

## *Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...*

*Aboard Austrian Airlines OS 7002  
Tallin, Estonia – Vienna, November 8, 2001*

### **Kalevipoeg**

This is what? *A national epos!* The story of *Kalev ja Linda*, a legendary couple and their hero son at the outset of Estonian history many centuries ago. Tallinn, formerly Reval, the capital, dates back as a statutory city to the Ides of May 1248, sealed by Erik Plovpenning, King of Denmark [1]. Danes, Germans, Swedes, Russians, and Germans and Russians again, raided and occupied the country over the centuries till independence was won eventually. A country the size of Switzerland with 1.5 million people, with a proper language, of Finno-Ugrian type, i.e. westernmost of the Uralo-Altai group, an agglutinating idiom, related to Finnic, Hungarian, Turkish etc. Despite my extensive linguistic interests, in Estonia I had no idea about the meaning of a single word. And the above-mentioned national epic was entirely new to me. *Tant pis!* What an achievement for such a tiny nation to preserve its identity despite centuries of oppression in a sea of Slavonic and Germanic neighbors.

I was invited by the Estonian Museum for the History of Medicine (fig. 1) – still a compulsory subject in the students' curriculum as in most countries of the Old East. What a difference to the 'modern' West. A meeting on transfusion medicine was held discussing the proper techniques, the pitfalls, the potential dangers of transmitting infectious agents and the original contributions of Karl Landsteiner (1868–1943) exactly one century ago and later. I was asked to comment on the latter's personality, a purpose for which a Viennese medicohistorian was assumed to be well suited. Landsteiner made the first of his epochal discoveries still in Austria, next to many other brilliant elaborations. In 1919, amidst the chaos and need following World War I, he left for Holland and in 1922 settled at the Rockefeller Institute in New York City. Eventually becoming a Nobel laureate in 1930 for his work on blood group serology, he died in this city during World War II. Parallel to Moriz Kaposi (1837–1902) he had

turned Catholic from his native Mosaic denomination, a point seen critically by some, and more so in our time [2]. Looking into his bibliography compiled by the staff of the Rockefeller Institute [3] leads to the line by William James (1842–1910): 'The great use of a life is to spend it for something that outlasts it.' These words should convince everybody. He was a giant of methodical investigation worth to be hailed in any such context [4].

Tallinn is a beautiful port city on the Baltic with a well-preserved historical center. Sometime in the *Cinquecento*, the belfry of St. Olaf's Church had the highest spike of Christianity (then 159 m), a rank which was held shortly early in the *Quattrocento* by St. Stephen's in Vienna with 137 m. A mighty structure indeed. There is no university or medical school in Tallinn, but rather in Tartu (Dorpat). In the latter faculty, Abdul Chalid Achundow, an Azerbaijani from Baku, translated Abu Mansur Muwaffaq's Persian treatise on pharmacology for the first time into German in 1893. The first ever translation was into Latin, by my first predecessor Romeo Seligmann, in Vienna in 1830 and later. A must for me, to go there upon a future visit, trying to unearth something about this elusive personality and his vita.

The directrice of the medicohistorical museum, Mme Helle-Reet Martinson, and her deputy, Mme Helgi Soodla, made me feel particularly welcome and comfortable and eventually took me around the city and its environs. I saw a palm tree garden (*Talveaed*), the port, the shores of the Baltic with first snow flurries, the national president's residence and finally the exquisitely beautiful castle of Kadrioruloss (Kadriorg, Katharinenthal) built by Czar Peter I in the early 18th century. Today, its baroque rooms house an art museum, and I had the good fortune to be taken around by the director, Mr. Jüri Kuuskemaa, an expert and art historian. What a pleasure to see the gorgeous *stucchi* on the walls and ceilings, many with Czar Peter's emblems, and to behold the fine paintings of some great or lesser Italians, Flemmings, French, Russians, *Breughel*,

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Fig. 1. The Museum of History of Medicine in central Tallinn. Drawing by Maire Uibo, ink, copyright with the artist.

*ter Borch, Wouverman* etc., the names of European fame. My favorite – understandably I hope – was the portrait of a Hapsburg princess, daughter of Philip II of Spain – a redhead of course.

Flying back, my heart is full of so much culture in a corner of our small continent which I had not been sufficiently aware of, and by having met such cordiality by my colleagues. I fervently wish that the country will be within the European fold in 2 years' time and look forward to prosperity in her own identity. *Three cheers for Estonia!*

### References

- 1 Vana Tallin, VIII(XII) Estopol, Tallinn 1998, Estonian with German summaries. p 17.
- 2 Holubar K, Fatovic-Ferencic S: 1902–2002, a hundred years after Kaposi. *J Invest Dermatol* 2001;117:1325–1326.
- 3 Chase MW and the staff of the Library of the Rockefeller Institute: The bibliography of Dr. Karl Landsteiner. *J Immunol* 1944;48:5–16.
- 4 Speiser P, Smekal FG: Karl Landsteiner (Engl ed). Vienna, Hollinek, 1975.

*à bientôt,*

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