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A Jewish story.
Summers in Pärnu

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and ethnic
identity
revisited

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in post-Soviet Russia

German Nazis
go green

Historical memory
in Bulgaria

Many enter – few get out

Overcrowded prisons in the Baltic states

also in this issue

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DUNES OF HAPPINESS

FIFTEEN SUMMERS IN ESTONIA

Estonia, the source of my happiest childhood memories. . . . Between the ages of five and twenty I spent fifteen summers, a total of three or four years, in Estonia. Pärnu, the resort where we summured, sits on the west coast of Estonia, a two-hour drive from Tallinn. Pärnu owes its historical reputation to the three-mile strand, the mud baths, and its microclimate, steady and mild, curative for anxious city types with high blood pressure, raw nerves, and pallid faces. Still the vacation capital of Estonia today, Pärnu flourished

during the interlude of Estonian independence before World War II. Then came the Soviet annexation in 1940, the Nazi occupation, and finally the Soviet “liberation”, which lasted until 1991. Many streets were given Soviet names, like Nõukogude (Soviet Street; since renamed), but the town retained much of its character. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Pärnu became the object of summer pilgrimages by the intelligentsia from Soviet cities. When my parents and I first came to Pärnu in 1972 – after having tried rotten-apricot-smelling Sebastopol and shashlyk-greasy Sochi – we were smitten by Estonia’s culture. Years of Soviet rule couldn’t take either the northern European breeding or the memories of independence out of the local Estonian population. Such notions as work ethic, public interest, privacy, and efficiency were as natural to them as they were alien to much of the Soviet population. Going to Estonia for the first time was like going abroad.



The author with Ekaterina (Katya) Tsarapkina in the Shrayers' Zhiguli. Pärnu, ca. 1980. Courtesy of the author.

During my fifteen vacations in Pärnu, I made no more than half a dozen acquaintances among the Estonians. There were minor exceptions: the stylish librarian at the children’s library; the saintly Evald Mikkus, whose studio apartment we rented for ten summers in a row; the drab-cheeked Estonian woman who let me dig for trout worms in her kitchen garden. And there was one grand exception: the Estonian artist Jüri Arrak and his family, who became our family’s close friends. For years, my parents and I would return to Pärnu and see the same faces of the local Estonians at the grocery stores, the cafés, the telegraph office. We greeted them in Estonian – *tere* (“hello”) or *tervist* (“health”); they replied curtly, and never in Russian. An invisible wall separated the “Russians” from the Estonians. The “Russians” included the local non-Estonian residents and us, the summerfolk. As Russians, we were, by default, part of the greater occupational force; as Jews, we were fellow victims of Russian – and

Soviet – imperial domination. While the Estonian landlords, postal workers, waiters, and sales clerks weren’t especially friendly to vacationers, they treated us a thousand times better than people working in any Soviet office or establishment outside Estonia would. To those tired of being watched and supervised, the sensation of inscrutability was liberating.

I said “intelligentsia”, but I should have said “Jewish intelligentsia”. In those days, perhaps two-thirds of Pärnu’s summer population were Jewish. First hundreds, then thousands of Jewish parents from across the Soviet Union brought their progeny to Pärnu in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a remarkable environment. Summer after summer, Russian-speaking Jewish kids who had known each other since early childhood would congregate on the beach, play charades, or go to movies together. While in Pärnu, our parents put aside perennial concerns about antisemitism. There were certainly non-Jewish parents and

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children among the vacationers – Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Armenian, Uzbek. But the Jewish element prevailed. One of the summer jokes from the late 1970s went like this: In retaliation for the establishment of a new Jewish settlement on the West Bank, the PLO detonated a bomb . . . in Pärnu. During the rest of the year, when we were not in Estonia, Jewish kids experienced one form or another of prejudicial treatment. But within the summer Pärnu community, being Jewish was both “cool” and “hip”. Pärnu was the summer comfort zone of our childhood.

The odor of the old Hanseatic League still hangs under the vault of Pärnu’s dilapidated town gate where we occasionally played. We spent most of our time at the beach or in the seaside parks with secluded benches, inside the wooden orchestra shell when it rained, on the tennis and badminton courts when it didn’t, and regardless of the weather, at the main playground with its squeaky merry-go-rounds and sagging swings. Inspired by the East German-Yugoslavian Westerns starring the debonair Gojko Mitić, we were mad about Mohegan warriors. But I also recall a period when my Pärnu friends and I became fascinated with seafaring Hanseatic merchants, with Lübeck and The Hague, with Brabant cuffs and wooden clogs, and also with what we heard from our parents about Pushkin’s great-grandfather, the “Blackamoor of Peter the Great”, who had spent some time in Pärnu (Pernov) in the 1730s.

In addition to the surviving gable-roofed buildings, Pärnu prides itself on its late 1920s and 1930s architecture, including the Mud Baths Clinic, the Kursaal, and Rannahotell, a local gem of Functionalism.

To a visiting Western European, the town would have a familiar appearance, a little like Ostend, Binz, Harlingen, Cuxhaven, Sopot, Palanga, Jurmala, and other North Sea and Baltic Sea coastal resorts. But to me and to my childhood friends, there is nothing like Pärnu anywhere in the world. In our memories of those summers, we dwell in the kind of happiness that is beyond the reach of language – especially an adopted language.

Throughout my pre-college years, I used to go to Estonia for two, sometimes three months. My parents would ship me off soon after my birthday in early June, and usually joined me in July. For the first two

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summers we rented an old cottage on the other side of the Riga Highway, a long walk from the beach across the bowels of Pärnu, where the streets smelled of burning coal and raspberries. The cottage belonged to Luule, an Estonian woman who later married a Finn and moved across the gulf. She charged a token rent, but the house had no gas or running water and swarmed with mice and silverfish. Every morning Grandmother Anna Mikhailovna and I would walk to the beach past the town market, with its pickle jars, bunches of scallions, heaps of ornate lettuce, mounds of black, red, and yellow currants, sugar snap peas, and early summer apples (including the aromatic variety the locals called “Fox’s Nose”). Along the way we recited Russian poetry, mainly from the repertoire of nineteenth-century lyric by Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev, Nikitin, Nekrasov, and Fet, but also the twentieth-century poet Esenin, whose bluesy lamentations infected me with a nostalgia for the destroyed pastoral.

Coming to Pärnu year after year from 1972 to 1986, one got to know a whole community of peers, as well as their siblings, parents, and extended families. The core of our Pärnu *kompaniia* was formed around 1975, when we were seven or eight. On days deemed unfit for going to the beach, the adults would hide from the newspaper-flapping northern winds behind the protective wall of the concrete parapet that separates the beach from the seaside park and Rannahotell. The grownups, among them the art historian Boris Bernshtein and his wife, the pianist Frida Bernshtein, the musicologists Yuzef Kon and Olga (Lyalya) Bochkaryova, the violinist Anatoly Reznikovskiy, and the pianist Marina Trey, placed their chaise lounges in concentric

circles and spent the mornings reading, smoking, and discussing politics and the arts.

In loud whispers they talked about Brodsky, Nabokov, Neizvestny, Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, and other forbidden subjects. The kids would brave the chilly wind and play in the shallow water. During the rest of the year, some of us lived in different cities, but in Pärnu, we were inseparable. Many of our parents congregated in the same spot at the beach and gathered at night for little soirées where they told racy jokes and consumed large quantities of Cinzano Bianco, available in Soviet liquor stores in the mid-1970s. In the evenings our folks took turns hosting suppers or after-suppers, at which Estonian-made rowanberry wine and Benedictine liqueur were abundantly consumed. The kids were served rhubarb juice, and the fare included smoked herring, smoked cheese with caraway seeds, and red currant tarts. We dreaded the end of August.

I treasure my Estonian memories because in them I never feel alone among my peers. I met my two closest friends, Maxim Mussel and Katya Tsarapkina, in Pärnu in the early 1970s. My father and Katya’s mother are the same age and grew up in adjacent buildings in Lesnoe, a neighborhood of the working-class Vyborg district in Leningrad. When I first met Katya’s mother, Inga Kogan, she had the bluest of cornflower-blue eyes. A movie buff, she married a man four years her junior, a tall and dapper chemical engineer and former water polo player. Katya is forty-seven as I prepare these lines for publication, and to this day she insists that her father represents the gold standard of male beauty, as Dr. Freud smiles down on her from his heavenly clinic. Both Katya’s grandfathers were Jewish, both her grandmothers non-Jewish, and Katya looks most like her West Slavic ancestors. From her father she inherited his slenderness and long legs, from her mother the enchanted half-smile of an absinthe drinker. The melancholy of her shtetl ancestors dwells in Katya’s eyes and on her brow. Having studied classical ballet from an early age, Katya still possesses a lilting gait.

I find it difficult to write about close friends in connection with our past, as it forces me to put closure



Rannahotell, Pärnu, Estonia. Postcard, ca. 1938. Courtesy of the author.

Members of the Jewish-Russian intelligentsia congregating on the Pärnu beach. Three men in a circle: Efim Lifshits, Yuzef Kon (face blocked), Vladimir Tsarapkin; in the chaise lounge: Emilia Shrayer. Courtesy of Emilia Shrayer and David Shrayer-Petrov.

to our story. Instead I close my eyes to give them rest, and I see our white Zhiguli sedan parked on the roadside. We have just returned to Pärnu from a blessed Estonian forest. We have been picking bilberries, wild raspberries, and forest mushrooms. Fatigued after several hours of work, Katya is sitting in the back seat by the window, her long arms locked in a perfect geometrical figure. She squints at the camera as though all of the world's allure and surprise have been concentrated in her face. Images like that one forbid closure, as does my Estonian childhood.

By 1983 Maxim Mussel had become my best male friend. Katya and I had both known him for a long time as one of the founding members of the Pärnu Jewish Mohegans. Now one of Russia's leading authorities on brand management, he is still remembered by the Pärnu kids as "Max Krolik", Max the Rabbit. He earned his nickname because as an eight- and nine-year-old he had retainers on his teeth and sported gold-framed round glasses. This combination evoked an association with Rabbit in Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*. Max Krolik, or Krol for short, looked the most intellectual among us and was usually seen with a book in hand. I envied him his spectacles, associating them with mental prowess and refinement. As a youth he was unathletic, oversensitive. A streak of Slavic blood flowed in his veins, calming his explosive self the way a peaceful Russian river cools a hot summer landscape. Maxim's origins call for a brief digression because of the way they illustrate the workings of mixed marriages in my former homeland. Before World War II, Maxim's maternal grandfather, Israel Abolits, married a woman whose first name and patronymic, Olympiada Nikitichna, made one think of a merchant's wife in a nineteenth-century Russian vaudeville show. He loved his Lipa breathlessly all his life, and she, too, adored her Izya, an engineering professor. Maxim's parents divorced when he was in his teens and led their own lives, and I mainly remember my young friend summering with his grandparents. His grandfather had an old-fashioned professorial briefcase the size of a small pig, and he used to carry it with him to the beach, to the park, and to the public baths he frequented. Folded newspapers jutted out of its half-

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zipped compartments like giraffe necks. Even on hot days, Maxim's Russian grandmother went around the resort in dark floral dresses with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

Maxim was a tireless reader of any foreign fiction he could find in translation. In high school he was the only person I knew who had actually finished Proust and Musil. He was the first to have discovered Julio Cortázar and Pär Lagerkvist, and he also put me onto Hermann Hesse. I remember the two of us walking along the Pärnu beach and trying to figure out how to play the glass bead game.

Our lives have been joined together, forming a charmed triangle of friendship. Each of us is as different as can be from the other two. Katya is phlegmatic, sometimes unstoppable. She's also boundlessly generous. Although Maxim is given to moments of apathy and cynicism, he is a gentle soul, which is a rare quality in men. In our three-way dynamics, I tend to be the decider, and in my egocentrism I can sometimes be an overbearing friend. It's been twenty-six years since I left the Soviet Union, and to this day I miss the presence of Maxim and Katya in my daily life. We make every effort to see each other – in St. Petersburg or Moscow, in Milan, in Marbella, in Boston. Three times we have met in Pärnu for summertime reunions. When we get together, putting aside our families, spouses and children, countries, formed habits and tempered predilections, time drops its shackles. Forever fifteen, we find each other on the amber alley that takes us to the seaside amusement park and

the art nouveau mansion of the former casino. Katya runs ahead of us, always slightly en pointe. I'm next, clutching badminton rackets. Max, his chest acting up in the pine-infused air, lags behind. Under his arm he clutches a Russian translation of Remarque's *Three Comrades*. "Look, boys," Katya turns her head and waves her arms, "Look, they've fixed the Ferris wheel. Please let's go up!"

In some ways, I miss Estonia and Pärnu more than I miss Russia and my old home in Moscow. I realize now that our summer visits, between 1972 and 1987, were a release, especially during our refusenik years, when our family lived in limbo and my parents were persecuted. The Estonian vacations gave us a temporary escape from an oppressive Soviet reality. A month in Estonia, away from Moscow's officialdom, charged us with enough spirit and energy to last a whole year.

Before returning to Moscow by night train, we used to stop in Tallinn for a day or two. This was one of our annual rituals of parting with summer and Estonia. While our parents shopped for Estonian-made clothes and household goods that had the semblance of things Western, the kids roamed around Vyshgorod (Upper Town), Tallinn's medieval center. We loved to stand on the castle's observation landings, whence one could take in the entire port and the steely semicircle of the Baltic Sea. Ecstatic, we mouthed the quaint names of the castle towers: Fat Margarita, Long Hermann. Parents treated us to delectable sandwiches with anchovies and hard-boiled egg, and also to cheese pastries and chicory-flavored coffee.

After Estonia's white beaches, soft colors, and understated elegance, the arrival in Moscow left me with a gnawing sensation of entrapment. The rainy season would have already begun in central Russia. Waddling Moscow buses would greet us with splashes of cold mud. And one more acute sensation on returning to Moscow from Estonia: watermelons. The watermelons would arrive from the south around the end of August or early September. Street corners and areas in front of food stores would be filled up with cagelike metal containers full of watermelons. People marched in place in front of the large containers, choosing watermelons, sniffing them, tugging at their twisted piggish stems, tapping them like doctors giving an abdominal exam. Emotions ran wild and people would get into fights over watermelons. Women would lean over dirty edges of the metal containers to reach for watermelons, and boys would peer at their underwear and garter belts. Streams of rancid pink juice flowed down pavements and mixed with the Stygian waters of the city streets. "Moscow again," I used to think, refusing to forget Estonia. "Now it's ten more months before we go back to Pärnu." ❌

maxim d. shrayer

The excerpt was adapted from the author's coming book *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*. Copyright © 2013 by Maxim D. Shrayer.



The author with his parents, Emilia Shrayer and David Shrayer-Petrov, visiting Panga Rehe, the summer home of the Estonian artist Jüri Arrak. Summer 1977. Courtesy of the author.

The author with Maxim Mussel. Pärnu, August 1986. Courtesy of the author.