

By Daniella Zalcman

The Core Curriculum helps Toomas Hendrik Ilves '76 serve his homeland of Estonia

When David Luther '76 arrived at his office one Monday morning, he barely noticed that he had received an e-mail from Tom, an old college friend. The subject line contained a mild expletive, which was vaguely alarming, but the Oppenheimer senior officer was swamped and his inbox was filled with more urgent, work-related missives.

A few hours later, he checked the message and immediately began to laugh. It read: "I'm the president, I was just elected president of Estonia!"

Luther reached for the phone.

"I called him up and congratulated him," he says. "And then he invited me to go to the inauguration, so I did. How many people do you know who are going to be president of a country?"

On September 23, 2006, Tom — more formally known as Toomas Hendrik Ilves '76 — became the fourth president of Estonia.

"And," Luther adds, laughing, "you'll be happy to hear that he's cleaned up his language

substantially since he's gotten into politics."

Reclining in an overstuffed booth in the Café Carlyle almost a year later, a glass of Sam Adams at his fingertips, Ilves' first words are a compact expression of affection for his alma mater.

"Anything for Columbia," he says as he begins the interview, adjusting the signature bow tie that accompanies him to all public appearances.

Ilves is in New York for his annual address to the United Nations General Council on September 27, but his visit also includes a stop in Morningside Heights to participate in a discussion one day earlier with President Lee C. Bollinger and Mikheil Saakashvili '94L, president of the Republic of Georgia, as part of the World Leaders Forum.

Ilves' dialogue with Saakashvili and subsequent Q&A session with students and others in attendance begins with an outline of the state of each country's relationship with the Russian Federation and the possibility of and barriers to European integration. But gradually, the conversation turns to more lighthearted reminiscences of their college years by the two heads of state.

More than 31 years after his graduation, Ilves in particular credits Columbia for providing the liberal arts background that prepared him to become the leader of an Eastern European nation. He echoes a thought from an essay published more than a decade earlier, in the Fall 1993 issue of CCT, when he was Estonia's ambassador to North America: "My hope is that in 20 years, a large part of Estonia's political, economic and cultural elite ... will be as familiar with Hobbes and Locke as our graduates are, and that they will consider that knowledge simply part of being an educated adult."

The son of refugees from Soviet-ruled Estonia, Ilves was born in Stockholm in 1953 before emigrating to America with his parents several years later.

"I don't remember it [Sweden], I left at 3 — I only have vague images. My parents moved to New Jersey and it's been downhill ever since," he quips.

Ilves was valedictorian at Leonia H.S. in 1972 before majoring in psychology at the College. Then a long-haired activist, he was a research assistant from 1974–79 in the psychology department and earned an M.A. in that subject from Penn in 1978.

"I took a lot of philosophy as well, and I was attracted to psychology in that I thought it was a way for dealing empirically with philosophic issues," Ilves says.

He spent much of his time in the lab working with James F. Bender Professor in Psychology Don Hood, researching visual perception and light adaptation. "Everyone, including me, liked Tom," Hood, also a professor of ophthalmic sciences, recalls. Back then, there were "no hints of political leanings, but he was gregarious. He was bright and worked hard on the research projects in the laboratory."

Ilves immersed himself in his research and in his schoolwork, citing his fellow students for having greatly shaped his undergraduate years. "The fact that a professor can have brilliant insight is expected," he said at the World Leaders Forum. "But when someone else sitting around the table says something amazing, that's when you feel the embarrassment of not having thought of it first."

For Ilves, those insights defined his time on the Morningside Heights campus.

"Columbia was a time of intellectual discovery," he says. "That's what I liked. And I also liked the fact that if I didn't want to discover anything intellectually, I could just hop on the subway and go downtown."

But more than the pull of New York City, what most attracted Ilves to Columbia was the Core Curriculum. "At that time, there was only Columbia, [the University of] Chicago and St. John's University that had a core, and that was very important to me," he says. "I always thought that every undergraduate should have that foundation. I consider it the sine qua non for being an educated person."

Ilves' love of the Core stayed with him long past his college years. At one point, he even tried to bring a similar program of study to the national university in Estonia, with the help of Dean of Academic Affairs Kathryn Yatrakis. Though it has yet to catch on, Ilves says he's determined to try again.

"Take the Core seriously," Ilves admonishes. "When I talk to people who are graduates of the College, the older you get the more salient the Core and Contemporary Civilization and Literature Humanities become as part of your undergraduate experience. The other stuff all changes. Whatever you studied 30 years ago may not be the same at all in the present unless you stayed in that field and kept up on it, but all of that philosophy is still significant."

The Enlightenment texts from Contemporary Civilization particularly appealed to the son of Soviet exiles. Though Ilves had never been to his parents' homeland and would not travel to Estonia until 1984, from an early age he would raptly listen to visiting family friends discuss Estonian politics.

The effect was profound. According to an interview in a local New Jersey paper with his mother, Irene, the future president would march through his house as a young child, chanting, "We're going to free Estonia and kick all the Russians out!"

Ilves' father, Endel, encouraged his son's budding patriotism. He insisted that both parents speak Estonian to Toomas and his brother, Andres, at home. "He said it's a small nation, there aren't many of us and we must not forget the homeland," Irene told The Record.

And indeed, both brothers returned to Europe to work as journalists, writing extensively about the democratic world as the USSR slowly crumbled. Andres also worked for Radio Free Europe as the head of the Afghanistan bureau in Prague, and now heads BBC's Persian and Pashto World Service.

Ilves has applied his Contemporary Civilization readings to Eastern European politics in the wake of Soviet disintegration, citing Politics and The Republic along with his favorite Enlightenment texts as being a vital foundation on which to build a democracy.

"I firmly believe that the world would be much better off — at least the democratic world — if everyone did the Core as an undergraduate," he says. "The Enlightenment is the foundation of what modern democracy is. There are too many countries, especially in the post-communist world, that don't understand that the state is there only at the behest of the citizenry."

Ilves pauses to reflect, hands clasped in front of him.

"And of course the undemocratic world would be even better off, I think," he says, laughing.

Classmates remember Ilves as being fiercely outspoken as an undergraduate, but few foresaw his political career.

Luther met Ilves while taking a class with the future president's first-year roommate. Ilves spent many evenings in Luther's seventh floor cinderblock Carman suite, and the two became fast friends. "What quickly struck me about him is that he had a great sense of humor, and he loved debating and talking politics," Luther says. "He also had extremely conservative views, which were aligned with my opinions. But mostly, he was a lot of fun to be around."

Ilves and Luther spent the next two years living across the hall from each other in Plimpton and spending much of their free time together. "He was very immersed in his studies, to say the least," says Luther, "but that doesn't mean he wouldn't also take time to go out and have a beer at the Campus Dining Room on 119th Street."

But after his studies and lab research, "his real second passion in those days was music," Luther says. "He introduced me to Bruce Springsteen, Lou Reed, Kinky Friedman — I guess they're common names now, but in '74 they were new performers. I can remember spending a lot of time sitting in his room while he played disc jockey, saying, 'You gotta hear this guy.'"

After earning his M.A., Ilves taught English in Englewood, N.J., for a couple of years, and in 1981 became the director of art at the Vancouver Arts Center in Canada. Then, in the first of many steps that would bring him closer to his Baltic roots, he began lecturing on Estonian literature and linguistics at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

Ilves enjoyed teaching, and says that academia always has been an important part of his life. "I've been teaching all along, I'd say. The fact that I'm constantly giving speeches, lectures, it's all sort of pedagogy."

Those who knew Ilves best as a college student never would have predicted a departure from the academic world. For example, "I would have thought that he would be a professor of psychology teaching in a college or university," Hood says.

Luther agrees, adding that Ilves would never shy away from any debate on any subject, always expressing his views in a manner that would befit either a professor or a politician. "He had very strong opinions about the Soviet Union and we knew that his family was from Estonia, but to us he was just Tom from Leonia. I would have thought that he would become a professor, or at the very least someone in academia."

But while lecturing in Canada, Ilves became more and more involved in Estonian current events.

"I went to graduate school, and I realized I'd been in school for too long," he says. "Then I started writing about Estonia and the Baltic and Soviet stuff and eventually it caught the eye of some people who offered me a job at Radio Free Europe."

Ilves moved to Munich in 1984 to work as an analyst and researcher, focusing his writing on developments in the Baltic region. By 1988, he was asked to take over Radio Free Europe's Estonian desk.

Once immersed in Eastern European politics, the switch from journalism to diplomacy was seamless.

"Estonians have always been fairly active in what is going on in Estonia," says Ilves. "The dissident writer Lennart Meri became foreign minister, and I would write speeches for him in

English. Then he became president — and since I was one of the few people who knew anything about foreign affairs, he asked me if I would become the ambassador to the United States [and Mexico and Canada], because he needed someone who had a feel for the West.”

Estonia was in a period of transition, struggling to create a national identity in the turmoil of Soviet dissolution. For Baltic leaders, breaking ties with the former USSR meant strengthening their connection with the western world — and with America in particular.

By then, Soviet occupation had ended and Estonia had declared independence. So in 1993, Ilves quit his job at Radio Free Europe, renounced his American citizenship and moved to Estonia.

After serving as the Estonian ambassador to North America for three years, he became the minister of foreign affairs. Ilves became instrumental in Estonia’s induction to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union in March and May 2004, respectively. For him, last fall’s trip to address the entire U.N. assembly was the culmination of years of hard work.

“I devoted five years of my life to getting Estonia into those organizations,” Ilves says. “I consider that the most important part of what I’ve done until now.”

Once the Luxembourg European Council outlined the accession and negotiation processes in 1997, Ilves helped to initiate a series of negotiations regarding Estonia, Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and the Czech Republic’s inclusion in the EU a year later. In 1999, the group expanded to include Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania and Slovakia. Ten countries acceded along with Estonia in 2004, and Bulgaria and Romania joined after prolonged negotiation on January 1, 2007.

Ilves’ rapid political ascension didn’t stop there. From minister of foreign affairs, he went on to join the Estonian Parliament in 2002 and the European Parliament in 2004.

But for all his accomplishments and all his work in helping Estonia to acclimate to its post-communist existence, it never occurred to Ilves to consider the presidency. Once he even

told a Baltic publication, City Paper, "I definitely am not interested! And I hope that all speculation on the topic will cease."

But when the communist then-president of Estonia, Arnold Ruutel, came up for reelection in September 2006, it became clear that Ilves was the only realistic opponent.

"I was asked by lots and lots of people [to run]," says Ilves, shrugging cheerfully. "I was basically the only theoretical contender who ranked higher than the incumbent, who at the time was challengerless. All the Western-oriented political parties in Estonia encouraged me: the social democrats, the conservatives and the liberals."

Weeks later, Ilves defeated Ruutel by a 174–162 vote in the Estonian electoral body to become the second youngest head of state in the EU. His executive role in the Estonian parliamentary democracy is defined mostly by his representation of Estonia in international affairs, while Prime Minister Andrus Ansip is the head of government.

Ilves lives with his wife, Evelin, and daughters, Juulia Kristine, 15, and Kadri Keiu, 4. His son, Luukas, is a junior at Stanford in its directed studies program, which, according to Ilves, is much like Columbia's Core.

Today, the president's vision for his country is simple.

"A thriving small country in northeast Europe, that's what I'd like. It's getting there, having surpassed Portugal in terms of GDP per capita this year, so we're doing rather well, I'd say," he offers with pride.

Recent Estonian history hasn't been without its share of hitches, most notably including a series of cyberattacks last April and May that crippled Estonian Web sites and cell phone networks. But by most accounts, Estonia is indeed thriving. According to the International Monetary Fund, with a population of 1.3 million in a country roughly four times the size of New York City, Estonia has the 37th highest GDP per capita of the 179 countries included in its survey, and is growing at a robust annual rate of 11.4 percent. The unemployment rate — 4.2 percent as of July 2006

— is one of the lowest in the European Union.

The main industries in Estonia, which is almost entirely energy independent, are engineering, information technology and telecommunications. An article in the August 2007 issue of Wired Magazine called Estonia “the most wired country in Europe.”

“Every day is different, alas ... or thank goodness, as the case may be,” the president says wryly. “I would just hope that those trends would continue.”

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