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Writing on the limits of the Estonian diaspora : belonging, þÿgender, and sexuality in Heljo Liitoja s autobiog

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Writing on the Limits of the Estonian Diaspora: Belonging, Gender and Sexuality in Heljo Liitoja's Autobiographies

Abstract: This article analyzes two autobiographies of the Estonian-Canadian Heljo Liitoja (1923−2010) as participation in the post-Soviet national reconstruction of Estonia. The article argues that some of Liitoja's experiences, such as her connection to the Toronto gay and lesbian community and the controversies within the Estonian diaspora, could not be addressed in an autobiography framed within an Estonian life story writing competition. The article suggests that Liitoja's autobiographical book that discussed these topics was able to stretch the limits of the Estonian diaspora narrative.

Keywords: autobiography; belonging; nationality; gender; sexuality; Estonia; Toronto

Introduction

> Among other stories in the collection, A HUNDRED LIFE STORIES OF THE CENTURY is also mine. All that was written happened, but even more had happened that did not fit among those lines. Here I would like to put down one missing section that has been fairly important in my life. The title THE MISSING PART refers to that. (Liitoja 2002, 5)[1]

This is how Heljo Liitoja (1923−2010), an Estonian emigrant living in Toronto, Canada, started her book published in Estonia in 2002. An autobiographical work very rarely provides such a direct statement to interpret the text as a missing section of an earlier writing. The earlier autobiography that Liitoja refers to was written for a writing

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[1] Teiste lugude hulgas kogumikus SAJANDI SADA ELULUGU on ka minu oma. Kõik, mis on kirjas, on ka juhtunud, aga juhtunud on veel nii mõndagi, mis nendesse ridadesse ei mahtunud. Tahan siin kirja panna ühe puutuva lõigu, millel on küllaltki oluline tähtsus minu elus. Sellele viitab ka pealkiri SEE PUUDUV OSA."

competition on Estonian life stories in 1999 and published in 2000 in the first volume of an Estonian life stories anthology (Liitoja 2000). It also appears in a slightly abbreviated form in an English-language collection of Estonian life stories (Liitoja 2009). These collections placed Liitoja's autobiographical narrative in the framework of telling an Estonian life story, a way of returning history to Estonians during the post-Soviet transition in the form of a mosaic formed by individual lives. (On Estonian post-Soviet life stories, see, for example, Hinrikus and Kõresaar 2004; Kõresaar and Jõesalu 2016; Jaago, Kõresaar, and Rahi-Tamm 2006.) In particular, during the 1990s, Liitoja's generation played an essential role as carriers of the cultural connection to the pre-war Estonian republic (see, for example, Kõresaar 2004a; Hinrikus 2009, x).

Estonian life narratives of the post-World War II era are often divided into three parts of a "cohort of experience" (Kirss 2006, 611): the stories of those who stayed, those who were deported, and those who fled (see also Kirss and Kivimäe 2009, 15–16). Heljo Liitoja's autobiography corresponds to one common variation of a story of her generation, one that discusses escape from the occupied country during the World War II and the life in exile after the war. Simultaneously, however, her autobiography demonstrates a diversity of individual lives lived within a challenging historical situation. Liitoja was born in 1923 as a daughter of educated Estonian parents. She spent her childhood in Tartu, the classic intellectual capital and university town of Estonia, and her teenage years in the national capital, Tallinn, where her family moved in 1936. Her generation received their education in the nationalistic atmosphere of the young Estonian nation before the outbreak of World War II radically altered their future. The war and the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940 forced Liitoja's childhood family to become separated, and Liitoja herself joined the German war effort in 1941. During the war, Liitoja migrated to Germany, and after the peace she managed to

escape repatriation to Soviet-annexed Estonia and was accepted as a refugee in Canada, where she became an active member of the Estonian exile community in Toronto. After she passed away in 2010, she was remembered as a Sunday school teacher and producer of plays and concerts for children within the Estonian community.[2]

In this article, I study Liitoja's autobiographies as texts that construct one's own self-understanding and as contributions to community-building as a diaspora Estonian. I approach Liitoja's texts as autobiographies written within the context of the post-Soviet "memory-boom" (Luca and Kurvet-Käosaar 2013) on a life lived first as an Estonian girl and young woman in Estonia before and during World War II, and then, after the war, an Estonian refugee in multicultural Toronto. In addition to recollections of the Estonian diaspora community, Liitoja's autobiographical book also reveals other aspects of her life, which she felt were pulling her further from the Estonian community. These were some of the "missing parts" of her life story suggested by the title of her book. Liitoja reports how at a turning point in her life in 1970, she became friends with men who were part of the rapidly developing Toronto gay community. Liitoja established an interest toward gay lives she had no prior knowledge of and, as a student of sociology, she conducted a small research project on the well-being of gay men. Eventually, she—a "middle-aged suburban housewife"—became "an honorary member of the homosexuals" (Liitoja 2002, 5).

While the experiences and self-understandings of diaspora Estonians have been studied previously (see, for example, Ojamaa 2018; Ojamaa and Karu-Kletter 2016), Liitoja's autobiographies offer perspectives on the changing importance of diverse

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[2] Roiser, Tiiu. 2010. "Mälestades Heljo Liitoja (1923–2010)." Eesti Elu, October 8. http://www.eesti.ca/malestades-heljo-liitoja-1923-2010/article29852

engagements within an autobiography. I suggest that Liitoja's book, the "missing part," is a contribution to the construction of post-Soviet Estonian nationality and it stretches the limits of the Estonian diaspora narrative. The book was published in Estonia in the Estonian language, and its back cover portrays wartime events that the book does not actually address, indicating the author's connection to the defining moments in Estonian history. The book is not well known in Estonia, however, and when it was published it was not reviewed or discussed in newspapers or magazines. That said, it is a story that widens the scope of diaspora Estonian life writing and the understanding of diaspora Estonian identification in general. For this reason, I claim that both of Liitoja's published autobiographical writings participated in the process in which the Estonian nation was reconstructed and redefined.

In what follows, I discuss what kind of aspects of being an Estonian girl and a woman—first in Estonia before and during World War II and then in the refugee community in Toronto—Liitoja's writings construct and how they both comply with and challenge the Estonian post-Soviet narrative. I also discuss how Liitoja addresses the limitations of the diaspora community and the factors that separated her from it. I approach these topics with questions of national and gendered belonging and focus on opportunities of narrating these belongings in an autobiography. Therefore, I first discuss the concepts of belonging and diaspora, together with a focus on Estonian life writing as a context of constructing belonging.

I utilize Liitoja's autobiographical texts in their published forms, and I have also familiarized myself with the manuscript that Liitoja sent to the writing competition in

1999.[3] I discovered, however, that the differences between the manuscript and the published form are quite minor, consisting mainly of changes in grammar and wording and the exclusion of some medical details. When I quote Liitoja's autobiography written for the competition, I use the English translation (Liitoja 2009). In my translations of *See puuduv osa* (Liitoja 2002), I use the English terms "homosexual" and "homo," even though they are not widely utilized anymore, to make a difference between Estonian *homoseksuaal* (or *homo*) and *gei*, translated as "gay." I refer to the author by her married name Liitoja, rather than her maiden name Nurm, as that is the name she published her texts under. It is also a way to emphasize that my focus is on her autobiographical narration, not on her life events as such.

Constructing Belonging in Diaspora Life Writing

I utilize the concept of diaspora when discussing the Estonian community in Toronto after World War II. According to Jonathan Grossman's (2019) summation, the most salient features of diaspora are immigration and the location of a community outside of the homeland, combined with enduring orientation toward the homeland, transnationalism, and group identity. In my understanding, the Estonian (as well as other Baltic) post-war exile communities fulfill all these criteria. Those who had fled the occupied countries formed transnational networks, with both political and cultural goals, that aimed at preserving the national community and restoring their nation-states. As Grossman (2019, 12) emphasizes, those migrants who do not maintain their ties to the cause of their homeland and who disassociate themselves from the community of

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[3] The manuscript is stored in the Estonian Cultural History Archives at the Estonian Literature Museum in Tartu: Eesti Kirjandus Muuseum. Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv. f. 350. M 863.

the people with the same descent are no longer included in the definition of diaspora. Therefore, the diaspora community I discuss in this paper consists of those Estonians in Toronto who considered themselves as forming an Estonian community. While Toronto was the site of the largest Estonian refugee community in Canada and one of the largest in the world (on the Estonian post-war diaspora communities, see Kulu 1997), not all Estonians participated in the community activities—let alone organized them for decades, as Heljo Liitoja did.

In my study, Liitoja's autobiographies offer an example of how the movement between different communities is produced in autobiographical narration. The analysis of these diverse belongings reveals how it was possible to narrate the role of these communities within the context of post-Soviet Estonian life writing. As Vikki Bell (1999, 3) has described it, belonging is a performative achievement. In line with Elspeth Probyn (1996), she states that the term "belonging" consists not only of being but also of longing, thus emphasizing the affective side of the concept (Bell 1999, 1). This double connection of belonging—being in one place and at the same time longing for somewhere else—is essential when discussing diaspora communities which are defined by the longed-for homeland. Following Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (2014, 9), I see narratives of remembrance as constructing a community. I consider the writing and publishing of life writings as a method of constructing the Estonian nation and, in the case of Estonians in exile, as a way of bringing into dialogue the Estonian experiences from abroad with those from the homeland (on Latvian refugee narratives, see Bela, Garda-Rozenberga, and Zirnīte 2016). In other words, following Rogers Brubaker (2004, 11–12), I consider nationality not as an essence but as a process shaped by, among other things, writing and the publishing of life writings.

According to Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 199), belonging is always a dynamic process. Among the aspects of belonging that she presents, the analysis of belongings as social locations outlines the particularities of intersecting group belongings in a certain historical setting. In the case of Heljo Liitoja, her heterosexual womanhood and her Estonian nationality were formed by the conditions of being a refugee in multicultural Toronto—a metropolis that rendered the intersecting belongings more visible than a more homogenous location would (on the heterogeneity in Montreal, see Probyn 1996, 25–26). Yet, as Yuval-Davis (2006, 200) underlines, intersecting differences do not merely add up; they construct one another. Liitoja's texts both produce and perform belongings as an Estonian and, in particular, as a heterosexual Estonian woman in diaspora. Moreover, Liitoja's autobiographies are an example of a life story that questions the boundaries of normative heterosexuality, even if the narrator discloses only her own heterosexual experiences and feelings (see Lambevski 2011). In her book, Liitoja positions herself as a self-identified heterosexual writer, a definition that is rare, particularly among those autobiographers born and raised during the interwar era. Therefore, reading her autobiographies also opens opportunities to analyze heterosexuality, and especially heterosexual womanhood, as gendered and sexualized positioning, and to understand how this positioning also shaped her national belonging as an Estonian.

For Yuval-Davis (2006, 202–203), while not all identity narratives are about belonging per se, they often convey meanings of membership in certain groups or communities. I read Liitoja's autobiographies as contributions to cultural memory, as I study them from the perspective of a historian interested in remembering as a cultural and dynamic process (Erll 2011; De Cesari and Rigney 2014). My reading of Liitoja's autobiographies emphasizes the importance of the context of remembering and how this

context intertwines in the writing with memories of life events. While Liitoja's book *See puuduv osa*, published as a stand-alone autobiography and even subtitled as an autobiography, could very well be studied within the genre of memoirs, my reading places it in the context of Estonian post-Soviet life writing. Moreover, I choose to call these texts autobiographies and sometimes life stories, especially when referring to the context of the writing competitions, to emphasize that they are not memoirs of an especially notable individual, but writings that participated in the mosaic of Estonian history during the post-Soviet national reconstruction (Kõresaar and Jõesalu 2016, 48).

Starting in 1989, prominent Estonian memory institutions (most importantly the Estonian Literary Museum) gathered life stories, and autobiographies were also published in magazines and newspapers. This advanced people's interest in writing and made publication of life stories, not only writing for archives and researchers, an essential element in Estonian post-Soviet memory work. In the 1990s, collections of life stories were created for writing competitions motivated by small prizes (Hinrikus 2009, ix), and selections of these works have been published as anthologies (for an overview of the collection campaigns and the resulting anthologies in the 1990s and early 2000s, see Hinrikus and Kõresaar 2004, 23–25). Life stories were not only gathered from Estonians residing in Estonia but also from those who had lived their lives after World War II outside of Estonia as refugees, such as Heljo Liitoja.

In writing competitions, the call for writing formed the immediate context and shaped how the writers formulated their narratives. Liitoja participated in a competition conducted in 1999, titled "A hundred life stories of the century," which was framed in terms of the dramatic events of the twentieth century and their meaning for Estonia and Estonians. The call for writing asked the participants to focus on the events that had shaped their destinies the most (the call for writing is reprinted in Hinrikus 2000, 7–8;

for analysis, see also Kõresaar 2004b, 89–90; Kirss and Kivimäe 2009, 26; and Kõresaar 2011b, 7). Liitoja's autobiography received an award in the competition and this acknowledgement—of which she was rather proud, according to her son (Kirss 2006, 552)—may have encouraged her to publish her memories also as a stand-alone book. In the epilogue of *See puuduv osa*, Liitoja (2002, 191) states that she had already finished the work twenty-seven years earlier, but the text offers some reflections on changes that occurred during the recent decades; this indicates that it was at least revised prior to publication. In this epilogue, Liitoja cites the changing position of gay and lesbian rights as one motivation for writing, noting that even though tolerance increased, full equality had not yet been achieved. Liitoja's book is an important contribution in itself, as stories of non-heterosexual lives are virtually invisible even today in the Estonian public discussion on autobiographies, be they of Estonians residing in Estonia or those abroad.

As Anne-Marie Fortier (2000) describes it, migrant belongings consist of both movement and attachment, as the emigration from the longed homeland is combined with settling in the new country. To refer to Michael Rothberg's (2014, 129–130) analysis, Liitoja's autobiographies offer a case that combines both *transnational* remembering, as her texts participate in the diasporic Estonian memory production, and *transcultural* remembering, as they formulate a hyphenated belonging as an Estonian-Canadian. Liitoja's autobiographies function as a fruitful example of interspersed attachments to diverse communities, and how these attachments sometimes contradict each other. On the level of the writings, these contradictions become visible when something is left out from one narrative or a certain perspective is emphasized. In other words, interpreting these choices of writing requires asking why something did not "fit among those lines," as Liitoja describes in the beginning of her autobiographical book.

Overcoming the Limitations of Girlhood

Heljo Liitoja begins her autobiography published in the anthology chronologically with her birth and childhood. When recounting this period, Liitoja emphasizes her poor physical health and the ability to learn quickly as important aspects that shaped her life course. The boredom of being ill and bedbound led her to learn to read by the age of four, and she was also taught German before school age. Due to her poor health, Liitoja was sent to school a year later than usual, but then she was able to start straight from the third grade. This made her a sort of overnight celebrity at the school in Tartu, but when her family moved to Tallinn when Heljo was thirteen, she attended a new school where she was no longer regarded as special. Partly because of being the youngest in the class, she felt different from the other girls. She describes their markers of adult femininity:

> After all, many of my classmates had curls, silk stockings, even high-heeled shoes. My hair was totally straight, and I wore thick, cotton stockings and low-heeled shoes that fastened with a buttoned strap so they would stay on. Perhaps there were others, too, without the curls and silk stockings, but I did not see them. (Liitoja 2009, 368)

Liitoja's longing to be one of the "ladies" of her class forms an interesting contradiction with another type of longing that she expressed when describing her earlier childhood in Tartu. Then, she recalls, she had wished to have been born a boy but also to be a mother, although she emphasized that at that time she had no knowledge of how one becomes a mother (Liitoja 2009, 367). What is common to all these desires—to be a boy, to be a mother, to be "a lady"—is the desire to *not* be a girl. In this way, her writing expresses ambivalence with her gender starting already in the memories of childhood and the diverse difficulties that came with fulfilling the assigned female role of her age. That said, nothing in this description reveals possible limitations imposed on her because of her gender. Her later autobiographical book paints a slightly different

picture of her childhood, however. There, when recalling her girlhood, she describes herself as "the black sheep" of her family (Liitoja 2002, 20) and comments on her enduring difficulties around understanding the difference between what was suitable and what was not (Liitoja 2002, 15).

In her autobiography written for the competition, Liitoja again repeats her desire to be a boy in connection to the sparking of the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany after the first year of Estonia's Soviet occupation in the summer of 1941. Her desire is tied to her Estonian nationality: "as a girl I could not rise up to defend it [Estonia], weapon in hand" (Liitoja 2009, 367). In her narration, gender and nationality intertwine and produce a desired nationalistic position consisting of the traditionally male ability to defend one's country with arms (Yuval-Davis 2006, 205–206, 208–209). Contrary to her assumptions, however, Liitoja describes how she got a chance to wield arms and in a way be freed of the limitations of her gender. She describes how, due to her ability to speak German, she first became an interpreter between the Estonian and German troops and later the only female member of the Erna battalion, which consisted of Estonian men fighting on the side of the Germans in 1941. According to her son, Liitoja often recalled a story of carrying a machine gun and storing hand grenades in her boots (Kirss 2006, 552).

Paradoxically, Liitoja describes how the main reason why she was able to remain in military service was because of her gender. A German signal officer in charge of the battalion believed that women lowered military morale, but he was not able to dismiss Liitoja, as leaving the battalion would have required her to walk a long distance through woods full of Red Army deserters, which would have been unsafe for a young woman. While the exact nature of the danger is not elaborated on, the officer's statement can be interpreted as a reference to the possibility of sexual violence—

comprising the only mention of that in Liitoja's autobiographies. Both the war zone and post-war Germany—locations that Liitoja describes in her writings—were frequent sites of violence against women, although this issue was not openly discussed until decades after the war (see, for example, A. Grossman 2011 on violence faced by German women; for an overview of sexual violence by the German troops, see Mühlhäuser 2017). Even though the topic of sexual violence has not been completely silenced in Estonian post-Soviet women's life narratives, these aspects are not mentioned in Liitoja's writings (on Estonian deportation narratives, see Kirss 2005, 30–32; on sexual violence in Baltic women's autobiographical fiction, see Kurvet-Käosaar 2003).

Neither of Liitoja's autobiographies include any reflections on her participation in the Nazi German war effort in Estonia or her minor participation in the German wartime prison camp system, as she worked for a while in a prisoner-of-war camp in the coastal town of Paldiski (on comparable omissions in Romanian exile literature, see Luca 2013, 69–70). In post-Soviet Estonia, siding with the Germans during the war was largely perceived as a natural choice between the "lesser of the two evils" (Wulf 2016, 150), with Estonia falling victim to two totalitarian regimes. Liitoja's story written for the competition follows the common pattern in Estonian life writing where the threat came from the Red Army, and the Germans are even called liberators (see, for example, Kõresaar 2011a). In Liitoja's case, it is noteworthy that this emphasis prevailed despite the decades between the war and the time of writing, when she lived in Canada and was inevitably exposed to the post-war narrative of World War II as a struggle against the ultimate evil of Nazi Germany, as well as the legacy of the Holocaust. As Ene Kõresaar (2011a, 353) observes, the discussion concerning Estonian guilt over the atrocities of the Nazi regime was avoided both in Soviet Estonia and in the diaspora. In addition to the fact that the Estonian diaspora community had been effective in maintaining the

Estonian war narrative, the context of writing for a competition on Estonian life stories further strengthened the nationalist interpretation of the war. Therefore, the positioning of writing an Estonian life story within the framework of a competition did not offer space to enter into the controversy of the situation. However, these aspects do not arise in Liitoja's autobiographical book either. There the focus is more on the personal aspects of life in the diaspora community.

Fractions of the Estonian Refugee Narrative

In her autobiography written for the writing competition, Liitoja's narration of her wartime experiences makes a surprising leap that is not explained in the story: she reports that a year after serving in the prisoner-of-war camp, in 1943 at the latest, she was in Germany, working as a maid and a nanny (Liitoja 2009, 371). She narrates how in Germany during the war she was able to continue her studies, first in Berlin, then in Innsbruck during the collapse of the Third Reich, and later, after the war had ended, at the Baltic University at the Hamburg Displaced Persons Camp.[4] Eventually Liitoja was accepted by Canada as a refugee, but this required her to downplay her prior education, as Canada was only looking for maids, and to claim to have better physical health than she did. In the context of a refugee narrative, revealing past incidents of lying for the sake of personal safety does not necessarily read as a sign of dishonesty but more as a demonstration of one's intellect and will to survive (for accounts of stealing food in Estonian deportee life narratives, see Kirss 2005, 27–28).

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[4] On Estonians at the Baltic University, see Järvesoo 1991; in this book, Liitoja (then Nurm) is listed among the students of the university (p. 268) and, with the first name Helju, among those who attended Hansa University in Hamburg (p. 254).

While diverse means and even the certain level of dishonesty needed to escape war and occupation are common elements in refugee life stories, Liitoja's account differs from the dominant narratives in a number of ways. First of all, she left Estonia for Germany in 1943 at the latest, not during the fall of 1944—"at the last moment" (Kirss 2006, 636)—as emphasized in many refugee stories. Moreover, the fact that she left Estonia contradicts her earlier stated dedication to the defense of her country. Her account does not in any way describe the reasons for leaving or underline the involuntary nature of her departure, like many refugee narratives do. As Liitoja had been an active participant in the German war effort, she certainly would have been in danger of deportation during the Soviet occupation (see, for example, Rahi-Tamm 2011, 249). Thus, her need to escape does not require specific motivation; only its timing during the war does. Whereas Tiina Kirss (2006, 631) has argued how stories of the escape and hardships faced on the way out of Estonia form a "founding myth" in Estonian refugee life writing, Liitoja's autobiography does not discuss the actual act of leaving the country. Unlike many other refugees, she does not give the exact dates or details of her voyage; instead she concentrates on her experiences in Germany. That said, Liitoja mentions how she brought with her memorabilia from home, as well as her folk costume (Liitoja 2009, 372), an act which emphasizes her enduring emotional connection to her homeland and potentially serves in the text to compensate for her early departure, which could be read as a sign of disloyalty to her country.

Another interesting difference between Liitoja's account and many refugee narratives is that when she recounts her departure from Estonia she does not mention any of her family members left behind. Contact between Liitoja and her childhood family was re-established later, as is revealed in her book. It was common that correspondence between Estonian refugees and their families back home only began

during the late 1950s (see, for example, Kurvet-Käosaar 2015, 165). In her book, Liitoja repeatedly refers to her difficult memories of childhood, such as how she never felt loved by her parents and perceived herself as living in the shadow of her sister (Liitoja 2002, 127). Moreover, she remembers how her mother described her: “Our Heljo has no heart. When she cries it is only because of anger” (Liitoja 2002, 116).[5] These notions reveal the contradictory feelings of leaving her childhood home. They combine the difficulty of longing for a home that one is not able to return to and at the same time feeling the freedom to start a life on one’s own, not being bound by the limitations of a position as a middle-class family’s daughter.

Among the three groups of Estonians with different life trajectories after the war—those who stayed, those who were deported, and those who fled—one important question addresses betrayal and the right to represent the Estonian nation. As Tiina Kirss points out (2006, 613), status as a refugee was important for those who fled, as it emphasized their reluctance to leave Estonia behind. On the one hand, from the perspective of those who stayed, the refugees could even be described as traitors of the homeland (on these accusations, see, for example, Kurvet-Käosaar 2003, 322). On the other hand, for some members of the diaspora communities in the West, refugees were the only ones who could represent what they considered to be the true Estonia, and those who had stayed behind were either perceived as losing their national identity or regarded as communists (on these discussions in the Latvian diaspora community, see Hinkle 2006, 2). Indeed, Liitoja’s autobiography reveals how she fulfilled her role as a carrier of Estonian culture in diaspora, but simultaneously how limited this role turned out to be.

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[5] “Meie Heljol pole südant. Kui ta nutab, siis ainult viha pärast.”

Shifting Belongings in a Multicultural City

After years spent in displaced persons camps in Germany, in 1948 Liitoja migrated to Toronto, which became the site of the biggest Estonian community "in the free world," as she describes it (Liitoja 2009, 376). In Toronto, she participated in 1949 in the establishing of an Estonian Sunday school for children. This work with Estonian children offered opportunities for self-fulfillment: she wrote and directed plays, trained a children's choir, and produced recordings with the children. As Liitoja herself stated, she "staunchly held on" to her Estonian heritage (Liitoja 2009, 378). As a result, she became a sort of "national mother" (Kirss 2005, 29–30) in the Estonian community. She translated books into Estonian, so that the children could learn the language of the homeland, and she taught Estonian heritage songs. The Sunday school also used books from Soviet Estonia, although they needed slight modifications, as Liitoja describes:

> The latter [books from Soviet Estonia] I would put through censorship so to speak, so that there would not be words like "communism," "pioneer," *kolkhoz*, or other such references to the regime in the homeland. Talking about such things was taboo. (Liitoja 2009, 378, italics original)

In the autobiography written for the competition, this description is the only reference to the limitations of what was possible to discuss within the diaspora community. In *See puuduv osa*, however, Liitoja also recounts her travels to Estonia—a controversial topic within the diaspora community, as some considered visiting Soviet Estonia as acceptance of the annexation (on similar disagreements within the Latvian community, see Hinkle 2006, 17). Liitoja describes how her first trip to Estonia in 1969 provoked mixed feelings, as she was hoping to find Estonia as it had been over twenty years before, but eventually she realized that while a lot was familiar to her, a lot had also changed. She describes how the trip altered her understanding of the Estonian diaspora

in Canada as well. Until then, she had hoped to raise the children of the community there as Estonian, trusting that they could foster a connection between Estonia and Canada. Now her impression was that developing such a connection was impossible, and this formed a crisis in relation to Liitoja's previous idea of maintaining Estonian culture in diaspora.

In an interview, Ingvar Liitoja, Heljo Liitoja's son, referred to this first trip to Estonia as a cause for his parents' divorce (Kirss 2006, 553–555). Liitoja herself only mentions the breakup toward the end of her autobiography written for the competition, noting that after her divorce she once more started her "life from zero" (Liitoja 2009, 379). In contrast, the divorce is one of the main topics in her autobiographical book. There she narrates how she felt that her previously model family was, after the divorce, revealed to merely be a sham. On several occasions throughout her story, she ponders when she had actually been happy during her marriage. Another main topic of her autobiographical book, her connection to the Toronto gay community, is not mentioned at all in the text written for the competition, even though in her book it is closely linked to her divorce. Nor is this contact with the gay community acknowledged by Liitoja's son in his interview, and neither is his mother's book addressing the topic.

In her book, Liitoja recalls how in 1970 at an experimental theater she frequented, she became acquainted with a young man named Michael, whom she later learned was gay. Soon she learned that not only Michael but also her other friends from the theater were gay, and they revealed how their sexuality had affected their lives. Getting to know these new friends opened novel perspectives for Liitoja regarding the city of Toronto. By the late 1960s, the gay community there had grown large enough to claim a recognizable neighborhood (Nash 2005, 116; see also Nash 2006). Moreover, the friendship she developed with Michael offered her a chance to be needed at a time

of crisis in her marriage and when she no longer found pleasure in her work with the Estonian children. Michael's diverse troubles with both mental health issues and drug abuse meant that he was in need of care, and Liitoja was able to fill a traditionally feminine role outside the context of a heterosexual nuclear family, nurturing a gay man young enough to be her son—and indeed, she did think of Michael almost as her third son (Liitoja 2002, 112).

Liitoja soon realized that the grim descriptions of gay men she found in the few books on the topic did not match what she saw in her friends. She criticized the previous research for omitting love:

> It was in vain to search for the word "love" in the themed literature. I already knew it existed, but reading those books one could think that love is the exclusive privilege of the heterosexuals, and the homosexuals are only interested in what is below the belt. (Liitoja 2002, 74)[6]

During the period when Liitoja found her way to the gay and lesbian community, she was also attending courses in sociology at the University of Toronto. Her interest in the lives of gay men resulted in her starting a research project on gay men's well-being. Through the Community Homophile Association of Toronto (CHAT), she was able to find people to interview and fill out her survey, and also access the scarce books that had a more positive take on gay lives. According to Catherine Jean Nash (2005, 119–120), CHAT was established in 1970, just after the partial decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada in 1969. The association was highly assimilationist,

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[6] "Asjata otsisin ka sõna 'armastus' selleteemalisest kirjandusest. Teadsin ju nüüd selle olemasolust, aga neid raamatuid lugedes oleks küll võinud arvata, et armastus on eksklusiivselt heteroseksuaalide eesõigus, homoseksuaalid on huvitatud vaid sellest, mis asub vööst allpool."

emphasizing the similarity of gays and heterosexuals. For this reason, the organization was also open to sympathetic heterosexuals (Nash 2005, 130; on the history of CHAT, see also Warner 2002).

As Nash describes, however, precisely at the time when Liitoja became a part of the community, the scene of gay and lesbian organizing in Toronto was rapidly changing. The more radical Gay Liberation Movement was gaining ground. Therefore, Liitoja's contact with the local gay scene occurred during a period of significant change as well as internal tensions. Her account offers insight into how these different approaches were perceived by someone who was in a way an outsider but also following very closely the events within the community. Liitoja describes the discussions that took place within CHAT, where "the young radical gays" were not satisfied with merely offering possibilities for socializing and mutual help within the gay community but called for more active stands against the heterosexual society. While Liitoja perceived the Gay Liberation Movement as a search for equality between gays and heterosexuals (Liitoja 2002, 118), she also felt that the struggle was not only for gays but for the freedom of all (Liitoja 2002, 128), and she perceived the Gay Liberation Movement's call for temporary separatism as a form of building new walls (Liitoja 2002, 134). At the end of her book (Liitoja 2002, 188–189), Liitoja describes the difficulties faced by gays and the changes needed in society; her narrative tells strongly about the need for equality and the essential similarity of gays and heterosexuals in a manner that is in line with the assimilationist stands of the older homophile movement.

On a more personal level, Liitoja describes the gay community as a place where she felt at ease, and some of the notions she utilizes here are similar to those she uses when recounting her relationships with Estonians back in the homeland. On both

occasions she was able to find people with whom she spoke “the same language” (Liitoja 2002, 37). Moreover, the gay community in Liitoja’s narration also represents a context where ethnicity or national background—her own or that of others—did not play a role. In fact, she recalls only one time when she was asked where she was from (Liitoja 2002, 98). Considering how Liitoja had lived for decades in Toronto within the Estonian community, this connection to the gay community allowed her to integrate more deeply into Canadian society. She describes how, for the first time, she developed an interest in it and was even angered when she felt that Canada did not fulfil its own ideals as a free society (Liitoja 2002, 125–126). As her narration forms several links between her connection to the gay community and her first trip to Estonia in 1969, her description reads as an account of the integration needed after realizing that the next generation of those who shared her heritage would grow up more Canadian than Estonian and that staying confined only to the Estonian community would not be sufficient for her either.

While Liitoja saw joy and loving relationships within the gay community, her account does not shy away from the difficulties that gays and lesbians faced. At that time, homosexuality was still generally considered an illness, and a number of the men that Liitoja met had experienced attempts of conversion therapy. Also, the threat of violence was present on several occasions (see, for example, Liitoja 2002, 146). Pondering how the society’s hostile attitudes affected gays and lesbians, Liitoja wondered whether heterosexual relationships could survive under similar pressures (Liitoja 2002, 104). She compared her own experiences, including feelings of being misunderstood and lonely, to what gays and lesbians felt (Liitoja 2002, 127).

In a number of ways, Liitoja’s connection to the gay community made her redefine and question understandings about her own self as a heterosexual woman with

an Estonian background in multicultural Toronto. In Liitoja's autobiography, the gay and lesbian community formed a gateway to Canadian society and to a hybrid position as Estonian-Canadian. While the coming out narrative has been for decades the dominant story told about finding a gay and lesbian community (see, for example, Plummer 1995), according to my analysis, there is nothing in Liitoja's text that would allow reading it as an account of redefining one's sexual identity. Indeed, Liitoja's association with the gay community emphasizes her heterosexuality. In her autobiography, heterosexuality—often left unnamed in other works—becomes defined.

Re-evaluating Heterosexual Womanhood

In her book, Liitoja describes that when she became acquainted with the gay community her study filled most of her life and offered her an escape from a difficult life situation. The research and the new friendships that she developed reshaped her belongings and her understandings of herself. Her previously frequent socializing with the Estonian community significantly lessened, and her new friendships revealed the critical attitudes toward gays and lesbians within the Estonian diaspora. Already when Liitoja spent her time at the theater and was friends with Michael, her Estonian acquaintances asked whether she knew that her new friends were gay (Liitoja 2002, 34). This coincided with the end of her marriage; her "fall from traditional heterosexual grace" (Lambevski 2011, 207) combined the elements of being associated with the gay community and as a divorced woman being a "failed" heterosexual.

Even more than her friendships, Liitoja's research on the gay community raised suspicions about the reasons for her sudden interest in gay and lesbian issues. She started hearing rumors about herself in the Estonian community: "Was maybe one of my sons a homo? Or perhaps my husband? Did I myself have a tendency toward 'that

way'?"[7] (Liitoja 2002, 100.) Whereas these questions do not include the word "lesbian," Liitoja herself does not avoid the term. Her study was limited to men, due to her professor's advice, but she was also interested in how women perceived their lives (Liitoja 2002, 91). While it was mostly gay men that she became friends with, she does mention meeting lesbian women at community gatherings. To a certain extent, her account reflects the male dominance of the gay community of the time (Nash 2005, 116–117; Warner 2002, 80–81). On a more personal level, Liitoja describes feeling an "invisible wall" (Liitoja 2002, 128) between her and the women in CHAT, as well as being afraid of not knowing what to do if a woman should show interest toward her.

Liitoja's account provides a rare example from a writer of her generation who analyzes her own heterosexuality and perceives it as one orientation among others, not as a self-evident form of sexuality. For Liitoja, her position within the gay community opened opportunities to discover new ways of gendered living, of being a man or a woman at that time and place. This led her to question her earlier understandings of what is suitable and what is not, and to ponder whether she still wanted to follow the norms she was raised with. Indeed, her description of the nature of sexuality can even be interpreted as finding something lacking when she was not able to feel attraction toward women, as she herself describes: "By that time I had come to a conviction that we are all born with both homo- and heterosexual prerequisites and it only depends on environment and experiences in youth which side took primacy. Why had that side not

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[7] "Äkki oli üks mu poegadest homo? Võibolla abikaasa? Oli mul endal kalduvust 'sinna kanti'?"

developed in me?”[8] (Liitoja 2002, 130) After these reflections, Liitoja continues by wishing that she were close enough to some of the lesbian women to discuss sex with them. She assumes that women know well what other women want. Then, she immediately questions her own assumption and ponders, “or does it happen to them, too, that while one falls asleep satisfied, the other next to her, once again disappointed, cries bitter tears into the pillow?”[9] (Liitoja 2002, 131.) These considerations illustrate Liitoja’s understanding of the similarity between lesbian and heterosexual desires. Moreover, they show how, by speculating about the feelings in a lesbian relationship, she was able to also address the topic of sexuality without needing to explicitly refer to her personal experiences.

Indeed, while Liitoja’s description of her interest toward lesbian women can be perceived as an attempt to understand her own sexuality, she does not directly address her own sexual feelings or experiences. Likewise, the need for interpreting indirect messages in discussions on sexuality is mentioned in Liitoja’s own narration. She describes after her divorce engaging in discussions with women in a similar situation as she had been in—living in the suburbs with children, beautiful houses, and good husbands—who nonetheless felt that their men did not understand their personal needs. In these discussions, sexuality was not addressed but, according to Liitoja, it was possible to “read between the lines” (Liitoja 2002, 178). Therefore, not only in her

[8] “Selleks ajaks uskusin kaljukindalt, et me kõik oleme sündinud nii homo- kui ka heteroseksuaalsete eeldustega ja olenes vaid keskkonnast ja nooruses saadud elamustest, kumb külg esikoha pärib. Miks ei olnud see tahk minus arenenud?”

[9] “või juhtub nendelgi, et üks jääb rahuldadult magama, kuna teine tema kõrval järjekordse pettumuse tõttu kibedate pisaratega patja niisutab.”

autobiographical writing but also in the conversations that she describes, personal sexual experiences crossed the limit of what was considered proper to discuss.

Conclusions: Differing Evaluations of the Life Lived

Heljo Liitoja's autobiographies published in the early 2000s in an anthology and as a stand-alone book mention many important themes in Estonian history: defending her country in the Erna Battalion during World War II, participating in the Baltic University in Hamburg, and contributing to one of the most prominent Estonian diaspora communities in Toronto. These elements "establish a common ground for cultural remembering" (Kõresaar 2016, 434); by citing them, Liitoja's autobiographies connect to post-Soviet Estonian life writing and participate in the reconstruction of Estonian nationality. That said, Liitoja's texts also reveal the contradictions and limitations in the Estonian diaspora community. She recalls the tensions in the diaspora surrounding contacts to Soviet Estonia, and as she became "an honorary member" of the Toronto gay and lesbian community she experienced the heteronormativity of her national community. Moreover, emphasizing her experiences of the conservatism and traditional gender roles of that community, she describes how her divorce drove her further away from the Estonian diaspora. Even as Liitoja's contact with the gay community meant closer integration within the wider Canadian society, it also entailed distance from the Estonian diaspora community.

As Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 202–203) describes, different belongings are not equally important all the time, but especially at times of crisis people tend to get closer to their "nearest and dearest." Following Yuval-Davis, I interpret Liitoja's distancing from the Estonian community in the early 1970s as due to her feeling more secure and being able to open herself up to other attachments than those that tied her to her country of origin. In this way, too, Liitoja's autobiography differs from those refugee life

narratives that focus on escape and early settlement in the new home country (see, for example, Runcis 2011). Her account is an Estonian-Canadian—not solely Estonian—life story. Liitoja published her memories of the gay and lesbian community in the early 2000s, over twenty years after the events took place. While a story of narrating the events in the Toronto gay community could have been an important contribution to its history, her book was written in Estonian and published in Estonia, and thus placed within the framework of telling an Estonian life story. Moreover, publishing *See puuduv osa* in Estonia was a statement vis-à-vis the Estonian discussion on gay and lesbian rights, as it told a story that interlaced an Estonian diaspora life narrative with memories of a gay and lesbian community.

When studied together, Liitoja's two autobiographies offer opportunities to address what is omitted from them both. Liitoja's writings do not discuss sexuality as a lived experience. While her contemplations regarding gay and lesbian lives address sexuality, her own sexual feelings and experiences are left undiscussed and can only be analyzed between the lines. Liitoja's writings—especially her autobiographical book—stretch the limits of what can be addressed within the Estonian diaspora narrative, but the questions of experienced sexuality are something that she still was unable or unwilling to include in her narration. In particular, her narrative does not examine the possibility of gay and lesbian experiences within the Estonian diaspora community, since she discusses them only outside of it.

Both of Liitoja's published autobiographies end with a short section on her life events from the mid-1970s onwards and an evaluation of her life as a whole. In her text written for the competition, Liitoja describes how her life took an unexpected turn shortly after her divorce in 1973, when she suffered a stroke and was given at most two and a half years to live. Contrary to this dire prediction, Liitoja lived over thirty-five

years longer, worked for almost twenty years more, and wrote her autobiographies. Whereas in this text Liitoja describes her stroke as a hardship, which made the start of independent life difficult, the event receives a rather different interpretation in her book. In the final section titled "Myself," Liitoja there describes embarking on a new life after her divorce, establishing a home on her own, and starting a full-time job. In this version, returning from the hospital after the stroke and needing to rely on the help of others offered a way for her to finally develop equal friendships based on mutual help and respect. Her "gay friends"— a sort of proof of her tolerance and open-mindedness (Liitoja 2002, 101)—had become her true friends, to whom she was also able to show her weaknesses.

I have discussed in this article the questions of *belonging* in Liitoja's autobiographies and demonstrated how she negotiated her own life narrative in relation to the communities she was part of. I want to end by pointing out how both of these autobiographies are also stories of *becoming*. They tell of self-realization and the opportunities, as well as obstacles, faced first by an Estonian girl in interwar and wartime Estonia and then by an Estonian heterosexual woman in the post-war Estonian diaspora community in Canada. Despite their limitations, the communities that Heljo Liitoja belonged to allowed her to nurture and develop her talents and abilities, and to play diverse roles in the different lives she lived—though not always, as she herself writes, quite in the way she had expected.

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