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SOVIET ESTONIA

A SURVEY

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
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THE STORMY BALTIC

THE WIND blows from the west, driving the foam-crested waves before it.

On the sea-shore, breasting the storm, stands a high hill.

On that hill, according to legend, the giant Kalev, the ancestor of the Estonian people, lies buried. There Linda, Kalev's wife, mourned his death, and her tears glisten to this day in Lake Ülemistejärv, which lies not far from the hill. There, too, lived their son, the giant Kalevipoeg, who with one hand could tear up a mighty oak by the roots. Ancient epics record the brave deeds performed by Kalevipoeg, who knew no fear in fighting the enemies of his homeland.

Around the grey hill, on the summit of which stands an ancient fortress, factory hooters echo one another.

On the highest of the fortress towers flutters a scarlet flag.

The animated streets of a big city run down to the sea-shore. That is the city of Tallinn, the capital of Soviet Estonia.

* * *

At 60° north latitude, the Soviet coast of the Baltic Sea forms a peninsula. On the north it is washed by the Gulf of Finland and on the south-west by the Gulf of Riga.

Further westward lies the Moonsundi Archipelago, a group of islands of fantastic shape, separated from each other and from the mainland by narrow straits.

Prominent among them are two big islands—Saaremaa and Hiiumaa.

The peninsula and the islands comprise the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic.

To the east, on the border between Estonia and the R.S.F.S.R., stretch the smooth waters of Lake Peipsi Järv (Lake Chud) and Lake Pskov. On the south, the Estonian Soviet Republic adjoins Soviet Latvia.

To cross the republic from one end to the other by train takes less than twenty-four hours. It has an area of only 45,000 square kilometres, which, however, is one and a half times that of Belgium.

The traveller who enters Estonia by land will not see any important changes in the surrounding landscape. He will see the same quiet, slightly undulating plain, the dark fir thickets in the damp hollows, and small winding rivers running through low valleys.

Estonia is the extreme end of the great Russian Plain; here the plain slopes gently westward to the sea.

The islands, too, differ little from the mainland; they are just as flat, with low, sloping shores.

At a first glance the northern coast of the Baltic region seems dreary and monotonous; it does not reveal its beauty at once. But if examined more closely, picturesque spots will reveal themselves to the eye: a low hill all covered with wild flowers; and next to it another hill, taller than the first. On its summit runs a line of trees which comes to a sudden stop at the brow, as if afraid to descend. A belt of sparsely growing birch-trees girding a field; a mill standing in a clump of willows; an aspen-tree on the bank of a stream, its bright trembling leaves flashing like silvery lights.

In the south-east of Estonia, where the land rises perceptibly, the eye is attracted by

a chain of high hills. Prominent among them is Munamägi, "egg mountain," the highest point in the republic; it rises 317 metres above sea-level.

The northern extreme of Estonia is also somewhat elevated. There, on the coast of the Gulf of Finland, there are big outcrops of grey limestone forming steep cliffs. That is the so-called "glint." Now overhanging the water, and now retreating inland, this "glint" stretches far beyond Estonia to the suburbs of Leningrad.

Rising as high as fifty metres, split and worn by wind and water, the "glint" cliffs assume fantastic shapes. Looking at them from the sea it seems as though the turbulent waves are pounding the foundations of ruined ancient buildings. Some of the "glint" cliffs stand out distinctly against a background of pine forests.

Through the whole of the middle part of Estonia runs a belt of lowlands. Here trees are more sparse and stunted; it seems as though they are being sucked in by the yellow, swampy ground. Here and there patches of dry land are seen, with houses and cultivated fields; but the further south-west you go, the wider are the marshes.

Through marshes, between swampy banks, the river Pärnu, an important river in Estonia, runs to the Gulf of Riga. It is fed by innumerable small tributaries, which run out of the lakes.

In Estonia there are over fifteen hundred lakes. They occupy five per cent of the area of the republic. Marshes occupy about eighteen per cent.

Gazing at the Estonian landscape one can read as in a book what took place here thousands and millions of years ago. The "glint" ledges, the outcrops of limestone that are found everywhere, show that the sea was here in the distant past; for, as is known, limestone, a light, porous stone, was formed out of the shells of innumerable generations of crustacea which inhabit the sea.

Vestiges of the glacial period are distinctly visible in Estonia. In that period gigantic masses of ice moved down from the north across the Russian Plain and also covered the Baltic region, which by that time had been freed from the sea. The ice carried down lumps of rock torn from the Scandinavian mountains, grinding them up in the process. Meanwhile the climate changed. It became warmer, the glaciers melted, retreated to the north, leav-

ing on the plains boulders and accumulations of sand and shingle. That accounts for the boulders found in the fields and for the hills of Estonia.

While retreating, the ice was held for a long time in the deep hollow of the Baltic Sea. As long as the sea was occupied by the ice the streams of water on the land were unable to flow into it, and so they spread in the hollows dug by the ice, and also in those places where the glacier had filled the river-beds with masses of sand and had formed dams. That accounts for the numerous lakes that are scattered over the whole of the north-western part of the Soviet Union.

But why did not the water flow into the sea when the glacier melted?

Because of the dams formed by the glacier, and also because of the flatness of the country, which hindered the flow of the water.

CROSS-ROADS OF THE WINDS

We find much that is interesting when examining the flora of Estonia. As is the case in the whole of the middle zone of the Russian Plain, here mixed forests predominate, forests in which, in addition to fir and pine, there are birch, aspen, linden, and in some places oak and maple. In those forests we can find, side by side with northern fir covered with hoary clumps of lichen, small trees with bright, soft, fleshy needles on their flexible branches. These are yew-trees, close kinsmen of the yew-trees that grow in the Crimea and in the Caucasus.

And another surprising thing. The trunks of the mighty oak-trees are entwined with thick and tightly clinging ivy, just as they are in the forests in the south.

It seems as though north and south have met on the Baltic coast. How is this meeting

to be explained? How do the green inhabitants of the south manage to survive here? Who tends them?

The sea.

The Baltic Sea is part of the World Ocean. As is known, in the winter water cools much more slowly than the land; it retains the summer heat longer. Even the big lakes have a moderating effect upon the climate on the coast. It is easy to understand, then, what a tremendous preserver of heat the ocean is. The air that comes from the Atlantic greatly moderates the continental climate of the middle zone of the country, it reduces the cold in winter and the heat in summer. It goes without saying that the breath of the ocean is felt more markedly in those places that are nearest to it.

Thus, whereas the mean January temperature in Vologda is 14° C below zero, in Tallinn, which is in the same latitude, the mean temperature is 3° C below zero. On the Estonian islands the winter is even milder.

It is clear now why southern plants survive the winter here.

Often, in Estonia, there is no snow at New Year. The sledge-driving season is short, and the sledge roads are unreliable.

The ice near the coast is usually thin and some parts of the sea here are navigable all the year round. And yet, at this season, on the Caspian Sea near Astrakhan, two thousand kilometres to the south-east, there is a thick coat of ice that lasts three or four months.

Estonia suffers from dampness rather than from cold. During a half of December fog descends on the land. The coast of the Gulf of Riga is one of the dampest places on the Russian Plain. The rainfall here is over 600 mm per annum. Thus, if all the moisture that comes down in the form of rain and snow in the course of a year were retained on the surface, the land would be covered by water more than half a metre deep.

The weather is changeable here, however. The air from the regions that have a sharply continental climate invades these parts and drives the rain clouds away in the summer, and in the winter brings intense frost to replace the thaw. Those winds come either from the Arctic tundras or from the south-eastern steppes. The Baltic region is the cross-roads of the winds.

The wind blows with tremendous force on the coast, raising not only the waves of the sea,

but also waves of sand. They pile up the sand on the sea-shore into large dunes. Those dunes seem to be motionless, but actually, the force of the storms pushes them inland, where they threaten the fields and roads. They move at the rate of two or three metres a year. In many places along the coast trees have been planted to check the movement of the sand.