

## Book review

# A Moth on the Fence:

Memoirs of Russia, Estonia, Czechoslovakia and Western Europe

*by Nikolay Andreyev*

Introduction, Notes and Afterword by Catherine Andreyev

Translation (from Russian) by Patrick Miles

Hodgson Press, Kingston-upon-Thames, 2009

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Reviewed by the Editor

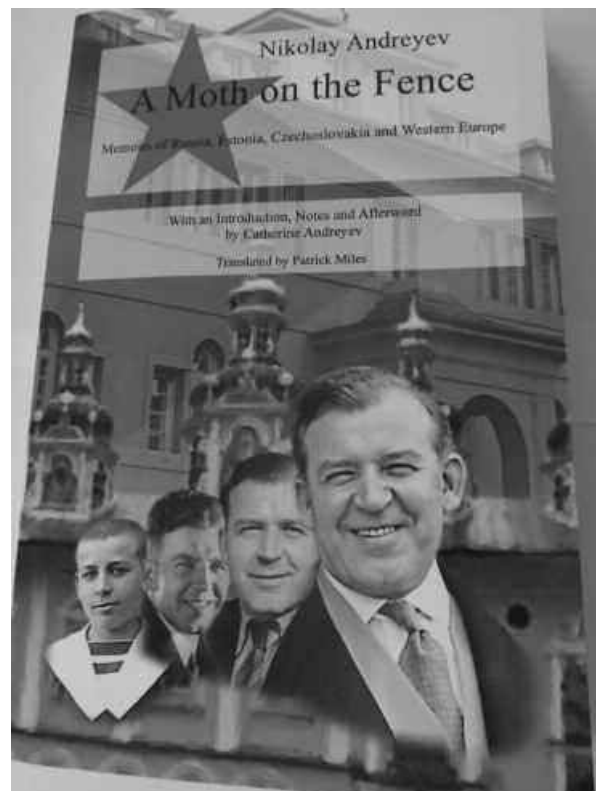
*A Moth on the Fence* is a most remarkable and a very readable autobiography.

Its author, Nikolaj Andreyev (1908-1982) was a distinguished scholar, highly ranked mediaevalist, and expert on Russian literature. Educated at the Russian High School in Tallinn, he took his doctorate at Charles University in Prague, a city where he remained for 22 years, becoming researcher then director of its Kondakov (Archaeological and Historical) Institute. After the turmoil of war and his release from incarceration at the hands of SMERSH, he was persuaded to take a post in the Department of Slavonic Studies at the University of Cambridge. From 1949 until his retirement in 1975, he enjoyed a distinguished teaching career being appointed to a Readership in Russian Studies in 1973.

Becoming visually impaired following unsuccessful eye surgery in 1978, he began to record his reminiscences on audio tape. Following his death, in 1982, the Russian language recordings were transcribed to create a 730 page transcript. These were edited by his widow, Gill, and his daughter Dr Catherine Andreyev, now a Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Oxford, with the help of Professor Irina Belobrovsteva, of the (then) Tallinn Pedagogical University.

Published in 1996 by Avenarius, a Russian language publishing house in Tallinn, it was described by one reviewer as “a thrilling narration of outstanding historical value”. After a delay of 13 years, its English translation, by Patrick Miles, has recently been published, under the title ‘*A Moth on the Fence*’. In her Foreword, Catherine Andreyev explains how, for English readers, the text has been shortened (to 245 printed pages) without detracting from the human story line and the impact of political events during the period covered, (from 1908 to 1949).

Born near to St Petersburg in 1908, both of Nikolaj’s parents were teachers. From middle class



backgrounds in Tver province, their views were those of the liberal intelligentsia. In 1916, two years after the outbreak of war, the young offender institution in which his father taught was moved to Volosovo, about 85 km southwest of St Petersburg, on the railway line to Tallinn. It was there that they learned of the Tsar’s abdication and the October Revolution.

By 1918, after the Constituent Assembly had been dissolved and the Cheka had been formed as the Bolshevik’s military and security arm, ‘proletarian terror’ spread into the provinces as the Civil War began. By May 1919, Volosovo was occupied by the Whites. A month later, however, the Reds counter-attacked and the Andreyev family fled, firstly to Yamburg (now Kingisepp), then to Gdov on the line from Narva to Pskov, a mere 2km

from Lake Peipsi. Their stay in Gdov was but a brief respite. In the chaos and confusion of war, keeping ahead of the Reds, along with thousands of others, they fled North, (luckily in their case by horse and cart), eventually arriving outside Narva on a bitterly cold November evening. Two days later, a 600 strong column of refugees from Gdov crossed the bridge over the Narva river into Narva town proper. It took them another three days to trudge to Yevve (Jõhvi) where they turned south to Kurtna, their home for the next six months.

Penniless, tired, hungry, cold and ill, their problems were far from over. Nikolay's ten year old sister and their devoted Nanny, who had accompanied them into exile, died within a few days of each other; (a younger brother had also died in infancy). Nikolay and his parents each caught typhus. To make matters worse, their personal, identity documents were stolen, the consequences of which "bedevilled the whole Estonian period of his parents' life". Without these documents it proved impossible for his father to return to the teaching profession. He had to take whatever employment was offered, and there was little available. (Later, when Nikolay travelled abroad he did so using a 'Nansen' passport).

The autobiography provides a rare, first hand, account in English of the trials and tribulations that faced the many thousands of Russian refugees who arrived in Estonia as a result of the Civil War. It also reveals the resilience of those refugees and sheds light on the relationship between the refugees and the local, Estonian population. This appears to have been at least 'workmanlike' and often warm.

He and his parents survived and adjusted to their new situation, eventually moving to the Kadriorg area of Tallinn, where they lived in a small, basement flat on Poska street. Though a non-smoker, his father had found employment in a local tobacco factory, (owned by a 'Russified Englishman' called Lange).

Nikolay first attended the Russian émigré boarding school in Narva before joining his parents in Tallinn and transferring to the Russian High School on Narva street, where he was a top student. (Unaware of the attempted coup he was one of the very few pupils who turned up for lessons on 1st December 1924).

Completing High School in 1927, and having decided to study the history of (primarily) Russian literature, he chose not to go to Tartu, Moscow or Leningrad Universities. Instead, he opted to study in Czechoslovakia where President Masaryk had earlier taken a 'Russian Action'

initiative to help students exiled by the Russian Civil War complete their studies. (This benevolent attitude and supportive funds had ebbed somewhat by the time Nikolay arrived in Prague, however).

About half of the book is devoted to the 22 years he spent in Prague. The large, active Russian diaspora living there enjoyed its fair share of intrigue in the inter-war years; the autobiography describes it in detail and at length. Nikolay prospered, gaining his doctorate from Charles University and becoming director of the Kondakov Institute. After September 1938, however, when the Munich agreement was signed, March 1939 when Nazi Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, and after Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR, the "blossoming of Czechoslovak freedom" rapidly drew to an end.


Under increasingly difficult conditions, Nikolay remained in Prague during WWII. He paid his last visit home to Tallinn in 1938, the last time he was to see his father.

In May 1945, Prague was liberated by the Red Army. Within a few weeks the prominent members of the Russian émigré community were arrested. Nikolaj suffered the same fate at the hands of SMERSH, the counter-intelligence arm of the Red Army. Never put on trial, he was moved between transit jails in Czechoslovakia and the eastern part of Germany, before being summarily released in Dresden and making his way to a displaced persons' camp in Berlin. It was whilst he was seeking the documentation needed to survive in occupied Berlin that a member of the French Administration likened his position to that of "a moth on a fence", emphasising the fragility of his situation.

Though the autobiography does not cover his life in Cambridge, after his 1948 departure from Berlin, Nikolay's daughter Catherine sheds light on this period in her Afterword.

His mother, who had joined him in Prague, after his father's death in 1942, was deported back to Estonia. In 1958, the bedridden old lady was allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Cambridge where she lived out the last two years of her life with her son and his family. She died on February 25th, as did Nikolay.

Nikolay Andreyev's captivating narrative is remarkable, revealing his unfailing and detailed memory of people and events. Despite the horrors which he witnessed and the pain which he must have suffered during his life, his autobiography reveals true humanity and even a sense of humour.

Make certain that you put it on your reading list! 

Book review

# Mary Tamm: First Generation

## The Autobiography

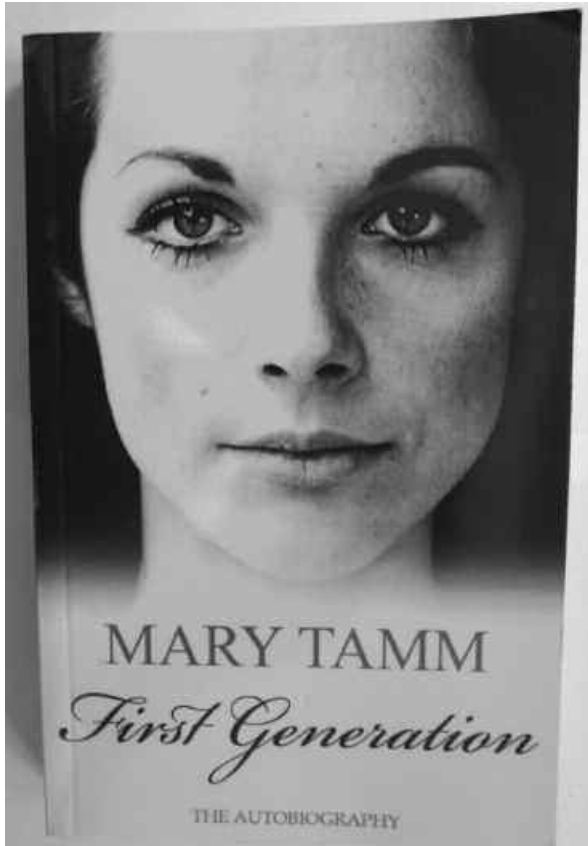
Foreword by Colin Baker

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Reviewed by the Editor



As Romanadvoratrelundar the Time Lady, Romana to you and me, Mary Tamm travelled the universe aboard TARDIS in the company of the Fourth Doctor Who, Tom Baker.

This may have been the actress's best-known role, other thespian achievements being overshadowed by her appearance in 26 episodes of the world's longest running science fiction television show, episodes which were shown during late 1978 and early 1979.

Her autobiography gives a rather more balanced view of her distinguished career on stage, screen and television., (at least until the early 1980s).

Born in Dewsbury on 22nd March 1950, the second daughter of Raissa and Endel Tamm, 1944-era émigrés from Estonia, she was brought up in Bradford amongst a large and closely-knit Estonian émigré community. Her father hailed from Rõngu in

Tartumaa, about 40km south west of Tartu, where his family were farmers and landowners. In the 1940s, four of his brothers were deported to Siberia by the KGB, only one of them surviving.

Mary's mother Raissa, née Kisseliev was born in Omsk to a military family; her father, a colonel in the tsarist army, was lost in action in Turkey. After Raissa's mother died of typhoid, she and her sister were taken to Estonia by Russian relatives who already lived there. Over 30 years later, living in exile in Bradford, Raissa was deeply committed to upholding the cultural traditions of Estonia, where she spent her formative years.

As a youngster, Mary spent some of each weekend at the Bradford Eesti maja, "the club", the Saturday night gathering point for Bradford's Estonian community. A very active organisation, it boasted male and ladies' choirs as well as a dance troupe. Mary recalls the choirs' melodies and close harmonies as 'sublime'. (Nevertheless, another recollection is that singing was the number 2 past time after drinking vodka!)

An Estonian school was held there on Saturday afternoons, when children who spoke fluent Estonian at home, were taught Estonian grammar; (not an easy task at the best of times and particularly so for someone with such a rebellious streak as Mary). In her autobiography, Mary also claims that her parents spoke 13 languages, between them, but does not list them.

Endel Tamm worked long, laborious hours at Listers Mill, once the largest silk mill in the world, (which ceased operation in 1992). Fellow Estonian émigrés who first settled in Bradford and also worked in the local mills included mathematicians, surgeons and scientists: "Estonia's finest brains packing wool", Mary poignantly observes.

Unsurprisingly, Mary seldom mentions her father's influence during her early years; he must have been at work or in the Eesti maja! It was Raissa, her indefatigable mother who imbued in her rebellious daughter the will to succeed. The first step in

mother's strategy was for Mary to gain a scholarship entry to the prestigious Bradford Girls Grammar School, a goal which she achieved in 1961.

It was then that her interest in drama really began; she took part in school drama activities and joined a number of local theatre groups gaining awards along the way.

By the age of 16, she had firmly set her sights on studying at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), in London. Entering RADA in January 1969, she graduated in the spring of 1971, winning two, end-of-course prizes, one for excellence the other for dialect. Though opportunities for new graduates were hard to come by she landed a nine month contract with the new Birmingham Repertory theatre, whose renowned Artistic Director was Peter Dews, a fellow Tyke from down the road in Wakefield. (Her earlier theatrical achievements in Bradford had not gone unnoticed!)

The autobiography has a curious structure that, nonetheless, seems to work. Primarily chronological, the thread is broken by the insertion within the text of a two-part "Interlude", the account of her first visit to Estonia in 1990. The first part of the "Interlude" follows after her graduation from RADA in 1971, whilst the second appears after the record of her life in 1976, when she met her husband-to-be, and experienced a memorable trip to Sri Lanka. Interestingly, her Dr Who days of 1978/79 are recalled in less than 30 pages of the 200+ page paperback!


Much of it is a racy account of the very many famous actors, actresses, sportsmen and 'personalities' whose paths crossed hers. The list is as impressive and unlikely as it is long. Those readers interested in the affairs of thespian luvvies will have a field day! For readers of LENNUK, however, most interest will probably derive from the story of her early years and of her visit to Estonia in 1990.

It was only after her mother's death that she contemplated such a visit and meeting long lost family. It was renowned documentary film maker (and BEST member) Kersti Uibo, who persuaded her to go. Resident in London and Estonia, and married to an Anglican priest, Kersti also assumed the role of Mary's guide during the trip.

The autobiography provides a moving, personal 'travelogue' at a crucial but uncertain time in Estonia's recent history. Many other descendants of Estonian émigrés living in the West must have had similar experiences during their first journey 'home'. Waiting for her in Tallinn was her cousin Jaan and his family, and during her visit she visited her father's former home in Rõngu and met her father's sister-in-law, Linda. She put on a magnificent spread to welcome her despite the difficult economic conditions which then prevailed. (How times have changed!)

A memorable side trip which Mary recalls with pleasure was that which she and Kersti made to the island of Kihnu, where Kersti's parents were then staying.

On the boat from Stockholm to Tallinn, (Mary travelled on the ill-fated 'Estonia'), hearing Estonian being spoken around her, she momentarily felt that for the first time in her life, "she belonged", even though in England she had never consciously felt herself to be an outsider. Later, she seemingly revised her view: "they are strangers .... the common bonding of any race is strongest in exile ... I have superimposed the camaraderie of the Estonian communities back home on the people around me on the boat". At the end of the visit she "was suddenly overcome with ... what? Pain, grief, survivors' guilt .... " and began to sob. The sense of identity in second generation émigré communities can sometimes be a very confusing matter!

The book is fun to read if, unsurprisingly and unashamedly self promoting, It deserves an audience beyond the Dr Who faithful. As a 'light' read, I can recommend it. 

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# Outside in

## *Estonia through foreign eyes*

Book reviews by  
**Neil Taylor**  
*Chairman of BEST*

Back in 1992, a lot of 'odd-balls' landed up in Estonia for the first time, myself included! Each of us needed a new focus either in our private life or in our business; maybe even in both. Our hope was that Estonia would quickly improve our personal and professional balance sheets. Ideally, this would be achieved with the minimum of effort on our part. We could then put behind us the inadequacies that had become apparent at home.

At the time we were united by our ignorance of Estonia; it was genuinely hard to find any useful books on the country in English. But, our paths would soon diverge as we headed off in many different directions.

Some made money quickly, perhaps deviously, before moving on to pastures new. Others failed to make money yet stayed; of course, they always blamed the Estonians for their failure, never themselves. The third (and to my mind the best) group accepted the frustrations of working in Estonia, settled down to a lifetime of commitment to their host country, and regarded occasional monetary rewards as a bonus; a very small number have even managed to learn Estonian!

Not only may we now cast our minds back to those heady days of almost two decades ago but, perchance, several recently published books can also help us do just that.

That a book with the title "*Back on the Map, Adventures in Newly Independent Estonia*" (by Marc Hyman), should be published in 2009 seems odd. Sadly, it does not live up to its title in other ways. In fact it appears that the author did not have a single adventure during his time in Estonia. This might be interpreted as a compliment to Estonia, but it makes for a very boring read.

The author taught students, all of whom were 'normal', he ate regularly at the Eeslitall (Guest House on Dunkri in Tallinn) and failed to start an affair on every occasion he went to a discotheque. He arrived with a bundle of dollars, though not quite as many as he had hoped since some were needed for a Belarusian transit visa, which he had not allowed for. Predictably, a trip to St Petersburg provided a break in his Estonian sojourn

As the author spent a year in Estonia, it is strange that he often assumed that throwing around dollars and marks would still be appreciated, despite the introduction of the kroon. He never seemed to realise that what might have been appropriate for a street-trader in Moscow was the complete opposite for a serious restaurateur in Tallinn. Kroons may have been an irritant to him, but they played a crucial role in Estonian nation-building.

A reader may conclude that the author never really got to know any Estonians (or Russians). He exchanged small talk with them but seldom progressed any further.

A postscript, written in 2009, suggests that he maintained little contact with Estonia after he left. We are given no updates on those he taught, those he despised or even those with whom he danced.

To shed light on life in Estonia from 1991 to 1994, during its unexpected transition from a Soviet backwater to a vibrant independent republic, needs a lively diarist. Let's hope one still emerges!

Vello Vikerkaar is the pen-name of an American journalist who has been based in Tallinn for many years; a number of BEST readers will probably know his real name. But, as he has not yet decided to 'come out' we will continue to use his pen name in discussing the book "*Inherit The Family*", which he authored.

It is a compendium of articles, published over many years, in *Eesti Ekspress*. These have won

him great acclaim except from a tiny number of lost souls who would prefer a rigid Estonia in the hands either of a new VAPS or a revived Soviet régime. (The VAPS were members of an anti-Socialist and anti-parliamentary movement established in 1929 by veterans of the Estonian War of Independence).

Estonians can rarely laugh at themselves so it takes an American to laugh at and with them. Vello has an Estonian wife, a Siberian husky, and has lived in the country with both of them for several years; he therefore has an entitlement to hold forth. Both lead him along amusing paths that Marc Hyman totally failed to find.

The constant theme of the book is the frustrating lack of commercialism in Estonia. Whilst it is a relief never having to face an Indian or Middle Eastern scenario of constant street approaches, the writer's surprise at failed attempts to spend money will certainly strike a cord with many BEST members. Whether he wants to rent an expensive flat in central Tallinn, or find a modest room for the night on Prangli Island, the indifferent reception he gets is identical. His worst experience has been trying to order vegetarian meals; the treatment he receives is more appropriate for a paedophile or somebody whom it is impossible to understand and who is best kept at a distance. Such treatment also betrays a lack of commercial sense. How easy it would be for the meat or fish to be removed from an offending dish and substituted by more vegetables. The client would be happy and the providers' profit would be even greater.

Justin Petrone was lucky too; soon after his arrival he met the right Estonian to marry. In his book *"My Estonia"* he shares with readers his initial concern that his matrimonial decision might have been taken too quickly but, by the end of the book, all is sweetness and light. He demonstrates an early devotion to his future wife by following her to Karksi-Nuia and Suure-Jaani, where he met her relatives!

The bulk of the book is about Estonia and not about him. It is a narrative, so more difficult merely to 'dip into'; it is worth reading over one or two sessions, as much for the scenic (and very non-scenic) descriptions of his


surroundings as for his encounters. He mentions interludes abroad which help to place Estonia in a wider context.

Critical of Eesti Maja, fortunately not in Britain but in New York, he rather unkindly describes it as "a bunch of old farts toasting President Päts until some post-1991 blood comes along to dilute it"!

He is more patient with Estonia than the other two writers; perhaps he is fortunate to be working on a weekly paper, the *Baltic Times*, rather than on a daily one, as this allows time for reflection or relaxation.

Those who want to learn more of the author's opinions can turn to his blog: [www.palun.blogspot.com](http://www.palun.blogspot.com).

Reading these books has reminded me of the great gap that still exists in foreigners' knowledge of Estonia in Soviet times. Maybe, only Estonians can be entrusted with filling this void. If so, let us hope that several of them will rise to the challenge, whilst memories still remain clear yet not as painful as they once were.

Younger Estonians might also describe their experience of 'plunging' into the West after a Soviet upbringing. A critical analysis of the West by an Estonian 'newcomer' would be of great interest to a wide readership. I am reminded that Chiang Yee's *"Silent Traveller in London"* first published in 1938, is still in print, having entertained and informed several generations of British readers. Hopefully an Estonian will write a sequel. 

*Back on the Map: Adventures in Newly Independent Estonia*

**Marc Hyman**

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*Inherit the Family: Marrying into Eastern Europe*

**Vello Vikerkaar**

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*My Estonia: Passport Forgery, Meat Jelly Eaters and Other Stories*

**Justin Petrone**

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