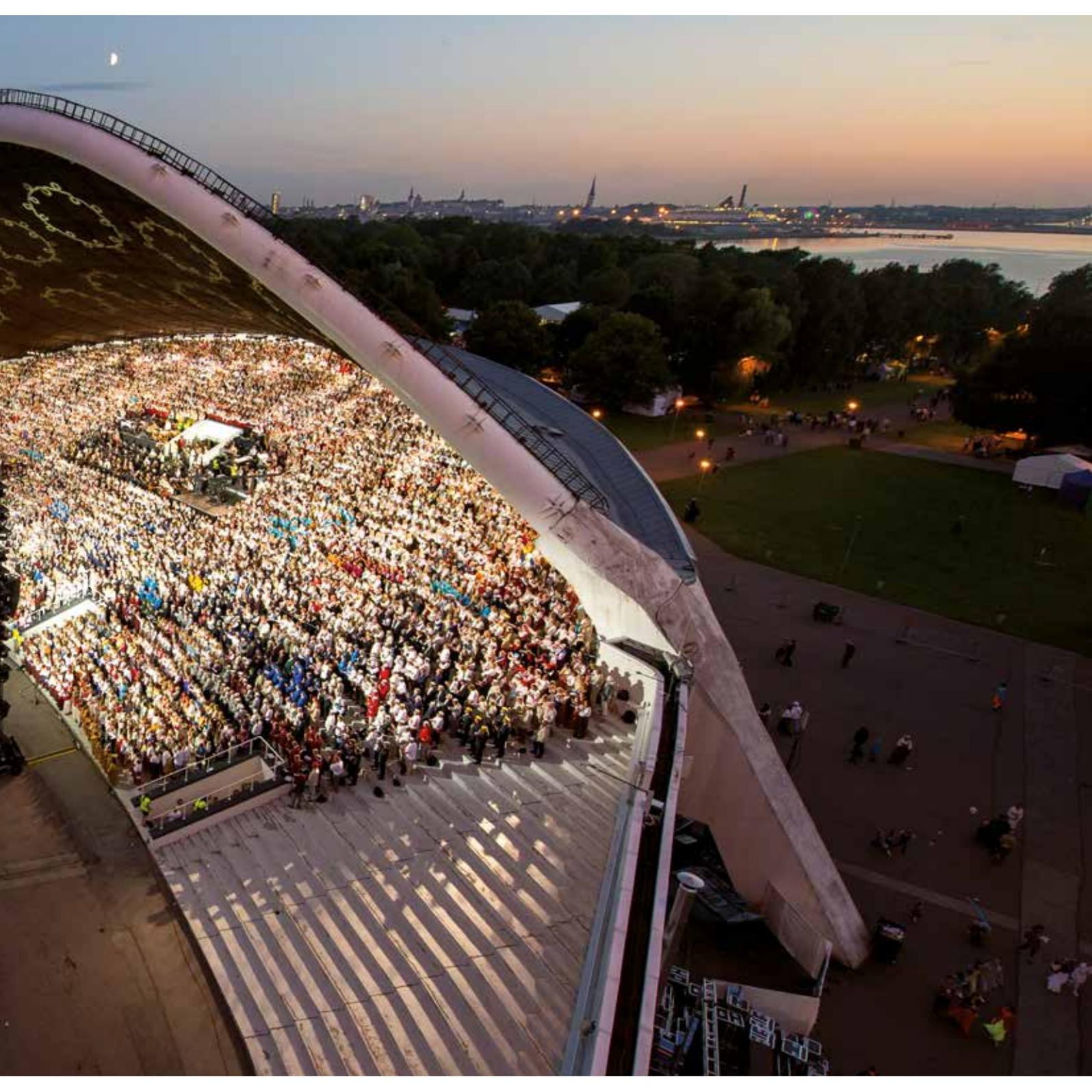
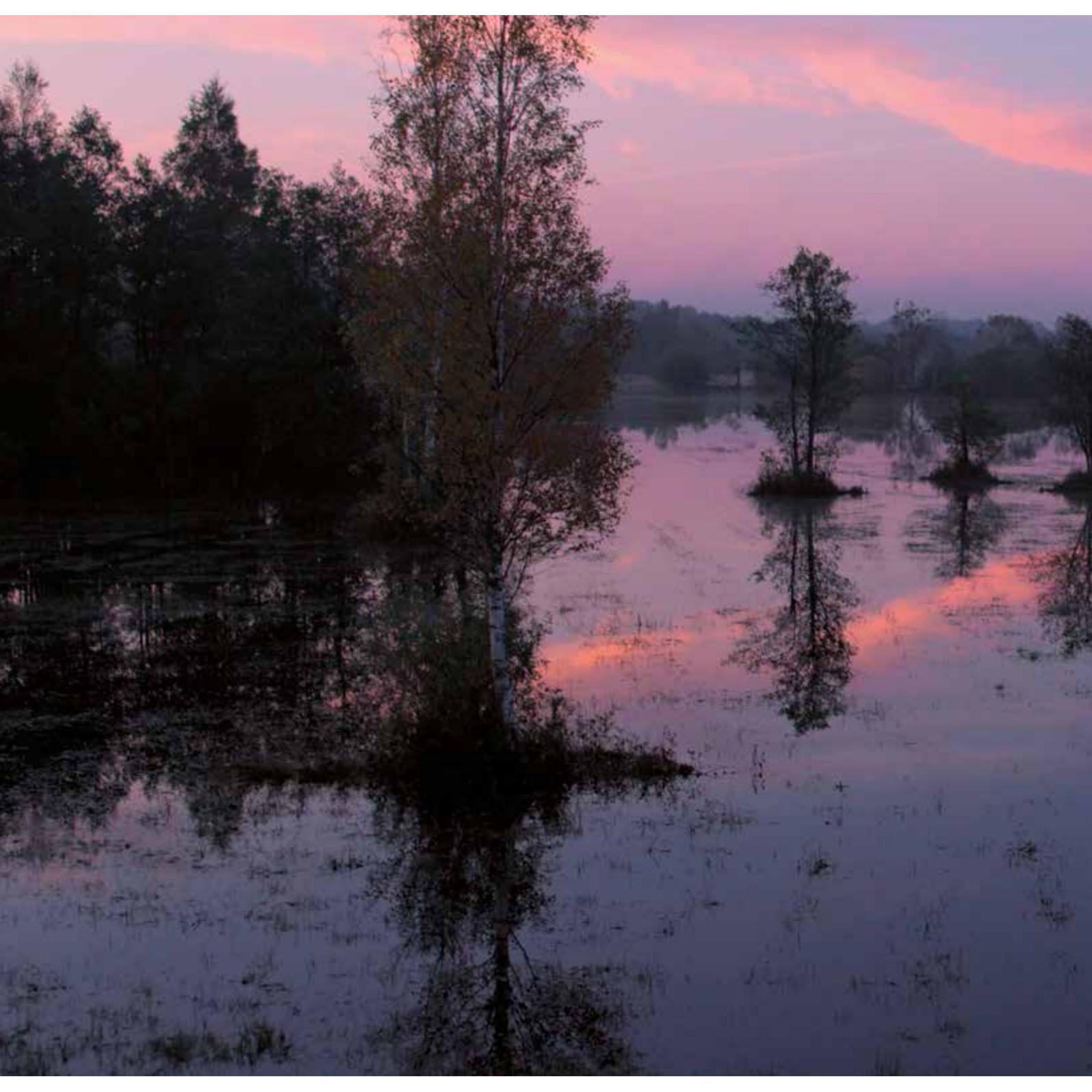


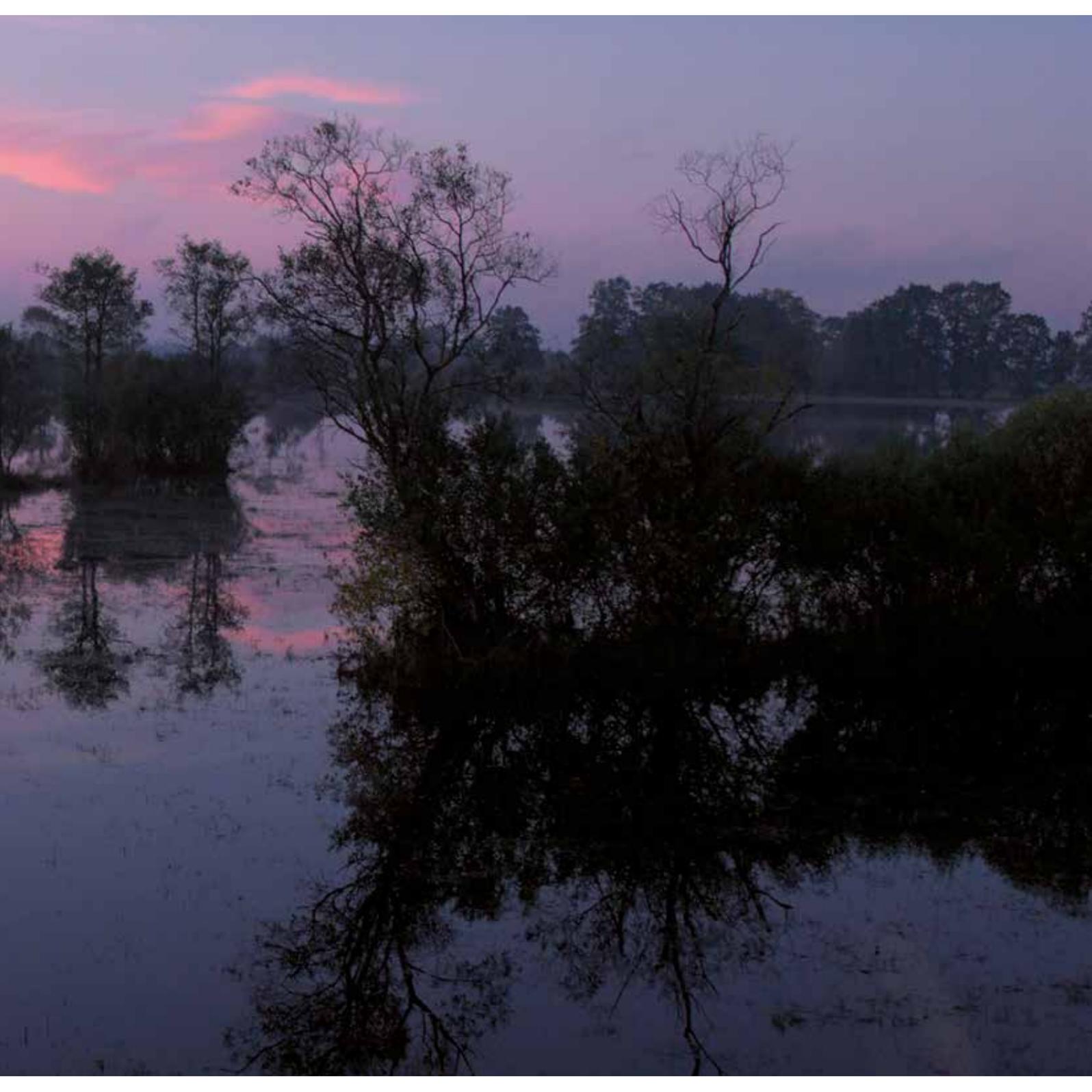
Celebration

Estonian Song and Dance Celebrations
1000 choirs
1000 dance groups
an audience of 300 000











A song festival has never been fashionable because it is not a thing of fashion. A song festival is for the heart. Just like the Estonian language and spirit, like love itself.

Lennart Meri (1929–2006)

Ethnologist, filmmaker, former President of the Republic of Estonia



The sea stopped here ...

Even with extremely acute eyesight, when looking down at the Earth from space, it is possible that one would not see Estonia's 45,000 square kilometres on the shores of the Baltic Sea straightaway. It's okay.

Our ancestors knew what to do about that – if you cannot be seen, you must be heard. But how does a nation, quiet by nature and living in small families dispersed amongst forests or in urban nests, make itself heard?



Actually, it is not particularly complicated – Estonians, with a population of about 1.3 million – have discovered a means to do just that. For 150 years we have been organising song celebrations, and for 85 years dance celebrations, which bring together almost the entire nation.

Naturally, a prerequisite for the success and survival of such celebrations is that this nation should start singing from a young age, and, naturally, their own songs. The music for a proper song celebration bridges generations and can be sung by toddlers in kindergarten, by their parents and grandparents.

All-Estonian song and dance celebrations take place every five years. The repertory for each festival is decided two years beforehand and then rehearsals begin. First, every choir and dance group aspiring to join in prepares for a regional competition in which only the best go forward to the national celebration. Once this hurdle is passed, rehearsals continue.

There are thousands of choirs, folk dance groups and orchestras in Estonia. Some of them have attended song and dance festivals for decades; often several generations of a family sing and dance together.

Rehearsals take place after school and after work, a few days a week. With admirable patience and infinite enthusiasm, the singers and dancers polish their syllables, steps, notes and harmonies.

Finally on the festival grounds, singers and dancers spend several days adjusting the arrangement of dances and harmony of songs: after all, they have come from various places, far and near. At the celebration, they must perform as one.

At the celebration, thousands sing and dance, almost a hundred thousand listen and watch. For three days. In any weather. People eat, drink and are together. On top of all that, in their homes, many people around Estonia and around the world watch these festivities live on TV and via the Internet.

But why? Why do they all come together and sing and dance and make music? And why does the audience enjoy it?





Estonians don't worship their military past; rather, we keep our unity alive in another way. Instead of fighting together, our sacred heroic feat is singing together. Echoes of songs mark the borders of our homeland. We are one big buzzing beehive whose life force flourishes and grows thanks to its secret language and songs.

What is this secret language, you ask? Estonian is one of the Finno-Ugric languages, and it is spoken by about a million people in the world. So, it is a rare language, which survival depends to a great extent on the song and dance celebrations. Singing keeps the mother tongue alive. Keeping the Estonian language alive is our modest contribution to cultural diversity in the world.

The song and dance celebration is not a once-off event; it's a process which perpetuates culture, language and traditions. Song and dance nourish the soul, language helps preserve it. Speakers of all languages are welcome to our song and dance celebration! Because above all, song and dance are also languages – bridge-building, all-embracing, instinctively intelligible languages.

In choirs, egos dissolve. Choral singing is the opposite of egotism. The best choral singer in the world is someone whom nobody knows, someone who skilfully blends into the choir. And the best folk dancer in the world is someone who blends into the pattern on the dance field. Estonians have thousands of "the best choral singers and folk dancers in the world".



The Estonian choral singing tradition has three supporting pillars. First, the ancient form of folk songs, the runo, where the choir repeats the words of the lead singer.

The second strong influence was Martin Luther's chorale. Luther established the importance of the word in the church service, which fortuitously linked up with older rituals of local nations. Acceptance of Lutheranism was also accompanied by improved literacy and sight-reading.

The third pillar contributing to the development of Estonian choral singing tradition was the Herrnhuter brotherhood, who arrived in Estonia in the 18th century and who, unlike the official church, favoured collective singing.

For Estonians, song and dance festivals are mighty rituals which persist from century to century. This is our trip to the sacred grove, our prayer and our being.

Pilgrimage

An integral part of every song and dance celebration is a parade. It is a kind of pilgrimage which brings together all performers and their supporters; it's also a party in the high street, the samba carnival of the North, so to speak.

The parade comprises choirs and ensembles from Estonia and abroad. They're happy and proud – they have been chosen from among many applicants, and they have been practising their songs and dances for this grand festival, which is about to begin now. They are proud of their home, flags, colours, national costumes and themselves. The parade is the final stage where the choirs showcase their unique voices and colours, before they all become a unified entity.

The parade is organised into counties; the number of participants exceeds 40 thousand. One of the more important parts of the parade is its head, which comprises the general leaders of the celebration, as well as the flame and the festival emblems. The most esteemed amongst the esteemed – the veteran leaders of the celebration – are usually invited to join the head of the procession. When generations cradle each other and share their experiences, traditions are preserved.



The parade has a set route in Tallinn and proceeds from Freedom Square to the Song Festival Grounds. Time allocated for the parade is five hours.

The procession moves through the city. Traffic is halted. People come from far and near to see the parade, take pictures and cheer. The singers and dancers flow like a river toward the festival grounds. Cheering the parade provides the spectators with a sense of participation in the celebration. The jubilant crowds rightfully believe that they too contribute to the common undertaking.

When the procession arrives at the festival site and the public settles in, the crucial moment is finally here: the festival flame is lit. The party may begin.

Oh rain, my brother

Rain has always been a good companion for Estonians. It was certainly acknowledged by our ancestors – one of their traditional songs was called “Oh Rain, My Brother”.

Naturally, the song and dance celebrations have not escaped the rain. Not only that – on occasion, rain has assumed the role of the director and changed the trajectory of the parade as well as locations of performance sites.

One of the earlier examples of rain conducting the party comes from the third song celebration in 1880 (the first song festival to take place in Tallinn). Because of the heavy downpour of rain, there were fears that there wouldn't be enough people at the celebration, and there was a wish to let everyone know that the celebration was still on. Since there was no mass media, the paraders journeyed through town, knocking on doors and inviting people to come out and join them.





During the 2004 festival, the organising committee decided to cancel the second performance of the dance festival as well as the parade because of particularly awful weather conditions. Nevertheless, a large number of singers and conductors decided to walk the route of the parade. At the head of the unofficial procession was Eri Klas, the chief conductor of the first concert; the festival flame was also carried along. Thousands of people participated in that spontaneous unofficial parade – Estonian performers and Finnish drummers, a Norwegian brass band and the Estonian mixed choir from Toronto.

In 2017, the youth song and dance celebration was hit by very bad weather and one of the dance shows was cancelled at the last minute. The young dancers, however, could not be stopped. They assembled in Tallinn's Freedom Square and initiated a spontaneous dance party in the pouring rain. Social media spread the information fast and it became an exhilarating and iconic event, showing just how deeply rooted these celebratory rituals are within us.

Fire, walk with me!

Fire has played a leading role in empowerment ceremonies since time immemorial. Fire has a powerful purifying effect; fire eliminates everything excessive. Singing has a similar effect. If you sing at the top of your voice, you forget your stomach ache or your bank loan. Only the good remains. You are free!

Fire unites us, linking the past with the future. In recent years, the song and dance celebrations have taken place in Tallinn, but the original flame was lit in Tartu, the cradle of our song festivals. The flame was lit and it united the gathered peasants into one nation.

The song festival flame travels across Estonia; accompanied by singers, dancers and musicians, men, women and children. The flame's journey begins in Tartu and ends in Tallinn. The flame does not often take the straightest roads but meanders across the land, inviting everyone to come along, spreading the spirit of singing and dancing.

The flame takes several weeks to arrive at the site of the celebration.

This is the prelude to the party; this spreads the values and power of the song and dance festival to even the remotest corners of Estonia. The flame's arrival is always a powerful event full of heartfelt emotions.

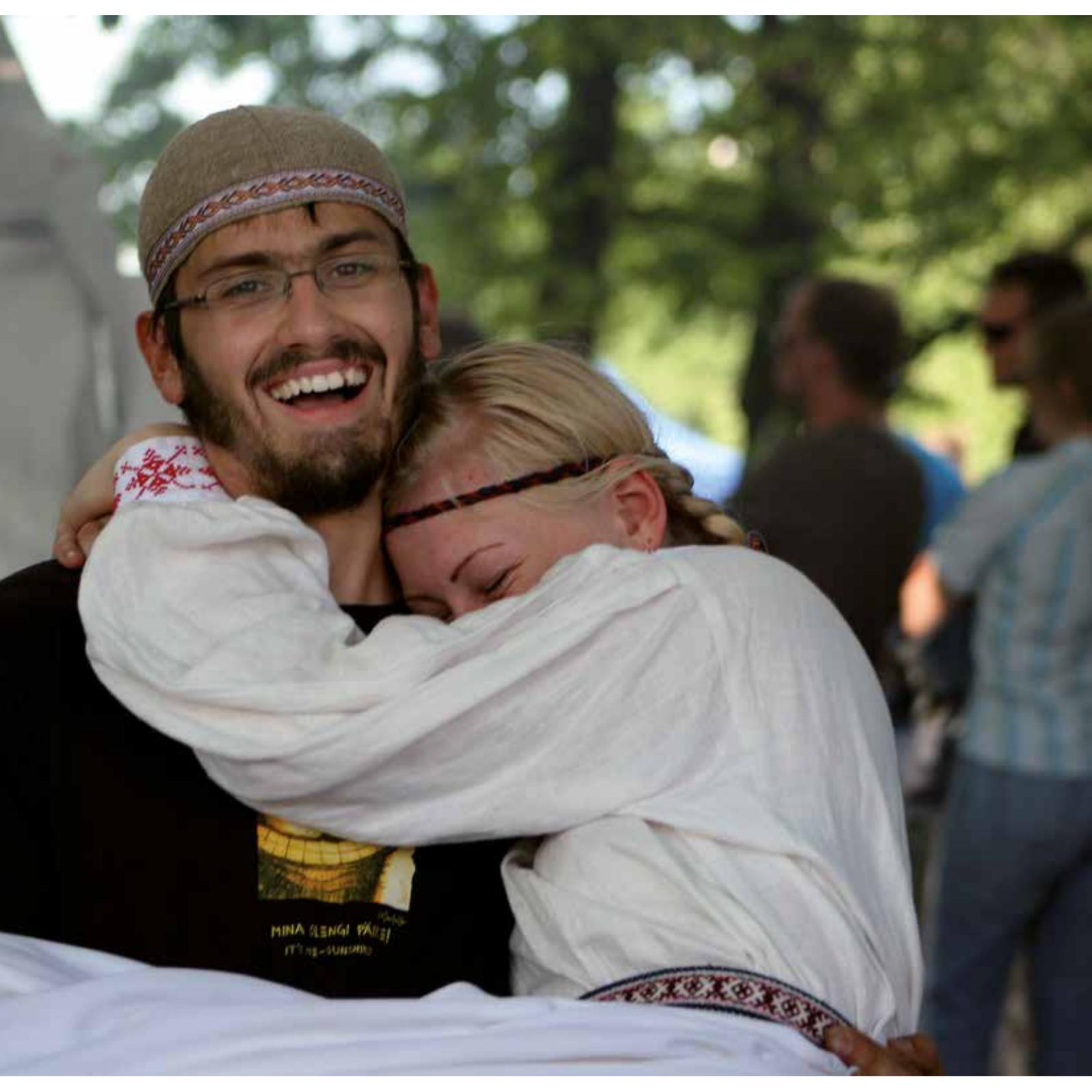
The first time such a journey took place was in 1969 – to celebrate one hundred years of song festivals.

Sometimes the flame travels on a horse-drawn carriage, sometimes on a lorry or on a bicycle, sometimes on boats along rivers and the sea. In 2019, on the 50th anniversary of the birth of the flame-carrying tradition, the flame's journey will be especially spectacular – the flame will travel through every county in 33 days, kindling joy everywhere and inviting people to join the festival.





When the flame finally reaches the festival site, it ascends to the top of the tower and is used to light the Cauldron to the accompaniment of the massed choirs singing the traditional song "Koit" (Dawn). The flame remains alight until the end of the festival.



MINA DENGİ PAKIŞI
IT'NE-SUNUŞU

Nobody is alone

For a song celebration to succeed, the performers and the audience must be in accord. There are tens of thousands of performers, and many times more viewers-listeners, but they are balanced. One would not exist without the other.

It is fairly simple for the performers: they have worked hard for years to get to the celebration, and once there, their actions are determined by the programme. The audience, on the other hand, is free and more disorganised; yet their role is crucial to the success of the event. The audience of a nationwide song and dance celebration is generally well aware of what is expected of them. Those that aren't soon catch on.

To be present here and now: this is the distinct feature of a great festival, which can never be reproduced. Visitors are thus advised to enjoy everything to the full. Besides songs and dances, the party mood is also determined by the sun and clouds, mobile phones ringing and children shrieking in delight. These are all components of great festivities and such details become permanent fragments in the kaleidoscope of people's memory.

Therefore, dear visitors, rejoice. You are all significant features of the festival, like the gusts of wind and raindrops on your face.

The bandstand is a sacred place

Estonians cherish bandstands; they know that on festival grounds rituals are performed and a common spirit grows. There are thousands of them across the country. Every self-respecting village has one. The song festival site's value is spiritual. Nobody would dream of herding pigs, sowing rye or planting trees there. People gather on that site and the site turns that gathering into a cultural event.

When villagers gather at the song festival grounds they forget any ill feelings they might harbour towards one another. The grounds spread positive vibrations. There is no rivalry, no life-and-death struggle, quarrels are forgotten. It is how it is. The charm and pain of rural existence. As most farmhouses are located quite far from one another, song festival sites act as places to come together, to sing and dance and check out the jolly single people. It would be silly to waste this crucial time trading punches. Those who do die out. Therefore, people who survive the natural selection process on song festival grounds seem to be truly mild-mannered; and, usually taciturn, they readily burst into song.





But we know that as important as the ability to sing is the ability to listen. Therefore, in 2017, students of the Estonian Academy of Arts designed and built bandstands for the forest, or wooden megaphones, called RUUP, which allow us to listen to the forest and ourselves. To do that, we simply have to lie down on the forest floor right on the edge of Estonia and lend an ear to one of the three wooden megaphones scattered among the mighty fir trees. So we can take part in nature's own great song festivals.

And like every great symphony is composed of small notes, the great song and dance celebrations grew out of small events of singing and dancing together. Small song and dance festivals that occur between the great celebrations are vital components of the tradition. Yes, local festivities and all-Estonian song celebrations mutually support and feed each other – they are the roots, trunk and branches of one tree.

And this world tree with its buzzing crown supports the sky.

The highest arches in Estonia stand over the singing stage, the largest squares are the song festival grounds.

The all-Estonian song celebration takes place at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds, where the roof above the stage is a rare design on a global scale – this 30 m tall arch, built without pillars, is entirely unsupported – a triumph of the architects' and engineers' wisdom. The stage and arch were constructed in 1960 for song festivals. Subsequently, the Vilnius song festival stage was modelled on this design.

The project's authors are architects Alar Kotli and Henno Sepman.



Whatever happens on the Song Festival Grounds, it does so under the guardianship of Gustav Ernesaks, the legendary composer and conductor - the Estonians' Father of Song. Ernesaks, however, is not looking at the grounds from the conductor's rostrum, where we would have seen him during his lifetime; instead, he's sitting on the grass - where the spectators sit during festivals. He's with the people to whom his heart belonged.

The memorial to Gustav Ernesaks was designed by Ekke Väli and Vello Lillemets.



How to silence 30 000 singers?

We can praise the choirs, song festivals and the audience, but ultimately we are faced with the question: how is a song released from a choir? Who pulls the rabbit out of the hat? This is a job for the conductor. Trust between the conductor and singers, and faith in each other's abilities form a wonderful foundation for music.

However, a conductor and democracy have nothing in common. A true conductor is an enlightened monarch, the leader and teacher of the choir.

A conductor's face is a feature of paramount importance. The more musical the face, the more successfully the conductor can elicit delicate subtlety from the choir. Sometimes a conductor is photographed from below, as if a still image of someone waving a baton against the background of clouds endows that person with more power and sublimity. All wrong. This kind of image conveys solitude. A proper conductor always has people in the background. While conducting, there is the audience; and, when the conductor bows to the audience, the choir becomes the background.



It is certainly impressive to see the conductor ascend the dais – they lift their hands and ... silence descends over the festival grounds. 30 000 silent singers on stage, eyes fixed on the conductor – this is an unforgettable experience! It is not that difficult to make 30 000 singers sing together, they are, after all, trained to do that. But not everyone can make 30 000 singers be silent simultaneously.

This moment is the highlight in the career of every conductor. In preparation for this they work on a song for two years, and with choirs all over Estonia for six months.





Born into a choir

Over 40 000 people in Estonia sing in choirs. The number of choirs is over 1300, and the number of specially trained choir conductors is about 1000. Approximately half of all Estonians participate in choirs or dance groups at some point in their life! And they all take part at least once in a song or dance celebration.

In Estonia, there are more people singing in choirs than in any other country. Choral singing is included in the curricula of most schools.

How about dancing?

Nobody knows when Estonians first danced. Maybe during the winter solstice, by stomping around and making noise, trying to frighten the mythical wolf who had supposedly swallowed the sun.

In the 12th century, the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus wrote about the Estonian warriors: "...in order to conceal their soured mood, they pretended to be merry by singing and dancing like bacchantes ...".

Although the medieval inquisition and local pastors believed the dances to be pagan rituals performed to the accompaniment of bagpipes, the practice stubbornly refused to die out. Apparently, the Estonians were especially keen to enhance their fertility by dancing.

In the 19th century, the world was conquered by the polka, and one hundred years later the Estonians were dancing it in fifteen different ways. Recording folk dances became all the rage, and dance groups popped up like mushrooms after rain. The logical result of all this was the birth of the Estonian dance celebration.



The first dance and gymnastics festival – called the Estonian Games – took place in 1934. At that festival, 1500 folk dancers performed between gymnastics programmes. By then, the folk dance movement had been spreading throughout Estonia for a decade, inspired by the Nordic countries. Besides recording and teaching old dances, the movement also created new dances, with contemporary choreography. Dance celebrations in fact grew out of the organised joint performances of these groups.

“My pot-shaped cap fell off during the very first dance and remained in the grass to the end. But I felt so wonderful and proud,” 98-year-old Ilse Tarang, a participant in the 1934 Estonian Games, said in 2004.



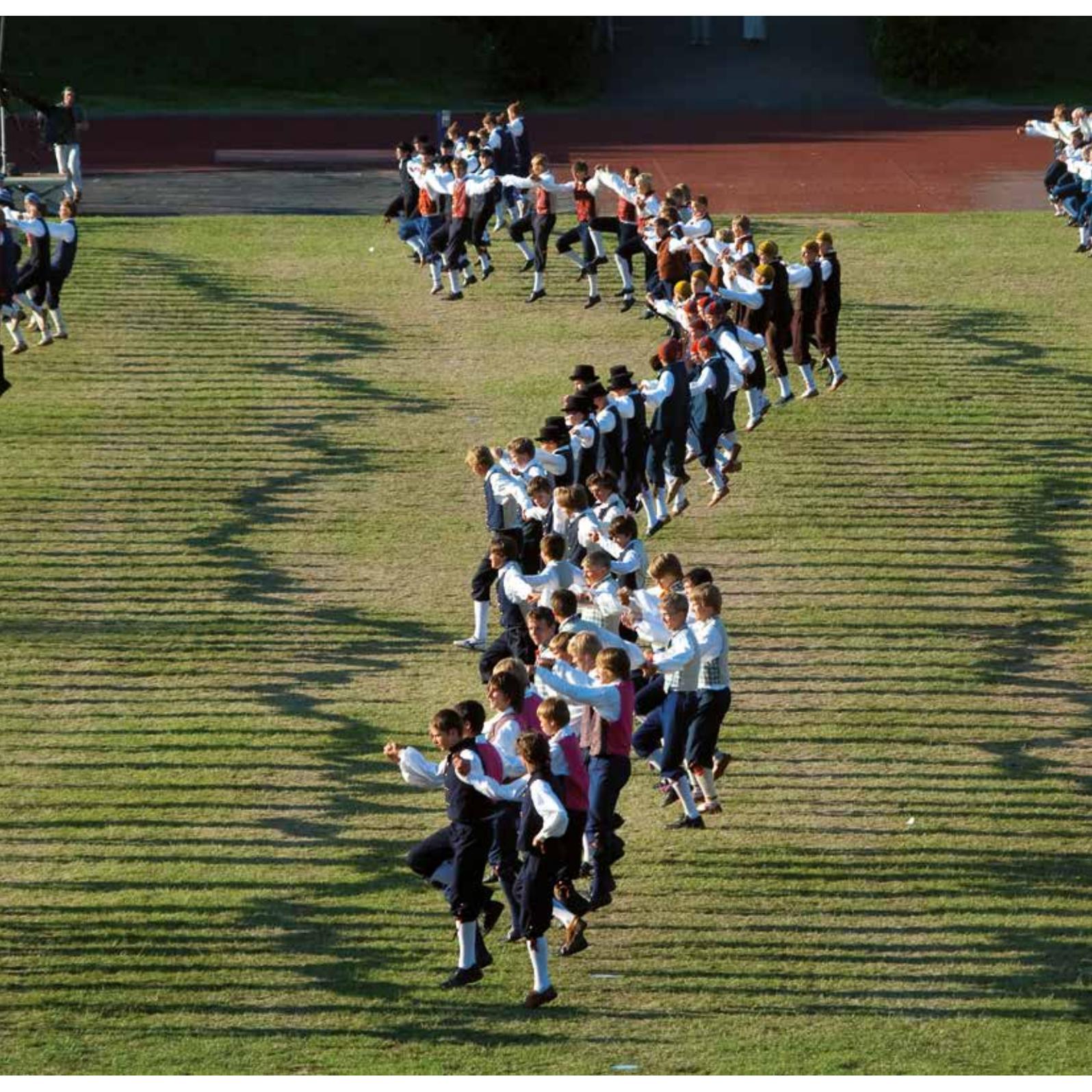
Dance pattern

Those who have ever witnessed up to 10 000 people in folk costumes create stunning patterns in a stadium will probably never forget it. A 90-minute show of cohesive dance formations takes years of rehearsing.

Estonian folk dances are not flamboyant: there are no acrobatic tricks. The most dramatic aspect is women's skirts flapping and fluttering when the women twirl or when men lift them up. The women's skirts certainly produce beauty and aspiration; everything else is kinetic energy serving this aspiration.

An Estonian dance is generally quite slow; people do not prance or jump about. This passive approach may be owing to the exhausting daily work routine over the centuries. Another reason may be that Estonians noticed a significant law of physics a long time ago: whoever jumps up inevitably comes down, and this may harm a caterpillar or a worm, a butterfly or a flower. This should not happen! Estonians are forest people and believe in nature. The Estonian dance is therefore cautious, like dragging one's feet so that worms and snails have time to escape. Only if the soil is free of tiny creatures will the Estonian folk dance gradually involve feet thumping on the ground.







Dance and song celebrations usually go together, although there have been separate dance festivals as well. Special dance celebrations for women, men, children, grannies and grandpas are also organised sometimes.

Every dance celebration for a wider audience usually has a theme, a story told to viewers in the language of folkloric choreography. All dances and movements thus follow certain dramaturgical patterns. The content in most cases tackles the eternal questions: who are we, where do we come from, and where are we dancing to?

The last dance is always 'Tuljak', whether the winds are blowing from the east or the west.

And, last but not least – folk dance has helped countless numbers of modest and shy Estonians find their better half.





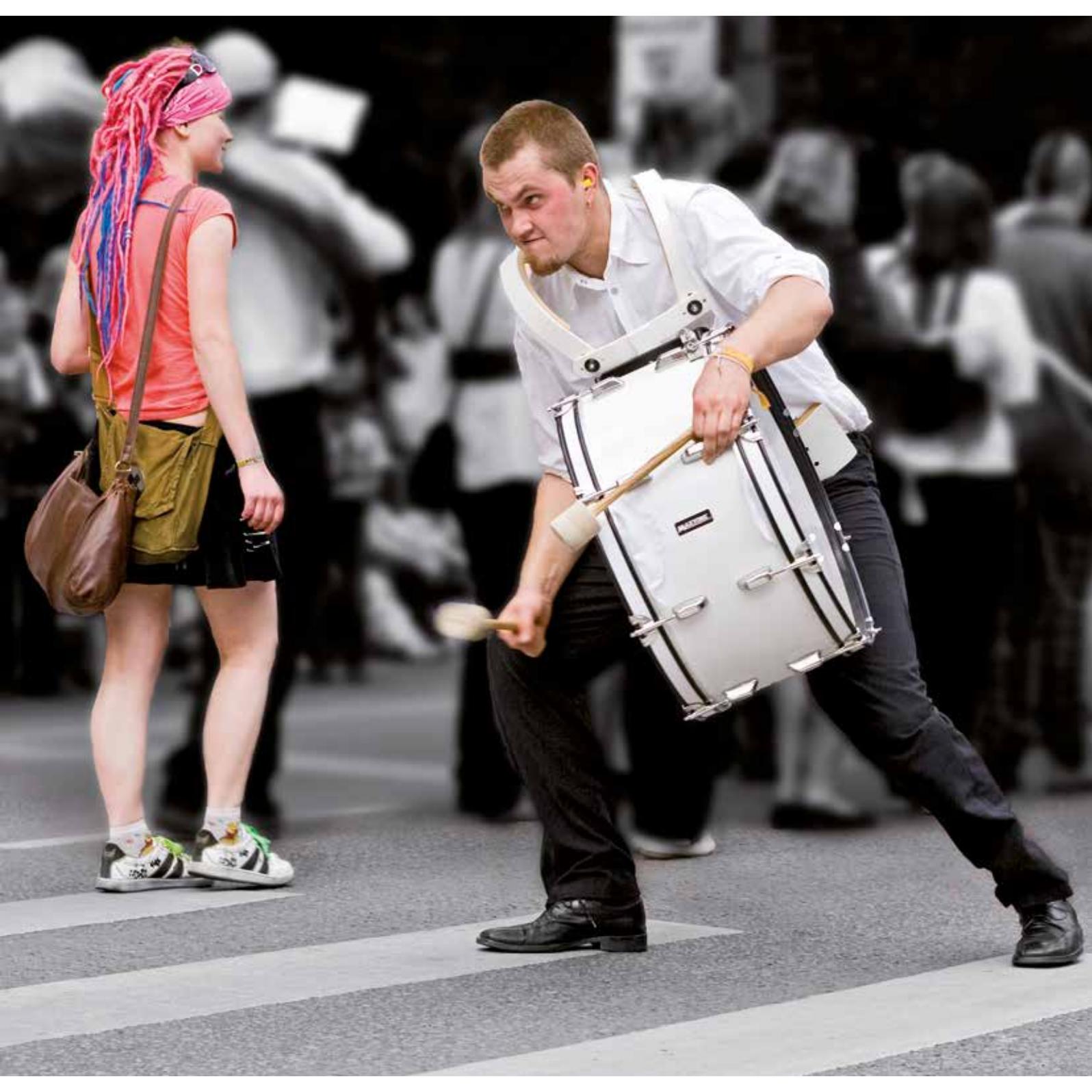
The party comes to town

Participants prepare for the song and dance celebration over several years.

During the week of the party, these preparations acquire a completely new dimension – the dance groups and choirs finally get to meet in Tallinn to rehearse together and put some finishing touches to their performances. The dancers arrive in Tallinn early in the week and start practising their patterns, while the choirs turn up a few days later and take 2-3 days to make their voices sing in unison.

For participants this preparation period immediately before the festival is a big event in itself – it is an emotion-filled intensive training camp where work and fun go hand in hand. Long hours of practice in dusty stadiums or under the big arch bring both exhilaration and exhaustion, yet the rehearsals are not cut short by a heat wave or a downpour – the celebration takes place whatever the weather! Thus, for many Estonians, life experience naturally includes sleeping in schoolhouses, eating soup on the grass, wearing dusty shoes, laughing in the rain, singing in sweltering heat and dancing in a storm. We love it.

Streets, shops, buses, trams and trolley buses are suddenly full of people wearing national costumes. The huge influx of enthusiastic singers and dancers spreads the party mood around town. It is common for singers and dancers at bus stops or in checkout queues to burst spontaneously into a song or a dance; and this is infectious, it changes the atmosphere of the city. People become more patient and smile at each other more often, city life grows increasingly cheerful as the days pass.





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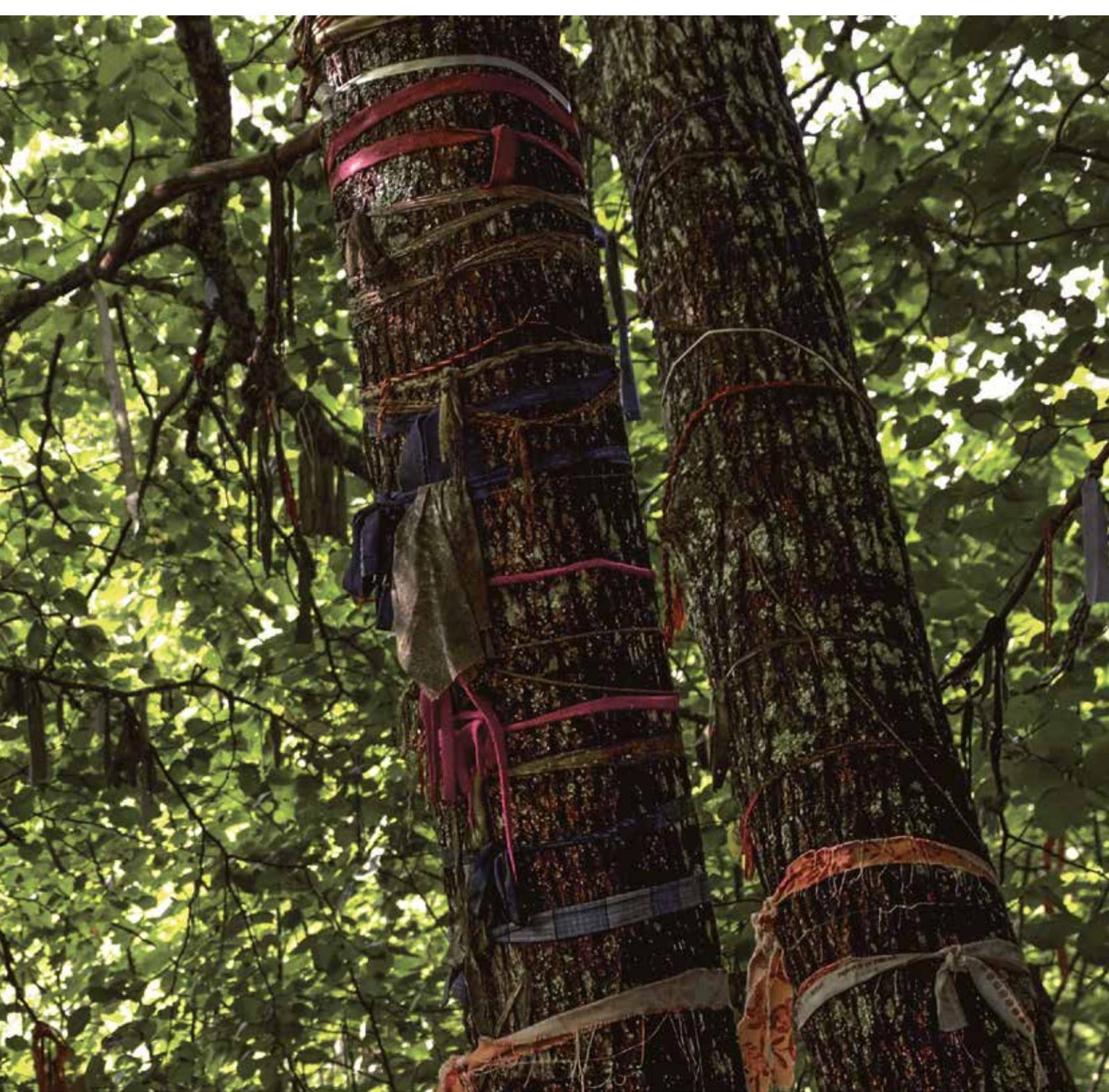
Quite a few things have changed in Estonia. We can be pretty certain, for example, that no folklorist used to tell people what kind of national costumes they should wear at a party. National costumes were like national dishes: people put on what they considered pretty, just as they ate what they liked most. Only much later were clothes and food prescribed and canonised, starting a new era.

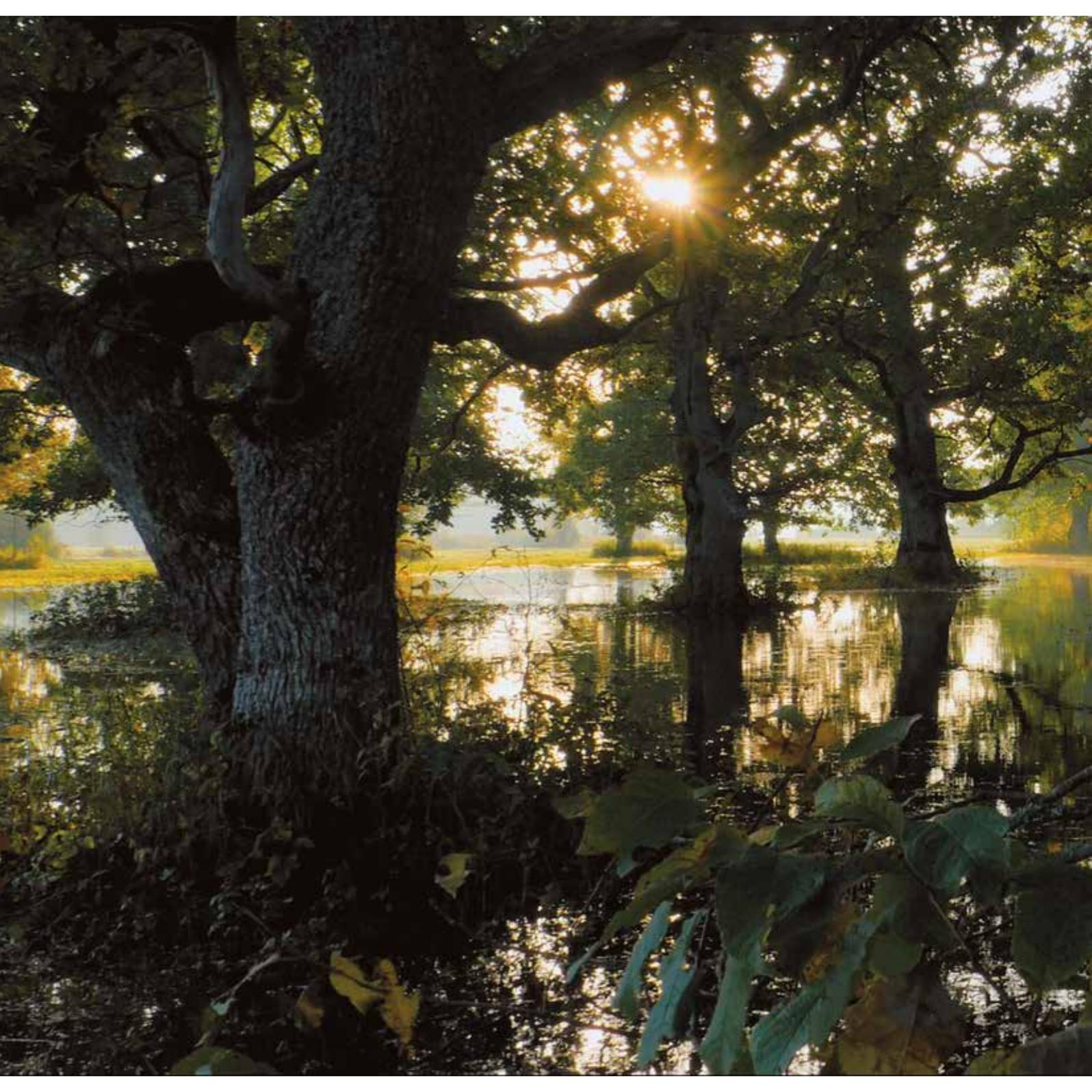
Until then, the national costumes had developed sometimes by natural selection, and sometimes by divine intervention. This free-flowing state of affairs came to an end, however, and national costumes began new life as mummified museum exhibits. Every piece of clothing got a name, a code and a user manual: what type of primitive footwear goes with what apron, what belt needs what knot, what kind of brooch suits a coif. Today all this is taught by folklore experts, so everyone is reassured that they have their trousers and shirts on the right way around.

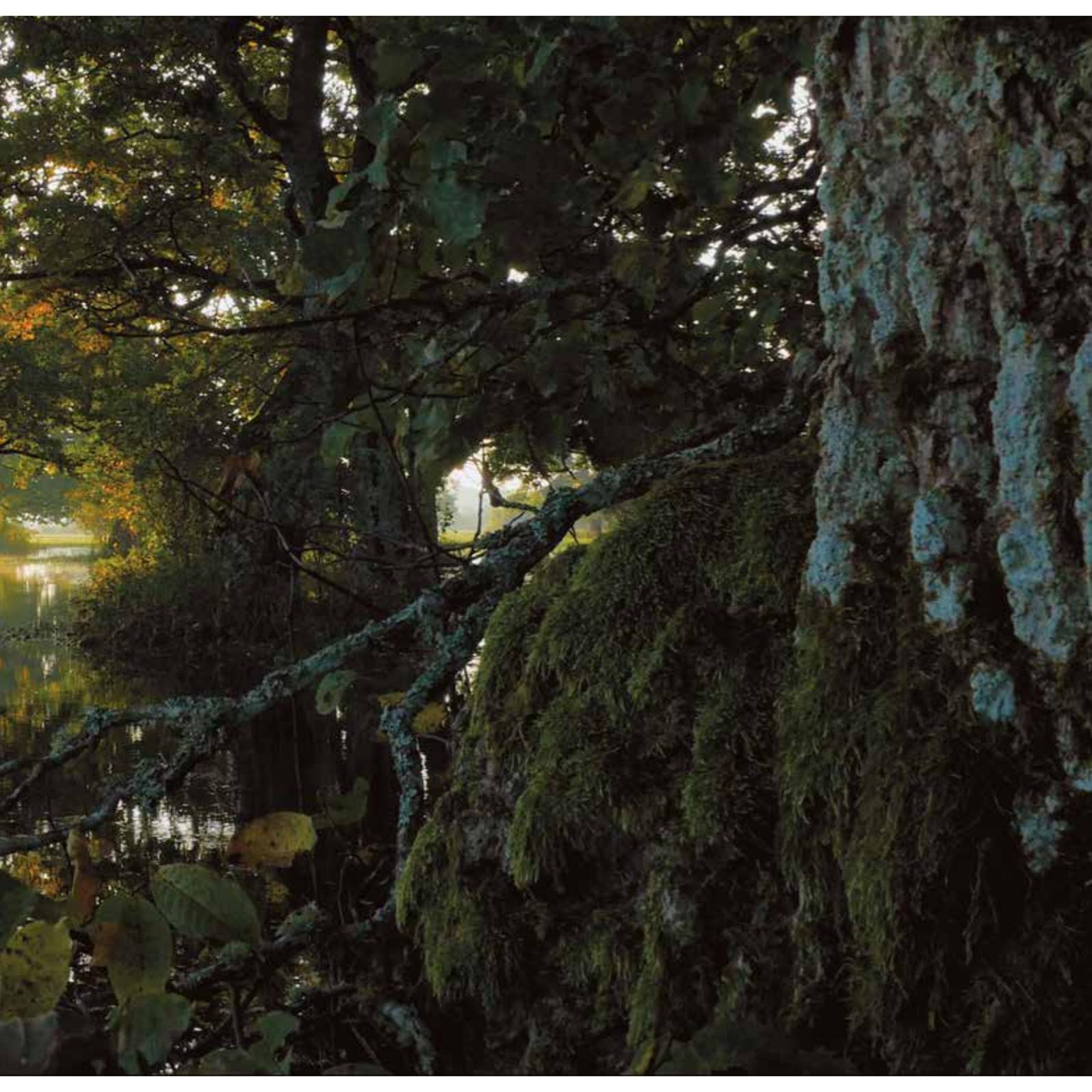
Now that national costumes are no longer a part of our everyday life, their patriotic-therapeutic function prevails. They instil hope that in the grip of global tempests we will still have a secret seed hidden away in a dark closet corner to tie us to our ancestors.

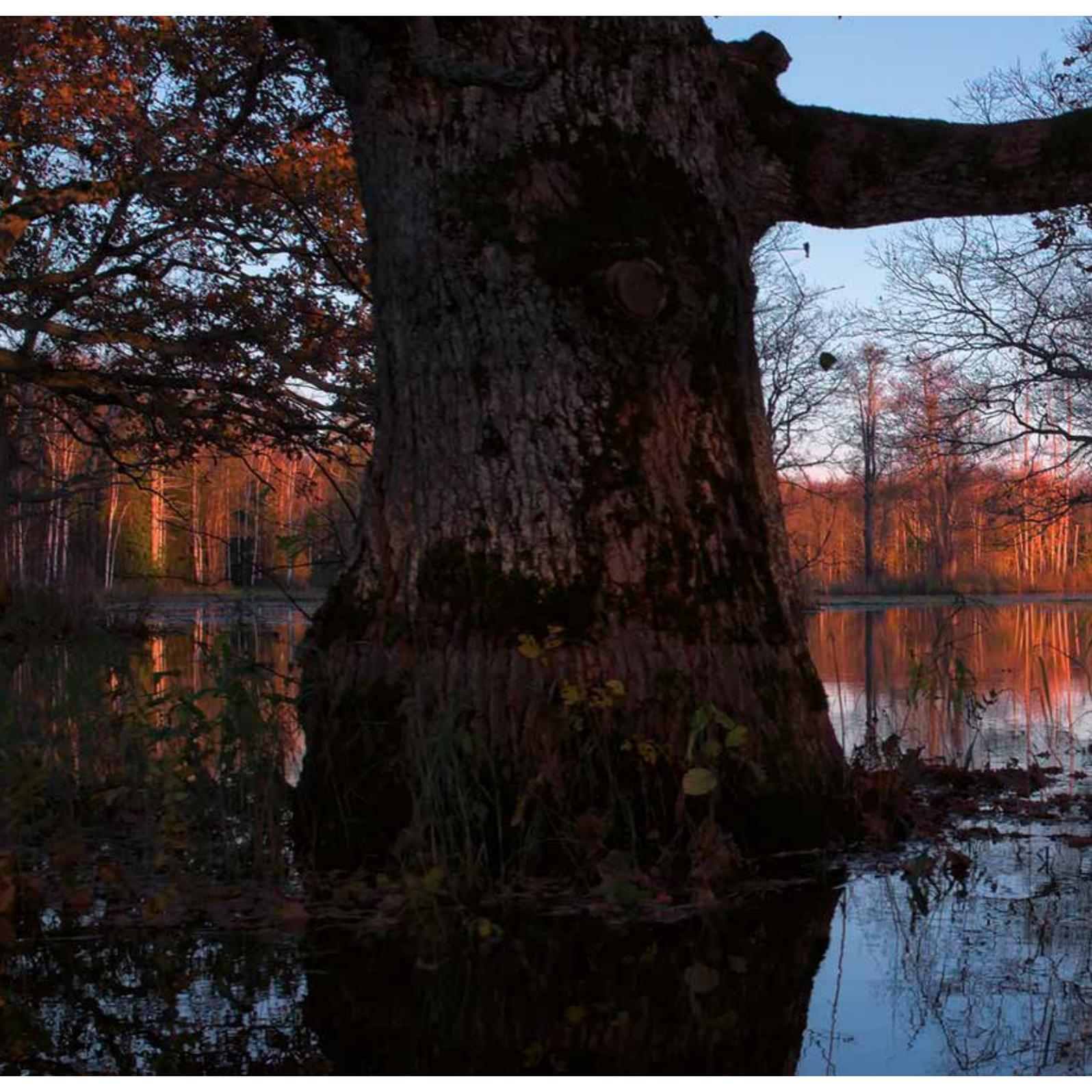
So, all the singers and dancers at the celebrations are always properly attired in national costumes. National costumes are worn by many audience members, too; although it has to be said that the authenticity of their clothes doesn't get inspected. And of course, all foreign guests at the celebration are welcome to show off their national garments, striped, or not.

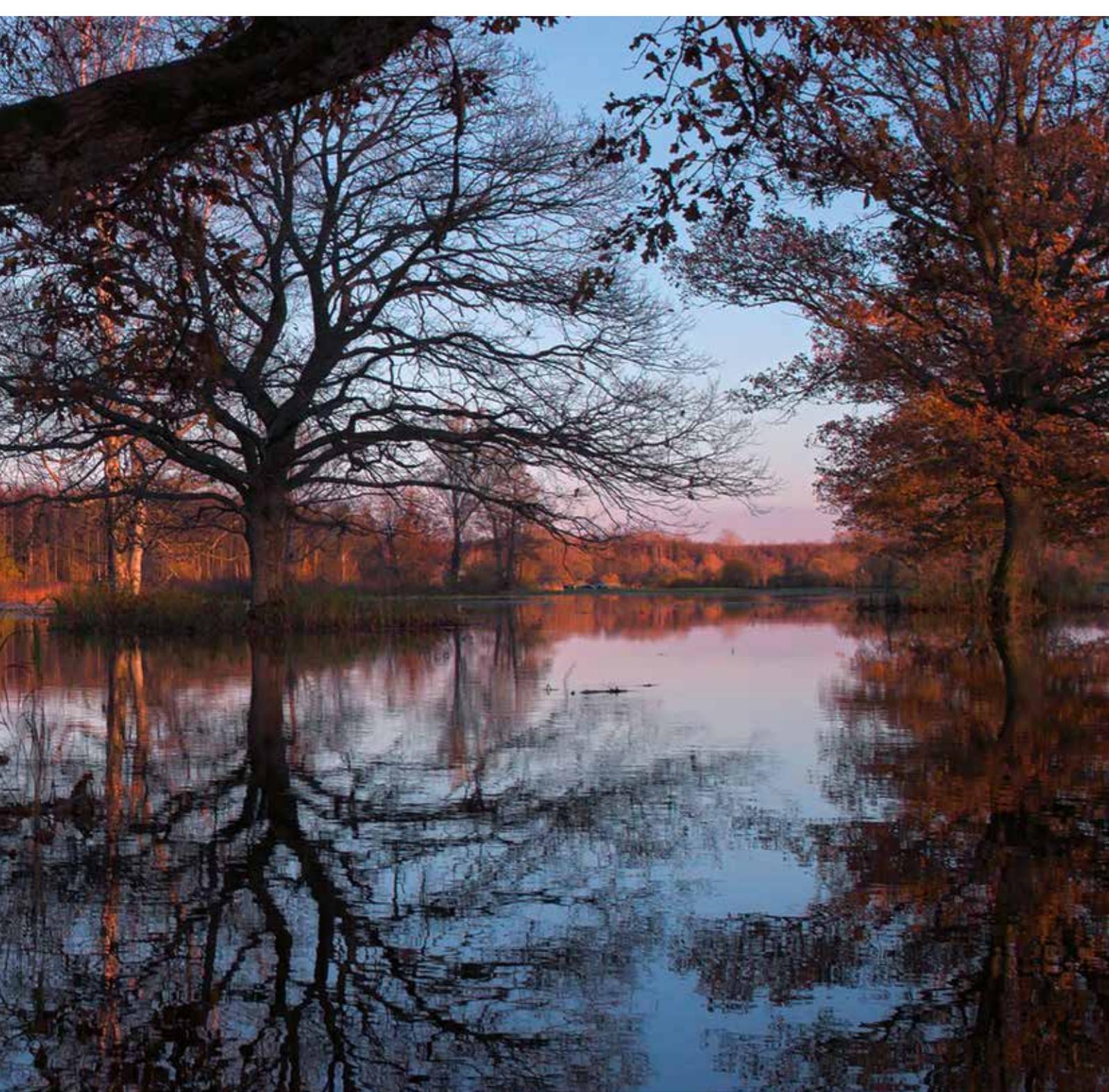


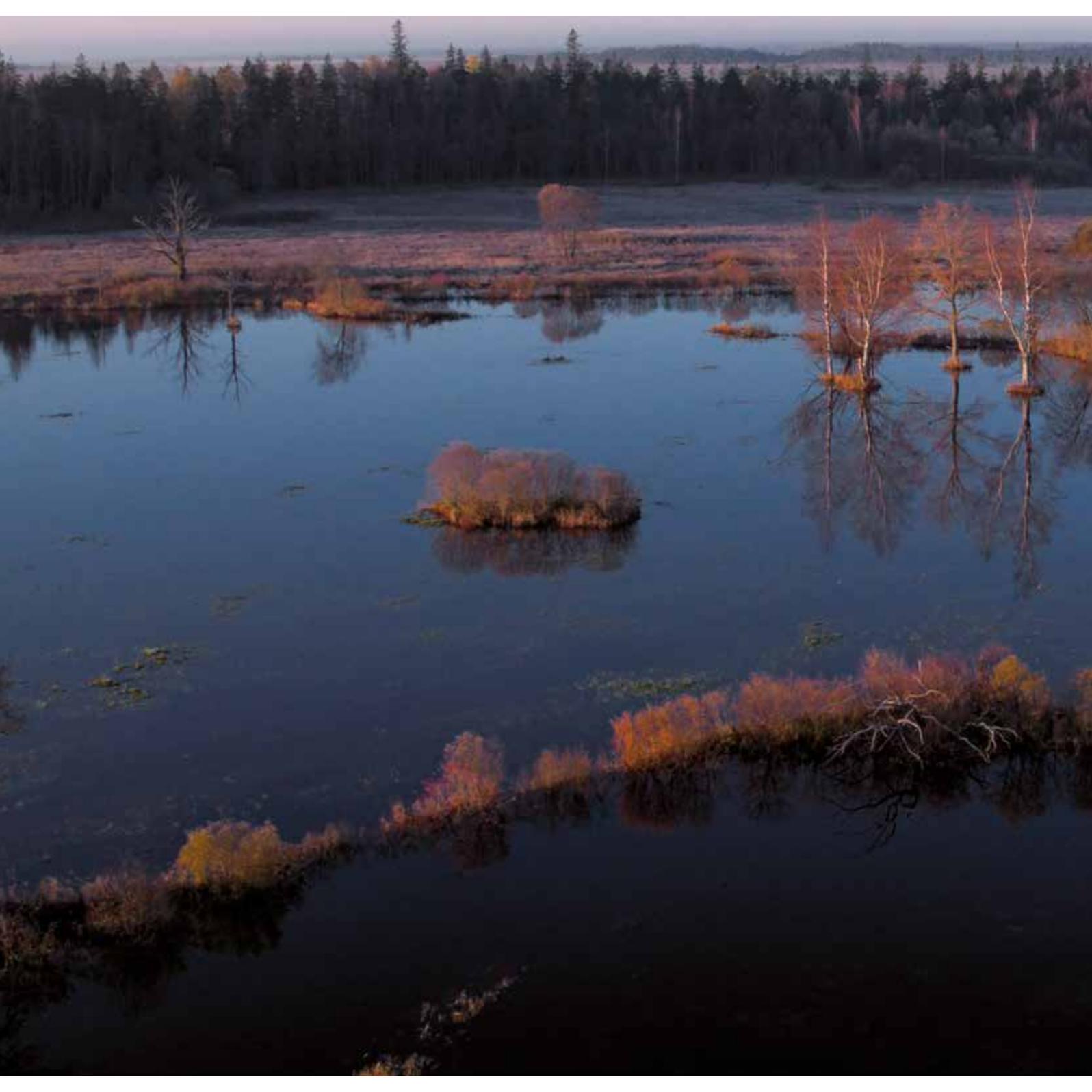






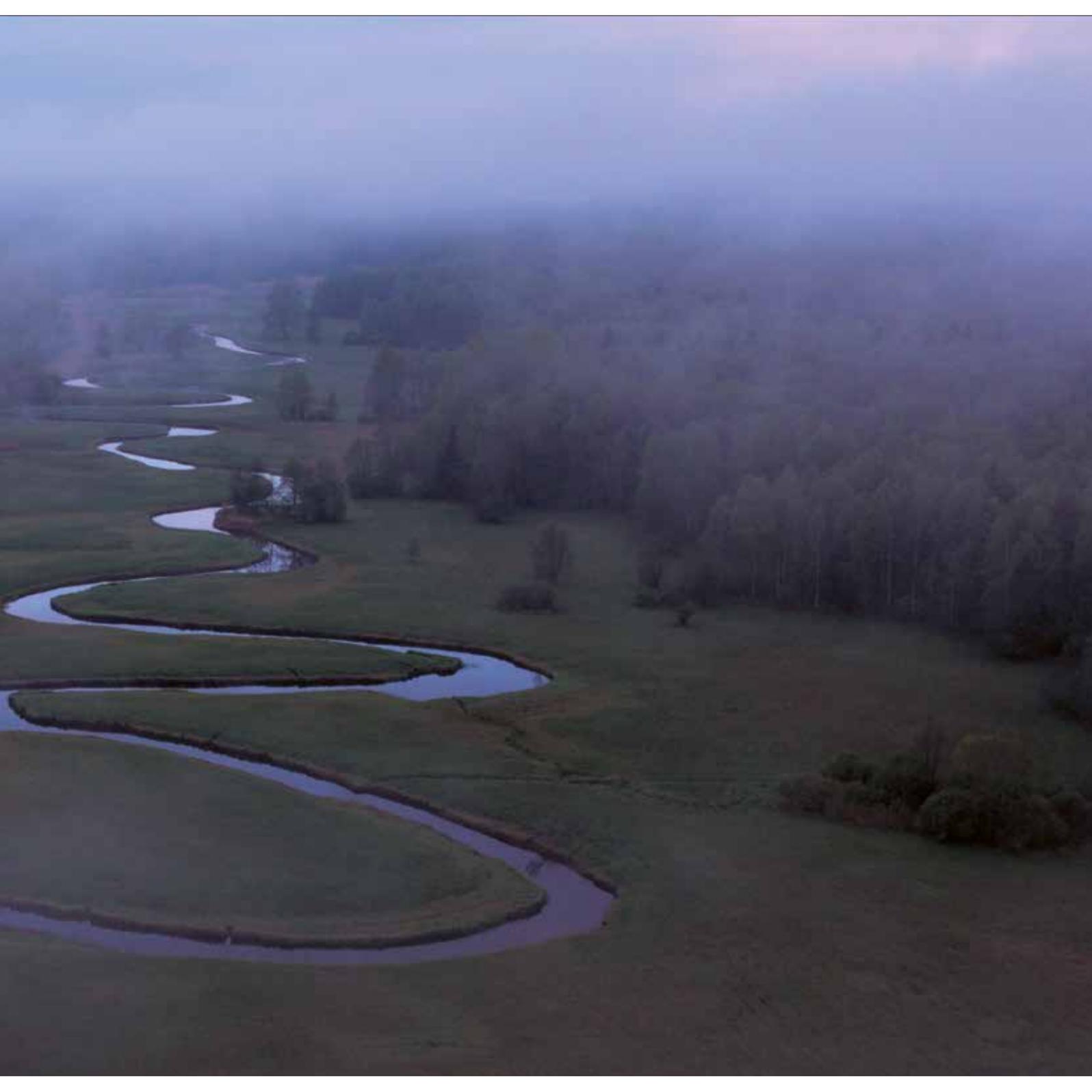




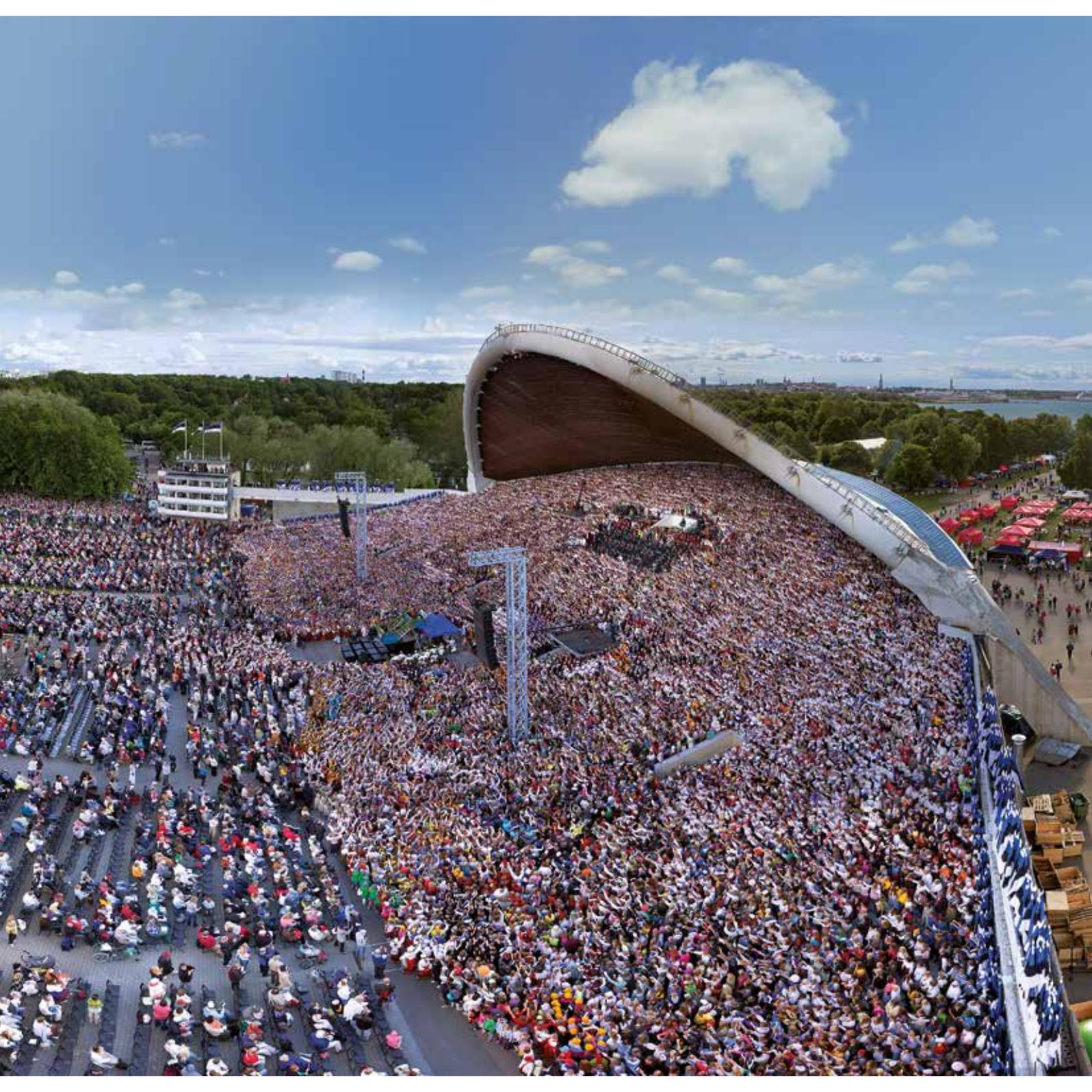












A bird's-eye view of history

Estonians have always found it difficult to talk to one another, so they sing together.

Singing together produces a sense of belonging together. In the distant past, choir practices were like club meetings, where people gathered to discuss local matters. When singing together finally escaped the boundaries of home and villages in the 19th century and turned into one huge song celebration, there was no turning back. Another half century of nationwide song celebrations, and the hoped-for miracle was indeed born: "the forest and land were ours!" Through singing, the peasants became a nation and the nation became more confident, daring to proclaim their own state and defend it.

Song festivals have of course been organised by other peoples as well, before the Estonians. The latter gratefully embraced the custom, domesticated it and made it into something truly grand. The first organisers here were undoubtedly inspired by the local Baltic German song festivals and the spirit of the romanticist era, which took an interest in peripheral cultures.





Once upon a time in Tartu: Estonia's first big song celebration – 1869

Tartu boasts one of the oldest European universities (University of Tartu, established in 1632) and is affectionately known as "Athens on the Emajõgi River".

The very first song festival took place on 18-20 June 1869 in Tartu. It was a festival of gratitude to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the abolishment of serfdom in Livonia. It had taken five decades for the ordinary countryfolk to develop into a nation – the Estonians. Although Estonia was part of tsarist Russia at the time, the young nation's self-awareness nevertheless grew vigorously.

Many participants travelled to Tartu on foot or in horse-drawn carts, and the kind people of Tartu offered them overnight accommodation. For the first parade, the order of choirs was determined by drawing lots, these days choirs are arranged in alphabetical order by counties. The song festival started with a concert of ecclesiastical songs on the first day and secular songs on the second; a singing competition was held on the third day.

Awalik au-tunnistus ja jäädaw mälestuse täht,
mis
suurel wiiekümneaastasel
Cestirahwa priikslaskmise
Rõõmu-pühäl

Juuni kuul

aastal  1869

Tartus,

kuhu igast poolt Cesti rajadest Cestimehed islo olnud tõttanud, et wennalikus ühenduses kui ühe
pere pojad liituse ja läno lauludega jalki wabaduse tingituse eest Jumalale auu anda ja laaswendri
üksmale waimu elole mies wabaduses äratada,

Gabrina Estonia Laulu-Seltsile,

kes sellesama pidu mõisolaulmisel 29. juunil kuu päätwal oma laulmisega kõigist üle
käis ja hoole ja osawuse poolest laulu harimise põllul esimeseks seltsiks arwati,

Carlo Wenemise-Seltsi poolt

armastajast südamest, ennalitust meelest anti.

Elagu, kaswagu, õitsegu

Cesti laul ja Cesti lauljad!

Elagu, kaswagu, õitsegu

Tallina Estonia Laulu-Selts ja Lauljad!



Only male choirs took part in the first song celebrations, which was to be expected, considering the accommodation possibilities, and social conventions of the day. In 1891, mixed choirs were accepted as well, and in 1933 women's choirs performed for the first time. The picture became more diversified later, when student and regional song festivals were introduced. Further festivals have emerged in recent years, such as night song festivals, e-song festivals, punk song festivals and others. In 2004, the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian song celebrations were added to the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage.

Latvians have played an important role in the evolution of Estonian song festival traditions, with Latvian Jānis Cimze training many Estonian and Latvian schoolmasters and teachers in choral singing in his seminary in Valka.

Tallinn hosted its first song festival in 1896 (the 3rd national song celebration). Since 1928, all national song celebrations have taken place in Tallinn. By that time, in 1918, the country had become independent and was called the Republic of Estonia.

Period of prohibitions 1944-1991

After World War II the Republic of Estonia was violently annexed by the Soviet Union. Nationality was ostracised by Soviet authorities, in principle it was banned.

Unsurprisingly, the tradition and leaders of song and dance celebrations did not escape the bans either, during the Soviet occupation some members of the organising committee were replaced.

Song festivals were not banned as such because it was hoped they could be turned into a useful Soviet propaganda tool. This was ultimately unsuccessful, the ritual clothes and the magic of the festival grounds kept living within the people. Donning their national costumes and coming together in sacred places to sing together while secretly taking an oath of allegiance, on the inside, spiritually, people were free, irrespective of external limitations or tribulations.

During the Soviet occupation, and regardless of the communist rhetoric, there was never any doubt in the minds of Estonians that celebrating singing together was something to cherish as fundamentally their own. A festival that was "national in form and socialist in content" suited the authorities. Singers in national costume performed a repertory approved by the communist party, glorifying "the fraternal family of Soviet peoples" and "great communist leaders and teachers". This concession was enough to allow people to sing whatever was dear to their heart.

ELAGU EESTI NSV 10. AASTAPÄEV!



**KÕIK NÕUKOGUDE EESTI
1950. A. ÜLDLAULUPEOLE!**

One of the songs most loved by Estonians is 'My Fatherland is My Love', which has become the nation's unofficial anthem. Based on a poem written by a beloved Estonian poet Lydia Koidula, the song was composed by Gustav Ernesaks on 4 March 1944 in Moscow, a few days before Tallinn was bombed in a Soviet air raid (9-10 March 1944). During that raid large areas of the city were destroyed.

It could be said that in a way this song has encouraged the faith in Estonian people's hearts that while people may be taken away from their homeland, deported to prison camps or exiled, home cannot be taken away from people's hearts.

The 1947 song festival programme still included 'My Fatherland is My Love'. However, the Soviet authorities subsequently realised that this song had a deep impact on people and banned it from the following festivals.

How much the authorities actually dreaded the singing people was evident in the large number of guards and their eagerness to disperse people after the last song was performed. To prevent any outbreaks of spontaneous singing or dancing, the grounds were drowned in marching tunes.

The 1950 song and dance celebration was the gloomiest and most ideologically charged. Stalinist repressions and sovietisation were at their peak and forcible collectivisation was taking place. Mass deportations had been carried out in March 1949. It wasn't until 1960 that 'My Fatherland is My Love' was once again spontaneously sung at the end of the festival.

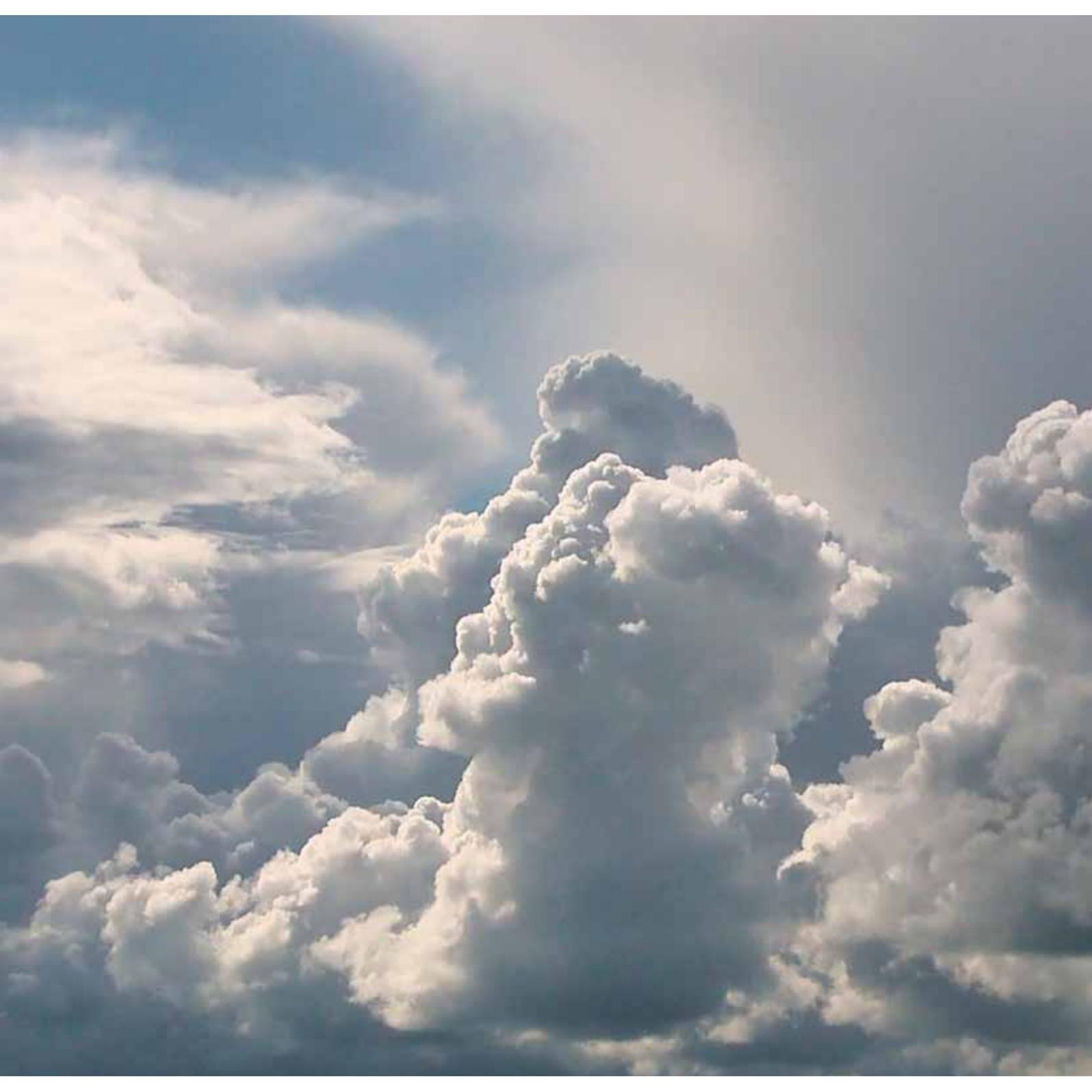
The beehive was still buzzing, uncompromising in its determination.



Re-independence – a time of falling walls 1987–1991

International climate changed in the late 1980s. The inevitable end of the Soviet Union edged closer. The monstrous system, an empire built on fear and terror which had claimed tens of millions of victims, eventually entirely exhausted itself. This was sensed by the nations of occupied states whose aspiration for freedom grew stronger. Thus, an era began in Estonia and the Baltic states, now called the Singing Revolution, which lasted over four years with various protests and acts of defiance.

In summer 1987, during the Old Town Days in Tallinn, a group of punks initiated a spontaneous sing-along in Town Hall Square, which soon attracted a large number of people and transferred to the Song Festival Grounds. Thereafter people sang together on the Song Festival Grounds every night from 6th to 13th June. Although media coverage was absent, the news spread through word of mouth. Whispers of freedom had reached the soul of the people, and that had to be screamed from the rooftops.





A year later, in May 1988, a pop music festival took place in Tartu, where at an open-air concert on Tähtvere song festival grounds suddenly the Estonian national tricolours were brought out – three bikers drove by, flying the flags. This precipitated the appearance of more and more flags on the festival grounds – full of hope, hundreds of spectators had been carrying Estonian flags in their bosoms.

A few weeks later, during the Tallinn Old Town Days, a number of young people walked from Town Hall Square to Tallinn Song Festival Grounds carrying the tricolours, now with considerable confidence. And, naturally, it was accompanied by singing.

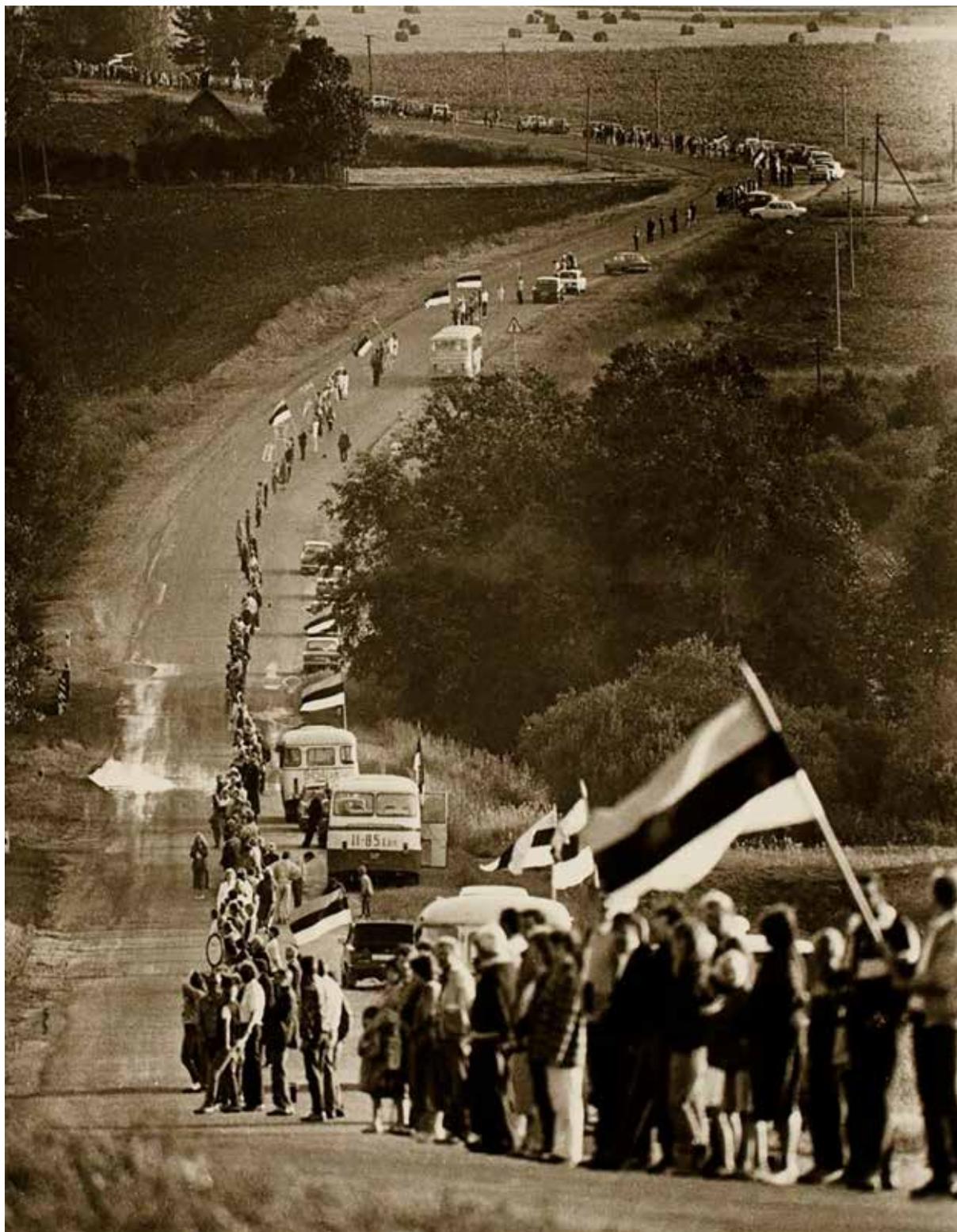
A few months later on 11 September 1988, an estimated 300,000 people from all across the country gathered on Tallinn Song Festival Grounds to present political demands and listen to patriotic songs at the “Song of Estonia” event, where for the first time during the occupation the reinstatement of Estonia’s independence was demanded in public.

In front of the assembled crowd, to conclude his rousing speech, Heinz Valk, a well-known artist and politician, uttered these immortal words “One day we will win, no matter what!” This phrase has now entered into Estonian folklore.

The Baltics are waking up!

On 23 August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed – a contract which included a secret protocol that divided various European countries into “spheres of influence” between dictators, ignoring international law; this “left” the Baltic states to the Soviet Union. On 23 August 1989, on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the pact, the peoples of all three Baltic states jointly organised a peaceful protest demonstration in which men, women and children stood side by side in a human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius in the so-called Baltic Way. A total of almost two million people took part, and the length of the human chain was about 620 kilometres.

At seven o'clock in the evening, the password “Freedom” simultaneously started travelling from Tallinn and Vilnius towards the Estonian-Latvian border, and “The Baltics Are Waking Up!” – a song specially composed for the event, was played; it felt like a joint anthem for the three Baltic nations. This unprecedented event gained considerable international news coverage.





On 9 November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell.

Lithuanian independence was declared on 11 March 1990, Estonian independence on 20 August 1991, and Latvian independence on 21 August 1991.

On 1 May 2004 all three Baltic states joined the European Union.

Without the tradition that had lasted well over one hundred years, there would have been no 'singing revolution' that helped Estonia restore its independence. Masses of people, who expressed their will by singing, confused even the most dedicated of military men. Gratitude for regaining independence and its very survival rings out in our songs today and tomorrow.

Thus, every song festival, like the very first one, is a festival of gratitude.

Forever towards the beehive

“He flies from flower to flower and flies towards the beehive”, wrote the Estonian poet Juhan Liiv in a poem that was turned into a song by the composer Peep Sarapik. This is a song every Estonian knows almost as well as the national anthem.

In 2017, people voted to send “He Flies Towards the Beehive” into space aboard the ESTCube satellite. The song was then recorded during the 12th youth song and dance celebration in the summer of 2017.

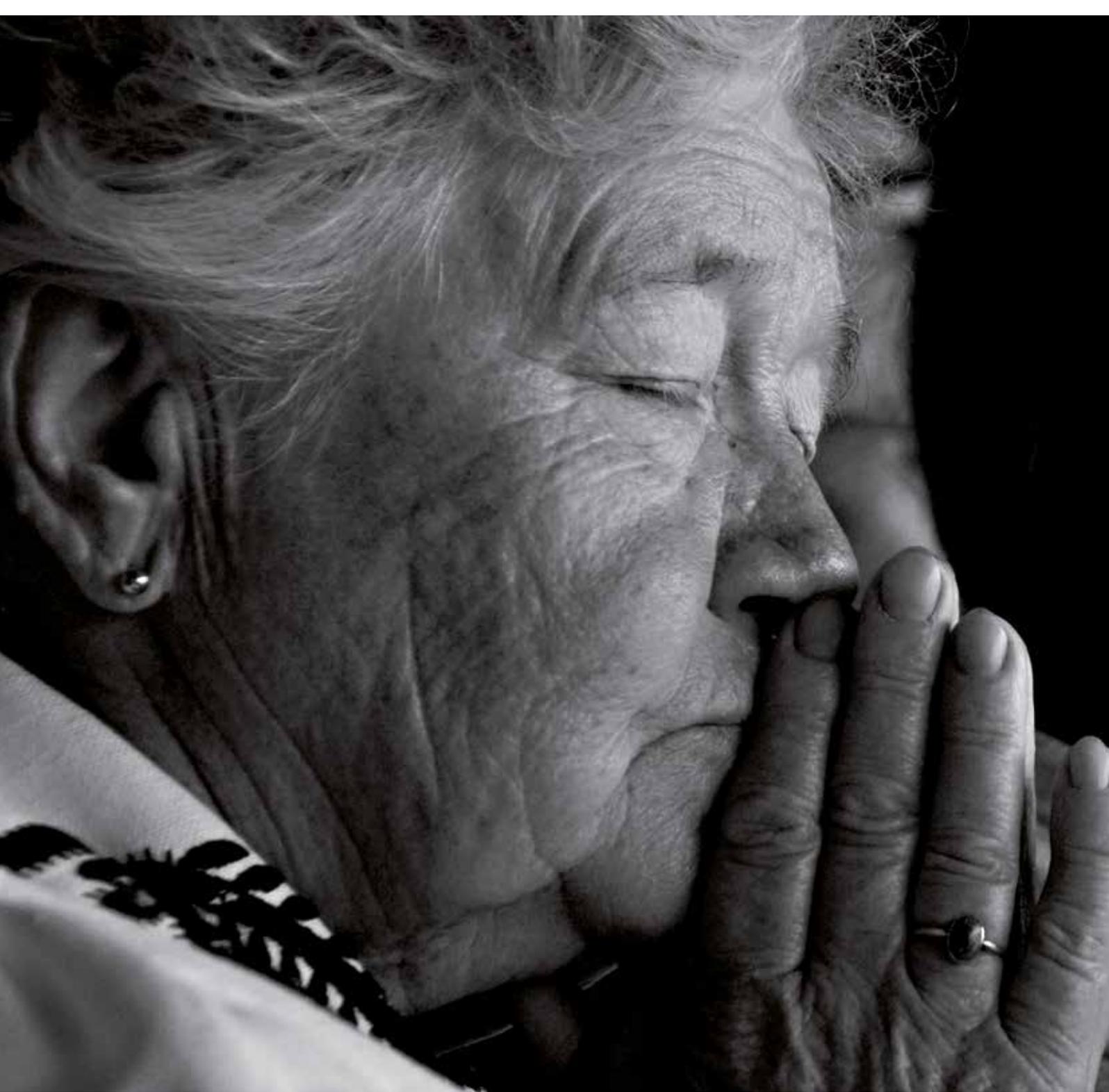
Lines from the poem are now also inscribed in the wall of a memorial at Maarjamäe, next to the Song Festival Grounds: “And thousands fall along the way, and thousands make it home. And take away the trouble and care. And fly towards the beehive.” These are the words commemorating the Estonians who perished during the Soviet repressions.

Estonian professor of literature Rein Veidemann has suggested that those dozens of generations, united by the land and the Estonian language, spoken in its various dialects, who have become the humus of this land or who have crumbled to dust elsewhere long ago, have etched an undying yearning in our souls for our own beehive. Yet this yearning, he reminds us, only acquires its meaning when one is responsible for this land – here, now and in the future: when one’s personal destiny merges with the destiny of the country.

And we know it will continue for centuries to come.

Our flight towards the beehive.







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