

## Remembering the Boys from Estonia in New York— Final Days of the Iron Curtain

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Thirty-six years ago on June 13, 1988, approximately five hundred *Väliseestlased* (Estonian Diaspora) gathered in midtown Manhattan for an event that was of notable historic significance, and which unfolded with breathtaking excitement. It was a concert by young boys, Estonia's RAM (*Riikliku Akadeemilisi Meeskoori*—State Academic Men's Choir) *Poistekoor* (Boys' Choir).

As an American-born daughter of parents who fled in 1944 when Soviets once again invaded and came to re-occupy Estonia, I recall here the choir's visit in the unique context of the time. My reflections are from my own experience attending the concert, archival film footage by Kalju Meri, news accounts and an interview with one of the former choristers, now a grown man in Estonia.

To grasp the magnitude of this event, we must focus on the fact that the RAM boys choir represented the first visit to the United States by a cultural ensemble from Estonia since World War Two. For those middle-and-older-aged in the audience, it was the first time since their traumatic escape from Red Terror forty years earlier that they were in the presence of such a large group of youngsters from their homeland. The audience members were immediately smitten by so many young faces characteristic of their lost country, while their enunciation was described with great elation in *Vaba Eesti Sõna* by music critic Juta Kurman as "pure and clear." Every syllable was formed, she praised, and word stresses were in perfect harmony with musical stress while the consonants rang. We know it was different than the version of the mother tongue spoken by the local Estonian-American children, whose language, regrettably, had been eroded by time and distance. The singers' crystalline and beautiful sound from a beloved land immediately stirred up very deep feelings among those assembled.

Fifty boys, some as young as ten, made up the choir. Most were between ages eleven and fourteen with a handful of lower voices eighteen to twenty-two from Tallinn Conservatory. They were led by the celebrated conductor Venno Laul (1938-2018) and with them as piano accompanist was Maestro Laul's son, then sixteen-year-old Indrek Laul who eventually became CEO and General Manager of the renowned Estonian Piano Factory.

That day New York City's heat, a sweltering 92 degrees, contributed to the electrifying energy of anticipation. St. Peter's Church was an ultra-modern space, with skylit ceilings and enormous street-to-ceiling windows of clear glass from where passersby witnessed the interior. Mostly from New York and neighboring states, the crowd brimmed with whispers and hums that reached a veritable buzzing as they waited for the choir to appear. A rapturous ovation rose from the onlookers when the boys filed on stage.

The young boys were in black Baroque-era choristers' costumes with white knee-high stockings and long white ruffled collars. *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus* rang the first pure notes of Mozart, sounding every bit as fine as the Vienna Boys Choir. Classical pieces by Handel, Mendelssohn, and Brahms followed, and then forty minutes into the evening, *Me Oleme Põhjamaa Lapsed* (We are Children of the North) took the audience by storm. Folks were familiar with this song and its lyrics by treasured poetess Anna Haava, being sung by male choirs, but here was the resolute declaration of identity by quintessential, young Estonian children themselves. A passionate audience response brought an encore, and from there songs by Estonian composers such as Tormis and Eespere kept lifting spirits to an even higher point when strains of *Mu Isamaa on Minu Arm* began. We all knew that in the homeland it had become an unofficial Estonian anthem, as the actual one was banned under Soviet rule. The boys sang, the audience stood, eyes were moist.

In the momentary silence following, a few voices from the audience began spontaneously singing the Estonian national anthem, *Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm*, until the entire standing crowd sang, cheeks wet with tears. Suddenly from the balcony a large blue-black-and white tricolor was lowered. Maestro Venno Laul turned toward the audience and bowed. A lone, high woman's voice called, "*Elagu Eesti!*" (Long live Estonia.)

Finally, the boys began to sing *America, the Beautiful*, and once again the gathered folks stood and sang along robustly and yet again with tears. The unspoken emotions and meanings that had unfolded in this space were myriad and complex. Some had lost their homeland and had been living abroad for long decades, while others were experiencing their first visit to free shores. All this melded further with the underlying tragic significance of the June 13 date itself, marking the day 1941 when tens of thousands innocent Estonians were deported by Soviet forces. And yet at the very time of this New York visit, winds of freedom were unfurling in the homeland with massive gatherings of all night singing on the song festival grounds—songs of patriotism, defiance, and determination for a newly free Estonia that none could truly imagine that night.

Valnar Neidre was a twelve-year-old boy who sang in the choir. As an adult in Estonia, 36 years later, he now recalls how amazing New York was—the huge skyscrapers and vivid colors; how his family at home had somehow procured a black-market special camera-film for "a boy going to America." And even though there had been other concert venues on the trip, the New York concert among Estonians in particular stood out. "All the local people were extraordinarily friendly, warm and reaching out to us," he recollects. He also fondly remembers getting one of the small blue-black-and white flags that local Estonians had given each of the boys (that had been individually sewn). "I felt very proud to have one," says Valnar, "because at that time it was still the red SSR flag that flew atop Pikk Hermann."

In today's much-changed world, performing groups from Estonia certainly still evoke excitement and appreciation among *Väliseestlased*. But that night in June 1988 in New York City within the heft of history, some alchemy transformed music and an abiding love for homeland that bridged time and sea, into an unforgettable, unique event.