

Postimees, October 22, 1998

By Paavo Palk

Ambassador Wells Returns to her People

Melissa Wells served in Latin America and Africa for three decades before her dream came true – she, Miliza Korjus' daughter, became US Ambassador to Estonia.

Your appointment to Estonia drew a lot of attention as your mother Miliza Korjus was considered to be an Estonian singer. Do you consider yourself connected to Estonia?

My mother's family on her father's side had lived in Estonia for many generations, but my mother herself was born in Warsaw where her father who was a colonel of the Russian tsarist army, served. My mother's father was sent from Warsaw to Moscow where he was at the time of revolution.

Mother, looking for the sanctuary for children, split with father in the tumult of events and she could not escape Russia, then the Soviet Union, before the end of twenties. Then she met her husband in Tallinn.

Did Miliza Korjus regard Estonia her homeland?

Yes. It was in Estonia that my mother met my father, I was born in Estonia and my mother started her singing career in Estonia, she was very fond of her Tallinn singing teacher Barbara Malama. We have many photos about Estonia, about our relatives, friends, my grandfather's house. The main reason I will come by boat on the 30th of October to Tallinn, is, that I grew up looking at the skyline of Tallinn. I had received this photo from my grandmother and I always showed it to my guests in California.

What kind of relations did you have with Estonian community in the United States?

When the war started, the Molotov-Rippentrop Pact and all that – my family lost all contacts in Estonia.

In the seventies I started new contacts with Estonian community. There were not many Estonians in Africa, but I found some in Brazil and met them. In 1977 when I served at the US Mission to the United Nations I established real and serious contacts with Estonian community and met Ernst Jaakson, I also visited Estonian House on the 34th Street.

You are a high ranking officer of the US Senior Foreign Service – you have the rank of Career Minister. Which event has been most exiting in your career?

If we speak about my achievements, it is my contribution to completion of Mozambique war. During my term of office, we started the negotiations which finally led to peace and free elections. Mozambique does very well today.

The relations between Estonia and the United States are good. Do you think these relations may even get better and if so, in which spheres?

Improvement is always possible. First, our new point of view is reflected in the Baltic Charter which was signed by President Clinton and presidents of the three Baltic countries. Now it has to be put into practice.

One of the priorities for me is to establish much stronger US – Estonian economic relations through trade and investment. Economic relations between these two contries are minimal at the moment, but recently I took part in a business seminar in New York and I was pleasantly surprised to notice increased interest towards Estonia. I cannot imagine a better basis for a final security guarantee than a strong, vital and healthy business relationship between Estonia and the United States.

A US company NRG Energy is interested in privatization of Estonian power stations. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke have spoken about it. Has NRG Energy contacted you as well?

Yes, in the course of my preparation for Estonia I have met many representatives of companies interested in Estonia and NRG Energy is one of them. The NRG representative in Washington will attend the ceremony of my appointment and we have also met on a number of occasions before. They are fully satisfied with course of events at the moment.

Does the US fully support joining of three Baltic counties with EU or does the US regard it essential to take into consideration its own commercial interests in this process?

As I understand it, Estonia is in the highway of joining negotiatios. As to Estonia or any other candidate states, this process concerns the interests of the US. We do not speak about relevant problems with the candidate states only, but we also speak with Brussels. In principle we regard it as a very good idea and we support Estonia joining the EU, but we also wish to guarantee that the US interests are not impaired.

Last week the US Congress insisted on denunciation of Molotov-Rippentrop Pact. Does the US government support this resolution of the Congress?

The US government is still discussing it.

Close contacts of diplomats with the host country are regarded as an advantage in the US foreign service, but how often does it happen that a person returns to one's homeland as US Ambassador?

It has happened at least once or twice. This is what happened with our Austrian Ambassador. Now we have more career diplomats who were born outside the US. When I started my service there were very few such people. I was not only a woman, but I was also born abroad.

You have served as United States Ambassador to Zaire, to Mozambique and to Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. Can your African experience be of use to you in the Baltic Sea region or are your tasks totally different?

I do not consider them totally different. Of course, the climate is different, but people are the same everywhere. Whatever I have experienced in Africa, I would not say that these things may be directly connected with Estonia, but they are definitely connected with regions not far from Estonia.

Your last assignment was Sao Paulo, before that you served in Africa. Aren't you afraid of Estonian cold and rainy climate?

No, nothing can decrease my enthusiasm towards coming to Estonia. Coming to Estonia as United States Ambassador is a dream come true for me, it is simply wonderful. I am very glad to come to Estonia. I was born in an independent Estonia and now after Estonia regained its independence I as Ambassador have the opportunity to help Estonia create strong relationship between Estonia and the US for the next millennium.

It is interesting that many people have asked me whether I have bought everything necessary, boots etc. I have told them that I will buy everything in Estonia, that I will go back to my people. They are tall and I am tall, they have big feet and long arms – there is no better place for me to go shopping than in Estonia.