

# Estonian Genealogical Research

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Estonia is a small country of less than two million people located on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Though it developed a distinct cultural identity over time it was not independent until this century. The gentle spirit of this country is perhaps best exemplified by the hundreds of thousands who gather at the national song festival held every five years since 1869 at an outdoor amphitheater in Tallinn to sing the songs of their heritage.

Estonians have lived along the Baltic Sea for several thousand years. Waldemar II, King of Denmark (1170-1241) invaded Estonia in 1219 and built the Tallinn (Reval) Castle. In the course of the 13th and 14th centuries, the Teutonic Knights, a German military and religious order, gained ascendancy over Estonia as well as Latvia. Southern Estonia and Latvia became known as Livonia. In 1561 the Teutonic Knights were disbanded. Tallinn and the nobility of northern Estonia then submitted to the protection of the Swedish crown and Poland gained ascendancy over southern Estonia, including the region around Tartu. Under Swedish rule a system for local church records was established and consistory archives established. Disasters destroyed two-thirds of the Tallinn consistory archive in 1684 and the Saaremaa archive in 1710. Still, some parish registers dating to the 17th century have been preserved.

While the Swedish period brought many positive developments in record keeping and preservation, the bitter wars of the period resulted in the destruction and dispersal of many archives. Swedish officials also took many documents to Stockholm before Livonia was lost to Peter the Great. In 1710 Peter conquered Estonia and in 1721 formally annexed it to Russia by the Treaty of Nystad. Russian rule effected considerable changes in record keeping as many earlier records were turned over to paper factories or sold to merchants as wrapping paper.

A native Estonia property-owning class came into existence as a result of agrarian reforms that began in 1849 and continued into the 1860s. At the end of the 19th century, the press aided an Estonian cultural revival and nationalist literature began to emerge. Political movements demanding autonomy sprang up in Estonia after the Russian political turmoil of 1905. Russian rule ended with the Russian revolution of 1917. Estonia proclaimed itself independent on February 24, 1918.

Based on a secret protocol with Germany, Soviet forces occupied Estonia along with the other Baltic republics of Latvia and Lithuania in June 1940. When Germany invaded Russia during the war, German troops occupied Estonia as well. As the Germans retreated from their defeat in Russia late in 1944, the Russian army returned. Over 60,000 Estonians fled from the Soviet occupation to Sweden and Germany.

Estonia responded quickly to the power vacuum caused by the abortive coup of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and declared independence on August 20, 1991. Its status as a new nation was recognized internationally and the last of the Soviet occupation troops left in 1994. Estonians have survived centuries of domination by neighboring powers. Symbolic of their persistence is the oak, long regarded as a sacred tree in Estonia.

When Estonia was conquered by the Teutonic Knights at the beginning of the 13th century there were some 100,000 Estonians. As of the 1989 census the total population was 1,565,662. In 1994 it was estimated that 64% of the population were Estonians, 29% Russians, and the other 7% consisting of Ukrainians, Belorussians, Finns, Tatars, Jews, Latvians, Poles, and Germans. Tallinn is the capital and largest city with a population of 442,700 in 1994. Other important cities are Tartu (formerly Dorpat), Narva, and Kohtla-Järve. Estonians are traditionally Lutheran while a minority belong to the Russian Orthodox, Baptist, and other religions.

## Genealogical Sources

Parish registers. While a few parish registers extend back to the 1600s, most begin in the 1700s. There were no general rules for the maintenance of early registers and they followed no particular format. Baptisms included the name of the child and father, father's residence and baptismal date. Marriages had information on residence and social status (widowhood was noted particularly for women) and residence as well as names and the date of marriage. Burials listed the name of the deceased, place of death, and date of burial. After the Northern War in 1710, the quality of the registers improved. Names of mothers and godparents were mentioned more frequently. Birth dates were recorded along with baptism dates. The age of the deceased, reason

*Fig. 1 - Modern Estonia*



for death, and date of death became common in burial registers. In the 18th century transcripts of the local registers began to be made for use by higher church or civil authority. In some parishes family registers were maintained in which the vital statistics for a single family were compiled into family entries. The language of the records was German and Estonian; and less frequently, Latin and Swedish. Russian was mandated after 1892 and Estonian after 1920. A standardized and printed format for the registers was introduced in 1926. Parish registers since 1834 have been systematically preserved. Original parish registers through 1940 are presently housed at the State Historical Archive in Tartu. Some originals parish registers are in the local churches. Those from churches in Tallinn are in the city archive. Some originals 1834-1926 are at the central civil registry office in Tallinn, though these will eventually be transferred, if not so already, to Tartu. Transcripts 1926-1940 are located at the central civil registry offices throughout the country. The Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, has microfilmed of most parish registers through 1940.



*Fig. 2 - A portion of the Tallinn city wall*

Civil registers. In 1946, the Soviet controlled government established a civil registration system based on the Russian model. A separate document was created for each registration of birth, marriage, or death. These records are centralized at the Central Civil Registration Office in Tallinn. These are only available for official purposes at that office or at local civil registration offices.

Revision lists. The revision is a tax list created to establish the amount of the poll or head tax assessed each household. The earliest revision preserved in Estonia is 1782. Subsequent revisions were initiated in 1795, 1811, 1816, 1834, 1850, and 1858. Each revision was conducted over a span of years. Revisions list the number of the household; name, parentage, current age and age at time of last revision, sex, nationality, social rank, family relationship, and change of status since the last revision of all those in a household. Females were not recorded in the 1811 revision. The revisions are filed at the State Historical

Archive in Tartu and at the Tallinn City Archive; but, as is the case with parish registers, the Family History library has microfilm of them in its collection.

Local census. In the absence of a national revision system, Estonia established its own system of local censuses conducted annually from 1858-1917. The lists are called variously as family lists, community member lists, and resident lists. In some cases the local copy of the 1897 national census is preserved and is interfiled with the local census records. As a minimum these censuses include the same information as the revisions and often more such as occupation, marital status, religion, and birth place. The lists are preserved at the State Historical Archive in Tartu and the Tallinn City Archive. There are 13 fonds and an estimated 1,200 census volumes for town administrations and 463 fonds and an estimated 3,500 volumes for the districts of Harjumaa, Järvamaa, Läänemaa, Virumaa, Saaremaa, Viljandimaa, and Võrumaa. Many have been filmed.

Guild records. These are membership and family records of those in a guild of merchants, craftsmen, tradesmen, skilled laborers, and those indentured to learn an



*Fig. 3 - Tallinn Civil Registration Office*

art, trade or skill. The records list names of skilled and unskilled laborers in all types of occupations, ages or dates of birth, places of origin and residence, family relationships, types of skills, etc. Many records list all the family members with marriage dates of couples and birth dates of their children. These records are found in the Tallinn City Archive but microfilm copies are available in the collection of the Family History Library.

Name change records. All Estonians between 1830-1836 received surnames. Prior to that time, the people followed the naming customs according to their ethnic heritage. Estonians used nicknames and parents names along with their given name, i.e. Murrista (nickname) Jaco (father's name in the genitive case) Madde (given name). Germans used surnames. Swedes followed the patronymic system of the Nordic countries rather than using surnames. When choosing surnames the Estonians were greatly influenced by their everyday world. Their surnames abound

with the names occupations, trees, wild animals and birds, tools, household commodities, furnishings, kitchen utensils, food, drinks, clothing, and field crops. Some adopted patronyms such as Juhanson. Some opted for maintaining the old nicknames as surnames. Still others derived their surnames from the farm names where they had lived for generations. The records consist of about 200,000 cards which list the old name and then the new name. There are also name application forms which list the old and new names. These records are a must for extending research into earlier periods. There are filed at the Central Civil Registration Archive, Tallinn.

**Recruit/conscription lists.** These are lists of those entering military service or being drafted, 1797-1917. Drafting of selected groups began earlier but as of January 1, 1874, all 21 year-old males were subject to military service. Conscription occurred each year in October. Initially, the term of service was 6 years active and 9 years reserve. The length of active duty was reduced to 5 years in 1876 and then varied between 3-5 years thereafter. Deferments were granted for only sons, sole breadwinners, etc. Over 50 percent of the draftees were not inducted. The records include the name of the recruit/draftee, age (recruit lists), birth date (conscript lists), religion, marital status, literacy, and residence. Recruit lists include a physical description such as color of hair and eyes. They can be researched at the State Historical Archive, Tartu.

**Genealogy/nobility collections.** There are five collections at the State Historical Archive in Tartu. One pertains to Estonian nobility and a separate one to the nobility of Oesel (Saaremaa), an Estonian island in the Baltic Sea. There is a general collection of Estonian genealogy. Finally, there are the records of the Estonian Bureau of Genealogical Research, and the Dorpat Genealogical Society. The records consist of family histories, personal books, pedigree books and charts, lineage registers, family documents, miscellaneous genealogical notes documenting family names, relationships, and dates of birth, marriage and death.

### Research opportunities

Because of the LDS Church microfilming program, one can do considerable Estonian research at the Family History Library. Since filming of Estonian genealogical sources began in 1992, over 24,000 volumes of material have been acquired: 18,000 vols. of vital records, 7,000 vols. of revision and census lists, and 1,600 guild books on 3,303 rolls. The vital records are from the Lutheran, Russian Orthodox and Jewish religions. Filming has been at the State Historical Archive in Tartu as well as the City and Civil Registration Archives in Tallinn. Be aware that film prints are not stored in the main library because of limited space and that desired films either need to be ordered in advance or at the beginning of a visit to the library.

There is an excellent gazetteer to assist researchers in becoming acquainted with the localities in the records: Hans Feldmann, *Baltisches Historisches Ortslexikon* (Baltic

Historical Dictionary), Wien: Böhlau, 1985, Teil 1 (Part 1): Estland (Estonia), (Family History Library call number: 947.4 E5fh, vol. 1). The text is in German but with a little bit of study it can be used by English speakers.

A major obstacle for most researchers will be language. The early records are in German (Gothic script), Estonian, Swedish, and Latin. Orthodox records are in Russian and in 1892, a program of russification resulted in many records being recorded in that language until independence was achieved in 1918 and Estonian was adopted as the national language.

The Tallinn City Archive and State Historical Archive in Tartu are open to researchers and are run much like any archive in the west. The assistance is professional. There is a minor problem in that the Tartu archive is a three hour bus trip from Tallinn so a non-native speaker may need some tour assistance to get from the airport to the bus terminal and then get situated in Tartu upon arrival. The Tartu archive has an excellent web site at <[www.eha.ee](http://www.eha.ee)>. The site had more options if one can decipher the Estonian text. For instance, the guide to the collections in the archive is available in Estonian but not in English.

The Estonian Genealogical Society (*Eesti Genealoogia Selts*) was established in 1996. A home page is located at <[www.aai.ee/~urmas/riisae.html](http://www.aai.ee/~urmas/riisae.html)>. However, there seems to be no agents providing research assistance at this time.

The Estonian genealogical past is well preserved and available for researchers to document their ancestry. Genealogical services are still primitive, but the records exist and with a basic knowledge of archives, a researcher can effectively pursue the genealogical past.

Fig. 4 - Central Russian Orthodox Cathedral, Tallinn

