

Documents Pertaining
to Jewish Cultural Autonomy
in the Republic of Estonia
between the Two World Wars
(1918-1940)

Exceptional Estonia - an Oasis of Tolerance

Foreword

The Republic of Estonia was born on 24 February 1918, with a Manifesto of Independence as its birth certificate. From the very first days of its existence, the young Republic aimed at empowering its people and was well aware of the importance of protecting its minorities as equal citizens. In the War of Independence (1918–1920), allies like Great Britain, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, US, France and Latvia fought alongside Estonia, and together with Estonians, there were Estonian Swedes, Baltic Germans, Russians and Jews fighting shoulder to shoulder. Rule of law and protection of human rights were the inspiring goals that brought together all the peoples of Estonia in the fight for independence, and later, when the Tartu Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia was concluded, in a common effort to build up the state.

Today, a hundred years later, Estonians still feel proud of the tolerant spirit of the Manifesto of Independence, and international lawyers still acclaim the virtues of Estonia's Cultural Autonomy Act of 1925. Another exceptional fact is perhaps less known: in 1934, a Chair of Jewish Studies was founded at the University of Tartu – an example of tolerance in an era of complete lack of tolerance in Europe. This event is one in a row of many that we feel worthy of thinking back to and commemorating, when we prepare for celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia in 2018.

Through the centuries, the Jewish community in Estonia has been relatively small – between the two World Wars, there were a little more than 4000 Jews in Estonia – but their community life was active, rich and well respected. The Second World War and

the foreign occupations that followed it destroyed the Estonian statehood and its historical communities, especially the Jewish one. With ease, undemocratic aggressors eliminated the internal liberties of a democratic state. When the Republic of Estonia restored its independence in 1991, it was fully aware of this risk and made efforts to rapidly join the European Union and NATO, and succeeded in doing so in 2004 – already ten years ago!

The Embassy of Estonia to the State of Israel had a wonderful idea: to compile a publication on the life of the Jewish community in interwar Estonia and to celebrate all those dates that are worthy of cherishing. Now, some very important historical documents can be found in this small publication, with a special focus on the founding of the Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Tartu 80 years ago. I wish to congratulate all those who put this booklet together and extend my gratitude to our good partners: the Estonian Jewish Museum, the Estonian State Archives, the Estonian Institute, the Estonian Historical Archives, the Tallinn City Archives, and Mr. Mark Rõbak, for their invaluable contribution and help.

May this booklet accompany you on a journey to the past and inspire you with good new ideas for the future – ideas which can one day be penned on its blank pages.

Tallinn, January 2014

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Urmas Paet', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Urmas Paet
Minister of Foreign Affairs

Compiled by:

Estonian Embassy in Tel Aviv

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Estonia Between the Two World Wars (1918-1940)

The chain of events unleashed by the First World War and the 1917 Russian revolution led through the War of Independence (1918-1920) to the birth of the Republic of Estonia. For the first time in history, Estonians had their own state, governed via representational democracy by the Estonian people. Estonia was a multinational country; its population of about 1 million people consisted of Estonians, but also Russians, Germans, Swedes, Jews and others.

The governing system in Estonia was determined by the constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly on 15 June 1920. Typical of the era and based on the idealism of a newly independent people, the constitution was remarkably liberal. Estonia was a parliamentary democratic republic, where the supreme power belonged to the people; the one hundred-strong *Riigikogu*, the Estonian parliament, had legislative power. Executive power was vested in the government that was headed by *Riigivanem*, the State Elder. One of the peculiarities of the constitution was that it did not stipulate the post of the head of state (president); the State Elder, whose duties included some representational functions of a head of state, primarily fulfilled the tasks of a prime minister.

The administrative division (into parishes and counties) and the national symbols of the newly established republic were based on historical traditions.

Estonia's international status became more secure in 1921, when the leading countries in the world recognised Estonia *de jure*. Estonia became a full member of the League of Nations in the

same year. Estonia's relations with most countries were friendly. Relations with the communist Soviet Union were exceptional: despite sharp ideological opposition, economic relations were pragmatic, because the internationally isolated Soviet Union desperately needed an access to the world market, and the young Estonian state needed the income earned through transit trade.

Estonian political life in the 1920s was influenced by the large number of parties: the parliament usually consisted of six bigger and four to eight smaller parties. The only option with such fragmentation was to form coalition governments, involving representatives from four or five parties. Hence only general principles could be agreed upon when governments were formed. In solving more specific questions, discord was quick to arise, and coalitions were therefore unstable – the average duration of a government was less than 11 months.

However, the young state turned out to be surprisingly successful in administrative and economic areas, which strengthened its stability. A national currency, the Estonian *mark*, was adopted as early as 1918. (The *mark* was replaced by the *kroon* in 1928). Land reform was of crucial importance. The economic and political supremacy of the Baltic German nobility which had lasted for centuries came to an end; tens of thousands of new farms were established by a number of new smallholders. Industry and trade also developed rapidly, although excessive reliance on Russian markets and extremely liberal credit policies caused a temporary setback in 1923 and 1924. The new economic policy of Finance Minister Otto Strandman helped to end the crisis: without neglecting industry, the focus was now on agriculture and Western markets, and also on Estonia's own needs. By the end of the 1920s, Estonia had successfully integrated into the European economic space.

Developing national culture became essential. Much attention was paid to the humanities: Estonian-language terminology, history, ethnography, economic geography, etc. were furthered. For the first time, it was possible to acquire education in the Estonian language, from primary school to university, and the University of Tartu became the national university. At the same time, national minorities were able to acquire secondary education in their mother tongue and enjoy cultural autonomy.

The main factor of instability in the early 1920s was the threat of communism. Not that the communist ideology and movement were influential in Estonia, but the few communists had the backing of the Soviet Union together with the Comintern, who generously financed their followers abroad. The aim of the communists was to seize power by means of an armed rebellion and immediately afterwards turn to the Soviet Union for help. However, the attempted coup on 1 December 1924 failed, after which the communist movement lost support in Estonia. The biggest threat to Estonian independence was the Soviet Union, whose foreign policy moves were keenly observed. The planned military-political defence league (Baltic League) against the Soviet threat of invasion involving all Baltic countries (from Finland to Poland) failed, and Estonia had to rely on the world community and the League of Nations.

The worldwide economic crisis that began in 1929 reached Estonia a year later. Falling prices, import restrictions, prohibitive tariffs on the world market and the dwindling domestic market hit both agriculture and industry badly. During the years of the crisis, the total value of production diminished by 45% in agriculture and by 20% in industry. The sudden halt in exports had a negative impact on Estonian external trade, and the general financial shock dealt a heavy blow to the country's finances. The standard of living

fell rapidly, as did incomes – unemployment rose drastically. The measures taken to overcome the crisis brought only partial relief.

The declining economic situation brought dissatisfaction amongst the population. People blamed everything on politicians, parties, parliament and government. Politicians used the opportunity to undermine their political opponents. All this made the domestic political situation unstable. Attempts were made to increase stability by reducing the number of parties, but the parties united under the strain of the crisis could not withstand the test of time, and the fragmentation in the parliament increased further. It became more difficult to form coalitions, government crises lasted longer, and the lifespan of a government shortened; in two years (1931–33) the Cabinet changed six times.

In such a situation, a remarkable number of people longed for a strong-minded statesman who would put an end to the politicians' squabbling, to "put the house in order", and restore the standard of living to the level obtained before the economic crisis. This desire was further enhanced by examples from abroad, where authoritarian forms of government were spreading, as well as by claims from some domestic politicians that the root of all evil was the constitution, which did not foresee the position of the president. The State Elder Konstantin Päts was among the first to suggest changing the constitution, electing a president with extensive powers, reducing the influence of the parliament and extending the government's options for action.

These ideas were enthusiastically supported by the Union of Veterans' of the Estonian War of Independence (the *Vaps'* movement). Opposing themselves to the so-called old political parties, and accusing their leaders of ignoring the needs of the state and pursuing their own interests, the Union won the support

of the dissatisfied majority, thus becoming a remarkably numerous and influential popular movement. The draft constitution compiled by the Union members achieved an overwhelming victory at the referendum in October 1933. The new constitution replaced the previous parliamentary method of government with the sole power of the head of state, thus offering an opportunity to establish an authoritarian regime.

By the beginning of 1934 the situation in Estonia had improved. The worst of the economic crisis was over, thanks to the devaluation of the national currency *kroon* the previous summer. The lengthy fight over changing the constitution ended in the ratification of the constitution proposed by the *Vaps*. The forthcoming elections of the State Elder (*i.e.* head of state) and the parliament promised to ease the tensions in domestic politics.

However, the great popularity of the *Vaps* movement was of concern, and the State Elder candidates Konstantin Päts and Johan Laidoner carried out a *coup d'état* on 12 March 1934. Claiming that the *Vaps* movement was planning to seize power, they arrested several hundred leading *Vaps* members and closed their organisations and newspapers. At the same time a six-month general state of emergency was proclaimed, political meetings and demonstrations were banned, and the State Elder and Riigikogu elections were postponed. On 2 October 1934, the Riigikogu session was prematurely brought to an end and the parliament was not allowed to convene again. This was the start of the so-called Silent Era. The state of emergency was extended, political parties were replaced by the only official party, the Fatherland Union and its professional chambers, journalism was subjected to censorship and various publications had to fold, state control was established in significant fields (trade unions, local governments, churches, universities etc.), opponents of the new regime were under police

surveillance, and legislation was carried out through the decrees of the State Elder. In 1937, the State Elder Päts convened a national assembly to draft a new constitution which came into force on 1 January 1938. It legalised the existing administrative practice, making permanent several temporary restrictions caused by the state of emergency and reducing people's participation in state administration. The state of emergency, censorship and state control continued, political activities were still forbidden, important laws were issued as decrees. The newly established position of president was filled by Konstantin Päts, and the new two-chamber Riigikogu was subservient to the president, as was the government. Nevertheless, President Päts allowed competitive parliamentary elections to be held later in 1938 and political opposition to his regime obtained a significant number of seats.

In the economic sense, the "Silent Era" was quite successful, although success was primarily based on the favourable world situation, and not on the new regime. However, the forceful intervention of the state into economic life in the longer perspective heralded new problems due to the expanding nationalisation, ineffective state institutions, high taxes, suppression of salaries, extensive subsidising of farmers, and other factors. Ordinary citizens, however, experienced a gradually improving quality of life in those years. Päts' politics relied on the idea of national unity, which emphasised the need for people to stick together regardless of their education, employment and wealth. These views were promoted through the State Propaganda Office, which also organised relevant national mass campaigns. There was no persecution in Estonia on ethnic or national grounds, institutions of cultural autonomy were supported by the state. Mainly for these reasons the authoritarian regime of President Päts secured the support of the majority of the population, including national minorities, and did not have to face a strong opposition.

The biggest threats to Estonia came from outside, as the international situation in the second half of the 1930s quickly deteriorated. Serious dangers to world peace and Estonian independence came from the Stalinist Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, as both became militarily more powerful and aggressive. At the same time, the League of Nations and democratic countries showed their inability to solve international problems. Efforts towards international agreements to guarantee Estonian security failed. Under such circumstances it was hoped that Estonian independence can be secured by cautious balancing between the Soviet Union and Germany. Unfortunately, it worked only until the two aggressors agreed about the fate of Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania. The 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact placed Estonia in the Soviet sphere of interest. The Soviet Union forced Estonia to sign an agreement on Soviet military bases in Estonia that considerably weakened the sovereignty of the country. In the summer of 1940, at the same time when Nazi German units occupied Paris, the Soviet Union occupied and annexed Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Soviet occupation was followed by three years of Nazi and five decades of another Soviet occupation. All through these decades the idea of liberty was kept alive both in Estonia and in exile, but it was only in 1991 that the Republic of Estonia could regain its independence and restore its statehood.

*A New Beginning for All
the Peoples of Estonia: from
the Manifesto of Independence
to the Constitution*

On 24 February 1918, the Salvation Committee of the Estonian National Council *Maapäev* published the “Manifesto to All the Peoples of Estonia”, the founding act of the independent Republic of Estonia, by which Estonia proclaimed itself a democratic republic after centuries of being ruled by other countries, and guaranteed national cultural autonomy rights to all the national minorities living in the Republic: Russians, Germans, Swedes, Jews and other nationalities. From the very beginning, the authorities of the independent Estonia guaranteed and secured the principles of national minority autonomy. The government sought ways to overcome national hostilities and discrimination, which were once widespread in the Russian Empire and very common during the First World War and Russian revolutions in 1917. During their brief occupation at the beginning of 1919, the Russian Bolsheviks meted out severe punishments against all those who opposed them, be they Estonians, Jews or Russians. Several dozen Jews were murdered in Tallinn, Tartu and Narva. At least 178 Jewish men fought in the Estonian War of Independence (28.11.1918–02.02.1920) against invading Soviet Russia and German Baltic Landeswehr. Especially the Estonian Jewish youths from the University of Tartu and from the high schools were actively engaged in fighting for the Estonian cause.

Manifest

kõigile Eestimaa rahwastele.

Eesti rahwas ei ole meenotanud jooksul korraldada ühtegi riigiasutist. Kõik need põlve on mees kehtinud talupoja loetus, et kehtinud põlvkondajate ajast ja võimete rahwaste meelkõrgele. Kõik need on kord Eesti mees tuleb, mis, kehtinud püüdnud oleja talupoja loetus. Kõik need on kord Eesti mees tuleb, mis, kehtinud püüdnud oleja talupoja loetus. Kõik need on kord Eesti mees tuleb, mis, kehtinud püüdnud oleja talupoja loetus.

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Eestimaa

teema ajalooliste ja etnograafiliste

piirides, taaluataste taanest peate

riigiswast demokraatlikel

wahariigiks.

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Su üle Jumal wainagu
Su wõitja rohkelt õnnista
Mis ilal ette wõtab ja,
Mu kallis linnad!

Elagu Eesti-ew demokraatiline Eesti wabariit!

Elagu rahwaste rahu!

Eesti Maapäewa Wanemate Nõukogu.

Talupoja loetus.

Excerpt from the "Manifesto to All the Peoples of Estonia" (24 February 1918):
"National cultural autonomy rights will be guaranteed to national minorities living in the Republic: to Russians, Germans, Swedes, Jews and other nationalities."
Source: ERA.1962.1.56.4. (the Estonian State Archives).

This set the stage for energetic growth in the political and cultural activities of Jewish community. On 11–16 May 1919, the first Estonian Congress of Jewish Congregations was convened to discuss the new circumstances Jewish life was confronting. This is where the ideas of cultural autonomy and a Jewish secondary school in Tallinn were born. Jewish societies and associations began to grow in numbers.

The Estonian War of Independence ended with the victory of Estonia and its democratic principles. On 15 June 1920, the freely elected Estonian Constituent Assembly adopted the Constitution of Estonia that allowed ethnic minorities to establish autonomous institutions in the interests of their culture, to educate their children in their mother tongue and guaranteed that each citizen had the right to determine his or her national belonging. It should be noted that the percentage of Estonians in the 1.1 million population of the Republic of Estonia according to the census of 1922 was 87.7%. The other 12.3% was made up of ethnic minorities, including the Baltic Germans (16 000) and the Jews (4500) living mostly in towns, and the Russians (92 000) who mainly lived territorially closer together, primarily in the eastern part of Estonia, and the Swedes (9000) in the western parts of the country and on the islands.

*From the Beginning of the
Jewish Cultural Autonomy to the
Inscription into the Golden Book
of the Jewish National Fund*

Free of internal ethnic disagreements, Estonian politics towards its minority peoples was a generous one. On 21 February 1925, the Parliament of Estonia (Riigikogu) adopted the Cultural Autonomy of Ethnic Minorities Act, which enabled national minorities numbering at least 3000 to establish a cultural self-government. In order to qualify for national minority status, a group had to be included in a special list of minorities. At the same time, no one could be forced to identify with any one group; every individual was legally free to choose and decide his or her own nationality. The bodies of cultural self-government were the following: a cultural council ('national parliament'), board of culture (executive and representative bodies) and local cultural boards of trustees.

In May 1926, the Jewish Community organised democratic elections for the formation of the Cultural Council. 71% of Jews who were citizens of Estonia cast their vote and, on 6 June 1926 the Cultural Council started functioning. This date is now considered the beginning of the Jewish Cultural Autonomy in Estonia.

Cultural autonomy in Estonia was enjoyed by the Baltic Germans between 1925 and 1939, and by the Jews between 1926 and 1940, whereas the Russians and the Swedes were satisfied with protection on the basis of their traditions, the constitution and

local governments. The phenomenon was a significant landmark in Estonian ethnic policy and a friendly exception regarding minorities compared to many other European countries. Jewish cultural autonomy was unique in the world and earned a great deal of international acclaim.

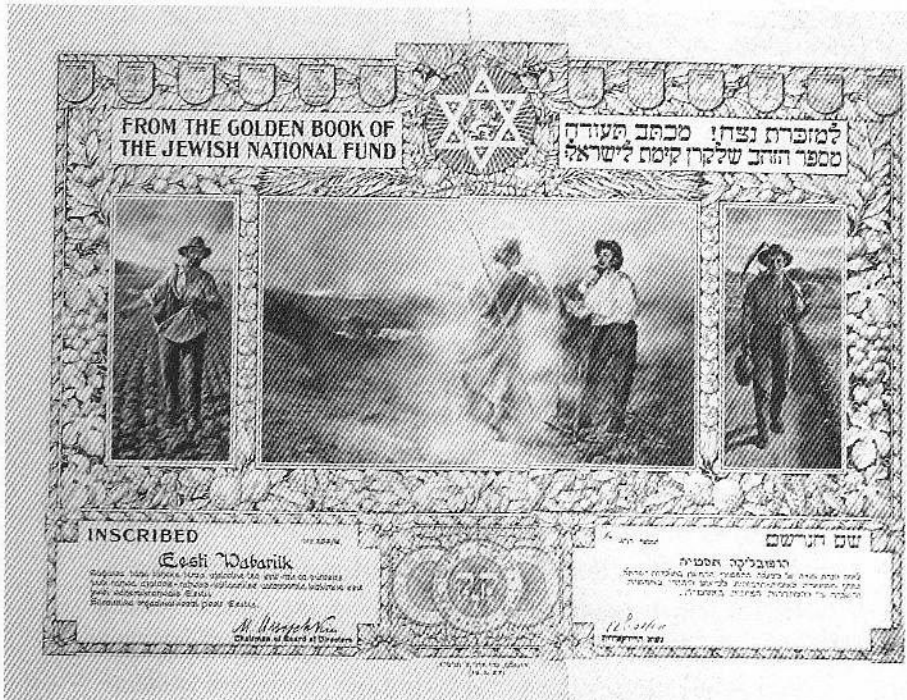
<p>ג. ה.</p> <p>אך האב דעם כבוד אינגעליאדן איך צו דער ערשטער פייערליכער ערעפנונגס- זיצונג פון קולטור ראט — דעם אייבערשטן ארגאן פון דער קולטור-אויטאנאמיע פון דעם אדישן מערב און עסטו וועלכע וועט פארקוטען זינט דעם 6-טן יוני אום 12 אדר אין זאל פון דער אדישער גימנאזיע אין טאללין (רעזעל). קארו שטר. 16.</p> <p>פארזיצער פון הויפט קאמיטעט. ד"ר. מ. קלאמפוס.</p>		<p>א. ב.</p> <p>אזכור להוסין בזה את כבי אל הישיבה ההגות הראשונה של הועד התרבותי, הארגון הנבחר של המעט היהודי באסטיה, שתחיה ביום א (6 יוני) בשעה 12 בצהרים — באולם של הגימנסיה העברי בטאללין (רעזאל. Karu t. 16).</p> <p>יזב ראש של הועד הראשי. ד"ר. מ. קלאמפוס.</p>
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רעזעל 28-טן מאי 1926.

Invitation to the opening ceremony of the Estonian Jewish Cultural Council on 6 June 1926 (in Hebrew and Yiddish).
Source: the Estonian Jewish Museum.

In appreciation of the benefit of the unique cultural autonomy that was granted by Estonia to its national minorities, on 18 February 1927 a page was dedicated to the Republic of Estonia in the Golden Book of the Jewish National Fund. On 1 April 1927 Dr. Gur-Arie Terlo, the representative of the Jewish National Fund, handed over the certificate of gratitude (excerpt from the Golden Book) to the Estonian State Elder Jaan Teemant. The Hebrew and Estonian inscriptions read in English as follows:

“The Republic of Estonia. As a sign of gratitude for the first historical deed in the history of Jewish people through the gift of national and cultural autonomy to the Jewish minority in Estonia. Recorded by the Zionist Organisation of Estonia.”



Excerpt from the Golden Book of the Jewish National Fund, devoted to Estonia.
Source: ERA.31.5.1893. (the Estonian State Archives).

*From Albert Einstein's Letter to
the Opening of the Chair of Jewish
Studies at the University of Tartu*

The cultural autonomy introduced fresh vitality into the Jewish community of Estonia and soon there were a large number of cultural, educational, sport and entertainment societies; a number that was indeed surprising if the relatively small number of the local Jewish population (4500) is taken into consideration. Naturally, most was done in the two major cities of Tallinn and Tartu. Tallinn was the largest city and the capital with a wealthy Jewish community, while Tartu prided itself on its old and world-famous university, Jewish students and student institutions. In the 1930s there were about 100 Jews studying at the University of Tartu, 44 of whom studied jurisprudence and 18 of whom studied medicine. There were five Jewish student societies in Tartu: The Jewish Academic Society, the Women's Student Society Hazfiro, the Fraternity (Corporation) Limuvia, the Fraternity (Corporation) Hasmonea and the Endowment for Jewish Students.

As a logical result of Jewish cultural autonomy in Estonia, the Jewish Board of Culture set an important goal to establish a special faculty devoted to Jewish Studies at the University of Tartu. Due to the international economic crisis and a lack of money and lecturers, preparatory work lasted longer than expected.

Many internationally well-known personalities expressed their support for the foundation of the Chair of Jewish Studies. Among them was Albert Einstein, who in October 1930 sent a letter to the rector of the University of Tartu. It can be considered as an expression of respect to the whole of Estonia.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

BERLIN W. den 16. Oktober 1930
WARERLANDSTR. 2

An seine Magnificenz

Herrn Professor Dr. K ö p p
 Rektor der Universität

T a r t u
 - - - - -

Sehr verehrter Herr Rektor!

Herr J. Blumenfeld, Tartu berichtete über die bevorstehende Gründung eines Lehrstuhls für Jüdische Wissenschaft an der Universität Tartu und über das verständnisvolle und wohlwollende Entgegenkommen, das der Plan bei den Hochschulelbehörden gefunden hat.

Ich begrüße die Gründung mit dem Wunsche des Gedeihens und bitte Sie, sehr geehrter Herr Professor, für die erwiesene Förderung den Ausdruck der Freude und des Dankes entgegenzunehmen. Möge dieser Beweis vorbildlicher nationaler Toleranz allenthalben in Europa die wohlverdiente Beachtung und Anerkennung finden.

In ausgezeichneter Hochachtung

A. Einstein

In Berlin, on October 16, 1930

To his Excellency, Professor Köpp, Rector of Tartu University.

Highly respected Rector,

Mr. J. Blumenfeld from Tartu has informed me of the forthcoming opening of a Chair of Jewish Studies at the University of Tartu, and of the understanding and generosity with which this idea has been met by the authorities.

I greet the founding of the Chair with wishes for its success, and ask you, Mr. Professor, to accept the expressions of my joy and gratitude for your support. May this example of outstanding national tolerance find worthy attention and recognition all over Europe.

With highest respect,

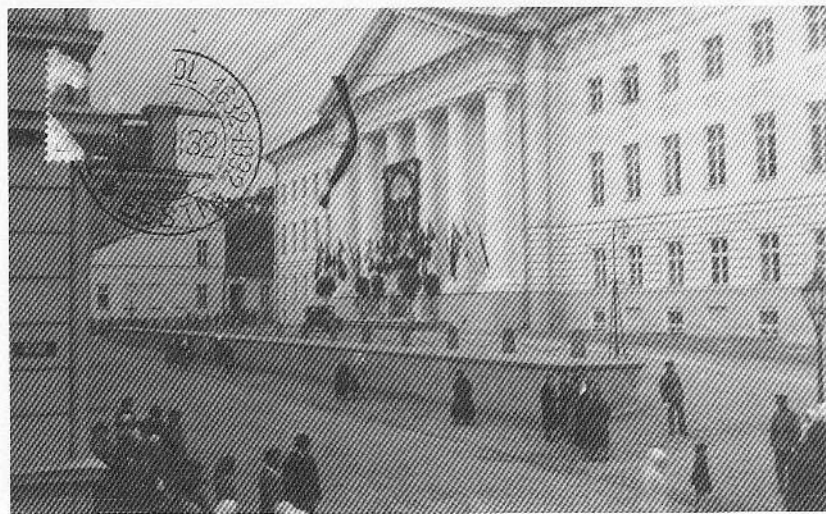
A. Einstein

Albert Einstein's letter to the Rector of the University of Tartu,
 Professor Johan Köpp.

Source: EAA.2100.19.158. (the Estonian Historical Archives).



Professor Lazar Gulkowitsch with a group of *Judaica* students of the University of Tartu (1930s).
Source: the Estonian Jewish Museum.



The main building of the University of Tartu in 1932. In the same year, *Alma Mater* celebrated her 300th Anniversary.
Source: EAA.3825.1.138.41. (the Estonian Historical Archives).

The Chair of Jewish Studies finally started its activities as a part of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Tartu at the beginning of 1934. Professor Lazar Gulkowitsch (1898–1941), an eminent scholar of Jewish Studies, who was dismissed from the University of Leipzig with other Jewish scholars due to Nazi-led persecution, was appointed as the first Professor of the Chair of Jewish Studies and began teaching.

All this can be considered exceptional. Notwithstanding the international and domestic turmoil of the '30s and the growing worrisome influence of National Socialism on some circles of Baltic Germans in Estonia, Nazism was outlawed as a movement contrary to social order and, by decree of the State Elder Konstantin Päts, all publications ridiculing Jews were banned as writings inciting hatred.

From Laidoner and Ben-Gurion to the Prelude of Diplomatic Relations between Estonia and Israel

In the 1920s, many Zionist organisations started their activities in Estonia, among them youth associations “HaShomer HaZair” and “Beitar”. Like in other countries, many of the Jews aimed at emigrating to Palestine and creating the Jewish national home there. More than 200 Estonian Jews left for Palestine between 1929 and 1935. There they contributed to the founding of many kibbutzim, among them Ein Gev and Kfar Blum.

Some contacts were established between the Republic of Estonia and the Jewish circles of Palestine under the British Mandate. In 1925, General Johan Laidoner, the Supreme Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, visited Palestine. After the return from his journey, in a speech to the Estonian Jewish Community, he expressed his opinion that founding of a Jewish national home in Palestine is just a matter of time.

In 1933, David Ben-Gurion visited Estonia, and so did Zeev Jabotinsky in 1939.

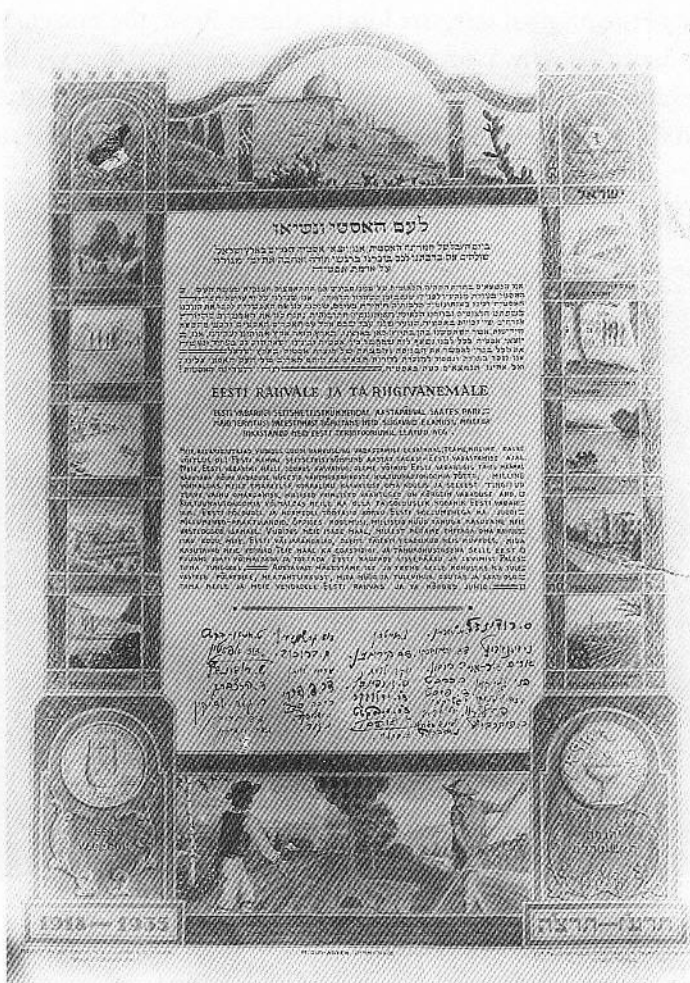
In 1930, Estonian Honorary Consulate in Tel Aviv started functioning and played a noteworthy role in developing relations between the two countries. The Honorary Consul was Mr. Maurice Litwinsky (1988–1951), a well-known personality in banking and trade in Palestine. He did not limit his activities only to business and consular matters but promoted contacts with Estonian educational institutions, libraries and publishing houses as well. It is worth mentioning that his father, Yaakov

Elhanan Litwinsky (1852–1915), a native of Odessa, purchased one of the original sixty-six lots in Ahuzat Bayit, the nucleus of the future Tel Aviv. With a grain of reserve we might thus say that the Litwinsky family laid the grounds for both the city of Tel Aviv and the future relations between Estonia and the State of Israel.

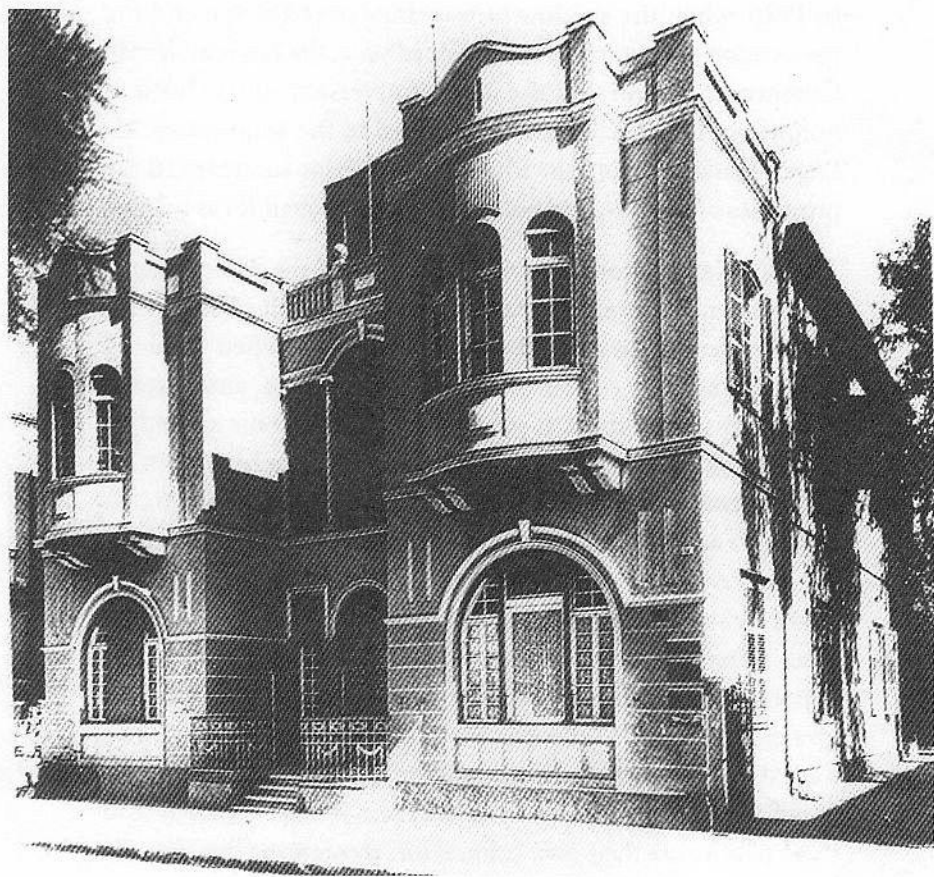


Socialist Zionist movement activists with David Ben-Gurion
in Tallinn on 5 May 1933.

Source: the Estonian Jewish Museum.



Letter from Estonian Jews from Palestine to the Estonian people and State Elder on the Day of Independence of Estonia, 24 February 1935.
Source: the Estonian Jewish Museum.



The Litwinsky House at Achad Ha'am St 22 in Tel Aviv –
the location of the Estonian Honorary Consulate in the 1930s.
Source: Estonian Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Oasis of Tolerance

In 1936, when the shadow of war drew over Europe and the persecution of Jews in Germany gained pace, the Estonian Jewish Community celebrated the 10th anniversary of its Cultural Autonomy. In the publication dedicated to the anniversary, Mr. Eugen Madissoo from the Ministry of Interior summarised the principles of the Estonian policy towards nationalities as follows:

“The people of Estonia, having been one of the minorities in the Russian Empire, has travelled along its path of sufferings and this cannot be deleted from its memory. When it gained its independence, established its state and home, and became a majority nation itself, it proclaimed that its home should be home to all peoples living on its territory. There have been no fights between majority and minority nations in Estonia, this is why there are no winners and no losers. National minorities have not gained anything, and nothing has been given them as a gift either. What belongs to them, and what they live, is natural and clear in itself, and it has been recognised as belonging to them as a national minority. There has never been a question in Estonia, to give or not to give, to allow or not to allow – there has only been a question how to give or how to secure the principle of the rights of national minorities, how to secure them the right belonging to them to organise their own cultural life. By securing this, Estonia has recognised cultural autonomies of national minorities as a cornerstone of its statehood. The anniversary we now celebrate is thus an anniversary of the whole Estonian people.”

Without a doubt, interwar Estonia was not completely free of anti-Semitism: expressions of it could be found in the internal political fights, characteristic to the global economic crisis and

depression in the 1930s, somewhat in the newspapers, and there are some written testimonies of incidents on the level of everyday life. However, they were extremely rare, and there was no anti-Semitism on the state level in the independent Estonia. Proving this is an article in “The Jewish Chronicles”, published on 25 September 1936, with a remarkable title: “Estonia – An Oasis of Toleration”.

Estonia: An Oasis of Toleration

Because of her remarkably rapid economic recovery and the prevailing low cost of living, Estonia has recently been called the “Golden Corner of Europe”. But by whatever fair name this beautiful little country may be called on account of her economic position, it can certainly be said that her treatment of Jews does her honour. Estonia is the only country in Eastern Europe where neither the Government nor the people practise any discrimination against Jews and where Jews are left in peace. [...] When Estonia won her independence after the War, the Jews were granted full rights. By the Estonian Constitution, all national minorities were granted equality, while every minority numbering over 3,000 was, if it so desired, also granted cultural autonomy, with the privilege of organising and administering public and private schools and other educational institutions and of establishing a Cultural Council and a Cultural Board of Control. The German minority, numbering some 18,000, immediately took advantage of this privilege and established their Cultural Board and their own schools. The Jews were longer in organising themselves culturally. In 1926, representatives of Estonian Jewry finally met in Tallinn and formed a Cultural Council and Board (the latter is now presided over by Mr Aisenstadt, a leading Jewish figure in Estonia). The Board organised three Jewish schools, towards the upkeep of which the State contributes the major part.

THROUGH THE BALTIC STATES

III—ESTONIA

An Oasis of Toleration

(From our Special Correspondent—TALLINN, ESTONIA)

Because of the remarkably rapid economic recovery and the prevailing law cost of living, Estonia has recently been called the "Golden Corner of Europe." But by whatever law none the beautiful little country may be called on account of its economic position it can certainly be said that the treatment of Jews does not bear honor. Estonia is the only country in Eastern Europe where neither the Government nor the people practice any discrimination against Jews and where Jews are left in peace. In sharp contrast to the other national embassies granted to Estonia, Jews ten years ago (1923) held the post and Jews are allowed to lead a free and unimpeded life and labor in the broad world, their unmet and unfulfilled needs.

The Estonian Jewish population is a small one, but of a high order of achievement. There are about 3,000 Jews in Estonia, only about 100 in Tallinn, the capital, the others living in Tartu (Reval), Narva, Valga, Pärnu and other smaller towns and villages. The first Jewish settlements in Estonia date back to the early thirteenth century. In 1222, however, the Russian Tsar, under whose domination Estonia was for centuries, expelled all Jews. In 1828, some 300 Jewish men aged from ten to fourteen, were, according to a local historian, sent to Estonia to serve as "Soviet" labor. The majority of these, made in four working battalions, had such the survivors were later allowed to remain and settle in Estonia. In 1856, there was in Tallinn, then known as Reval, a Jewish Community numbering 675. Its growth was slow, as the Russian Emperor forbade settlement in Estonia and particularly in Reval, which was one of Russia's main fortresses.

When Estonia was liberated after the War, the Jews were granted full rights. If, in the Estonian Constitution, all national minorities were granted equal rights, while every minority numbering over 2,000 was it at least, was granted cultural autonomy, with the privilege of organizing and administering public and private schools



Dr. Konstantin Perts, Professor of Estonian Language.

three Jewish schools, towards the upkeep of which the State contributes the major part. Besides the State language, Hebrew and Yiddish are now taught to some 500 Jewish children in Tallinn, Tartu, Valga and other towns. The Board consists of twenty seven members elected every three years. Its activities are controlled by the Estonian Ministry of Education. It can levy taxes, which the Government collects for three years. In practice, one member of the Jewish national assembly and subject to the Board's rules. On the other hand, every Jew has a right to leave the Estonian Community if he so desires. This, however, occurs very rarely, since Estonian Jews are proud of their cultural autonomy.

The religious spirit predominating among the Estonian Jews is best evidenced by the "Shabbat Club" in Tallinn, one of the finest cultural institutions in Eastern Europe, containing a well-equipped library, a spacious reading room and a theatre. The 200,000 Jews of Moscow have nothing to equal it. Its inspiring spirit, chief organizer and professor is Mr. N. Loewen, a worthy business man.

Estonia's recent attitude towards the minorities has also given local Jews another opportunity which is unique in Europe today. As a logical consequence of their cultural autonomy, the Jews have been given the right to organize a separate Faculty of Studies at Estonia's only University of Tartu, after a petition by the Jewish Cultural Board to the Government in 1929. The Government promptly announced that such a Faculty would be opened as part of the Faculty of Philosophy, with the right of students to graduate in that department, the course to be provided by the Jewish Cultural Board, but the communication to be granted by the University. Owing to lack of funds the Chair was not opened till 1934, the public spirit of Mr. Paul Gonsky, of London, chief sponsor interested in Tartu, making the decision possible. In latter thirteenth, a former lecturer in Leipzig, was invited to occupy the Chair. Today about 12 per cent. of all Jewish students at the Tartu University attend this Faculty. Apart from its great value for Jewish studies, the Chair also plays a beneficial part in spreading Jewish thought and knowledge both inside and outside the University. Non-Jewish students are invited to attend the lectures, which are also frequented by a number of non-Jewish students.



Estonia's attitude to her Jews at a time when in many of the neighboring countries they are shamefully deprived of human rights has been of benefit not only to her Jews but also to the country at large. Estonia appears to regard Jews as the rapid development of which the Jews have played a most beneficial role. If Estonia has remained the only one in Eastern Europe, the Jews are largely responsible, and this is readily accepted by the Estonians themselves. It is significant that in the other Baltic countries where discrimination against Jews is general, economic recovery is much slower than in Estonia. A prominent Estonian leader with whom I discussed the conditions which undoubtedly exist, particularly in the Baltic countries, between the treatment of Jews and the economic situation, said: "We have granted complete freedom to the Jews, just as we have to the other minorities. The Jews have repaid a thousandfold by their industry, quality and persistence."

Of course, Nazi propaganda purveyors to Estonia as elsewhere, had long ago, Estonia Nationalists, known as the "Vapses," tried to spread anti-Jewish feelings. However, thanks to Konstantin Perts, the President, the anti-Jewish movement was stopped in the last term it would affect the normal relations between Jews and non-Jews.

Street scene in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, which was built with the help of Jewish "industries" using Jewish capital conscripted to serve in the Russian Army of The Kaiser's I and other educational institutions and of establishing a Cultural Council and a Cultural Board of Control. The German university, numbering some 15,000 students, took advantage of this privilege and established their Cultural Board and their own schools. The Jews were largely in organizing themselves culturally. In 1926, representatives of Estonian Jews finally met in Tallinn and formed a Cultural Council and Board, the latter is now presided over by Dr. Agreston, a leading Jewish figure in Estonia. The Board organized

BOARD OF DEPUTIES COORDINATING DEFENCE COMMITTEE OPEN AIR MEETINGS	
HYDE PARK Sunday, 11.30 a.m. Mrs. MONICA WHEATLEY RABBI L. RADNOWNITZ Mr. S. B. GILBER Mr. ALEXANDER HARRIS (Chairman, Ex-Secretary) (Hewson) Mr. F. ROZOWITZ	HAMPSTEAD HEATH Sunday, 11.50 a.m. Mr. HANES COHEN Mr. C. M. PICCIOTTO Mr. F. M. LINDAU Mr. JACQUES COHEN

Article "Estonia: An Oasis of Toleration" in "The Jewish Chronicle" on 25 September 1936. Source: the Estonian Jewish Museum.

Besides the State language, Hebrew and Yiddish are now taught to some 500 Jewish children in Tallinn, Tartu and Valga. The Board consists of twenty-seven members elected every three years. Its activities are controlled by the Estonian Ministry of Education. It can levy taxes, which the Government collects for it, and every Jew is considered a member of the Jewish national minority and subject to the Board's rules. On the other hand, every Jew has a right to leave the Jewish Community if he so desires. This, however, occurs very rarely, since Estonian Jews are proud of their cultural autonomy. [...] Estonia's correct attitude towards its minorities has also given local Jewry another opportunity which is unique in Europe to-day. As a logical conclusion of their cultural autonomy, the Jews have been given the right to establish a separate Chair of Judaica at Estonia's only University at Tartu, after a petition by the Jewish Cultural Board to the Government in 1929. The Government promptly announced that such a Chair would be opened as part of the Faculty of Philosophy, with the right of students to graduate in that department, the funds to be provided by the Jewish Cultural Board, but the accommodation to be granted by the University. Owing to lack of funds, the Chair was not opened till 1934, the public spirit of Mr. Paul Goodman, of London, who is specially interested in Tartu, making its inception possible. Dr. Lazar Gulkovitch, a former lecturer in Leipzig, was invited to occupy the Chair. To-day, about 12 per cent of the all-Jewish students at the Tartu University attend this Faculty. Apart from its great value for Jewish studies, the Chair also plays a beneficial part in spreading Jewish thought and knowledge both inside and outside the University. Non-Jewish professors are invited to attend the lectures, which are also frequented by a number of non-Jewish students.

Estonia's attitude to her Jews at a time when in many of the neighboring countries they are shamelessly deprived of human rights has been of benefit not only to the Jews, but also to the country at large. Estonia depends on export trade, in the rapid development of which the Jews have played a most beneficial role. If Estonia has overcome the crisis and is without unemployment, the Jews are largely responsible, and this is readily conceded by the Estonians themselves. [...] A prominent Estonian leader with whom I discussed the connection which undoubtedly exists, particularly in the Baltic countries, between the treatment of Jews and the economic situation, said: "We have granted complete freedom to the Jews, just as we have to the other minorities. The Jews have repaid a thousandfold by their industry, loyalty and patriotism." [...]

The Jewish Chronicles, 25.09.1936 p. 22-23.



Library of Bialik Society in Tallinn (1930s). Source: TLA.1382.1.15.
(the Tallinn City Archives).

From the Grip of the Occupying Powers to the Restored Independence and Modern-day Democracy

A fatal blow hit the Republic of Estonia and its Jewish community when the two totalitarian regimes, Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union signed an agreement on 23 August 1939, shared between themselves the territories of the states that were situated between them, and initiated the Second World War. In the summer 1940, while Nazi German troops marched to Paris, the Soviet Union occupied the Republic of Estonia, annihilated its state order and, alongside other institutions of civil society, put an end to the Jewish Cultural autonomy. The Soviet regime destroyed the cultural and educational life of national minorities, closed down the Chair of Jewish Studies of the University of Tartu and liquidated the Jewish Cultural Autonomy bodies. On 14 June 1941, the Soviets organised their first campaign of deportations; about 10 000 persons were taken by force from their homes and transported to Siberia and Ural mountains in Russia. About 400 Jews – 10% of the whole Estonian Jewish population which, proportionally, suffered thus the biggest loss – were among those deported. In the second half of June 1941, in the course of Soviet and German fighting, Nazi troops invaded Estonia. About half of Estonian Jews managed to escape the Nazis by evacuating to the Russian territory. About 12% of them fought in the Soviet Army. The rest (about 1000 people) who did not want or could not evacuate, remained in occupied Estonia and were murdered by Nazis, among them the Professor of Jewish Studies Lazar Gulkowitsch with his family. One of the very few Jews who escaped the atrocities was a student of Jewish Studies,

Isidor Levin. The University of Tartu scholar and poet Uku Masing and his wife Eha Masing saved him. Uku and Eha Masing are recognised as Righteous Among the Nations and a tree is planted in their honor in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.

During the Nazi German occupation, many Jews were transported to concentration camps in occupied Estonia from other parts of Nazi-dominated Europe. It is a sad fact that there were Estonian citizens who collaborated with the Nazis and participated in the crimes committed against the Jewish people. Nowadays Estonian authorities have repeatedly condemned the activities of all individuals – whether they were the representatives of a foreign power or Estonian citizens – who committed crimes against humanity and carried out mass repressions in occupied Estonia.

All the bitter blows of destiny and half a century of occupations could not do away with the aspiration for independence and democracy among the Estonian population. In March 1988, the Jewish Cultural Society was founded in Tallinn. After the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991, the Jewish Community was established in 1992. The Tallinn Jewish School was re-opened in 1990, being the first school for a national minority to be established in the restored Republic of Estonia. On 16 May 2007 a new synagogue was opened in Tallinn. It can accommodate 200 people and also functions as a cultural center. It is located next to the Jewish School and the Community Center.

The wish and will of the interwar Republic of Estonia to secure for all of its citizens their natural right to national self-determination can be a source of inspiration for generations to come. The Jewish community, conscious of its roots and confident for its future, is once again a natural and inseparable part of the Estonian society.

Juudi palve Eesti Vabariigi eest.

תפילה בעד ארץ אסתי.

Kõige vägevam Jumal, kuningate kuningas, kes Sa valitsed taevas ja maa peal! Ava oma taevallikkude rikkuste õnnistus ja kalla oma heldus Eesti Vabariigi peale. Kinnita ja kosuta teda.

Õnnista, Jumal, selle maa valitsejaid ja nõuandjaid: valitsegu neid tarkuse, mõistlikkuse ja mehisuse vaim, et nad seisaksid kindlasti omas ametis ja teeksid head ja õigust kõigele rahvastele Eestis.

Jumal, kaitse oma lüüdmata armus selle linna ja kõike Eesti Vabariigi elanikke igasuguse kurjuse ja õnnefuse eest igasuguse pealetungimise ja segaduse eest. Õitsegu välimine ja sisemine rahu meie isamaal.

Mingu täide ja sündigu Issanda tahtmine!

Aamen!

אל שולם מלך מלכים הממשל בשמים ובארץ. פתח אוצר ברכת שמך ומשוך חסדך על ארץ אסתי. חזק ואמץ אותה וממשלתה.

ברך נא האל את יועצי המלוכה. גם כל העומדים על מקודתה ברוכים יהיו ליי. רוח חכמה עצה וגבורה עליהם תננה. למען ישמרו את משמרתם לעשות הטוב והישר לכל עמי ארץ אסתי.

אנא האל. הסר ברחמך הרבים מיושבי העיר הזאת וממל שוכני ארץ אסתי כל חלי וכל מדוה. כל נגע וכל פגע רע. ישרה ישע ויפרח שלום בארצנו. ושבע שמחות ישכן בקרבנו.

כה יוסוף יי וכה יתן!

אמן!

A Jewish prayer for the Republic of Estonia (most probably from 1938, in connection with the 20th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia).

Source: ERA.1107.1.109.5. (the Estonian State Archives).