

BUT WHEN DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE CANADIAN?

By Elle Andra-Warner

Being granted Canadian citizenship is just the first step to becoming Canadian. The psychological process to find that identity may take years and some may never find it. This essay paper is about the journey of Estonian child refugees of World War II to find the Canadian identity.

Introduction

By the time the Soviet Union forces had swept over Estonia in September 1944, over 80,000 Estonians had fled into exile, mainly to Germany and Sweden. In Europe, many were housed in United Nations Displaced Persons camps, grouped together by nationality.

My parents were Estonians who fled Tallinn just hours before the Soviets invaded, and then occupied, Estonia's capital city. Following the end of the Second World War, they were interned at the Estonian Displaced Persons camp – a war refugee camp – in Eckernforde, West Germany, where I was born a few years later in the city's Hohenstein Castle (a section of the castle was converted into a maternity ward for about three years).

People lived in these camps for years – homeless and stateless – waiting to be accepted by another country. While living at these camps, Estonians developed infrastructures to maintain their culture. They set up schools, theatre groups, orchestras, choirs, sports groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and so on. Dr. Karl Aun in his book *The Political Refugees*, said this about these Estonians:

“In Germany, in the refugee camps, promotion of ethnic culture among refugees was not only an activity to pass the time but for many became a way of life – for language, post-war confusion, and enforced activity produced ethnic enclaves in the multinational refugee camps.”

The emphasis was two-fold: to remain distinguishably Estonian by preserving the Estonian language and Estonian culture, and to pass it on to the next generation. This later became the base for ethnic organization structure and cultural activities of refugee Estonians in Canada that emerged during the 1950s when I was growing up in Port Arthur, Ontario – now part of the city of Thunder Bay in Northwestern Ontario.

My family arrived in Toronto in October 1951, after sailing across the Atlantic Ocean on the *S.S. Columbia* and entering Canada at the Port of Quebec City. In November, we moved to Port Arthur where there already was an Estonian exile community and an Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. In early 1952, a weekend Estonian Supplementary School was established. We also had Estonian folk-dancing groups for both adults and children; Estonian choirs; sports clubs; fishing and hunting groups; women's and men's groups; Bible groups - all this for an Estonian population totaling perhaps 200-300 in Northwestern Ontario.

It has been said that the Estonian post-war refugees were surprised at the lack of interest by Canadian society in the cultural aspects of life, like the performing arts, fine arts, literature, music and amateur athletics. Estonians felt Canadians placed a low priority on these cultural aspects, viewing them as entertainment and providing no special financial support from the government.

Those perceived cultural differences with Canadian society reinforced Estonian ethnocentrism, especially among those Estonians who were underemployed or working jobs they would have never undertaken back in Estonia. Many Estonian refugees developed a pattern whereby they lived a dual existence – one life at the workplace conforming to Canadian social customs and another during their off-hours, within their own Estonian society and organizations. For example, someone who had been held status in their homeland (like teacher, lawyer, artist, etc.) was still respected and afforded professional status within the exile Estonian community, even though now in Canada, they held work positions in lumber camps,

maintenance, office cleaning, hospital kitchens or any place they could get a job.

This strong ethnocentrism in the Estonian community – the feeling that drove Estonians to strive for perfection – was the catalyst for their economic and professional success in Canadian society. They felt they succeeded and survived precisely because they were Estonian. The Estonian community demanded that the children of Estonians remained Estonian, but they also expected Estonian children to be outstanding in Canadian society, from school, sports, music and art to any activity in which they became involved. The expectation to excel was so strong that decades later, many Estonian child refugees as adults still carried on their shoulders the need to be exceptional achievers.

Dr. Aun captured the mood well when he stated that "...*the determination to remain Estonian had a messianic element to it.*"

It was that kind of cultural dualism that I grew up in.

The exiled Estonians felt it was up to them to maintain and promote the Estonian culture because the Soviets were destroying it in their homeland. They gave themselves the role of keepers of the Estonian culture, with the responsibility to maintain it until the homeland – *meie kodumaa* – was free again.

As the years rolled by, it appeared unlikely that Estonia would ever be free from the Soviet occupation. Over 90% of Estonian refugees in Canada became naturalized citizens, many making the choice so that their children – the child refugees born outside of Canada, like myself – would have Canadian citizenship. The idea of returning to the homeland of Estonia became an unrealistic notion, an unthinkable idea. A free, sovereign independent Estonia – no longer forced to be part of the Soviet Union – was an impossible dream.

In 1991, all that suddenly changed when the Soviet Union collapsed and with lightning speed, the impossible had happened; the homeland – *kodumaa* – was once more a free and independent state.

However, a free Estonian presented a serious identity question for many of us child refugees. Even as adults, the pull of the Estonian culture on us remained very strong. With Estonia now free again, many of us felt driven to visit our homeland...but we were also afraid. What would happen if we visited Estonia and felt so totally Estonian that we never wanted to come back to Canada? Where did we belong? Were we "Estonians" living in Canada? Or, "Canadians" of Estonian heritage? Where was home? For the first time, many of us began to seriously explore our cultural dualism.

Part One: Personal vs. Collective Identity

By 1991, I had lived most of my life in Canada, having arrived here in the 1950s when I was five years old. Whenever I travelled to other countries, I always felt "Canadian", but once back in Canada, I felt as if I was on the outer edge of being a Canadian, not quite belonging in the Canadian circle.

Early in my research, I had an interesting conversation with one of my daughters, Tami Saj. I said to her, "You are born here in Canada. If I were to say to you, 'I want to find that Canadian identity you have', what would you tell me I need to do? When do I know I am really Canadian?"

She thought about it for a while and said, "I just always knew I was Canadian because I was born here. I don't know what it is like not to be Canadian. I just know this is my country. This is home."

That short conversation provided me with the key component to answering the question: 'When do you know you are Canadian?' It is when you can ask yourself 'Where do I call home?', and the answer is – without hesitation – Canada.

Perhaps searching for this large romantic, mythic entity called "Canadian identity" has been done all wrong. We've been looking at it the wrong way; we've been looking for a common descriptor that can be

applied to everyone. Being Canadian is a personal, individualist identity...it is part of our personal journey, not a collective one.

I like the insights that the late Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye offered on the personal versus national identity debate:

"Identity differs with each individual. It involves layers: family, gender, upbringing, ethnic background, personal values, religious inclination. Whatever shapes us, is us. The state is only one part of this. Our identity is a personal collage, our unity is a public fact."

Even as a child, one already has a personal identity, and for us child immigrants that sense of identity did not disappear because we moved to another country. Who we are – our identity – continues to evolve within the geographical environment, political and social framework of where we live. We need to let Canadianism evolve within our total personal identity and to let it happen without rejecting our cultural heritage for the Canadian one. Rather, both are part of our evolving identity.

Canadian author Wilf Ferguson in his book *I Hate Canadians*, further described this concept:

"To identify yourself solely with the state gives us the facile nationalism. The other extreme, identifying yourself exclusively with an ethnic collective, gives us racial segregation, separatist dogma, and almost inevitably, intolerance. But we do have a third choice: to unite our personal background with that of the nation."

Part Two: Immigrants vs. Refugees

I do make a distinction between a refugee and immigrant, because they are two different groups of newcomers to Canada, two contrasting reasons for seeking entry to Canada.

An immigrant comes to Canada after making a choice to leave their homeland for economic, lifestyle or other reasons. They can return to their country of origin at will and have accessible reference points as to place, relatives and family history.

War or political refugees, like my parents and the displaced persons of the Second World War, fled their homeland for compelling reasons and cannot return without risking death or injury. They passionately loved their homeland, had a strong attachment to the land and its people and though they faced imminent danger, the decision to flee was still difficult.

Some Estonians that fled had tragically already lost family members or had helplessly watched as loved ones and/or friends were shipped in cattle trains to Siberia during the first Soviet occupation of 1940-41. Through circumstances of war, some who fled left behind family members, including parents, children and even spouses.

So painful were the memories, that many never spoke of that time, never told their children the stories of their escape or loss. Memories were compartmentalized into private spaces, deep in their conscious.

Part Three: The Watershed Moment

For a refugee, the psychological process to become Canadian – to call Canada home – may take decades. For me, it took 40 years.

My watershed moment was in October 1991. I was flying west over the Canadian Arctic returning to Canada after my first visit to Estonia, which had reclaimed its sovereignty in the closing days of the Soviet Union. As I peered through the window down at the barren snow-covered landscape, I suddenly realized I was flying home – not simply the physical one, but the psychological one: "home" was Canada.

It was exciting, energizing and emotional to feel the passion of being Canadian, of being part of its history and of Canada's history being part of me. I had gone to explore my Estonian roots, but instead I discovered my Canadianism.

Later I learned that other Estonian child refugees had similar feelings about finding their Canadianism while visiting their ancestral homeland.

"When I visited Estonia in 1992 as part of a programme to teach English to Estonian teachers, I realized that I was irrevocably Canadian. I had been terrified before that it would call out to me so strongly that I would have no choice but to uproot myself and my child back to *isamaa ja emakeel* [translation: Fatherland and mother tongue]. As I saw the approaching Tallinn skyline from the plane from Helsinki I started to get very teary. However, as fascinating as it was to finally see all those things and places that had been mythologized and romanticized to me as a child, I developed an affectionate and curious distance. It was thrilling but it was not my world. It was the first time I had ever met any relatives except for an aunt and uncle. Now I had other aunts, uncles, scads of cousins, etc. Some of them even had uncanny resemblances to my parents, physically and in mannerisms. I got to see the very farms my parents grew up on and I could imagine them as children playing in the woods or by the river. But despite all those connections, ultimately I felt more a Canadian than I have ever felt before."

- *A Canadian who was an Estonian child refugee, born in 1947 in European Displaced Persons Camp for Estonians.*

The evolution of an immigrant's identity is a complicated psychological process. Daisy Neijmann said it well in her essay, "In Search of the Canadian Icelander: Writing an Icelandic-Canadian identity into Canadian Literature":

"It took decades for the immigrants to develop a new identity which incorporated both their heritage and their new Canadian reality."

Part Four: Personal Tapestry

One's personal identity is something like a personal tapestry, woven from an individual's past history and experiences.

My personal tapestry begins with my parents, Regina Andreus and Juri Jurivee. They did not know each other in Estonia, but met in Danzig, Germany, after both had fled separately.

My 27-year old mother had been married previously, but it had been four years since her husband had disappeared after being taken away after a midnight knock on the door. My father was 33 years old, with a wife and two young children. He was also a merchant marine engineer, and with the Soviets closing in on Tallinn, his life was at risk if he stayed. However, there was a problem – according to what I've learned, his wife refused to risk the lives of their children in the dangerous escape when in a few months, after the end of the war, the Allies would force the Soviets to leave Estonia and everything would be fine. That didn't happen. The Iron Curtain closed over Estonia in September 1944 and didn't lift until 47 years later. My father never saw his family again.

My parents' stories are not unique in the Estonian diaspora; many shared similar dramatic experiences. Even small actions and quick decisions came to have profound, life-altering effects on people's lives – as this "tale of the two sisters on a farm" implies. As told by one of the daughters, a truck arrived and the driver said the Soviet Army was advancing and was only an hour away. He invited the two young women to hop on and try to make a run for it with him. One sister accepted with only the clothes on her back. Her sister wanted to bring her bike as well, but was told there was no room for it. Rather than abandoning her bike, the sister chose to stay behind. She then endured 47 years of Soviet rule.

While I know that my mother left with the last German convoy leaving Tallinn (Estonia had been under German occupation before the Soviets returned), my father never discussed his escape with me. However, both ended up in Danzig, Germany.

When the Soviets were close to entering Danzig, my father helped my mother leave Danzig on his merchant marine ship *Strasbourg* (after the war, it was part of Britain's merchant marine and given back its original Estonian name, *Aksi*). As told by my mother, only immediate family could be accommodated on the fleeing ship, so my parents married on December 31, 1944 to facilitate her being allowed on board.

Later, the Allies brought my parents to the displaced persons camp set up in Eckernforde, West Germany, where I was born in 1946. My parents remained married to each other for the next 31 years, until my father died in 1975.

After living in the camp for 2 ½ years, we resettled in England as a temporary measure. In 1951, my parents received permission to immigrate to Canada. I remember in England being told we were moving to somewhere so far away that we could only reach it by going on a ship for a long time.

After sailing across the Atlantic Ocean on the *S.S. Columbia*, we arrived in Quebec City in October 1951. My parents, 10-month old brother Toomas (born in England) and I were part of the 4,573 Estonian displaced persons to arrive in Canada that year.

My father went first to work in the bush camps, later at Port Arthur Shipyards. Our first night in Port Arthur was spent at the Prince Arthur Hotel, then we moved to a small "tourist" cabin on North Cumberland Street for about a year before moving to a rented house on Munro Street. Five years later, my parents bought a home on the same street.

In January 1952, I started kindergarten at St. James Public School, skipped Grade 2 and continued to get top marks. Things went generally well at school, except teachers seemed to know nothing about Estonia, its culture or its people, not even where it was geographically located. It seemed to me as a child, that to Canadians, the Estonian people didn't exist. Yet I knew we did, even if it was only in the Estonian community.

One of my strongest memories of public school was during the annual Remembrance Day somber services, where Canadian and British veterans of the Second World War were remembered. I felt like an outsider at these ceremonies, and felt little connection with the history. I wondered why no one ever said anything about other countries that fought in the war.

The Remembrance Day ceremonies always left me with tugged, confused emotions. My Estonian school taught me how Estonia lost its freedom because of the Second World War, while my Canadian school taught me that freedom was secured by victory in the war. Canadian culture celebrated freedom; Estonian culture mourned the loss of freedom. Both were my cultures.

Remembrance Day is a sensitive time for many post-war refugees and immigrants. Eric Manfred Timm, an English teacher in Toronto, wrote an article "Painful Memories" for the *Globe & Mail* in 1998 expressing his feelings about German Canadians mourning their Second World War losses behind closed doors on November 11th. He wrote:

"For my parents, Remembrance Day is an annual trauma. Over the years, they've managed to get through it by avoiding radio and television newscasts and going for long walks. But last November (1997) the years of frustration and unhappiness came to a head and they felt that if they didn't do something, they would explode.

So, on their multi-masted flagstaff overlooking Lake Simcoe, they hoisted three flags to half-staff. The Canadian flag in the middle and on top, the German flag on one side, the UN flag on the other. In the evening, they lit every candle they could find in the house. Then, they sat down in their living room and mourned the sons and daughters fallen in wars everywhere."

He closes the article with these words:

"My hopes are that some day German Canadians will be able to mourn the catastrophe of the world wars alongside other Canadians, that German Canadian war veterans will gain entrance to commemorative ceremonies. And that good people like my folks will not have to dread the approach of November 11."

After the article was published, the Globe & Mail received a large number of Letters to the Editor in response and most were condemnations of Mr. Timm's views. Interesting to note that in the 1996 Canadian census before the article, Canadians of German ethnicity constituted the third-largest ethnic group in the country, behind the British and the French.

Part Five: Push and Pull Identities

Developing a new identity is a complicated and long process. Daisy Neijmann called this push-and-pull factor, "oppositional aspirations": there is the same eagerness to preserve their cultural heritage as there is to becoming Canadian, to participate in Canadian society and contribute to the adopted country.

I understand that. For example, in my Canadian school, I played on the school's sports teams, studied hard for academic achievement and was integrated into the school society. Yet on weekends when I attended Estonian school, I tried to excel learning the Estonian language, history, geography, traditions and literature. We put on plays in Estonian for our parents, just as we did in English in our Canadian school. Our parents reminded us that we were now Canadians, at the same time insisting we speak Estonian at home. There was a strong push to be the best Canadian and the best Estonian.

As a child refugee, I consider myself as belonging to the "transition" generation, in the middle of a three-generation process leading to immigrant's descendants being Canadian with no ethnic markers. Here is how I see it:

- **Homeland Generation:** the adult refugees will likely consider themselves as Estonians first, their homeland as being Estonia even if Canada is where they ultimately live most of their lives.
- **Transition Generation:** child refugees will have dual identities, eventually transforming from being Estonian Canadians, to Canadians with Estonian heritage.
- **First Generation Canadians:** most children of the child refugees, while having an interest in their heritage and even participating in some activities, will consider themselves Canadian without an added ethnic or cultural identifier. They often visit their ancestral homeland, sometimes staying for a time.

Here are the reflections of a First Generation Canadian, Dr. Tania L. Saj, my daughter, and the granddaughter of Regina Jurivee:

"Probably due to a combination of travel and the reality of second-to-none opportunities and standard of living in Canada, I am Canada's biggest fan. Estonia, or any other country, just doesn't register even a distant second, because I know I could never achieve the things I have achieved anywhere else but Canada.

My visit to Estonia; really, it only reinforced my feelings of not being Estonian, and not wanting to be. At first I think I felt guilty, but then I realized that – for the above reasons, but also because I felt very strongly that to visit Estonia or to potentially live in Estonia would negate Nana's decisions for coming to Canada. I felt that to honour her memory, and to show "respect" to her for her decision to have a better life for her and her future family, that I should be the "best" Canadian I could – and go forward with all that determination I could. Because I had been given that opportunity, I felt that I would be throwing away all her hard luck, and strength in deciding to come, if I did anything less.

Thinking I was Estonian would be like saying Nana shouldn't have bothered to leave Estonia."

She added:

"I think immigrants had a wonderful spirit, perhaps the best you can have: wanting a better life and acting upon it. Even if it is under political pressure or other sad conditions, they have made the decision that they cannot continue living like they have, which can be contrasted with their fellow country people that may also feel that way but do not leave. The acting on it is what is so wonderful.

However, so many only go as far as the physical voyage and once they get to Canada don't take advantage of the opportunities because of all their "ethnic baggage". I feel that multiculturalism can be a bad thing, if it encourages immigrants to retain their culture in spite of taking advantage of what Canada, or any émigré country, offers. They left because they wanted a better life, but then they don't take advantage of it, and create "Little Italies" or whatever which keep them locked up emotionally, nationalistically.

Seeing all the harm ethnic identity can do in Africa, I really question multiculturalism in a different way than I did before. The opportunities Canada offers are second-to-none, and any immigrant to Canada should focus on that and remember the spirit in which they decided to come to Canada – to have a better life. This should be the main thing, before they focus on their national or ethnic identity, which is not bad in itself, only when it supersedes the former."

Part Six: Speaking to the Elders from the Transition Generation

Over the years, I've heard our elders say that my generation has lost interest in their Estonian roots, and that they have left behind their Estonianism. I can't speak for those of Estonian heritage who were born in Canada, but speaking for the child refugees, the elders are wrong. We were the recipients of the post-war Estonian community's cultural nurturing and for most of us, being Estonian has been a strong part of our lives since birth. Our childhood and teen years were filled with being part of Estonian culture, language and celebrations.

Our Estonianism is embedded in our souls, even as we move towards a Canadian identity.

Although we continued to speak Estonian to our parents and attended Estonian cultural events, our direct involvement and participation in the organizations decreased, particularly with those of us who lived outside Toronto (home to Canada's largest number of Estonians). Most of us married non-Estonians, our circle of friends become mainly non-Estonians and our children did not speak Estonian.

Until relatively recently, many Estonian events were held in Estonian language, the organizations emphasizing the need to maintain the language at events, alienating somewhat those child refugees who did not feel confident in their Estonian speaking skills. Within the Estonian culture, there had always been a strong emphasis on speaking Estonian – if you didn't speak Estonian, you were not a true Estonian. There was not a lot of room to participate if you didn't speak Estonian.

However, I would like to thank the Estonian elders for their many hours of volunteer commitment and dedication to teaching us our heritage. The elders were the ones who so many years ago had to make the difficult decision whether to flee or stay in their homeland. They were the ones who came to new homelands like Canada and started the schools, taught the folk dances, led the choirs and directed the plays. They put Estonia forever in our souls, and for that, I salute and thank them.

I would also say to the elders that Estonian child refugees will always have a strong identity to their heritage, whether or not they attend Estonian organization functions. They have struggled to merge their

two identities and are the ones for whom the psychological journey to become Canadian has been the hardest. They grew up with such a strong Estonian identity that finding their Canadian one has been confusing.

The feelings of confusion and displacement are not restricted to those only in Canada. A man from Sweden who had been born in Estonia and fled with his parents emailed me the following:

"I did visit Estonia for the first time in 1992. Early in the morning when one could see Estonia on the horizon, I stood on the deck for quite a long time while getting closer. Actually, I did have some tears in my eyes. Well, to be honest, I was crying. I did think about my father and my mother that did leave this country in panic, and the people that they loved; their parents, their brothers and sisters, their relatives, their friends. They were forced to leave them all behind. If one never has been in the same situation, one probably never can fully understand how they felt.

In Estonia, I did meet a lot of relatives – aunts, cousins, etc. I did meet my other younger sister and she told me that she remembered me quite well when I was about one year old. One thing that was amazing to me was the fact that I did meet a lot of people that in some way looked like me...it was quite obvious that we were relatives! After about 50 years of absolutely no knowledge or contact this was quite an amazing experience.

However, sad thing was that I didn't feel much like being an Estonian, probably, mostly because of the fact that my Estonian language was much too poor...but on the other hand, I didn't feel much Swedish. This was quite confusing. Who am I? Am I Swedish? Or am I an Estonian? Or something in between? Still, I'm not quite sure."

When I began this research project, I expected to conclude that two cultures could co-exist equally within an individual without one being stronger than the other. I expected to find that you could have an equal but separate Canadian and Estonian identity. I was wrong.

At some point, child refugees and immigrants struggle to find "home" – to find where they really belong – one identity evolves to be stronger. In other words, we begin to hold less tightly our identifying heritage (albeit with some guilt feelings) and start to more strongly embrace being Canadian.

Part Seven: Hyphenated Canadians

Over the years, one area that has received negative comments is the use of the hyphenated Canadian, someone who calls themselves Italian-Canadian or Chinese-Canadian, etc. During my childhood, I do not recall anyone calling themselves Estonian-Canadians, so I have never called myself a hyphenated Canadian. However, I have no problem with someone who does – that is their choice.

Our tolerance of hyphenated Canadians is one of the things which is distinctive of our Canadian culture. Author Wilf Ferguson in his book, *I Hate Canadians*, asks why the term is so subversive to our national identity. He argues that how we identify ourselves is an intensely personal matter. It is a way for us to unite our personal background with that of the nation. Hyphens identify us – on the left side is our private story and on the right side, our public one. Ferguson notes that a Hungarian-Canadian and Irish-Canadian share neither Hungary nor Ireland, but they do share Canada.

As Canadians we have an overriding identity and overriding values. Canada is the one category we all share, united by common nationality, by a Charter of Rights, by a Constitution and by a name, Canada. I like his way of thinking.

The Conclusion: Coming Home

Returning home from Estonia and discovering my Canadianism – the psychological journey to find my Canadian identity – was mostly over. However, over the years, my sense of being Canadian continued to strengthen to where finally, I feel my Canadianism is as valid as born-here Canadians; as valid as those whose grandparents were pioneer farmers, railway builders, miners and politicians; as valid as those who can trace their direct descendants back multi-generations to the early European settlers in Canada. Canada belongs to me as much as it does to any other Canadian.

Immigrants have been here for hundreds of years, and together with the indigenous people of Canada, they have been our nation builders. Their histories are part of the Canadian tapestry, just as my Estonian history and experiences as a child refugee are now also part of Canada's history.

We, the Estonian child refugees, have gone on to build our lives on a solid Estonian and Canadian cultural foundation to make us the individuals we are today. For me, the two cultures have merged into a solid personal identity that keeps evolving.

In conclusion, the answer to the subject of this essay – “but when do you know you are Canadian?” – seems simple: when “home” is Canada...but it may take us a long time to get there.