
*Estonian Life Stories* constitutes the most wide-ranging English translation of Estonian autobiographical writings up to now. Translated and edited by Tiina Kirss, the book contains twenty-five life stories, which bring to life the complex and often controversial events surrounding (the loss of) Estonian interwar independence, World War II and the Stalinist terror. The stories are introduced by a comprehensive preface "On the Collection of Estonian Life Stories" by Rutt Hinrikus and a longer introductory article “Estonian Life Stories and Histories” by Tiina Kirss and Jüri Kivimäe. Together, these provide the reader with the historical and theoretical tools for better and more detailed understanding of the stories that follow. Furthermore, references to the specific historical circumstances and culture-specific everyday practices are thoughtfully commented on by the editor in footnotes throughout the book, which should be very helpful for readers unfamiliar with the foreign and distant world of the Estonian writers. Additionally, the book contains a glossary of frequently used terms and some colloquial expressions, as well as a map of the narrators' spatial life-trajectories. Editor Tiina Kirss and compiler Rutt Hinrikus successfully meet the challenge of translating the life-stories on multiple levels—linguistically and culturally, in time and place—and yet they have retained the flavor and the specificity of the Estonian case and the uniqueness of each story.

The tradition of Estonian autobiographical writing can be traced back to the Estonian “national awakening” era folklore collection campaigns at the end of the 19th century. However, more influential for the contemporary authors has been the atmosphere of the Eastern European “memory boom” since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. That period in the 1990s was, according to Hinrikus, “heavy with remembering, collecting memoirs and revising history,” and shaped by the telling of previously hidden, untold, or forbidden stories about the past (Hinrikus 2003). *Estonian Life Stories* draws on the large collection of autobiographies, collected since 1989 through various public calls for submitting one's life-story by the Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum. More specifically, the stories in the book emerged from the autobiography competitions “One Hundred Lives of a Century” (1999) and “My Destiny and the Destiny of Those Close to Me in the Labyrinths of History” (1997), the results of which were first published in a two-volume Estonian-language selection *One Hundred Estonian Life-stories of a Century* in 2000 (Hinrikus 2000). A third volume to this collection was published three years later.

This collection of autobiographies is not the first to appear in English. One focusing on traumatic events entitled *Soviet Deportations in Estonia* appeared in 2007 (Kukk and Raun 2007). Two others, *The One Who Remembers, Survives* (Kirss, Kõresaar, and Lauristin 2004) and *Carrying Linda's Stones* (Lie, Malik, Jõe-Cannon, and Hinrikus 2006), explicitly centered on the experiences of Estonian women. *Soldiers of Memory: World War II and Its Aftermath in Estonian Post-Soviet Life Stories*, edited by Ene Kõresaar, is the most recent addition to this English-language body of literature. It offers a complex analysis of the experience of World War II from the diverse perspectives of Estonian soldiers’ fighting on various sides of the frontline (Kõresaar 2011). Although all of these books boast excellent scholarly analysis of different dimensions of Estonian history, these studies have dedicated less space to the presentation of the historical actors’ original voices, whereas *Estonian Life Stories* focuses on the latter task.

Unlike the afore-mentioned volumes on specific historical phenomenon or groups, Kirss’ collection is the most comprehensive collection of Estonian autobiographies in English.
Its 500-plus pages present 25 life-stories by both men and women with diverse life trajectories. There are, however, some factors that appear to reader as subtle principles of selection in the volume for emphasizing certain experiences and therefore they deserve some attention. Although the birth years of the writers vary from 1905 to 1973, the book is dominated by the cohort born in the 1920s (15 people) and the 1930s (5 people). All but one of the authors lived through the Second World War, and eight of the male contributors are military veterans. Additionally, the “Estonian” in the title of the book appears to refer to a linguistic rather than civic category, since all of the writers are native Estonian speakers (and not Russian speakers who compose 30% of the current inhabitants of Estonia).

That Estonian Life Stories is mostly about the “Interwar” ethnic Estonian generation successfully reflects the general message of the book. It is a presentation of what I would call the “Estonian case for one’s destiny in the labyrinths of history” in the 20th century. Through the twenty-five autobiographies, the book effectively presents the native Estonian dominant social and cultural memories and grand narratives of the Second World War and Soviet period for a foreign readership. Indeed, the lives of the Estonian “Interwar” generation were greatly shaped by the ways they reacted and adapted to, or fought against the events spanning 1939 to 1953: World War II, military conscription (for men), the wartime Soviet and Nazi occupations, the Stalinist deportations between 1941-1949, the 1941 wave of emigration/escape to the West, agricultural collectivization etc. Their childhoods were stymied by the most “traumatic” and “labyrinthic” period in modern Estonian history, a time when individual fates were strongly affected by both arbitrary and systematic but almost never good interventions of grande histoire. And yet each story in the book reflects a unique combination of historical circumstance, personality and style years after the events retold by the authors. The editor's concerted efforts to map the Estonian historical “labyrinth” of 1939-53 could explain why the twin issues of migration and dislocation are overrepresented in the collection, as six recall deportation to Siberia, five describe emigration to the West, and two depict the return to Estonia from inland Russia.

Despite the coverage of all of these fascinating aspects, it was puzzling to see an absence of the generation born between 1940-1960 with the exception of one rather special story. Unlike their parents, this large age cohort came of age in the post-Stalinist period and therefore experienced much more stable and less violent (political and social) conditions, and faced the changes of 1989-91 in middle age. This absence should leave plenty of space for another collection to appear in the future.

Overall, I am confident that this beautifully translated, well edited and introduced book will provide an excellent introduction to foreign readers interested in the specificities of native Estonian history, memory culture, autobiographical traditions, and most importantly, the fascinating lives of the great “ordinary” people.

Uku Lember
Central European University, Budapest

---

1) Paraphrasing the title of the Cultural History Archives autobiography competition from 1997: “My Destiny and the Destiny of Those Close to Me in the Labyrinths of History.”