

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

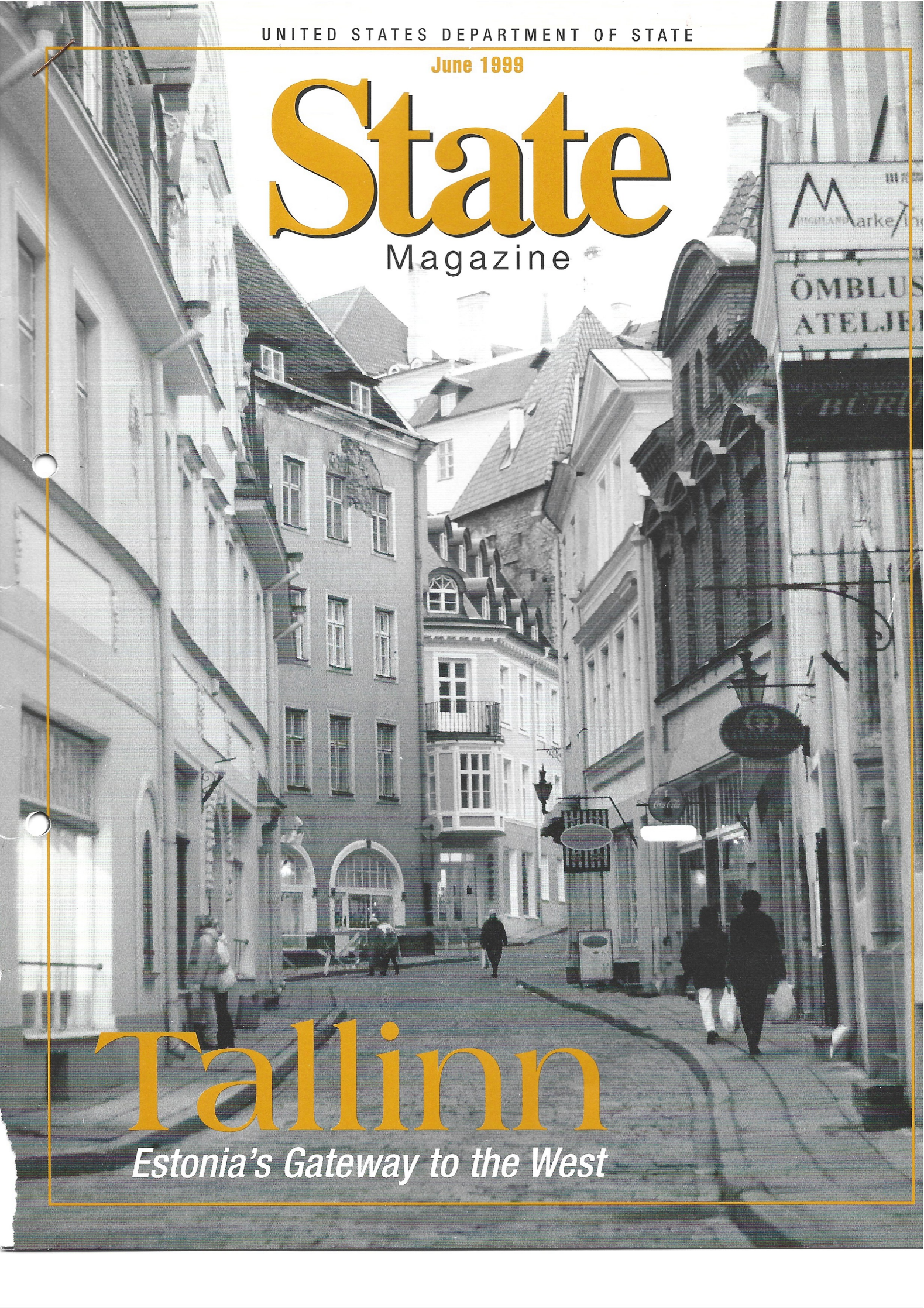
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State

Magazine

Tallinn

Estonia's Gateway to the West



Tallinn's Old Town, completed in 1335.



Photo by Ann A. Lundberg

By Richard C. Lundberg

Eight years ago, Estonians left 45 years of Marxist economics behind and jumped headlong into the world of free-market economics, adopting and adapting to capitalism with a vengeance.

Anyone assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Tallinn will very quickly recognize the trappings of a lively, consumer-oriented society—from neon lights and well-stocked supermarkets to the variety of cars on the streets. Thankfully, most of the new drivers in these cars no longer look upon red lights merely as “polite suggestions” to stop.

Those who can't afford a car or prefer public transportation ride on trams and buses that are brightly decorated from stem to stern with advertising for pet food, cosmetics or fast-food hamburgers, or with colorful dancing cows extolling the virtues of Estonia's high-quality dairy products.

Computer hardware and software are also advertised on public transports in a land whose people—young and middle-aged alike—wholeheartedly embrace computerization and Internet connectivity. And like the Finns, their

ethnic and linguistic cousins to the north, Estonians suffer from a severe case of addictive cellular phone-itis.

Five thousand years ago, the tribal ancestors of today's cellular phone users migrated from far to the east, settling in the low-lying lands of rivers, lakes, marshes, forests and islands that make up Estonia, a country slightly larger than Vermont and New Hampshire combined.

The tribal people brought with them Estonian, a non-Indo-European, Finno-Ugric language replete with 14 case endings that takes 44 weeks to learn at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center. For those who have studied a Slavic language or Latin, just double or triple the number of cases with which you struggled!

That complex and fascinating language, spoken today by just over 1 million people, was the cornerstone of the survival of an Estonian sense of identity throughout centuries of foreign overlordship. Today, the language remains one of the dominant symbols of the independence of a vital, democratic and free-market Estonia.

The Finno-Ugric tribespeople lived largely as free peasants up to the 13th century. Since then, Estonians have been ruled by Danes, German nobility, Poles, Swedes and czarist Russia for 200 years. From February 1918, when they declared their independence from Bolshevik Russia,

to the first occupation by Stalin's Red Army in 1940, Estonians enjoyed just over 20 years of freedom. A three-year Nazi German occupation that began in 1941 was followed by four and a half decades of Soviet rule.

The scattering of 70,000 Estonians in 1944 to Sweden and Germany, and ultimately as far afield as the United States, Canada and Australia, helped reinforce worldwide the memory of a free and independent Estonia. The United States never recognized the incorporation of Estonia and the other two Baltic states of Latvia and Lithuania into the USSR. The Gorbachev period of *glasnost* and *perestroika* created the necessary climate for real change. The period from 1987 to 1991 was marked by step-by-step progress toward independence, including the 1988 "singing revolution," when Estonians in huge numbers gathered together in peaceful rallies to sing their national songs and hear political speeches.

In 1989, 2 million Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians formed a 600-kilometer-long human chain—from Tallinn through Latvia to Vilnius, Lithuania, drawing world atten-



by Peter Hendrikson

Ambassador Melissa Wells, center, joins Peace Corps volunteer Robben Romano and Mark Hendrikson, son of Defense and Naval Attaché Peter Hendrikson, for a flight in a Polish PZL-104 "Wilga."

Gathered around a computer screen, from left, are Timothy Tickner, information program officer; Vitali Gaitsonok, LAN manager; Susan Larson, community liaison officer; Michele Brown, information technical officer; and Brigid Weiller, community liaison officer.

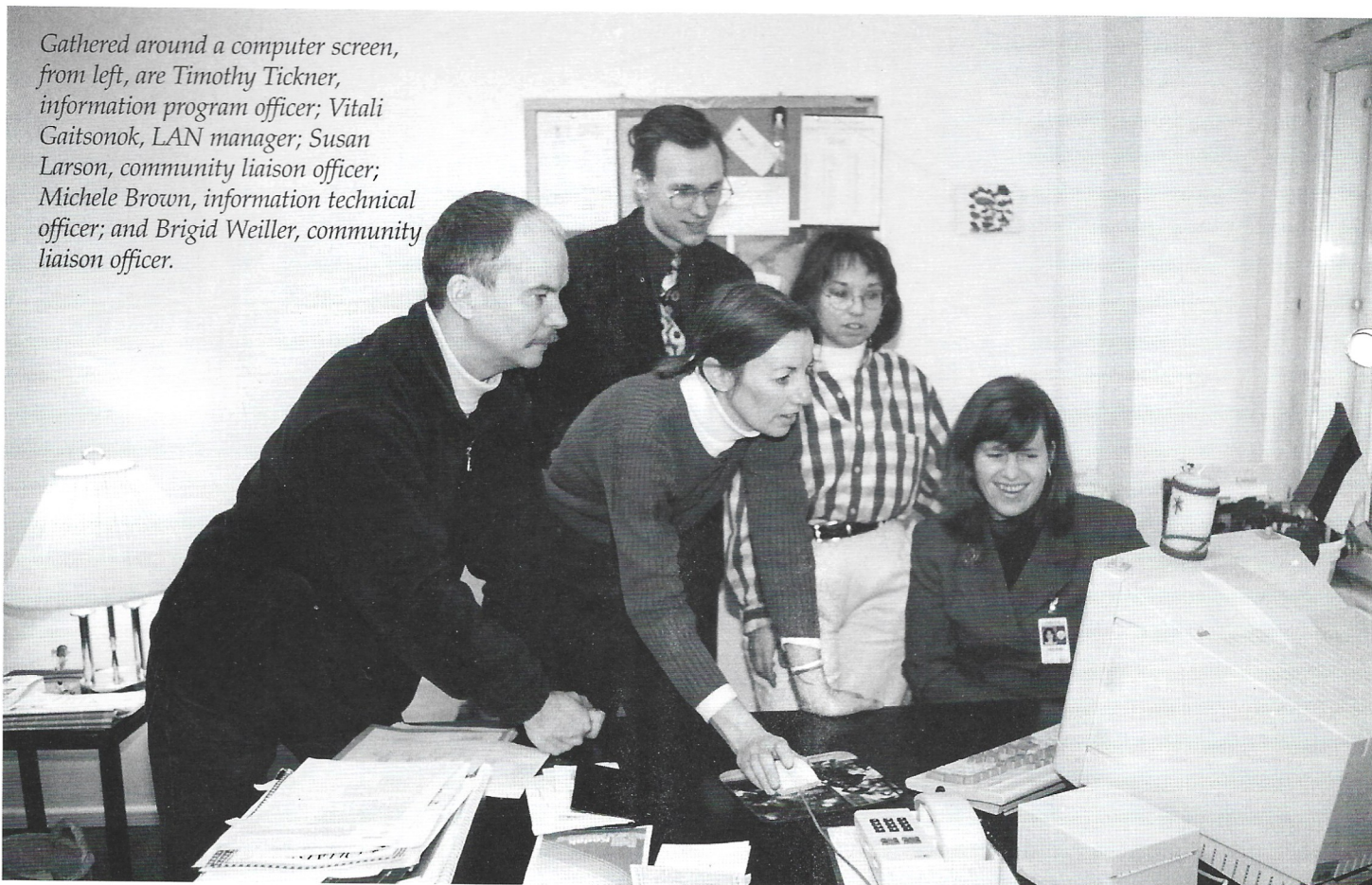


Photo by Ann A. Lundberg



The medieval building that houses the municipal government of central Tallinn.

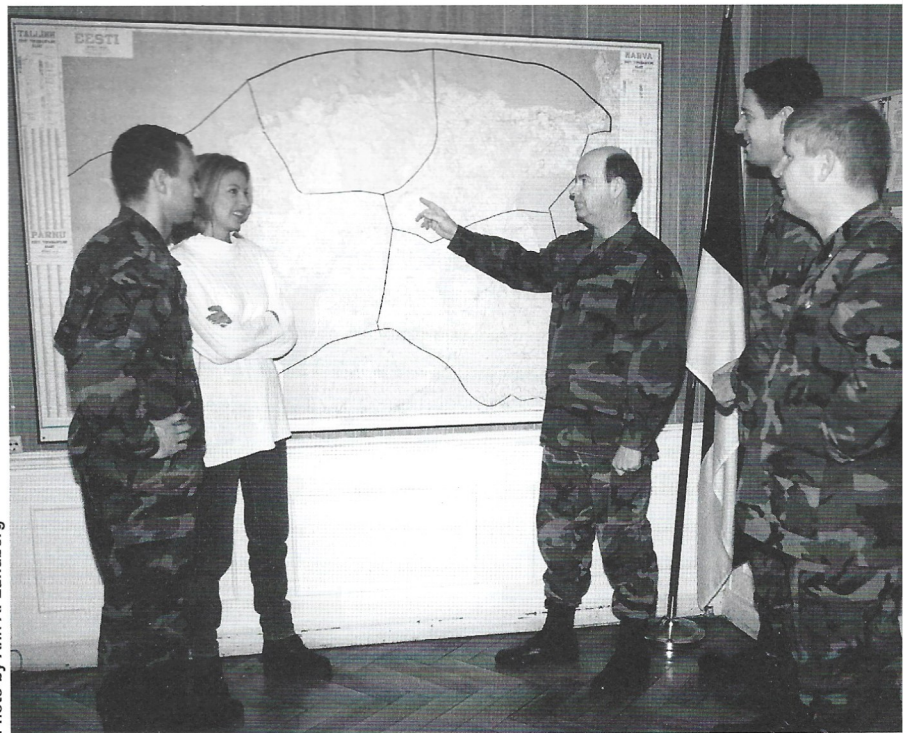
tion to their struggle for freedom. On Aug. 20, 1991, a resolution of the Estonian Parliament declared full independence. Estonians celebrate Aug. 20 as "Reindependence Day," the day when they reasserted their right to political and economic freedom following the dismal period of Soviet occupation. The United States recognized Estonian independence on Sept. 2, 1991, just four days before its recognition by the moribund Soviet Union.

The U.S. Embassy returned to Estonia's capital, Tallinn, in late 1991. As in some other newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, the embassy first operated out of a hotel. Currently, embassy business is conducted in the very same building that housed the U.S. legation from 1938 to 1940, then led by a minister resident in Riga, Latvia. As this article goes to print, the building's co-tenant, the British Embassy, is preparing to move into new, separate quarters.

Small compared to most other U.S. Embassies, Tallinn's has continued to expand operations. Currently, the community includes a score of Americans and 30 Foreign Service Nationals.

In addition to State and the U.S. Information Service, the embassy includes a Defense Attaché Office, an FBI office and a separately

Members of the military liaison team plan an upcoming trip. From left are Senior Master Sgt. Mark Vilella, translator Annika Veimer, Col. Grant Hayden, Capt. Mark Teel and Lt. Col. David Williams.



housed Military Liaison Team. The Security Assistance Office has not only aided the Estonian defense forces, but has also funneled vital humanitarian assistance to such projects as adult and children's medical care facilities.

Although some posts worldwide have lost their Marine Security Guards, the embassy in Tallinn expects to welcome Marines within a year.

The post's dedicated Peace Corps volunteers have tackled their assigned English teaching and small business development tasks. In addition, they have diligently worked to improve the lives of Estonia's young people.

The only U.S. government organization to leave Estonia was the Agency for International Development, and that was for a reason that must gladden Estonians: their country was deemed to have done so well in its democratic and economic development that it "graduated" from the need for AID assistance. That places Estonia first among its Central and East European neighbors.

After 14 months without an ambassador, the embassy staff, Estonian officialdom and the Estonian public were delighted when Ambassador Melissa Wells reported. An Estonian-born career minister in the Foreign Service, Ambassador Wells left Estonia at age 1 with her singer-actress mother.

Ambassador Wells, who previously has presented her credentials several times during a distinguished Foreign Service career, was delighted by a very welcome break from traditional formality when Estonian President Lennart Meri hugged her and said, "Welcome home!"

Since the opening of the Tallinn embassy eight years ago, three ambassadors and their staffs have tackled issues

vital to the two nations' bilateral interests, to Estonia's democratic and free-market economic development and Estonia's pursuit of full integration into Western economic and security structures. The Baltic Charter, signed last year by President Clinton and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, emphasized U.S. support for the sovereignty, security and prosperity of the three Baltic states.

Estonia's post-independence economic policies have resulted in high ratings by international credit agencies. They also resulted in the country's inclusion in the first group of Central and East European nations to participate in accession negotiations with the European Union.

A key mission goal is to strengthen U.S. economic and commercial ties with Estonia, working to ensure that Estonia remains a truly open economy with minimal trade restrictions. The embassy staff works to see that U.S. investors enjoy a level playing field in a nation striving to become a European Union member and that Estonia is fully committed to protecting intellectual property rights as it moves forward toward World Trade Organization and EU membership.

A small country with a fledgling military, Estonia seeks greater security through membership in NATO. It is already active in the Partnership for Peace program and has participated in Bosnian peacekeeping operations through the Baltic Battalion.

The embassy strives to assure Estonia that neither history nor geography will work against its future membership in NATO and to help the country prepare its defense forces for that eventuality through a variety of military training and assistance programs.

Enjoying a light moment are, from left, Ambassador Melissa Wells; Taimi Alas, political/economic assistant; Reene Sepp, commercial assistant; David Katz, economic/commercial officer; Kai Kass, translator/protocol assistant, and Rita Solis, ambassador's secretary.



Photo by Ann A. Lundberg



Commerce is king in Tallinn, as evidenced by advertising on the city's tram cars.

At the same time, the embassy emphasizes, in bilateral and multilateral meetings, that genuine security hinges upon political and economic stability in the Baltic region and good, cooperative relations with Russia.

Improved relations with Russia depend to a large extent on the successful integration of the non-ethnic Estonian community—predominantly Russian-speaking and making up about one-third of the country's population of close to 1.5 million people—into civil society. The children and grandchildren of Russians who arrived in Estonia during the Soviet occupation are certainly linguistically and culturally tied to Russia, but most have little or no interest in returning to an economically unstable and politically troubled Russia.

Recognizing that ethnic integration is both a domestic and foreign policy challenge for Estonia, the embassy has advocated needed legislative changes to speed the process and sought to support the nongovernmental organization sector and its work in educating all Estonians about their rights and responsibilities in a democracy. The embassy, in cooperation with other embassies and the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's mission, is monitoring Estonia's progress toward integration.

When the embassy staff needs a break from embassy work, the simple humdrum of life or the darkness of a northern winter, they can meander the winding, cobbled streets of one of Europe's best-preserved—not rebuilt—and most enchanting old towns. It's a place filled with some of the finest examples of 14th- and 15th-century architecture on the continent. A night out could include a dinner at one of Tallinn's Estonian, German, Chinese, Indian or Italian restaurants, followed by a memorable concert.

A three-and-a-half-hour ferry ride or a one-and-a-half-hour hydrofoil trip away is Helsinki and the Estonians' Finno-Ugric cousins to the north. When the weather cooperates, embassy employees drive to neighboring Riga and its old town, or simply explore the gentle Estonian countryside and visit lovely, becalming islands such as Saaremaa.

When Estonia's rather long, dark winters get them down, staff members have two basic choices: look to Tallinn travel agencies for charter escapes to the sunny south or remember that the long days of spring, and the really long days of summer, will soon arrive. Although Tallinn has fewer than six hours of daylight in the depths of winter, by the summer solstice, celebrated this month, it enjoys about 19 hours of daylight and accompanying long twilights.

Estonians expend their energy on democratic, economic and social development rather than on bemoaning their history. Working in Estonia is never dull. One's workaday field of vision encompasses more than Estonia because of the need to fully understand the importance of cooperation and collaboration among all three Baltic states, their close relationships with the Nordic countries and the enduring influence of economic and political developments in Russia on Estonian life.

From the time of Czar Peter the Great through the Soviet era, Russia viewed Estonia as its "window to the West." The embassy family, both staff and family members alike, know from experience that the economically, politically and culturally vibrant country in which they work and live is today a dynamic Western nation. ■

The author is the public affairs officer in Tallinn.

By Richard C. Lundberg

The U.S. Embassy returned to Tallinn two weeks after Estonia's declaration of "reindependence" on Aug. 21, 1991. USIS Tallinn began its operations when the mission moved into the current embassy chancery building in 1992.

Since the office's inception seven years ago, three public affairs officers and a dedicated Estonian staff have carried on an extremely active public diplomacy program in a country that has swiftly transformed itself into a democratic state with a full-blown free-market economy.

While change in former communist states is often quick, it comes with myriad expected and unforeseen problems. USIS Tallinn works closely with Estonia's public, private and nongovernmental organization sectors and with other embassy sections to tackle those problems.

The Estonian print and broadcast media, while free and independent, are still undergoing maturation. USIS uses International Visitor programs, in-country speaker and professional-in-residence programs and a variety of other tools to underscore the significance of the media's watchdog role in a democracy and the importance of both media self-criticism and knowledgeable public criticism of the media to the development of good journalism.

USIS has worked with other mission elements to support the strengthening of democratic institutions, the rule of law and ethnic integration efforts in Estonia. Over the course of five fiscal years, until Estonia's recent "graduation" from the USAID Support for Eastern European Democracy assistance program, USIS Tallinn oversaw the awarding of Democracy Commission small grants that dealt with a wide variety of issues: the acquisition of Estonian citizenship by Russian speakers, journalistic ethics, NGO involvement in regional cooperation, women's rights, fostering environmental advocacy, and nurturing entrepreneurial thinking in young business and economics students.

While the amount of "postgraduate" funding is significantly smaller, USIS is still very much involved in democracy building, ethnic integration and rule of law and public administration issues. It supports these through traditional speaker programs and International Visitor programs, edu-

"Fat Margaret," the nickname for this medieval entrance to Old Town.

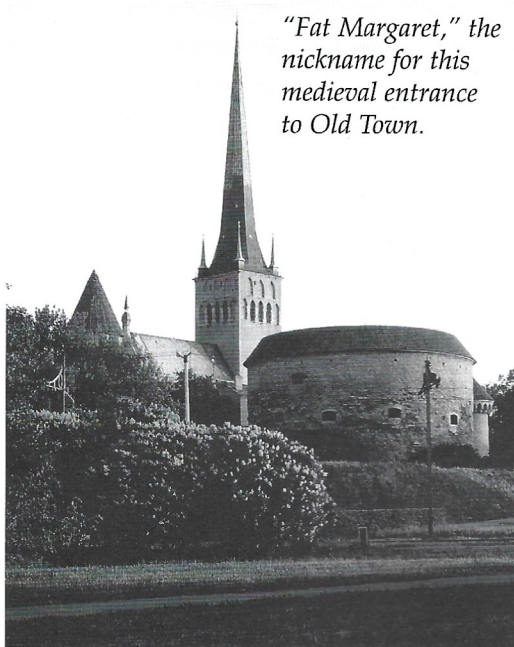


Photo by Ann A. Lundberg

ational exchanges, Information Resource Center outreach programs and a train-the-trainers program for women's NGOs in the Baltic states.

The post looks forward to continuing its NGO work as the Baltic-American Partnership Fund, a U.S. government/Soros Foundation joint effort, begins to implement assistance programs benefiting NGOs in all three Baltic states.

USIS supports the strengthening of U.S. economic and commercial ties with Estonia and Estonia's integration into Western economic and security structures—central mission goals—through traditional diplomacy tools including International Visitor programs

focused on the formulation of U.S. foreign policy, the transatlantic security relationship and U.S.-European trade issues. The protection of intellectual property rights has been addressed at post-supported seminars and by U.S.-based workshops and visiting U.S. international property rights experts.

In a nation whose institutions of higher education have emerged from decades of Soviet-era academic isolation and rigidity, and where university administrators, faculty members and students are eager for international contacts, USIS is deeply involved in educational exchange work. Without a binational Fulbright Commission, the post handles all in-country tasks involved with a small but influential Fulbright exchange of U.S. and Estonian university lecturers and graduate students. The public affairs officer and USIS Estonian staff work with the Open Estonia Foundation to recruit and interview graduate school candidates in fields vitally important to Estonia's political and economic development for the U.S. government/Soros Foundation-funded Muskie Fellowship Program.

In a few short months, as USIS Tallinn transforms itself into the embassy public diplomacy section, these professionals—and their USIS FSN colleagues around the world—will become employees of State, bringing with them a wealth of experience and deep and genuine pride in what they do. ■

The author is the public affairs officer in Tallinn.