

1941 EXECUTIONS IN KUESSAARE CASTLE

The following article appeared in the local newspaper of Saaremaa "Saarte Hääl" ("Voice of the Islands") on Sept. 13, 1988. As explained below, the old historical Kuressaare castle was used as a jail and execution site during the Soviet years.

May the Sorrow of Their Suffering, Their Anguish and Their Agony Stay Forever in our Souls

To this ancient castle...to the keeper of our history, people come alone, in groups, on excursion. We shriek on her walls as children, walk by them as lovers when we are young, and sit to rest on them in our twilight years.

In the castle yard we have held festivals, some for just our islanders and some for all of Estonia. Until now, the merriment of our song and dance festivals have overshadowed the past and present significance of this old castle-fort.

During these joyous moments we don't need to remember that the grief of the past, the anguish and pain of our forefathers lie beneath our celebrations. The passage of centuries allows us to rationalize some events into nonexistence or at least into incredibility.

But what if the anguish and pain are not relics from past centuries? What if they are separated from us by no more than one generation? Would that knowledge cast a dismal shadow over our castle with its courtyard and walls, making them something to hate, or would it cause us to view them with greater tenderness, as something to cherish? For nearly half a century, most of us have been unaware that such a page of history even exists. If our current trends hadn't made the publication of these facts possible, then we might still refuse to believe that such a period existed in our nation's history.

At this summer's festival of men's choirs, our castle's ancient courtyard heard a song of remembrance for them - - for the first time in 47 years, a song for those people who were destined to die here as victims of Stalinism. In the songs of the men's choirs, the sorrow of their suffering, their anguish and their agony, which must stay in our souls forever, were brought to life once more.

No one can undo what has already been done. The information publicized in the press and chronicles of the early 40's cannot be denied. No one can call the facts in these publications lies, especially since these facts -are backed up by the most accurate record of all - - living memory. Believe this when you read it:

"Terror reigned in Saaremaa far longer than in any other part of Estonia. The tiny city of Kuressaare saw nearly as many bloody killings and brutal murders as Tallinn and Tartu, cities which are tens of times bigger. The old historical Kuressaare castle was used as a jail and execution site. The castle's subterranean vaults had been expanded and dug deeper for this purpose in the summer. Victims from all over Saaremaa were dragged to these dark underground holes. The terror escalated sharply when the Germans invaded from the mainland. People were seized and executed in a most brutal manner on the basis of petty and absurd accusations. In a summerhouse by the castle, they found a divan coated with blood and punctured with bullet holes. Apparently, victims had been tortured here before they were killed.

The bodies of the first 8 victims of terror were discovered on September 22, 1941. Four of them were found under a mound on the sports field within the castle walls. Three more bodies were found nearby in an empty well. The body of a woman had been buried in the courtyard.

A few days later, on September 25, the courtyard of Kuressaare castle was the site of a most dismal event. Thirty-one bodies were brought up from the vaults beneath the castle walls, and family members tried to locate and identify their missing relatives. The corpses, twisted and wretched with the agony of death, included one of a woman. The victims included several people well known in Kuressaare: the Kuressaare naval school director Captain Tear, Magistrate Bever, Judge Adamson, and others.

But even this did not signify the end of the dreary, miserable list of murder victims in Kuressaare. On September 29, thirty more corpses were found beneath the cellar floor of the former Komsomol house by the road leading to Kuressaare castle. One of the corpses was that of a woman. Later, two more graves were found in the Kuressaare cemetery, one containing nine and the other, six victims of terror.

The most gruesome executions of innocent people were carried out at Torgu on Saaremaa island. Here they found an entire grave of murder victims who had been executed with poorly aimed shots and had died in agony. At least one body showed evidence of suffocation. The bullets had missed the director of the Tūrju fishery, who managed to escape from the mass grave before it was covered up. A total of 16 persons had been executed at the mass grave which had also been meant for him. All these innocent people had been dragged to the threshing room of Laaspollu farm, and taken out to be shot several days later, one by one.

According to verified information, the numbers of Estonian losses (murder victims) by March 15, 1943 were as follows: Tallinn 117, Tartu 208, Harjumaa 209, Läänemaa 242, Saaremaa 115, Pärnumaa 93, Viljandimaa 186, Järvamaa 125, Virumaa 262, Tartumaa 200, Valgamaa 22, Võrumaa 10, Petserimaa 17. Victims of terror, execution site unknown, 44. Total 1,850, including 169 women. (The Estonian People's Year of Suffering, Tallinn, 1943.)

A former resident of Sõrve O.T. writes to our newspaper about the neutralization of those individuals considered dangerous to Stalinism:

"I know quite a bit about what happened in the castle courtyard. To my knowledge, only 3 men were executed there. They were found later in the courtyard well. All the others had been tortured to death. There were about a hundred of them. I don't know the exact number. There were many methods of torture: some had their lips slit, others their noses, tongue, or ears. Many of them had one or both feet scalded. And there were those who had strips of flesh cut from their backs, and their hands bound behind them with barbed wire. There were those whose eyes were poked out. One woman had her breasts cut off.

I was there when the corpses were carried out of the cellar. That day, thousands of people came looking for their relatives. Many found them. It was a horrible scene; I'll remember it until I die. In addition to that, about twenty men were murdered at a mass grave in Iide village at Sõrve. We don't know exactly who carried out that torture. They say that a squad of seamen did it. The head of the Saaremaa department of the People's Commissariat of State Security at that time was Vassili Riis, who must have known about these acts of torture.

I think there are plenty of people who still have information about these crimes. Many are afraid to speak up, because they remember all too well the deportations to Siberia. I, too, don't wish to reveal my name and address. Who knows what these times will bring. And yet I hope that justice will prevail."

" *There were many methods of torture* "

Think about it.

Even when the death penalty is imposed by the decision of a court, there is no reason to carry it out in this manner. It is absurd to justify these acts by claiming that laws change in wartime, particularly since the accusations against persons destined to be murdered (read: civilians) were never investigated. In 1941, nearly 2,000 people were executed in Estonia as "hostile elements" or as "potential enemies." Such labels served the Stalinist policy of genocide quite well, and constituted the whole law of wartime and the Stalinist period.

To those of you who caution us to stop poking around in past events, and tell us to view the powers of Stalin and the policies of Beria as historical inevitabilities, let us remind you: On Nov. 26, 1968, at the initiative of the Soviet Union, the United Nations General Assembly approved a convention which excludes war crimes and crimes against humanity, including crimes of genocide, from the statute of limitations. And remember: A nation that forgets its past is destined to repeat it.

We must know how to listen to the silence of the ancient courtyard. Piercingly, unbearably painful, isn't it? But we may choose not to go there, not to think about what has happened there. But did they have a choice?

On Thursday, September 15, the Popular Front of Saaremaa is holding a memorial ceremony in the castle courtyard, because:

The sorrow of their suffering,
Their anguish and their agony,
Must stay forever in our souls.

Helju Rauniste