

Estonian Independence Day Celebration  
Sunnyvale, California  
February 27, 2016

Thank you, Ambassador Marme, and thank you to President Toomas Hendrik Ilves. I am honored to receive the Order the Cross of Terra Mariana. It makes me especially happy to think about how pleased my mother would be for me get this award. She loved her country and was deeply committed to helping a free Estonia in any way she could.

As some of you may know, the Kistler-Ritso Foundation supports a museum in Estonia that memorializes the occupation period. Just last week we announced some significant changes, to be implemented in time for the centennial in 2018. We also announced that we are changing the name from Museum of Occupations to VABAMU. This is very exciting, but not without controversy, and there is quite a bit of commentary in our expat Estonian community about the plans. So I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words about that.

My mother's intentions for the museum are best described by her words at the opening ceremony with President Lennart Meri: "Never again!" That means the museum must have social impact. My mother wanted the museum to be a protector of Estonian freedom, helping people realize that freedom is not free: we must not take it for granted, but rather work to protect it.

President Ilves said this in his speech on Independence Day: *"Estonia's concern is amplified by the fear that everything that has been restored and created anew during the last quarter century may disappear again. We are always worried about our survival."* This closely describes my mother's way of thinking. That is why she founded the Kistler-Ritso Foundation, and at the request of the Estonian government, the museum: on the fervent hope of "never again!"

The prison doors, suitcases and artifacts behind glass are valuable mementos of Estonia's past, but they are only important in the context of the lives they touched and the stories they represent. At the heart of VABAMU will be the stories of real people who lived in that terrible time of occupations: those whose lives were tragically lost, and those who survived; those who were deported to Siberia, those who fled West, and those who stayed. Stories of the resistance of the home guard and Forest Brothers. Stories of the perseverance of the Estonian people, who kept their national identity alive through 50 years of Soviet oppression, maintaining hope of freedom, expressed through prayers, stories and song. Hearing about the lives of real people prompts us to make an emotional connection. Rather than viewing the occupation period as "something that happened long ago to someone else," we want visitors to identify with those who suffered and died, feeling "there but for the grace of God go I." These stories are historical fact. We will communicate historical fact in a way that makes people identify and remember. Our mission is to educate the young—and by young, we mean anyone under about age 45—and the international community in such a way that it makes a lasting impression and impels to social action.

History is a story. The occupation is most meaningful in context. My mother often lamented the fact that most people in the west did not know that Estonia was a thriving democracy before the occupation. Like the Holocaust museum, we will show the way of life in the 20's and 30's that was lost. And we will show Estonia's fight for freedom and the amazing recovery that came afterwards. Estonia is remarkable not for its victimhood—sadly, there are far too many victims of evil in this world. Estonia is unique for its non-violent “singing revolution” and its quick ascent to one of the most successful democracies in the world today. Estonia ranks among the highest on the freedom scale, lowest in corruption, is the only country to abide by the EU guidelines for debt ratio and contribution to defense, and is a leading tech center. These are things we can be proud to show to the world.

My parents never liked the name “Occupation Museum,” because in English the first definition that comes to mind for “occupation” is a job or career. But they went along with the decision of the Supervisory Board of the time. Although the name is less confusing in Estonian, the judgment of the current Supervisory Board is that the museum will be better served by a name that can represent the more comprehensive story we intend to tell: in addition to occupation, that story includes resistance, the fight for freedom, and the bold decisions, hard work and innovation that brought forth the country we are so proud of today. As President Ilves stressed in his speech on Independence Day, the world is changing, Estonia is changing and we must embrace this change and harness it for the best. We must make the choices, as President Ilves said, for courage, greatness and the future. My mother loved Estonia deeply. But she was willing to leave Estonia for something she loved even more: freedom. The Kistler-Ritso Foundation and VABAMU have and will continue to work to promote Estonian freedom.

Freedom and democracy are fragile, and require constant vigilance—we must all work together to ensure that Estonians never again have to endure the horrors of occupation. The stakeholders are all the people of Estonia, young and old, citizens and expats, native Estonian speakers, minorities and immigrants. We all have a common interest in educating future generations and increasing the visibility of Estonia throughout the world so that “never again” is a reality.

We are grateful to Museum Director Merilin Piipou and her team, and volunteer board members Sten Tamkivi, Ott Sarapuu, Anne-Ly Reimaa, Mike Keller and Susan Kornfield for their hard work and dedication to making this museum all that my mother hoped it would be, and to President Ilves for his steadfast support of our mission. I would not have been able to do the service to Estonia for which I am receiving this award, without their help.

While it is quite well known that the Kistler-Ritso Foundation endowed the museum in Tallinn, many folks are less aware that we also endowed a new program at Stanford University focused on studying *Estonia and Related Regions: Occupation, Resistance, Freedom, and Recovery*.

Donations and endowments alone don't make for success or impact. That comes from vision, courage, leadership, and energy. In the case of Stanford, all of these qualities are embodied by Estonia's great friend, Mike Keller. Mike has recruited a superb team around him, including Liisi Esse, a young Estonian and excellent academic to run the program. As a result Estonia - the most digital country in the world - and our museum (that remembers occupation, honors resistance, revels in freedom and celebrates recovery) has a home and a footprint in Silicon Valley, and a highly valued relationship with what is probably today the worlds best research university.

So in addition to reiterating my thanks to President Ilves, and Ambassador Marme, I would like to make sure we all recognize Mike, his wife Carol, Lissi Esse and the other staff who have done so much in a short time to support freedom in Estonia and make our story visible to many more people in the United States.

--Sylvia Kistler Thompson