

THE BALTIC FEDERATION IN CANADA

Notes on its founding and on the first six decades of its operation

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1. Founding, Purpose, and the Founding Fathers of Baltic Federation in Canada

1.1 Introduction

Shortly after World War II – more specifically, during second half of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Canada received some 100,000 immigrants from the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (about an equal number from Estonia and Latvia, somewhat more from Lithuania). These were not the “ordinary kind” of immigrants, who come to Canada for economic reasons. Instead, they had fled their beloved homeland ahead of the oncoming Soviet army; and they did not wish to return home when the war had ended, to be made citizens of the Soviet Union against their will. Many of them had managed to escape across the Baltic Sea to Sweden; for others, the escape route went through a number of DP (displaced-person) camps in Germany. In the end, members of both groups were the lucky ones – they received immigration visas to Canada and landed soon at its shores and begun to build new home in Canada!

Owing to the reason for leaving their birth-homeland, many of them remained strongly motivated to helping their brothers and sisters left behind and – by then – had been incorporated against their will into the Soviet Union. This wish to help their compatriots back home placed an extra burden on the Baltic newcomers to Canada, over and above the usual problems associated with starting life in a new and unfamiliar land. They took upon themselves, to:

- Keep alive their national heritage and culture; to build on it and share its fruits with rest of the multicultural Canada;
- Make sure the free world is made fully aware of the real political and socio-economic conditions in their occupied birth-homelands, and to appeal to the Western nations for political support in finding a way to end the Soviet occupation in the Baltics.

1.2 Birth, Purpose, and Founding Fathers of the Baltic Federation in Canada

As is noted in the introductory section, the mid-1900 newcomers to Canada from the three Baltic countries had strong motivation to preserve their national heritage and to help their compatriots in occupied homelands to regain freedom. In order to recruit Canada’s political support in this – especially for the second task – it was necessary for them to assist the Canadian Government and its people with receiving full information about the real political and socio-economic conditions in the occupied Baltics (as distinct from the “information” provided by the soviets to West at the time). For this, each of the three Baltic communities in Canada – in addition to founding their various religious, ethno-cultural, cultural and youth organizations in major centres throughout Canada – also founded their **central socio-political** organizations. Thus, the **Estonian Central Council in Canada**, **Latvian National Federation in Canada**, and **Lithuanian-Canadian Community** were born in Toronto in the late 1940s. Even though the names of these organizations went through some changes in the early years of their existence, their purpose and operational aims have remained basically unchanged over the six decades since their founding.

In the interest of increasing effectiveness of their message to rest of Canada, the three Baltic central socio-political organizations decided to combine themselves into an **umbrella-organization** that could speak for all of them, when needed. In the first edition of a multi-volume Works on Estonians in Canada (*“Eestlased Kanadas I”*), Enn Salurand, Secretary-General of the Estonian Central Council writes that upon arrival of the Lithuanian Consul-General V. Gylis in Toronto in 1949, the **Baltic Federation in Canada (“BFC”) was founded in Toronto the same year**. For the Estonian community, its BFC founding father was banker Artur Ekbaum; and for the Latvians, it was Reverend A. Lūsis.

It should be noted at this juncture that – in an article written by Milda Danys – it is said that the Baltic Federation was founded in 1940. The article can be viewed by opening the on-line “Multicultural Canada” Website <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/>, then on “Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples”, “Lithuanians”, “Politics”. However, as the founding-year noted in that article seems to be at least five too early for the arrival of the first Baltic after-the-second-WW immigrants, the reference in the article, in all probability, is of some other “Baltic Federation”, not the Baltic Federation in Canada (BFC), subject of the present Notes!

The purpose of BFC was, and is, to provide an **effective communications link** between the three Canadian-Baltic communities and the rest of Canada, with the specific aim of **helping the compatriots** in the “old country” – initially, to regain their freedom and later (after 1991), to develop and maintain effective cultural, trade and tourism relations with Canada.

1.3 About governance of the Baltic Federation in Canada

According to its Constitution, drafted in 1955, the presidency of BFC rotates between its members (initially, every year; but changed to every two years by the 1971 amendment to Constitution). Thus, the presidency of BFC returns every four years to each of its member-organizations for a new two-year term. At the outset, the **first member** was the Lithuanian-Canadian Community; **second**, the Estonian Central Council in Canada; and **third**, the Latvian National Federation in Canada. The same order of rotation between its members for heading the Federation has been maintained throughout the, by now, nearly six decades of its existence.

The BFC constitution also spells out how the other executive functions – vice president, secretary, treasurer and members without portfolio – are divided amongst its three member-organizations. However, its constitution is presently under review, to make it reflect more closely the current situation in the Canadian-Baltic communities and “back home”, as each of the three countries have recently become members of the European Union.

2. Some early activities of the Baltic Federation in Canada

Even though the BFC was founded in 1949, it began to operate in a more structured ways the following year. Its first public event was to organize an **ecumenical commemoration service** in Toronto in June 1950, in memory of the thousands of innocent Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians arrested during the night of June 14, 1940 by the Soviets and deported in cattle-cars to Siberia, to the various Stalin-gulags. Many of them did not survive the ordeal; some of those who did, were not allowed to return to their home-areas and were directed to settle elsewhere in the Soviet Union.

The first commemoration service was held at the Bloor Street United Church in Toronto; the next two, in June 1951 and 1952 respectively, took place at the large and prestigious Massey Hall in Toronto, with the guest-speaker the well-known Canadian author/journalist Wilson Woodside. In connection with these public events, informative English-language leaflets were handed out to the hundreds of visitors, who came from all walks of Canadian life! The leaflets outlined the nature of illegal deportations of Baltic people by the Soviets; as well, they provided an overview of the actual socio-economic / socio-political conditions in the occupied Baltic countries at the time.

Similar commemoration services were organized by the BFC every year since the first three, although they were held at different locations in Toronto; also, some parallel services were held in other major centres in Canada. These public events were well attended and received wide coverage in various modes of public press. Thus, their secondary goal – to be a tool in providing truthful and complete information to the Canadians at large on what was actually taking place behind the iron curtain in the Baltics – was well met, and the “Baltic message” was beginning to be more fully understood by more and more Canadians!

3. The “Baltic Evenings on the Hill” - about their birth and purpose

3.1 First, some general notes on the subject

As is outlined in the two previous chapters of these Notes, one of the key tasks – for some forty years – for the Baltic Federation in Canada was to assist the Government of Canada and the Canadian public at large to obtain reliable and truthful information about the socio-political conditions in the Soviet-occupied Baltics. In the first half of that time-period (1950 - 1972), this was done through various public forums (such as the annual commemoration services), and through specific presentations to the various senior members of Government of Canada and to influential Members of Parliament. In 1973, a different approach for delivering the “Baltic message” was born and has been used successfully ever since (in almost every year – sometimes skipping the years with Canadian federal elections). This soon became known as the “**Baltic Evening on the Hill**”, or simply the “**Baltic Evening**”. To date, there have been 27 such evenings held in Ottawa.

These evening-events are organized by the BFC in conjunction with one or two senior members of the Canadian Parliament and/or of the Senate. Their cost is born by Canadian-Baltic communities – the organizing and admin-costs by their central organizations, other costs by the participating community-members, personally.

The purpose of these evening-meetings is to make it possible for a relatively large number of members of the three Canadian-Baltic communities – around 75 (about 25 from each) to meet – as invited guests (around 100-120) – with Members of Canadian Parliament, Senate and selected senior government officials in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, over a gala dinner with quality entertainment. Usually, these evenings have been held in the prestigious Confederation Hall, in the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Needless to add, the innate agenda of such evenings is to present to the rest of Canada – for their understanding and consideration – a topic, or a group of topics, of great importance to the three Canadian-Baltic communities at the time.

3.2 On the origin of the “Baltic Evening”

The event “Baltic Evening” has its origin in the presentation of the book “*Graves Without Crosses*” – an English translation of the Estonian-language book “*Ristideta hauad*”, written by Arved Viirlaid, a Canadian-Estonian of Toronto. The presentation took place over a gala dinner, given jointly by a group of Canadian-Estonians, -Latvians and -Lithuanians to the Prime Minister of Canada, John G. Diefenbaker, his Foreign Minister Michael Sharp, various other high-ranking officials of Government, Members of Parliament and of the Senate, in Ottawa on February 21, 1973. The event was organized by a group of executive members of the Estonian Central Council in Canada: Ottawa resident Walter Pent – vice president, Hans Lupp – president, and Kaljo Jõgi – member at large. Earlier on the same day, the book was presented to the Governor-General of Canada, Roland Mitchener. It has been estimated that approximately 2000 copies of the book, which speaks of the sad situation, where – by historic events completely beyond their control – Estonians ended up fighting and dying on both sides of the Soviet-German conflict in World War II.

The book presentation event in Ottawa was well planned and brilliantly executed – it brought the Estonian, indeed the Baltic question to the forefront with many influential Canadians, and it provided a pleasant way for a relatively large group of hard-working members of the Canadian-Baltic communities to meet – and communicate directly – with an equally sizeable number of influential Canadians, all at once! As expected, the Baltic Evening soon became, and still is, a popular event and is well attended by all parties.

The second Baltic Evening was held on March 13, 1974. It was patterned on its predecessor and was officially sponsored by Mr. P. Yuzyk, an influential member of the Canadian Senate. At that evening, guest-speaker was the well-known Canadian religious leader of Ukrainian descent, Archbishop Maxim Hermaniuk. Also during the evening, copies of two booklets: “*Estonia, Story of a Nation*” and “*Estonia and European Security*” were distributed to hundreds of influential Canadians.

To date, there have been 27 Baltic Evenings held in Ottawa, and one is planned for May 2008 (more about that in chapter 4). For the interested reader, a birds-eye view of these events can be obtained from the programme-page of the 26th Baltic Evening – copy available from the Website http://pahapill.ca/be_2003_programme.htm.

Through these annual gala events in Ottawa, together with the various direct presentations to senior members of Canadian government, influential politicians and to the public-at-large at the gatherings discussed in chapter 2, the “Baltic message” did, indeed, get through to the Canadian (and other Western) political decision-makers. Thanks to their support at various international high-level political gatherings throughout second half of the 20th Century, together with the perseverance of Baltic Peoples themselves, disintegration of the soviet “Evil Empire” picked up momentum in the late 1980s, and the three Baltic countries regained their independence in 1991.

4. Some recent and present activity at - and concerns of - the BFC

In contrast to the early objectives of the Baltic Federation in Canada outlined in the three previous chapters, the Federation has recently directed its attention to a critical issue faced by all three of its member-communities internally, right here in Canada. There is a serious lack

of in-community facilities for proper storage of the relatively large amounts of **archival-value heritage materials** generated in the past six decades by the successful operations of their various organizations – cultural, ethno-cultural, religious, and others – throughout Canada. The communities themselves do not have facilities for proper storage of the literally thousands of boxes of such materials, much of which have been, and are, kept in the attics and basements of private homes of the long-time – by now, the rapidly aging – leaders of these communities. Upon their passing away, some of the valuable heritage materials could end up in dump-yards. This must not be allowed to happen!

In an attempt to seek expert advice and, hopefully, obtain some assistance in finding solutions to the problem, the 27th Baltic Evening (held in October 2005) was arranged to bring these concerns to the attention of rest of the multicultural Canada. As a direct result of that evening, there has recently been some indication – through the **Library and Archives Canada** – that solution to the problem might soon be found. Therefore, it is now planned to make the next Baltic Evening (scheduled for May 2008) to be a follow-up to its most recent predecessor – again with the subject of preservation of Canadian-Baltic heritage materials as its main theme. It is also planned to hold a “roundtable” on the issues related to this problem, with both the government specialists and community leaders participating in the discussion. The roundtable would be held in Ottawa during daytime of the 28th Baltic Evening – and it would be similar in structure to a previous roundtable held on the subject of Trade and Tourism in conjunction with the 26th Baltic Evening. A birds-eye view of the programme of the latter is available from Website http://pahapill.ca/roundtable_2003_progamme.htm.

5. Epilogue

The aim of these Notes is **not** to provide a full-scale report on the activities undertaken by the Baltic Federation in Canada in the past. But rather, it is an attempt to give – through selected examples from some of its past activities – a brief overview of the Federation’s activity in the nearly six decades of its operation, with some detail added in to place its founding, purpose and mode of operation in historic context.

No doubt, much more complete records do exist in the archives of the three member-organizations of the BFC, written in their respective languages. In fact, the specific data – names of people, dates of events, etc – used in these Notes has been taken from the first two volumes of a multi-edition Estonian-language Works on Estonians in Canada: “*Eestlased Kanadas I*”, KEAK 1975, and “*Eestlased Kanadas II*”, KEAK 1985. Without access to the rich information in these published sources, it would have required much more research-time on my part to prepare these Notes. Thus, my sincere thanks go to the publisher of these books, to the “KEAK” – Kanada Eestlaste Ajaloo Komisjon (Committee for the Historic Works on Estonians in Canada)!

j.p.