

Culturescapes 2006

*"Encounters with others, with other people, have always been a fundamental experience for our species, at all times and everywhere in the world."* Ryszard Kapuscinski in "Lettre International" (74/2006)

Tallinn and Tartu lie only 200 km apart, both part of one of the smallest countries in the European Union and yet the mentality and the atmosphere in modern Tallinn is completely different to that of Tartu, an old university town. They are regarded as rivals, in much the same way as Basel and Zurich or Hamburg and Munich. So close and yet so different? The contrast between the inhabitants of the Scandinavian countries and the inhabitants of Sicily is much greater, but is negligible in comparison to the Europeans enjoying their holidays on Lampedusa next to the Africans who arrive there exhausted after a perilous flight. Where does a foreign/strange/alien culture begin, where does one's own end? How alien is another culture and how alien one's own?

Even if we are living in a globalised world in which enterprise resource planning is flourishing regardless of all borders, the question still remains as to whether mutual understanding is thus improved. In the former Eastern block, in particular, it is generally believed that in Western Europe very little differentiation takes place and that much of what lies in the East is equated with Russia. And yet almost everyone from the East looks westwards. To be a member of the Club of 25, soon of 27 and of NATO was and probably still is, the order of the day. Is a sense of European community achieved in these larger entities comprised of individual states or can individuality only be preserved within the larger entity? This coalition, so strictly based on economic considerations, will probably only work in the long run if people begin, on an individual basis, to complete the process of assimilation and osmosis by seeking dialogue and understanding with these new "others". There is no "end" in sight. We shall meet "new others" again and again, who will only gradually loom out of the chaos and tumult of the present. It is possible that these "new others" will be produced by the struggle between two opposing cultural currents in the contemporary world – globalisation, a reality in our daily lives and the propensity to preserving our diversity, our differences and our individuality.

The history of Estonia has been characterised by centuries of foreign domination. The Estonians, who have been living on the eastern coast of the Baltic since the third millennium B.C. and who gave their name to the modern nation state, have been beset by a number of foreign powers in the last 800 years: at first it was the German crusaders and the Danish king who forced their way into the country. Later Russia and Sweden and for a short while Poland as well, split the country between them. Finally Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. It was only in the period between the two world wars that Estonia enjoyed the status of a sovereign state. Despite all this the Estonians managed to preserve their culture and language over the centuries. Estonia is the smallest and most northerly of the Baltic States but also a border state between Russia and Scandinavia i.e. Western European society: a country in which the cultures of west and east meet. Estonia, lying as it does at this important junction has developed into one of the most successful post-communist transformation states since the end of the Soviet occupation in 1991.

The Estonians – with around only one million citizens, one of the smallest nations in Europe – do not flinch when confronted with great challenges. They themselves like to describe their land and population as "small but industrious". They are proud of the economic reforms that have been carried out in Estonia, the modern IT-state E-stonia, their traditional and

contemporary vocal music and a great deal more besides. They thus live according to the motto which Jakob Hurt (1839-1907), one of the leading figures in the national emancipation movement, gave them more than a hundred years ago: "Although we are a small nation, our culture can make us great and famous". In 1905, so only shortly after Hurt and still under Russian domination, the literary movement "Noor-Eesti" (young Estonia) coined a second motto: "We want to remain Estonians and nonetheless become Europeans!" This is still true today. The Estonians wish to preserve and cultivate their identity and culture in an Estonia which experienced an influx of several hundred thousand members of national minorities, most of them Russians, White Russians and Ukrainians, during the 1950's, under Soviet rule; at the same time they want to be good Europeans and establish a firm place in the European domain.

The aim of Culturescapes is to contribute to a more differentiated reception of the manifold cultures, languages and histories of the peoples of Europe. Europe harbours more than 200 cultures and languages within its borders. They are spoken and lived in 48 countries: 25 EU member states and 23 non- (or not yet) EU member states. We all want to enter Europe's future together. Let us look eastwards sometimes as well and implement our cultural life in the sense of politics by other means.

Jurriaan Cooman