A SLIGHTLY MODIFIED VERSION OF THE ESSAY PUBLISHED ORIGINALLY AS *A LIFELONG PASSION FOR ESTONIAN JAANIPÄEV* IN FEASTS, FAIRS AND FIESTAS: CELEBRATIONS FROM CORNERS OF THE WORLD, CHRISTINA HOAG, EDITOR. RED PENGUIN BOOKS (2024)

The Many Paths of Midsummer—Jaanipäev*

** The J in Jaanipäev is sounded like the English Y, and the ä like the a in "cat."*

by Kaja Weeks

I grew up far from Estonia, a little northern country on the Baltic Sea that was my parents' homeland. Yet from early childhood, celebrations from its ancient roots planted themselves within me.

Midsummer became inspirational! Two days—bridged by a night (June 23-24) when dusk is said to kiss dawn—form a magical holiday, *Jaanipäev*. As the first American-born child of World War Two refugees from Estonia, I absorbed its language even while growing up in suburban north New Jersey. The festivities of *Jaaniöö* (Midsummer's Eve) and *Jaanipäev* (Midsummer's Day) began with bits and pieces of childhood enchantment and grew to a life-long fascination.

Celebrating in the Jersey Pinelands—far from Estonia

As I write this, many communities where I live in North America will be planning their festivities to celebrate Jaanipäev. Seattle, Portland, Alberta-Canada, Lakewood, Middle Village Long Island, Connecticut, and many more will celebrate.

But decades ago in an Estonian communal space of pine-forested south Jersey many customs were first kept alive, including the magnificent bonfire of Midsummer's

Eve by the folks who had just a few years earlier arrived as refugees. I was just a slip of a girl when I first became riveted by bright, flaming tongues reaching up to the darkening sky, pops sounding and sparks lighting the air. The deeper meaning was not yet clear, only that it was connected to ways of beauty and yearning that came from my family's homeland.

At that time, with the refugee community just beginning to settle into the new world while still holding strong ties to each other and their birthland, well over a hundred people would show up. Generations mingled, from infants to grandparents, and most everyone knew (or knew of) each other.

The evening was preceded by an afternoon of camaraderie around shared foods, drink, and most importantly, indulging in long saunas. The preeminence of sauna-going as part of *Jaanipäev* has been present from age-old customs. While back in the home country saunas abounded and were a natural part of weekly or even daily life, they also held an important place in our North American gathering spaces. Estonians simply love saunas, sitting naked or wrapped in a towel in the hot steam with good company, using birch branches with their leaves intact for an invigorating massage. The unique sound of birch branches whisking the skin and its associated fragrance is treasured in our sauna-culture. Warming up in the heat is alternated with a cold shower (even better, in some locations, is a dip in an adjacent lake) or sitting in a cozy front room where there are cold drinks and snacks. Then back to the steamy heat!

Meanwhile, early in the day big logs were dragged from the surrounding woods to a central site for the much-anticipated evening event. Kids were encouraged to find plenty of dry branches, brush or paper scraps for kindling. Then a sturdy foundation and top logs that would fuel a long-lasting fire was created. I loved watching the artful construction, followed by the crowd's first chants of *Sütti, sütti*—light up, light up—until yellow and red fire blazed high and the scent of wood smoke filled the air.

Around the bonfire songs sounded well past midnight. I sang too, in a language different than my school-day English. These words were filled with lilting vowels, laced like pearls between flickering consonants—*Jaan läeb Jaanitulele, kaasike*—Jaan goes to the St. John's bonfire, *kaasike*. The verses painted pictures of a young man and his silk-tasseled, silver-beaded horse, pulling a brass carriage with gold coins glinting in its wheels. Next to Jaan sat a rosy-cheeked maid, his beloved.

Fire-Leaping and Stories of Magical Traditions

Elders told stories of *Jaaniöö*, how in the old country this was the time of the midnight sun, an orb that blushed until vanishing for a moment just before new light began. The long days left no room for night, only a dreamy twilight settled over the ground. They whispered about the *sõnajala õis*, a blossoming fern in the forest that would bring luck to those who found it. It would be some years until I grasped the inherent love spells of young couples, whose midnight forays in their search for a glow could only be magical since botanically ferns don't blossom. But the luminous,

woodland image stayed in my child's eye, reappearing decades later as poetic metaphor in my writing.

Sometimes, as the fire grew lower, one or another brave soul would leap over it. This ritual, I would learn later, was one of many rooted in pre-Christian times and was meant to bring good luck. In earlier times when *Jaanipäev* was known by other names (such as *Põõripäev*, Turning Day, which reinforced the significance of seasonal change), countless customs with other-worldly connotations prevailed. Once the Christian calendar came into effect the day melded with the nativity of St. John the Baptist, and the appellation of *Jaan* (John) took hold, hence the English translation to St. John's Day even though the celebrations in Estonia have not held those religious values. Rather, ancient meanings marking the end of spring sowing and forthcoming work of summer haymaking held strong, with traditions believed to ensure prosperity for the remainder of the year.

At *Jaanipäev* spirits were asked to bestow luck for livestock and crops. There was a strong belief that the light of the Midsummer fire would protect against evil creatures that might move around in the night, one of the reasons everyone was urged to partake. Particularly before the 19th century, vocalized charms and spells along with many fascinating magical rituals prevailed. Historic accounts give examples such as bathing in morning dew, which was believed to bring beauty, health and luck. Just how did one collect the elusive water droplets? One could simply kneel in the grass and

bring dew to the face with moistened hands. Or, in the evening one might take fabric such as a shawl to the meadow and pull it until through until thoroughly wet. Then the precious dew could be squeezed into a bowl or even preserved in a bottle.

Such hints of nature's primal power still color the holiday. Even if participants no longer fully believe in the ancient magic, some rituals still pay tribute to powers of spirits and nature. The practice of fire-leaping that I witnessed at our bonfire gatherings is a great example. At that moment though, for a youngster sitting cross-legged on a blanket in front of waning flames in the Jersey Pine Barrens, the dares, whoops and cheers merely conveyed a sense of delight embedded in this holiday.

Hard Historical Events Shaded Everything, Even Holidays

Had I been born and raised in Estonia, I might have reveled endlessly in *Jaaniöö*'s airy allure. But like many things entrenched in history, particularly those passed through family kaleidoscopes of loss and ensuing trauma, darker colors among the summery green were eventually revealed as I grew older. The fact was, our community of parents had fled for their lives from their homeland after two successive invasions and in advance of a third that would brutally take their countrymen, women and children even as they themselves made it to freedom. They longed and grieved and raged. Their will to preserve that endangered culture permeated all our lives so that even celebratory beauty carried undertones of mourning and resolve.

My contemporaries growing up in Estonia certainly were heaped with hardship—the same wartime horror (Soviet occupation, then Nazi, then again Soviet occupation) that cast out my family and eighty thousand others from their native land like seeds into the wind left the occupied homeland behind an iron curtain for nearly fifty years. Grim days were punctuated by massive deportations to Siberia, censorship, and oppression of individual free will. Certain songs, writings and even holidays (such as Christmas) were forbidden and had to be celebrated in secret.

The Midsummer holiday escaped that prohibition. Retrospectively, my impression (and hope) was that for home-Estonians, as we called them, this might have been *one* holiday during which young and old could take flight to an utterly joyous, bewitching time. I believe our kin drew profound power from the land itself. Estonia has always been infused with polytheistic reverberations in which trees, rivers, and other parts of the earth are alive with spiritual meaning. And consider midsummer's spectacular interlude of white nights and peak of flowering beauty, how fields with spikes of golden rye rise among blue cornflowers and scarlet poppies, how the woods, roadsides and meadows are filled with myriad wildflowers. On the heels of the solstice, it is a call to harness the brightest time.

Across the ocean our celebrations were contained in half a night and maybe part of a day until we returned to unremarkable towns and cities, distant from each other and filled with workaday English. But in Estonia, by June 23rd, then as now, cities and

populated towns emptied as most people simply seemed to disappear from their daily dwellings to natural landscapes throughout the country. Age-old customs prevailed—birch branches gathered to decorate indoors and out, including horses and farm animals, birch whiffs made for all-important sauna going, field flowers braided into wreaths for girls' hair. In another example of nature leading the way, *Jaanipäev* feasts have always been laden with dairy foods since early summer's rich grass yields the best milking time for cows. And while our teens and adults enjoyed celebratory beer during this time, we always also heard of a special fermented alcoholic drink, *Mõdu*, popular during Midsummer. Made with water, birch juice, honey, local berries, fruits and spices, this traditional beverage was one some of us would only get to experience after Estonia regained its independence (1991) when travel there became easier.

Small Pinewood Bonfires — An Entire Land Lit with Bonfires

Our North American pinewoods bonfires were wonderful, but subdued in comparison to the effect of those lit throughout an *entire* land—on Estonian hillsides, farmyards, at the edge of forests, in river bends, or by the sea. On the islands, old boats transformed into festive pyres. Village swings became a center of play and singing. To describe them as "large" dwarfs the reality of these giant wood structures on which two to eight people can stand on opposite planks, grip the upright beams and rhythmically rock toward the sky.

We didn't have those incredible swings in south Jersey, but with fire crackling in the background we did hear stories about them from people. They were the ones who carried memories from their own childhoods of growing up in a free Estonia, who played ring games and swung on the big swing in a village green or homestead farm.

Thankfully, they also remembered the so-called "swinging songs." So, in the 1960's while American pop radio played The Beatles, *I Want to Hold your Hand* and Simon and Garfunkel harmonized *The Sounds of Silence*, I was smitten by old dialects and tunes . . . *Veli hella vellekene, tee meil kiiku kiitusmail* . . . Sweet little brother, make us a swing on the green . . . *Kiigu, kiigu kõrgele* . . . Swing, swing high.

How the Songs Lit a Life-long Creative Flame

In North America these words and melodies were heard nowhere else at that time besides small clusters of Estonians who were bringing their children into the fold. And it was these very lyric expressions that led to a critical turning point for me. Their presence explains how a child—who experienced an esoteric celebration in a rare language from a faraway place upon whose shores her foot had never stepped—went forward on a life-long path to own the holiday her own way.

I never stopped singing and, in fact, became a professional musician. I continued to love traditional music of Estonia so much that I performed it, studied it and eventually visited a free Estonia to hear more of it. Lyrics filled with descriptive metaphors linked to nature moved me and led to scholarly books and archives that

documented history and held extensive field recordings. Some of the most appealing narratives had themes of *Jaanipäev*. The recollections of songstress Minna Kokk were especially gorgeous as she described how everyone, young and old, was expected at the bonfire. "Dozens of fires at dusk that shone like stars in the sky, so many you couldn't count them," she said. She described dancing, swinging on the big wooden village swing, and the romantic search for a magical fern blossom, with an "evening kiss, that on *Jaanipäev's* next morning still burned on a maiden's lips."

Through folkloric collections I heard song recordings made by musicologists early in the twentieth century. Some of those singers were born in the late 1800's! One woman, named Marie Sepp, was from *Kolga-Jaani* parish, a relatively isolated area of farms, meadows, forests and marshes in southern Estonia. Marie was 74 years old in 1937, when her singing about *Jaanipäev* was recorded. "Come to *Jaaniku* (the St. John's bonfire)" she sang, adding, "Come tend the fire, be on guard for the sparks!" How happy I was to learn the catchy melody and sing along, moved that the voice I was hearing was from a woman who had been born around the same time as my own Estonian great-grandmothers.

Perhaps the most astonishing revelation through my research came through reading the book *Hõbevalge* (Silver White) by Lennart Meri, the first president of Estonia after the country regained its independence. He was also a renowned writer and anthropological filmmaker whose reconstructions of history included scrutinizing

indigenous poetry. These so-called runic verses were passed from generation to generation by oral traditions and a phenomenal collection is archivally preserved. Meri suggested that what later came to be called *Jaanipäev* bonfires may have been spurred by the *Kaali* meteorite which fell upon an Estonian island, *Saaremaa*, around 4,000 years ago. A cataclysm with the impact energy comparable to the Hiroshima blast, it fell upon a lightly populated area and was also widely witnessed in the skies of the Baltic Sea region. I understood Meri's suggestion that *Jaanipäev* traditions may be re-enactments from the ancient fireball's earth-shattering incident when I saw for myself the event memorialized in archaic verses. "I saw *Saaremaa* burning," is among the descriptions, with songs reflecting a belief that the sun itself had fallen to earth. In one of my visits, I stood on the island at the meteor crater site, which survives as a small lake, rock-rimmed, round and full of dark water. I was mesmerized, enveloped by June's light and by time seeming to stand still. Ancient connections stirred within me.

Flash forward—decades later from my childhood, the year 2021. For the last year and a half, the world had been crippled by a global pandemic. Normal lives, work and travel were halted; unimaginable numbers of people became ill or died. Remaining functional, not to mention creative, was challenging. Fortunately, I'd finished a collection of poems inspired by my ancestral roots and it had been published the year before. One of the poems was titled *Midsummer Birches,* and these phrases from it—

Jaaniöö birch leaves bitter-sweeten the air. A young man's beloved rides his silk-tufted horse—were broadcast.

This happened as a result of a composer from California, Brigitte Doss-Johnson, who was so inspired by my poem, *Midsummer Birches (from the collection Mouth Quill—Poems with Ancestral Roots)*, that she set it to choral music. She then created a virtual chamber choir to perform it. To my astonishment, singers in addition to Estonians—from the United States, Canada, Japan, the Basque region of northern Spain, Malaysia, and Australia—learned the complex music and many words in Estonian, one of the most difficult languages.

Doss-Johnson's music contained my English language poem that was set to her newly composed music that she wove with an old traditional *Jaanipäev* song. Choristers' calls to come to the *Jaaniöö* bonfire were sung complete with claps, shouts and stamps, and alternated with four-part a cappella singing that portrayed Estonian Midsummer through a vibrant and mystical sound palette. The performance, in the form of a musical video, was finished just in time and released globally through cyberspace on June 24th, the day marking *Jaanipäev.*

With this music I continued to celebrate a holiday beloved since I was a child, passed down from a long line of ancestors—now with my own artistic expression and its sounds ringing out around the world.

Estonian Egg Butter (*Munavõi)*

Foto: Kaja Weeks • Estonian bread from Amest Nordic Foods

Inspired by the rich grass growing season, this is a perfect dairy spread for *Jaanipäev*, the Estonian Midsummer celebration.

Ingredients:

3 hard-boiled Eggs
4 T (1/2 stick) of softened sweet butter
1 T Chives, finely chopped
1 T Dill, finely chopped
1 t mustard of choice
Salt and pepper to taste

Method:

Boil eggs 10 minutes, then plunge into ice water. Peel when cooled. Use fork to mash yolks to creamy consistency. Chop egg whites fine or chunky, as preferred. Combine all ingredients. Use a small wooden spoon to lightly whip to airy consistency.

Serve:

Spread generously on squares of black rye bread (*Leib*).
Optional topping: Thinly sliced cucumbers

About the Author

Kaja Weeks is a poet, essayist, and classically trained singer. She is the daughter of World War Two refugees from Estonia. Much of her writing contemplates this history, including the long-lasting effects of war, occupation, displacement and longing. Kaja's memoir-based chapbook, Mouth Quill—Poems with Ancestral Roots was published in 2020. Estonian author **Imbi Paju** wrote: *Each one of her poems in that book is like a pearl, words bequeathed by refugees' and ancestors and runic singing in the midst of English.*

Kaja's poems have been set as choral music by composer **Brigitte Doss-Johnson** and were performed virtually by a global choir. In 2025 Dutch-Estonian filmmaker **Helga Merits** created a an audio version of Kaja's poem Seabrook Farms (1949) backing them with historic photos and original music for the DVD version of Merits' film The Paradox of Seabrook Farms.

Her writing (including two Pushcart nominations) has appeared in journals such as *The Sugar House Review; Ars Medica: A Journal of Medicine, The Arts and Humanities; Under the Gum Tree; Brevity Blog*, in the book *Feasts, Fairs and Fiestas: Celebrations of the World* (2024), and elsewhere. Kaja's literary website is https://lyricovertones.com