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# Estonian Community Houses as Local Tools for the Development of Estonian Cultural Policy

*Egge Kulbok-Lattik*

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PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

## **Egge Kulbok-Lattik**

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## 1. Introduction

This article will analyse the foundation and development of society<sup>1</sup> and community<sup>2</sup> houses from the second half of the 19th century until the last years of the first period of Estonian statehood in the end of 1930s.

Society houses (later community houses) were founded on the initiative of ordinary people and rural intelligentsia all over Estonia since the 1880s, with the aim to provide space for cultural activities of choirs, orchestras, theatre groups and libraries; for common festivities and leisure time of the local communities in villages (also in towns). By offering possibilities and space for self-expression and feeling of togetherness of ordinary people, society houses were part of the emergence of Estonian nation-building and a public sphere, where new ideologies and a system of values were channelled among the population of rural areas on the eve of a change in the historical framework of Estonia – from an agrarian society to a capitalist economy.

Preconditions and historical reasons for establishing community houses, just as many other spontaneous and free initiatives of the second half of the 19th century, lie in several socio-political changes in Europe, e.g. the spread of ideas of enlightenment and national awakening and progressing

capitalist economy. In Estonia these processes appeared as the expressions of society and temperance movements of the whole population, guided by the emerging national elite. The endeavour for common activities and the vision and actions of outstanding individuals were in its essence cultural political (Kulbok 2008), with the objective of moving towards independent existence and national self-determination, breaking away from the patronage of the Baltic-German nobility and the Russian Empire. (see Karu 1985; Raun 2003; Jansen 2004; Karjahärm and Sirk 1997; Laar 2006; Zetterberg 2009)

During the first period of Estonian independent state (1918–1940), with the adoption of the Law of the Community Houses in 1931, the network of community houses was set up by the state. According to §1 of the Law of the Community Houses (1931), the aim of a community house is to be a centre for cultural and free educational activities and a home for educational and social associations in its area of operation. §2 states that in order to meet the objectives mentioned in §1, community houses should have rooms for libraries, reading rooms, studios, rooms for lectures and public meetings, rooms for singing, musical and theatrical rehearsals as well as rooms for physical training and other educational activities. (RT 53, 1931)

The coordinated foundation and development of a network of community centres is linked to Aleksander Kurvits<sup>3</sup>, whose letter to the Minister of Education (18 May 1927) provides arguments in support of the idea of setting up the network of community houses. In 1935 Kurvits wrote:

The most important task of community houses is to be a location for public festivities and meetings. /.../ Singing, music and theatre plays in particular contribute to the creation of feelings of togetherness and solidarity. That is why the most important task of community houses is to offer good conditions for activities which enable the full spread of feelings of togetherness and solidarity... (Kurvits 1935: 3–4)

According to Uljas, there were more than 400 community houses by 1938 in Estonia (Uljas 1990:19).

The main aims of this article are as follows: firstly, to examine socio-historical preconditions and reasons for establishing Estonian society houses in the second half of the 19th century and to describe how they contributed to the national self-determination and the creation of a public sphere in Estonia, connections between cultural practices and political mobilisation will be described. Secondly, to investigate how society houses developed and became community houses within the formation of state-subsidized network - as an instrument of cultural policy during different cultural policy periods in Estonia and so the historical formation of Estonian cultural policy will be reviewed.

Literature on cultural policy has various takes on the concept. In a broad sense, cultural policy deals with the class of interests, history of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations and the circulation of symbolic meaning in society. In a limited perspective, cultural policies are seen as tools for the administration of arts. (McGuigan 1996: 1) This article will investigate both: the historical formation of Estonian cultural policy, using the expanded concept of cultural policy (Eräsaari 2009: 64) as “epistemic and interpretative approach between cultural analysis and cultural policy, including historical reflection”. In order to examine how community houses developed as an instrument of cultural policy during different cultural policy periods in Estonia, I will also use the more specific approach to cultural policy – as a tool for the administration of arts and cultural practices.

## 2. Theoretical concepts

### 2.1. From a public square to nation-building, from a public sphere to a nation state

One of the main developments in the societies and intellectual life of Europe in the 19th century was the increasing involvement of people in public life. Various initiatives in the framework of society movement based on the free will of people expressed the growing strive towards freeing the society from the strict limitations of corporative or class society. Such initiatives were influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment, French Revolution about equal human rights and the newly emerging national consciousness (see Karu 1985; Jansen 2004; Aarelaid 1996; Karjahärm & Sirk 1997; Laar 2006).

Similarly to European societies, Estonian cultural and public sphere also evolved as a result of combined activities: Estonian newspapers, society and temperance movements and cultural practices showed the growing involvement of Estonian people in public life. Important preconditions for these developments were wide-spread literacy among Estonians and agrarian reforms of the 19th century which had a direct impact on the majority of the population on the Estonian territory as peasants became land owners. As a result of the Russian central power and the socio-economic situation dominated by the Baltic German nobility, the elite of the 'awakened peasants' was highly motivated to build up their cultural and public sphere with the intention to improve the status of Estonians in society. (see Karu 1985; Aarelaid 1996; Raun 2003; Jansen 2004; Karjahärm & Sirk 1997; Laar 2006; Zetterberg 2009)

The concept of public sphere has a long and complex genealogy: Max Weber sees cultural change revolve around different parts of social life (Schroeder 1992: 23), many theorists and thinkers (like Arendt (1959), Gramsci (1957), Williams (1958), Bourdieu (1993), Foucault (1984) etc) have conceptualised public sphere in different ways. Jürgen Habermas formulated the whole concept of public sphere with its historical development in his analysis "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (1962). Habermas describes how the forming publicness starts to mediate between the state and private individuals and how the public sphere involves the self-cultivation project of bourgeoisie (Habermas 1989). Crossley and Roberts have summarized that "Habermas describes public sphere as a bourgeois public in which "large number of middle class men, qua private individuals, came together to engage in reasoned argument over key issues of mutual interest and concern, creating a space in which both new ideas and practices and discipline of rational public debate were cultivated in the late 18–19th centuries in Germany, France and Britain" (Crossley and Roberts 2004:2).

Hence, to understand the developing public sphere in Estonian newspapers and discussions held in the circles of new Estonian national elite among their personal friendships and social salons (see Laar 2006:343–354), the use of Habermasian concept of public sphere is clearly relevant. As Habermas reveals the connection between the public sphere and political mobilisation, it is possible to examine the role of forming Estonian public sphere as a bridge between the emerging cultural and national self-determination and the political demands for equal rights in society.

However, since this article aims to describe the foundation of Estonian society and community houses as emerging cultural institutions contributing to the development of Estonian public sphere, some of the aspects, which express their ambivalent nature, need more precise conceptualisation. In the context of Estonian cultural policy research, Bakhtin's<sup>4</sup> concept of *public square* opens the



essence of society and community houses, which were to be a public places for festivities and cultural practices of ordinary people living in villages and towns. Bakhtin's concept also enables to theorise cultural practices cultivated in the society and community houses as the Estonian popular or folk-culture<sup>5</sup>.

Bakhtin's concept of *public square* is connected to the ancient and medieval European popular culture of masses – garish, diverse, and playful, which flourished on public squares and marketplaces, during the festivities of ordinary people, which by nature was ambivalent, and strongly democratic and rebellious. (See Lotman<sup>6</sup> 1987:5-14; Bahtin 1987:185-192) Lotman explains that in the Bakhtin's concept of *public square*, the „carnevalesque“ laughter culture of people with its ambivalent and creative coexistence of opposite dispositions of culture reveals: where high and low, sinner and sacred, terrific and fun, dirty and clean exchange places and balance each other. Its quintessence for Bakhtin appears in the tradition of medieval carnival, where the popular culture of masses opposes and “cancels the dominant cultural mindset of rational dogmatic antitheses of binary constraints” (Lotman 1987:5-14).

A similar idea was expressed by Michael Gardiner<sup>7</sup> (2004: 28–48), who analysed the Habermasian concept of “public sphere” and Bakhtin's ideas about “public square”, and has said that, “for Bakhtin the *public sphere* in European history never confirmed the realm of sober and virtuous debate of the sort that Habermas claims to have identified in “The Structural Transformation”. Gardiner claims that Bakhtin's marketplace and public square in early modern times “were witness to a tumultuous intermingling of diverse social groups and widely divergent styles and idioms of language, ranging from the serious to the ironic and the playful” (Gardiner 2004:38). In Bakhtin's view, the dialogic tradition provides a vital counterweight to an abstract Enlightenment version of truth, which “knows only a single mode of a cognitive interaction among consciousnesses”, that real public sphere was always marked by pluralistic and polyphonic, conflictual situation of interactions. (Gardiner 2004: 36 and Bakhtin, 1984a: 81 cited in Gardiner 2004)

Examining Estonian society and community houses, Bakhtin's concept of *public square* enables to explain the ambivalent nature of community houses which appeared during several historical eras since they were founded. It is important to remember that since the 1880s society houses were built under the conditions of reactionary politics of Russian Empire, where all other cultural initiatives except the temperance movement were forbidden. Therefore, Bakhtin's *public square* as a concept helps to discover the polyphony of complex interactions and voices, including the hidden intentions and resistance of Estonians against the suppressive regime. As in the framework of temperance movement, traditional cultural practices were continued (choirs, orchestras, theatre plays, etc), Estonians could diligently sing songs to praise the Tsar, whilst continuing to express their feelings towards their home and country. Bakhtin's concept of *public square* enables to explain the ambivalent essence of Estonian community houses as party-places for local communities without open political intentions, with the most important task to be a location for public festivities, meetings and cultural practices where people shared joy, pleasure and feelings of togetherness and solidarity and at the same time society and community houses contributed to the increasing national consciousness and identity.

According to the scholars of Estonian nation-building (e. g. Raun 2003; Jansen 2004; Aareleid 1996; Karjahärm & Sirk 1997; Laar 2006), in the beginning of the national movement, the Estonian national aspirations were mainly connected with cultural goals, however, with time the national

movement became more and more political, demanding “equal rights” with the ruling Baltic-German nobility with regard to participation in running local affairs. Hence, open discussions in the newspapers, political debates and activities among the Estonian elite who guided the political and social movements are theorised with the Habermasian *public sphere*.

Society and community houses with their cultural practices, theorised within the framework of Bakhtin’s *public square*, supported the process of state-building by bringing the ideas of the Estonian elite to the grass-root level. These two parallel directions of the historical development of culture intertwined with each other and so contributed to the formation of a successful Estonian nation-building movement. The movement started with cultural practices and a shared feeling of togetherness, so reinforcing the basis of national identity and ended with political self-determination. This kind of explanation is coherent with the findings of prominent theorist of nations, Hroch<sup>8</sup>, who empirically develops and demonstrates the concept of a three-stage process of nationalist mobilisation: heightened *cultural* awareness of national distinctiveness among intellectuals and literati, a concept of nationalism as a political programme, mass mobilisation on behalf of this programme. Hroch also shows these phases in relation to other social transformations, especially economic changes. (Hroch 1996).

## 2.2. Society and community houses contributed to the Estonian nation-building

The emergence of Estonian national consciousness is traditionally associated with the spread of Herder’s<sup>9</sup> (1744–1803) ideas, that all people have their own culture and popular spirit *Volksgeist*, and culture as a common identity of folk and nation<sup>10</sup>. Current article aims to examine how society and community houses contributed to the national self-determination and the creation of a public sphere in Estonia (as arguments given above already partly showed). Therefore, the general discourse of the theories of nationalism and the academic discussion – whether the nations are constructed by the elite as modernists<sup>11</sup> claim, or are they an ancient, ethnic, territorial and linguistic phenomena as the primordialist<sup>12</sup> thinkers argue – will be left aside. We can find many convincing arguments from different theories. It is relevant to describe the Estonian nation-building with the results of Hroch’s research which underlines four factors of successful nationalist movements: (1) a strong sense of identity and common historical past within the group; (2) a certain level of vertical mobility (some educated people must come from the non-dominant ethnic group without being assimilated); (3) an increasing level of social communication, including literacy; and (4) a nationally relevant conflict. (Hroch 1996)

The article reveals the connections between the factors of successful Estonian nation-building and community houses, which became the new important places for the development of culture of Estonians, who certainly shared the common historical past within the group (1). Community houses provided space and possibilities for new cultural practices, such as: singing in many-voiced choirs, playing music in brass bands, acting in theatre plays, lending books from libraries and taking part in lectures, as well as having public festivities. Even if these cultural practices were borrowed from Baltic Germans, in the light of postcolonial theories, they had an exceptionally great importance, both in the cultural life, as well as raising educational standards of the country people. Cultural activities in the society houses involved a large number of country people from the whole strata: from the rural intelligentsia, to handicraftsmen and hired farm labours. It also attracted women, married or not, to leave the confines of the family and domestic circle, thus paving the way for the development of the feminist movement. Hence, the society and community houses provided a

certain level of vertical mobility (2), and also served increasing the level of social communication and literacy (3). Estonian ethnologist Ellen Karu points out that despite the high rate of literacy (96, 2 per cent already in 1881) of Estonian country people, the opportunities to take up intellectual pursuits had been extremely limited for centuries for them. The society and temperance movement with their wide range of cultural activities played the most progressive role historically. By building society and community houses, people themselves created the conditions necessary for the development of their culture (Karu 1985:281). Finally, the establishment of society and community houses was based on nationally relevant conflict between Estonians and Baltic Germans (4), with the basic intention to improve the status and suppressed rights of Estonians.

### **2.3. Institutionalised context for constructing national identity – roots of the cultural policy of a nation state**

In order to open up the connection between the nation-building process and formation of Estonian cultural policy, it is necessary to define the concept of national identity. It represents socially constructed phenomena. British scholar Stuart Hall claims that the construction of identity<sup>13</sup> is a process, which works through marking down the differences and symbolic limits, and that identity construction requires the existence of the other. (Hall 1996: 3–4)

Hall (1994) emphasises the role, culture plays in the construction of nations and national identities, describing nations not only as political constructs, but also as ‘*systems of cultural representations*’ (Hall 1994: 200). People are not only citizens by law they also participate in forming the idea of the nation as it is represented in their national culture. “National cultures construct identities by creating meanings of ‘the nation’, with which we can identify; these are contained in stories that are told about the nation, in memories which link its present to its past and in the perceptions of it that are constructed”. (Hall, 1994: 201) Hall claims that a nation is a symbolic community constructed discursively: a national culture is a discourse, a way to construct meanings which influence and organise both our actions and our perceptions of ourselves. Nationality is explained as a narrative (Geertz 1975), a *story* which people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world. National narratives do not emerge from nowhere and do not operate in a vacuum. They are, rather, produced, reproduced and spread by actors in concrete (institutionalised) contexts. (de Cilla, Reisigl, Wodak 1999)

Here the historical role of the cultural policy of nation-state appears with a primary goal to form and develop an institutionalised context for cultural practices. Since statehood, national identity is a subject of cultural production, reinterpretation and circulation of symbolic meanings of culture, and it is shaped by the tools of cultural policy, or as E. Gellner states it, “the role of the state as the “organism” is to ensure that this literate and unified culture is effectively produced, that the educational product is not shoddy and sub-standard” (Gellner 1994).

Montserrat Guibernau<sup>14</sup> points out the importance of the role “elite culture” plays in construction of the narratives of national culture, as ““elite culture”, by definition, is a high culture with an established language and a substantial body of literature and knowledge”. Guibernay explains that the control of the learning process lies in the hands of scholars and institutions ready to preserve, develop and inculcate the culture upon a diverse population. “Their mission is to achieve a linguistically and culturally homogeneous population able to communicate with each other and to work and live within that culture” (Guibernau 2007:16-19). At the same time Guibernau argues that

“culture-based unity” between the elite and the masses stands at the heart of the conception of a shared national identity. “A common culture legitimizes the existence of the nation and is employed as an argument in favour of social cohesion and unity among all sectors of an otherwise diverse national population” (Guibernau 2007:16-19). Guibernau claims that top-down dissemination of a common culture has to be compensated for by some bottom-up contributions, because through common traditions, symbolism and ritual, elites and masses unite as members of a single nation, which is then placed above and beyond social differences. “By sharing common culture, history, attachment to a particular territory and project for the future, elites and masses come to regard themselves as a community of fate”. (Guibernau 2007:16-19)

Examining the foundation of Estonian society and community houses as the bottom-up initiatives of country people gives a wonderful example of the strength and potential of the grass-root level activities and contribution to the efforts of elite in building up national identity with shared common culture.

### 3. Roots of community houses: historical preconditions for the foundation of society houses in Estonia in the 19th century

#### 3.1. The roots of Estonian community houses lie in the society movement

Th. Nipperdey explains that before the “era of societies, individuals spend most of their lifetime in a “life circle (*Lebenskreis*) designed by home, corporation (guild, nobility) and the church. Breakthrough from such a “life circle” began with the spread of societies and journalism and important factor in this process was literacy, which widened individual’s ability to communicate and to become involved in public affairs. (Jansen 2004:155)

European society movement can already be found from professional and student societies of the Middle Ages as well as from the movements of different religious confessions. In the modern sense, it is possible to follow the society movement since the 18th century Europe, when, especially in Germany, the establishment of reading and music societies, but also societies based on other interests, increased. (Jürjo 2004:115–120) Similar movements flourished in many European countries – enlightening cultural houses in Tsarist Russia, Finland and Sweden as heralds of the springing development of citizenship<sup>15</sup> (see Hackmann, Clark, Alapuro, Tumanova & Aleksandravicius) and settlement houses<sup>16</sup> in England and America which were based on the ideas of Mathew Arnold and Jane Addams. (Bilton 2006:135–150)

Baltic provinces of Tsarist Empire were described by a specific feature – abundance of voluntary organisations – in describing life in the more advanced Governate of Livonia<sup>17</sup> in the second half of the 19th century. This is stated in the Russian and Baltic-German newspapers of the time and by officials of the Tsar. In 1860 *Revalsche Zeitung* stated that associative spirit is the most significant spirit of the era. It was believed that “associative spirit” or “mania for societies was just in the blood of Germans”. (Jansen 2004:153) Baltic-German “associative spirit” was taken over by the elite of indigenous people, Estonians, whose intention was to improve their social status.

The society movement relied on education and the spread of journalism in the Estonian language. Estonians own their widespread literacy to the Baltic-German Estophiles<sup>18</sup> who were influenced by Hamann’s and Herder’s ideas<sup>19</sup>. (Jürjo 2004) Literacy was spread through the network of public

schools developed in the first half of the 19th century, as there had to be a school in every parish. The network of schools and literacy played the most significant role in the general advancing process of the rural population and the whole society in Estonia. (see Andresen 1970, Karjahärm and Sirk 1997; Jansen 2004; Laar 2006; Vahtre 1993; Zetterberg 2009).



*Photo 1. Children in Harju-Jaani parish school; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann. Album "Estonica" Ethnographic photos from 1890ies (F 11684/1-321)*





Photo 2. Children in Harju-Jaani parish school; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann. Album “Estonica” Ethnographic photos from 1890ies (F 11684/1-321)

In addition to the literacy, the foundation of parish schools in the 1840s and 1850s helped spread a new type of choir–music tradition, as the first choirs were attached to schools. The founders of the choirs were mostly parish clerks–schoolteachers, them being the only people in the countryside with a musical education. The singers in these choirs were teachers and senior pupils of the schools, as well as people of the neighbourhood from all strata of the country people interested in singing (Karu 1985:272). Deep roots of Estonian pre–industrial tradition of music<sup>20</sup> – singing the runo–songs (*regilaul*) as a historical feature of Balto-Finnic culture and its later developments of spreading many-voice German choral singing and orchestra music, played an important role as basis in laying the ground for 19<sup>th</sup> century music societies, the most wide-spread type of societies.

### 3.2. National awakening and the first bloom of society movement

The mid19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the national awakening of Estonians. In 1857, the first Estonian national newspaper “Perno Postimees” was founded and in 1878, Estonian political newspaper “Sakala” started to mobilise masses for active national participation. Name “Estonian folk” was introduced to people who used to call themselves “the country folk”. The leading force in the Estonian national movement was the new elite. Main figures who defined two parallel ideologies of emerging Estonian national movement were: Jakob Hurt (1839-1907) who offered the most explicit vision of culture as the key role for Estonian national identity, and Carl Robert Jakobson (1841-82), the author of *Three Fatherland Speeches*, offered the ideas for political nationalism. These ideas found passionate discussion and compliance of emerging intellectuals, the middle class consisting of civil servants, merchants and artisans, school-teachers, and, increasingly, the ethnic

Estonian clergy (see Kruus 1939; Karjahärm & Sirk 1997; Raun 2001, 2003; Jansen 2004; Laar 2006; Zetterberg 2009).

Since the national awakening in the 1860<sup>21</sup>s, the number of Estonian societies started to grow in the first hand in towns: Vanemuine Men`s Song Society in Tartu (1865); the song societies Revalia (1863), Estonia (1865) and Lootus (Hope; 1877) in Tallinn; Koit (Dawn, 1872) in Viljandi; Ilmarine (1865) in Narva; Endla (1872) in Pärnu; the Kalevipoeg Society (Kalev's Son, after the hero of the Estonian national epic; 1876), mainly known as school society in Rakvere; and others. These societies served as an example for the activities of the choirs in the countryside, where the first officially registered music society was the Jüri Music Society, founded on the basis of the Jüri parish choir near Tallinn in 1866. Soon in 1871 Sangaste- Laatre Choir and Music Society began to work on the basis of fixed rules. (Karu 1985:272)

By the 1870s the choirs had reached a level of development enabling them to arrange concerts and parties on their own. However, it was extremely difficult for them to obtain the permission of the authorities for giving performances. Only an officially registered society with fixed rules guiding its activities could be the avenue for more extensive field of activities. In the 1880s fifteen music societies all over the Estonia<sup>22</sup> had their rules officially registered, more vividly the action was taken in economically more advanced South-Estonia (Karu 1985:274-275, 1993:161).

The first society movement which spread all over the country was a fundraising operation. It was intended for setting up the first Estonian language higher popular school called Estonian Alexander School<sup>23</sup> in the honour of Alexander I. This social movement gave an experience of acting as equal members of a voluntary organisation and so supported the emergence of modern civil society and citizenship among the Estonians.



*Photo 3. Estonian choirs in the end of 19th century; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann.  
Album "Estonica" Ethnographic photos from 1890s*





Photo 4. Estonian choirs in the end of 19th century; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann. Album "Estonica" Ethnographic photos from 1890s (F 11684/1-321)

The song and drama societies (i.e. theatrical societies) forming "Vanemuine" (1865) laid a foundation for the Estonian national theatre (the first performance was held in 1870) and, following the example of Baltic German song festivals in Riga (1836) and in Tallinn (1857), organised the first<sup>24</sup> Estonian song festival in June 1869. Nearly one thousand singers and musicians and an audience of 12 000 participated in the event. (see Põldmäe 1969, 1976; Karu 1985; Kuutma 1996; Aarelaid 1996; Karjahärm & Sirk 1997; Raun 2001; Jansen 2004; Laar 2006; Zetterberg 2009) The song festival marked a breakthrough in the Estonian national feelings. Consciousness about common identity awoke from the solidarity people shared when singing and playing music together.

The chief organizer of the event, Johann Voldemar Jannsen<sup>25</sup>, who was a well-known writer and journalist, had composed the lyrics to the melody by a Finnish composer, Fredrik Pacius. During the festival that song was presented to a wider public with the result of it later becoming the national anthem of Estonia. According to Kuutma, this major event in the musical as well as cultural political sense outlined the objectives of national advancement, national unity and cultural independence. (Kuutma 1996) The song festival was widely covered in the Estonian newspapers, so it is possible to follow the connections between cultural practices, public sphere and the emergence of first signs of the political mobilisation of Estonians.



Photo 5. Estonian Song festival in Haapsalu in 1896; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann.  
Album "Estonica" Ethnographic photos from 1890s (F 11684/1-321)



Photo 6. Estonian Song festival in Pärnu in 1890; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann.  
Album "Estonica" Ethnographic photos from 1890ies (F 11684/1-321)

The most significant feature of the societies established with different aims (educational, literature, firemen's, farmers', temperance societies etc) was, that amateur arts began to play a major role within

their activities. Besides singing and playing music, also amateur theatre gained great popularity in the Estonian countryside. Besides the general propagation of drama, the societies took practical steps from the very beginning: they looked for stage directors, obtained drama books and stage properties at the society's expense, and tried to find rooms for performances. Hence, one of the pre-requisites for the societies to function and pursue their cultural aims was the existence of suitable places for meetings and rehearsals. (Karu 1985:276-278) Also educational activities, such as lecturing (about wide range of thematic – agriculture, temperance, history, education and natural sciences) and setting up libraries (which was not easy as tsarist authorities hindered the establishment of library societies in order to control the people's aspiration<sup>26</sup>). Mixing these activities during the parties with programmes: so that there were meetings with speeches first, and drama sketches followed by music numbers and dancing afterwards – these were new cultural practices introduced by societies and differed considerably from the earlier traditional get-togethers of the country people. As Karu puts it, societies introduced new standards – generally associated with town life and parties with programme. The lectures promoted the spreading of modern outlook centred on the natural sciences and dislodging religion and old beliefs of the country people. (Karu 1985:280) Hence, lack of the rooms suitable for parties with artistic programme – with giving performances, concerts and having place for dancing, was one of the major obstacles to social life in the country in general at that time.

In the last decades of 19th century the most important communal buildings in the countryside included churches, pubs, schools and parish government houses that together with the pharmacy, hospital, a few shops and larger dwellings constituted the parish centre. Schoolhouses and parish government houses were best suited for the societies' needs (meetings and concerts). The availability of those rooms depended on local authorities, community board, or the pastor, who often held schoolhouses too sacred for the "sinful society activities", as well as having concerts with secular music in church, and prohibited their use. (Karu 1990:620-622) In order to find a way out, the societies themselves had to rent or begin building suitable rooms – i.e. society houses. The first one was the modern house of the Kanepi Song Society at Kanepi in 1887.





*Photo 7. The first society house in Estonia, built by Music Society in Kanepi 1887, from the private collection of E. Karu, used with permission.*

In 1890 the music society of Vara-Matjama (Maarja Magdaleena parish) rebuilt an old communal granary into a society house. The 1890s witnessed the building of houses for the voluntary firemen of Jõhvi (1896) and for the music society of Tudulinna (Iisaku parish). Although in the 19th century only a few societies could build their own house (because of the lack of resources and suitable site), the foundations had been laid for the births of a new type of building in Estonian village – the society house, i.e. the cultural centre of the village. (Karu 1985:278)

In 1890 there were 25 Estonian societies and 27 German societies in the Governate of Livonia. In 1900 the number of Estonian societies had grown up to 102, as the number of German societies was 71 in the Estonian part of the territory of Governate of Livonia. (Jansen 2004:176) The activities of Estonian societies were covered in Estonian newspapers widely and with enthusiasm, which indicates that the developing Estonian public sphere already demonstrated the first signs of political demands. This was a warning signal to Baltic-Germans and the officials of Russian Empire. Since the middle of the 1880s different society movements originated from the ideas of Estonian national awakening were repressed by the Russification politics of the tsar Aleksander III. The society movement of Alexander's Schools (using Estonian language and being a more popular school) was ended with force and schools started teaching exclusively in Russian. Estonian newspapers were closed, strict control and censorship was set about establishing new societies. If any detail in a statute of a society referred to the national movement, it was banned. (see Kruus 1939; Raun 2001, 2003, 2009; Karjahärm & Sirk 1997; Jansen 2004; Laar 2006; Zetterberg 2009.) Emerging Estonian *public sphere* was paralyzed but also evolving *public square* was hit hard.

However, under the circumstances of repressions from the state, the society movement continued to expand by transforming into a temperance movement – further fuelled by the social need for frontline force in the battle against the growing number of pubs and drinking. The ideas of temperance had already been introduced to the Estonian society in the beginning of the 19th century

by church and later by the leading figures of Finnish temperance movement. Kreutzwald<sup>27</sup>, due to his work as a doctor<sup>28</sup> in Võru (a small town in Southern Estonia), was very much aware about the lifestyle, health and social problems of Estonians in town and peasantry nearby, and as a result he became one of the leaders of early temperance movement in Estonia. (Gustavson 1980)

### 3.3. Pubs (inns) – arena of egalitarian *public square* of peasantry and temperance movement

Inns and pubs were popular and traditional meeting places in Estonia already in the 18th century. The traditional celebrations mostly took place in the farmsteads or in the open air meeting places of the villages (youth dancing, swinging) during summertime but people (mainly men but also women) also gathered in inns, traditionally on Thursdays or on Sundays after going to the church. Pubs were not just places for drinking alcohol and having fun as public square, but they were also important spaces for the Estonian public sphere in rural areas where peasants exchanged news and discussed important social matters (for instance wrote letters to the Tsar complaining about the arbitrary of Baltic-German landlords). Pubs became increasingly important as they were used by farmers for trading, hiring servants for coming seasons and spending their leisure time, dancing and having fun. (Karu 1985:62; Zetterberg 2010:228–244; Uljas 1990:8–11)



*Photo 8. Estonians in the pub; Estonian History Museum, author: Heinrich Tüdermann. Album “Estonica” Ethnographic photos from 1890ies (F 11684/1-321). Original: Bagpipe blower, lithography from 1840s, Art Collection of Estonian History Museum, author: Theodor Gebllhaar, (G4157)*

Pubs also expressed the progress of new capitalist economy based on value exchange relations, as commercial institutions and alcohol was a commodity to be bought and sold. (See Rosenzweig 1983) In the 1860s, Estonian peasants began buying farmsteads at free market prices<sup>29</sup> from the estates. By the end of the 19th century, the peasants in Southern Estonia (Livonian province) possessed over 80% and in Northern Estonia (Estonian province) 50% of the available farmland. Some of the farms were rented and farm owners comprised the major economic power in the Estonian society at the time farm owners were also the most active and vital group of people at the time.

(Laur, Pirsko 1998:180) Despite many positive aspects, the growing number of inns and pubs and increasing alcohol consumption also caused social problems among the peasantry. (see Eisen<sup>30</sup> 1914:184).

An organised temperance movement started to fight against pubs. As all other societies were forbidden, temperance societies spread. As a result of the work done by the local school teacher Jüri Tilk<sup>31</sup> for several years, the first Estonian Temperance Society “Täht” [*Star*] was established in Tori<sup>32</sup> in 1889, following the example of similar Finnish societies “Alku” and “Raittiuden Ystävät”. The statute of the society was legally recognised by the authorities of tsarist government and soon it gathered 100 members. By the 1903 more than 50 temperance societies had been established in Estonia, especially in these areas where previous cultural societies had been closed. In addition to anti-drinking propaganda the activities of temperance societies were similar to those of music societies offering amateur art opportunities for singing in choirs, theatre plays, different lectures, organising parties, exhibitions, sell-outs, so they raised funds for their activities. Tea houses or society houses (*seltsimajad*) were built for the activities, but mainly schools or rented rooms were used for meetings. (Karu 1989:29)

In 1900 vodka monopoly was established by the Russian state in Estonia and most pubs (2400) were closed. Only a small part of pubs continued working as alcohol shops owned by the state or as buffets (Vahtre 1997:957–971). This also marked the beginning of moderation of temperance movement. Since 1906, when establishing educational societies became legal again, many people moved away from temperance movement – several temperance societies were closed. It is possible to draw parallels with the analysis of Alasuutari<sup>33</sup> between the impacts of the Finnish temperance movement on people’s way of life and the similar impacts in Estonia. Alasuutari points out the role of the ideology of temperance movement on the state formation and on modern character formation, describing temperance as a civic religion which may have had on people’s way of life on several levels: “First, such social movements restructure the social organisation. As free and equal members of a voluntary organisation, people became citizens, and members of the Finnish nation. Organised into social and political movements, citizens began to make claims to the state. Second, the ideology of a social movement can be seen as a response to social changes. (Alasuutari 1991:182)

As a result of closing the pubs, one of the pillars of public sphere of local communities in countryside – traditionally a church, school and pub – was unbalanced. There was a social demand for more suitable meeting places to fulfil the social needs of local communities as well as for the cultural and educational activities of the societies.

## 4. Modernisation and the foundation of independent state in Estonia in 1918

### 4.1. Engagement with modernity and the second bloom of society movement

Under the still repressive, but weakening Russian empire, the early years of the 20th century provided a unique opportunity for an Estonian engagement with modernity<sup>34</sup>. (Raun 2009:39) The whole society was greatly enlivened by the emergence of a new generation of Estonian politicians<sup>35</sup>. A characteristically Western modern social structure gained ground. The growth of urbanisation among Estonians was especially noteworthy<sup>36</sup>. The general educational and cultural level of the population steadily increased, prosperity increased, and the standard of living improved<sup>37</sup>. New

generations of Estonian students gained confidence from their larger numbers and felt a growing sense of intellectual community (Raun 2009:41). Most famously, the movement of young Estonian intellectuals called “Young Estonia” and its principal ideologist Gustav Suits developed a fundamental aim for cultural nation-building in 1905: “More culture! This is the first condition for the emancipation of ideals and goals. More European culture! Let’s be Estonians, but let’s also become Europeans!” (Raun 2009:41) Estonian *public sphere* developed and flourished during this period: newspapers played an essential part in the Estonians’ social and political awareness. Also the *public square* advanced and grew: in 1905 there were more than 500 societies and associations in Estonia which were very important in involving masses in public life and in the social mobilisation of society (see Karjahärm 1973:628; Aarelaid 1996; Jansen 2004; Laar 2006; Raun 2009; Zetterberg 2009). The foundation of society houses had already started in the second half of the 19th century, but the extensive building of society houses started in the beginning of the 20th century and lasted until the World War I, being most intense from 1905–1914. There were 55 association houses in 1914. (Uljas 1990:9; Karu 1990:624)

However, building society houses in the villages was not an easy process despite the rapidly developing capitalist relations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonia. Even if the money for building was raised through the income from parties, bazaars and out-sells organized by societies and donations of local people, a building site, design plans and builders were still needed. According to Karu, building site was a major problem as there were few farmers who owned land in appropriate areas (in a parish centre, near big roads). As it was common problem to many societies all over the country, it was reflected in several newspapers.

On August 31, 1901, the newspaper *Postimees* wrote in its editorial:

There is no place like home, the Estonians, say. Our people know the value of home. But a real home you need a house of your own. And your own house you can build on your own land. This has taught Estonians the value of land... because land is only basis that a better life can be built upon. If our people strive to improve their lives, our societies should set their aims on getting their own houses. Many societies have been taken aback, because this is not easy to achieve. But nothing comes easy in this world and one’s own house is certainly worth any amount of trouble. (Karu 1990:622-624)

Several Estonian societies went on with the building process despite the amount of troubles it caused in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, with the help and money of the local people, put up a number of society houses that are used even today, 100 years later. Such are the society houses at Kanepi, Iisaku, Puhja, Väike-Maarja and some other places<sup>38</sup>. Some society houses were built jointly, e.g. the house of Vaivara farmers’ society and the temperance society Külvaja (1910), the house of Torma firemen’s society. In some places Tori, Vigala, Mõniste etc) communal granaries or taverns were rebuilt into society houses. (*ibid*).





*Photo 9. Firemen's Society House in Otepää, from the private collection of E. Karu, used with permission.*

The building of society houses in the countryside also marked the birth of an architecturally new type of building, which meant a big change in the rather monotonous and traditional appearance of Estonian villages. As all the societies were inclined towards amateur art activities, they all needed a stage, first of all, a hall and a stage, as well as additional rooms (cloakrooms, actors' rooms, etc). The library and reading room also had to be accommodated. Therefore, the society houses differed very little from one another in their interior planning. Their size and external architectural construction differed and varied based on the financial situation of the society and local community. With general advancement in time, bigger and bigger society houses were built, which shows also the growing interest in the activities of societies. (Karu 1990:628-629)

To summarize: by building society and community houses, Estonian people themselves created the conditions necessary for the development of their culture. As Karu claims, building their own houses can be considered one of the most praiseworthy undertaking of the societies, as it created favourable conditions for pursuing society activities for many years to come and at the same time improved greatly Estonians' self-reliance and belief in their own potential. After all, these houses were built with the money and work of the people from the local communities, without any aid from the outside. (Karu 1985:79)



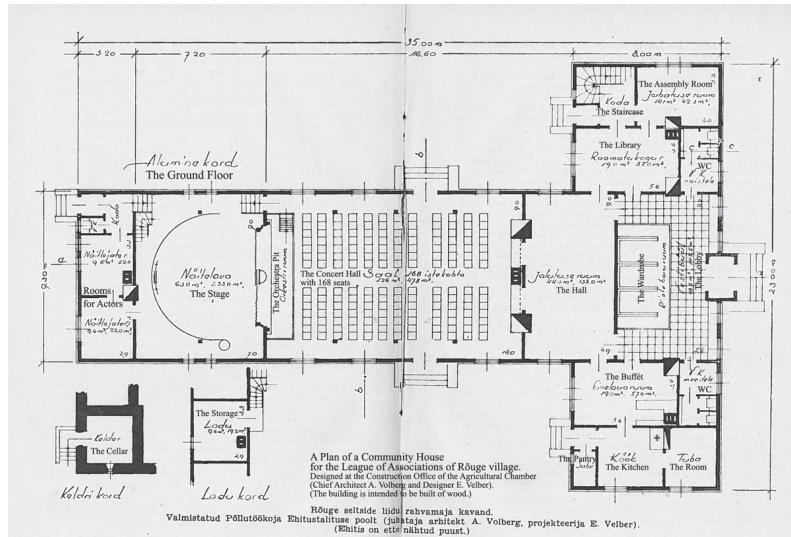


Photo 10. A Plan of community house for the societies of Rõuge Village, Kurvits 1935

From the era of awakening in the 1860s until the independent statehood in 1918, the state-run cultural policy existed only inasmuch as measures implemented by the Russian Empire towards one of the Baltic provinces. This was a reactionary and suppressive cultural policy towards the national awakening of Estonians with the aim to Russify both, the educational system, and the public sphere. Despite this context, the era was also *the Prologue* to the formation of Estonian cultural policy (Kulbok 2008:120–144), the period of foundation of Estonian public and cultural sphere and most of cultural institutions – theatres, artistic associations, community houses and others, which became significant pillars of independent statehood. Compared to the old monarchist imperial states, in Estonia (like in many other new nation-states) activities and institutions were born spontaneously from the bottom-up initiative of people. (Kulbok 2008:127–128).

In order to sum up the process of nation-building in Estonia during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the words of Estonian scholar Ea Jansen could be used: “The spread of journalism, the work of the new national elite who carried and propagated nationalist ideas, and the strong society movement, which reached the grass-root level and guaranteed massive support, were important prerequisites necessary for the creation of an independent state” (Jansen 2004:20). In this article these social interactions are conceptualized as *Habermasian public sphere* and *Bahktin’s public square*. Combining the activities of the national elite and the bottom-up cultural activities of people, the common cultural-based national identity was formed, which became the basis for the political demands.

#### 4.2. Independent republic of Estonia and the formation of (regional) cultural policy

After the World War I in 1914–1918, historic circumstances opened up opportunities for several small nations for self-determination. On 24 February 1918 the independent republic of Estonia was declared with the Manifesto to the Peoples of Estonia. A basic and radical reform – The Land Act – was passed on 10 October 1919 which had a strong impact on forming a relatively egalitarian

society and an economic basis of a new state. The Land Act expropriated almost all of the landed property, which had mostly belonged to the Baltic-German nobility, leaving them just over 50ha each<sup>39</sup>. The land was primarily given to those who had participated in the War of Independence, to set up viable small-holdings. Such a semi-socialist reform was possible mainly because the upper class had hitherto consisted of ethnic others and this had also prevented further stratification among Estonians. According to some foreign observers<sup>40</sup> (see Wieselgren 2002 (1942):22 via Annist 2011:76–79), Estonia was surprisingly egalitarian. Modern ideas were spread among the educated rural population; education- and export-oriented agriculture became the main branches of the Estonian economy in 1930s despite the ongoing urbanisation. (Annist 2011:76–79)

During the first years of independence the society movement developed even further (for example, memorials for the War of Independence were extensively set up), taking in the activities of educational, youth, singing and acting, women's, farmers', writers', fire-fighters' and other societies and institutions. By 1929 there were 1385 associations, dealing with different cultural activities in Estonia in all over the country. Intensive grass-root cultural action needed continuously a special space in villages therefore community houses were actively built. Since the beginning of independent statehood the building of society houses and community houses was usually supported by Cultural Endowment, Regional Endowment or by the Head of the State Capital; the Ministry of Education also offered advice and support.



The community house of the fire brigade society of Paistu parish.  
Opened in 1934.

*Photo 11. Firemen's Society House in Paistu parish, Kurvits 1935.*

In a previous article (Kulbok 2008), I have described the cultural policy of 1918–24 as rather chaotic, and have labelled it *The Years of Quests and Foundation*. It was the time when the cultural life was mostly influenced by initiatives from the grass-root level, not through coordinated organisations. The founding of the Cultural Endowment (*Kultuurkapital*), initiated by the creative intelligentsia<sup>41</sup>, was one of the most innovative acts in cultural policy in the 1920s, the law was completed and

passed in 1925<sup>42</sup>. The beginning of the 1920s was a time when the creative intelligentsia became conscious of and started to express its interests. It is proven by the establishment of professional associations, as these protect special interests. In 1921 the Estonian Singers' Union was formed, in 1922 the Estonian Writers' Union and the Estonian Sports Association, in 1923 the Estonian Artists' Union, and in 1924 the Estonian Academic Society of Musicians. (see Kulbok 2008; Uljas 2005). Cultural policy as a whole in that period was the subject of intensive debate among the intelligentsia and the political elite, where important role was played by Farmers' Party. The Republic of Estonia was a country with relatively educated rural people and egalitarian society during its first period of independence. Emerging community houses clearly expressed the vitality of cultural life in the rural regions of Estonia, and they became significant institutions of regional cultural policy.

## 5. Community houses as local actors

### 5.1. Network of community houses in 1930ies

The coordinated establishment and development of a network of community houses is linked to Aleksander Kurvits<sup>43</sup>, a state official, whose letter to the Minister of Education (18 May 1928) included the idea of setting up the network<sup>44</sup> of community houses and presented arguments and principles on how to organise state subsidies for supporting the establishment of community houses. Kurvits's ideas became the basis for the strategic planning of the network, and in 1929 a draft of the "Law about Public Community Houses" ("*Avalikkude rahvamajade seaduse eelnõu*") was sent out.

The draft received criticism from the local municipalities who were assigned to take on their shoulders the financing and construction of community houses. In a letter from the Union of the Rural Municipalities of Estonia it was pointed out that, "It can hardly be expected that if the responsibilities for the constructing and maintenance of community houses were to be given to the local municipalities, it would enforce the self-initiative actions of associations. On the contrary, it may cause the spread of a negative attitude against top-down policy, like "*krõonu asi*"<sup>45</sup> or "*herrojen metkuu*" within the free educational and cultural work, which will be the end of free initiatives." (cited in Uljas 1990:17)

Another argument was the lack of money. Externalisation of costs was proposed as a solution: "the idea of self-initiative of local associations, with a reasonable amount of support from the state and local municipalities, should remain the leading principle of the law" (Uljas 1990: 17). After gaining acceptance from most of the critics, the Law of Community Houses<sup>46</sup> was passed in 1931, together with The Regulation of the Construction of Community Houses.

When drawing up the network, the aim of the Ministry of Education was that community houses should be located in the central point of a region, that they should be accessible for the people, and that their activities would reach as far as at least seven kilometres (Kiis 1998:115–120). The construction and maintenance costs of the houses belonging to the network<sup>47</sup> were partly covered by the state budget (low-percentage of state-guaranteed loans were given and also support by Cultural Endowment, Regional Endowment or by Head of the State continued (Uljas 1999:24–25). It was planned that by the year 1937 the approved number of community houses in the network would be 533. By that time there were 222 independent community houses and 235 local schools that were used as community houses. According to the plan, the optimal network of community centres had to develop by 1950.

With these laws and regulations, which legalised the free initiative of people in the local communities, one of the characteristic tools of Estonian cultural policy or, more specifically, the tool for regional cultural policy, was established for many decades. Table 1 shows that community houses were started in all the counties in Estonia (see table 1).

*Table 1. The number of community houses in Estonian counties in the 1930s*

County	Number of community houses accepted in the network	Number of rejected community houses	Number of community houses belonging to the network in 1939
Harjumaa	51	9	53
Järvamaa	30	19	40
Läänemaa	44	12	54
Tartumaa	58	12	66
Virumaa	42	5	45
Võrumaa	37	13	41
Viljandimaa	34	3	38
Pärnumaa	53	10	63
Valgamaa	18	2	19
Petserimaa	18	8	18
Saaremaa	34	7	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>477</b>

Source: *Uljas 1999: 19*

The years 1925–1934 are called the period of establishment of cultural institutions, as it was during this period that the framework for the support of the principal fields of culture (not only for community houses) was created with the help of cultural legislation. Examples of this include the Public Libraries Act in 1924; the University of Tartu Act in 1925; the National Minorities Cultural Autonomy Act in 1925; the Societies and Their Associations Act in 1926, which affected the activities of cultural and educational societies; and the State Applied Art School (*Riigi Kunstiõõstuskool*) Act in 1929. (Kulbok 2008; Uljas 2005) I have distinguished a second period in Estonian cultural policy from 1925 to 1934 and labelled it *The Formation of Purposeful Cultural Policy*: from 1924 the desire to strengthen the purposeful<sup>48</sup> functions of the state began to dominate. In 1928 a committee on cultural policy was formed within the supervisory board of the Cultural Endowment. Largely thanks to the work of this committee the most prolific years of the Cultural Endowment began when many new initiatives were launched<sup>49</sup> in cultural policy. (Kulbok 2008:120–144; Uljas 2005)

According to §1 of the Law of the Community Houses (1931), the aim of a community house is to be a centre for cultural and free educational activities and a home for educational and social associations in its area of operation.

§2 states that in order to fulfil the aims mentioned in §1, community houses should have rooms for libraries, reading rooms, studios, rooms for lectures and public meetings, rooms for singing, musical

and theatrical rehearsals as well as rooms for physical training and for other educational activities. (RT 53, 1931)

In 1935 Kurvits gave a comprehensive overview of his ideas about the role of community houses in a published handbook entitled “Community House.” In his handbook Kurvits gives a detailed description about what should be taken into account in planning, constructing, decorating and managing a community house which has to become a spiritual and intellectual centre of the local community but also an enjoyable place for spending leisure time. He also gave detailed instructions on how to decorate the houses with national crafts and art and how to make the garden around the village hall look beautiful and well-groomed.

Kurvits writes: “The most important task of community houses is to be a location of public festivities and meetings. Looking at the historical development and main aims of our community houses, we can say that many community houses have been built mainly to fulfil that task. Nowadays we also have to admit that community houses are mainly used as party-places and all kinds of educational activities mostly take place in schools, parish houses or elsewhere. /.../ Primarily - singing, music, theatre plays, etc have a great meaning in creation of the feelings of togetherness and solidarity. This is why the most important task of community houses is to offer good conditions for activities which help to spread the feelings of togetherness and solidarity: to offer good conditions for singing and playing music which will elevate and connect the spirit of our citizens, warm up their souls and carry them to higher mental spheres, away from everyday life; theatre plays could reveal the soul and spirit of our nation as well as the spirit of other cultural nations in its artistic perfection, that our festivities and family celebrations could become beautiful and lovely gatherings; that meetings could give knowledge and skills for more appropriate arrangement of life and economy to contribute to national goals.” (Kurvits 1935:3–4)

It is possible to see Kurvits expressing his thoughts here about the essential role of community houses as places for the amateur art activities, joy and leisure time of the local community. Kurvits seems to be clearly aware of the impact of cultural involvement into the national identity and local coherence. Kurvits develops and explains the role and goals of community houses as local actors of cultural policy, showing the wider benefits that cultural participation brings to the people, community, nation and economy in the context of national ideology. Such rhetoric and ideas have meaning and relevance today, as they sound quite often in the rhetoric of the contemporary cultural policy.





A perspective sketch for the community house of Aruküla.  
Designed at the Construction Office of the Agricultural Chamber.

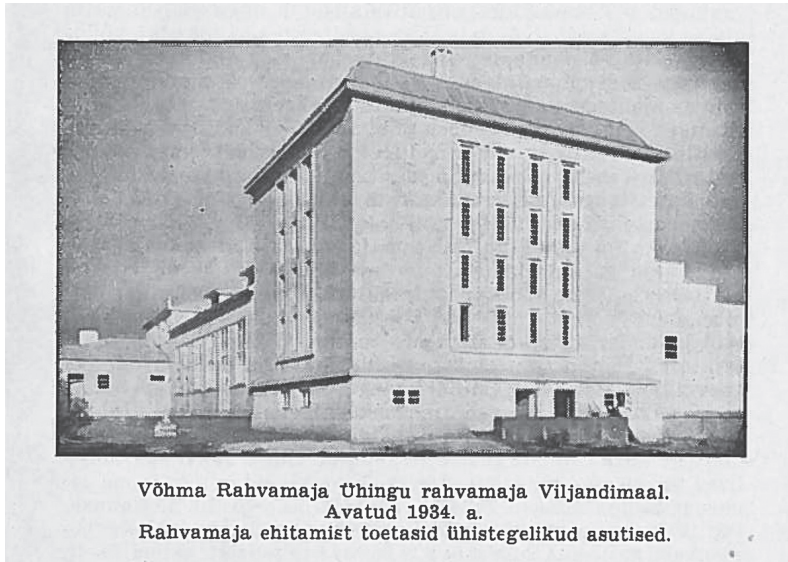
Photo 12. A perspective sketch for the community house of Aruküla, Kurvits 1935.

## 5.2. Network of community houses becomes a tool for top-down cultural policy

Kurvits wrote, “It is important to cultivate and train the understanding of citizens that a community house is also a sacred place, like the church, and that the way of conduct in this house must conform to the recognised rules of civility” (Kurvits 1935:40–62). Kurvits and his civilising concept about the community houses, where Estonians could become cultivated citizens with a strong national identity, combined with the ideas of political establishment of the time. From 1934–1938, during the silent era, Estonia lost its democracy<sup>50</sup> and the Government Propaganda Office (*Riigi Propagandatalitus*) was established in 1934. Political parties were marginalised, ridiculed and blamed for the country’s problems. Demonstrations and meetings were prohibited newspapers that were critical about the government were shut down. Follow-up censorship was set up in the media, literature and theatre. (Kulbok 2008:132) The *public sphere* was muted and silenced.

The ideological basis of the new political power consisted of nationalism, love for one’s country and solidarity, while the basis of political life was to establish professional organisations and mass organisations led by the state, and the basis of the economy was to be private property with a strong government sector. (Elango, Ruusmann, Siilivask 1997:283) The role of the arts (literature, theatre and fine arts) was to implement and propagate national ideals. In architecture, national dignity and strength were to be expressed. The network of community houses was used to circulate these campaigns of national or ethnic culture at the grass-root level. The silent era of Päts<sup>51</sup> brought an essentially pro-totalitarian ideology developed by the national propaganda office, which was implemented with the support of a nationalist/popular cultural policy. The state tried to replace the free initiative characteristic of democracy with enforcement by the state and a corporative structure inspired from above. The regime tried to control a large part of free initiative; especially as it concerned political organizations and trade unions, but also *public square* - societies and associations whose actions took place in the community houses. (See Karjahärm 2002; Kulbok 2008) Step by step, the state attempted to use the network of community houses as local tools for ideological and political purposes. (Kulbok 2008:132) Government Propaganda Office<sup>52</sup> organized powerful nationwide national propaganda events: the Estonianisation of names (including place-names); the

propaganda of the national costumes in connection with the XI nationwide song festival (1938); home decoration; and the study of ancient Estonian culture. (see Vaan 2005:48-49).



The community house of the Võhma Community House Association in Viljandimaa (Viljandi county). Opened in 1934. The construction of the community house was supported by different societies in cooperation.

*Photo 13. The community house in Võhma, opened in 1934, Kurvits 1935.*

## 6. Conclusions

This article observes the establishment and historical development of community houses as a characteristic tool of Estonian cultural policy and analyses how community houses contributed to the process of nation-building. Connections between cultural practices and political mobilisation, with the focus on the history of Estonian cultural policy, are also examined.

Community houses were founded all over Estonia from the 1880s onwards with the aim to offer free space for the educational and cultural activities of the local communities. The most important task of community houses was to be a location for public festivities, get-togethers with new cultural practices within amateur arts (choirs, orchestras, drama) played major role.

As party-places for local communities, without open political intentions, the community houses are theorised by using Bakhtin's concept of *public square*. Open discussions in the newspapers, political debates and activities among the Estonian elite, who guided the political and social movements, are theorised with the concept of Habermasian *public sphere*. Community houses supported the process of state-building by bringing the ideas of the Estonian elite to the grass-root level. This made it possible to gain wide support to the ideas and the political programme of the elite among the whole population, which is one of the preconditions to establish a nation-state according to the theory of M. Hroch. Two parallel directions of the historical development intertwined with each other, and

contributed to the formation of national identity, based on common culture and ended up with political self-determination.

By analysing the establishment of community houses, historical development of the Estonian cultural policy have been revealed. Since the foundation of Estonian nation-state, the basic role of cultural policy was to (re)produce the institutions and conditions for cultural practices emerged from national narratives, thus ensuring the affirmation of significant and meaningful common culture – national culture of Estonians.

During the first period of Estonian independence (1918–1940), with the adoption of the Law for Community Houses in 1931, the network of community houses was set up by the state. By 1938 there were more than 400 community houses in Estonia. The construction of community houses as cultural institutions was clearly the expression of socio-economic vitality of rural regions. It also explains how the official concept of national culture in the frame of forming cultural policy of the Estonian nation-state evolved, defining regional culture as popular or folk culture.

Since the beginning of the silent era (1934–1938) the state started to use the network of community houses for ideological purposes, and top-down cultural policy was applied. The network of community houses was used to circulate national or ethnic culture at the grass-root level. With setting up the network of community houses, and with laws and regulations which legalised the free initiative of people in the local communities, one of the characteristic tools of Estonian cultural policy or, more specifically, the tool for regional cultural policy, was established for next periods of cultural policy, which lasted over 60 years (1931- 1991).

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- 1 Society house was built for the activities of one certain society (music, drama, educational, farmer's, firemen, temperance etc).
  - 2 A community house was built for the activities of many societies, for the general use by the people of local communities.
  - 3 Aleksander Kurvits (1896–1958), state official of the Ministry of Education from 1921–1940, who made a significant contribution to the development of Estonian free education work and the foundation of the network of community houses.
  - 4 Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 - 1975) was a [Russian philosopher](#), [literary critic](#), semiotician and scholar, who was persecuted by the regime in Soviet Union. His writings, on a variety of subjects, inspired scholars working in a number of different traditions and his distinctive position did not become well known until he was rediscovered by Russian scholars in the 1960s.
  - 5 The concept of folk (popular) culture which gained more attention by historians and cultural researchers after Bahtins' work was published in English in 1960s (e.g Tamm, M. 2007. *Kuidas kirjutatakse ajalugu. (How to Write History.)* Varrak, Tallinn, p. 24; Burke, P. 1981. The “Discovery” of Popular Culture. In: *People’s History and Socialist Theory*. (ed. by) R. Samuel. Routledge, London, p. 216-221; Burke, P. 1988. What is History of Popular Culture? In: (ed. by) J. Gardiner. *What is History Today...?* Humanities

- Press, Atlantic Highlands, p.121-123; Shay, A. 2002. *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation and Power*. Wesleyan University Press p. 224-225; Kuutma, K. 2010. From the Construction of Concepts to Knowledge Production: the Interdisciplinarity of Folkloristics. In: *Keel ja Kirjandus*, p. 687-702; etc.
- 6 Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman (1922 - 1993) was a prominent Russian literary scholar, semiotician, and cultural historian in Estonia. He was the founder of the Moscow-Tartu school of cultural semiotics and is considered to be the first Soviet structuralist because of his early essay *On the Delimitation of Linguistic and Philological Concepts of Structure (1963)* and works on structural poetics. Lotman analysed Bakhtin's cultural concept in the introductory article "*Kutse dialoogile*" published in Estonian in 1987 as collection of Bakhtin's works, see *Bakhtin, M. 1987. Valitud töid*. Ed. P. Torop. Tallinn, Eesti Raamat.
  - 7 See Gardiner, M. (2004). "Wild publics and grotesque symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere" In: "*After Habermas. New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*", (eds) Nick Crossely and John Michael Roberts, Blackwell Publishing/The Sociological Review, UK, p.28-48.
  - 8 M. Hroch has empirically studied and analysed Estonian nation-building as well as other nations in Eastern Europe (Slovacs, Slovenians, Latvians, Finns, etc) without the political past of statehood. See Hroch, M. 1985, 2000. *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe: a comparative analysis of the social composition of patriotic groups among the smaller European nations*. Cambridge University Press, New York; Hroch, M. 1996. *From National Movement to the Fully-formed Nation: The Nation-building Process in Europe*. New York and London: Verso.
  - 9 Since Herder, there have been many theories about nations and nation-building: philosophers and thinkers e.g. Hegel, Marx, Engels, Weber, Hobsbawm, Bauer, Gellner, Smith, Breuilly, Geertz, Armstrong, Kedourie, Kohn, Connor, Deutch, Hroch and many other theorists whose different positions are classified as primordialist, modernist, ethno-symbolist. (See Guibernau and Hutchinson 2001, Laar 2006)
  - 10 Herder specifically emphasised the multitude and diversity of cultures, and thus he greatly encouraged cultural nationality, as evinced by numerous suppressed people of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Turkish Empire including Estonians, Latvians, etc. (Jürjo 2004, Jansen 2004, Laar 2006)
  - 11 e.g. Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Breuilly 1996; Kedourie 1960; Hobsbawm 1990 (see Guibernau and Hutchinson 2001, Laar 2006)
  - 12 e.g. Herder; Bauer 1908; Geertz 1973, close to it also Armstrong 1982 and Kohn 1965 (see Guibernau and Hutchinson 2001, Laar 2006)
  - 13 In contemporary research on *identity*, perceptions of identity ("identity" and "sameness") are seen as relative phenomena that may be abandoned, changed or constructed by different levels (personal, professional, community, national, constitutional, etc) in a dialogic process. (see also Hall, Du Gay. (1996). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Sage, UK.; Kotov, K. (2002). *Polylogical Estonia: National Identity and Languages of Culture*. [http://www.sotsioloogia.ee/vana/esso3/15/kaie\\_kotov.htm](http://www.sotsioloogia.ee/vana/esso3/15/kaie_kotov.htm); De Cilla, Reisigl, Wodak.(1999).*The Discursive Construction of National Identities*. [http://brigitazepa.biss.soc.lv/magistri/veci/DA/Semin/C4%81ru%20literat%C5%ABra/analizes\\_pancmieni/D9%20identitate\\_Wodak.pdf](http://brigitazepa.biss.soc.lv/magistri/veci/DA/Semin/C4%81ru%20literat%C5%ABra/analizes_pancmieni/D9%20identitate_Wodak.pdf))
  - 14 See Guibernau, M. (2007). *The Identity of Nations*. Cambridge, Polity Press, UK.
  - 15 Materials of the V International Symposium of the North-Eastern Culture and History in Tallinn City Archive in 2004. The theme of the V symposium was "Associations and Civil Society in North-Eastern Europe. Regional Peculiarities in the European Context?". ~[histor/osteuropa/datei/tagungen.htm](http://histor/osteuropa/datei/tagungen.htm),
  - 16 The *settlement movement* was a reformist social movement, beginning in the 1880s and peaking around the 1920s in England and the US. Bilton, C. "Jane Addams, pragmatism and cultural policy", *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2006, 12:2, p 135–150.
  - 17 Governate of Livonia - historical district in Southern Estonia and Northern Latvia.
  - 18 Three pastors, Otto Wilhelm Masing, Johann Heinrich Rosenplänter and Eduard Ahrens, were prominent advocates of peasant education in Estonia by giving out a newspaper for peasants, founding an academic magazine and compiling the grammar of the Estonian language. (Jürjo 2004: 406–410)
  - 19 Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) and Herder (1744–1803) saw folklore as an expression of spontaneity, naturality and truth in his collection of European folk songs, Estonian and Latvian among them – which became an inspiration for the Baltic-German intelligentsia who discovered new values in the indigenous people living around them. (Jürjo 2004: 398–406)
  - 20 18<sup>th</sup> century religious movement of Herrnhuter denomination, descending from Moravian Brothers gained ground among the peasant Estonian bringing along their spiritual songs and introduced also egalitarian attitudes. See: Pöldmäe, R. (1988). *Vennastekoguduse muusikalisest tegevusest meie maal*. In: *Teater. Muusika. Kino. (The Musical Activities of Moravian Brethren in Our*

*Country*); Leichter, K. (1991). Seitse sajandit eestlaste lauluteel: kultuuriloolisi andmeid aastaist 1172–1871. Tallinn (*Seven Centuries of the Estonians' Path of Singing: Cultural Data from 1172–1871*).

- 21 The 1860s also marked the beginning of Estonian national music-writing. From that time on, the choirs could perform songs and folk-songs arranged by Estonian composers instead of the widely spread choral music of the German *Liedertafel* type prevalent at that time.
- 22 The Sõprus (Friendship) Estonian-Russian Song Society in Mustvee (1881), The Salme Music and Song Society in Tori (1882), the Edendus (Progress) Song Music Society at Laius-Tähkvere (1883), the Kanepi Song Society, the Tartu-maarja Music Society (both 1885) and the Ilmatar Song and Music Society at Suure-Jaani (1887). (See Karu 1990)
- 23 The fundraising began in Viljandi County and turned into an all-Estonian mass organisation founded in 1869, with its own chief committee (1870–1884) which arranged various cultural events and agitation activities. (see Kruus 1939, Andresen 1970, Karjahärm and Sirk 1997; Laar 2006, Zetterberg 2009)
- 24 The event was inspiring for neighbours and similar song festivals were organized in Latvia (1873) and in Finland (1884). (see Põldmäe, R. 1969. *Esimene Eesti Üldlaulupidu* 1869; Põldmäe, R. 1976. *Kaks laulupidu* 1879-1880)
- 25 Jannsen, Johann Voldemar (1819-1890) established first Estonian newspaper “Perno Postimees” in 1857, together with his daughter, famous national poet (1843-1886), they both played a crucial role in the
- 26 The first society which gained the right to set up library was the Edendus (Progress) Song Society at Laius-Tähkvere 1883 (Karu 1985: 280).
- 27 Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803 – 1882) and one of the first intellectuals, leaders of the , wrote the (Kalev's Son) and many other works based on .
- 28 Gustavson, H. (1980). Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald ja meditsiin Võrus. Tallinn, käsikiri.
- 29 The peasants made use of long-term bank credits, which they later paid back from income received from growing flax and potatoes (the flax prices went up because of the American Civil War and the consequent drop in cotton imported to Europe). (Laur, M. and Pirsko, P. 1998, p. 173-192)
- 30 Eisen, J.M. (1914). Eesti Karskusseltside Keskoimekonna Kirjastus, no 53, p 184.
- 31 Jyri Tilk (1865–1929) was a teacher and activist of the temperance movement.
- 32 Tori village in Western Estonia, Pärnu county.
- 33 Alasuutari, P. (1991). Individualism, Self-Control, and the Finnish Temperance Movement. *Ethnos* 56 (1991: 3–4), p.173–188, Tampere.
- 34 Modernity also implies a new cultural code, i.e. a transformed set of values, well summarised by Alberto Martinelli: “Rationalism, individualism/subjectivity, utilitarianism, the incessant quest for knowledge, innovation and discovery, the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject, the refusal of limits, the principles of liberty and equality of rights and opportunities.” (Raun 2009:39)
- 35 In 1904, Estonians achieved their first major political breakthrough at the Tallinn municipal elections. The Estonian-Russian bloc gained a majority, defeating the Germans who had so far remained in power.
- 36 In 1913, the percentage of ethnic Estonians had increased in Tallinn to 71.6% and in Tartu to 73.3%, the two largest towns in Estland and Northern Livland. (Raun 2009:41; Reiman 1936:191; Pullat 197:60)
- 37 With two decades, by 1916–1917, ethnic Estonians accounted for about 7 000 of the secondary school students in the Northern Baltic region or a little more than half of the total number (13 000). The explosive growth was also evident at the university level, from about 200 students in 1900 to about 1 000 by 1915, although in this case more than half were enrolled at institutions of higher learning outside of Estland and Northern Livland (Raun 2009:41).
- 38 As examples can be named: music societies built their houses at Päidla (Otepää parish) in 1905, Puhja in 1906, Laius Tähkvere in 1909, Pala (Kodavere parish) in 1901, Rõngu in 1910, Iisaku in 1910, and Maarja Magdaleena 1912; temperance societies at Haaslava (Kambja parish) in 1907, Ropka (Tartu-Maarja parish, in 1909; firemen’s societies at Suure-Jaani in 1904, Elva (Nõo parish) in 1909, and Palmse (Kadrina parish) in 1910; farmers’ societies at Valgjärve in 1905, Väike-Maarja in 1910 and Varbla in 1913 and the Põlva educational society in 1910 and many others (see Karu 1990:624)
- 39 No compensation was initially paid for the expropriated land; this was done starting in 1925, and at lower rates than the market value. The expropriated land formed the state reserve, which was divided up to form new farms.
- 40 Swedish Professor Per Wieselgren describes Estonia in the 1930s as a country where there is no sign of social differences, which can be observed in some other countries, such as Poland (Annist 2011: 76–79).

- 41 In 1919 with a war in progress the subject of subsidies for culture was widely and enthusiastically discussed at the meetings of the creative intelligentsia. One of the most vigorous fighters for the creative intelligentsia's position was the writer and poet F. Tuglas. In January 1919 he wrote an article "The National Development of the Arts" where he sketched a plan for subsidising culture. (Kulbok 2008:129; Uljas 2005)
- 42 Almost at the same time the question of financial problems of theatres was raised. In principle, it was decided that the state would cover 30% of the actors' salaries which caused serious problems for the two biggest theatres "Estonia" and "Vanemuine". Other theatres (for example, the Drama Theatre Society) turned to the Ministry of Education for help as well. (Kulbok 2008; Uljas 2005)
- 43 Aleksander Kurvits (1896–1958), state official of the Ministry of Education during 1921–1940, contributed to the development of Estonian free education and establishment of the network of community houses. Estonian researchers also own Aleksander Kurvits the systematic overview of laws and regulations concerning culture and education, which he collected and reproduced in the Ministry of Education since 1929, thus making it easier to focus on the development of the cultural and educational policy of the time.
- 44 Kurvits wrote, ".../ It appears that both: contact and united coordination between local associations is lacking which may have caused parallelism in actions and perhaps not the best use of resources. The strategic plan for the network of community houses would solve a lot of problems with funding and the coordination of the establishment of the houses" (Uljas 1990:9–15).
- 45 "*Kroonu asi*" in Estonian, "*Herrojen Metkut*" in Finnish; it refers to top-down policies and orders, which are imposed on people.
- 46 Community houses in the towns were also added into the law.
- 47 To get financial support from the state budget, associations that wanted to construct a community house should present coordinated architectural solutions, worked out by the Ministry of Education. According to the law, it was also possible to leave the network three years after getting the financial support. (Uljas 1999:24–25)
- 48 Otto August Strandman (1875–1941) Estonian politician, key figure in composing the radical land reform law and the 1920 Constitution, Minister of Finance (1924)
- 49 For example, the creation of the network of community houses, the reorganisation of theatres, and the organisation of the work of museums and art schools. This committee also oversaw the establishment of the three cultural temples of Tallinn – the conservatory, the art museum and the art hall. In February 1929 the committee passed the regulations of the Cultural Endowment cultural propaganda foundation, while Konstantin Päts was appointed to develop the collection of statutes of the art museum foundation. Later the statute collections of the Estonian National Museum and the Estonian Culture Film foundations were developed. Thus, the work of committee involved a very wide spectre of cultural policy. The central figure of the committee was Konstantin Päts (President of Estonia 1934-1940) who had innovative ideas about constructing Estonian statehood. (Kulbok 2008; Uljas 2005)
- 50 The country was practically governed by three men: Konstantin Päts, Johan Laidoner and Kaarel Eenpalu. The work of the parliament was halted, and while it was not officially dissolved, it was never summoned. (Kulbok 2008:132)
- 51 See Karjahärm, T. (2002). Konstantin Pätsi poliitilised ideed. *Konstantin Pätsi tegevusest. Artiklite kogumik*, Tallinn, p 88-94.
- 52 See Vaan, L. (2005). Propagandatalitus Eesti Vabariigis 1934-1940. *Tuna*3/2005, p 43-54.