

## ***My Estonia: Passport forgery, meat jelly eaters and other stories***

by Justin Petrone

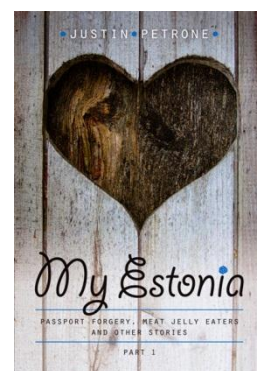
2009. PetronePrint. <http://petroneprint.ee>. 367 pps.

Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [www.diverosophy.com](http://www.diverosophy.com)

Justin Petrone, the protagonist and author of *My Estonia* is probably one of those people whom our intercultural colleague Greg Madison (see: <http://www.amazon.com/End-Belonging-stories-psychology-relocation/dp/1449534163>) would call “existential migrants,” a twenty-something who leaves home in search of real life, true self, and what-comes-next. Justin finds love, life and a new world in Estonia with journalist girlfriend Epp who becomes wife and eventually business partner.

The book is a delightful, often humorous collection of stories of the anguish of decision-making, leaps into the void and the discovery of everyday life via the mundane challenges of settling into a new culture. For me it was also rich in insights into a different generation. It is an enlightening resource for a kind of by-the-way acquisition of cultural knowledge, given in this case the author’s US American self and his adopted life in Estonia. It’s real, it’s messy, it’s inspiring.

Justin and Epp, who originally met at a journalism conference in Finland, have since gone into the publishing business—hence this book. They first focused on Estonian writers, but this was only the start of a series of books, where various authors describe their life and adventures as expats in one specific place, for example New York, Paris, Alaska, Spain, and Argentina. If this first volume is anything to go by, this is precisely the kind of literature that we need to learn from and be able to put into the hands of young expats going abroad, whether called, sent or simply off on their (next) adventure. Mostly the kind of event, experiences and stories found in this book are the matter of less well told and fragmented blogs, where it is hard to see the developmental thread of acculturation sometimes desired, but often with a bit of kicking and screaming.



The book’s stories are concatenated into a sort of running autobiography, graced by interesting culturally conflicted moments of meeting, eating, cheating and heating, encounters with the law, bureaucracy and moments of flirting with and flouting the system. The volume’s middle is graced by a generous collection of colorful photos that help the reader position the characters, the environment and the narratives. The caption of the last photo—of the author seated in nature—is in fact most telling about the book itself, “Over one year, so much happened in this tiny land that it stopped being foreign. Estonia and I became intimately acquainted. In the end, I came to love it, both for its beauty and its ugliness.”

You can take a closer look at the series at [http://petroneprint.ee/my\\_estonia.php](http://petroneprint.ee/my_estonia.php). Interesting reads all, I suspect, and perhaps for some of you other existential migrants their publishing venture might be an opportunity to tell your story! More excitingly, Epp has also written a book called *My America* which I am now itching to read.

In his novel, *The Gates of The Forest*, Elie Wiesel noted that, "God created people because God loves stories." Others’ well-told stories such as those in *My Estonia* are often a good invitation to reflect on, learn from, share, and fall in love with our own adventure, a strong antidote to the dislocation and so called “culture shock” experienced when expatriation challenges our sense of personal continuity.