

In Estonian, there is a pithy word – Isamaa (Fatherland), which brings to mind the romantic national awakening and liberation movements of the century before last. Fatherland is a theatre of battles and victories, heroes and glory, as well as grievous losses and sacrifices.

Yet there is another land, much more ancient and pristine – a land, which in the minds of the people of this country has been a mother rather than a father. It would, of course, not do to call it motherland – that would sound like an inversion of words from the recent centuries of horror, from the colonial era.

Estonia has never been a motherland that brings other people's children to its family by violence. Yet it is said that Estonia once, many thousands of years ago, had a mighty Emajõgi – the Mother River – which carried the waters of Lake Peipsi to the Livonian Bay, and this is how the river flowing through Tartu today – although in the opposite direction – got its name.

Emajõgi, great and calm, equably absorbs the water of all rivers and streams, and bears it to the sea, which – even bigger and more motherly – in its turn receives it all with open arms.

It also receives mothers' tears, which over and over again, from times immemorial, have washed off the blood of all the battles – often pointless and harmful – that have been fought on this soil.

I wonder whether perhaps even the mediaeval Christian missionaries could sense the local rural peasantry's vision of their land as an abundant mother when they asked the Church of Rome to dedicate it to Virgin Mary, Mother of God. It is known, though, that here the worship of Mary became intertwined with the old worship of earth-mother. It is the way of religions to be thus interwoven, and become specific for the country they spring from, the country where mothers hand down their beliefs to sons and daughters.

The Mary of the Bible, just as Estonian mothers, and all mothers of all nations, has two sides, two aspects. The agonised mother, with tearful eyes and a bleeding heart, the Mater Dolorosa, is one of them. But that is never the whole truth. Above all, also Mary, mother of Jesus, was a woman of immense bravery, never broken or embittered by the terrible blows of ill fortune,

always offering atonement and consolation.

Perhaps, in the history of Estonia and her people, that first aspect – the suffering mother tending the wounds, grieving for her husband and sons – has been more prominent. And yet, if we look into the past or closer, into the history of our nation or our families, it is in fact quite a different image of a mother that first meets the eye.

She is a foremother, and at the same time a young woman radiating infinite vitality, unquenchable joy of life. Despite wars and deportations, homelessness and grief, she has the faith to go on with life. Even in the most difficult circumstances, she will find a solution. She will mend the already patched garments, light the fire, pick up a scared child in her arms. And it will be all right once more. Life will go on. There will be bread on the table, and the spirit of love and conciliation in our hearts.

Of course we must mourn our losses and remember the battles of our fathers. But there is something else, perhaps more important, that we can learn from our mothers. We can learn to wipe the tears over and over again from our own and others' cheeks, and the way the sun comes out and smiles, even after the darkest of days. From this woman and mother of yore, shining with eternal youth, we must first and foremost learn the strength to carry on, the strength to bring forth life. This strength is not violent, although firmly able to stand its ground. The secret of this strength is not in anger or bitterness, but in forgiveness and joy of life. These simply cannot be eliminated or quelled.

No matter whether we look into the past of our nation or try to visualise the future, it is good to keep before our eyes this image of a mother, calm and serene as a river, bright and full of joy. Life goes on. Life always goes on, another meal is cooking in the kitchen, and mother's lips are there to kiss away the child's pain.

Sometimes, the same lips sing ancient and ever-marvellous songs, and say the words that appease the wrath of Fatherland's sons as if by magic. Mothers simply know in their hearts that joy, love and faith, not anger and vengeance, are the true sources of vitality.

Thank you, mothers!