

Dear friends!

First let me – by way of introduction – welcome you to Kadriorg and also wish you all a lovely Estonian Independence Restoration Day. For it is the restoration of independence that we are talking about today, isn't it?

Unfortunately, our calendars call it "the day when Estonian independence was regained". What is the difference, we might ask? Estonia's national independence, confirmed by the Supreme Council on 20 August 1991, is a historical fact.

Usage of language and grammar mirrors our way of thinking. But do we really consider the recovery of our freedom, after half a century's yearning, to be something impersonal, something passive? The expression "independence was regained" carries exactly that meaning. Whereas "restoration of independence" denotes positive action, purposeful activity from our side. Which, in fact, it was.

Today 16 years ago, a new path opened for the people of Estonia. At the same time, that day signified the end of a long half-century full of misery.

We have got used to saying that not a drop of blood was shed when restoring Estonia's independence. But this is not true. Estonia restored her freedom, but paid for it for more than 50 years, paid with tens and tens of thousands of lives and broken destinies.

In Estonia, the communist regime took several hundred thousands of victims – murdered, imprisoned, deported, escaped and persecuted. Let us ask ourselves: were not the Forest Brothers part of the process of the restoration of independence? Were not the schoolchildren, who defied the occupying powers in 1980, restorers of our independence? Probably to a greater extent than some of those who bear decorations today.

Today, we tend to forget. And furthermore, we are indeed advised to forget, as we read a couple of years ago in a review of the film "Memories Denied", where a critic asked: why should the deported, the victimised remember? Why should they be hostages to their memories? It is better to forget, not to tell.

The reason why we must never forget can be read in the weekly Sirp, in the issue published in the week of the anniversary of Estonia's incorporation to the Soviet Union. It sounded as a distant and sovietised response to Marie Under's "Christmas Greetings" from 1941.

In Sirp we read that of the 53,000 deported, 40,000, which is as much as 75 per cent, returned alive. And many of them were even able to go on with their creative work and – lo and behold! – were even rewarded by the Soviet state.

Indeed, Jaan Kross and Artur Alliksaar managed to return from the camps. Regrettably, Heiti Talvik was among the unfortunate 25 per cent. And under which percentage are we advised to

categorise Jüri Parijõgi, who was murdered in July 1941?

But what disturbs me most is another attempt to paint our past as some kind of inevitability, which is better left in silence. Some men of letters consider that life in the Soviet Union was not so bad, in some ways it was better than in Estonia today. During the occupation, everybody was equal – the KGB officials, the careerists, the spies, the national heritage inspectors.

The example set by those who defied the evil of totalitarianism, and the memory of their sufferings, helped the people of Estonia to retain their identity and restore their independence. For this reason, I think that the victims of communism deserve an illustrious monument. Not only in the capital of the United States of America, but also in the capital of the Republic of Estonia.

To keep us from yielding to the appeals to deny our memories and history, we need a monument to the victims of communism, we also need memory, we need art. Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel did not forget their past. Their works allow no one to forget it, ever.

Dear friends.

20 August 1991 and its outcome would have been impossible without the dissenters, the so-called dissidents. In a few days, it will be already 20 years from their most well-known demonstration in Hirvepark. Some of them came to Hirvepark with a towel rolled in their sleeve and a toothbrush in their pocket. They were already familiar with deportation and repressions. They were prepared for a second – in some cases a third – trip to Siberia. The fate of Enn Tarto, Mart Niklus, Lagle Parek and others was not history, which it was advisable to forget, but a reality.

20 August 1991 would have been impossible without the Popular Front and the Citizens' Committees, and the compromise between the leaders of those two popular movements. Voting for this agreement, the members of the Supreme Council did their duty to the state and the people of Estonia.

This was self-evident. This step had to be taken. Because the people of Estonia demanded it.

Dear friends, members of artists' unions.

The people of Estonia, who had lived under the occupying regime, needed an awakening. That role could not be played by the leaders of the Estonian SSR. And the voices of the dissidents had been silenced.

And yet there were those in Estonia who held up our fortitude, who exhorted us to sing and to demand our due together.

Those were the people who carried the idea of independence that had been taken from us, who retained our inherent values. In literature and art, on the scene, in the music and on the Song Festival grounds. Often furtively, covertly, between the lines. As if talking about something

else. But the people understood, and found encouragement.

Until, in April 1988, the artists' unions came together and said it right out. They said, in the words of the poet Hando Runnel, that the Soviet Union was a colonial empire. They said, in the words of the artist Heinz Valk, that there was no such thing as a half-independence.

The Soviet power had no means to challenge the appeal of the spiritual leaders. Except brutal military force, whose final threats accompanied the restoration of Estonia's freedom in August 16 years ago.

You, Estonian artists, were at the forefront of life, you opened our eyes. As we know, you have withdrawn by now. You are not vociferous participants in the process of "establishing the paternity" of our independence. You do not emphasise your central, even critical role in the restoration of our statehood. For many of you, it was just another step on a path chosen earlier, taken in a more active and visible manner.

Thank you for that, and I wish you stamina in keeping the people's spirit fresh.

And now my appeal to young artists. Our freedom, our being part of Europe and our participation in world culture does not mean that we could take refuge in the narrow tower of our own personal worries, interests and pleasures. Our civic freedoms, and especially our artist's independence, must be defended every day, every moment. We must approach and transgress the set boundaries, because this is what makes creativity possible.

Just as our creative artists, by perceiving and transgressing the boundaries – as citizens and as individuals – helped to restore Estonian statehood.

I bow deeply to you, creative artists, and to all the other supporters of that cause.

Thank you.