



Karl AST (1886-1971)

Uus Eesti, 24.1.1938

Travel Notes by Karl Ast. XIV.

Modern Palestine

Land where people survive thanks to their own efforts, cooperation and enthusiasm.

Translation from Russian by Avigail Rashkovsky.

What the emigrants from Estonia are saying

I spent an evening at the Brenner Workers' House named after the labor movement leader who had been killed by an Arab bullet. Fifty offices for administrative staff of various organizations and societies. Downstairs they have a huge dining room and a kitchen powered by electricity. Looks like any other workers' house: meetings, training courses, lectures. Lots of people move to and fro.



Beit-Brenner, 1935

Suddenly somebody grabs me from behind.

“Hello, Comrade Ast,” I hear in perfect Estonian. Turning back, I see a young woman wearing a white apron. “You don’t know me, but I know you. When I learned from a newspaper that you have already arrived at our land, I decided to find you. Many people from Tallinn would like to meet with you. And you just came here by yourself! Couldn’t miss the Workers’ House?”

“Yes, dear. I could not. How long have you been here?”

“It has been two years already.”

“How are you?”

“Not so bad. Quite well, actually.”

Later it turned out that “not so bad” was not completely accurate. The woman’s brother was killed by terrorists just two days before their parents arrived. You can only imagine how they felt. It was, probably, the first time that they saw an oriental cemetery – this deserted, severe and dreadful space. And there their son was laid (Jews are buried on the day of their death), the son who was supposed to meet them at the seaport. Now this family is supported by their young daughter who is working at the Brenner House as a waitress and kitchen aid¹.

“For how many people do you cook?”

“About a thousand servings a day, on average. And also tea, coffee, pastries.”

“Do you bake your own bread?”

“No, but we make our own pastries and cakes.”

Very soon all these sweets are on our table, and we continue this conversation. Other compatriots are joining, including a lawyer from Narva.² I am surprised that they still remember Estonian language. They laugh and brag.

“This is our heritage and pride. Nobody here understands this language. How can we forget such a beautiful language? It is our mother tongue, after all.”

¹ Karl Ast talks with Riva Neshet (born Itzokh) (1919-2011), whose older brother Israel (in Palestine – Israel Ben-Yehuda) was killed by an English soldier on 5.6.1936. He was a member of the Jewish military organization Hagana. [M.R.]

² Apparently, Dov (Boris) Krigman (1907 - 1990) [M.R.]

I began to understand them. Yes, they became citizens of Eretz Israel³, but all their thoughts were about Estonia. The girls are crying talking about Estonia. Same heartache is common among other Ashkenazi.⁴ I talked to a young man from Germany who proposed to a girl from Tallinn, a friend of my wife and a pupil of Mrs. Neggo⁵. This man was interested in philosophy, received university education.

“What are your memories of Germany?” I asked. Not a very sensitive question. He looked at me disapprovingly.

His response was like this, “Whatever happens in Germany, whatever injustice is done to us, I still love this country, it is my homeland. I cannot be indifferent to it, I definitely cannot feel animosity.”

An elderly Jew, who worked in a kiosk, even said, “I would like to live in Lithuania. My bones will remain here, but my memories live on in Lithuania.”

Estonian Jews are linked to their old homeland because of their relatives who still leave there, and because of the particular Estonian way of life that they, too, absorbed. I was sad when one young woman said, “Here nobody celebrates Christmas, no Christmas trees. I used to love this. It was so nice...”

“So where is your homeland – Palestine or Estonia?”

“Estonia.” She pronounced it as if this was the sweetest word in the world.

The kiosk worker, whom I mentioned before, stated categorically: “I would be a fool to believe in God, but I believe in the laws of nature. And according to the law of nature, Palestine should belong to Jews.”

This deep conviction is shared by everyone. Whatever is ahead of them – be it water or fire – Eretz Israel is going to be built. This is the faith that sustains them.

³ Erez Israel – Land of Israel. [M.R.]

⁴ Ashkenazi Jews is “a subethnic group of Jews that was formed in Central Europe.” [Wikipedia]

⁵ Dance instructor. Neggo studio in Tallinn. [M.R.].