

Adventures in Estonia



In the summer of 1997 I needed to leave Russia and St. Petersburg for a visa renewal trip. Rather than make another visa trip to Helsinki in Finland, I opted for neighboring Estonia instead. As you can see on the map below, the distance from St. Petersburg to the Estonian capital city of Tallinn is not much different than from St. Petersburg to Helsinki, Finland.



And as you see from the maps (see below also), Estonia is the smallest of the three Baltic Republics that were former members of the Soviet Union – by force, not by choice! The other two are Lithuania which is the largest of the three, and Latvia. The only thing they have in common with Russia is a common border. Each Baltic country has its very own language which is not Slavic and therefore not related to the Russian language. The three languages are not related to each other either. Most of the ethnic peoples of these lands would rather have nothing more to do with Russia or the Russian language and tend to be offended if one tries to initiate a conversation with them speaking in Russian. Nevertheless, unless the individuals from neighboring Baltic countries know English or some other common European language between them, they are forced to communicate with each other in Russian, like it or not, because Russian is the only common language they know! Russian was the language of education during Soviet times.



Here we have a closer look at Estonia. You can see that Finland is just across the Baltic Sea. The Estonians have much more in common with the Finns than with the Russians or even the Latvians on its southern border. This is because the Estonians were a Finnish tribe and their language is very similar to Finnish. Like the Finns, they are a hard working people and have rebuilt their country and economy relatively quickly after being set free from the Soviet Union.

After World War 2 Stalin forcibly exiled half the Estonian population to Siberia and replaced them with Russians. If I remember correctly, the ethnic population is roughly 40% Russian and 60% Estonian. On the Estonian side of the border with Russia there is a city called Narva that is 90% Russian. During the breakup of the Soviet Union, some Russians wanted the city to

become part of Russia rather than Estonia. But in 1997 the Russians living in Narva were glad they didn't become part of Russia and are happy to live in Estonia! They know they have a much better life in Estonia than they would have had in Russia. The Estonian economy is much better.

In the Summer of 1997 I lived with my missionary friends in the city of Tallinn for one full month. I visited once before for a day on the way to St. Petersburg by land from Poland. My friend Yan drove a tiny Polski Fiat from Warsaw through Lithuania and Latvia. His intention was to re-enter Russia from Latvia but was advised against it as being too dangerous. There are many highway robbers in Russia but few if any in Estonia. So we drove through the Eastern side of Estonia and entered Russia at the border town of Narva. Talk about adventure! If you are bored with life, try driving a car through Eastern Europe some time and enter Russia. You will be greeted by a border guard on the Russian side carrying an AK47 automatic weapon. No joke! I saw it with my own eyes! But that was in 1997. I don't know if they still carry AK47s today.



Andres with ethnic Russian girl who was raised in Estonia. She could speak fluent Estonian and was our happy helper to distribute Gospel literature.



Russian Olga who was raised in Estonia. She couldn't speak Estonia but was a good English speaker and so could get a job selling picture postcards to tourists.



Two Estonian girls holding up a poster that says, "What Everybody Needs is Love!"



Estonian young people. I asked the boy on the right if he likes the Russian population. He replied he doesn't actually hate them but has no Russian friends.

Most of the ethnic Estonians and Latvians in Latvia I met resented being greeted in Russian though they all knew it! In order to talk to the young people in the above photo, I had to greet them first in English! This is because they have great national pride and hate the fact they were taken over by the Russian speaking Soviet Union against their will.

When I was in Riga, Latvia, though people knew me and my friends were

foreigners, they would still speak to us in Latvian! My Polish friend would smile and then say in Russian, "I can communicate in only Russian, Polish and English!" They always complied and spoke in Russian.

The young people told me they don't speak English and so I asked them if they could speak Russian. "Sure we can," was the reply, "no problem!" So I pulled out my Estonia Bible and showed them Scriptures explaining in Russian what they meant. This impressed them for they knew I didn't read Estonian but I knew the Bible well enough to find the parts I was looking for. I could recognize the name of the books of the Bible in Estonian.

Before I went to Russia, in Japan around 1992 I met a young lady from Latvia. I was excited to meet her because I was studying Russian then and wanted to practice it with her. But she told me in English she didn't want to speak Russian with me. "That's not our language," she said. "We have our own language."

Interestingly, the Estonians were the worse speakers of Russian. This is because the Estonian language is not an Indo-European language as is Russian, Lithuanian and Latvian.



Russian girl distributing literature to an Estonian boy



Two Estonian girls who received posters.



Right: Lily from San Jose who was a regular monthly supporter of our missionary work in Estonia.



A beach in Tallinn



Estonian ladies.