

Estonia Today

Russian Old Believers in Estonia

Eastern Estonia is home to many Russian Old Believers. The Old Believers are Russians who fled to Estonia because of religious persecution. They found homes on the west banks of Lake Peipsi. The first Russian Old Believers appeared in Estonia on the coast of Lake Peipsi near Mustvee in the late 17th century. Today there are about 15 000 members in 11 congregations of Old Believers in Estonia.

History

In 1652, Patriarch Nikon of the Russian Orthodox Church introduced a number of reforms aimed at centralising his power and bringing the rituals and doctrines of Russian Orthodox in line with those of the Greek Orthodox Church. Old Believers rejected Nikon's reforms. Consequently, the Old Believers were cruelly persecuted, exiled, tortured and executed all over Russia. Their churches, icons and homes were burnt. As a result they took refuge abroad.

In Estonia, the building of Old Believer worship houses began in the early 18th century in Prichudye (the Lake Peipsi Region). In the middle of the 18th century, new houses of worship were built in the villages of Varnia, Krasnye Gory (Kallaste), Kasepeli, Kolki and Chernyi Posad (Mustvee). Unfortunately, as the country was under tsarist rule, the Estonian authorities were forced to close the houses of worship in the middle of the 1840s. On a positive note, the Old Believers avoided persecution and execution.



In an Old Believers' church (Photo by Birgit Püve)

The 20th century considerably changed the lives of the Old Believers. Estonian independence in 1918 created an environment of acceptance and religious freedom. The Old Believers in Estonia were able to practice their religion in peace while their fellow worshippers in other countries were being discriminated against and persecuted. In the 1920-30s, new worship houses were built and old houses were reconstructed. World War II and the illegal occupation of Estonia by the Soviets once again broke the peace. The war led to houses of worship in Raja and Kükita being burnt down as well as the worship house in Tartu. The end of the war signalled a time of peace in Prichudye and the restoration of the villages began.

Old Believers Today

Today there are 11 congregations of Old Believers in Estonia with a total of 15 000 members. The congregations mainly lie in areas along the banks of Lake Peipsi, but also exist in Tartu and Tallinn. At present there are 4 actively functioning chapels in the villages. The descendants of the Old Believers willingly baptise their children in the worship houses. The Old Believers of Estonia strive for a revival of old traditions.

A unique 7-kilometre village street, consisting of the Raja, Kükita, Tiheda and Kasepää villages, follows the shore of Lake Peipsi. All of the houses are of a peculiar architecture and are situated in a single line. Most buildings are two stories and have either balconies or small towers. Every house has an icon inside and a spade in the yard.

Raja village is well known because the icon painter Gavriila Frolov founded his famous school of icon painting in Raja at the end of the 19th century. Icons painted by Frolov and his students can be found around the world. Raja also has one of the oldest Russian-language schools in Estonia (1815).



People in the Lake Peipsi area (Photo by Annika Haas)

In the summer of 1998, an Old Believers Museum was established in Kolkja where everything connected with the life of Old Believers is exhibited.

Celebrations and Food

Easter is the greatest feast for the Old Believers. It is the victory of life over death, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is celebrated for three days, during which the graves of relatives are visited. Christmas is celebrated on 6 January. The Christmas religious service begins in the evening and ends at midnight. There are also local church patron feasts.

Since fasting is an important part of the Old Believer religion, the Old Believers fast weekly and on certain religious holidays their eating habits vary greatly. During the fasting period meat and milk products are not eaten. Instead, the Old Believers eat light meals such as porridge with vegetable oil, sauerkraut soup with mushrooms, or Peipsi smelt, oat flummery and black radish with oil. The greatest variety of dishes is prepared during Easter. The most famous of these dishes is pascha. Pascha is made of quark or cottage cheese with raisins and candied fruit.

The traditional food of the Russian Old Believers can be enjoyed at the fish-and-onion restaurant in Kolkja. The restaurant was built with funds from the PHARE programme.

State support

In 1995, the Old Believer congregations formed the Union of Old Believer Congregations, whose chairman is currently Pavel Varunin. The Society of Old Believer Culture and Development was registered in Tartu in 1998. It is the first and only non-profit organisation that aims to help Russian Old Believers living in Estonia. The society helps solve social and economic problems and assists in the preservation of their cultural heritage.

The Society has published a leaflet with the support of the MATRA-KAP Program and created the Old Believers homepage www.starover.ee. The Society has also organised an international conference and published several books.

In 2008 a holding trust of the Estonian Old Believers' Cultural Centre was formed, which unites different Old Believer organisations and cultural collectives.

The Old Believers receive support from the state budget through municipal, regional and social support programmes. They also receive funds to help preserve their heritage and culture.

Since 2007 the community of the Old Believers has been supported by the state budget through the Office of the Minister for Population and Ethnic Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry of the Interior has supported restoration of Old Believers' worship houses, art and cultural valuables.

The Interior Ministry's Peipsiveere Programme 2008-2011 began in 2008. One of its objectives is to provide support in applying for resources from structural funds.

Recently the Estonian Ministry of Culture adopted "The cultural programme of Peipsiveere 2009-2012", the main goal of which is to preserve the vitality of the Old Believers' cultural space.