

NEWS IN BRIEF

SCHOOL LORE COMPETITION FOR CANADIAN ESTONIANS CONCLUDES WITH PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The Estonian Museum Canada (VEMU) in Toronto, in collaboration with the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, organized a campaign to collect the school lore of the Estonian diaspora community in Canada throughout 2021. Submissions for the campaign were welcomed from both current students and individuals who had either worked in education or previously attended an educational institution. The campaign honoured the memory of the former director of the Estonian Supplementary Schools in Toronto, Edgar Marten, who passed away in 2020.

The project was centred around collecting general folklore that pertained to five major topics of interest: 1) jokes and anecdotes; 2) fears, beliefs, and predictions; 3) celebrations and important holidays or dates; 4) free time and friends; and 5) games and pastimes. Other interesting material, such as descriptions of guide and scout activities and camp experiences, was gathered as well and helps to further document the school-related and educational experiences of Estonians in Canada.

Information relating to children's and youth heritage has been collected in Estonia since the 1920s. Materials documenting educational heritage have been gathered nationally in Estonia in three separate cases to date: in 1992, 2007, and 2018. Based on earlier collection campaigns, a plentitude of research and informative material meant for consumption by the general public has been published but information regarding Estonians abroad has been very hard to find to date. The aforementioned project was the first sizeable campaign to collect the school lore of diaspora Estonians and their educational experiences, therefore providing valuable comparative material to the existing Estonian counterpart.

Valuable interviews were conducted mainly with Estonians in the local Toronto community but some from the Montreal area were also included; a grand total of 18 interviews or over 20 hours of audio-visual footage was the result. A very special thanks on behalf of the organizers goes to everyone who was willing to be interviewed, who shared with us their memories, experiences, and materials. This is a great resource for further studies and research that will take place in the future. Thanks to the campaign an invaluable collection of photographs, written correspondences, documented personal school-related memoirs, published material and much more was also contributed.

Six written submissions were gathered from students of the Estonian Supplementary Schools in Toronto; a big thank you to both teacher Kai Kiilaspea for her words of encouragement and the young writers for their thoughts and recollections. We would

also like to thank director Monika Roose-Kolga and the parents for helping find willing interviewees. Posts made on the school's blogsite were also researched and recorded. The results of the campaign showed that differing approaches have to be taken for individuals living in Estonia versus Estonians living abroad. It became apparent during the project that the web-based questionnaire which worked well in Estonia was, for a multitude of reasons, not appropriate for the Canadian context and had to be altered, the main reason being that it is not a format people here are used to. Instead of collecting answers through a text-based format, July 2021 saw a switch to interviews that took place and were recorded via online meeting platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype. In the end, this change of format ended up being very beneficial to the project and valuable material was collected. The great thing about conducting interviews was the direct line of contact between interviewer and interviewee; it also gave a chance to use the so-called "snowball effect" to find future participants.

To help conduct interviews, we looked to interviewers from younger generations: young adults Kati Kiilaspea and Kaisa Kasekamp, who were knowledgeable about the local lifestyle and talked with Estonian-Canadian students, and on the Estonian side we had help from Pille Triin Voolaid. Interviewees were divided into three age groups: 1) current students; 2) younger and middle-aged individuals who are former students or current teachers and are of working age; and 3) currently retired former students and/or teachers who still support Estonian-Canadian school life. Valuable memoirs and descriptive materials paint a multi-faceted picture in the long-term perspective, starting from the childhood of the post-war generation and carrying through to today's youth and their school-related culture. Estonians in Estonia are time and time again thoroughly moved by a unique miracle of sorts – the fact that for over 70 years, the Estonian diaspora community in Canada has managed to thrive and continues to do so thanks to the strong internal desire to be an Estonian, no matter how far they are from the homeland. The various supplementary schools have played a truly valuable role in this longevity, and this was summed up well by one of the respondents: "Our school is basically a basis for the growth of Estonian culture, for keeping the Estonian spirit alive. It's also where lasting friendships with fellow Estonians can begin to grow and flourish, friendships that truly last forever. These are the two most important aspects and they pave the path for language, reading, writing, grammar, etc to follow." The same gratitude for keeping Estonian culture alive was expressed by individuals associated with the guide and scout movement.

A goal of the project is definitely the desire to draw attention to and pinpoint the heritage and youth culture of Estonians abroad, something that has not been highlighted to a great degree in Estonia as of yet. This would allow for further research and analysis and therefore comparison of school life in Estonia and of diaspora Estonians, both in the past and present. Based on the materials gathered during the course of the campaign, a publication and exhibit are planned for the future to showcase the

findings to a larger audience; it would be displayed both in Estonia and Canada. The aforementioned themes and topics will also be touched upon at a permanent exhibit in the future new home of VEMU.

All materials collected over the course of the project will be preserved according to the ethical standards within the scientific archive EFITA of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum and at VEMU.

The campaign has officially ended but individuals who missed out and wish to participate can still do so; further information about the campaign as well as the questionnaire in both English and Estonian can be accessed through www.folklore.ee/kp. The organizers of this project can also be contacted by those wishing to be interviewed or to submit further archival materials that pertain to topics discussed in the campaign.

The main organizers of the Estonian-Canadian collection campaign for educational heritage were Piret Voolaid, Senior Researcher of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum and the Executive Manager of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, and Piret Noorhani, Chief Archivist of VEMU in Toronto. Johanna Helin, a former employee of VEMU, also helped out in the early phases of the project.

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Piret Voolaid, Piret Noorhani



Figure 1. A photograph from Hille Viires' personal collection. Many Estonians living in Canada have varying experiences with Estonian schools abroad; this picture, depicting students deep in the throes of playing, is taken at the Estonian school in Stockholm in 1952.