

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Dear friends!

I wish to thank you for this invitation, as I could address many among you, if not all of you, also as “companions in fortune and misfortune”.

It has been also my fortune to live abroad as an Estonian, but now I have been back in my country in 15 years. Chance – or fortune, as you wish – also once brought me to Canada, or more exactly, to Vancouver, where I worked in 1981–1984.

And I will never forget the Jõekäärü summer cottage near Eudora, which I visited on several occasions in my childhood, and where I also experienced the start of true life: my first love.

My first time at the Forest University was, in my opinion, the start of my intellectual approach to the „Estonian cause”. Before that, Estonia, Estonians and all related matters were something I had to do as a child born of Estonian parents, but at Kotkajärve in August 1971, everything changed – into exciting, inspiring thoughts, into an academic subject of research.

For Estonians, Canada has a special significance, as this is the home of the second largest Estonian community in the world – at least 25,000 people.

You are a respected, successful and influential community in Canada, and your role in preserving the Estonian spirit outside Estonia has been significant.

Furthermore – your material, but especially spiritual support helped the people of Estonia to fight for their independence almost 20 years ago. With your support, Estonia has developed vigorously, become a wealthier and happier place. I thank you on behalf of the Republic of Estonia for your help and your support.

Canada has been a good and safe home for the Estonians who ended up here. We can see this when looking at the Estonian churches, the Estonian school, the Estonian newspaper, the busy social and cultural life and the number of youth organisations. It was my genuine pleasure, for instance, to accept the proposal to be honorary patron of the Toronto film festival Estdocs 2007.

Friends.

Ever since Estonia’s independence was restored, many Estonians have returned from Canada to the land of their ancestors. There are several ex-colleagues of mine from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: the Prime Minister’s Counsellor in Foreign Affairs Kyllike Sillaste-Elling, Mart Laanemäe, Ambassador to several countries, Andres Kasekamp, Head of the Foreign Policy Institute, and Toivo Klaar, Head of the Tallinn representation of the European Commission. For a shorter period, also Siiri Oder, Toomas Orav, and Toomas McConnon worked in Estonia – the latter is probably one of the most talented people with whom I have ever had the honour of working together.

Yet also other Canadian Estonians have been helpful in building up Estonia: Ülo Isberg, the

Captain of the Estonian House in Toronto, who even volunteered to spend six months in Iraq as an Estonian officer, and whose excellent command of foreign languages considerably helped the rest of the world to understand what Estonians were doing in Baghdad.

There are other examples, from quite different areas of life – Madis Jürima, a second-generation Estonian from Canada, who applied for the restitution of Luua manor park that his grandfather had received as recognition of the courage shown in the War of Freedom. The love for trees lasted through generations and Madis became the landscape architect of the Royal Botanical Gardens here in Toronto. Yet when he regained the ancestral park, Madis moved to Luua, bought another hundred hectares of land and founded Estonia's largest and most successful forest school. Today, a major part of the new oak and lime alleys in Estonian cities and settlements come from Madis Jürima's Karukäpa Forest School.

Let us keep in mind that all those I have listed were born in Canada after the war. They resolved to come to their country, to build up Estonian state. Without them, Estonia would be much poorer spiritually and intellectually.

Some more examples: Mehis Kivilo, owner of a travel agency, Elmar Tampõld, builder of cultural bridges, Erich Rannu, entrepreneur, as well as architects Henno Sillaste and Tõnu Altosaar and of course Maret Truuvert, founder of the first modern dental clinic in Pärnu, who took care of dozens of Estonian officers studying at Borden.

In other words, there are quite a few Canadian Estonians who have established new close ties with Estonia. I am happy for them. I will not say: all Estonians, come home! That would be an over-simplification. Still, I recommend everyone to consider whether moving to Estonia, in your case, would be a probability.

The matter that I am actually inviting you to consider, to debate in your paper and your society meetings, and among your friends, is the relation of the Canadian Estonians to their country now that Estonia is free, now that Estonia is democratic. After seventeen hard years, when welfare and safety have been accomplished by hard work, on our fourth year of full membership in the European Union and NATO.

Estonia is your country; it is our country, the country of our ancestors. You do not need an invitation to come home. Perhaps a little encouragement from time to time.

Yet nevertheless – if you cannot come – we need your thoughts and inspiration. We know what can be accomplished if all Estonians all over the world work together.

I assure you that Estonia's course is clear and that we shall not abandon our choices, whose keywords are the European Union and NATO. My recommendation to you is that instead of the too-often-heard concerned question What are they doing in Moscow? you ask a question much more important for modern Estonia, which is: What are they doing in Brussels? and What are we doing in Brussels?

It is very important for Estonia to be at the heart of Europe. We belong there politically and

culturally, but we must also belong there spiritually and mentally.

I know that many of you follow the daily events in Estonia with interest. The news of the last few months may have caused you worry, made you ask: what has happened to Estonia's success story, if the economic growth of the first quarter is only 0.4 per cent and the government has to cut down the expenses in the state budget?

Just before my departure from Estonia, I listened to the radio and happened to hear a question: what shall we do if the economic growth is no longer as fast as it was a year ago?

Yesterday, when I arrived at my hotel in Toronto and listened to the radio, I heard the newsreader ask: "What are we going to do with the slowdown in the Canadian economy?"

We can only conclude that similar problems are currently being addressed all over the world.

In my opinion, nothing horrible has happened to Estonia as a success country. Estonia's economy has entered a new phase, where the former development advantages – comparatively cheap labour compared to the EU countries, and the considerable increase of our credibility after our accession to the EU – have exhausted themselves.

Estonia is no longer a cheap labour country. We all have longed for Estonia to become a successful country with wealthy people! Estonia is well on her way. Last year, Estonia's GDP was larger than that of Portugal. A country that was a European Union and NATO member already in 1990, when Estonia was still under the Soviet occupation. Still, as we are moving towards European welfare, we cannot continue as a cheap labour country. The structure of Estonian economy must be rearranged. This is the new phase we have reached today.

This is a typical economic cycle, which currently has reached the cooling phase; and as an open economic space, Estonia is sensitive to all such fluctuations. The economic growth figures from recent years are awe-inspiring – more than 10% a year – and such rapid growth was bound to end some day.

I am an optimist and believe in the Estonians' ability to cope with a slower growth, make the right decisions and live more frugally. In the past 20 years, we have proved this several times. Otherwise, it would seem possible to increase the gross national product per capita about 30 times in mere 17 years. That all this cannot continue at the same rate is obvious to anyone who has lived a little longer in an economically developed country.

Security – Estonia's greatest problem of all times – is another important issue. This is why we all struggled – we in Estonia and you over here – to bring Estonia to NATO. We made it. Being in NATO, we must realise that we have obligations to NATO as a collective security structure. This means that if we wish that others would help us in need, we also must help other NATO members.

This is the reason why both Estonian and Canadian soldiers are in Afghanistan, in the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar. We are steadfast and shall stay there as long as NATO

does. We did not become NATO members to enjoy the alliance's security guarantees. We are in NATO because we are prepared to share common responsibility and be allies.

Dear friends.

Estonia is doing well. We are wealthier than ever before. We feel safer than ever before. More and more children are born to Estonian families every year. More good new literature is published – more in fact than those busy with both work and family life have time to read or can afford to buy. Estonian film-makers are strewn with prizes on international festivals. Our sportsmen bring medals from top contests.

Estonia is big. I don't know if you can find Estonia in every port of the world, as Ernest Hemingway once wrote. But Estonia is and will continue to be firmly present in Canada. Estonia is here. And this is a very warm and cosy feeling.

Thank you for this warm welcome, and my best wishes for success in all your doings!