

How to Define an Estonian? Identity Study in Stockholm

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Our working group at the Estonian Literary Museum's Department of Ethnomusicology has combined musical and identity studies. The initiative for this sprung from the idea that diaspora studies could provide us with interesting results as to the role of music in people's lives, and vice versa: music studies can provide us with new knowledge about diasporas and integration, since one of the most important parts of a person's ethnic identity – language – can become subject to significant changes abroad. Music, however, supports language skills, but also has opportunities for joint experiences. We will also investigate to what extent the claim that Estonians are a singing people is reflected in the Estonian identity.

During our research, we aim to collect all kinds of information on Estonian musical culture at home as well as abroad. A certain part in the formation of our common Estonian identity are the kinds of songs that were sung among the Estonian émigrés when Estonians at home had to sing Soviet anthems.

These concert programmes cannot be reconstructed from people's memories, which makes all recordings important help material along with concert programmes and other printed matter. If in luck, the choirs might have their own archives, but this kind of material is often scattered between people. It would be of great help for our research and for others interested if as much of the material on the music culture of the diaspora would reach the Estonian Cultural History Archives (at the Estonian Literary Museum).

One of our methods used is the half-structured interview. Lately, Estonian researchers have conducted many kinds of interviews. These texts are stored in archives and will enrich our self-image as they are used as research material by scholars of different disciplines. We used this type of interview for the first time in Stockholm in the autumn of 2008, where we conducted interviews with 12 Stockholm Estonians of whom one had just moved there from Estonia. Four 15-year old girls answered the questions together.

We will analyse what kind of knowledge about Estonia we found from the interview responses. The respondents' sex, age and place of birth (Sweden or Estonia) have been marked with abbreviations.

1. The Estonian language.

The fact that language is considered important for the Estonian identity was agreed upon by all respondents, including those whose first language was Swedish and whose proficiency in the Estonian language and usage spheres were limited, as often happens when you live abroad.

“If you don’t speak it [Estonian], calling yourself Estonian becomes sort of pointless.”
(m43S)

Although everyday life can make people’s language skills deteriorate, a strong marker of Estonian identity is that one speaks or intends to speak Estonian with one’s children

“It would be kinda strange if my mother would speak, like, English with my children. Or Swedish.” (w15S)

Estonian skills are valued as an opportunity for direct communication with other Estonians in the world as well as all Estonian residents.

“We can talk to each other and not have to get by with English or something like that. [---] It is always nice to meet others [in the wide world] that you can talk to. [in Estonian].” (m43S).

“When I am in Estonia I can get by in Estonian.” (w31E>S).

For children born abroad, hearing the language which they usually only hear at home everywhere can be a positive experience, but also strange.

“We were in Estonia and I was sitting in a pram and people walked past and I said “oh, they speak Estonian!”, because I wasn’t used to it.” (w15S)

“It is just strange to hear Estonian coming from the telly. I don’t know why, but it is so unfamiliar.” (w15S)

2. Appreciation of heritage.

When we asked about the pros and cons about being Estonian in Sweden, the cons were mainly associated with the past, not with contemporary multicultural Stockholm, where foreigners are met with rather positive interest. The surrounding attitude also creates a base for a sense of pride of one's heritage. Those of working age might come across difficulties due to their foreign-sounding name, which Swedes have difficulty pronouncing and which can lead to questions regarding their command of the Swedish language when seen on a CV. However, one of the Swedish-born informants said that they thanks to their Estonian descent and language skills. had never had to look for work. Feelings of shame about one's background and fear of negative attitudes due to negative stereotypes only appeared in the case of one of the informants; the others had met rather positive attitudes. The teenage girls also thought that the most important thing about being Estonian is pride of one's country.

“At times I haven't wanted people to find out, like Estonian, because they might say a thing or two about Estonians, that they steal and that they do this and that. So I haven't always wanted to be all that proud of being Estonian.[---]. After my children were born it has become more important and I am less ashamed about the fact that I really am Estonian.” (w31 E >S).

“Being Estonian in Sweden is quite...most are very successful people, which means that if you tell someone that you are Estonian it is more like “oh, you are such diligent people”.” (w34S)

Pride in their heritage because of famous Estonians was expressed more by those born in Estonia, who also wished to pass this on to their children.

“Despite the fact that we have some bank robbers, I still feel proud of the fact that I am Estonian, and it doesn't disturb my spirits. [---]. When I lived in Austria there was a chamber choir, this Fila chamber choir, that sang there. And when they sang Cyrillus Kreek's song “Blessed is the Man”, then I felt that oh, I am so happy that I am Estonian. And I was there with some Austrians, and they immediately went green with

envy because I was Estonian. That was really...then I felt that walked with my back straight.” (W33E>S).

“All those who are here...the Swedes who have Estonian roots. In that sense I am proud that they are still...Käbi Laretei, that more or less everybody knows that she really is Estonian and...in that sense it is a good feeling that, that somebody knows that she is Estonian.” (w40 E> S).

“It was not I who made that song, it was Veljo Tormis or Arvo Pärt or one of them.” (M43S)

Feelings of shame can appear in spite of existing pride, when Estonia doesn't do well in a sports competition or the Eurovision Song Contest. Those born in Sweden can temporarily „forget“ their Estonianness during episodic bouts of shame. Pride and shame are very closely intertwined: for some reason, the sense of shame is at the same time showing a potential and a wish to feel proud of the Estonian identity.

“Otherwise I was very [proud], I felt that we were always in the top-five [in the Eurovision Song Contest] – an Estonian, that was very nice. And then all of a sudden something happened and the whole thing has just gone downhill. Quite embarrassing. And then I say that I don't know anything about those Estonians. That is a choice I have, I can make that choice. To be Estonian or not. [Laughs]. Very practical.” (w34S).

“Estonia got beaten by Bosnia yesterday...in soccer, 7:0. Then we will obviously call Sweden our homeland. [---] [After the Estonian song at the Eurovision 2008] it was really embarrassing. Then I really didn't want to tell anyone that I am Estonian.” (m40S).

3. The relationship to Estonia.

The concept of homeland is not unambiguous when living abroad. It is obvious, also on the basis of our interviews, that Sweden is a safe and loved home for the Estonians there. Which of the two countries they specifically denoted as homeland varied. For some, it encompassed both countries – Sweden and Estonia, the informant differentiated between a spiritual and

actual homeland. For some, their homeland was the country where they felt the most at home; where their friends or they themselves lived, meaning Sweden.

However, all respondents perceived Estonia as being close – a country often visited and at times considered for residence, when the financial situation would allow.

“The question of homeland, I mean, Central Sweden and Estonia are both, let’s say, familiar territory, where I move around freely and without thinking.[---] The homeland is sort of two notions or two...as someone sees it. One is practical, the other is – how do you say– more in the emotional sphere and is also connected with my identity. [---] in terms of identity then, Estonia is the homeland but in a practical sense it is Sweden, since I have always lived in Sweden.” (m53S).

“Whenever I go to Estonia , then I always sort of feel that it is as if I were coming home, that it is home to me. But when I come here, I also have a home.” (w31 E>S)

“It would be nice to sometime in the future try to live in Estonia and..”(w34S)

“If you call yourself Estonian, then you have somehow also made the decision to have a relation to Estonia.” (m43S)

For the young cosmopolitans, Estonia is like granny’s native village in the country. They couldn’t imagine living there, but the bonds with it are still important, and more significantly, close friends and relatives can be found there.

“I enjoy being in Estonia and Sweden and Estonia are my home countries, but I would never want to live in Estonia.” (w15S).

“Estonia is my home country and really close and all that, but I would never want to go back or live there for real. It feels so small and the possibilities are so few somehow.” (w15S)

“I have all of my relatives in Estonia, I have good friends there and everything...I just like it there. I would definitely live there.” (w15S).

For the older people, Estonia functions more as roots, background and culture.

“When I find out that someone has Estonian roots, then I have something extra, that connects us somehow.” (m40S)

“Part of Estonia was with the émigrés, in the sense that there was these people, there was the Estonian School, the memories and this awareness and...” (m53S)

The question of roots is at times actualised first with the birth of children and the opportunity to pass something on to the next generation – the creation of a bond between generations.

“I think the whole Estonian thing has become much more important now [that the children have arrived] than it was before. Before, I didn’t really think so much about it.” (w31 E>S).

It appears that one component that does not influence the choice of homeland and sense of closeness is citizenship. A close connection with Estonia was expressed in the same manner by both Estonian and Swedish citizens.

4. The relationship to Estonians.

Since one of the foundations for a collective identity, apart from a sense of belonging, is the mutual recognition between members of the group, identity is always closely connected to the question of borders – of who is inside of and outside of them.

One of the main aims of our research is to investigate how people with different ties to Estonia define a “proper Estonian” – what the defining properties are in their eyes.

According to the simplest criterion, an Estonian is a person who speaks Estonian and whose forebears had Estonian roots. Secondly, someone can come to be considered “a real Estonian” when they share the common cultural background and honour it. This also applies to people of Russian descent living in Estonia.

“We have all grown up in the same way. When we start singing a song or talk about some film, we already know what it is.” (w40E>S)

“The song festival is for instance a very Estonian tradition, and when they [the Russians] have gone there, then they accept Estonian traditions.” (w15S).

“There has been a lot of very likeable Russians and as long as they are likeable – when someone is likeable, let’s put it that way, then yes, then there is a lot in common [if they wish to learn the Estonian language and culture]” (w34S)

Foreign were rather those who do not accept us or our culture, those who live in Estonia but do not want to get to know the country, or who after leaving belittle the values found here.

“Someone said something to me, that the song festivals are nonsense and that they wouldn’t sing things like that, and that was really annoying. Even though they themselves had Estonian roots . That really made me kind of angry. Well, they don’t feel Estonian, then. If they don’t like it...” (w15S).

Yet another piece of common Estonian ground was the Estonian nation, more specifically the recognition of its importance.

“Something that definitely should unite would be, let’s say, this understanding of why the Estonian nation exists. You can consider yourself more or less Estonian, but you must understand why the Estonian nation exists and that without this it is very difficult...” (m53S).

It was also expressed that the ideal Estonians are those for whom you don’t have to feel ashamed.

“We have this spontaneous thing, that an Estonian ought to be someone who behaves properly. But at the same time...well, impossible.” (m40S).

The question of whether Estonians in Estonia and Estonians abroad really are similar enough to see familiarity in each other and call by a single name came up repeatedly. There were two types of response to this question: there were those, who only thought émigré Estonians were “their own”:

“I have very much in common with them [émigré Estonians], since we have all grown up in another country but all speak Estonian and attempt to preserve some kind of Estonian culture.” (w34S).

“It is very uncomplicated to meet other Estonians from Sweden and we talk about our own things. But it is less so with the Estonians from Estonia.” (m43S).

Those who denied all feelings of estrangement from themselves as well as the Estonians in Estonia were fewer:

“No, in that sense I do feel very much at home in Estonia, I don’t think that I am some sort of Swedish Estonian or anything...quite the opposite, like...it is surprising, friendly in every way, polite and mostly there is never any mention of anything like that. But then there wasn’t in the beginning of the 90s either.” (m53S)

From our interviews, it could be presumed that the informed differentiation between Estonians in Estonia and those abroad is beginning to disappear: the teenagers did not perceive any such problems, what was important to them was the difference between the big cities with their cosmopolitan lifestyle and the provincial lifestyle. The communication with Estonian youth would come simply and naturally if it weren’t for the language barrier.

5. Multiculturalism and openness.

All respondents had experienced co-existence of different cultures and identities. They all clearly felt like individuals who encompassed two or several cultures. They were noticeably proud of this – multiculturalism is in itself valuable as a part of a democratic worldview. The Swedish-born informants placed more emphasis on the value and the increasingly multifaceted

perspective that familiarity with several cultures and languages provided them with in their lives; as representatives of a minority culture, they became more interesting and distinctive in the eyes of Swedes proper. Those who had been born in Estonia thought that experience of living abroad provided the openness necessary for leading a full life.

“The fact that I have –how would you say– a dual background, that I have an Estonian as well as Swedish background, I usually see as something positive.[---]. It gives me a double perspective.” (m43S).

“Yes, it [multiculturalism] is interesting and at the same time...It makes me a tad...well, not better, but... [---] like a broad view, when you have two identities...You have more self-confidence, more individuality.” (m40S).

“Many have also said that I am a completely different person [than when living in Estonia], more open.” (w40E).

Being used to the open societies of the Nordic countries, Estonian society was also expected to value different cultures and worldviews.

“I think that is it really absolutely necessary....that how much is in this free and tolerant society [---] differences must be tolerated. Many things don't unite us, we are very different as individuals...” (m53S)

There was no general opinion as to how open or closed the “Estonians at home” are – some, based on their own experiences, held them to be just as open and easy to communicate with as themselves, but there were also those who claimed that Estonian Estonians are taciturn and conservative – in particular, Estonia could acknowledge the attempts of others to learn the Estonian language and not parry those who do not speak it perfectly.

“When I see how people behave in Estonia then yes, I believe that language is very important and there is probably some kind of defence wall...and since the Estonian language is so complicated in comparison with the surrounding languages, then

Estonians aren't used to people speaking poor Estonian, but in Sweden people are much more used to it. There's people in the streets here who speak bad Swedish but still get accepted somehow." (m53S)

If this person placed great value on command of the Estonian language, other informants didn't insist on this as much.

"If someone for instance doesn't speak Estonian, is born outside of Estonia, but wants to and feels Estonian, are they then...then I think they can call themselves Estonian, of course. They really are!" (w40 E>S)

6. Music.

Informants often spoke about music in their lives and its connection to Estonianness already before we reached the music-section of the interview. Many stated that music was the most important area of culture to them, others said it was just one field of many. In any case, music is one of the first paths to Estonian culture, and one of the easier to find. Thus we can say that an Estonian identity is formed in children with whom the Estonian language is spoken and Estonian songs are sung. A large part of familiarity with the Estonian culture also comes from singing in nursery school, children's song groups and school choirs.

When young people mainly listen to songs in English, then choral singing means Estonian songs; the song festival is a powerful sense of fellowship also for people with other kinds of interests or other musical preferences.

"I definitely know many more Estonian songs than I do Swedish." (w34S)

"It is very beautiful when we later know all of those [Estonian] songs." (w15S)

"Because we have been singing Estonian songs since childhood." (w15S).

"It is not at all like I have anything against the Estonian culture or anything, but to me, it is not as...[interesting as politics]. Yes, I attend the song festival from time to time, not every time, but it is and I stand there and sing patriotic songs and it all goes straight into my heart." (m43S).

“Not only Estonians sing at the song festival, for instance. It really is fantastic. We get together and then we all sing one and the same song, which we have practised in our countries. The same language, the same song.” (w34S).

The Stockholm girls clearly do not differ from Estonian girls of the same age in that they all prefer to listen to music in English.

III: “I like the English.”

II: “Yes, English, that is like the main thing, that it isn’t some, I don’t know...”

I: “in Japanese or...”

II: “or Chinese or...”

III:” Or like, I once heard some Estonian rap music. That kinda felt really strange.”

II: “Yeah, I think that really is very...I don’t know...”

But Estonian music has a place in the lives of the parents of teenagers.

“There was this Mr Lawrence, who I really quite liked and then there was this fantastic A-rühm, hiphopers. Brilliant, rapped in Estonian.” (m40S).

“No I definitely like listening to Estonian music, that I have to say I really enjoy listening to. It is hard to say if it is because of musical instinct or just out of interest, that it is interesting, interesting to listen to.” (m53S).

All informants responded in the negative to the question of whether music can close borders or create strife between different peoples or states. One informant reminisced on dirty ballads ridiculing the Russians.

“I once put together this booklet of dirty ballads, old, ancient ones, just as I have learnt many of these dirty ballads. And I never thought about the contents, but then we

were in Tallinn just when those riots happened there with the Russians and the statue which was pulled down...I was in Tallinn then, in Estonia, and on that day we went to Tartu and we started to sing these dirty ballads and I noticed that...and I began to think about what the text really said and anyway, there was this anti-Russian song there and then I understood that oh, OK, I guess we won't be singing today, 'cause all of a sudden....if someone were to take offence all of a sudden, then...." (w34S)

It seems that songs ridiculing "the other" are more directed towards the own community, connecting it, not outwards: songs with "foreigners" are not connected with real people, and do not banish any actual people of other nationality, but attitudes hostile of the culture. The song does not increase hostility, but rather mitigates it.

Summary

We can yet again arrive at the conclusion that Estonians in Sweden describe a strong and conscious Estonian cultural identity which does not conflict with their identities as Swedish citizens – it is an informed choice that they make. The Estonian music culture constitutes an important part of this. In comparison to the research carried out in Sweden in 1997, we got the impression that the relationship to Estonia has become even more unaffected, close and at the same time more relaxed – the question of moving to Estonia is for the most part no longer as open as it was in the decade following the restoration of independence. They have made their decision to live in Sweden, but to do so whilst preserving their culture and language to the best of their abilities.

Musical co-operation occupies a central position in this, since it often brings together different generations of Estonians and provides them with a real opportunity to nurse their Estonian skills or pass them on to their children.

The openness of the general Estonian identity is extremely important from the perspective of the strength of émigré Estonian identity: do the Estonians in Estonia recognise the émigré Estonians as their own, and will they continue to "fit" into and enrich the self-image of Estonia's Estonians and add more self-confidence and openness?