



## ESTONIA AND THE CLASSICS

Earlier this year I received an official invitation to give lectures during May in the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Tartu in Estonia. I was most fortunate to have Mike Truu (an Estonian by birth) as my guide and interpreter during my two-week stay in Estonia.

I flew to the Estonian capital Tallinn by way of London and Stockholm. Tallinn lies on the north coast of Estonia, a mere 82 km. from Helsinki across the Gulf of Finland and 380 km. from Stockholm. SAS operate a daily return flight between Stockholm and Tallinn.

We know that the region around Tallinn was occupied at least 3500 years ago. Bronze bracelets, rings, brooches, silver artefacts and Roman coins have been found in graves. Tallinn was a port and trading centre on the East-West trade route. It has a natural harbour, protected by two islands and Toompea Hill, a famous landmark. Pirita Beach is a well-known Baltic holiday resort and was used by the Soviets for yachting events during the Moscow Olympics. The contrast between Old Tallinn and the modern city could not be more striking. The latter contains much to remind the visitor of almost fifty years of Soviet occupation. Icarus buses from Hungary belch fumes all over the city as do the many chimneys from Soviet factories.

The huge blocks of flats built by the Soviets to house their workers are a blot on the landscape. But Old Tallinn is simply another world. It was an Hanseatic Free City and a member of the Hanseatic League of over 100 trading towns. It contains features from the Danish, Swedish and German occupation of Estonia which was for a long time the northernmost province of the Holy Roman Empire. Seafarers, merchants and artisans lived in the lower part of the Old City. The upper part was occupied by the knights. Every night the heavy oak gates separating the two sections of the city were locked. It is incredible that the high stone walls, red-roofed defence towers, homes of the common people and mansions of the nobility, as well as many churches, have been preserved in their original state for all these centuries in spite of devastating wars, fires and the heavy Soviet bombing of Tallinn in 1944. Four different walking tours of Old Tallinn are available to the visitor, together with a detailed guide-book showing not only the route but also a description of every building along that route.

After a few days in Tallinn, we proceeded south by bus for some 120 km. to Estonia's second-largest city Tartu which is the home of Estonia's only university with some 8000 students and 9 different Faculties. (Tallinn has a large technical institute which is called a university in some guidebooks.) Tartu University has a long and varied history. It was founded by the Swedish king Gustavus Secundus Adolphus in 1632, completely destroyed in the Northern War with Russia in 1700 and rebuilt around 1800. Lectures began in the present Main Building with its Classical facade in 1802. The Classics Department is situated there and lectures given in the Classics Museum where the walls are painted in the style of Pompeii and plaster casts of original antique sculptures adorn the building. Many of these artefacts were taken to Russia in World War I and displayed at the new Russian University of Voronezh in 1918. Among the few original pieces in the Museum are Roman glass utensils, a small marble bust from Olbia and Greek Red-figure vases. Between 1941 and 1944 a large part of the Main Building was used by the German army as its field

headquarters. The Classics Department was the home of the KGB until they went back to Moscow in 1991.

Lectures are all of two hours duration! At present there are 14 students in Classics, all of them women. I had a full house for my lectures, whether conscripted or voluntary I had no means of knowing! Certainly they all understood English well enough but were too diffident to put questions in English. Like all Estonians, the students are fascinated by their roots and were most intrigued when I read the following passage from Tacitus to them:

Turning, therefore, to the right hand shore of the Suebian sea, we find it washing the country of the Aestii, who have the same customs and fashions as the Suebi, but a language more like the British. They worship the Mother of the gods, and wear, as an emblem of this cult, the device of a wild boar, which stands them in stead of armour or human protection and gives the worshipper a sense of security even among his enemies. They seldom use weapons of iron, but clubs very often. They cultivate grain and other crops with a perseverance unusual among the indolent Germans. They also ransack the sea. They are the only people who collect amber- *glæsum* is their own word for it - in the shallows or even on the beach. Like true barbarians, they have never asked or discovered what it is or how it is produced. For a long time, indeed, it lay unheeded like any other refuse of the sea, until Roman luxury made its reputation. They have no use for it themselves. They gather it crude, pass it on in unworked lumps, and are astounded at the price it fetches.

(*Germania* 45, Penguin translation)

Incidentally, Tacitus was very wrong about the Estonian language. Of course it bears no resemblance to English. Estonians belong to the Finno-Ugric group of peoples. Their language is closely related to Finnish and is a distant relative of Hungarian. It has no connection whatever with Indo-European languages nor with Latvian or Lithuanian, the languages of Estonia's two Baltic neighbours.

By the way, I brought back a beautiful amber necklace as a present for my wife. The Estonian word for this valued commodity is *merevaik*.

I also gave lectures, by request, on the social, political and historical background to four of Cicero's speeches.

I was allowed to travel widely in Estonia, even to places recently out-of-bounds to Estonians themselves such as the large Baltic island of Saaremaa in the West where my SA passport was studied long and hard by a formidable Soviet Passport Control Officer who had clearly never seen such a document in her life! Everywhere I went I was showered with Estonian hospitality, especially in Tallinn and Tartu. The memories of a society in transition will long remain with me.

K.O. Matier, University of Durban-Westville