russia were handed over to the museums. Commissars were nominated to administer museum work. The collections of a number of larger museums were redistributed. So, for example, the collections of the Estonian National Museum were divided into several parts, and two more museums were set up on the basis of them in addition to the aforementioned one. On the basis of the collections of the Provincial Museum, the State History and Revolutionary Museum was established. Some of the collections were again distributed among other museums. The Soviet authorities were of course tracking down the symbols of national history. Fortunately, people managed to hide some of them. So, for example, the members of the Estonian Students' Society were able
to hide, under the floor of a farmhouse, the first flag of the society which was at the same time historically the original Estonian national flag dating from the year 1884. Up to the Soviet period, the flag had been preserved at the Estonian National Museum. After regaining independence, this national symbol was again handed over to the same museum in 1993.

During the German occupation which started in the summer of 1941, the organizational rearrangements were insignificant. On the initiative of the local self-government materials pertaining to the history of the Republic of Estonia were handed over to central museums; the Estonian National Museum, for example, received a great number of medals and badges. Under war conditions, some museum buildings were converted into military bases for the German army, which meant endangering them as they became strategic targets. When the Soviet Army was again nearing the Estonian border in 1944, the collections of a number of museums were evacuated to the countryside where they were not so greatly endangered, but, on the other hand, the storage conditions were not so satisfactory. In conclusion it can be said that due to the selfless activity of museum staff, most of the treasures were rescued from the disaster. The transportation of the most valuable museum treasures to Germany was also hindered.

By the end of World War II a number of Estonian museums, including the Estonian National Museum, had lost their buildings in the holocaust. Now, as the Soviet state became the owner of all the buildings, by rule, replacement rooms were found for the collections. At the same time, the attitude towards national history was essentially ironic. So, museums had to be content with rooms that were actually unsuitable for their purposes. As religious organizations were persecuted in the Soviet society, church buildings were used as storage rooms for archives and museum collections. This kind of unethical act was actually not the greatest insult the churches had to endure, for their buildings were even used as storage space for flour or as sports halls.

The new waves of repression were accompanied by a tendency to assemble requisitioned property in the museums. In this way, much of the property of the victims of the 1949 mass deportations came into the possession of museums. At present the authorities of the Republic of Estonia are trying to solve the complicated ownership problems which have arisen from this injustice. As a rule, objects, documents, and books will be returned to their former owners. At the negotiations conducted with the Russian delegation, the Republic of Estonia is demanding the restitution of museum treasures taken to Russia during times of war. Among them the most important ones are the art treasures taken to Voronezh during World War I and the properties of the Estonian Postal Museum (later the Communications Museum) taken to Leningrad (St. Petersburg) by the Soviet authorities.

During the ideological pressures of the 1950s, when the museum collections, especially the photo, medal, and flag collections, were purged of 'unsuitable' material, most of these treasures had to be concealed — i.e. preserved without cataloguing.
The common tendencies of the ideological empire – centralizing, changing of names and the cult of so-called correct history established by the censor – were also evidenced at Estonian museums. Undoubtedly, the transfer of museum collections and staff to the capital, further from the university, was to weaken and splinter the contribution museums made to educating the nation. As all over the Soviet Union, the museums in Estonia also had only two messages to convey: first, culture is socialist in content and national only in form, and second, only officially recognized people suited to joining the common revolutionary fight, are worthy of commemoration and memorial museums. The displays dedicated to the independent Estonian state disappeared almost completely from the expositions of central and local museums, and the figures who had established and developed the independent state were erased from history. The writers and artists who had defected or at least remained neutral, were remembered to some extent. Ethnography and some historical figures had to be pressed into the service of the slogan that culture was socialist in content and national in form.

However, the historical memory of the people had already been in existence long enough. A certain methodological scheme for museum work had been developed, and it was not changed. The museum as quite an exacting and traditional institution continued to function in Estonia even during the years of the Soviet occupation. As the nomenclature of historical events and figures that can be followed by people has now changed, it is increasingly important for people to become acquainted with real history.

The general experience of systematizing and displaying collections exists. Just now the primary task of Estonian museum workers is to achieve parity with the level of contemporary Western museology, especially in the scientific sphere, in order to be able to document present time which will soon become history. If more effective financial possibilities arise for constructing new museum buildings and improving conservation conditions, progress will be possible. One more thing that is necessary in the contemporary world is to re-establish and expand the pre-war contacts between the Estonian museums and those abroad.

Undoubtedly, all the previous stages of history have added something essential to culture. Now when the Russian occupation in Estonia has come to an end, we realize that quite a few things that happened during those years in the life of Estonian museums have become productive. A number of quite important museums have been founded and their network has been expanded considerably. All the 145 registered active museums have the opportunity to seek for their chances in the changing economic conditions - the collections they possess are interesting enough to educate Estonians themselves as well as attract our visitors. Welcome to our museums!

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