

The Archives of Sisters Agnia (Rutt) and Elga Eliaser – Unique Documentation of a Typical Fate of an Educated Estonian Family

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About the Eliasers

Agnia and Elga Eliaser's father Rein (Roman) Eliaser was born in Sangaste in Valgamaa County in 1885. He studied at the Theological Seminary in Riga and then went on to study law at the universities of Kazan and Tartu (1906-1910). In 1908 (?) he married Anna Gailit (born 1885), sister of author August Gailit.

From 1910, Rein Eliaser worked as a barrister. Anna and Rein Eliaser's first child Roman Rein Eliaser junior was born in 1913, their daughter Agnia Eliaser in 1914, and Elga Eliaser in 1920.

During the revolutionary times that saw the birth of the Estonian Republic, Rein Eliaser senior ended up in the centre of events: in 1917, he briefly worked as editor in chief at the newspaper "*Tallinna Teataja*", in 1918 as specialist at the Ministry of Justice, in 1919 as the secretary to the Estonian delegation and in 1920 as the secretary of the Tartu peace delegation. When more peaceful times arrived, Rein Eliaser senior focused on his work as a barrister, at times also involving himself in politics. He was a Member of Parliament, (substitute member 1931-1932, member 1932-1934 [1937]) representing the Estonian People's Party, later the National Centre Party. He was a member of the Civil Collegium of the Estonian Supreme Court from April 1939 to December 1940. In 1939, Rein Eliaser was awarded the Order of the White Star of the Third Class.

Rein and Anna Eliaser's children followed in their father's footsteps. After finishing secondary school (Rein junior studied at the Jakob Westholm Gymnasium for Boys, Agnia and Elga went to the Tallinn Commercial Gymnasium for Girls), all three Eliaser children studied law at the university of Tartu, and finished *cum laude*; Rein junior in 1937, Agnia in 1938 and Elga in 1941. From 1937, Rein junior worked as assistant at the Tartu University's seminary for Political Science and defended his Master's thesis in 1940.

After graduating from university, Agnia Eliaser worked as assistant to her father, barrister Rein Eliaser, and later at several law offices and legal aid bureaus. Between January and June 1941 she worked as senior accountant at the National Library of the Estonian SSR.

On the 14th of June 1941, Rein senior, Anna and Agnia Eliaser were arrested. Rein Eliaser senior died in Sverdlovsk Oblast USSR PCIA SevUralLag in October that year before any sentence had been pronounced. Anna and Agnia Eliaser were deported to Naromsky krai in the Chainsky Raion in Tomsk Oblast, where they remained until 1945. Agnia Eliaser listed field work, berry picking and tar boiling as their tasks at the kolkhoz.

Rein Eliaser junior worked as editor of the international news department at the newspaper “*Postimees*” in Tartu between 1943 and 1944. He was arrested in 1945. The ESSR People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs sentenced him to 10 years imprisonment. Rein Eliaser junior died on May 1st, 1953 while in the penal establishment in Karagandy Oblast.

Their younger sister Elga was sitting her final exams in Tartu during the time of the June deportations, and thereby escaped deportation. During the German occupation she worked as a translator at the “*Postimees*” editorial office in Tallinn. From 1944, she lived in exile in Sweden (formally as a stateless person, she never applied for Swedish citizenship).

Elga Eliaser worked at a tuberculosis hospital in Strängnäs which had been opened to treat refugees from the Baltic countries, and later as an office worker in Stockholm. She worked at the Estonian National Foundation (*Eesti Rahvusfond*) until 1957 (?) editing the periodical information bulletins “Newsletter from Behind the Iron Curtain“ and “East and West”, as well as being involved in other organisations in the diaspora. In 1957, Elga Eliaser commenced work at the Reuters news agency and as news correspondent for the British newspaper “The Daily Telegraph” in Sweden, first as technical staff and later as a journalist. Between 1970 (?) and 1981 she was “The Daily Telegraph’s” Scandinavian correspondent, and also worked for other publications.

The deported Agnia and Anna Eliaser were granted permission to return to Estonia in the spring of 1945. Between 1945 and 1949, Agnia worked as a reporter at the newspaper “*Sirp ja Vasar*”, at the ESSR Planning Commission’s Training Centre as lecturer in constitutional and labour law, at the Tallinn Technical School of Accounting and Planning as teacher of Soviet law, constitution and financial analysis, at the Tallinn Secondary School No. 20 as teacher of constitution, psychology and logic and at the ESSR Artists’ Union as senior accountant.

In March 1949 Agnia and Anna Eliaser were deported once again, this time to the Nazarovsky District in Krasnoyarsk Krai, where Agnia worked in the fields, in construction,

in a brick factory, etc. Agnia and Anna Eliaser were released and returned to Estonia in 1956, where Anna passed away the following year.

Agnia Eliaser commenced work as accountant and legal adviser at the *Punane Koit* (Red Dawn) textile factory, at the Eesti NSV Kunst publishing house as well as at Pelgulinna Hospital's prenatal clinic in Tallinn, and at the Pharmacy Directorate within the ESSR Department of Health as well as elsewhere.

After numerous refusals, Agnia Eliaser was granted permission to leave the Soviet Union and went to stay with her sister Elga Eliaser in Sweden permanently. During the following years, the sisters did a lot of travelling. Agnia worked for the "*Teataja*" newspaper and other émigré publications (the magazine "*Triinu*" and "*Usk ja Elu*") and was active in different émigré organisations and societies (the Committee of Estonia, the Estonian National Council, the Estonian Writers' Cooperative, the Estonian PEN-club and the Estonian Culture Society). She was a member of the organising committees for the Third Estonian Women's Congress at the ESTO-80 and the meetings of Estonian women's organisations at the ESTO-96.

During the late 1980s and the 1990s, Agnia Eliaser was active in the heritage protection movement (the Stockholm Estonian Heritage Protection Society) and sent spiritual (books) and material humanitarian aid to Estonia.

In Sweden, she published two memoirs about the deportees' lives in Siberia – "*Passita ja pajata*" (Without Passport or Pot, Lund 1985; the H.Visnapuu Fond Award) and "*Üheksa ametit..*". (Nine Trades..., Lund 1986)

Agnia Eliaser passed away in Stockholm on the 21st of December 1996. She was laid to rest in the Forest Cemetery (*Metsakalmistu*) in Tallinn in 1997.

Elga Eliaser passed away in Stockholm on the 7th of August 2003. She also rests in the Forest Cemetery in Tallinn.

About the archive

The Eliaser sisters' archive was given to the National Archives of Estonia after Elga Eliaser's passing in 2004. The Department of Personal Archives finished arranging the archive in 2007. The archive spans 239 volumes and is stored at Tõnismägi 16 in Tallinn. It contains records related to the sisters' life and work: identification cards, work certificates, work books, calendar notebooks, diaries and documents reflecting their different activities.

Archival materials from the Third Estonian Women's Congress and women's organisations at ESTO – 80 and ESTO – 96 as well as publications, messages regarding meetings, fund raising, circulars and other activities from different émigré organisations, societies and periodicals sent to Agnia and Elga Eliaser all reflect the sisters' activities in the émigré community.

Personal letters from relatives and acquaintances also make up an important part of the archive. Other authors' articles, publicistic writings and manuscripts for fiction have also been deposited in Agnia and Elga Eliaser's archive:

- 1) "Notes from Ruhnu 15/16 VI 1936" – A sketch of a visit to Ruhnu with August Gailit (?): author unknown (Rein Eliaser junior?),
- 2) Authorised translations of Marie Under's poetry into German and French.
- 3) J. Jaigi's "*Ballaad*" with a dedicatory autograph "to Miss Eliaser on the 2nd of April 1948".

Records in the archive also help give a wider overview of the sisters' interests and cultural preferences: theatre and concert programmes, folders from art exhibitions and other cultural events along with invitations, tickets and programmes from literary and musical evenings arranged by the Estonian Cultural Society (*Eesti Kultuuri Koondis*) and from events held at important days (the anniversaries of the Estonian Republic and the University of Tartu).

The voluminous photograph collection contains photos of the families Eliaser and Gailit, of Anna and Agnia (Rutt) as deportees in Krasnoyarsk krai, of Elga Eliaser's work editing periodicals for the *Eesti Rahvusfond* in the 1950s, of the sisters' joint travels in the 1970s-1990s, but also photos of cultural figures (Marie Under, Friedebert Tuglas, August Gailit and others), of nature and cities (for instance Narva and Narva-Jõesuu in the 1920s and 1930s).

The archive also contains Agnia Eliaser's pencil drawings and watercolours from Krasnoyarsk krai in Siberia and sketches of the memoirs' cover design.

Summary

When arranging fonds, the archivist inevitably puts the records into a new context and into dialogue with each other. An example of this is when I, during the course of arranging the Eliaser sisters' archive put a diploma for high production capacity issued to Rutt Eliaser by the SSSR Coal Industry Ministry's Krasnoyarsksastroi trust and its subdivision, the Nazarovo

brick factory in 1953 and 1955 and a certificate testifying to the issuing of an award to Rutt Eliaser for creative and community work in 1992 by the Committee of Estonia as well as a testimony issued in 1995 by the Professor Juhan Aavik Foundation for the arrangement of Juhan Aavik's musical compositions and compiling of a card index into one file next to each other.

Archival science is seen as a helpmate for historical studies. The work of the historian is in many respects different from that of the archivist. Ideally, the archivist should focus on what kind of document he has at hand and then focus on what this document speaks of. Luckily, I have not met a single archivist abiding by this rule during my 15 years in the profession. I contemplated Rein Eliaser senior's letter to the head of Tallinn's First Legal Advice Bureau – a letter which on the surface said little –, where he asks for his June wages to be paid out to comrade Rein Koemets and “if needed give the writing desk and typewriter table to my daughter Elga Eliaser, or pay her in instalments in case she wishes to sell them to the Bureau and the Bureau would wish to purchase them.” Rein Eliaser signed the letter at Pechory station on the 17th of June 1941. I have leafed through Rutt Eliaser's guest book of a couple of hundred pages, where the first six entries were made by Karl August Hindrey, Henrik Visnapuu, Jaan Kärner, Karl Eduard Sööt, Karl Ast-Rumor and Friedebert Tuglas, (who on the 29th of May 1929 writes: “the Swedish king will arrive at Café Werner with six warships”) and the six last entries were made by Hando Runnel, Gustav Ernesaks, Teet Kallas, Mati Unt, Jaan Kaplinski and Mats Traat.

The uniqueness of the Eliaser archives mentioned in the heading mainly lies in the fact that the “Estonian story” of the 20th century is documented through the eyes of a single family in such a multifaceted way: life in the Estonian Republic through its birth and destruction, Siberia and exile, the Estonian SSR and the restoration of independence, parallel fates; despite the incomparable conditions, moral dilemmas and forced choices, they held startlingly similar stances in truly principal questions – all the things which give true content to the “big history” and gives it meaning.

The archive of the sisters Agnia and Elga Eliaser is unique just as all personal archives are. Inside every little story lies another, in whose shadow an even larger one lurks.