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# EVERYTHING IS WONDERFUL



Memories of  
a Collective Farm in Estonia

SIGRID RAUSING

## Everything is Wonderful: Memories of a Collective Farm in Estonia

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*Just like it was taken for granted that houses could be abandoned and slowly decay, so it was taken for granted that people died in prisons, and that it was possible that no-one would really ever know the cause of death. This is the nature of totalitarianism.*

In 1993-94 Sigrid Rausing completed her anthropological fieldwork on the peninsula of Noarootsi, a former Soviet border protection zone in Estonia. Abandoned watch towers dotted the coast line, and the huge fields of the Lenin collective farm were lying fallow, waiting for claims from former owners, fleeing war and Soviet and Nazi occupation. Rausing's conversations with the local people touched on many subjects: the economic privations of post-Soviet existence, the bewildering influx of western products, and the Swedish background of many of them. In *Everything Is Wonderful* Rausing reflects on history, political repression, and the story of the minority Swedes in the area. She lived and worked amongst the villagers, witnessing their transition from repression to freedom, and from Soviet neglect to post-Soviet austerity.

## Everything is Wonderful: Memories of a Collective Farm in Estonia Details

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Sigrid Rausing**

## From Reader Review *Everything is Wonderful: Memories of a Collective Farm in Estonia* for online ebook

### Suzanne says

In the early 1990's, Sigrid Rausing did her anthropological fieldwork in Estonia, studying the Estonians attempts to reconcile post-colonialist privatization with their Soviet, collective farming past. *Everything is Wonderful*

There was much to like about this book, given the author's interest in the people and their past. Estonia is a land that isn't mentioned much in the books I read, so this memoir was a welcome look into a country previously closed off to Westerners.

I found much of her writing depressing, though. The Soviet history left little for these people to build upon. Everything seemed to be cold, outdated and dirty. They had little access to goods from the modern world - mostly because it required money they didn't have. Even with the attempts of former Swedish/Estonians to resettle, the future looked bleak. Still, I'm glad to have gotten a glimpse into this world.

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### Jenny (Reading Envy) says

In 1940, Estonia was formally annexed by the Soviet Union. Despite a brief blurb of Nazi occupation, Estonia was changed into a world of collective farms (around 20, give or take, decreasing as they merged). While the title of this book may lead the reader to expect the isolated life of a collective farm, it is more of a play on the idea of an entire nation reduced to the philosophy of collectivism (fully realized in 1949) and its aftermath (ending in the early 1990s.)

Sigrid Rausing did her anthropological fieldwork for her PhD in the village of Pürksi in 1993-1994. She had grown up in Sweden and was fluent in Swedish, something which would help bridge the gap considerably since Estonian was such a difficult language to master. In anthropology (and folklore, which is where I started out), fieldwork requires a year *at minimum* to establish a true insider perspective of a place and a people through participant observation. This means that Rausing was not just staying in a ritzy hotel and taking notes on her days off; she was living with everyday Estonians (sometimes at personal risk to herself) and caught up in the same mundanity of daily life that everyone else was seeing.

This memoir has the benefit of time. Her original fieldwork was published in an academic book much closer to the time of her research; this looks back at the same information and the same time with the benefit of personal and historical perspective. Much of what I learned about Estonia's history was not known to her when she was entrenched in the fieldwork in the 1990s.

The portrayal of post-collectivism Estonia is pretty bleak. The Swedes (formerly making up 7/8 of Estonia's population) fled from the Russians. The Jews fled from the Nazis. The Germans fled from the Russians. In the end, the villages are sparse and many of the family farms are left unclaimed. Items of cultural importance - songs, stories, histories - were lost or morphed into less reliable sources. While it is interesting to study a culture at such a significant time of tradition, it almost seemed like she had very little to study! There is a sense of loss, of emptiness, and ennui throughout the retelling. Still, it doesn't suffer from unwieldy academic language, and I think this type of book allowed her to talk more about the characters she interacted with, rather than reducing them into archetypes and themes.

*I received a copy of this through NetGalley in exchange for an honest review. Books from Estonia are hard to find, so I was happy to find this!*

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### **An says**

I enjoyed this book very much, both for the insights in the lives of the Estonians trying to get by right after privatisation of their collective farm, as for the glimpse behind the scenes of the anthropological fieldwork that led to the book, from going flat to flat to carry out a survey, to accidentally setting fire to the landlord's kitchen.

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### **Hana says**

All that I know of Swedish culture I've learned from Ikea catalogs. In Ikea everything is wonderful: clean, spare, priced for the perfectly egalitarian world. When you take, say, a cabinet home from Ikea you have to assemble it yourself. What looked simple suddenly becomes puzzling, an exercise that leaves you rather humbled at your own cluelessness, at your own clumsiness.

This is a book written by an expat Swede now living in Britain remembering her anthropological graduate research field year (1993-1994) spent in the once Swedish region of post-Soviet Estonia. Rausing was studying the remnants or re-membering of Swedish culture in a land emerging from totalitarianism. I suspect you are already a bit confused. Entirely appropriate. So am I. Perhaps clarity (or an Ikea chair) will emerge as I read on.

Okay. I think I've almost got this figured out. (view spoiler)

Part of the problem with Sigrid Rausing's book is that it doesn't have proper instructions (or maybe I'm just not bright enough). She jumps around a lot--from her own childhood memories of Sweden, to historical information about the Holocaust in Estonia, to scenes in 1993 that too often go unexplained and uninterpreted. Why (in a region with almost no Swedes--since they were all evacuated in 1944) are Estonian schoolchildren marching to the piano music of Swedish films? Rausing mentions that it's a "way of building Swedishness"--but that raises more questions than it answers. Perhaps the school had something to do with various sporadic Swedish charitable efforts to revive post-Soviet Estonia, but it was never clear to me. Another problem: characters come and go in rather random ways, or are reintroduced chapters later with no little clues that help the reader remember who they are. The overall effect for me was frustration.

The frustration was made worse because when she's on form Sigrid Rausing writes beautifully.

There are wonderfully atmospheric descriptions of the land, ravished and then abandoned by the Soviets. The Noarootsi Peninsula, where Rausing worked as an English teacher and did her field studies, was once a military border zone with watchtowers that "still stood, stripped and weathered, not yet historical landmarks, but no longer structures of authority. They all had that indeterminate Soviet look, between incompleteness and dilapidation: white brick badly put together, concrete poured on the ground to form haphazard paths, woodwork rotting on the platforms, signs in Russian rusting on the floors, long since stripped of wire and anything else of value."

Perhaps the cheeriest place in town was a basement bar named Gorbyland in ironic commemoration of Mikhail Gorbachev's unsuccessful effort to curb Soviet alcoholism. Gorbyland "was small and cosy, selling Western chocolates, ice cream, cigarettes, and packets of coffee as well as Russian and Estonian vodka, sangria, Soviet liqueurs, and beer...That night there were about ten men and three boys there, silently watching a Russian videotape of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, cheaply and probably illegally dubbed by one bored voice making only the slightest pretense of drama." Overall, the impression is of relentless cold, grubbiness and poverty. And drunkenness. Alcoholics are everywhere; drinking seems the only way one gets through life. Everyone stinks of unwashed bodies and clothes, booze and cigarettes. It was seriously, deeply depressing.

Things improve in the spring with its "intoxicating sense of opening up, and the realisation that what had preceded it had been a state of near hibernation. The outside again became a public and noisy meeting place after the dark and snow-bound silence of winter. The summer was relentless in its own way; a long heatwave of glaring sun and dry wind day after day." And flies. The kind that go for your eyes and nostrils. And great clouds of mosquitoes.

Altogether Post-Soviet Estonia was about as far from an Ikea catalog as one can get and perhaps a dose of Swedishness would not go amiss. As of 2015, Ikea has yet to expand to Estonia although things are looking up and *fake* Ikea furniture is now available [lawsuit pending]. Meanwhile, I was glad to finish the book and felt terribly down for two days after. Three and a half stars.

Content rating PG for way, way too much drinking and a dreary scene in a topless bar.

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### **Meg Marie says**

Both an intriguing history and a beautifully written memoir. I feel like I learned a lot from this book about the history of Estonia, and my only wish is that she had more discussions of the actual people that she met. I feel like I got her thoughts and less about what her experience was like, somehow.

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### **Janette McMahon says**

An interesting look at post Soviet Estonia, particularly one particular area that was heavily Swedish throughout history. A readable non fiction book that I would recommend if you have an interest in social anthropology.

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### **Luke says**

Mix of history and personal account of a year spent interviewing and working in a post-Soviet rural town. Perhaps the dissertation that this book came out of gives more of the tales of the residents pasts and experiences, but this account was hampered/meandering as a memoir for my interests.

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## **Tuck says**

a re-cap of authors phd in social anthropology. estonia, a kind of anvil where the hammer of ussr, nazi germany, bolshis, stalin and about anybody else wanting to hammer some serfs, has had a hell of a history, and post ussr, out on the west coast, the collective farms were dead. the estonian-swedes evacuated in wwii never came back and like any poor, traumatized farming area was having a hard hard time dealing with the 'trasition". author rausing re-visits the people and places she came to know in early 1990's (but before the economic explosion of the noughties, and subsequent bursting of said bubble, and the slow come-back of 20teens) . so the litany: poor health care, poor transportation (but hells bells, bettern oklahoma), poor farmers, poor outlooks, and she tries to talk to lots of folks about history (lots know very little) , farming, fishing, swedish memories, death camps, etc.

a nice look a back o beyond estonia. has beautiful maps, no pics wha?!, and helpful timeline.

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## **Deniss Ojastu says**

Huvitav vaade Eesti elule 1990-te alguses Läänest tulnud antropoloogi poolt, kes elas kohalikega Noarootsis umbes aasta aega. Kõige huvitavam oli minu jaoks eestirootslaste ajalugu läbi sajandite, samuti isiklikud autobiograafilised seigad autori elust (nii-öelda seiklused post-sovjetlikus Eestis).

Samas aga jäi minu arvates osa tema kui antropoloogi tööst tegemata - ta ei mõistnudki lõpuni kohalike inimeste ideaale, rõõme ja unistusi. Ta jäi natuke pinnapealsele tasandile - kirjeldatud ja läbi mõtestatud sai ennekõike see, mis jäi silma ehk materiaalne vaesus, alkoholism, abiorganisatsioonide töö, Lääne kaupade järk-järguline tulek ja muud nähtused, mis olid 1990-ndatel üle Eesti hästi nähtavad.

Raamatu suur voorus on ausus ja kirjelduste täpsus.

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## **Tarmo says**

Kui ma 1998 Tallinnast Haapsallu tööle läksin, vaatas mõni mind nagu vaimuhaiget. Sigrid Rausing tegi aga mitu astet kõvema hüppe. 1994. aastal Londonist Pürksi aastaks Noarootsi kooli võõrkeelt õpetama. Praegu on ta üks Suurbritannia rikkamaid naisi, jagab oma heategevusfondi kaudu iga aasta u kakskümmend miljonit laiali. Siis oli lihtsalt Tetrapaki kaasasutaja laps. Noarootsis tegi ta oma antropoloogiaalase lõputöö ja selle kõrvalt hiljem selle raamatu siin.

Raamat on Noarootsis päris palju võnkeid tekitanud. Need, kellele see ei meeldi, leiavad, et Rausing kujutab siinset elu liiga mustades toonides ja kohati on võõrustajate vastu lihtsalt ebaviisakas. Minu arust see ei ole nii. Ka mulle tundub ka see aeg hoopis kenam kui Rausingu raamatus, aga samas lõpetasin ma sel ajal keskkooli ja alustasin iseseisvat elu - elu oleks helge ja ilus tundunud ilmselt igasugustes oludes. Mäletan oma esimesi kuid võõras ja väikses Haapsalus. 1998 oli juba jupp maad uhkem kui 1994, aga tunnen Rausinguga ikka hingegulust.

Ja kirjutatud on see hästi, lakooniliselt, jahedalt ja täpselt.

Igal juhul on lahe mõelda, et nii mõjukas tegelane tuupis 20 aastat tagasi keset talve Pürksi kolhoosikeskuse

maja sooja vee ja korraliku kütteta korteri eesti keelt (õppiski ära), jõi viina mahlaga, käis üle jäättee Haapsalus kinos ja paarutus rattaga mööda poolsaart ringi.

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### **Mandy says**

In 1993 Sigrid Rausing spent a year in a remote village in Estonia working on her PhD, an anthropological study of a country and a people who had just gained independence from the recently collapsed Soviet Union and were caught between their communist past and capitalist future. Purksi was her home for a year and she lived and worked amongst the villagers, witnessing the sometime difficult transition from Soviet neglect to a very different way of life. She was never just an observer, but an active participant in the villagers' daily life and as a result the book is a very evocative study of ordinary people living in extraordinary times. The people she makes friends with, the daily grind of finding heat and food without adequate electricity and water, the lack of money, the severe weather – all are vividly portrayed and chronicled in this blend of travelogue, memoir and anthropological study. Rausing maintains an excellent balance between writing about her own thoughts and feelings and those of her subjects, and the result is an absorbing and enlightening portrait of a small society in its historical and cultural setting. A very enjoyable, entertaining and informative read.

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### **Riley says**

I'm a sucker for anything Soviet/post-Soviet, so this book started with a point or two with me. My older sister is an anthropologist, as well, and I found Sigrid Rausing's musings on some of the fundamental questions of that profession interesting.

From the book:

"All we know are clichés. Fieldwork can get you beyond the clichés, but only if you stay with the people for so long that you almost want to just stay forever. Then you have to leave, before you tip over the edge and go native."

Or, "Not long after this, I got sick. The room, my room, felt drained of colour, and I felt sick of the place as well as in body, angry and frustrated. I wanted, suddenly, normal life and intelligent conversation. I felt the idiocy of talking in a language I knew only the barest bones of, the idiocy of never understanding properly, or saying what I deeply meant or thought. This was either the low point of my fieldwork or a brief return to sanity from the practice of anthropological fieldwork. Or perhaps it was both."

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### **Alan says**

Actually, it sounds like everything was pretty miserable.

Philanthropist Sigrid Rausing is perhaps best known as the publisher of *Granta Magazine* and *Granta Books*. In 1993-94 she was completing work on her anthropology PhD by doing fieldwork while also teaching English in the village of Purksi in the parish of Noarootsi in northwestern Estonia. The PhD paper became the basis of her 2004 book *History, Memory, and Identity in Post-Soviet Estonia: The End of a Collective*

Farm and the experience itself became the basis for this 2014 memoir which came out in paperback in early 2016 as *Everything is Wonderful: Memories of a Collective Farm in Estonia*.

Estonia had declared its renewed independence from Soviet Russia on August 20, 1991 but it took a further 3 years until August 31, 1994 for the occupation troops to leave. The early post-Soviet years were difficult as the new democracy broke with the centralized Soviet system and worked towards a free-market economy. The system of Soviet collectivized farms had never been a success under the totalitarian regime which led to shortages of food and market goods being supplemented by the black market.

The area of Noarootsi is unique in Estonia due to its history of a Swedish speaking minority. Rausing billets at various private homes while learning about the local history and dealing with the local populace. Some of the alcoholics are a bit menacing, but the overall tone of the book is melancholic. It gives a picture of a people failed by an earlier system and in a limbo while a future tries to begin. The history of the area and of odd trivia such as the founding of the Swedish village Gammalsvenskby in the Ukraine is covered quite well.

Trivia note: One of the unnamed Estonian prog-rock albums that Rausing hears is the group In Spe's "Typewriter Concerto" written by its then leader Alo Mattiisen:

*... whilst Ivar played particular pieces of Estonian music from the mid 1980's for me. Grave avant-garde ensembles, some based on folk songs, most with no lyrics. One famous one was dedicated to the typewriter, and featured a typewriter as an instrument, subtly antibureaucratic, and hence anti-Soviet. "That was the time for Estonian music," he said. "Now it's all in English, all the same."*

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### **Paul Miller says**

If you've lived your entire life in the US, there's so much stability we take for granted - public safety, personal ownership, free speech, free elections, etc. Imagine that in your lifetime, you were assured of nothing, really. This is the story of an anthropologist spending a year in rural Estonia just after the fall of the Soviet Union. Poverty mixed with national and political ambiguity - horrid memories to deal with. Well-written, and thought provoking, but definitely a niche-read.

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### **Kirsty says**

I chose Sigrid Rausing's *Everything is Wonderful: Memories of a Collective Farm in Estonia* as part of my Around the World in 80 Books challenge. I was quite looking forward to it, particularly as I have included very little non-fiction on my list. It seemed as though it would offer something a bit different, and whilst a lot of the themes are similar to some of the other Eastern European literature which I read before it, the very fact that it is a memoir makes it all the more fascinating.

Between 1993 and 1994, Sigrid Rausing, a Swedish anthropology student working towards her PhD at University College London, travelled to Estonia to undertake fieldwork. She stayed in a former Soviet Union border protection zone named Noarootsi. She met and interviewed many different people for her project. The book's blurb proclaims that 'Rausing's conversations with the local people touched on many subjects: the economic privations of post-Soviet existence; the bewildering influx of Western products; and the Swedish background of many of their people.' In this memoir, published twenty years after her fieldwork ended, Rausing reflects upon history and political repression, and the way in which the wider world affected the

individuals whom she met.

Of the aims of her PhD, Rausing writes that she wanted to explore the themes of history and memory in Estonia: 'I was there to study the local perception and understanding of historical events in the context of the Soviet repression and the censorship of history.' The collective farm which she stayed and worked on folded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and was 'officially closed down in February 1993, following a vote by all the members in which just one person voted for its continued existence.' Rausing lived and worked in the village, immersing herself as much as she was able into gatherings and the like, and trying her best to learn the very difficult Estonian language.

One gets a feel for Rausing's surroundings almost as soon as the book begins. She writes: 'The rest of the villages on the peninsula - bedraggled collections of grey wooden houses with thatched roofs, sometimes propped up by shoddy white brick - were like villages all over the Soviet Union at that particular time. Forgotten places sinking into quiet poverty.' Rausing gives many examples of the visible changes within Estonia following the breakdown of the Soviet Union, and the effects which poverty and strict rule had: 'Haapsalu was the nearest town to my prospective field site. It had been a spick-and-span little coastal town in the 1930s, a summer spa where people came for mineral mud baths. Now, the baths were long since gone, the paint on the beautiful wooden houses flaking and unkempt... The main street was wide and muddy, with many shops selling few things, and almost no cars.'

The most fascinating element of *Everything is Wonderful* is the way in which Rausing manages to be at once a participant and an outsider in Noarootsi. Because of her position, she is able to gather so many different perspectives on issues affecting Estonian people. She builds a full picture of life for those villagers and townsfolk 'forgotten' by the wider world, often lived in poverty: 'The people on the collective farm had little connection either with the land or with high culture. They just got by, day by day, enduring the uncertainty, the confusion, and the quiet fear: fear of unemployment, fear of Russia, fear of the future.' *Everything is Wonderful* is stark and bleak, but very human; it is at once enlightening and harrowing. Rausing's memoir is a fascinating and important piece of social history, told from a position of retrospect, but working from the notes which she collected whilst on her fieldwork trip.

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