

A Preliminary Look at Two Groups of Refugee Musicians Who Settled in the United States: Those Who Came Primarily From Austria and Germany, 1938 to 1943, and Those Who Came From Estonia, 1944 to ca. 1950¹

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Abstract

Much has been published about internationally known European composers and performers who fled the Nazis just before and during World War II and settled in the United States. Little is known about the approximately 2,000 musicians, mostly from Austria and Germany, who were assisted by the National Committee for Refugee Musicians 1938–1943. The Committee was created by the American composer Mark Brunswick (1902–1971). The refugees were helped to obtain entry visas and then to gain employment as musicians.

Another group of refugee musicians came to the U.S. somewhat later, from Estonia, fleeing both the Nazi and Soviet regimes. The largest number emigrated in 1944. Few of either groups of refugee musicians came directly to America. The complicated and sometimes discriminatory immigration laws and practices of the U.S. government are discussed in some detail.

Archival research has established where many of the Western European refugee musicians eventually worked in America. Equivalent archival research is needed to establish what assistance Estonian refugee musicians received in the U.S. This may make it possible to understand their contribution to American culture, while they simultaneously maintained the vibrant culture of their small country for other Estonian refugees who settled in the United States.

These days the word “refugee” once more conjures up terrible images of suffering – primarily in the Middle East, with serious repercussions for all of Europe. We know there are groups in other parts of the world who may not be in the current headlines but are nevertheless experiencing the trauma that has afflicted human beings for the millennia about which we have some information. Today I will talk about a relatively small group of refugees who were able to settle in the United States, musicians who came primarily from Austria and Germany just before and at the beginning of World War II, and musicians who came from Estonia towards the end and just after that war.

Please forgive me if I combine personal comments with more scholarly statements in this paper. Given the nature of this conference, dedi-

cated to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Urve Lippus, and the fact that I was unable to be at her funeral last May, there may be more personal comments than usual.

Why did I choose to compare these two groups of émigrés? Some twenty-five years ago I began a detailed study of an organization, the National Committee for Refugee Musicians, that was then almost unknown among those musicologists who were concerned with refugees from World War II (see Babbitt 1999: 52).² Much had been published about the major European composers, as well as about many important performers, and some scholars, both historians and theorists, who came to America as exiles from their home countries. To name just a few of those composers: Arnold Schönberg, Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek, Béla Bartók, Kurt Weill, and Darius Milhaud. Famous

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Aime Martinson Andra for help translating sections of the book by Avo Hirvesoo (Hirvesoo 1996), to Evi Arujärv of Estonian Music Information Centre for providing a copy of that book, and to the Estonian Musicological Society for inviting me to participate in the conference of the society on 23 April 2016 in Tartu, dedicated to the memory of Urve Lippus. The present contribution is based on my paper held in the conference.

² Apart from the citation of Mark Brunswick’s work with the Committee (see below) in small dictionary articles, this was the first public mention of it, more than ten years after I began my research and recorded oral history interviews with some of those refugees.

conductors, pianists, string players and others were also subjects of studies. But there was another stratum of exiles living in America – performers with professional careers in Europe or teachers at European universities and conservatories – whose stories were relatively unknown. It was mostly these persons who were assisted by the National Committee for Refugee Musicians in a special way. Not only was assistance given to get them out of Europe, but, of particular importance, once they arrived in the USA, they were helped to get jobs as musicians – as teachers in schools, universities, and conservatories, and as performers in orchestras, choruses, and opera companies. It was a difficult task because jobs for native born American musicians were hard to get (and still are).

The home of the National Committee for Refugee Musicians was in the musical capital of the United States: New York City. First called the “Musicians’ Committee for Refugees Coming from Germany,” then, from 1938 to 1941, the “Placement Committee for German and Austrian Musicians,” it eventually settled on “The National Committee for Refugee Musicians,” the name by which it is known – when it is known at all. The “Committee” was actually one person, the American-born composer and poet, Mark Brunswick (1902–1971), who in 1946, became the first chairman of the Department of Music at The City College of New York. CCNY, as it was known, was founded in 1847, the first public institution of higher learning in New York and the first in the United States to be tuition free. In 1961 it became one of the many campuses of the City University of New York, or CUNY, as it is now called.

Brunswick had spent 13 years between the 1st and 2nd World Wars in Europe, mostly in Vienna, with some commuting to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger. In 1938, when the rumbles of war became loud, Brunswick and his wife, Dr. Ruth Mack Brunswick – a psychiatrist who worked with Sigmund Freud – returned to the USA. Shortly thereafter Brunswick created the Committee. Based on the primary source material in the City College Library’s Division of Archives and Special Collections, we know that between June 1938 and January 1941 a total of 1,496 musicians were assisted by the Committee. This consisted of help getting temporary or permanent teaching or performing jobs, but also giving financial assistance to purchase or repair instruments. We do not yet

have exact figures for the remaining time that the Committee was active, that is, until 1943. Initial work with these documents suggests that a total of about 2,000 musicians were helped.

I put aside my research and writing about that Committee in 1990–91, when I became an *estofil* and started my work on the life and music of Veljo Tormis. A few years ago I returned to my earlier project and now I am working with a co-author, Jayme Kurland, who completed a Master’s Thesis in 2015 on the Committee (Kurland 2015). We are writing a book about the National Committee for Refugee Musicians, Mark Brunswick, and Music and Politics at the City College of New York.

When I heard of this conference I wondered what I could talk about that would in any way relate to the work of Professor Lippus. It was true that many years ago she and I wrote a grant proposal to work together on a one-volume history of Estonian music. I saw little that I could bring to that project, but she insisted that I would add to it the point of view of an American and western European trained musicologist. We’ll never know if it would have been a fruitful collaboration because we didn’t get the grant – and each continued working in her own areas of research and writing. Although our contact became less frequent, I knew that Urve was actively pursuing the subject of the history of Estonian music and was encouraging her graduate students to do the same. Indeed, one of her recent publications was *Muutuste kümnend: EV Tallinna Konservatooriumi lõpp ja TRK algus* [Decades of Transition: The End of the Tallinn National Conservatory and the Beginning of the Tallinn State Conservatory] (Lippus 2011). In her footnotes she refers to the single most important published source of information about Estonian refugee musicians, *Kõik ilmalaaneni laiali – Lugu eesti pagulasmuusikutest* [All Dispersed in the World’s Forests: The History of Estonian Refugee Musicians] by Avo Hirvesoo (Hirvesoo 1996), of which fifty-six pages (out of a total of 382) are devoted to those refugees who settled in America. A limitation of this book for us is that a few hundred Estonian musicians’ names are mentioned, but some have little information about them, nor is there extensive material that helps one get a clear picture of Estonian refugee musicians’ contributions to musical life in America. That would probably require a second volume. Another one of the very few reference books on our subject, *The Esto-*

nians in America (Pennar, Parming, Rebane 1975), includes factual material of great interest, but for us it has another limitation: it is about Estonians, not about Estonian musicians.

To compare the situation in which both of these groups of refugee musicians found themselves we must look at American immigration and naturalization law and presidential proclamations. There were some differences in the way the two groups were treated, though the picture is not clear cut. We can see that these laws responded “to the nation’s needs as well as, at times, to the demands of nativists and xenophobic movements, changing periodic bouts of hyper-nationalism, wartime anxieties, and humanitarian concerns about refugees.” (I quote from a documentary history of these laws by Michael LeMay and Elliott Robert Barkan, published in 1999; LeMay, Barkan 1999: xxiii.) The subject is fascinating, but I will just set the stage for our period by noting that the first era of U.S. history provided unrestricted entry for immigrants, up to 1880 – with the exception that from 1790 only white persons could immigrate and become naturalized citizens. From 1880 to 1920 the sole group excluded from these privileges were the Chinese. The next era, from 1920 to 1965, was ruled by an elaborate quota system based on national origins. These were originally “based on 2% of the census of the 1890 foreign-born population” (LeMay, Barkan 1999: xlii), but the government kept tinkering with the basis for the quotas. According to the proclamation of President Hoover in 1929, Estonia’s annual quota was 116. The two other Baltic nations had quotas of approximately one hundred (Latvia) and two hundred (Lithuania). Looking at other European nations, using rounded figures, we see Russia with ca. 2,800, France with 3,000, Italy with almost twice that, Poland, 6 1/2 thousand, Germany with 25,000, the Irish Free State with 18,000 and Great Britain and Northern Ireland at 66,000. Remember: Estonia’s annual quota was 116, but it was not filled every year. It may seem strange that during the Second World War all the European quotas were hardly filled: in 1942 only 10% of the total, the following year one half of that, in 1944 6% and in 1945 7%. Unfortunately a regulation that was in place long before World War II had not been cancelled, namely, that a visa had to be obtained at the American consulate in the country of origin. Once the United States entered the war, diplo-

matic relations, hence consulates, existed only in Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain.

In the years leading up to the war, getting visas for German and Austrian musicians was also very difficult. Most, but not all of them were Jews and anti-Semitism, a fundamental policy of the Nazis, also existed in Washington. There is ample documentation showing that Breckinridge Long (1881–1958), the Assistant Secretary of State in the Roosevelt administration, actively pursued policies so that “during the 10 years of Nazi terror only 16,000 Jews a year were admitted to the United States” (LeMay, Barkan 1999: 215) although the lives of millions were in peril. Secretary Long specifically called for creating bureaucratic delays in granting visas. As the situation grew worse there were various committees in America working to get Jews, Catholics and anti-Fascists out of Germany, Austria, and Italy. Many of these refugees went first to whatever country would take them, though all countries set limits to the number of immigrants they accepted. They went to England, France (until it was invaded), Portugal, Argentina, Cuba, India, and elsewhere. From there they applied for American visas and the lucky ones got them.

A significant modification of the quota law came from Congress in 1948, but prior to that President Truman promulgated a directive, in December of 1945, on “Immigration to the United States of Certain Displaced Persons and Refugees in Europe.” In it he removed the necessity of obtaining a visa in the country of origin (LeMay, Barkan 1999: 205). Although there were still quotas, by 1951 a total of 341,000 immigration visas were granted. Reflecting American foreign policy, the Cold War encouraged officials to admit persons whose home countries were now under Soviet domination, even though the visa applicants were currently in Germany, in displaced person (DP) camps.

Those changes in the law certainly aided some Estonians wishing to eventually emigrate to the United States. First they had to leave Estonia. Some had gotten away to the West during the initial occupation by the Soviets in 1939–1941. The Nazi invasion in July of 1941 led other Estonians to try to leave, mostly across the Baltic to Sweden. The return of the Soviets in 1944 inspired the largest emigration of that period. By late that year “there

may have been up to 100,000 Estonian citizens as refugees in the West.” (Raun 1987: 166) The large number who had gone to Germany were placed in DP camps at the war’s end. Fortunately we have a number of written accounts of life in the camps, including information about the music that was written and performed in Geislingen, one of the thirty-eight large camps in the American zone of Germany in which Estonian schools were established. A great resource for this information is the *DP Chronicle: Estonian Refugees in Germany 1944–1951* by Ferdinand Kool, published in 1999 in Estonian and in 2014 in English (Kool 2014).

As I gathered facts about these two groups of immigrant musicians and tried to compare them I realized that one of the underlying questions for me, as an American musicologist, was: how did each group contribute to American music culture in the second half of the 20th century?

Several related explanations of their differences occurred to me, which, to be verified, probably require the research tools of sociology, along with a background of musicology:

1. The German and Austrian refugees came to a country already steeped in the traditions of their centuries-old classical music and therefore they were more readily recognized in the United States as masters of their art.
2. Estonian classical music had first been cultivated in the late 19th century and was mostly unknown in the United States until the last quarter of the 20th century – although some individual Estonian performers did gain recognition before that.
3. The sheer numbers of Austrian and German refugees yielded a wider influence on American musical culture than could the smaller number of Estonian musicians who were able to work as musicians in the USA.
4. Estonian refugees, whether or not musicians, were understandably concerned with sustaining the culture of their small nation, and therefore gave great attention to their own communities in exile. Thus *Eesti Kultuuripäevad* [Estonian Cultural Days], Estonian language schools, choral societies, and international ESTO gatherings of Estonian cultural activities were maintained in the United States for the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st, well past the resumption of Estonian independence in 1991.

5. As has been noted in other studies of refugee musicians, both of these groups, especially their respective composers and performers, enjoyed greater professional success in their adopted country than did other exiled members of the intelligentsia because their mode of expression – music – was more independent of language, as compared with those refugees whose work was in the social sciences and literature. Scientists also did better, though I do not now have data to prove this.

At this moment I would like to digress from the central themes of this paper to mention something said to me by a highly educated Estonian during one of my many visits here. Somewhat reticent when he talked about this, he nevertheless made it clear that he was resentful that the world had paid so much attention to the Holocaust, yet so little was said about the deportations, killings, and serious mistreatment of the Estonian people by the Nazis and the Soviets, particularly during the years that Stalin ruled the Soviet Union. What I think he failed to recognize was that in the country that was considered the 20th century’s “leader of the free world,” that is, the United States, most people couldn’t distinguish between the Balkans and the Baltics. It did not really register with them that the loss of 25% of its people, in a nation whose total population had been about 1,134,000 in 1939, constituted another lamentable atrocity.

Fortunately, in 1969, a group of Estonian refugees who lived in the Greater New York City area established the Estonian Archives in the U.S. in Lakewood, New Jersey. By now, well into the 21st century, most of their documents have gone to the huge collection of the University of Minnesota’s Immigration History Research Center in Minneapolis, which I was not able to examine. As I reviewed materials that are still in Lakewood and as I spoke with the volunteer staff that maintains those archives, I learned that many Estonians who arrived in America in the 1930s onward earned a living as farmers or construction workers or, once their English improved, in mid level office jobs. This was not accidental. American policy dictated that preference for immigration would be given to those following “agricultural pursuits,” as well as to those in construction and other types of work needed in the localities in which they were to settle. Probably it was their excellent education

in Estonia, and then their maintenance of schools on all levels in the Displaced Persons Camps in Germany and Sweden immediately after World War II, that made it possible for them to eventually become successful entrepreneurs and professionals in many fields. There were also choruses and instrumental groups in the Estonian DP Camps that sustained that vital part of Estonian culture.

In thinking about the nature of the two groups of refugee musicians under consideration, it seems to me that I have been comparing apples and peaches – both fruit growing on trees, but very different in their taste and texture. Our two groups were musicians who were forced into exile from their respective European homelands and both eventually settled in the USA during and after World War II. In general (there were certainly differences within each group), the groups differed in numbers, in their renown upon arrival, in their attitudes about integrating into American society, and in the assistance they received from American citizens and organizations. In New York City the Estonian Music Center, created in 1956

and maintained by a number of local Estonian musicians and music lovers, organized concerts, looked after composers' rights, assisted young composers, and established music archives. Oddly enough, during the twelve years that I worked on the biography of Tormis and frequented Estonian House (Eesti Maja) in New York, I never once heard about this organization. But I must consider chronology before I jump to conclusions. I began my research into Estonian music and musicians in 1990, many years after the Estonian Music Center was created. On the basis of archival work, we now know the kinds of assistance the mostly German and Austrian refugee musicians received in America between 1938 and 1943. Equivalent archival research is needed before we can say precisely what help was given to Estonian refugee musicians in the United States after World War II. We may then be able to understand how they contributed to American musical culture and also maintained the vibrant culture of their small nation for the Estonian refugees who settled in the United States.

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