

078-1985

Richard K. Taylor  
July 31, 1985

SPECIAL TO: Lew Founier, Record, columnist

Estonians in Canada, a book

by Laurier professor Karl Aun

When a Canadian asks an immigrant how he likes living in Canada, it often isn't really a question. The questioner expects to hear that Canada is a great country and that the immigrant feels happy to be here.

But, as Karl Aun points out in a new book, *The Political Refugees: A History of the Estonians in Canada* (McClelland and Stewart), the expected answer didn't spring easily to the lips of Estonians forced to flee their beloved homeland after the Second World War.

"...the refugee was not happy being in Canada. He considered himself to be lucky that he had escaped the many dangers and survived the hardships of war and its dislocations; he was satisfied that he could earn his living and have a more-or-less normal life without fear and without want.

"But how could he be happy when he had been deprived of his friends and relatives? He had been forced out of his homeland to which he was emotionally attached, and a brutal destruction of this land and its people--his people--still went on. This, he hoped, would some day come to an end so that he could return home again."

While the hope to return home, believed in by most Estonians in the late 40s and 50s has now faded, they still remember Estonia with deep feelings and regret that they probably will never see it again.

Aun, professor emeritus of political science at Wilfrid Laurier University, points out that Estonia had a rich culture before the Second World War, with opera houses, ballet companies and theatre groups everywhere. Their near absence in Canada, especially just after the war when the great influx of Estonians took place, came as a surprise.

Another surprise for those early post-war immigrants was the great Canadian interest in making money and in success, in general. That, and talk about cars, seemed to exhaust the interest of far too many Canadians the Estonian refugees met in Canada.

In addition, the commercialism of life--the huge billboards, advertising sections in newspapers and commercials interrupting radio programs--was distressing. Many Estonians felt that commercialism had killed the spirit of Christmas here every bit as effectively as communism had killed it in the land they left behind.

Because most Estonians that came to Canada had a variety of skills and were well educated they did well in Canada. In fact, Estonians soon earned more than Canadians as a whole. In 1971, according to Statistics Canada, the average Estonian earned \$6,477, compared with \$5,033 for the average of all Canadians.

Most Estonians now live in the big centres--Toronto, Hamilton, Montreal and Vancouver--and are well represented in the professions. But they are becoming increasingly assimilated. In fact, less than 50 per cent now use Estonian as the language of the home.

Aun, who emigrated to the United States in 1949, came to Canada 10 years later to teach political science at Waterloo Lutheran University, the forerunner of Wilfrid Laurier University.

He said Canada seemed culturally barren then but has changed greatly for the better since.

And what of his country, absorbed into the U.S.S.R. and now called Soviet Estonia?

"At my old Estonian University of Tartu, my alma mater, there now are more professors teaching Russian than Estonian," Aun said.

"It is almost impossible to believe that in an era of liberation and de-colonization all around the world, a formerly independent and highly developed small nation has been colonized and is gradually being destroyed by deliberate Russification.

"Almost nobody outside the country knows or cares. Why, I ask."

He added, "There still is some hope since if hope is lost everything is lost."

His book is available at the WLU Bookstore.