

ON THE LATVIA-BASED ESTONIANS

This study focuses on the Estonians living in Latvia, on their history, culture and language. Former inhabitants of the Luts (Ludza) linguistic “enclave” in Latvia, the Estonians in Latgale have become extinct, as have the Koiva (Gauja) Estonians, also known as the Leivu people. Today, the remainder of the Estonians in Latvia are rapidly becoming assimilated with Latvians and Russians.

Of the 2,677 Estonians living in Latvia in the year 2000, a total of 1,024 lived in Riga. In 1999, the Estonian population in Aluksne still totalled 309, that of Valka 139, while 102 persons lived in the Limbaži region and 172 in the areas surrounding Riga.

Re-established in 1988 and 1989 respectively, the Estonian society *Eesti Selts* and the school *Riia Eesti kool* will hardly be able to prevent the Latvian Estonians from becoming assimilated. The main emphasis of my study is on the history, language and culture of the present-day Latvia-based Estonians, as well as on their assimilation. The language of the Latvian Estonians has not been studied systematically, and the approach to language applied in this study is mostly socio-linguistic. The Estonians living in Latvia mainly speak a southern variant of Estonian (Võru), which does not differ significantly from the Võru spoken in Estonia. A systematic linguistic research on the Estonians living in Latvia remains to be done, and the respective immigration and demographics also call for a separate study. Today’s Latvia is such a multicultural country that the Estonians, being so small a minority, are easily swamped by the rest of society and have no choice but to assimilate. The Latvians accept the Estonians as a minority only if they know the Latvian language and act according to the rules set by the Latvians. Indeed, the Latvians have never granted minority rights to the Estonians, and it is therefore unlikely that they will be defined as an official minority in the future, either. They are simply too few to constitute a minority, and in the present-day Latvia there are other, larger minorities with no minority rights, such as the Russians, Ukrainians and the Poles. For political reasons, current Latvian legislation does not recognise the concept of “minority”, nor do any minorities exist from a legal point of view. The term used in this context is “ethnic group” which, according to the legislation, has certain defined rights, such as the right to establish cultural societies, newspapers and schools. In fact, these rights mean that the minority or ethnic groups have been granted some degree of cultural autonomy.

The original Estonians living in what is today Latvia were the Leivu people. The Lutsi people were brought as serfs to the Ludza area in the 18th century. In the 1860s, the Estonians moved to the present-day Latvian-Estonian borderland area, mainly because in this area there was still land available for them to buy. They went to Riga and other industrial cities of the Russian empire to earn the money for the land. However, agriculture did not offer a means of livelihood to

all young Estonians, and some of them had to establish themselves in Riga to find work there.

The Riga Estonians can be defined as immigrant workers. They started to move there in the 1880s and took jobs at the Riga factories, attracted by better wages and circumstances. The languages used in the factories were Russian and German, spoken to some degree by many Estonians. They worked mainly in the Pardaugava textile and metal-working factories. Many women found work as servants.

The first Riga-based Estonian association was the Estonian choral society *Imanta*, founded in 1880. However, the workers found that it was too bourgeois and German in character. In the year 1900, Mihkel Pihlatamm, a smith employed by the Lange shipyard, founded *Riia Eesti Karskusselts*, i.e., the Estonian Temperance Society. *Riia Eesti Hariduse ja Abiandmise Selts* was founded in 1908 as a cultural society for all Riga-based Estonians. Initially, the society had some temperance-associated aspirations which, however, were fairly soon forgotten. The society also founded an Estonian school, with the objective of teaching the Estonian language and culture to children. Surrounded by a foreign environment, the children's Estonian skills remained, however, very modest, and the Estonians were fairly rapidly assimilated. The society also had its own library, a choir and a theatre group.

The immigration of the Estonians took place within the country's borders, so that there are no specific records about it, except for the congregational records of the population moving into a parish. However, it is impossible to calculate the number of Estonians on the basis of their names in the books, since the Estonians also had German, Slavic and Latvian surnames. In Riga, there were two Estonian congregations, one Lutheran and the other Orthodox. However, only a small fraction of the Riga-based Estonians were members of the Lutheran congregation. Due to their relatively low social status, the Estonians had no political or economic influence in Riga.

However, many of the leading men of Estonia's first era of independence spent long periods of time in Riga, including *riigivanem* (President) Konstantin Päts, who studied at the Riga religious school; Jüri Jaakson, to become the Governor of the Bank of Estonia; Mart Raud, an important energy industry director; and Kaarel Eenpalu, later a minister. An international metropolis, Riga had offered them a place to study, for example in the Polytechnic (a technical university) or other springboards for their future careers. All these men had also been very active members of the Estonian societies and associations in Riga.

At the turn of the 19th century, Riga was clearly a German and Russian city; with the Latvians, the Poles, the Estonians and other minorities having virtually no influence at all. They constituted the labour force badly needed by the factories. This made it possible for many Estonians to climb the social ladder, whereas in Estonia, they would have remained workers in agriculture or in industry. It has always been a problem for the Estonians that they have very rapidly assimilated and adapted themselves, even merged with others, first with the Russian and German cultures, and later also with the Latvian culture. Mixed

marriages were common and had an adverse impact on the internal cohesion among the Estonians. There were very few divorces, but the marriages between two ethnic Estonians ended more rarely than those concluded between Estonians and non-Estonians.

In Latvia, the Estonian culture had no particular political or social status. It was mainly promoted by a number of nationally-oriented Estonians whose role in the maintenance of the Estonian culture must not be underestimated, since they had to operate in an environment which was fairly hostile and anti-Estonian. It was particularly difficult to foster the Estonian culture in the rural areas, since the level of activity was usually not high enough to keep cultural societies and schools running. However, the entertainment value of cultural societies, with their dances and theatrical performances, must not be looked down upon, since it would otherwise have been very difficult to get the Estonians together, especially in the rural areas.

The Luts and the Leivu people did not have sufficiently nationalistic personalities to work for the survival of their language and culture. But then again, the Luts and the Leivu did not really identify themselves as Estonians, either.

In the Latvian Republic, the Estonians did not enjoy any minority rights. Therefore the authorities were not required to treat them as a minority. However, the Latvians living in Estonia did have minority rights, understood as the right to their own culture and language. In fact, Latvia did have to meet the requirements of its own Estonian population, for example, schools, in order to have its neighbouring Estonia continue to guarantee minority rights to the Latvians living there, even if the number of the Latvian population, due to assimilation and mixed marriages, no longer justified such treatment in the 1930s. The Estonian schools were mainly situated close to the border or in Riga. During the economic depression of the 1920s and '30s, Estonians continued to move to Riga for work, Riga being the closest large city. During that period, *Riia Eesti Selts* remained quite active, despite the fact that only a small number of the Riga-based Estonians actually belonged to the society.

During the Soviet era, the Estonians led a quiet life in retreat, with the Estonian language being spoken only within the domestic walls. The Estonian society and the school were suppressed. However, the small Estonian congregation continued to operate in principle, even though there were very few gatherings.

The Estonians, like many other ethnic groups, lacked all linguistic or cultural rights which, in the main, were granted only to Russians. The Estonians were assimilated through mixed marriages, becoming either Latvian or Russian, normally through the change of language.

Through the nationalist uprising towards the late 1980s, the Estonians in Latvia started to reorganise and also reopened the Estonian school. The school curriculum includes Estonian as the first foreign language, taught to Latvian and Russian children. However, the assimilation has proceeded so far that there are no longer any young bilingual Estonians in Latvia.

About one third of the Latvia-based Estonians live in Riga, whilst there is

another concentration of Estonians close to the Estonian-Latvian border. Today, there are only very few Estonians in Latgale.

On the basis of the above, the Estonians in Latvia can be described as a very rapidly assimilating minority, the main reason for this being the minimal differences in culture, mainly related to the language and mentality. The religion, the cultural background and the history of the two people are relatively similar.

The Latvia-based Estonians themselves are to blame for their current situation, since prior to World War II, there were still Estonian schools in Latvia but less than half of the children in Estonian neighbourhoods actually attended them. The parents considered that the Latvian schools provided more opportunities for further studies, even though the Estonians, especially in the rural areas, did not seek any particularly advanced education, but instead went to agricultural and horticultural schools.

The Estonians did have various cultural societies, but only a small fraction of the Estonians actually joined them. Therefore, the assimilation with Latvian society and the opportunities thereby provided were prioritised over the survival of the ethnic-national identity. Indeed, it seems that the maintenance of the language and the culture was not seen as a vital necessity – the Estonians in Latvia would have had the possibility to do so. The Soviet era saw the peak of the assimilation development, but even during that period Estonian could still be spoken at home, as some people actually did.

How long will the *Eesti Selts* society remain Estonian, that is another question: today, only the old speak Estonian fluently, the middle-aged and the children not at all. Thus the Latvia-based Estonian ethnicity has no concrete Estonian-language continuity basis since the students in the Estonian school are mainly not ethnic Estonians, the majority being Latvian or Russian.

The people are not prepared to emphasise their Estonian ethnicity. The Estonian identity has generally meant the language, currently no longer very well known. Anyone unable to speak a language will have difficulty in identifying himself with that particular minority and sharing its identity. It is, however, possible to identify with a minority through nostalgic feelings, but the language is often the most clear identifying factor of a minority, and this is also the case with the Latvia-based Estonians.

The younger, i.e., the middle-aged Estonians have normally come to Latvia due to marriage. The birth rate among the Latvia-based Estonians has always been relatively low. Today, there are virtually no Latvian Estonian children, since the mother tongue of the children is either Latvian or Russian.

Relatively few records of the Latvia-based Estonians remain, since most of the documents were destroyed in war. The records of the public authorities contained very little information about the Estonians, because these people had generally very little to do with the authorities. Normally, the remaining sources are school records, but even then, the nature of the material is very bureaucratic, being statistics and similar documents. Various statistics on the Estonians have also been gathered, some of them haphazardly, others, such as the demographic statistics, more systematically. The Estonians have not been compared with the

other Latvian minorities; due to their number, language and culture, the Estonians differ greatly from the other Latvia-based Slavic minorities as well as from the Lithuanian, Jewish, German and Livonians, and their thorough comparison with the other minorities would not only be impossible, but also distorting.

The approach of my study was descriptive. I have tried to utilise the source material in as comprehensive and multi-faceted a manner as possible. However, the fact that the Latvia-based Estonians have never previously been studied, and that there is no systematically gathered information or data about them, constituted a problem. The process of assimilation has progressed quite far, and we are in fact dramatically late in studying this Estonian minority since there are only very few sources and people to interview left.

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