

*Kristel Rattus, Terje Anepaio*

# Managing the other: Stories of the Estonian Russian-speakers in the Estonian National Museum's core exhibition

**Abstract** In October 2016, the Estonian National Museum opened its new building and new core exhibitions. The exhibition about Estonian culture, *Encounters*, introduced several new topics as well as novel approaches, which highlight the points of contact between different social groups, and stress the importance of tolerance and equality.

The largest minority in Estonia are the Russian-speakers. Yet, it has not been common to exhibit the Russian-speakers' culture in Estonian museums. In the Estonian public discourse, the tendency has rather been to contrast the two communities. *Encounters*, however, aimed to create a dialogue. The paper will address some challenges, which occurred in the communication with the Russian-speaking community during the preparation of the exhibition. Firstly, the museum was to win the Russian-speakers' trust. Secondly, the Russian-speakers sometimes considered exposing one's everyday culture in a museum improper.

**Keywords** Estonian National Museum, core exhibition, Estonian Russians, collaborative museum, oral history

In October 2016, the Estonian National Museum opened a core exhibition on the history of Estonian culture in its newly completed exhibition building. Entitled *Encounters*, it is markedly different from previous core exhibitions at the National Museum. The new features are based on a renewed understanding of the role of the Estonian National Museum in the early 21st century.

In addition to practical questions, the preparations for a new house and new core exhibitions<sup>1</sup> between 2008 and 2016 also raised methodological and ideological issues for the Estonian National Museum, leading the institution to more clearly articulate its goals and identity. What could we maintain from the existing National Museum, and what should be changed? What sort of museum would Estonian society need? The museum kept on coming back to these questions. Reaching agreement on the principles and approach to the exhibition, which told the story of Estonia's culture, became the central locus of the re-defining of the National Museum's identity in these years.

The popular image of the Estonian National Museum has traditionally been bound to pre-industrial Estonian peasant culture. Founded in 1909, the idea of the Estonian National Museum actually goes back to the height of the era of nationalism and the creation of nation-states<sup>2</sup>. The course of the development of the Estonian state and the Estonian National Museum have much in common with the development of other nation-states and national museums in north and east Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The National Museum was to be one of the instruments of the new national society and a celebration of Estonian nationality.

Today, the so-called traditional 19th century view of the nation has become outdated. In a contemporary society, people's identities are diverse and dynamic. People travel often, the places where they live and work may not be located in their country of birth, cross-border marriages are common. Museum audiences are also increasingly international. Nevertheless, according to the results of EuNaMus<sup>3</sup>, a comparative study of European

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1 At present there are two core exhibitions at the Estonian National Museum, one about Estonian culture, entitled *Encounters*, and the other about Finno-Ugric cultures, entitled *Echo of the Urals*.

2 In Western Europe, these processes occurred during the first half of the 19th century following the Napoleonic Wars, while in north and east Europe, they took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

3 An international project conducted under the auspices of Linköping University and Professor Peter Aronson, the full title being *European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen* (EU FP Grant Agreement No. 244305).

national museums held between 2010 and 2013, national museums still have an important role in dealing with topics that pertain to membership of a nation, citizenship of a state and the role of specific nationalities among other nationalities. Museum-goers attach great significance to their own and their ancestors' places of origin. On one hand, the displayed artefacts and stories offer stability that allows people to feel at home in a world with open borders, while on the other trying to reformulate traditional national narratives according to contemporary needs, for example having room for actors other than just national heroes (see Robin 2013).

In the 20th century, the National Museum's core exhibitions (1927, 1947, 1994) focused on 19th and 20th century farm life. With the exception of an exhibition influenced by Soviet ideology opened in 1947, the core exhibitions were characterised by a National Romantic attitude: in the 1920s, the liberation of Estonian society from Baltic German influence was commemorated; in the 1990s, freedom from the Soviet occupation (see Nõmmela 2010; Reemann 2011). Most other social and cultural groups apart from Estonian peasants were absent. In the early 21st century, however, such approaches to Estonian national culture no longer adequately described the issues of interest to the National Museum. Since the 1990s, the National Museum has been dealing with and studying the everyday culture of non-peasant people, the Soviet period and contemporary life. These topics were, however, seen only in the temporary exhibitions, not the core exhibition.

When they started to outline the concept of the Estonian cultural history exhibition, the curators sensed a need both to take a more contemporary approach to national culture and to highlight the contemporary spectrum of interests at the Estonian National Museum. Firstly, for the *Encounters* exhibition Estonia was seen as a territory not in the sense of just one ethnicity; and the periods prior to the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as later periods, were defined as also an object of interest. As part of the exhibition concept the curators set out to present the everyday cultures of different cultural and social groups in Estonia throughout the history of settlement. No matter how unrealistic this was, these terms of reference summoned the most important innovation in the institutional identity of the Estonian National Museum: the main interest was placed on the population as a whole – not just speakers of Estonian.

Another goal for the National Museum was to involve more societal groups in the content generation process for the museum. In this regard, the museum drew inspiration from a methodological approach known as new or critical (Bouquet 2012, 9) museology (see Vergo 1989; Hooper-Greenhill

1992; Marstine 2005; Macdonald 2006). This philosophy, which came into greater currency in early 21st-century Estonia, is neither uniform nor clearly delineated. With the new building on the horizon, the Estonian National Museum selected above all the idea of bidirectional communication and the empowerment of audiences (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2010; Tatsi 2013; see also Simon 2010).

## The method of dialogue

The general title *Encounters* refers to a complex of 12 independent exhibitions. The axis of *Encounters* is made up of an overview of Estonian cultural history called *Journeys in Time*, expanded and supplemented with thematic exhibitions. Among them are familiar topics for the Estonian National Museum, such as exhibitions devoted to traditional Estonian folk culture and the rather well researched and exhibited<sup>4</sup> everyday culture of the Soviet period. In addition, there are topics that have not previously been customary for the Estonian National Museum, for example approaches to archaeology as well as aspects of intangible culture such as the Estonian language and runo song. Some exhibitions tackle the contemporary period, for example food culture and ways in which children and young adults experience the city. Other exhibitions take in the physical environment directly surrounding people by looking at the home and the natural environment. There is a separate exhibition hall for open curatorship<sup>5</sup> projects. Topics brought into the exhibition hall reflect different facets of subjective human experiences. There are personal stories of people of different gender, class, ethnicity and age. The crucial applied approach was to find a method that would be suitable to present different and sometimes conflicting cultural heritages. Here, the term ‘dialogue’ became central. Curators used it as the theoretical underpinning for the exhibition concept as well as a practical method for creating the exhibition. Dialogue

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4 Systematic research into everyday life in the Soviet Union started at the Estonian National Museum in 2002 with a research project financed by the Estonian Science Foundation (ETF5322) called *Strategies and Practices of Everyday Life in Soviet Estonia*. The implementers of the project, led by University of Tartu ethnologists, included Estonian National Museum researchers Terje Anepaio, Reet Piiri and Ellen Värvi, and head of collections Riina Reinvelt.

5 Open curatorship involves an institution (for example museum) delegating decision-making power over the content of an exhibition (or other museum production) partially or completely to authors outside the museum. Curatorship projects allow participants to use the institutions to satisfy their goals with minimal institutional intervention.

was treated as a principle that takes into consideration different subjective views and possibilities for interpretation without seeking a single meaning behind phenomena. Depicting social processes and events from several viewpoints, as seen by different participants, seemed to enable the creation of a multifaceted “thick” (Geertz 1973) description of cultural phenomena and avoid excessive reduction of the controversies that are inherent to any culture. An overview of a culture can be gained on the basis of subjective views when they are analysed in the context of a larger tradition and context into which they fit historically. “Dialogue” viewed in this manner does not deny subjective approaches, at the same time it takes into account the tradition of relating to such approaches and the contexts into which they fit (Gadamer 1975, 269).

### The ‘other’: Russian-speakers

Russian-speakers are the most numerous minority in Estonia making up about one quarter of the 1.3 million population. Estonia’s current ethnic composition took shape during the period of the Soviet occupation and annexation (1944–91), when several hundred thousand people from all over the Soviet Union moved to and through Estonia. Many of these people were offered jobs in Estonia, many came with the military. Most of the newcomers settled in the capital city of Tallinn and in the rapidly growing industrial centres in north-east Estonia (Sakkeus 1999, 320). Even though the newcomers were not all ethnically Russian, their common language was Russian.

While in the Soviet system Russians and the Russian language occupied a central and ubiquitous position, the regime change of 1991 along with subsequent Estonian-centred citizenship and language policies pushed Russian-speakers into a marginal and relatively restricted geographical and social space (Seljamaa 2016, 29; Jaago and Kõresaar 2012, 43). After the post-communist turn, the dominant discourse in the Estonian (oral) history<sup>6</sup>

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6 Oral history and life story research in Estonia started off in the mid-1990s as an interdisciplinary endeavour to gather and interpret autobiographical testimonies about the violent 20th century. In 1989, the Estonian Cultural Historical Archives announced the first life story writing campaign. Even though over the following 20 years, the endeavour enjoyed immense popularity, only a relatively small number of contributions were authored by Russians. During the 1990s, the collecting of life stories was related to the cultural restorationism in Estonian society and celebrated cultural, life historical and (ethnic) national unity (see Kõresaar and Jõesalu 2016).

has conceptualised the Soviet era mainly in terms of rupture and trauma, depicting the restoration of independence as a return from deviation to normality. It thereby contributed to the formation of the post-Soviet memory regime, which covered only a fraction of the spectrum of experience of the Soviet period and tended to mute memories contesting the national trauma story. Soviet-period newcomers have thus been treated as “henchmen of the occupation regime” (Seljamaa 2016, 31) and were confined to the position of oppressor (while Estonians, at the same time, were treated as victims). In this context, the Soviet-era settlers as the stigmatised collective ‘other’ have remained an overlooked and understudied subject. A change in the paradigm came with the turn of the century, when oral historians and memory researchers started to focus methodically on the multi-layeredness of the Soviet period and diverse everyday experiences of socialism (Kõresaar and Jõesalu 2016, 51, 53, 56).

However, to this day, in life stories, memories of the Soviet period are presented in several different mnemonic discourses (Aarelaid-Tart 2012). Compared to Estonians, the biographical schemata of Estonian Russians in the Soviet period are the exact opposite: while the Estonians tend to stress the horror of losing homes and families in the post-war period, Russians, in contrast, describe the post-war time as a peaceful period after the atrocities of the war. The regime change of 1991, which, for Estonians meant national independence and the opportunity for political and cultural self-determination, is reflected in biographies of the Russian-speakers in terms of shock at the establishment of a border between Estonia and Russia, at Estonian gaining the status of the only national language, or at attitudes towards the World War II and the subsequent Soviet occupation (Kõresaar and Jõesalu 2016, 53; see also Jaago 2004).

Similar tendencies hold true with the Estonian National Museum. It has researched and displayed Soviet culture and everyday life more systematically since the beginning of this century (for example by means of publishing questionnaires aimed at the public). However, until now, the research and exhibitions have focused mainly on Estonians or on general trends in society, the voice of the Russian-speaking community has generally been missing from the exhibitions.

### **Parallel Worlds. Parallel Lives**

*Parallel Worlds. Parallel Lives*<sup>7</sup>, one of the themed exhibitions that formed part of *Encounters*, is devoted to life during the Soviet period. The exhibition

is based on the autobiographical life stories of people who were all in some way connected with Estonia during the Cold War era. Grounding the whole exhibition on autobiographical narratives proceeded from the curators' intent to present an emotional human-centred view of everyday life during a diverse and controversial period. The telling of life stories as a socio-communicative activity is a means to establish a common ground in cultural remembering: a shared memory (Kõresaar 2016, 4). By displaying autobiographies at a National Museum exhibition, we hoped to engender empathy and understanding between different language groups in Estonia. We expected that by showing different narratives of life experience, different historical narratives could be reconciled.

The exhibition gives a voice to 15 people, born in the 1930s and 1940s, whose personal objects and biographical stories give viewers a glimpse of life from the 1940s to the 1980s in Soviet Estonia. Taking a global look at the Cold War era meant presenting stories from both sides of the Iron Curtain, including people who lived in the Soviet Union as well as the Estonian diaspora in Western Europe, Australia and the Americas. Some protagonists had spent their whole lives in Estonia, others had fled from Estonia to the West from the Red Army during World War II, been violently deported to Siberia or settled in the Soviet Union by choice; conversely some had moved to Estonia from other parts of the Soviet Union.

A biography is rarely passed on as a narrative whole. In everyday communication, people relate fragments of life rather than comprehensive life stories. This fact gave us a starting point for the exhibition design. We focused on themes raised by our protagonists and structured these topics into ten themed clusters, each giving voice to 2–4 people. The clusters were titled using a summarising keyword (for example happiness, success, trauma, regret, chance, etc.). Topics relating to a particular keyword were displayed in the same showcase. Five of the showcases concentrated on different decades of the Cold War: the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In addition, two touchscreens outlined the protagonists' basic autobiographical data. By presenting these momentary glimpses into people's worlds by means of their personal objects, photographs, archival documents, and narrated memories, we attempted to create a space in which simultaneous experiences and life-worlds proceed in parallel without intersecting. In the autobiographical

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7 *Parallel Worlds. Parallel Lives* was curated by Terje Anepaio, Anu Järs, Ellen Värvi and Riina Reinvelt.

narratives, voiced by the protagonists themselves, personal events of everyday life, such as birth, childhood, education, working life, family life, illness, travel, etc., interweave with major events in history, such as coups d'états, occupations, wars, etc.

### Finding Russian-speaking protagonists

Finding Russian-speaking protagonists who would agree to share their personal narratives as part of the exhibition turned out to be more challenging than we first expected. In order to find suitable individuals, the curators co-operated with different institutions of Russian-speaking communities (for example museums, cultural societies) as well as the Estonian national media.

The Estonian National Museum started documenting the culture of the Estonian Russian-speakers at the beginning of the 21st century. The first autobiographic interviews were conducted in both Estonian and Russian in the city of Narva, situated on the Russian border in north-east Estonia, in cooperation with Tartu University Narva College and the Pro Narva foundation, between 2003 and 2005 (see Reinvelt 2005). As a result of the endeavour, over 2,200 pages of text were collected by the archive of the Estonian National Museum. Conducted by students, the interviews were short and rather superficial; however, they offered us a valuable starting point for further interviews as the informants were selected based on these interviews. In summer 2012, we restarted audio-visual documentation in north-east Estonia, specifically oriented at the preparation of the future exhibition. We contacted 12 people, four of whom agreed to speak in front of the camera. In addition, we studied the Russian-language autobiographies published by the Estonian Life Stories association.<sup>8</sup> We assumed that people who had already published their life story would be more likely to agree to talk about their lives on camera. Yevgeni (born 1943) was one of the protagonists whose life story had been previously published (Paklar 2009). A miner by profession, but a journalist by calling, he was a voluntary correspondent to several media publications in north-east Estonia. Apart from talking to us, he also wrote us

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8 NGO Estonian Life Stories Association (ELSA) was founded in 1996 at the Estonian Literary Museum. Since 1997 the association has published 12 anthologies of life stories from the Estonian Literary Museum's life stories collection. Life story competitions are organised by the association to this day.



an additional story about his childhood in Russia. However, finding personal objects that could be displayed in the exhibition to illustrate his story was challenging.

In 2016, the year the new museum building was opened, we decided to launch a call through Estonian National Television's Russian channel in the hope of reaching wider Russian-speaking audiences. The response was less than expected, but after the call, one of the future protagonists, Paraskovja (born 1929), contacted us. In 1948, Paraskovja and a female friend responded to an industrial recruitment drive in the Soviet Union and ended up in Estonia. Her story mainly reflected on her career – her life and work in Sil-lamäe, the former Soviet closed nuclear industry town.

Compared to Estonians, the Russian-speakers had a different understanding of what was suitable to be presented in a museum. Among them, mainly items of art were seen as worthy of being presented, while everyday life objects were not valued as highly. This may be due to a different cultural background as well as a scarcity of material culture among Russian-speakers. On the one hand, the experience of the informants was limited to the large and sumptuous Russian museums that they had visited during the Soviet period, such as the Hermitage in St Petersburg. On the other hand, they often simply lacked things they could have given to the museum. As they explained, they came to Estonia during and immediately after World War II when life was dangerous and poor: they had fled from regions ravaged by war with only the clothes they were wearing.

Another challenge in the communication with Russians came from their lack of confidence in us. It turned out that the generally positive image of the Estonian National Museum that is commonly shared by Estonians, especially by the older generation (see Nõmmela 2010), was generally unknown among Russian-speakers. When we said that we were interviewing for an upcoming exhibition at the National Museum, we were not trusted. Many refused to talk on camera because they were afraid that the interviews might be shown on television. More often than not the Russian-speaking community had little or no information about the current Estonian cultural space, including museums.

Often the people whose personal items, photographs, etc., are displayed in the exhibition act as a bridge between the museum and its visitors. When

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, Yevgeni's personal objects and interview fragments were displayed in four showcases under the keywords love, happiness, shortage and chance. The love showcase was, however, his favourite.

visiting the exhibition during the opening reception of the museum, Yevgeni was completely satisfied with ‘his showcase’.<sup>9</sup> This showcase, displaying his wife’s wedding dress and wine glasses that were given to the young couple on their marriage, inspired Yevgeni to celebrate his 50th wedding anniversary in the National Museum. On the big day, the venerable couple arrived together with their children, grandchildren, relatives and friends. Even representative of Yevgeni’s home town council came to congratulate the couple. Together they viewed the exhibition and later sat at the party table. Later, Yevgeni’s former colleagues from the oil shale mine also visited the museum. They took lively interest in the exhibitions, but most importantly, they invited the National Museum to visit and discuss the possibility of carrying out autobiographic interviews among predominantly Russian-speaking former miners in north-east Estonia. They saw this as an opportunity to reflect on their contribution to Estonian life and economy (during the Soviet period oil shale production was the flagship of the Estonian economy).

The stories of the Russian-speakers in the core exhibition are an asset for us, the museum staff, because they facilitate the invitation of the Russian-speaking community to our museum. For example, we have organised events in Russian and talked about Russian-speaking community-related topics, such as the premiere of a documentary about the daily life of elderly people in the Estonian-Russian border city Narva and a discussion about the city’s evolution. We also hosted a discussion called *Soviet Sillamäe: Talking about a Closed Town*, at which museum workers from Sillamäe reflected on their lives in a place that was even absent from Soviet maps. This discussion was held in April 2017 with, in the audience, both Estonian- and Russian-speaking people.

### **Conclusions: a dialogue or a bridge?**

Our goal was to include the voices of Russian-speaking people in the story of Estonian cultural history and to create a dialogue between the two Estonian language groups. Did we manage to create a dialogue between the Estonian- and Russian-speaking communities? Perhaps not yet. Rather, we are building a bridge at the level of individuals and smaller groups. People from the Russian-speaking community, especially the older generation, such as former oil shale miners, discovered our museum through the objects and stories of their ‘fellow countryman’. Identification and nostalgia were the emotions they experienced. They saw their own lives and experiences, including

everyday life objects which to them seemed very commonplace, as valued through exhibition. A visit to the museum made them want to save their heritage and share it with society in the same way that they saw this heritage at the museum, i.e. through autobiographical narrative.

The dialogue we wish to build requires an active contribution from both communities. On the one hand, we might wish that Russians were more active in communication with us, but on the other hand, we as the museum could also be much more active as an institution. We have taken a step in this direction. This is likely to be seen and appreciated by representatives of the younger generation – the watershed between the two ethnic groups is smaller in the younger generation. A student from Narva, the mainly Russian-speaking part of Estonia, wrote in the National Museum’s blog (<http://blog.erm.ee/?p=9675>):

In our cultural space, the new conception of the Estonian National Museum is in many ways ground-breaking. The new core exhibition underlines points of contact between different groups and, without intending to do so, emphasises tolerance and equality. [...] The ENM has taken a big step by supporting a constructive dialogue between all people living within the borders of Estonia. I dream that other museums and institutions will follow the example of the ENM.

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