

**Your On the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

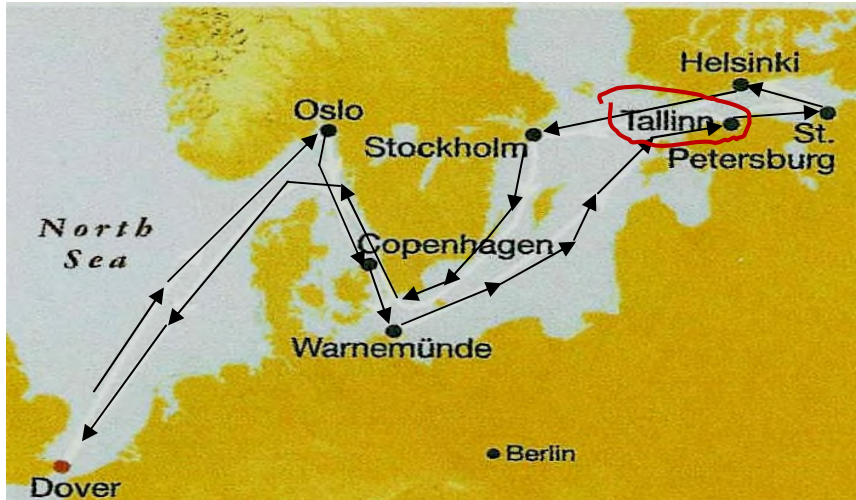
**The Baltic Sea Tour:
Tallinn, Estonia**

The Baltic Sea Tour

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Chapter 5: Tallinn, Estonia



August 9, 2008

We left Germany August 7 and headed for the northeastern part of the Baltic Sea. Our next stop was the capital of Estonia, the city of Tallinn. Of the places to visit on this cruise, Tallinn, Estonia, was not high on my list. During my high school days, I was told by history teachers that Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania were by-ways between countries that really mattered. Anyway, it turns out I rank Tallinn high on my list of favorite places for this trip.

The country may not have paid an active role in the intramural wars of the major powers in the sense of being an aggressor, but it has a long and colorful history of being pillaged by its noble neighbors. Often, the area was under the domain of other countries, such as Russia, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark.

Estonia has a pervasive Nordic presence. Throughout its history, Estonia has been affiliated with Finland and Sweden more than with the continental nations. Helsinki, Finland, is only 50 miles from Tallinn, a short ferry ride across the Baltic.

The languages of Finland and Estonia are similar, but some two thousand words sound the same but have different meanings. For example, our tour guide informed us that “remove hat” in Estonian means “sells postcards” in Finnish.

She also offered that “cool” in one language means “condom” in the other. My notes are jumbled here. I have a scribbling indicating she said these two words pertained to Spanish and English. To clarify my confusion, I consulted the “Super-Mini Spanish and English Dictionary” to verify this possible fact. Alas, the dictionary did not contain the word “condom.” But what should I have expected? It was a mini-edition, possibly published by Vatican Press.

Anyway, Tallinn is a delight. It has the charm of a tourist’s fantasy about Europe: Old buildings, castles, and palaces; musty smells; huge and heavy doors...dwarfing the rooms they protect; uneven walkways; tiny cars; seemingly infinite miles of narrow two-lane highways; foreign

languages (ha); meals that fit into your stomach without using external storage in a reluctant appendix; walking....yes, walking to a store; and most notably: the absence of piped music in elevators. Figure 2 shows examples of the architecture of the town.



Figure 2. Common sights in Tallinn.

What makes us yearn for the past? For something less efficient than what we have, something more jumbled and messy? It is the older people who have this yearning, those who lived in different landscapes when they were young. The younger people have no such yearning, no such problem. After all, how can you miss something you have never had?

Take it from me, you can. Walking through this place, I encountered an atmosphere I had never experienced in any other city. In addition to the unusual sights throughout this area, the town square was especially beautiful (as depicted in Figure 3). Our tour guide, Maia, told us the square is cherished by its citizens. One member of our tour group made this observation:

- “But the entire city appears as if WWII never came though. It looks like a time capsule from the past.”
- Maia, “The town is intact because people evacuated and did not defend it.”
- Tourist, “The French left Paris to the Germans. Same idea?”
- Maia, “Yes, the Nazis liked their treasures intact. So did the Soviets. Later in the war, the Russians took over our country. Lucky for us they did not demolish many buildings.”

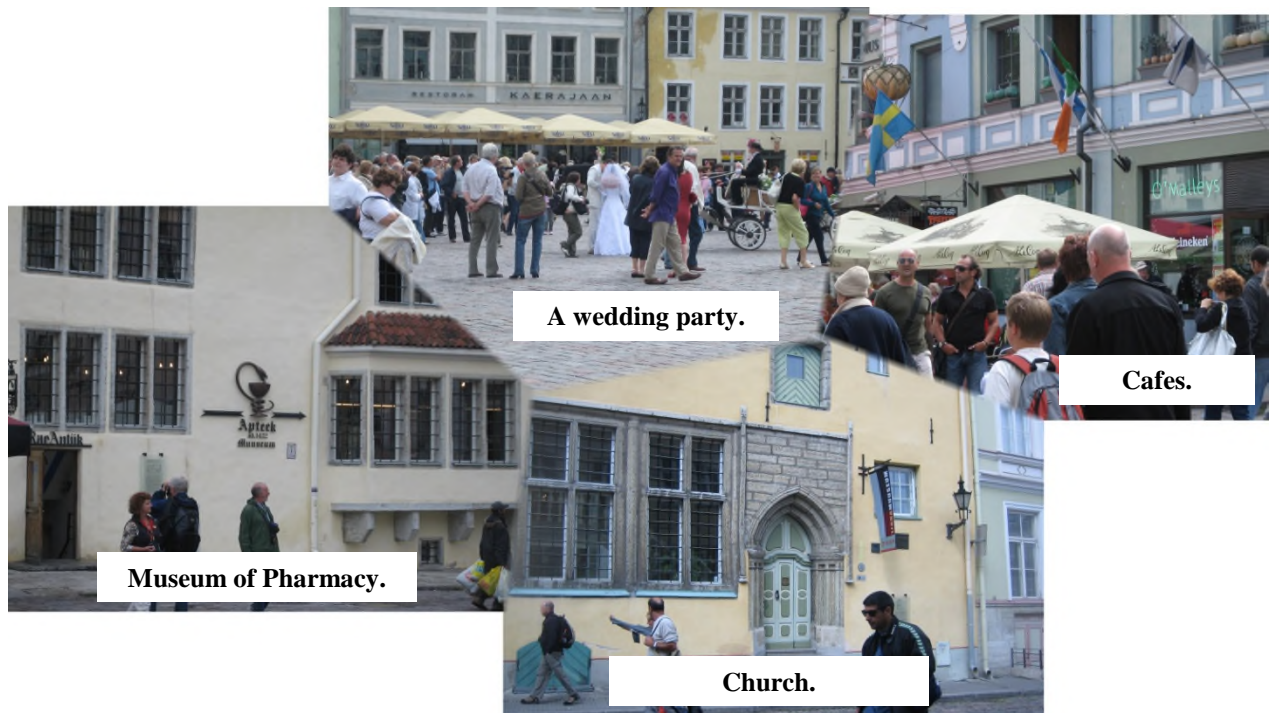


Figure 3. Scenes from the Town Square.

We watched numerous wedding parties parade around the square, as seen in the top photo. We learned Estonia (as well as Russia) has a tradition of newlyweds celebrating their union by showing themselves off to others. We encountered several wedding parties in the Tallinn town square.

The left photo is a shot of a pharmacy museum. Our guide informed us we had insufficient time to tour the museum, then offered this tidbit, “The museum has an exhibit of a 1422 pharmacy’s main medicine: Vodka!” No question, a prescription for this medicine would have eased pain...until the next morning.

Our Tour Guide

As you may have noticed, I have highlighted tour guides in these Baltic Sea reports. I have also highlighted them in other reports. These people have mastered three skills. They know history. They are fine speakers. They are social.

Which gives them two traits not possessed by many university professors. We students once counted how many times a history professor uttered “eh” in ten minutes. I have since lost count, but it was...eh... more than one hundred times.

Even for tour guides, this guide was exceptional. Maia was not only a fine speaker, she was well versed in history and international relations, and could relate the past to the present. One of the funniest parts of the tour, and a telling symbol of the Soviet mentality, is shown in Figure 4. As we were walking around the town, Maia made these observations:



Figure 4. Telling symbols.

- “After the Soviets arrived, we learned there were 90 different shades of Russian gray.” She said, “Look at this sidewalk. The cobblestones were laid many years ago. The square slabs were put in by the Russians. We’re replacing the slabs with mosaics.”
- “No one liked the Soviet system. We did what we could do to protest, but many protesters were sent to the Gulag.”
- “On one occasion, we created the Human Chain as a silent protest.” (Maia explained the 1989 “chain” of some two million people spanned over many miles.) “Some of the protesters were arrested. We never heard from them again. My mother forbade me to be in the chain.”
- “We used music to protest...our song festivals were protests.”
- Passing by a statue (a Soviet tribute to a Soviet soldier): “We want to tear it down, but politics keeps it up....Think of all those stones. We could use them for a tunnel to Helsinki!”
- “Toward the end of the war, the Nazis left our city. Three days later, the Soviets bombed us. Why? The Russians said their assault was to liberate us from the Germans. The Germans were gone! We know the bombings were to intimidate us.”

As the morning unfolded, I approached our guide:

- “Maia, I’m writing reports about several cities in North Europe. Do you mind my asking maybe a lot of questions during this day?”
- Maia, “Are you kidding! I love questions. It breaks up my presentation.”
- “Yeah, I can relate to that. In a former life, I liked questions from my audience. Anyway, I’ve been listening to your comments. You clearly don’t like Russians.”
- “No. You’re reading me wrong. I like Russians. I hate and detest the Soviets. I did not tell you this story: During the Soviet occupation, an artist created a statue that had ‘dawn’ as its theme. The Reds would not allow it to be exhibited because it implied better things were yet to come.”
- “No joke?”
- “No joke.”

Later, Maia told this story to the tour group, a short tale that explains her dichotomy:

- A Russian comes across a person who has fallen. The Russian picks up the person and then asks, “Are you OK?”
- An Estonian comes across a person who has fallen. The Estonian asks, “Are you OK?” then maybe picks up the person.

Maia explained Estonians were skeptical, and they tended to be cautious about their relationships. Given their history, it is a reasonable attitude.

The Russian Presence and Legacy

If the Estonians have an affinity for Finland, their feelings toward Russia are just the opposite. During this day, we learned from tour guides, waitresses, and fellow tourists that they considered Russians as “OK,” but they despised the Soviet Union. ...I use the word “despise” charitably.

In 1940, the USSR forcibly annexed Estonia into the Soviet empire. The Russians then immediately imported their laws, army, building styles, and themselves. During this time, most of the Estonian language and culture were suppressed. All political parties were banned---except for the Communist party. Thousands of Estonians were deported to the Gulags. As mentioned in earlier reports on Stalin, they may have been sent-off to Siberia for nothing more than a mumbled grumbling about standing in a long bread line.

Maia was especially strident about the Soviets. Later in the day, I approached her:

- “Maia, have you read Montefiore’s two books on Stalin? The writer was granted access to recently opened Russian archives. He has a lot of new information on Stalin. Some of the material is about his early years. Turns out that in his youth, Stalin was not much more than a bandit and a thug.”
- “No, I’ve not read these books. I’ll write down his name (which she did). Yes, he was a crook, but he was very smart...an evil ideologue. His crimes were committed to foster his ideas about Bolshevism. By the way, have you read *Putin’s Russia*, and Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War*?”
- “No, I’ll write them down (which I did). Hmm. An evil ideologue. I don’t think I’ve come across those two words used together.”
- “Plus he was a tyrant. For my country, I keep in my mind the old saying, ‘The worst tyrants are those who establish themselves in our own breasts.’ We must move on. I would like to talk more with you if we have time.”

An impressive woman. A few days later, Maia and I exchanged emails about the tour, Estonia, and Russia. Holly and I told her we wished to return to Estonia, and all agreed that she would be our personal guide. During this correspondence, she shared this story:

Both sets of Maia’s grandparents perished in Nazi concentration camps. Shortly after the USSR annexed Estonia, her mother was sent to Siberia for seven years for making a disparaging remark about Stalin. Her mom would not allow her to participate in the Human Chain for fear of Maia being arrested. Maia did not know about this past for many years. She had wondered why her mother was so worried about her daughter’s safety.

The Legacy Lingers

As you may have noticed, I have devoted a lot of space in the Baltic Sea reports to WWII and the Cold War. I am not arbitrarily bringing up the subjects. The memories of these times remain in the minds of many Europeans. If they are not on the surface, they lie closely beneath it.

Many Americans think of modern day Europe as a repository of passive nations, some reluctant to do battle with international terrorism---even within their own country. Consider 21st century Europe in comparison to the Europe of the past. In that past, a European country with any power at all made every attempt to wage war to gain more power and territory. I cite one example of many:

The benefactor for the Rhodes Scholarships---highly respected and keenly coveted awards---was Englishman Cecil Rhodes. Mr. Rhodes bequeathed these jewels of hubris to us and his Rhodes Scholars:¹

- “I would annex the planets, if I could.”
- And my favorite: “Remember that you are an Englishman and consequently have won first prize in the lottery of life.”

Take a look at a map of the world at mid 19th century. Most of the globe was owned by Europe. But incessant intramural battles, topped off with WWI and WWII, finally broke Europe’s imperialistic back.

Some scholars today write that Europe has made an ethical and moral about-face. That it finally learned its lesson. That it has taken on a different philosophy about international relations. To an extent, I think this idea has merit. But it is far from the complete picture. Perhaps a more telling indicator is that, unlike the past, a single European country no longer possesses a sufficient toolbox for waging war and annexing its neighbors---much less foreign places such as Mexico or South Africa.

After having commandeered most of the earth’s turf, and only giving it back under force, what did the Europeans leave the world as a lasting legacy? Well...Indians and Kenyans can speak English. Some African countries occasionally barter justice with European style courts---just as often with European style weapons. The Middle East, after having been arbitrarily partitioned by France and England (flip a coin: that’s the new national boundary), exhibits an Eden of peace and tranquility.

It is useless to lay blame on the Europeans for their aggression. If the Aztecs in Mexico had possessed the means to annex Spain, they would have done so.

¹ “Rhodes Scholars,” Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, in Leonard Roy Frank, *Quotationary* (New York: Random House, 2001), 392.

Where is OSHA when you need it?

We had been walking for several hours. Maia granted us a recess, “You’re on your own for a while. We meet back here in forty-five minutes. Don’t be late. If you are, you must find your way back to the ship.”

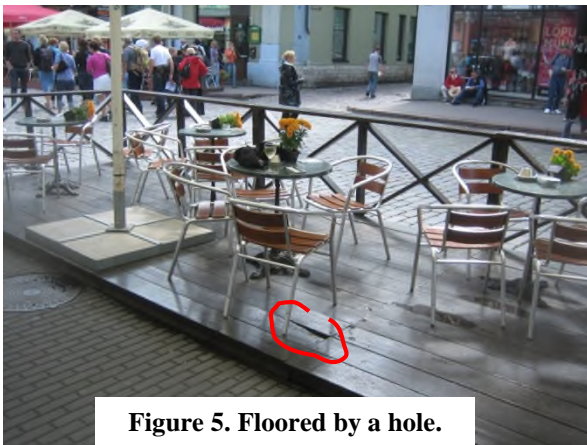
Holly wanted to visit the church on the town square. I favored the bar next door. She went her way, and I went mine. She, to offer thanks. Me, to praise the Lord for Pinot Gris. I sat down at a table of a sidewalk café. The waitress came over:

- “May I help you?”
- “Hello. A glass of white wine. Any Pinot Gris or something close?”
- “No, but something close,” as she left to fill my order.
-”Here you are.”
- “Thanks. How much.”
- “Four-fifty, Euro.”
- “In US?”
- “Sorry, we don’t take US currency. Euro or Krona. No US.”

(What! The almighty dollar not accepted in lowly Estonia?)

- “I don’t have anything but US dollars. All I have are twenty dollar bills.”
- “That’s OK. We honor US twenties, but we don’t give change.”
- ”Let me get this straight, you will take US dollars, but only if you like the exchange rate?”
- “Ha! I’ll tell that to my friends.”

(Therefore Uncle Sam, if you happen to audit this cruise, the documentation for my \$20 glass of tepid Estonian white wine is contained in this report.)



The saga at this sidewalk café was not over. Figure 5 shows a photo I snapped of my table and the surrounding area. The wine had been served; my \$20 had been forked over to a lovely flim-flam artist. I was about to sit down and relax for a few minutes---to savor the ambience of a lovely old city. I stepped back to get a shot of the café and the street. I then returned to my chair, pulled it around to the table, sat down, and fell backwards, tossing my legs in the air and taking the table, flowers, and wine to the ground.

I had not noticed the hole in the flooring. As I moved my chair around toward the table, its rear leg settled into the hole (the red circle in Figure 5), and I settled onto the floor. No worse for wear, I picked myself up and attempted to regain my composure. By then, the waitress had appeared:

- “Are you OK?”
- “Sure. Thanks. Just lost my wine, that’s all,” as I rearranged the furniture.
- “Don’t worry.” (Estonians have yet to adopt ‘No problem’ as a universal response to any spoken sentence.) “I’ll get you another one.”
- “Thank you. Say, how about you just giving me back my twenty?”
- “You’re joking!”
- “Yep. I’ll take the wine. Mind if I change locations?”
- “Of course, lots of room. Help yourself.”

Later:

- I explained the floor hole incident to Maia and asked, “Does Estonia have a government agency that inspects public places?” (An American OSHA.)
- “We’re governed by EU codes. And they can be very restrictive. Remember the 18th century water well we passed-by? Next to this well is an old Lutheran Church. The church is very important to this town, but we can’t enter it. Because of EU building codes, tours are no longer allowed.” (Yep, an American OSHA.)
- “Not so long ago, we were in Turkey. The Turks are joking that they may choose not to join the EU because they will be told how to grow tomatoes.”
- “Yes, it’s funny, but not so funny.”

Making Tallinn a Home Base for Touring North Europe

Maia and I exchanged other emails about which city to choose in North Europe if Holly and I were to return to visit this part of the world. Maia told me Tallinn was less expensive than Stockholm, Helsinki, or St. Petersburg. Plus, it was in-between many points of interest. Plus, it offered easy and inexpensive transportation around the area and into other parts of Europe. Plus, most citizens spoke English. ...which is what Americans expect foreigners to speak.

I will add my own plus: It is an enchanting place to spend time. If you’re in the neighborhood, don’t miss Tallinn, Estonia.