

**Interview conducted on October 24, 2002
With Erika Puussaar (Pres. of Estonian Garden Society)
And
Rita Tubalkain (Founding member of Estonian Garden)**

Time: 1:00pm

Where?: Cleveland Public Library

It was a cold, rainy day and I got a parking ticket while I conducted the interview.

How long have you lived in the US for?

RT: Since 1955. In Lakewood, it seems like a hometown to me.

EP: My family emigrated to Amer. in 1951 and we lived in Ann Arbor, MI. And then I married a local Estonian man from Cleveland and I have lived here for 35 years.

Can you please explain when and why you came to the US?

RT: At that time we lived in Montreal and my husband was a mechanical engineer and he found a job with ??? company and they brought us over.

So you went from Estonia to Canada to the US, is that right?

RT: We went from Estonia to Sweden to Canada and then to the US.

What was your original reason for leaving Estonia?

RT: Because of the second Russian invasion. Red armies came in and the only way to leave was by the sea because they were coming in from east and south and we were able to get the boat and go to Sweden

How old were you when you left Estonia?

RT: I was 22

So do you have any memories of the day you left?

RT:I remember it well. We left my hometown on Sept 19 and got the last train out to the coast. At the last moment I got separated from my husband and got on a boat. He got on another boat and we found each other in Sweden. The cities were burning all around us.

Erika, why did your parents emigrate to Amer.?

EP: I was a baby. I was one and a half years old when we escaped Estonia and my parents always told me they would rather be dead than red. And so we escaped to Germany and lived in the displaced persons camp for 7 years and Amer. was our dreamland and my father was a mechanic and he knew that in Detroit they had car companies so he thought if he could make it to Detroit he could get a job there. But we ended up in Ann Arbor where he was a mechanic for a construction company.

Can you please tell us where Estonia is?

RT&EP: They both explain where the country is and where they are from.

Upon arriving in the US is there a first memory that sticks out where you thought to yourself, "I made it to America"?

RT:I came by train and my husband had come to Cleveland months before to find an apartment for us and I remember driving by the shoreway and I saw what a beautiful city it was, the lake was right here and it reminded me of the sea that I missed and I saw the brick streets in Lakewood and it looked so nice. I kind of liked Lakewood right away.

EP: I was nine when I got to the US. We took a ship from Germany to New York and we got to NY early in the morning and I clearly remember there was a buzz on the ship when we were approaching NY and we all got up early to see the Statue of Liberty. So we knew we had arrived.

When you arrived here did you have relatives already established here to help you, or some sort of Estonian Org. to assist you?

RT: We didn't have relatives but there was a good group of Estonians here to help us, give us advice, and we didn't have money at the time so we got by with that. Also, we happened to have very nice neighbors. (Neighbor brought a chair over the day they arrived.)

EP: We arrived here with our family, 4 children and my grand mother. When we settled in Ann Arbor there were about 6 Estonian families and that was really an extended family. Most worked as custodians and kitchen help. We considered them family.

Upon arriving in Cleveland how did you make contact with the Estonian community, did you have to seek them out?

RT: My husband had already happened to meet an Estonian and actually we moved to the same street as him in Lakewood and through him we met other Estonians. And there was an Estonian church.

Was that community strong, did you feel kinship ties with the group?

RT: Yeah. We all felt like Erika said, a big family. We had each other and we were glad of that especially at that time when we did not speak good English.

EP: Explains how friends helped them in the process of buying a house.

RT: When we left Estonia we did not have any money. There was no Estonia so you could not use the money. We had been under German occupation and we had German occupation money but we could not use it except in the occupied countries so we did not have one penny and of course we could only bring with us what we could carry. I think we did pretty well when you think about it.

EP: Explains how her father used his last German occupation money to buy a camera that he used to take pictures with on the voyage over.

How would you define your ethnicity, are you Estonian or American?

RT: I would consider myself Estonian/American. I like Amer. very much and the people are very friendly and it truly is a democratic country. But my heart is really in Estonia. I noticed it at the last Olympic games when Estonia won events, that was really important for me.

EP: That is an interesting question because I consider myself more American/Estonian. Because when we were in Ann Arbor there were no Estonians in my high school except for my brother and a girlfriend, so we always wanted to assimilate into Amer. society because it never benefited me to stand out as a foreigner. I wanted to be an American. So I worked hard to not have an accent, I worked hard to get ahead, but now that I have married an Estonian and the older that I get, and I have visited Estonia 3 times now, the more Estonian I have become.

So you both have been back to Estonia?

RT: Both have been there three times.

How did you first hear of the Gardens?

RT: I think I saw a piece in the Plain Dealer written about it and at that time I was the secretary of the Estonian society and I talked to the head of the society and said that we should do something about it. He told me to get more info and I went to City Hall to get more info on the Gardens, at that time the Gardens met in the mayor's office at City Hall. I was asked to go to one of the meetings and I talked to the Estonians and many Estonians did not like the idea because they wanted to start collecting to buy money for an Estonian house. But we did not get enough money for the house.

Let us get into the funding issue because it sounds like that was a major problem from the start.

RT: It was a major problem because nobody had really made much money and we all had children who were on the verge of going to college so people gave like 2\$, 3\$, or 5\$. Then we started telephone sales, we collected newspapers, at that time you could sell newspapers, and we washed dishes at places and collected money from that. So the money came in slowly.

So you were involved from the start?

RT: Yes.

Was it just you or was there a committee?

RT: We formed a committee of about ten or less people and it took us six years till we had enough money until we could really start talking about building. We were fortunate because we had an Estonian architect living in Cleveland and his name was ????. And he also knew a sculptor.

Did they work for free?

RT: The architect did but we had to pay the sculptor. He is quite well known. But, he only charged us for the materials.

The sculpture that is in the Estonian Garden is a bit abstract. Can you explain the symbolism a little bit?

RT: Yes. There was a lot of talk about whose statue we should put up and we couldn't come up with anything and finally Mr. ??? said let us have an abstract monument with a flame on top and on the monument it says, "once again there comes a time" in Estonian. That is from the Estonian ???

EP: There is a flame on both ends that bursts.

RT: That burst into flame and the Estonian people will be free again. That was important for us at the time because Estonia was not free at the time. We were not allowed to put anything political in the Garden so we thought that would be appropriate.

Where did the non-political mandate come from?

RT: Because it is supposed to be paths of peace and things political don't fit.

Erika, how did you get involved with the Gardens?

EP: I got involved because, well first of all we always drove on MLK and I have always admired the statue and then a lady Leah Staff? has always been active from the beginning and she needed someone to take over so I did.

When was that?

EP: Six or seven years ago.

Can you explain what your position is? What your role is?

EP: Mainly, our main event is on June 24 when we celebrate our victory day and St. John's day, so every year we have a gathering at the Garden to celebrate these two events. And that is the main event of the year but we collect money to plant flowers and maintain the Garden, so my main responsibility is to maintain and we have a committee of about 8 people and we meet once a year and we make plans for maintaining the Garden. So that is about what we do.

You mentioned you celebrate your Victory Day. Can you explain what that means?

RT: A victory over the Germans.

EP: Now it has become, we celebrate all the different wars and occupations and how people have suffered to maintain their freedom in Estonia. S

RT: It was around WWI and that helped Estonia to become free.

EP: It has become a Victory Day for all of the different battles. Kind of like a Fourth of July type celebration.

RT: We usually honor all of the people who have fallen in fighting for Estonia.

The mission statement that started the Gardens mentioned peace and brotherhood among Cleveland's immigrant groups. When you first started building your garden did you view it as a celebration of your Estonian heritage or did you feel a connection with the other groups in the Garden?

RT: We did feel connected because in going to the meetings I met the other Garden representatives and they were all such nice people and we had interests in common because many of us had homelands that were not free.

You mentioned you met Weidenthal, can you share a memory or an impression of the man?

RT: I would say that he was truly in the words of gentleman. He was a gentle man. Very friendly, very kind, he was very friendly with me because I was a little shy and was not sure what I should do next and he was most helpful.

Do you have any special memories from the day of the dedication?

RT: I remember that it was a beautiful day the sun was shining. And at that time Cleveland's mayor was Mayor Locher and he was there and I helped to remove the cover of the monument, it

was covered with a white sheet. It got caught on something and we had a little trouble getting it off but when we did everybody said “ahh.”

How many people were there?

RT: There were at least 70, maybe more because there were representatives of other Gardens and Estonians. And the Estonian Ambassador from Washington was there and he was the honorary chairman.

Do you remember anything else, how did you get down there that day?

RT: Of course we all gave rides to people who did not have cars and my husband, who was alive at the time, gave rides to people. There was still a problem then getting down there as there is now because people are getting old and don't drive as much

What did you do that night, were there parties?

RT: After that we had refreshments in the Garden. But the night before we had dinner in the hotel which is now a senior citizen home on Lake Ave. On Edgewater drive there used to be a hotel.

Do you still visit the Garden?

RT: Yes I do.

How often?

RT: A few times a year if someone is taking me along because I can't get there by myself. That is the reason I stopped going to the Federation meetings because they were moved to the East side and again you can't get there if you don't have transportation.

And Erika you obviously still visit the Garden. Is it hard to find volunteers to help with the gardening? How does that work? Maintenance, cleaning, etc.?

EP: Well we are very fortunate because we have, I believe its 8 members and their spouses. And we do our major maintenance work in the springtime and then usually my husband and I will water and weed during the week and this summer was a very dry summer so my husband and I would go twice a week to water the Garden.

RT: Over the years my husband and I were in charge of the Gardens and over the years nobody has taken such good care of the Garden as Erica and her husband. They really go down twice a week and they do a fine job.

With the passage of time have your feelings about the Estonian Garden changed, do you identify with it differently, when you visit it now are your emotions different, are you sad, happy?

RT: Well of course I fell happier now that I know my country is free but I still love the Garden, it is a piece of my homeland and I think we all feel like that.

EP: I am very pleased that when we have our gathering more people are attending. So I am very encouraged by a renewed interest in the Garden.

Since 1966 have the number of people visiting the Estonian Garden and festival declined?

RT: Yes. There are not that many of us left.

EP: There are only about 60 active Estonian people in the Cleveland area so it is rather amazing that we got about 35 people to come to the last festival in the Garden.

Do you think the original message of promoting peace and brotherhood is still relevant in the Gardens today?

RT: I think they have lost a little significance but I hope it is still true.

EP: I don't have any knowledge of the previous meetings. I would like to visualize 200,000 people in a parade but I am not part of that history. I do know that the people who are on the committee are very optimistic about the Garden.

Where do you see the Garden in 30 years? What role do you see it playing?

RT: Well I hope it is still there and I hope it is in better condition then it is now. When the Gardens first started out the city had enough money and the city took care of the Gardens, now we it's up to the individual garden and like I said our people are getting old it's hard to really get, you know...

EP: What we're trying to do now is get a new generation on people taking care of the Gardens. They were not as Rita was the original people who started the Garden but now we have their children like Rita's son and daughter in law are active and there are other children of the original members involved. I am going to put it in my will.

If you could add one figure to your Garden, what/who would it be?

RT: I really can't say. It can't be a political figure and we have several good poets and musicians. I was in favor of ????? a famous Estonian poet. (Talks about how they picked statue in 1966).

Let us pretend that the statue in the Estonian Garden could speak, what would it say, what has it seen?

RT: It has seen a lot of sadness because most of the people who started the idea of the Gardens have passed away now and some families have just lost interest, mainly the second generation has lost some interest.

EP: I would say that the flame would say well done, especially since Estonia is free and the Estonians have been slaves to various countries that have occupied it and it is free now so I think it would say well done.

FINAL THOUGHTS.

EP: I am so grateful that we have an Estonian Garden because if we would try to start one now it would be impossible. For example, the Latvians are trying to start a Garden and it's a struggle. The Lithuanians have a magnificent Garden but you need hundreds of thousands of dollars now to get one started.

How much money did you have when you could finally consider building the Garden?

RT: I think when we had a thousand dollars we decided now to start.