LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Layers of the Past in Tallinn Historical Fiction: Jaan Kross and The Case of Balthasar Russow

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Abstract:
A tetralogy called *Kolme katku vahel* (*Between Three Plagues: The Story of Balthasar Russow*) by the Estonian author Jaan Kross was published in the 1970s. Kross's aim in this historical novel sequence was to educate his readers about the history of Tallinn and to activate their cultural memory. Kross was inspired by three texts about Tallinn: Balthasar Russow's *Chronika der Provintz Lyffland* ('Chronicle of the province of Livonia', 1578), a short story entitled 'Katsumus' ('An ordeal', 1947) published by the exiled Estonian writer Gert Helbemäe in 1947 in Sweden, and a hypothesis by the historian Paul Johansen proposing that the author of the chronicle, Russow, might have been the son of an Estonian wagoner from the Tallinn *Vorstadt* of Kalamaja. This article discusses how Jaan Kross's novel differs from earlier fictional treatments by major Estonian novelists of the Baltic German past of Tallinn. Through its comparisons between the varied sources of a modern historical novel sequence, the article's aim is to show how and why the main character of Kross's tetralogy changed existing spatial perceptions of Tallinn by unearthing buried elements of the city's history.

Keywords: Literary urban studies; cultural memory; literary geographies; Jaan Kross; Balthasar Russow.

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Introduction

A historical city novel allows the reader to perceive a former city space as a thrilling blend of time and space, and to meet the inhabitants of this chronotope. To depict a city as a lively mosaic of different sources of information confronting or supplementing each other is a challenge: Yuri Lotman has described the city as a place where different national, social and stylistic codes and texts confront each other and the result is 'a powerful generator of new information' (Lotman 2000: 194). Authors of historical fiction have often created a world that becomes part of the perception of the very place that is described. For example, in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) the little toy tin drum player, Oskar Matzerath, never lets the reader forget that Gdańsk was and is the Kashubian-Polish-German Danzig.

In the 1970s the Estonian author Jaan Kross (1920–2007) wrote a panoramic *Bildungsroman* set in sixteenth-century Tallinn (until the early twentieth century Tallinn was internationally known as Reval) entitled *Kolme katku vahel* (*Between Three Plagues: The Story of Balthasar Russow;* part I was published in 1970, II in 1972, III in 1977, and IV in 1980). The tetralogy chose as its protagonist one of the most important chroniclers of Livonia and Estonia, Balthasar Russow, presenting him as an Estonian historian. Livonia (Livland) was originally named after a Finnic ethnic group, the Livonians, and the name was used for most of present-day Estonia and Latvia until the end of the Livonian War in 1583. *Between Three Plagues* is probably one of the best-known city novels of Tallinn in Estonian and in translation.[1]

City novels enable urban sites such as Tallinn/Reval to be understood as an imaginative place: 'a site on the real-world map around which a complex of meanings and feelings have gathered' (Finch 2017: 48-49). One of the more important characters of Kross's novel, it could be said, is the city of Tallinn. But the main human character in the tetralogy who conveys the urban experience is a very special city-dweller who changes our understanding of his hometown's – Tallinn – history. Unlike some earlier writings on the same city, Kross's text definitely belongs among those that 'confound, de-territorialise and reimagine settled political, economic and cultural orientations' (Smith and Anderson 2020: 5).

A quick glance at Tallinn's history shows that the city, once a medieval Hanseatic town, served as a strategic stronghold for different foreign rulers, held first by the Kingdom of Denmark, then the Livonian and Teutonic Orders, and the Kingdom of Sweden, before it became the capital of the Estonian province of the Russian Empire in 1721. Although Estonians have always formed part of the city's population, before the twentieth century they tended to inhabit the wooden settlements (in German, *Vorstädte*) outside the city walls. The dawn of the new century marked great changes as the first Estonian mayor was elected in 1906, and then Tallinn became the capital of a new independent state when the Republic of Estonia was founded in 1918. After their country was occupied in 1940, Estonians were again a minority nation within the larger Soviet Union, facing continuous mass immigration of non-Estonians (see Parming 1972: 60) and cultural assimilation. Estonia regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

Kross's novel is intriguing in several respects. Historical novels often have an important part to play in nation-building, especially for young nations (Kaljundi, Laanes

and Pikkarainen 2015: 14). The historian Marek Tamm, analysing remembrance of the Estonian past, has written that narrative is one of the most influential shapers of cultural memory and national identity consists, to a large extent, of the 'stories we live by' (Tamm 2008: 502). Texts that become part of cultural memory provide a sense of belonging to members of the community and strengthen their national identity. Tiina Ann Kirss has shown how Kross creates connections in his tetralogy between the events of his novel and the 'dominant narrative pattern of resistance and the fight for freedom in Estonian cultural memory' (Kaljundi, Laanes and Pikkarainen 2015: 21-22). Kirss has pointed out that Kross had a clear wish to educate his readers about history so as to activate their cultural memory (Kirss 2015: 274).

In this article I explore literature in a spatial and territorial context looking for hidden geographies and examining how and why Kross's approach to the cityscape in his novel, and his idea of portraying Russow as an Estonian historian differ from the approaches and ideas of other fictional treatments of Tallinn's past. Central to this is an examination of the opposition that was commonly drawn between the city and the countryside in Estonian literature before this tetralogy. Through its comparisons between the varied sources of a modern historical novel sequence, the article's aim is to explore how the main character of Kross's tetralogy changed existing spatial perceptions of Tallinn by unearthing buried elements of the city's history. The novel is compared to representations of Baltic German Tallinn in earlier examples of modern Estonian literature by some of its most renowned writers – Eduard Vilde, A. H. Tammsaare and Karl Ristikivi.

At the beginning of the novel, Kross gives his character's name in a shortened form: Pall. In the English translation, this becomes Bal. In the following, 'Bal' identifies Kross's fictional character, as opposed to the historical human being Balthasar Russow.

The Prototype: the Author of the 'Chronika der Provintz Lyffland'

Kross's novel has a single main textual source, namely the well-known chronicle from the sixteenth century, Balthasar Russow's *Chronika der Provintz Lyffland* (1578, 'The Chronicle of Livonia', translated into English in 1988 as *The Chronicle of Balthasar Russow*). The chronicle, published in Rostock in Low German, instantly became a bestseller and was soon followed by two more editions, the second of them revised by the author in 1584 (Võõbus 1978: 87; Kreem 2013: 580). The historical chronicler (*c.*1536–1600) was the Lutheran pastor of the Church of the Holy Ghost (*Heiligengeistkirche*) in Tallinn, 'a devout follower of Luther' (Auksi 1975: 112), serving the Estonian congregation from 1566 until his death.[2] The chronicle with its 'colloquial, racy, brisk and captivating' style (Võõbus 1978: 87) recorded the history of Livonia from 1158 onwards, concentrating on the contemporary period (Kasekamp 1990: 19). The chronicle gave good coverage of Russia, Sweden, Poland and Denmark battling for superiority in the Northern part of the Baltic Sea. It was this recent history in the faraway Baltic provinces that attracted readers of Low German based elsewhere (Kirss 2015: 257), together with the chronicler's descriptions of the society and customs of the region (Urban 1981: 160). The text has been a valuable source for fiction in both Baltic German and Estonian literature and has an important place in Baltic cultural memory (Kreem 2013: 587).

William Urban argues that the historical Russow was probably himself quite characteristic of his city environment, seeing himself above all as a member of a city community that was for the most part middle-class burghers and artisans of predominantly North German origin (Urban 1988: vi):

> The conclusion must be that Balthasar Russow was neither an Estonian [sic] or a German as we understand those terms today. Rather he was a Reval patriot. That is, he was a member of a community that shared German culture, spoke predominately low German but also some Estonian, that was business-minded and therefore willing to deal with Hanseatic Germans, Scandinavians, Russians, and native peasants, that had a significant artisan community of a native ancestry (and therefore some class antagonisms as well as a symbiotic relationship), and that owed its principal political allegiance to the king of Sweden. Russow's own allegiances were to his religion first of all, then to his city, his family, his church, and lastly his king. (Urban 1981: 170)

Kross used the core material with masterly elegance. Sixteenth-century Livonia comes to life in all its aspects through the eyes of his protagonist. The novel, or more precisely the way Tallinn is described in it, could be called an amplification and extension of Russow's chronicle (see Lias 2005: 31). Kross goes into detail by mapping the city and explaining its history:

> When the north wind blew, the high water washed over the seaside road, flooding the marshland behind it, and then one could almost believe the old-timers's tales about a time long, long ago, when the dragon-bellied Hanseatic cogs rarely sailed to Tallinn, and the native vessels were light as seabirds, lighter even than boatmen's barges, and the harbour had been where now there was a marshland. But slowly the land kept raising its broad back up out of the sea, and foreign ships needed deeper waters. And so the harbour gradually moved ever further from the town walls, at first to the Small Coast Gate where nowadays fishing boats came ashore, and later towards the steeper shore near the Rose Garden, where a proper breakwater and ships could now be seen. (Kross 2016: 95-96.)

Tiina Kirss states that the tetralogy 'delves into what may have happened *besides* and *in between* the events of *grande histoire* such as invasions, sieges, political negotiations and alliances, and grafts these events onto a fictional scaffolding of Russow's life' (Kirss 2015: 258).

Kross has treated his protagonist as a kindred spirit for many reasons, one of which was that both were writers in a society where the freedom to write was restricted (Lepasaar Beecher 2016: 10). As a city chronicler, Russow clashed with local noblemen. Kross, meanwhile, was a writer in Soviet Estonia who had spent eight years in Siberia as a political prisoner, returning to Estonia in 1954. Yet, the trigger for Kross to write about Russow lay mostly in the possible national origin of the real chronicler (Salokannel 2009: 191-92). In 1964, Paul Johansen, an émigré Estonian historian of Danish origin, who had been City

Archivist in Tallinn from 1934 to 1939, hypothesised in the exiles' literary periodical *Tulimuld* published in Sweden, that Balthasar Russow might have been the son of an Estonian wagoner from the Kalamaja ('Fish house') settlement, a suburb of Tallinn that was the *Vorstadt* of the fishermen. Kross learned about this essay in 1969 when he was about to begin a TV film script about old Tallinn. Estonian identity was under threat in Soviet Estonia and Johansen's bold assumption enabled Kross to create a strong, central character with Estonian roots.

No confirmation of Johansen's thesis has emerged (Kreem 2008: 1075-76; Kivimäe 2014). His subsequent study ranked Russow's priorities as his religion, his city (*mine leve landstad*) under the Swedish crown, and his congregation, and concluded that being Estonian would have been identical to being a peasant (Johansen 1996: 244). The novel by Kross, printed in a run of 32,000 copies for each volume and followed by two more editions in the 1980s (Lepasaar Beecher 2016: 11), amplified the hypothesis and began to claim the status of historical truth for the imaginary Russow (Väljataga 2013: 693). In Volume 7 of the Soviet-era *Eesti Entsüklopeedia* ('Encyclopaedia of Estonia'), Russow was presented as an Estonian-born chronicler (Aarna, et al. 1975: 7). Even now, a display in Tallinn City Museum dating from 2001 (Lepp 2002: 134) presents the historical pastor of Tallinn's Church of the Holy Ghost as the son of an Estonian dwelling in Kalamaja (see Figure 1). Since the book's publication, historians have objected to the way the fictional Russow has constantly been identified with the historical Russow (e.g. Kaplinski 1988; Öpik 1988; Selart and Tamm 2012: 21; Kivimäe 2014).

Even so, Kross's interpretation of Russow's origin has become almost an accepted version of Tallinn's history, and while historical treatments still do not accept it as a proven hypothesis, the fictional Russow has established himself as an Estonian.

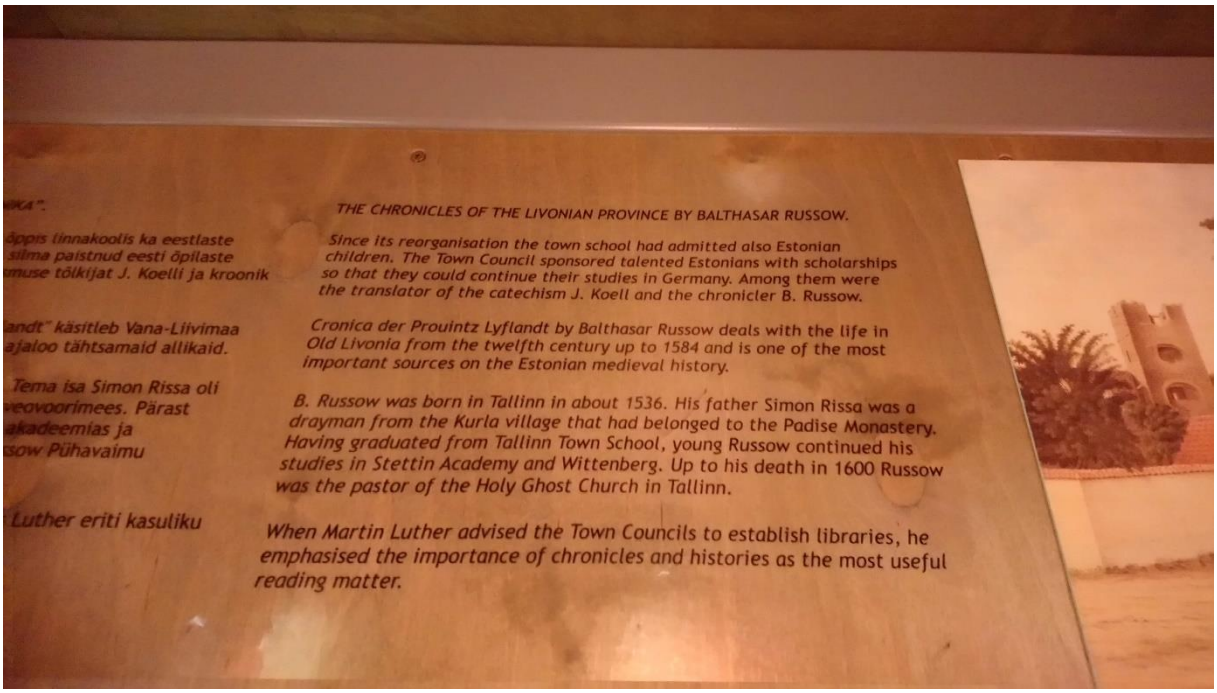

Figure 1. The display in Tallinn City Museum. Photo: Elle-Mari Talivee, 2018.

However, the literary Russow's Estonianness is not the only geography encoded within this text. Kross has disguised other spatial features within the text of his novel, creating a sense of place, while at the same time broadening the literary Russow's roots in the cityscape to create a kind of national identity, a term which has been defined as 'a certain kind of emotionally engaging collective identity built on shared cultural symbols (such as common language, history, and geographical area) and political goals (such as autonomy or independence)' (Kuldkepp 2013: 314).

Multi-Ethnic Tallinn in Literature: the Background

Following Kross's suggestion of looking at the chronicler as an Estonian author acting in the Tallinn city space, it is interesting to go through a couple of examples of how this multi-ethnic city was interpreted in Estonian literature after Russow's chronicle and before Kross's tetralogy.

Although the first known original Estonian literary work *Oh, ma vaene Tarto liin!* ('Oh Me, the Poor Town of Tartu!', 1708) is dedicated to the city of Tartu, which was ravaged in the Great Northern War, descriptions of city life in Estonian literature only started to become common from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Estonian writers wrote then 'in a struggle with the (colonial) medieval, early modern and modern Baltic German texts' (Kaljundi, Laanes and Pikkanen 2015: 12). This struggle often concerned the question of territory, and the desire for land is a recurring theme in the texts of this period (Raun 1981: 126).

The literary texts of the twentieth century developed more intriguing ways of conveying such relationships. How the portrayal of Germans developed in Estonian writing can be discussed through the lens of a novel by the Estonian writer, Eduard Vilde (1865–1933). In 1903, Vilde used memoirs written by Baltic Germans as a vital source for his novel *Kui Anija mehed Tallinnas käisid* ('When the Men of Anija went to Tallinn') in order to give an authentic description of the urban space of Tallinn city centre in the middle of the nineteenth century. Vilde's protagonist, Mait Luts, comes to the city from the countryside and tries to settle inside the city walls, but his attempt ends tragically when, because of a violent encounter with the hostile ruling class, his bride is seduced by an upper-class Baltic German landlord. The incident breaks Mait's heart and he tries to take revenge, but he is wounded and dies. Vilde's portrayal places the ruling class in the upper part of the city called Toompea (*Domberg*, 'Cathedral Hill'), while the Lower Town is for those in the category of the ruled, whatever their native language (Talivee and Finch 2015: 180). The unhappy protagonist is adventuring in a part of the city space that is forbidden to him.

Vilde's work, the first Estonian city novel, encompasses spatial transition in various ways. With his novel evoking anger against the overlords of the city, the author insisted on the need for Estonians to blend into the city population more courageously and supported the idea of an Estonian city. The subsequent Russian revolution of 1905, although suppressed, marked the start of changes in the city that culminated when Estonia became independent. The 1918 'Manifesto to all the peoples of Estonia' addressed a multinational

country where Russians, Germans, Swedes, Jews and others lived alongside Estonians, altogether totalling about one million people. Among them the Baltic Germans were the ethnic group that was to face the most radical changes in the next two decades. The events and the outcome of the 1905 revolution had already complicated the intricate relationship between the Estonians and the Baltic Germans (Raun 2000: 128), and then the radical land reform of 1919 expropriated almost all landed property from the Baltic Germans in order to give it to the peasantry and to those who had fought in the War of Independence (Kasekamp 2018: 103). Finally, from 1939–1941 Nazi Germany resettled 16,000 Baltic Germans from Estonia to Germany (Liivik and Liibek 2019: 21). There are a couple of memorable reflections on the life of the shrinking Baltic German community in the Estonian literature of the 1930s, some of them intriguingly associated with the Tallinn city space. Next, I will examine these.

In 1935, the Estonian literary giant A. H. Tammsaare (1878–1940) published one of the finest love stories in Estonian literature, entitled *Ma armastasin sakslast* (1935) ('I Loved a German', 2018). Prejudice (expressed by the relatives and neighbours but also deeply rooted in the main characters themselves) separates the two unhappy lovers in this novel, a young Estonian man called Oskar and a Baltic German girl called Erika: the offspring of a previously subordinate and oppressed ethnic group should not want to marry the granddaughter of a former landowner. In the novel, their tragic social situation is reflected through the city space of Tallinn. The couple cannot go to the cafe, to the cinema or dancing in the city together. They are expected to lead parallel lives, occupying different spaces within Tallinn. Yet, there is one shadowy, almost dark, borderland, a huge park with an old palace in the middle, and the lovers soon find out that late autumn weather and gloomy evenings free this place entirely for them, and there they can stay invisible. More than that, when they enter the park, they are people without history. Yet, the park is heavily loaded with symbolism as late autumn tells of decay with its rotting wet leaves, forecasting how Erika's world will fade away. Oskar is by nature drawn to the lighter parts of the park, while Erika prefers dimness, the fallen leaves and the half-light (Tammsaare 1935: 92). Finally, Erika leaves Oskar, choosing a man of her own kind. Ulrike Plath calls her choice to marry without true passion a form of suicide (Plath 2013: 65), while Mirjam Hinrikus treats the novel as wholly decadent (Hinrikus 2011: 20). The novel concentrates the Baltic Germans in only a very small part of the city space: the former rulers have lost their influence in the city.

Another example is that of the novelist Karl Ristikivi (1912–1977), who published his Tallinn trilogy as a young author between 1938 and 1942. The second part of the trilogy, a story of assimilation called *Õige mehe koda* (1984) ('The abode of a righteous man') appeared in the year when Estonia first fell under Soviet rule, 1940, initially under the title *Võõras majas* ('In a strange house').

The city Ristikivi describes is depicted as being in constant change, introducing the readers to the structure of a medieval city as well as to the development of urban life in the years 1850–1940. A medieval town is radically transformed in the course of the novel. The book tells of the merging of two city spaces, the erection of slummy wooden settlements around the city of stone, and of changes in the city population. At the centre of the novel is the house of a Baltic German merchant that burns down in 1930. An Estonian flax

merchant who has done well has a new house built on the foundations of the old one, in the Art Deco style of the period. The description of the Old Town of Tallinn in the novel says that the path leading to that place 'is overgrown with grass', referring again to the diminishing Baltic German population in Tallinn. Tallinn city centre was then a place that was changing very quickly as the old city centre in the middle of the Old Town was being replaced by a new one outside the city wall, where a new part of the city had grown up since the turn of the century.

These examples indicate that the Tallinn portrayed in Estonian literature is a divisive space that is alien in some way or another to either the Estonians (before the beginning of the twentieth century) or (after that for a few decades) the Baltic Germans. The otherness was first associated with the city's lower-class population of Estonian origin, but from the turn of the century it was the Baltic German ruling class that was spatially marginalised.

Reviving Russow's Tallinn

Jaan Undusk argues that there were three 'exiled texts' about Tallinn that inspired Jaan Kross, and that the author brought all three of them back from exile in his tetralogy (Undusk 2007: 26). The first was the chronicle of Balthasar Russow itself, which was not easy to find in translation. Its first translation into Estonian appeared in the 1920s and the second one was published by exiled Estonians in 1967 in Sweden and therefore unavailable to the Soviet Estonian reader.[3] The second text was a short story by Gert Helbemäe, an exiled writer who was not published in Soviet Estonia, and third was the publication by Paul Johansen hypothesising of the Estonian origin of Russow, published in an exiles' literary periodical in Sweden.

Gert Helbemäe (1913–1974) fled Estonia in 1944, and while he was staying at a displaced persons' camp in Lübeck at the beginning of his journey into exile, he visited the local municipal archive. Archival sources on Tallinn helped him write the short stories that appeared in *Vaikija: Jutte ja legende Vana-Tallinnast* ('The silent one: stories and legends about Old Tallinn') in 1947. The collection consists of six tales and focuses on Tallinn in the sixteenth century (Mägi 1968: 16). The protagonist of the short story *Katsumus* ('An ordeal') is Balthasar Russow, who is working on his Chronicle of Livonia in the story. A short novel of youth by Helbemäe, *Raekooli õpilane* ('Student of the town school'), published in 1948 in Stockholm, used Russow's chronicle as an important source as well. Yet, although both literary depicters of the chronicler Russow rooted their main character firmly in the city space of Tallinn, and Kross may have been inspired by his short stories (Talivee 2017), Helbemäe did not play with the idea that the chronicler could have been of Estonian origin.

Jaan Kross dedicated the whole decade of the 1970s to the history of Tallinn, giving prominence to Tallinn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Alongside the TV film script of 1969 mentioned earlier, which soon developed into the first part of the novel *Between Three Plagues*, he was interested in other famous residents of the city of Tallinn. In 1970 he published *Neli monoloogi Püha Jüri asjus* ('Four monologues on St. George'), the fourth of which portrayed the artist Michel Sittow, and in 1973 he wrote a children's book entitled *Mardileib* ('Martinmas bread') about how marzipan was invented in Tallinn.

The reasons why Kross decided to write about the history of Old Tallinn also lie in the context in which he wrote. Tallinn's Old Town was at that time a subject of some discussion as it was not considered to have any particular historical value, and so plans had been put forward for parts of it to be demolished. Architectural scholar Paul Härmson (1963) had recommended that half of the Old Town be pulled down and replaced with modern buildings. One of the ideological arguments then put forward by the Soviet regime was the lack of architectural value in the Baltic German heritage (Härmson 1963; see Juske 2006 and Alatalu 2009: 86). Almost as a protest, this had triggered the creation of the Old Town preservation zone which was established with the aim of starting an extensive regeneration of the area (Kalm 2001: 432). Controversy was caused as the heritage of the one-time colonisers was finally being taken as a part of local national identity by the Estonians, or even as a locus of national resistance (425, 432): the layers of Tsarist heritage, above all the Baltic German layers, were adjusted to be parts of the Estonian national culture and identity and Kross's tetralogy is an example of this (Kaljundi 2018: 105). At the same time, Baltic German architecture was being united with the international cultural texture of the Soviet Union (Näripea 2005: 307). Kross described the Old City of Tallinn thoroughly, providing that place with a meaningful history, for example the view from Bal's lodging:

> Looking to the right you can see almost everyone who is heading to the New Market in front of the Town Hall. Whether sellers coming to town through the Viru Gate or buyers from the eastern quarters of the town – they all cross the Old Market directly under your window: the country folk from the village beyond Lasnamäe Hill and Lake Ülemiste, their soft-soled peasant shoes tapping, their creaking wagons laden with wooden vessels, bowls and sacks, with squealing pigs and bleating lambs and mooing heifers; the artisan journeymen and master craftsmen with their spouses from the neighbouring streets, and servant girls in grey skirts from Viru and Munkade and Karja Streets; and later in the day, the wives of the merchants, holding up their silk skirts with bejewelled fingers as they pick their way in fashionable, dainty shoes, around straw and refuse and cowpats and horse manure. (Kross 2016: 138)

On the left 'the scene is even more exiting. Pulling up in front of the Warehouse are big-wheeled cargo wagons coming from the harbour, laden with all kinds of mysterious goods packed into hogsheads, barrels, casks, boxes and bundles, sometimes giving off unusual odours, sometimes still wet from the waves that washed over the sides of the barges' (Kross 2016: 138-39).

In a sense, making the Old Town into a partly Estonised heritage zone buries the former multilingual Lower Town under the architecture of the Old Town of Tallinn. This kind of 'burial' was essential in two periods of history: transforming the centre of the Old Town, Toompea, into a seat of Estonian government and institutions in the 1920s, for the young Republic and, in the time of the Soviet occupation, to avert the threatened destruction of the medieval urban environment.

The Hidden Geographies

Kross wanted to make his readers experience the old city, to hear it and even to taste it, and to understand the feelings its citizens had towards their surroundings:

> Christmas came, and the bells rang for many days above the snowy rooftops – from St Olaf's, and St Nicholas's, from the Dome Church and Holy Ghost, from the churches of Almshouse and Kalamaja and half a dozen town chapels. And then all over the town the smoke rose towards the sky from Christmas roasts, and in the dark of the evening dancing townspeople, their faces aglow with wine and firelight, whirled around a crackling Christmas tree in front of the town Hall, making the snowy cobblestones resound under their thumping feet. The New Year arrived and neighbours wished each other a happy 1558 as they met on the paths between banks of shovelled snow and the town's frosted walls. (Kross 2016: 166)

Kross had a talent for "'thick description" of social as well as physical landscapes' (Kirss 2000: 275). The physical description of a city in a novel often reflects different social standings, or those social positions may reflect the physical shape of the city. The city boundary may be marked out clearly in physical space (Remm 2011: 126), as in the way Kross mentions 'the Great Coast Gate drawbridge' (Kross 2016: 56), or it may be conveyed through the border crossings of the characters (see Talivee and Finch 2015).

Mait Luts, the main character in Vilde's novel mentioned earlier, had to cross multiple borders, both physical, in the form of the city gate, and intangible, as when the change to city life led him to hide his origins by changing his name to the German-sounding Mathias Lutz, and by switching language to German (Talivee and Finch 2015: 173). To some extent, Jaan Kross's Russow blurs these borders from the start. The sixteenth-century fictional chronicler does not encounter the problems of the nineteenth-century protagonist who, when studying in an urban German school, must deny or totally subordinate their Estonian origins (Raun 1981: 125). Young Bal is already bilingual, and his linguistic talent, along with that of several other non-Germans in the town school, is soon noticed by the teacher.

> In his [Teacher Frolink] *infima* classes a third of the pupils spoke that incomprehensible, bubbling, bland – like something in need of salt – native language among themselves. It was the only language he had heard of which seemed not to have a name of its own, being defined in terms of what it was not. In *quarta* and *tertia* about a quarter of the students seemed to be speakers of this language. But in the upper forms, *secunda* and *prima*, he had not noticed any. Had the non-Germans only recently begun to enrol their children in greater numbers? Or had their children already become German by the time they reached the upper forms, so as to be eligible for positions as priors? […] But then again some of the brightest heads in his classes belonged to non-Germans. More than anyone else, Balthasar Russö, in his second *quarta* class, had caught his attention. (Kross 2016: 52)

The protagonists of Kross's novels typically strive to prove that Estonians, like others, would have been able to rise in the European intellectual world if only they had been allowed to (Kisseljova 2017: 25). Kross wrote later about several educated Estonians who had risen from serfdom to the upper layers of society (Kirss 2015: 257-58). Bal gets a good education in Stettin, Wittenberg and Bremen, is offered a post as a pastor after returning, and secures his social position through three marriages, each time climbing higher up the ladder of the social hierarchy. This gives the novel another political-geographical layer as well. It was important for Kross in the 1970s, during the Soviet occupation, to express 'resistance to the pressures of homogenization and assimilation to a hegemonic language and culture' (Kirss 2000: 275), to preserve a belief in Estonian identity (Kirss 2015: 48). Bal is in Kross's interpretation an educated man who never forgets his ancestral past and who writes down the chronicle of the city in the shadows of censorship (see Lepasaar Beecher 2017: 16-19). This similarity between the writer and the protagonist indicates that the roots of the latter are not only in sixteenth-century Tallinn, but also in the capital of Soviet Estonia in the 1970s, which lets him serve equally as a symbol of the potential of the Estonians (see Jansen 2005: 138). This would be another layer of the hidden geographies of the novel, offering the reader a link between two distant periods. This was similar to the message of Vilde, who wanted to awaken people to the history of the city and use historical events to demand action in the present.

The territorial demand, the struggle for city space *intra muros*, either metaphorical or real, was one of the topics in emerging Estonian literature from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. As we have already seen, the protagonists of that era who try to settle inside the city walls do not succeed. Bal is, on the contrary, successful in this border-crossing as well as in social climbing, though he is a kind of border character from the very beginning of the novel.

Kross's novel begins with a powerful scene in which young Bal is skipping lessons and climbing the tower of St Olaf's Church to get a closer look at the Italian tightrope walkers' performance above the roofs of the city. Russow's chronicle itself mentions this event briefly as well. The subchapter in the chronicle serves the purpose of describing the kind of miraculous and almost impossible things that happened in Tallinn at various times:

> In 1547 some Italian daredevils, tightrope walkers and marvellous jugglers, came to Livonia. When they offered their services to the city of Reval, the Council had a large and incredibly long cable made. It stretched from the lofty spire of St. Olaf's as far as the Ropers' Walk.[4] And after this cable was stretched taut and firmly secured, all the city gates were shut, with the sole exception of the Great Sea Gate. Then the entire community, young and old, went out through it to see the performance of the tightrope walkers. And when all the populace was gathered outside, one of the acrobats gave an incredible performance on this cable outside the gate tower, high in the air above the ground. It was miraculous to see and also, because of the great height, terrifying and frightening. After this one had performed his tricks long enough, another one skipped very quickly along the cable over all the city's dikes,

> ditches and walls, all the way to the Ropers' Walk. They gave similar performances in other Livonian cities. (Russow 1988: 50)

The boy in the novel, from a suburb of wooden houses, looks down on Tallinn from one of the tallest buildings in the whole of Europe at that time: 'the harbour and the crescent of town at its edge, the bay with its islands of Paljassaare, Nairisaare, Salmesaare – was no bigger than the palm of his hand. The scattering of tiny houses was now far below' (Kross 2016: 31). The key to understanding the main character and his attitude towards his home city is probably revealed here in the very beginning, where the city lies in the palm of his hand, and he is able to look upon it. He is a character 'lifted out of the city's grasp' (de Certeau 1988: 92). This kind of perspective is rare, extraordinary and yet somehow medieval, as Michel de Certeau has pointed out, because art and fiction of that time favoured representing the city as seen from above (92). Bal is the one to discover the city for the reader, to map it. Moreover, the perspective described was also unusual because the spire of St Olaf's was not open to the public during the Soviet period, so his impressions convey something Kross's reader was not able to experience in person.

As a city chronicler, the wagoner's son from a Kalamaja household among 'the small wooden cottages and the blubber sheds and garden plots' (Kross 2016: 57), from the seashore with its willows, boathouses and fishing shacks (43), has to look down on the city from awkward or even dangerous positions. He becomes a kind of tightrope walker, figuratively speaking, who operates between social positions, wars, plagues and personal relationships. Tightrope-walking is a motif Kross had already used in his poetry (1964). The metaphor developed into the axis of the novel about Russow (Lias 2005: 31-34), and the 'canny balancing act' (Kirss 2000: 275) is typical of several of Kross's characters. The protagonists of Kross's novels are typically nonconformist thinkers. *Keisri hull* (1978) ('The Czar's Madman', 1992) is another example from Kross's oeuvre of a protagonist who is a political dissident, which was an extremely controversial subject or theme in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s (Kisseljova 2017: 33). In *Between Three Plagues* the chronicler, trying to stay objective at all times while documenting the history of his home city, '"compromising" vs. remaining true to oneself' as Tiina Kirss put it (Kirss 2000: 275), could not make a mistake along his way, just like the tightrope walkers who would fall down if they came to a halt.

Another territorial question is raised by the origin of the protagonist in a wider context. Bal in person still reflects the relationship and the close ties that any medieval city had with the countryside. The right to shape a landscape is a question of power and 'land' is supposedly what connects us to the previous generation (Lindström 2011: 26). The question of 'land' or 'territory' is eternal, as is the natural need of human beings to create an organised spatial sphere around themselves (Lotman 2000: 203), with each society constructing its own territory (Lando 1996: 6). Vilde and Tammsaare's protagonists had their roots deep in the countryside. Bal, already a second-generation town-dweller, feels thoroughly at home inside the city, on the streets that have the familiar smell of damp limestone, refuse and horses' urine, while the courtyards carry the scent of privies and blooming roses (Kross 2016: 97). He has instead mixed feelings about the countryside:

> the wide expanse of open countryside around them made the boys more than a little uneasy. […] Somewhere deep inside the town-dwelling Greys, deep in their bodies and blood even after several generations of town life, nested a knowledge, or suspicion, or sense, or memory that leaving town and going into the country was hazardous. (Kross 2016: 97)

Yet, Bal is able to combine his city roots and ancestral origin; he is no 'other' in either place. His personal connection is even deeper as his first and enduring love, Epp, is a girl from the countryside. A fictional character without any historical original, Epp is thought to have been created by the author 'to embody the nostalgic pull of the ancestral past – something so strong in Balthasar's consciousness and subconscious, that it had to be represented by a concrete figure' (Lepasaar Beecher 2016: 13).

Bal assists peasants who are seeking help in the city court, and openly acknowledges them as relatives. The real-life citizenry gave shelter to peasant refugees during the wars (Urban 1981: 167). This practice raises the question of linguistic geography in the novel. Bal's first wife Elsbet, the daughter of a German merchant, feels uncomfortable within their own home. The pastor's house of the Holy Ghost Church serves as a special refuge for her husband's fellow countrymen, whose native language – Estonian, in modern terms – starts to be spoken there as the first language instead of Low German (Kross 1998a: 296). The character mentioned earlier, Teacher Frolink, described this language, which then seemed to lack a name of its own, as 'being defined in terms of what it was not' (Kross 2016: 52). Elsbet addresses this language as *Undeutsch* ('Non-German') used by the lower class. Estonian was then termed *maakeel*, 'country tongue' (*Landessprache* in German) as being used by *maarahvas*, meaning 'people living in the countryside' (*Landvolk*) but in certain contexts 'Estnisch' as well, as Heinrich Stahl made the first attempt to compile the first Estonian grammar in 1637, labelling the language with that word (Stahl 1974). Bal brings this language from the countryside, the land, into the urban space.

Historical Tallinn was encircled by its walls. The descriptions of the city in Kross's novel mostly concentrate on the part within the walls. Even so, Bal shows his political inclinations when he mentions the wooden settlement of Kalamaja. The novel implies that the suburb of old Tallinn that is the birthplace of the chronicler already forms a kind of core structure of the city. However, the wooden settlements outside the city wall surrounding the Old Town were actually in essence quite temporary, as they were burnt down or cleared when the city was besieged. The historical Russow wrote of the Muscovite attack on 18 October 1570 that 'the people of Reval burned and levelled the Fishers' Village, where more than two hundred dwellings stood', and he criticises this decision, by the city council, to destroy the town (Russow 1988: 135).

Bal tries to stop the planned burning of the *Vorstadt*, and he is evidently upset when this decision is carried out (Kross 1998a: 95-97; 1998b: 354). The linguistic level of the text betrays his feelings as well, as he feels part of the town has been burnt down as if it were an open wound dully aching or glowing (in Estonian the word *huum* means both) in the darkness. Although he proves throughout the novel that he is as able to think and write as his fellow citizens of German origin are, he has brought his *Vorstadt* together with him

through the city gates. The reader is involved in a process of creating a place with very strong spatial ties. In this way, the novel broadens the usual concept of city, based on a distinction between the temporary wooden outskirts and the stone city encircled with walls.

Conclusion

To conclude, Kross seems, first of all, to have broadened the spatial positioning of the Estonians, or 'the people of the land', to include the interior of the city of Tallinn, in contrast with the work of his predecessors Vilde, Tammsaare and Ristikivi. His protagonist Bal is a long-established town-dweller who has long felt at home inside the city. In the shape of this character, the author has created a character of Estonian origin who never ceases to use his mother tongue. Through him, Kross presents a territory within the cityscape that is usually not perceived as being associated with the 'people of the land' at that time. It is the fictional character Balthasar Russow who unites these two spaces, the city and the countryside, instead of representing just one of these entities. In this study, then, the multiple potentialities of the buried city unearthed by the historical novelist include those which could reshape a national identity.

The spatial distinction between the slum, the suburb and the old city centre that is so characteristic of texts produced at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries does not appear so rigid here. Instead, Kross's character first gets to know the whole city from above as a schoolboy and then, both as a chronicler and as a literary protagonist, writes the text of the city in a way that creates for Kross's readers a more holistic or encompassing sense of urban space. No area of Old Tallinn remains unknown to the reader after reading Kross's novel.

Kross's main character is an explorer mapping the city with a feeling of empathy. In the mediations of city space he provides for Kross's readers, he introduces questions of linguistic geography contained in the languages which sixteenth-century Tallinn residents actually used, reviving long-lost place and street names. Yet, there is the question of autonomy, at least on a personal level. It relates to the reasons Kross wrote his novel sequence at all, as an example of a historical novel that can reveal aspects of contemporary times (de Groot 2010: 101). As told in Kross's tetralogy, the life story of Balthasar Russow derives its power from the fictional chronicler's nationality, which links the past with the present. As a writer in an occupied country Kross brought forth one layer that is important to his interpretation and to his time of writing. The protagonist of the novel, as a metaphorical tightrope walker, also connects the past and the present at the time of writing: both were societies where the writer had to follow certain rules. Kross's approach adds in an interesting way to how the Baltic German city space was depicted in pre-war literature. Eduard Vilde described an unsuccessful attempt by an Estonian to infiltrate 1850s Tallinn, while A. H. Tammsaare and Karl Ristikivi both showed in the first half of the twentieth century how ownership of the city's space changed gradually. Kross also differs from Gert Helbemäe, the other literary depicter of the chronicler Russow.

Kross has enriched the picture typically found in earlier Estonian and Baltic German fiction (see Undusk 2008), although the complexity of the bi-ethnic structure of Estonian culture (Öpik 1988: 159) may have privileged its Estonian side. However, by keeping apart

the two brilliant people, the fictional man and the historical one (Kivimäe 1999: 288), and by overlooking the various conflicts that could split the character internally (Kreem 2008: 1080), the tetralogy allows an enthralling insight into the spatial problems and hidden geographies presented in a literary text. The novel by Kross appears as an example of literature that changes urban histories through imaginary constructions.

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Notes

[1] *Between Three Plagues* has been translated into German, Finnish, Russian, Polish, Latvian, Dutch, and most recently English, by Merike Lepasaar Beecher (titled (I, 2016) *The Ropewalker*; (II, 2017), *A People Without a Past*; Volumes III and IV forthcoming) and Lithuanian (2020).

[2] No evidence has been found of Russow having written sermons in Estonian, although he must have had some skill in it (Kivimäe 2014).

[3] K. Leetberg (1920–1921); D. and H. Stock (1967).

[4] 'Köismäe' (German *Reeperbahn*), a settlement where ropes were made.

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