Legends Connected with the Sinking of the Ferry *Estonia* on September 28, 1994

Eda Kalmre

The Estonian folklorist Oskar Loorits (1900–61) has observed that most religions of the world have developed around death and funeral. Even today a great deal of folklore is created following catastrophes.

Traffic accidents involving numerous victims have already become a part of our everyday life. Radio, TV and newspapers allow us to follow all major natural disasters, mass murders, acts of terrorism or nuclear catastrophes occurring all around the world. Life and death are no longer strictly family or clan matters. In the late 20th century, Europeans have become used to the idea that progress in science has eliminated hunger and epidemic disease, and progress in technology can prevent catastrophes. The stronger the belief, the more severe is the shock following a setback.

The ferry *Estonia* sunk on the stormy Baltic Sea during the night of September 28, 1994, taking the majority of its crew and passengers along with it. Only a few people managed to escape from the ship during the twenty or thirty minutes it took the ship to go down. There were 137 survivors, 852 people were reported missing. The sinking of the *Estonia* is the worst accident that has ever occurred on the Baltic Sea, if we do not count the horrors of the Second World War.

After the *Estonia* catastrophe, oral traditions connected with the accident began to spread, just as it had happened after the *Titanic* went down. Quite similar rumours and legends appeared simultaneously in Estonia and neighbouring countries, Finland and Sweden. The Finnish folklorist Leea Virtanen has briefly mentioned them in her book on contemporary legends and rumours *Apua! Maksa Ryömii. Nykyajan Tarinoida ja Huhuja* (Virtanen 1996: 68). The Swedish folklorist Maria Hanberger

(Hanberger 1996: 109–121), and the Finnish folklorist Ulla Lipponen (collections in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literary Society) have collected and studied jokes that appeared after the sinking of the *Estonia*. On the analogy of such terms as Xerox-lore or Aids-lore, this phenomenon has been called catastrophe-lore (Hanberger 1996).

The treatment of catastrophes has developed into an interdisciplinary area of research where the studies of historians, researchers of journalism and folklorists have several points of convergence. Hannu Salmi, a Finnish historian, provides a good example of the historical approach that can be taken with respect to catastrophes. The term *catastrophe* was originally associated with dramatics; it came from Greek and marked the turning point in a drama in the Aristotelian prosody (Salmi 1996: 21–22). Hannu Salmi argues that disasters, catastrophes and accounts of disasters are modern contemporary tragedies, which could be treated not simply as a piece of news but as an Aristotelian tragedy, a mimesis of fear and sympathy. According to Aristotelian theory, an accident caused by ignorance – and not malice – was the most tragic of all. Accounts of disasters often emphasise the results of mistakes caused by ignorance. Therein lies the tragedy of shipwrecks like these of the *Titanic* and *Estonia*. Travel across the Baltic Sea on m/s Estonia was something everyone could understand. "Unawareness", a midnight voyage where nobody can anticipate potential disaster stirs deep emotions and feeds the imagination. The descriptions of possible disasters become a part of the narratives of eyewitnesses, the stories depicting the moments before the catastrophe, the "blissful unawareness". The blissful unawareness and the ultimate disaster have been successfully employed in disaster fiction, movies and literature. Tendencies of the supernatural and the metaphysical are rather characteristic of contemporary media lore. The recurring components of news broadcasting catastrophes are: (i) the reproduction of the tragic incident (the case as a visual image); (ii) the search for the culprit and cause; (iii) describing the destruction following the accident. Also, testimonies of witnesses play an important role. It is namely these narratives that illustrate the metaphysical essence of disaster (Salmi 1996: 21–40).

Andres Kõnno has analyzed the media coverage of the disaster of passenger ferry *Estonia* from the angle of Clifford Geertz's concept of chaos and Roland Barthes's theory of myth.[1] (Footnotes) The dividing line between the known and the unknown has always been veiled in secrecy and has never lent itself to sufficient and unequivocal explanation. Chaos being one of its integral parts, a catastrophe gets inevitably labelled as 'mystical'. (Kõnno 1996: 88)

Folklore, jokes, rumours and legends that have sprung up during catastrophes partly contribute to the construction of the semantic field of the shocking event. There is a reason why rumours and legends have been studied by focusing on the 'Three Cs': crisis, conflict and catastrophe. Both narrative forms provide the community important models of interpretation of the tragedy that happened to them.

The story might be presented in both journalistic and literary form. An important factor in the material is its surrounding psychological and social context. From a certain perspective catastrophes are even entertaining; the bigger the accident and the higher the number of victims, the more it finds coverage in the mass media, resulting in a larger number of popular songs, proverbial expressions, legends, jokes, beliefs, etc. Whether the disaster assumes international dimensions depends on the extent of the catastrophe, how many countries and nations are involved and how it affects society. The shipwreck of *Titanic*, for example, inspired more songs than any other event in American history.[2]

The focus of my paper is primarily on the *Estonia* catastrophe and narratives, particularly legends, concerning this incident. I will attempt to discuss the behavioural patterns characteristic in the media after major catastrophes and to observe the interaction of folklore, media and society. The present paper is based on materials published in the Estonian media after the shipwreck, and those collected by the Estonian Folklore Archives.

---

[1]) Andres Kõnno's findings on the journalistic studies about the sinking of MS *Estonia* more or less coincide with the findings of Hannu Salmi and the ones proposed by author of this article.

[2]) The American folklorist D. K. Wilgus came to this conclusion after studying traditional ballads about the *Titanic* disaster in the United States, Ireland and the rest of Europe (see McCaughan 1998: 140).

This Estonian postcard (Digipress Est. /P&S/ Printall) still carries just one meaning: blue, black and white are the flag colors of Estonia.

In Estonia, Ilmar Soomere gathered parapsychological experiences, omens and dreams connected with the accident and published them in the parapsychological magazine *Paradoks* within the first three months after the accident (see Soomere 1994). These publications are now prime source materials. Literary visions published so far have nothing substantial to add to newspaper accounts and appear rather to be based on them.[3] The

[3]) Novels and stories published till 2000.
Ehlvest, Jüri: *Päkapikk kirjutab* (Dwarf's Writings), *Vikerkaar* 1995, no.4.
Paju, Juhan: *Katkenud romaan* (A Disrupted Novel), Tallinn 1996.
"More than 100 kg of osmium was being shipped from Tallinn to Stockholm on board the liner. The market price of the shipment exceeded the price of the liner several times. The ship was wrecked in the middle of the sea and a special submarine collected the valuable contraband from the wreck. Russian Mafia, the KGB and well-known Estonian politicians had their hands in the incident."
In addition to the above two, five publications on media materials have been published in Estonia: *Mayday Estonia. Tragöödia Läänemerel* (Mayday Estonia. Tragedy on the Baltic Sea), BNS 1994; *Mayday Estonia II.*

only exception here is a biographical narrative about the accident and the ensuing events by a Swedish survivor, Kent Härstedt.[4]

THE MEDIA, THE COMMUNITY AND TRADITION

Many of us have personally experienced accidents involving numerous casualties. In smaller communities mass media intensifies the shock felt by each individual. During the Soviet period talking about death was a taboo, discussing major catastrophes was avoided. Victims of catastrophes had to manage on their own. Today's society in contrast encourages people to confront the death. A belief in the purifying effect of death has become a truism. After the *Estonia* catastrophe crisis centres and crisis lines were established and church doors opened to the wider public for the first time in Estonia.

Details of accidents spread extremely rapidly via media, and the status of eyewitness is forced on each one of us. Through communication channels the victims of catastrophes are brought closer to us. After the catastrophe of the *Estonia*, the Estonian author Astrid Reinla wrote indignantly that:

> One of the paradoxes of the end of the 20th century is that life, but especially death, are not private matters any more. They reach newspapers, broadcasting, TV screen and become everyone's property. Mass media show and multiply the ill Pope, Miterrand dying of cancer, as well as nameless heads chopped off during a bloody feud in a remote Chechen village, or a schoolbus which has driven into an abyss on a mountain road in Peru. (Reinla 1994)

Aasta hiljem (Mayday Estonia II. A Year Later), BNS 1995; A fictional story by Andi Meister, member of Estonian investigation committee *Lõpetamata logiraamat. Mayday Estonia III* (Unfinished Log-book), BNS 1997; *Miks Estonia? Sajandi laevahukk Läänemerel* (Why the *Estonia*? The Shipwreck of the Century on the Baltic Sea), Eesti Ekspress 1994; and Witte, Henning: *Uppunud tõde. Uued faktid ja teooriad reisilaeva Estonia huku kohta* (The Sunken Truth. New Theories and Facts on the Sinking of *Estonia*), Tallinn 1999.

[4]) In Estonian: K. Härstedt. *See, mida ei saanud juhtuda* (It Never Should Have Happened). Tallinn, 1996.

This illustrates a negative attitude towards the intrusive aspects of media in connection with the most private right of a person – the right to die in peace. Such expressions remained very much a minority viewpoint in the general attitude of the press after the catastrophe. The editor of one of the major Estonian daily newspapers puts it as follows:

> A respectable press can handle all subjects that are important for society; the difference lies in the point of view taken, and in the terms of expression and style. (Muuli, 1994).

Hannu Salmi notes that there are many similarities in broadcasting the news and mental exploration of *Titanic* and MS *Estonia*, but the channels of media have changes. A novel and clearly delineated issue that emerged in the television news of MS *Estonia* was the treatment of the concern and emotional crisis of the people who had lost their relatives. This has introduced a new meta-level in representing tragedy: We are witnessing a tragic play and at the same time have the chance to observe other people's reactions to the accident. (Salmi 1996: 36)

Analysing jokes, which appear after catastrophes, and the role of the media in promoting them, the American folklorist Elliott Oring says that the media triumph in national disasters. The disasters make news, and our awareness of national or international catastrophes depend primarily on the media (Oring 1987, 282).

Nowadays, the media in a post-catastrophic society are indeed behaving as a significant source of information. The majority of legends that spread after the *Estonia* catastrophe were inspired by and modelled after the materials the media had published about it. The largest number of such articles in Estonia were of course those published in tabloids, such as *Post*, *Liivimaa Kuller*, *Eesti Ekspress*, and in *Paradoks*, a relatively popular and widely distributed parapsychological magazine. *Hommikuleht* and *Eesti Elu* could be added to this list. In terms of genres, the material was published as a news feature, in-depth report, or a reader mail, but hardly ever appeared as the subject of commentary or interviews (although sometimes they were presented as veiled interviews).

With the help of the media, an aura of the supernatural was created around the accident. The Estonian press repeatedly depicted the shipwreck as a prophetic omen. The motifs of the shipwreck as an omen for Doomsday (Ots 1994), and as a punishment for atheism (*Paradoks* no 11/12, 1994), or the demoniac powers of Russalka[5] (Vint 1994) were depicted as self-evident fact during the months following the catastrophe. *Liivimaa Kuller*[6] (Väljaots 1994), *Liivimaa Kroonika* (Karp 1994) and *Paradoks* (no. 15/16, 1994) published a story of two little girls, who allegedly predicted the catastrophe of the *Estonia*. There is nothing new under the sun: the religious motif of punishment and revenge was also characteristic of the folklore that emerged after the *Titanic* catastrophe.[7]

For example, *Eesti Ekspress*[8] (Nov. 25, 1994) published an article on the 'most original version' about the catastrophe of the *Estonia*. The police had received a complaint, alleging that certain words and letters in the advertisements published in the weekly *TV-Nädal* were connected with the shipwreck on Sept. 28. On the cover of *TV-Nädal* there had been a large capital "Ä" – the 28th letter of the Estonian alphabet – and the dots on the letter had been slanting exactly in the same angle that the *Estonia* later ended up lying on the bottom of the sea. The word 'Lloyd' had been printed on the cover in large letters as well.

---

[5]) A statue erected to commemorate the perished crew of the warship *Russalka*, which sank in the Baltic Sea in 1893. In Slavonian mythology *russalka*s (mermaids) were spirits connected to the ancient water and fertility cult, and were believed to bring misfortune. Slavonic peoples believed that drowned maidens and unbaptised children turned into *russalka*s. – Translator's note.

[6]) A weekly tabloid

[7]) After the *Titanic* catastrophe people in and outside the Belfast ship factory believed that the sinking of *Titanic* was caused by curses. Before painting the ship a worker had written the following words on the ship's hull: "*Let God sink this vessel if He can!*" (McCaughan 1998: 141–142) Catholic workers believed another story – the ship's number 3909 ON, if read backwards ("NO Pope"), expressed anti-papal attitudes, and the ship and its number were from the devil. *Titanic* as a religious metaphor is first and foremost associated with Protestant fundamentalism. The message of various religious sects in Northern Ireland is based on the *Titnic* catastrophe. This catastrophe is used as a propagandistic slogan for spreading the word of God, warning against punishment for blasphemy and speaking of reincarnation (Hayes 1994: 194–196; Plunkett 1978: 311–313; McCaughan 1998: 143).

Lloyd's was the insurance agency for the shipping company Estline to whom the *Estonia* belonged. Actually, the weekly had run an advertisement for Harold Lloyd's pictures from the 1920s.

In order to attract public attention and to fill the information vacuum, the media often behaved in an unpredictable way, publishing all kinds of articles, which belonged rather in the realm of folklore. The previous example falls into that category. The public was also keen on finding news with a cryptic undertone in the press. For example, one week after the accident, a computer firm named Korel opened their new building in Tartu, and a short news item appeared in the newspaper *Postimees* (Oct. 5, 1994) shortly thereafter: The house resembled a ship to a minor extent, so people started to call the building "a white ship" and "the sunken *Estonia*", and it was considered a bad omen for the firm.

People also started predicting nothing good for the young country of Estonia, as the ship bearing the same name had sunk. Several articles about name magic were published in the press after the catastrophe, pointing out the significance of names in old folk belief (*Paradoks* 13/14, 1994; Soosaar 1994). All this reminds us of the interplay between folklore and the media as described by Donald Allport Bird (1976) who quotes, as an example, the sensational news of Paul McCartney's supposed death.[9] "The metaphoric notion of 'a state-ship' and the ship called the Estonia become identical objects in the human mind and fatalistic mysticism is developed around the name – one can never be sure that he/she won't go down to the bottom him/herself." (Kõnno 1996: 89)

After the shipwreck, a newspaper published a story which gave a numerological explanation for the accident in a letter to the editor, published in *Liivimaa Kuller* (Nov. 10, 1994). The author, armed with numerology, lay all the blame for the accident on the number 6. He also claimed that this unfortunate number had something to do with other major catastrophes, such as Chernobyl, Hiroshima, mass deportations and famines for example. Many numbers and operations in this letter do not fit

[9]) After the media had launched the news about the supposed death of this famous member of the Beatles, it spread widely and became the basis for pseudo-folkloristic beliefs and legends and magical games (Bird 1976: 290–292).

together; the fact was also pointed out by the editor's commentary. But the story was published anyway, because the newspaper wanted sensational material. When the press is short of real information, the preponderancce of ambivalent stories following the principle 'it is unbelievable, but still believable' tends to grow.

The period after a catastrophe is a heyday for astrologers, psychics and healers. They got lots of publicity in the press. There were interviews with people prominent in this field in Estonia. Archival data and materials published immediately after the shipwreck support the opinion that most persons, who were in some way or other touched by the catastrophe sought help from psychics and fortunetellers.[10] In difficult and unsettled times people tend to do just that more and more. Persons deprived of a safe daily routine find peace of mind in turning to traditional religion. Even dramatic changes in society cause an increase of public interest in UFOs, witchcraft, prophecy and alternative medicine. The period during the collapse of the Soviet regime, for example, witnessed an inundation of first parapsychological newspapers, magazines, reports describing UFO contacts, and the media began to publish everything connected to today's prophets and healers.[11] Oral tradition went rampant, and many newspapers later referred to the fact that during a public performance a week before the accident actually happened, the Russian astrologer Pavel Globa had foretold of a shipwreck with a number of victims that would happen on September 28. This was actually a piece of information that had been very freely interpreted by one newspaper, where it was changed to meet the circumstances.[12] That prediction became wellknown and was much talked about for some time after the catastrophe. In oral tradition this prediction became even more concentrated on that very

[10]) Many texts concerning the catastrophe of the *Estonia* that are found in the Estonian Folklore Archives include information or stories about visits to a fortune-teller. The psychic Veeliks Jalakas worked on the spirits of the people who went down with the *Estonia*, helping them to find peace on the request of their relatives. (Information from the catalogue of The Mother Earth Fair 1997, pp 26–27. This is a yearly fair devoted to alternative medicine and natural healing held in Estonia.)

[11]) Folklorist Guntis Pakalns (1995: 2) has observed same phenomena in Latvia.

[12]) According to the Russian journal *Argumenty i Fakty*, Pavel Globa predicted that fishermen would experience trouble caused by natural forces in March. For September 28, he predicted a great traffic accident.

subject, and in the course of time it attracted a lot of new details. A recording from the Estonian Folklore Archives, made in 1997, claims that

> Estonians will suffer from three major accidents. The first one was the catastrophe of the *Estonia*, the second one was the Kurkse accident[13], and the third one will happen next year. (EFA[14] II 23, 223/4)

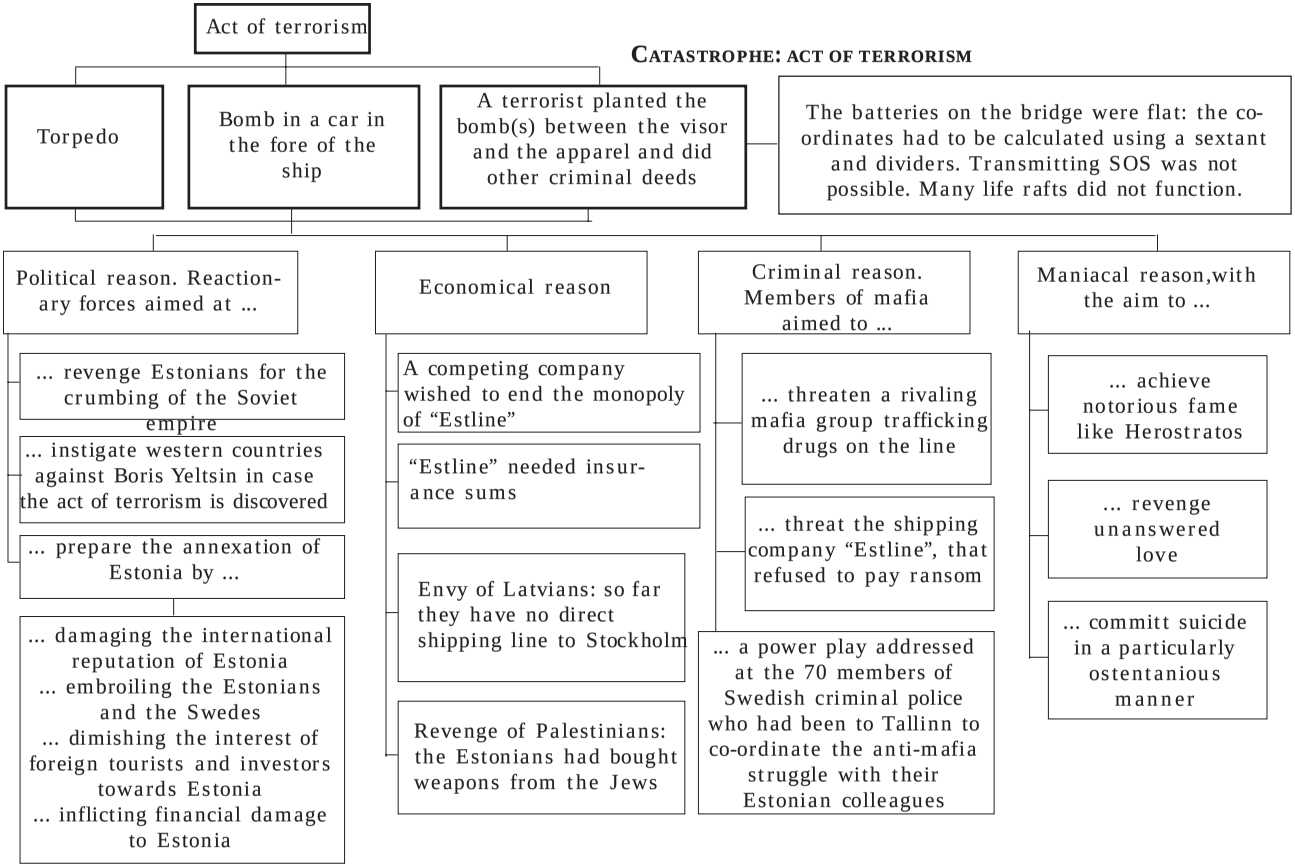
Omens of death, which had emerged spontaneously and were retold in many different places after the catastrophe, dealt with the same theme more generally:

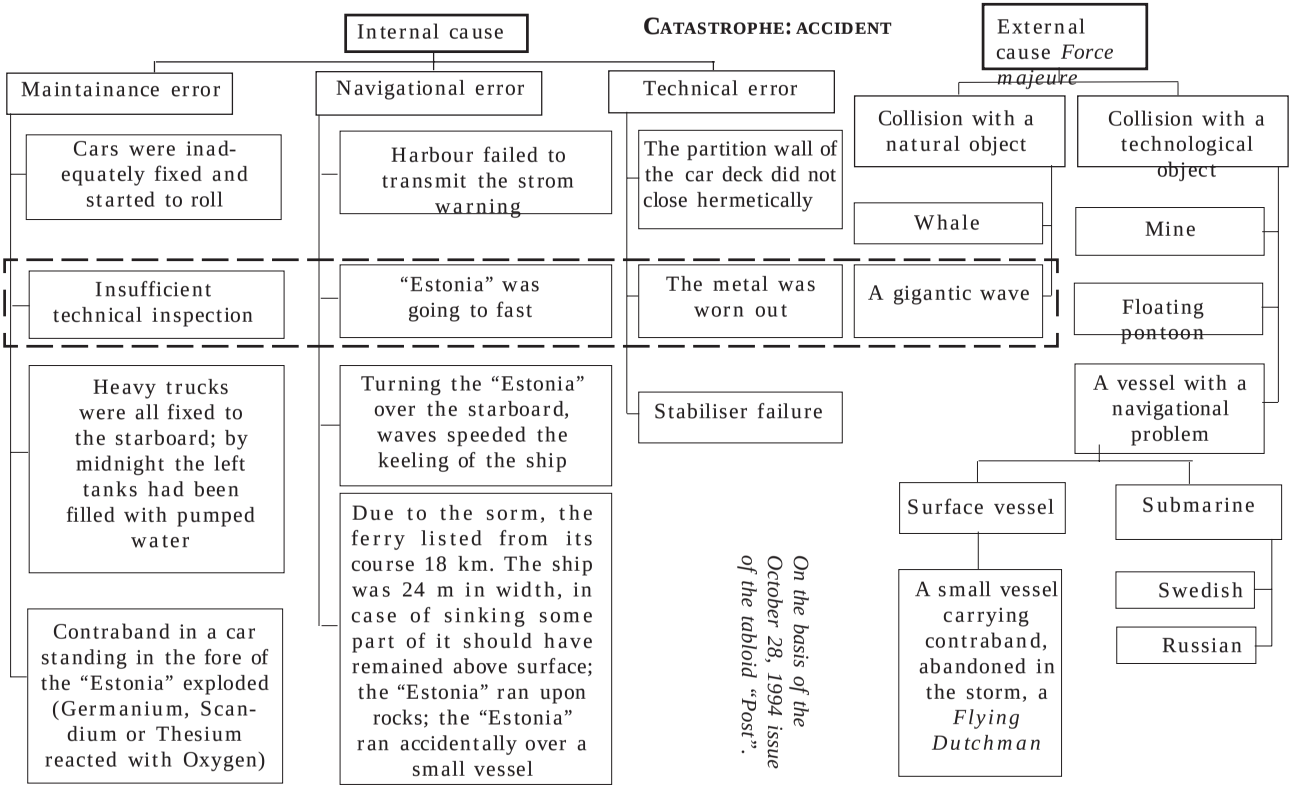
> My sister-in-law told me about this unaccountable incident. She had heard about it from a friend of a friend.
>
> In Annelinn[15], several people had seen a strange ray of light, which moved from the roof to the ground through the windows of one house, like a light, or the lights of a ship that was sinking. This happened in the night of September 28. (Informant: a woman of 38; EFA II 3, 407).

Family-centered legends were deseminated betond the influence of the media, even among journalists themselves:

> One of my husband's colleagues told this story at work after the catastrophe. A young man, a relative of his, had had to go to see his grandmother in the country on the evening of September 28. At least this was what his relatives thought. Instead, the man had gone on a one-day trip to Stockholm together with a couple of his friends. His grandmother, who knew nothing about his plans, had started to read the Bible that same evening. She had opened it at random and found a passage about a shipwreck. The parents of the man learned about his trip only when he came home after the shipwreck

[13]) The Kurkse disaster occurred in 1997 when a group of Estonian soldiers drowned while trying to cross the strait from island to mainland on foot as part of an army training campaign.
[14]) EFA = Estonian Folklore Archives, folklore collection.
[15]) Annelinn is a district of large apartment blocks in the city of Tartu, Estonia.


Act of terrorism
CATASTROPHE: ACT OF TERRORISM
Torpedo
Bomb in a car in the fore of the ship
A terrorist planted the bomb(s) between the visor and the apparel and did other criminal deeds
The batteries on the bridge were flat: the co-ordinates had to be calculated using a sextant and dividers. Transmitting SOS was not possible. Many life rafts did not function.
Political reason. Reaction-ary forces aimed at ...
... revenge Estonians for the crumbing of the Soviet empire
... instigate western countries against Boris Yeltsin in case the act of terrorism is discovered
... prepare the annexation of Estonia by ...
... damaging the international reputation of Estonia
... embroiling the Estonians and the Swedes
... dimishing the interest of foreign tourists and investors towards Estonia
... inflicting financial damage to Estonia
Economical reason
A competing company wished to end the monopoly of "Estline"
"Estline" needed insur-ance sums
Envy of Latvians: so far they have no direct shipping line to Stockholm
Revenge of Palestinians: the Estonians had bought weapons from the Jews
Criminal reason. Members of mafia aimed to ...
... threaten a rivaling mafia group trafficking drugs on the line
... threat the shipping company "Estline", that refused to pay ransom
... a power play addressed at the 70 members of Swedish criminal police who had been to Tallinn to co-ordinate the anti-mafia struggle with their Estonian colleagues
Maniacal reason,with the aim to ...
... achieve notorious fame like Herostratos
... revenge unanswered love
... committ suicide in a particularly ostentanious manner



On the basis of the October 28, 1994 issue of the tabloid "Post".

and told them about it. But his two friends did not survive. (Informant: a young journalist; the story was recorded from the husband [38] of the author of the present article; EFA II 3, 407/8).

Predicting the future by picking at random a passage from a book (especially the Bible) has been a folk practice up to the present day, and it has been preserved as a form of entertainment in everyday life in Estonia. This is also characteristic of children's lore.

Newspaper stories about people, who survived the accident or whose trip was for some reason cancelled, spread also in oral form. These stories circulated both in Estonian as well as in the international press and the Internet. *Paradoks* (no. 15/16, 1994) published an overview of those published in Estonian newspapers. Most published stories gave a material explanation to what happened, i.e. the trip was cancelled due to some practical obstacle (flat tyre, inadequate documentation, etc.). However, the materials sent to Ilmar Soomere immediately after the accident perhaps give a better idea of the omens, paranormal experience and dreams that actually circulated at the time (see Soomere 1994).

MEDIA LEGENDS

1) The materials published by the press inspired rumours about **the assumed causes of the shipwreck**. These spread very fast and were widely circulated among people. We have to agree with the Estonian catastrophe analyst Enno Reinsalu who states that although the technical causes of the catastrophe were constantly being scrutinised in the press, a consensus concerning all circumstances will never be reached (Reinsalu 1994). So many threads will remain untied forever, but they will offer plenty of material for endless discussions and will remain in the consciousness of the people and in their folklore.

Even the most sensation-loving newspapers published in Estonia in 1994 knew that many of the causes of the shipwreck, as suggested in their articles, actually belonged to the realm of folklore. A rather complete list of all sensational causes of the catastrophe that circulated among the public was published in

Clues disappear under water? Speculations about the sinking of the ferry were published in newspaper Eesti Elu, 8 November 1994.

the newspaper *Post* on Oct. 28, 1994, in an article entitled "Why the *Estonia* sank?" It presented a graph entitled *Folklore*, offering the following causes: it was sunk by a Russian submarine; it was blown up by a competing Mafia group; the captain of the ship destroyed the ferry, as it was carrying drugs, and he was afraid of the Swedish customs; the shipping line destroyed it as they wanted to get the insurance money; the accident was the result of a terroristic attack; etc., etc. Such sensational news produced material for discussion, and in spite of an official statement issued later (final report was published in 1998), they confirmed a firm belief that inexplicable and dubious things had lurked behind the disasterous fate of such a big and safe-looking ship. This is shown by recordings, made even as late as in 1998:

> (About the sinking of the *Estonia*) Many people in my close circle of friends were convinced that the causes were either linked to contraband or a Russian mine. Nobody believed that there could have been something else. (Informant: a 35-years-old well-educated woman; EFA I 32, 27).

2) In this group, the informant usually added the incident of **the mysterious disappearance of the second captain of the *Estonia*.** This was Captain Piht who was on board as a passen-

ger. He had been seen distributing life jackets on the deck, and he had been included in the first list of survivors. Members of the ship crew claimed that they had spotted him being taken to the hospital on a TV video clip. Later his name had been deleted from the list, and the video clip also went missing. Several other people, who had also been on the list, went missing with him, too. In many of these stories it was felt that Captain Piht was alive, but for some reason he was hiding from the world.

Naturally, this legend was the subject of much speculation in the press and such stories are still circulating among people. In any event, that story, as it was created and amplified into a legend by the mass media, reminds us of other modern tales which claim that president John F. Kennedy, Aristotle Onassis or princess Diana are still alive somewhere. After the Second World War, similar stories were circulating about Adolf Hitler and Martin Bormann.

> The sinking of the *Estonia* raised many differing opinions, but one prevailing opinion was that there must have been something suspicious, as there were many policemen waiting for the ship in Sweden. Another suspicious thing was those two sisters (twins), who had been in the lifeboat together with Captain Piht, because they had already been rescued, and why did this part [of the video clip] go missing after the first showing. People are sure that these persons are somewhere, because if they were dead, the bodies would have been returned. This leaves the impression that they had been liquidated, but why, the captain probably knew something. (Informant: a 70-years-old woman; EFA II 25, 80/1).

3) The legends about **some people who were abducted by UFOs** is the direct elaboration of the materials published by the press. Another version of the accident, offered by the press, is a collision with a submarine; in several tabloids the submarine became an unidentified swimming object. The articles also stated that no bodies were found and that some of the persons who had been on the list of survivors (Captain Piht and some others) later went missing. The newspaper *Eesti Elu* of Dec. 6, 1994 writes:

> The catastrophe of the *Estonia* has raised many questions. Where are these people now who were seen among the survivors and who later went mysteriously missing or died? No additional explanations have been offered. Such concealment of the real facts is very strange. It is direct evidence of dark forces at work.

And an account from the archives:

> … On a gathering of mediums held some two years ago in Tartu some guy told that they had been abducted. Perhaps he wasn't even lying, because I came across an article found from Sweden and translated into Estonian in some newsgroup, where the divers were astonished that the number of people found from the wreck of *Estonia* was so small…(EFA I 32,26).

Evidently, alien intervention in disasters that claim a high number of victims has become a fixed motif. Alien attack was also one of the popular versions for the WTC catastrophe on September 11 (Noormets 2003).

These legends could well be interpreted in a very humanistic way – these people could still exist somewhere, they could be alive.

4) Stories about people drowned in the ship calling home on their mobile phones after the accident are directly connected with the previous legend. This legend was promoted by the media, where it was discussed, without sparing the feelings of the readers, whether and for how long a person could remain alive in the compressed air inside the cabin on board the sunken ship.

These stories were circulated in Estonia as well as in Finland and Sweden. On the one hand they are based on legends created by the media, on the other hand, they coincide with conceptions of the spirit in older folk belief. The spirits of people who have died an unnatural death cannot find peace and come back to haunt their relatives. A mobile phone as a means of contacting the other world represents an old belief which has acquired a new and more acceptable contemporary context. Many memorates concerning the *Estonia* deal with the same subject.

The one-time soap commercial "Vinolia soap and Titanic – The Highest Standard of Toilet Laundry and Comfort at Sea".

The belief that a close person could still be alive somewhere is predominant in these recollections.

Folklorist Reet Hiiemäe recorded the following story during fieldwork in 1998:

> One month before the sinking of the *Estonia* – my daughter Lea was one of them that went down with her – so, one month before it [the catastrophe] I was washing my milk churns in front of the cattle shed and suddenly I heard my own mother calling me: "Leida! Leida!" I looked around quickly, but saw nothing. My mother had died long ago, so I racked my brains, wondering what she had wanted to tell me. I guess that's what it was. I asked a psychic too, but got no answer.
>
> It was in winter, they were showing 'Unbelievable Stories' on TV. My husband had gone to Tallinn that morning. I

went to the hayloft to fetch some hay, and suddenly I became so frightened that even my knees started to shake. I was so stressed the whole day; I couldn't find any peace. In the evening I had a shot or two of brandy and that helped. Of course I had always been afraid of the hayloft, it just gives you the feeling of some power residing there. But after the *Estonia* I am not afraid any more, I tell myself that Lea must also come home now and then, and I would never be scared of her. But several psychics have told me that Lea is actually still alive somewhere. And so it happened that one day when I was doing my laundry in front of our sauna, I suddenly heard: "Mommy!" I listened, and heard it again twice, but no more, but I knew it was Lea calling me. This house had been my mother's home, she had loved it very much, maybe that's why she came back. (Informant: a woman of 56; EFA I 32, 25).

From the *Estonia* to the *Titanic* and titanicology. The story about Urmas Alender

The teacher in a school in Paide, small town in the middle of Estonia, is teaching the 6th grade. They are discussing musical theatres and where they are located. It turns out that there is one in Tallinn, but… A pupil, Rein, has forgotten what the theatre is called. The others try to help him, whispering that a ship with the same name sank recently. "The *Titanic*!" Rein happily cries out.

It is hard to tell, whether the story is true or not, but this light-hearted school story was recorded in 1998 by an informant for the folklore archives. How vivid must the impressions of a ship which sank more than 80 years ago somewhere on the Atlantic be, when these can still overshadow a tragic accident that happened to the Estonian people and their neighbours not far from here within the past decade?! Or is it something else?

Even at the end of the 20th century the *Titanic* continues to sink. Tens of millions of people relived the accident through the James Cameron movie. In one way or another we are all passengers on the *Titanic* and the catastrophe has turned into one huge business in a world ruled by the media and entertainment industry.

In today's world the *Titanic*, or to be more correct, titanicology has grown into a distinct international cultural phenomenon, sublimed as the bearer of certain meaning, messages and signs, covering the whole spectrum from low culture to high culture, from pop culture to refined culture. In Summer 1998, for example, people who dined in *Kuursaal* in Haapsalu could order an appetiser "*Titanic*", a cabbage salad in the shape of a ship. The whole country could read a newspaper article 'Hoiugrupp sank like the *Titanic*' (*Hoiugrupp vajus nagu Titanic*) about the collapse of one of the largest Estonian banks with a photograph of the well known painting by Willy Stoewer depicting the sinking *Titanic* attached to it (Vedler 1998), or they could discuss when the new night club *Titanic* would be opened in Tallinn, etc. The keyword *Titanic* appears in fiction, scientific literature, movies, fine art, music, folklore, poetry, graffiti, cartoons and comic strips, caricatures, computer games, etc. Media has exploited the *Titanic* as the embodyment of certain symbols and messages in case of *Herald of Free Enterprise* as well as the recent *Estonia* catastrophe. Along with the motif of the ship, other visual and textual motifs of the disaster, such as life jackets, dance orchestra, deck chairs and icebergs were repeated over and over. As clichés their power was almost metaphoric (McCaughan 1998: 137). Certainly, the *Titanic Historical Society* has done its best to keep the worst sea catastrophe in the 20th century alive. The Society consists of thousands of people all over the world. New facts are being discovered about the *Titanic* all the time.

Plenty of material about the *Titanic* catastrophe was published in the media after the sinking of the *Estonia*. Many similarities were found between these two accidents, and not only around the actual circumstances; people also compared, either consciously or unconsciously, the legends, beliefs and attitudes in the media.

For example, a well-known dramatic story, and a subject of discussion for many titanicologists, is the legend that the orchestra of the *Titanic* had been playing until the very end, and that their last piece had been "Nearer, My God, to Thee". The psychological background and roots of this legend, amplified by the media, are discussed in a book by Wyn Craig Wade (1986: 62–63).[16] One legend about the *Estonia*, which got its start from

a cynical article in the newspaper *Post* resembles the legend about the orchestra on the *Titanic*:

> According to the description of one survivor, at about one o'clock on that fateful night of Sept. 28, Urmas Alender was drunk. When the ship started listing, many people found themselves standing on the chimney. Alender had been there, too, clinging to the chimney. And what did he do? He sang! They say that Alender had been singing at the top of his voice over the blasts of wind. This is the way the famous Estonian troubadour went down – gallantly defying the storm. He could not swim. (Liiva 1994)

A short oral version of the same story was recorded in Tartu in 1998:

> I have heard legends that Urmas Alender had been embracing a chimney and singing in the shipwreck. (EFA I 32, 26)

Urmas Alender was the expressive singer of an Estonian rock group; he had been performing on the *Estonia* on that memorable night, and had perished along with it. Most probably he was the best known and most loved public figure on board. After the accident many articles were published in the press about a memorial concert to Urmas Alender and about issuing a CD of

---

[16]) A.A. Dick, a Canadian passenger, who had survived the accident, said in an interview that looking back at the sinking ship her last memory was of men standing still on the deck, facing death, and the orchestra playing their last piece "Nearer, My God, to Thee". It turned out to be a poetic vision, but was accepted as true by people and had a soothing effect in the overall chaos. Later it became known that the orchestra did, in fact, play until the very end, but their last piece was "*Songe d'automne*", a popular contemporary tune with a considerably harsher melody. The author argues that Mrs. Dick may have remembered and wove into her story a shipwreck from 1905, where survivors on the board of the *Valencia* had sung "Nearer, My God, to Thee". They were heard singing from the boat, which had come to rescue them. People remembered the touching story and the motif has later been used in movies and fiction. After the accident the song gained tremendous popularity. It is worth noting that moments before the *Estonia* catastrophe Swedish passengers who spent time in the swaying bar, recalled the same song (see Härstedt 1996: 36–37).

his songs. It was often pointed out that the work and behaviour of the singer all seemed to refer to a predestination of fatal events.

> The apocalyptic end of Urmas Alender's life on the Estonia made him a legend, an Estonian Morrison. (Laulik 1994)

This brief legend spread its wings due to the image created by the media, and probably it also has something to do with searching for analogies with the well-known story of the orchestra on the *Titanic*. Obviously this legend suited the image of Urmas Alender and his last minutes on the ship. For comparison: the motif of the *Titanic* and its orchestra is repeated in other genres, such as the jokes about the *Estonia*, collected in Finland (Ulla Lipponen's collection in the Finnish Folklore Archives) and Sweden:

> – Mikä vuosi silloin kun Titanic upposi ja mikä vuosi kun Estonia upposi.
> – Silloin kun Titanic upposi, vuosi pohia ja silloin kun Estonia upposi vuosi keulaportti.
>
> *– What year was it that the "Titanic" sank and what year was it that the "Estonia" sank?*
> *– When the "Titanic" sank the hull leaked, and when the "Estonia" sank the hatch leaked.*
> (The pun derives from the double meaning of the Finnish word 'vuosi', meaning both 'year' and 'leaked'; M47, 144–1)

> – What orchestra was playing on the *Estonia*?
> – I don't know.
> – Brothers Deep (Bröderna Djup)
> (The answer consists of a pun known from jokes referring to the trademark '7UP'. (Hanberger 1996, 116)

The general focusing in on the individual which is very typical to media (and also popular culture) makes the material more tangible and helps create a closer and safer atmosphere. Every accident has its scapegoats and heroes. The once chivalrous orders 'Be British' and 'Women and children first' heard on board of the *Titanic* still rouse sentimental and patriotic feelings. People still believe that Captain Smith saved a child before going down

with the ship (McCaughan 1998: 140). The American press sang praise to a Mrs. Strauss who stayed with her husband, although an officer had asked her to step in the boat. Another married couple, the Dickinson Bishops, had to suffer from public scrutinity all through their life. It was believed that in order to escape the sinking ship and get the seat in the life-saving boat Mr. Dickinson had disguised himself as a woman (Wade 1986: 324–5).

After the *Estonia* catastrophe the press tried to put together a touching story of the romantic survival of two young Swedes (see Härstedt 1996).[17] I personally witnessed a TV report from a hospital where Kent Härstedt described his and Sara's escape on the stormy sea. The story centred on happy motifs: the optimism and unselfish help from two strangers, who right before jumping into the stormy sea agree to meet and have a dinner in a wonderful restaurant in Stockholm should they survive. This story was beneficient to the public in getting over the accident by finding something positive and beautiful in a tragic accident, to achieve balance and security.

CONCLUSION

Folklore material as a whole reflected two different sides of the crisis, which complemented and intermingled with one another, but were still clearly distinguishable. On one side there were personal experiences as reflected in individual stories, beliefs or behaviour; on the other side, there was the crisis affecting the whole community as reflected in the media. People were retelling meaningful dreams, omens, memorates, beliefs and rumours, short jokes and sensational stories. The press mediated and amplified all these, and gave a strong impetus to the nascent folklore.

Each legend about the *Estonia* has its own psychological and folkloristic background. From the folkloristic point of view, these legends are based on ready-made structures and the so-called collective memory, which has always existed in mythology or in story motifs, such as contacts with the spirits of people who have died an unfortunate death, an extreme cult of the dead – pro-

[17]) According to a conversation with a Swedish folklorist Maria Hanberger the story was discussed more in the Swedish press than in Estonian.

moted by contemporary pop culture – treating a dead person as a living being, fortune telling by opening a book at random, the use of the motif of the *Titanic* orchestra, amplified in literature, etc. From a psychological point of view, it is unavoidable that all kinds of mythologies and beliefs play a part in explaining catastrophes as the human mind tries to come to terms with these events even with scarcity of data. While suffering from a crisis, people search for a sense of security offered by legends, meanings, omens and other mythological constructions. In this case, the media took on the role of contributor, quick disseminator and amplifier. They most distinctly reflect the interpretation of the catastrophe provided by the community and its ability to overcome it. Psychologically it is likewise important that people should talk about the accident in order to find relief and detachment. This aspect is stressed, e.g. by scholars studying jokes.[18] The Estonian linguist Juhan Peegel, who has analysed soldiers' vocabulary during the Second World War, stated:

> People strive to ignore the worst, to diminish and ridicule hardships and dangers by renaming them, so as to enhance their capacity to endure and to find spiritual balance. That way the renamed grim reality may become illuminated by another, arrogantly contrastive light, creating a different, psychologically favourable climate." (Peegel 1976, 340)

In a postaccidental crisis situation, those social groups who are usually biased against superstitional traditions, such as premonitory dreams and parapsychological experiences, also described their experiences and retold stories (e.g. men aged 20 to 40). Those narratives circulated most widely and actively during the first two months after the accident. The stories spread almost explosively. By the third month the accident gradually became less important in the news. The community had vented the crisis; some sensational stories; some theories of conspiracy (the causes of the accident, the missing Captain Piht, etc.) continued

[18]) e.g. Dundes/Hauschild 1983 (jokes from Auschwitz Concentration Camp); Oring 1987 (jokes about the catastrophe of the space shuttle Challenger); Hanberger 1996 (jokes that appeared after the catastrophe of the ferry *Estonia* and about the mass murderer Mattias Flink).

to spread, as the media recalled them now and then. Stories with religious colouring and stories about miraculous escape were mostly told within the circles of close friends and remained within the family tradition.

References

Bird, Donald Allport 1976. A Theory for Folklore in Mass Media: Traditional Patterns in the Mass Media. *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 3&4, 285–305.

Eesti Ekspress 1994, 25 Nov. Estonia katastroofi omapäraseim versioon [The most original version of the catastrophe of the *Estonia*].

Hanberger, Maria 1996. Katastroflore – en studie av vitsar och skämt runt Estonia och Mattias Flink [Catastrophe folklore – a study on humour and jokes about Estonia and Mattias Flink]. *Nord Nytt* 62, 109–121.

Hommikuleht 1994, 22 Oct. Kaptenite naised on loodudki ootama [The wives of sea captains are made to wait].

Kõnno, Andres 1996. *Mythical interpretations in the press. "Estonia." The disaster in Estonian Media*. Stockholm, pp.88–97.

Liivimaa Kuller 1994, 10 Nov. Õnnetuse number 6 ja "Estonia" katastroof [6 – the number of accident, and the catastrophe of the Estonia].

Muuli, Kalle 1994. Kommentaar [Commentary]. *Rahva Hääl*, 9 Nov.

Noormets, Jaanus 2003. *11. septembri kuulujutud võrgumaailmas. ERA KK 207* [Rumours about the 9/11 attack on the web. Manuscript in the Estonian Folklore Archives].

Oring, Elliott 1987. Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster. *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol 100, pp 276–286.

Ots, Loone 1994. Surmalaev ja jumalate hukk [A death ship and the perishing of gods]. *Eesti Ekspress*, 7 Oct.

Paradoks 1994, no 11–12. *Pärnu psühhotroonikapäevad* [Pärnu days of healers and psychics].

Paradoks 1994, no 13–14. *Eesti riigi ja Eesti laeva hukk* [The perishing of the Estonian state and an Estonian ship].

Postimees 1994, 5 Oct. *Arvutifirma Korel avas Tartus maja* [The computer company Korel opened its new house in Tartu].

Peegel, Juhan 1976. Eesti rahvuskorpuse sõduriargoost [Soldier's jargot in the Estonian National Corps]. *Keel ja Kirjandus* 6, 339–342.

Reinla, Astrid 1994. In Pace? *Eesti Ekspress*, 7 Oct.

Reinsalu, Enno 1994. Tehnoloogilised katastroofid [Technological catastrophes]. *Rahva Hääl*, 1 Oct.

Salmi, Hannu 1996. Lissabonin maanjäristyksestä Estonian katastrofiin: onnetumuusuutisointi ja "tulevan pahan pelko" [From the Lisbon earthquake to the Estonia catastrophe: news of accidents and "fear of future misfortune"]. *Lopun alku. Katastrofien historia ja nykypäivää*. Turku, 21–40.

Soosaar, Enn 1994. Rajusügis maal ja merel. Kommentaar [Stormy autumn on land and at sea. Commentary]. *Rahva Hääl*, 6 Oct.

Virtanen, Leea 1996. Apua! Maksa ryömii [Help! The liver's crawling]. *Nykyajan tarinoita ja huhuja*. Helsinki, 68–69.

Media & Folklore.
Contemporary Folklore IV

Edited by Mare Kõiva

Tartu 2009

How to cite this article:

Eda Kalmre (2009). Legends Connected with the Sinking of the Ferry *Estonia* on September 28, 1994. *Media & Folklore. Contemporary Folklore* IV. Edited by Mare Kõiva. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press, pp. 288–312.

Article available online:
http://http://www.folklore.ee/rl/pubte/ee/cf/cf4