

FLUID BOUNDARIES

IMPRESSIONS FROM A BALTIC MEETING



PHOTO: UNN GUSTAFSSON

For so long, we lived apart. What is our life together going to be like now, after this separation?

For the third time, the Baltic Writers' Council has organized an international meeting with participants from the various countries of the region. Unn Gustafsson accompanied the group during a three day trip to Estonia, on the border with Russia.

Actually, we were supposed to be heading towards St. Petersburg. The sentence echoes silently in my head, more poetically factual than a matter of fate. This We of the trip – writers, translators, poets, critics, researchers – are now sitting in a bus chartered specifically for the meeting, heading towards Narva. It has been raining, but the sky clears up, and suddenly the afternoon seems awakened anew. All around me, the voices of my fellow-passengers rise and fall melodically, I am tempted to let myself fall asleep to this polyphony of discussions in Finnish, Estonian, Swedish, and occasionally Russian. It sounds like soft music. The river on the left seems to stand still in the afternoon sun. A vivid red float, whose resistance gives rise to a V-shaped tongue of foam, is all that reveals that the water is moving. On the other side is Russia.

It was in 1992 that the prelude to the future meetings took place. Approximately four hundred writers and translators from the Nordic countries, the newly formed Baltic States, Russia, Germany, and Poland gathered together on a ship that cruised around the Baltic Sea. One of the primary driving forces behind the “Baltic Waves’ Cruise” was Peter Curman, then chairman of the Swedish Writers’ Union. When he, seventeen years later, summarizes the cruise, he notes that the sea literally became a means through which people could talk to one another. There were disagreements among the passengers – how could it have been otherwise? – but what was most noticeable was a willingness to engage in dialogue. The Konstantin Simonov berthed in St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Gdynia/Gdansk, Lübeck, Copenhagen, Visby, Stockholm, and Helsinki. The seed was sown for two institutions that have pushed the dialogue further since then: the Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators, which was founded the following year by the Swedish Ministry of Culture, and the Baltic Writers’ Council. The Council functions as an umbrella organization for writers’ and translators’ unions in the countries on the Baltic Sea, as well as Norway and Iceland.

In 2005, the Baltic Writers’ Council organized the first meeting, called “Baltic Meetings”, with the city administration in Kaliningrad/Königsberg. It coincided with the city’s 750th anniversary and the assembled writers and translators were received warmly, in particular by representatives of the city. The then chairman, Klaus-Jürgen Liedtke, said in his introductory acceptance speech: “Why are meetings like this necessary? Because at this level there is no European Community, no public sphere – it is we who have to shape this sphere, by meeting each other. Culture is the only tool we have to transcend the limitations of nationalism and provincialism, but we have to start in a limited area, a region that has had something in common throughout its history, building a cluster of our own.”

They had gathered in Klaipeda and crossed the Russian border together, more than forty writers, translators, and artists. From Kaliningrad, with an extensive program that included not only literature but also film and environmental issues, they took a trip to the village of Chistye Prudy. Previously, it was called Tollmingkehmen. Here lived the Lithuanian national poet Donelaitis – who worked as a Prussian-Lithuanian priest. The region contains the common history of the participants, but their memories are divergent. In the texts written in connection with the journey, journalist and literary critic Olga Martynova revives Klaus-Jürgen Liedtke’s question and answers it with a description. Martynova is standing on the empty spot where the Königsberg Castle, the lost city, once was. Next to her stands the poet Richard Pietraß from Berlin. At the beginning of the last century, Pietraß’s father went to school two blocks away. Martynova’s father, however, came to Königsberg with the Red Army. Immediately after the slaughter, he went to look at the castle, where he escaped a bullet from a stealth shooter by a hair’s breadth.

“Pietraß and I cannot hold a real conversation about this. We can stand here and, each individually, think about what is foreign and what is our own. At least this is something the cultural meetings can achieve. And that’s no small feat.”

Myself, I remember subsiding to gale force winds and moderate visibility: SMHI’s marine reports, a daily testimony about negligible geographical distances. The slow voice lulled me to sleep as a child. Now, in self-imposed exile far from the Baltic coast, I get goose bumps when I hear it: “Fladen and Dogger, The Fishing Grounds and South Utsira, Skagerak and Kattegatt, Vänern, Öresund and Bälten, the Southwestern and Southern Baltic Sea, the Southeast Baltic Sea, the central and northern Baltic Sea, Gulf of Riga, Gulf of Finland, the Åland Sea, Archipelago Sea, Southern Gulf of Bothnia, Northern Gulf of Bothnia, North Kvarken, Gulf of Bothnia.” The Baltic Sea is the promised land of my childhood. In the fall of 1989, I was in third grade. I knew about the behavior of the black guillemot and how you can get seals to rise to the surface, how to clear nets and row. But I knew nothing about the other side, the other ports, the inlets, the coastlines. A few months before our departure, I speak with a good friend about this. “Isn’t it strange,” she said, out of the blue, “how our perception of reality has managed to be more or less cut in half for us? As if the entire Eastern Bloc was on the other side of the planet, and not right across the sea.” My memories are genuine; happiness tends to appear that way when looking back. But at the same time directly unaware of what the brackish water connected me to.

The second Baltic Meetings took place in 2007, on Gotland. The program was at least as extensive as the one in Kaliningrad. P.O. Enquist was present, as well as his fellow-swede Kjell Espmark, Sami Rose-Marie Huuva, Steinunn Sigurdardóttir from Iceland, Andrei Bitov from Russia. On Gotland there were lively cultural-political debates. I read the comments in the internal report from the event, and they seem strikingly similar: The culture of the area is poor. Not in spirit, but artists have an existence that is sensitive to economic fluctuations.

It thus feels slightly ironic that the city administration withdrew the official invitation to hold a third Baltic Meeting in St. Petersburg, citing precisely financial concerns. This occurred a few months before the meeting was to have taken place. The financial crisis had grown into a global problem. The administration regretted this most deeply, but found itself compelled to call off the trip. That we nonetheless are sitting on the chartered bus on the way to the border town of Narva is the result of a rescue at the finish line by the Estonian Writers’ Union, which has taken on the role of host, and the Baltic Writers’ Council, which did not give up. It is a Baltic Meeting at the last minute, as they probably also occurred at the time of the Hanseatic League, when the preconditions were suddenly turned around. We come from six different countries and represent even more political and cultural affiliations: we are nonetheless a decimated group. The program is smaller than it was at the previous meetings; the shared traveling is the focus.

Once we reach Narva River, the city abounds with the evening sun and the swallows are flying high above. The river divides, at a leisurely pace, the one side from the other, the one nation from the other: a fluid border. It is beautiful, and I realize that I had expected rather something gloomy. Instead, I suddenly remember a metaphor from one of Tomas Tranströmer’s poems: “sweet honey-dribbling June”. We check in at the perfectly acceptable city hotel and, all driven by the same impulse, then ramble along in groups towards the city’s fortress. It is a strange place. Located on opposite sides of the river are two fortresses that now – once again – belong to two nations. Ivangorod, on the other side, is younger and dilapidated by comparison. But when standing in the outer courtyard of the Narva fortress, the river cannot be seen and the gray mass of the two castle arches appears to be a seamless melding into each other. As if everything were one. “An emblem of the rivalry between the Eastern and Western Roman Empire”, as the Narva museum administration calls the historic sight. Today, a symbol of Europe’s, put literally, fluid – yet maintained nonetheless – border with Russia.

I’ve climbed up on top of the coping of the eastern wall and look out over the river and the land on the other side, a Swedish exile in Narva. After the Swedes had controlled the city for about one hundred years, the Russians recaptured it. This occurred right where I now stand, at the fortress’s weak spot: the wall facing the water. The famous engineer Erik Dahlbergh had worked for twenty years to improve its defense – against his better judgment, or at least against clearly impossible odds. I cannot help but think of the character in W.G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz*, his melancholy and bittersweet voice describing the inherent irony of the European building of fortresses.

Wiederholt sei es darum vorgekommen, daß man sich gerade durch die Befestigungsmaßnahmen, die ja, sagte Austerlitz, grundsätzlich geprägt seien von einer Tendenz zu paranoider Elaboration, die entscheidende, dem Feind Tür und Tor öffnende Blöße ge-

ben habe, ganz zu schweigen von der Tatsache, daß mit den immer komplizierter werdenden Bauplänen auch die Zeit ihrer Realisierung und somit die Wahrscheinlichkeit zunahm, daß die Festungen bereits bei ihrer Fertigstellung, wenn nicht schon zuvor, überholt waren durch die inzwischen erfolgte Weiterentwicklung der Artillerie und der strategischen Konzepte, die der wachsenden Einsicht Rechnung trugen, daß alles sich in der Bewegung entschied und nicht im Stillstand.

Today Narva is part of Estonia, with a population that consists of at least 85 percent ethnic Russians and even more Russian-speakers. I follow the bridge, with my eyes, to the other side, close enough to see the pedestrians, far too distant to make out their facial features. I ponder the irony of the place – if nothing else, it has endured. Later that evening, our Russian colleagues arrive. They cross the bridge.

The next day we return for a guided tour of the fortress. In addition, there will be readings. Our guide is a Russian-speaking woman who was born in Narva and speaks educated English and, to our ears, fluent Swedish. Her task, it turns out, is to demonstrate to foreign journalists just how splendidly visitors are received by the museum administration; and, indeed, visitors would appear to be received well. Nonetheless, one gets a conflicted impression when the guide – depending on the interest of the visitor, of course – speaks less about historical facts than the tailored ways of presenting them. Fixed in a place which had been conquered and reconquered again and again, in a kind of perpetual motion machine of border-drawing, doubleness is perhaps appropriate, I think. Finally, we are up in Långe Hermann and peer through the openings and drizzle at the red chimneys that adorn the Kreenholm plant. The guide and the Russian authors are immersed in a lively conversation. When she notices that I'm still there she switches quickly to English and continues to criticize the official history of the city. "Everywhere it says", she says emphatically, "that Narva was bombed to pieces in the war. But it should be that it was the medieval town which disappeared. The new Narva, which emerged during industrialization, remains." She is a pragmatist; a mother with several children and a professional woman who speaks at least three languages. It is not her intention to romanticize the former regime. Rather, I interpret it as a reasonable indignation: the city of her childhood most certainly does exist!

The insight into the river outside, the fluid border with Russia, does not leave me in peace. The place demands a confrontation with history – with people's different histories. But this does not occur. Perhaps this is also a desire of sorts on my part, having been raised at a safe distance from recently healed wounds. If they indeed have healed. In any event, our traveling group remains closed, without an audience or other interactions with the local community. Among the participants themselves the mood is conciliatory, gradually becoming high-spirited. Ilya Fonyakov from St. Petersburg explicitly thanks the Estonians for allowing Pushkin Street to retain that name, a gesture which

he claims to appreciate, the old school poet.

We are gathered in what was once the Narva fortress dining hall. What follows is almost a kind of interactive lyric poetry. Hannu Niklander reads his poetry in Finnish and it is translated – staged – into Russian by Fonyakov. Likewise, Peter Mickwitz in Swedish, Klaus-Jürgen Liedtke in German, Jürgen Rooste in Estonian. Gradually, an interplay arises in the dissonances between the languages and the voices. Just like on the bus yesterday, I am tempted to give in to this peculiar music, to be rocked, swayed in, away. Until Rose-Marie Huuva reads her own poem, translated from Sami into English. In bare sketches, we get a depiction of how the revivalist priest Lars Levi Laestadius collected Sami skulls and passed them on to the Swedish Institute for racial research that existed at the time. Karolinska Institute's skull collection, for example, was "enriched" by the collaboration, which also entailed Sami graves being plundered in the name of pseudo-science. In the form of poetry, Rose-Marie Huuva urgently asks whether it might be time to return the skulls now. I am pulled back to the present and the different political realities that are assembled under the reconstructed medieval chandeliers.

We leave the Narva on the same day. It strikes me that a possible confrontation – the German "Auseinandersetzung" captures it better – also could have involved the Swedish presence. With this I'm not referring to Charles XII and the Swedish lion, which now adorns the artistically folded toffee paper of Narva's candy stores; rather Swedbank and SEB, whose neon signs adorn innumerable facades. They shine faintly in the shadow of the financial crisis. As we now leave the city behind us, I have a feeling of already being on the way back home. As if our journey has reached a silent climax here at Europe's last outpost towards Russia.

The last night we spend in Käsmu, or Kaspervik, to use the old Swedish city name. There is the center that the Estonian Writers' Union has established within the framework of Baltic cooperation. Writers and translators come to this wooden house from the turn of the century to live and work. Similar places also exist in Ventspils, in Nida and Ahrenshoop: the fruits of the networking in which the Baltic Writers' Council and others have been engaged.

For many years, the international writer and translator center on Gotland, which was founded after the "authors' cruise" in 1992, was unique. In Käsmu now, the joint center's future is discussed with some concern. It is unclear whether the Swedish Ministry of Culture will divest itself of its responsibility, or maintain it. Many, if not most, of the participants in this trip have already lived and worked in Visby. Now they agree on a call for the preservation of the center's international character. Cultural policy work is thus conducted again.

The journey back to Tallinn goes through Lahemaa National Park. We stop at two country estates that have been turned into museums. Villa Sagadi and Palmse are magnificent baroque buildings, with well-trimmed, geometric lawns and landscaped gravel paths. They reflect not only the relationship between Russia and Estonia; they testify to the presence of a social class that no longer exists. At the end of World War I, in con-

nection with Estonia's first independence, both estates were dissolved and nationalized. After 1940, they were taken over by the Soviet authorities and "functionalized". Palmse, for example, was used for a long time as a convalescence home. Prior to that, they were inhabited by a mixed nobility that was typical for the region: the originally Swedish, then German, family von Fock and the Baltic German family von der Pahlen. For me, both estates seem somewhat unreal where they stand in the middle of Laheema's fleshy foliage. It is like stepping into a staging of Agnes von Krusenstjerna's novel suite on the Misses von Pahlen – obviously a very Swedish association. In furnished rooms that are not occupied but merely observed, a surreal feeling arises. It seems to emphasize the literary character. In fact, however, both Villa Sagadi and Palmse accommodate layer upon layer of fates, stratified like the shale they break in Kohtla-Järve, and our associations probably should point in different directions.

National and cultural turning points: these have marked all the Baltic Meetings. "Every problem cries out in its own language", noted Tomas Tranströmer in the 1960s, and given the ambiguity of his choice of words in Swedish, we could also say that "problems also cry out for an expression of their own...." During this third meeting, poetry itself has served as a language and as a common thread, or rather nerve. In particular, the Russian poets, who themselves were not able to attend, have left their mark on our meeting via their translations. Janina Orlov, current chairperson of the Baltic Writers' Council, highlights precisely that when I ask her – that the poem itself was able to be at the center. In contexts such as these it is otherwise easy for a certain distance to arise, ones speaks about the literature. And even if a more formal setting was lacking, an unofficial conveying of knowledge has nonetheless occurred: on the bus, during the shared meals, and in the hotel rooms. The Swedish journalist Ingela Bendt is a board member of the Baltic Centre for Writers and Translators and participated both in Kaliningrad and on Gotland. She stressed that it was very good that we managed to implement this third meeting "in order not to break a tradition". Transnational cooperation of this kind is fragile, almost organic in nature, and continuity is critical. The next Baltic Meeting is to be held in Turku, in 2011, in connection with the European Capitals of Culture (which also includes Tallinn).

This time, the farewell takes place, appropriately enough, on the bus – en route. *Daß alles sich in der Bewegung entscheidet und nicht im Stillstand*, whispers my fictional companion Austerlitz. Klaus-Jürgen Liedtke quotes Tomas Tranströmer (ubiquitous, not just in this text): "Everything sings. You shall remember this. Travel on!"

unn gustafsson

Swedish journalist working from Berlin