

By Mikk Jogi

President Toomas Hendrik Ilves on official Canadian visit

Estonia's president spent Sunday visiting old haunts in Georgina.

Taking time out from an official visit to Canada, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and his wife, Evelin, took part in a spring work day organized at the Estonian Summer Camp in Udora.

He attended this camp as a youngster during the 1960s, making this a homecoming.

It was an honour for Georgina and members of the Canadian-Estonian community to host President Ilves, York-Simcoe MP Peter Van Loan said.

The president took the opportunity to join the volunteers working on tasks such as cleaning cabins, clearing brush and stacking firewood.

"I am pleased to be here on the 61st anniversary of the camp and to join the volunteers in readying the camp for another great summer," President Ilves said. "Camp Joekaaru's history highlights the deep roots of the Canadian-Estonian community and the rich cultural diversity of Canada."

The president participated in the spirit of the "Let's do it!" community cleanup movement, which was born in Estonia and is practised in 100 countries.

Mr. Van Loan and Councillor Brad Smockum helped the president plant a tree to serve as a reminder of his visit.

President Ilves, whose parents were two of the thousands of people who fled the Soviet occupation of their homeland during the Second World War, was born in Sweden but grew up in the United States.

During his career as a teacher, journalist and politician, he lived and worked in the United States, Canada and Europe, moving to Estonia after independence was regained in 1991.

He was elected president in 2006.

In the early 1950s, a group of Estonian women in Toronto, who had emigrated to Canada with their families from the ruins of Europe as war refugees, were concerned about the lack of activities for their children during the summers.

This group of volunteers raised enough funds to buy a property to start a summer camp.

After a search, the group settled on an old farm in Udora.

Essentially a large field mostly barren of trees, it had a solid farmhouse and was bisected by Pefferlaw Brook.

Volunteers converted the farmhouse into a kitchen and added a mess hall.

Barracks to house the children were built, docks for swimming were added to the shoreline and washing facilities built.

Thousands of saplings were planted, which now stand more than 50 feet tall.

Over the coming decades, facilities were added and upgraded.

Georgina was an enthusiastic supporter of the camp.

Besides being supportive at the political level in the early 1960s, the town offered the services of its road graders to help level what became the athletic field.

This 400-metre track was the first metric-measurement track in Canada. Back then, a quarter-mile was the standard length of the day.

Canada unexpectedly benefitted from this: upon learning of the existence of a metric track here at home, the Olympic team asked to use this facility for training in preparation of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, where Canada won silver in the men's 800m and bronze in the men's 100m.

Now in its 61st year, the camp continues to provide cultural, language, artistic and athletic programs for second and third generation Canadian-Estonian children.

Original article on the York Region [webpage](#) .