

As I turn into our street by the 'no through road' sign and drive along towards the farm, I gaze at the flourishing fields either side. Last year, those on the right were brimming with snow peas; those on the left were a sea of oats. I remember that they were adorned with cornflowers, too. Now, in June, it's too early to tell what this year will bring. I drive on, past a painstakingly well-kept cottage, beneath whose carefully painted sign – which reveals the property's name to be 'Vaike-Viraku' – is a hanging basket of the most beautiful flowers. Before I reach our farm I pass two more properties: the wonderfully secluded Sügavoru, restored of late by an enthusiastic band of young men; and Kägara, perched on a hill with wonderful lake views. The latter is so well hidden that not even the Soviet soldiers charged with deporting the family that lived there could find them. As such, we have at least one set of neighbours – for whom, like Toomas, 2013 will mark the passing of 250 years since their forebears first came here. It almost sounds like a fairytale, doesn't it? And yet there would probably only be one property left standing here, in our little idyll, if we hadn't taken the somewhat unexpected decision ten years ago to move to the country.

Today you can get to our farm by bike or by bus, but as recently as 2003 things weren't that simple. A couple of times each year, in spring and autumn, the way to the farm would become an impassable mire, and your only hope of getting home would be across the fields in a 4WD. At the time, Sügavoru stood empty, bereft even of doors and windows, and the only future anyone could see for the sightless shell of a home was almost certain ruin. The old lady who had lived at Kägara for so many years had left, and her daughter's family were preparing to sell the property. Overgrown and abandoned to the elements, the area seemed one unlikely to enjoy any prospects as somewhere people would want to live. Even driving past from the nearby town of Abja-Paluoja, visitors from abroad wondered at the place – at the rack and ruin of it, as if the war had only just happened. True, the area wasn't exactly one that was exactly itself as a tourist destination: there was nowhere to eat, let alone anywhere to spend the night. It was the doleful face of the once proud region of Mulgimaa fading to black.

If nothing else, the recent census showed one thing very clearly: Estonia's population is on the decline, and rural areas are being hardest hit. Larger towns and cities are drawing more and more people to them. This gave some people the ammunition they needed to again tout the idea of a city state based in Tallinn, with the rest of the country shackled to it like some national park named 'Estonia' for the sake of it. Empty and abandoned. But is that what we want? A survey conducted by the daily newspaper Postimees a few weeks ago revealed that the majority of Estonians would prefer to live in the country – so said 52% of respondents in any case. And the places that are attracting the most people in this day and age are in fact where just 13% of people want to be living. So why is there such an enormous gap between what we want and what we settle for? Is it just that we lack the courage? Could well be.

When we moved to the country, most of our friends said "Oh, we'd love to do the same, but... well, it's just too big a step. We're not ready for it. What about work? What about family? What if you need a doctor? What about schools?" Indeed, we asked ourselves the very same questions. But what, in the end, makes more sense – to spend your whole life regretting the fact you live amidst the noise and grime of the city, with its mad traffic, and shelving your dreams of peace and quiet? Is sending your kids to some supersized school where the students, at an ever younger age, are complaining of constant headaches and other health issues, really better than sending them to a small school somewhere in the country? And how often do you need to call a doctor out, or rush to the emergency room, even when you live right next door to the central hospital? Granted, the one thing our green and golden fields may not boast is an abundance of career choices, but that's when you take the opportunity that's open to everyone: making work for yourself; creating your own job.

If you look around our part of the world today, it's clear that the war didn't end yesterday. In fact, far from it being littered with depressing reminders of the past, there is very little that calls to mind those lost years. All the land around has been carefully cultivated, and the local farmers would happily tend more. When we started rebuilding our farm, another family, from Abja, were inspired to turn their dream into reality. We spent a year building and buying materials together. The 'Mulgi Kõrts' tavern has now been happily operating for a number of years, and has become one of the most popular (and certainly most stylish) places to eat in the area. The lady of the family – who had been retrenched – also chose to set herself up in a new job and fulfil one of her dreams by opening her own bakery. And although she might not be exporting anything, the bakery's grown and grown, and now has five other employees. A single, courageous step leads to the next, and each one inspires more and more people.

When the lights started shining through the windows of a night on our farm at Ärma ten years ago, the family who owned Kägara chose in favour of the countryside, too. The daughter, a glass artist currently studying in Germany, is planning to set up her studio on the hill overlooking the lake. And the stout little letterbox and delightful sign hanging by the road that leads up to Sügavoru show that it only takes that one bold step to bring an entire village to life, and to make an entire corner of the country a happy place to live again. That's something at least half of all Estonians long for. They just need a little push to be as decisive, as courageous and as selfless. So let's get to work!