

# The Role of the Baltic Knighthoods<sup>1</sup> to 1920

Keynote address by **Ernst Dietrich Baron von Mirbach**

on the occasion of a Members' Retreat organised by the Association of Baltic Knighthoods  
(Verband der Baltischen Ritterschaften) at Höhnscheid in 2016

If we make "Politics and Responsibility" our theme at this Retreat for Knighthood Members and the roles and functions of our Baltic Knighthoods up to and including 1920 are to be our context, then we must begin by establishing what we mean when we talk about *politics*.

No question, *politics* has many facets. We usually think of politics as the mechanism we use in communities to arrive at decisions that bind all its members. But, as Arnold Bergstraesser tells us, politics is also "*the art of leading groups of people towards well-ordered outcomes*". We could then say we use *politics* to give shape and direction to the goals we set and the outcomes we want, both in the public and in the private spheres. Possibly the pithiest description of *politics* in current literature is Thilo Sarrazin's formulation in his 2016 book, "Wishful Thinking". He sees: "*politics as the rules we follow to get along with one another within a framework of society and state, once we have moved past the good manners and the etiquette we usually reserve for our one-on-one relationships.*"

Beyond that, *politics* also serves as a vehicle for addressing our immediate environment and how to shape it. At a gathering for our Knighthood Youth in Riederau as far back as 1960, Hans Joachim Schoeps put it this way: "*not only must you have command of your subject matter, you must also be able to lead people.*" Our four Baltic Knighthoods<sup>2</sup> would have seen their role and function over the span of many centuries in much the same way. It was a challenge they mastered very successfully.

Despite a range of local differences that once mattered more than they do today, each of the four Knighthoods had much the same role and functions. With differences at best so slight, much the best way in former times to tell members of each Knighthood apart was in how they spoke and expressed themselves. Thus, a *Livland*<sup>3</sup> Knighthood member [a *Livländer*] speaking would always sound quite different from an *Estland* Knighthood member [an *Estländer*], and a *Kurland* Knighthood member [a *Kurländer*] would never sound like an *Oesel* Knighthood member [an *Öselaner*]. Such differences as there once were have now all but completely disappeared.

In a document dated 30 September 1252, King Christopher I of Denmark addressed his vassals in Estonia with the words: "*We acknowledge you all come together as one (universitate vestrae) and wish to inform you that...*" These words serve as a first acknowledgement of corporate identity and make the *Estland* Knighthood the oldest documented representative assembly among the quartet of Baltic Knighthoods and, for that matter, within Europe as a whole. Not long afterwards, in 1259, '*Estland's vassals all come together as one*' (*universitas vasallorum suorum per Estoniam consititua*)

---

<sup>1</sup> *Translator's Note (TN)* – The terms 'Knighthood' and 'noble corporation' may be used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> *TN* -The four Knighthoods are those of Livonia (*Livland*), Estonia (*Estland*), Kurland (sometimes also written in English as 'Courland') and Ösel. To avoid confusion, we will call them *Livland*, *Estland*, *Kurland* and *Ösel*.

<sup>3</sup> *TN* – For all intents and purposes, the territorial boundaries of the former Knighthoods match those of the former Provinces of the Russian Empire as well as the boundaries of the principalities and duchies formed after the dissolution of the Teutonic Order in 1561. In broad terms, the old *Estland* boundary corresponded to the upper half of today's Estonia, *Livland* comprised the bottom half of today's Estonia and the top half of today's Latvia, *Kurland* the bottom half of today's Latvia below the city of Riga, and *Ösel* is the Island of Saaremaa.

asked their monarch to confirm an agreement they had earlier reached with the Bishop of Reval (*Tallinn*). The lords of Harjumaa [*Harrien*], Virumaa [*Wierland*], Järvamaa [*Jerwen*] and Läänemaa [*Wiek*]<sup>4</sup>, were formally joined together into a corporation within the Principality of *Esthonia* [*Ehsten*], as it was then called, on 25 August 1584.

In the Duchy of Livland, corporate status was not achieved by the Knighthood until 1641. Ösel had a rather different history. Its bishop had become a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire in 1228 and its vassal families fused into a corporate body at around much the same time, mirroring the developments in Estland. The Island of Ösel [*Saaremaa*] was only absorbed into modern Estonia in 1920 and had previously always been part of what was known as Livland or Livonia. To remove any possibility for confusion, let us remember that the entire territory of what constitutes Estonia and Latvia today used to be called *Livland* before the final collapse of the Teutonic Order<sup>5</sup>.

The feudal arrangements in Ösel, and the corporate character of its vassal families, are, as already remarked, as old as the bishopric itself. Records show that, upon taking office, the first bishop was already making feudal grants of land to his vassals and that the Danish kings who succeeded the bishops as rulers confirmed those same feudal privileges on several occasions in the period that followed. While the Kurland Knighthood is not as ancient as the Estland Knighthood, it is both remarkable and distinguished for having the oldest known register of member families [the so-called *Matrikel*], which dates back to 1620<sup>6</sup>. The duchy of Kurland lasted for a full 234 years. All four of these Knighthood corporations continued as fully functioning, autonomous, governing entities until they were disbanded by the new states of Estonia and Latvia in 1920.

In his book, *Das Alte Kurland* [*the Kurland of Yesteryear*], that is still well worth reading, Kurland's Baron Hamilkar von Foelkersam, – not to be confused with his Livland cousin and namesake – wrote that “*The Baltic nobility in Kurland invariably achieved the outcomes it wanted because of the power it exercised, even if it was never ruler of the land it inhabited in any legal sense. It was able to lead because of its role administering the land.*” The Kurland Knighthood ranks as one of the most enduring of political institutions, lasting from 1562 until 1920.

This would suggest that *politics*, as a medium for shaping attitudes and events, is something distinct and separate from the context in which it operates. That should give us comfort, especially in the older generation, where the business of running a large estate is no longer our role and the most we can aspire to in most cases is to simply leading small teams of people in the less demanding and more ordinary workaday lives most of us now live. In that quite remarkably structured social and administrative milieu that was once the Baltic Provinces of Russia, those in the very highest circles of power in St Petersburg always knew that the Baltic nobility lived by its own special code of nobility that would not allow it to ignore the demands of local administration, and that it would always do the job of administering the provinces to a very high standard because that was what its code demanded [*der Adel zum Handeln verpflichtet war, und der Adel verpflichtete sich*]. Under their system of government, members of the nobility filled every office and discharged every role and function on a purely honorary, ie on an unpaid, basis. Peer recognition and respect, not financial gain, were the only rewards where so many jobs needed to be done. As Schoeps put it in a different

---

<sup>4</sup> TN – These four districts comprised the former Principality/Province of Estland. Their German names in brackets and italics appear after the Estonian names in use today.

<sup>5</sup> TN – ie in 1561.

<sup>6</sup> TN - The register was the Kurland Knighthood's own listing of all its noble land-owning families and expressed its corporate character. Only the noble families in this register, to the exclusion of all others, had a voice in the affairs of the newly created Polish duchy of Kurland and the right to fill all its significant government and administrative positions. NB - the nobility of other parts of the Polish kingdom enjoyed similar provisions.

context: “You were never chosen for what you might become, but for what you had already achieved.”

The nobility’s right of assembly was set down in Provincial Law [*das Provinzialrecht*] and para 227 of that Law provided that: “The Diet [*Landtag*] may consider and resolve all matters pertaining to the rights, interests and institutions of the Knighthood, as well as everything that affects the well-being of the province as a whole.” And who were these people with such a political role in shaping the future of the Provinces? They were the male members of all the families registered in the respective Province’s Knighthood rolls, who also owned manors in their respective Province. It was only these persons who were entitled to attend and vote in the provincial Diets conducted at least every three years. The voting rights attached to the manor and only the manor owner of the day was entitled to exercise them. It was up to the Diet to determine who would fill each honorary office and what functions would need to be performed. As already stated, all work was performed on an honorary basis. Only the top elected official in each Knighthood, specifically, the *Landmarschall* in Livland, the *Ritterschaftshauptmann* in Estland and the *Landesbevollmächtigte* in each of *Kurland* and *Ösel*, had access to a modest allowance to defray the costs of their many representational roles and responsibilities. These involved trips and stays in St Petersburg, as and when required, and they were always costly. In addition, each Knighthood also had a complement of salaried employees.

Holders of honorary positions had to be owners of a knightly manor [*Rittergut*] of not less than 300 hectares (or 300 *desiatins*<sup>7</sup>) in size. The minimum size requirement in Estonia was lower and fixed at just 150 *desiatins*, equating to about 163.5 hectares. Persons seeking to be admitted to Knighthood membership usually had to document their ownership of a manor of at least the required size, except in Livland and Ösel, where the strict size rule was firmly adhered to. The principle was that only those who owned land and helped shoulder the burdens and responsibilities of owning land were entitled to also share in the rights and privileges of making their voices heard in the running of the Province and to nominate for honorary positions.

The newly formed nations of Latvia and Estonia abolished the manor landholding system in its entirety in 1919/20. Every large landholding was summarily nationalised, irrespective of personal standing or the merits of each case. Nor could residual landholdings [*Restgut*] exceed 50 hectares in size. With one fell swoop, not only did the new nation states discard the very concept of manorial enterprise together with its economic underpinnings, they also made it impossible for the Knighthoods to continue serving in the way they had been doing for centuries. The purpose of this agrarian reform – an agrarian revolution would be a better name – was not so much about satisfying a supposed hunger for land on the part of its nationals, rather, it was about breaking German economic power once and for all. No account was taken of the fact that the Knighthoods had already volunteered to relinquish a full one-third of their members’ manor landholdings for new settlers – that quantum of land alone would have come to some three million hectares. Every German elite in town and country was equally affected by the nationalisation measures, which demonstrates just how strong the motivation then was to break German economic power. The result left every German institution of cultural significance, including every church and guild, similarly stripped bare. Dissolving the four Knighthoods by force was then the obvious final step.

Manor owners were required to attend every Diet until they reached 60 years of age. There were fines for non-attendance. In Kurland, given the long connection with Poland and in keeping with the parliamentary norms that had operated there, delegates [*Landboten*] were required to attend Diet meetings on two dates. Delegates in the other provinces were required to attend a full Diet meeting

---

<sup>7</sup> TN - *Desiatins* were a unit of land use measurement used in imperial Russia and the Baltic Provinces. One *desjatin* slightly exceeded one hectare in size.

[*Virillandtag*] on just one appointed date. If there was a need for Knighthood members in Kurland to convene between *Landtag* meetings, they had access to a provision for so-called ‘conferences of brothers’ [*Brüderliche Konferenzen*] that were also open to young members of the Knighthood, who were not also manor owners. After 1869 when the bar on non-nobles buying manors was lifted, non-noble manor owners were able to cast votes at Diet meetings in all but internal Knighthood matters. The number of honorary positions needing to be filled far exceeded the number of persons eligible and available to fill them. In Estonia in 1914 alone, there were some 185 honorary positions to fill at Provincial level and across all four of the districts that comprised the Province. If you include the honorary positions at local parish [*Kirchspiel*] level, the total number of honorary positions grows much larger. It comes as no surprise therefore that many a Knighthood member would find himself occupying more than one such post at the same time. To decline an elected office was a stain upon one’s honour and only those over the age of 60 years, or those who were suffering an incapacitating illness, or who were facing bankruptcy, could expect to be excused.

To take just one example, admittedly extreme, of just how onerous the burden of holding multiple offices at the same time could be, let us take the case of Baron Heinrich von Behr-Stricken in Kurland during the First World War. As one of the few who had remained in Kurland, Baron Behr was called upon to fill all of 23 honorary posts concurrently. The effort so exhausted him that he died soon after. *Consumed in the service of others - ‘in serviendo alienos consumor’*. To seek assistance from a central government instrumentality was no option for a Baltic German. It would have only increased the influence of central government, whether it be Russian, ducal, Polish or Swedish.

It would be fanciful and wrong to suppose that the Baltic Knighthoods were only motivated by high-minded ideals like charity and caring for the wellbeing of others, or that manor owners’ focus was only ever on improving the lot of their Estonian and Latvian peasants. Of course the Baltic Knighthoods subscribed to those ideals too, but not to the exclusion of every other consideration. Naturally, they also pursued their own interests and preoccupations. Owning a manor was never a sinecure, nor did it only deliver material benefits, it also came with many burdens and obligations.

If we want history to reflect accurately what happened in the past, then we must not shirk unpalatable facts, nor diminish and fudge unwelcome detail. Only if we report accurately and faithfully can we hope to be able to understand what might have motivated past players on the stage at any given moment in time. But we also need to be careful to judge actions within the context of their own time. Each time we take a fresh look at the events of the past and confront the foibles of human nature anew, we risk giving some supposed farsightedness and wisdom too much credit on the one hand, and being too quick to dismiss some supposed short-sightedness or flight of ego on the other. The history of the Knighthoods has its fair share of highs and lows. It is not without its share of blame for some of the things that went wrong. As we contemplate the many forks along the long road of Knighthood history, we might spare a thought for Kleo, the historians’ muse, who pauses to weigh all options carefully, before committing finally to one path or another.

In feudal times, including in Kurland, the return of service for those who had been granted manorial land in the form of a fief was to provide armed horsemen in times of war. A rule of thumb required one horseman for about every 20 *Haken*<sup>8</sup> of land. The return of service obligation later ceased. Notwithstanding that Russia’s nobility was tax exempt in Russia, and the Knighthood nobilities of the

---

<sup>8</sup> *TN* – Originally an areal measurement, *haken* became from the end of the 17th century a measure of the taxability of land used by the peasantry and could have slight differences in meaning from province to province. Both the quality and quantity of all land used for agricultural purposes was taken into account. See page 88 of Heide W Whelan’s, *Adapting to Modernity*, 1999 Böhlau Verlag, Köln.

Baltic States<sup>9</sup> were similarly tax-exempt, Baltic German manor owners nonetheless acknowledged the corporate responsibility that flowed from their right to tax themselves, and thus recognised their obligations to fund the cost of administering themselves [*Ladengelder*] and their Province [in the form of the so-called *Willigungen*]. They set the level of these twin contributions as required at their Diets every three years. The *Willigungen* were to defray the costs of the many and varied roles and functions the Knighthoods had accepted responsibility for, even though there was no obligation in law for them to perform them. This self-imposed taxation imposed a substantial burden upon Baltic German manor owners, who, for the most part, were not a wealthy group. Yet they remained steadfast in meeting their obligations, despite their incomes fluctuating with the harvests and the seasons. They saw it as a sacrifice made gladly for the good of their Province and the community.

Provincial Law determined how the self-taxing provisions would work. It specified that, for every manor with a vote in the *Landtag*, the manor's size would determine how large its basic contribution would need to be. The scale used made each *Haken* equivalent to around 300 Rubels of gross income. Those 300 Rubels in today's money would be worth around 5,000 Euros, taking into account the difficulty of estimating today's equivalents and how rough any calculation would necessarily be. In addition to those 300 Rubels per *Haken*, and pegged to the circumstances of the day, the Diet also required further payments for the *Willigungen*. Of course, in those days when the patriarchal system set the tone, the manor owner was also expected to care for his peasants' wellbeing and to cushion them through any misfortunes, such as fire, a failed harvest, pestilence or war. The prevailing sense of shared community and obligation towards those less fortunate was such that it was natural for manor lords to see themselves as mere links in the chain. That mindset and the willingness to shoulder responsibility for the good of the community persisted. It kept the few surviving German schools running despite difficult post-war conditions generally and with former manor owners barely subsisting on the small parcels of land they still owned and deprived of the financial security they had once had before manors were nationalised. It also made possible publishing the first genealogical handbooks of the Knighthood families and commissioning Heinz Pirang's immensely valuable three-volume compendium of the Baltic Manor [*Das Baltische Herrenhaus*].

As might be expected in the patriarchal world of former times, a degree of controlling and discipline often made itself felt in the paternalistic approach taken to caring for the welfare of others, resembling the approach many parents also took to bringing up their children during this time. Notwithstanding the generally caring and supportive behaviour manor owners usually exhibited, some instances are on record where the odd manor lord did behave like a petty tyrant and was sanctioned by his Knighthood as a result. Other manor owners always rejected such tyrannical behaviour in most firm terms. To illustrate just how thinking within Knighthood circles had been progressing over time, we could take the example of Princess Lieven in Kurland, whose letters from the years 1796-7 to the project manager building her palace at Mesothén [*Mezotne*] have survived. In those letters, she gives firm instructions that no repression or servitude should ever be applied to any peasant engaged in building her palace and that hiring more workers as needed should always be the preferred course. Princess Lieven's role at Court was educating the imperial children and overseeing their preparation for a proper role in adult life.

Within the Baltic nobility, the commitment to caring for the wellbeing of others and especially for those in need extended first to family and to those of one's own class. Those in need would thus not be overlooked. Nor did manor owners ever withhold hospitality from those who might be without means and who came from one's own social circle. Such needy persons were known as '*Krippenreiter*' and were welcome to stay as long as they liked. The same generous approach also suffused the many bequests and foundations that had been set up and run for the support of those

---

<sup>9</sup> AN - the term '*Baltic States*' [*Baltikum*] for the Baltic provinces only came into use during the World War I.

felt to be in need. Just two such bequests in Kurland are the Katharine Bequest [*Katharinenstift*<sup>10</sup>] in Mitau and the 'Ada Baronin Manteuffel Bequest'<sup>11</sup>. The latter bequest or foundation operates to this day through the efforts of the Kurland Knighthood<sup>12</sup> and, as a result, its blessings continue to reach the many in need as well as contributing to a variety of cultural goals.

Anyone wanting to know who in Kurland would benefit from dedicated payments or *Zuwendungen* of the type discussed would have always received much the same answer, viz. that it is 'all for the good of our Land and its people' [ie 'das Land']. The term 'our Land' had many meanings, depending on context. One meaning would have been to Knighthood members sitting as a body at a *Landtag* or Diet meeting and expressing the corporate political will or intent. The phrasing of *Landtag* resolutions in former days supports that understanding of the term, because they all began: 'Das Land möge beschliessen...' ('It pleases the Land to decide...'). 'Our Land' also had another meaning when it was used to refer to the sum of all of Kurland's inhabitants. Here it means every Kurland inhabitant, the German and the non-German alike. However, when referring to how a Kurlander feels about the place he lives in and the people and the institutions he is committed to, then the term 'our Land' has yet another meaning, best reflected in the maxim so familiar to every Kurlander: 'Aus dem Land, für das Land' - ('ours is but to give back what we have drawn from the Land').

Aside from the action they took in respect of welfare and caring for the needs of others, in what other ways did the Knighthoods give shape to their political landscape?

In discussing the many other areas in which the Knighthoods were politically active, it might soon look as if it was the Knighthoods that were behind every significant development in the Baltic Provinces. That would put a wrong gloss on things, even allowing for how broad the range and scale of Knighthood activities was. That said, and notwithstanding some riders and constraints, there is more than a hint of truth in the proposition that the Knighthoods were indeed the main driving force. While we have been focussing on the role of the Knighthoods, we must not lose sight of the fact that a comparable German ethos dominated every city council and guildhall in all the Baltic towns and cities, including Riga and Reval, and this well into the nineteenth century. The process of Russification of course changed all that. When talking about Poland, Rousseau once remarked that: - 'It's the aristocracy that gets everything, the sovereign gets nothing, the cities less than nothing and, on top of all that, the peasants are serfs!' Those same words, with strong caveats, could have also applied to the Kurland of ducal times as ducal power in Kurland was gradually whittled away.

It was the Knighthoods that created and built the infrastructure that existed in the Provinces. They built it to suit the needs of their day and there is no value in wondering now how well it would meet the needs of our own day and age. Under the arrangements in force at that time, manor lords were responsible for maintaining the roads system. There was an oversight mechanism in the form of a committee set up for the purpose by the Diet. When the Estland Knighthood pushed for the Reval-St. Petersburg railway line to be built, it certainly knew that better and faster transport links to the imperial residence would benefit manor owners living along the rail-line's route and speed their

---

<sup>10</sup> TN – The Katharinenstift provided a safe and suitable home in Mitau for widows and spinsters of modest means from Kurland Knighthood families. A sizable bequest was used to found it in November 1775 and it had a large house at its disposal in Mitau. (See pp 125ff in *Kurland und seine Ritterschaft*, 1971, Pfaffenhofen/Ilm, published by the Kurland Ritterschaft.)

<sup>11</sup> TN – this generous bequest, willed to the Kurland Knighthood in 1914 and successfully claimed by it after WWI in difficult times, has remained largely intact and celebrated its centenary in 2014. It now operates as the *United Kurland Bequests (VKS)* and is the Kurland Knighthood's main vehicle today for providing care to needy members, scholarships and funding for cultural works in Latvia.

<sup>12</sup> TN – for more information, see the address: '*Celebrating 100 Years of the Ada Baroness von Manteuffel Bequest*' (2015) by the same author and published in the same forum.

early morning deliveries of milk and vegetables. Getting help, however, to build other infrastructure elsewhere in the Provinces was quite another proposition. In that regard, resentment still echoes in the words of a resolution the Kurland Knighthood passed in 1908: - *'In the absence, to date, of any action at [national] Government level to establish a telephone network for our Land, the Knighthood will now proceed to do so.'*

The education system in the Provinces was likewise mostly in the hands of the Knighthoods. After the duchy of Kurland was founded in 1562, the first duke, Gotthard Kettler, encouraged his manor lords to build some 70 churches in the duchy. Having supplied the land upon which the churches were built, the manor lords inevitably also became patrons of the churches in most cases. And, as patrons, they were also responsible for maintaining them. To support the churches, the manor lords also provided the parsons they had selected with livings [*Patronatswidmen*] in the form of small landholdings of various sizes. Any differences in size were irrelevant because no clergyman would get a landholding insufficient for his needs. Notwithstanding, some parsonages with more generous allocations of land were sometimes referred to as *parsonages on the champagne circuit*. The total land allocated to parsonages throughout Kurland amounted to 5,522 hectares, supplemented by a further 4,608 hectares of peasant land. In passing, it is interesting to note that some parishes were more or less 'handed down' through many generations of parson within the same family. Examples are the Stender family who remained parsons at Sonnaxt for a total of 149 years, and the Bilterling family, who were parsons at Sahten for 165 years. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that a degree of pride would build within these parson families – in German it was referred to as '*Literatenstolz*'<sup>13</sup>. Along with their pastoral duties, the parsons usually also supervised the running of the primary schools the Knighthoods and some individual manor lords had established for the education of peasant children on the estate. The existence of these schools goes a long way to explaining why the literacy rate in the Baltic Provinces stayed as high as 98-99%, but this was before the language of instruction was switched to Russian under Russification in the 1890s. By contrast, Russia proper's literacy rate for the same period was much lower and more like 30 to 40%. It was a requirement that those wishing to be confirmed in the Lutheran Church had to be able to read and write. Those also wishing to marry were subject to the same literacy requirement.

The Kurland Knighthood established a teachers' training facility in 1836 at Irlmlau, one of its own manors. The facility closed in 1885 when the Knighthoods' education systems gave way to Russification. The facility was a nucleus for Latvia's young intelligentsia, and, regrettably, a seedbed also for left-leaning revolutionary intelligentsia. Good German language skills were always needed to get ahead, especially for those wanting to study at the University of Dorpat [*Tartu*]. Not unlike what happened in other places as well, the path to professions for which a university education was required began opening first to those, who had begun their careers as teachers. This also helps to explain the big pools of their own, well-educated nationals that the new states of Estonia and Latvia could rely on after 1919, as they set about establishing and growing their new public services and infrastructure.

Russification, when it arrived in 1885, also gutted the courts system in the Baltic Provinces. The German staff was made redundant with no access to pensions and no prospects for redeployment. The Knighthoods responded by paying these laid-off people at least a modest pension.

With regard to secondary schooling, it was only natural that the Knighthoods would focus on those with a connection to the land, since the cities and larger towns managed their education needs

---

<sup>13</sup> TN – 'Literati were non-noble Baltic Germans, native or immigrant, who had received a higher education at a university or equivalent institution, and many were parsons. They were not legally constituted as a separate group or caste and had no political privileges. See page 30-31 of Heide W Whelan's, *Adapting to Modernity*, 1999 Böhlau Verlag, Köln.

themselves. The Livland Knighthood subsidised a secondary school with boarding facilities at Birkenruh to provide good general education to those coming from the land, who otherwise would have had to board in town with families they did not know. Home-schooling in manor environments for the first school years was widespread in those days. In Kurland the Knighthood established and subsidised the secondary schools and colleges [*Gymnasien* and *Landesschulen*] that operated in Mitau [*Jelgava*] and Goldingen [*Kuldīga*]. In 1906, the amount the Kurland Knighthood was outlaying each year for those secondary schools and colleges was 100,000 Rubels. The headmaster of the Mitau secondary college, Carl Hunnius, moved to Misdroy<sup>14</sup> in 1919 and founded the well-regarded Baltic school there, that later transformed into the boarding school that bore his name at Wyk auf Föhr<sup>15</sup>. In Estonia the Estland Knighthood also maintained the ancient and renowned Cathedral and Knights School [*Die Ritter- und Domschule*] in Reval until 1920.

Aside from some insignificant efforts by the German military administration during Germany's occupation of the Baltics during the First World War, no attempt was ever made to 'germanise' the native population. England managed its colonial possessions quite differently in this regard. At parish level, pastors always had to be fluent in the local community language. They conducted church services in either Estonian or Latvian every Sunday, and often, but not always, delivered a German service afterwards. Many manor owners and their wives followed another well-established custom and conducted their own in-house prayer services for every resident of house and manor.

Manor owners always talked to their estate employees in their native language, as did wives when they talked to their servants. There is doubtless some truth in the claim of at least one Estonian that the song festivals so integral to the national self-awareness of both Estonians and Latvians had their genesis 'in the music heard and learnt from the open windows of manor houses during the summer'. Both the Estonians and the Latvians, very musical as they both are, had a lot of help early on from Germans to get their song festivals up and running. Without this early help, the song festivals might well not have been as successful as they proved to be in rousing national spirit later on.

Unlike the Russian aristocracy, the Baltic nobility mostly lived year-round on their manors in the countryside. As a result, they had a closer connection to Estonians and Latvians living on the land.

The wives of manor owners viewed caring for the sick and those recently delivered of children as a sacred duty, and they took that duty very seriously. Some Kurland manors also had small hospitals on site, which were staffed by a doctor the manor lord paid for, along with pharmacies and access to free medicines. The von Behr family's large entail at Schleck was one such example with both a hospital and a pharmacy on the grounds. In addition, the Kurland Knighthood also established and ran asylum facilities at Tabor in Kurland, an institution for the deaf at Carolinenhof, four leprosariums and a midwifery school. The Tabor facility exists to this day and is still Latvia's only psychiatric facility for young people. After recovery of Latvian independence in 1991, the United Kurland Bequests [*Vereinigte Kurländische Stiftungen* or *VKS*<sup>16</sup>] made supporting Tabor one of its first priorities.

Over the years there were some curious and unusual bequests. One of the more curious was Baroness Sophie von Mengden's bequest in 1805. Its purpose was to fund the purchase of freedoms

---

<sup>14</sup> TN - The Baltic School at Misdroy (Miedzyzdroje in Polish) on the isle of Wolin on the Polish north western Baltic coast was founded by émigré Kurlanders in 1919 and dissolved in 1944 to forestall an imminent takeover by the Nazis. The school had a good reputation, a diverse student body and offered boarding facilities as well.

<sup>15</sup> TN – Föhr is a small island at the Danish-German border north of Bremerhaven.

<sup>16</sup> TN - 'Bequest', 'endowment', 'foundation' or 'trust' are all good translations of *Stiftung*. We choose 'bequest'.



from military service for peasants who had been compulsorily recruited into the army for the usual 25-year term. The Knighthood provided audit and oversight services for all bequests.

If we return to the definition of *politics* in the Baltic Provinces that we gave at the beginning as being about taking responsibility for meeting community needs and expectations, or as striving to meet the needs of our '*environment*' [or *Umwelt*], to use the term our Estland Knighthood member, Baron Jakob von Uexküll, once coined, then we must also talk about the emancipation of the serfs. That emancipation took place between 1816-1819 on the express initiative of the Knighthoods. The stress goes on 'initiative of the Knighthoods'. The Estland Knighthood's vote for emancipation was carried by an impressive 263 vote majority to 93 against, and despite opposition from top government circles in St Petersburg, which feared a backlash if serfs in Russia were to also demand emancipation. Things were much more backward in Russia proper at this time. Emancipation of the serfs was only finally achieved in Russia proper under Alexander II in 1861, some 42 years later, and Alexander II was indeed feted for his achievement as the 'Liberator Czar'. Nevertheless, putting emancipation into a broader context, Prussia, the perceived leader in early nineteenth century social reform, was only emancipating its serfs as recently as 1807 under its Stein-Hardenberg reforms. Mecklenburg followed suit in 1820. Leaving aside just how compelling it obviously is from a humanitarian standpoint for peasants to no longer have 'owners' to answer to and to be spared the ignominy of being tied to a masters' land and be unable to leave it as had been the case under serfdom, we do need to acknowledge the enormity of the economic sacrifice landowners were making at this time as they freely gave up their age-old access to a guaranteed workforce. Emancipation in these circumstances put the very existence of many smaller manors at risk. The financial consequences of the Napoleonic Wars still weighed heavily in those early post-war years and recovery was generally slow. It is not without good reason that bankruptcies too were such a feature of this period.

A point worth noting is that emancipation in the Baltic Provinces was achieved without committing the mistake that Russia proper made much later when it freed its own serfs. The mistake was to not also grant access to landownership when personal freedom was granted. In Russia's case, not granting access to landownership drove peasants away from the land and forced them to move to towns and cities. Here they swelled the numbers of the rapidly growing and poor urban proletariat, the very social group where revolutionary fervour was most certain to grow. In Kurland, peasants were given access to land for farms of their own, [*Gesinde*], as a part of the personal freedoms they were granted. Such *Gesinde* were on average about 36 hectares in size. In the beginning, peasants had to perform a specified amount of paid work at the manor to pay for or 'earn' their land, but that paid work requirement was converted into a cash payment by 1863. In Estland, the switch to making cash payments occurred in 1869. In addition to these provisions, the Kurland Knighthood created a Kurland Credit Union [*Kurländischer Kreditverein*] in 1832 and a Kurland Society to Further Economic Growth [*Kurländische Ökonomische Gesellschaft*] in 1838<sup>17</sup>. Both of these institutions contributed to better outcomes because they gave enterprising peasant-farmers access to cheap loans. As a result, peasants soon become owners of their own land. Thus, by 1914, ninety percent of such *Gesinde* in Kurland had fully transferred into Latvian ownership.

By the mid nineteenth century, the land set aside for peasant *Gesinde* was clearly identified on manor maps by marking it out using a 'red line' [*roter Strich*]. This identifying mechanism was applied throughout the Baltic Provinces, but not in Kurland. Such *Gesinde*-land was permanently detached from the manor proper and could not be returned to it. It is worth noting that even well before emancipation in 1816-19, there had already been several manor lords choosing to free their peasants of their own volition. One such was Baron von Uexküll at Fickel manor in Estonia. It may

---

<sup>17</sup> TN – Comparable institutions also existed in Estland and Livland and achieved similar outcomes.

have been inspiration from the powerful *Herrnhuter*<sup>18</sup> movement, or maybe too the Enlightenment ideas the freemasons were promoting in the Baltic Provinces, that caused manor owners like Baron Uexküll to act so early and of their own volition to release peasants from bondage.

If we continue to hold that politics is about us taking action to shape the world in which we live, then the examples provided above document convincingly that the Baltic Knighthoods not only recognised what needed to be done across the broad spectrum of public roles they were confronted with, but also that they were very successful in meeting all the challenges.

Whenever the Baltic Knighthoods submitted to their new Russian rulers, be it via the treaty with Peter the Great in 1721 in respect of Estland and Livland, or via the treaty arrived at in 1795 in respect of Kurland with the Empress Catherine II, the Knighthoods always insisted that they be allowed to retain their German language and their German faith in the form of the evangelical Lutheran Church. Their third demand, to also be able to retain their German system of law indefinitely, was not one that Russia would agree to, except as a temporary expedient. The eclipse of German Law was thus inevitable towards the end of the nineteenth century as Russification became more firmly rooted. It made no difference that Czars in earlier times had allowed German Law to stay when they ascended the throne. To survive and keep other precious treaty elements intact, the Knighthoods had no option but to yield on their demand that German Law be retained.

Use of the Estonian and Latvian languages in primary schools was the system the Knighthoods had established in the Baltic Provinces and they fought hard to keep its use going until overwhelmed by Russification. The former Estonian President, Lennart Meri, once remarked that the Knighthoods' commitment to retaining the Estonian and Latvian languages in primary schools for as long as they did had contributed significantly to Estonia's and Latvia's ability as emerging small nations to survive the Slav onslaught that had threatened to engulf them. The Lutheran Church, to which Estonians, Latvians and Germans mostly belonged, was also a powerful binding force and had proved to be a bulwark against encroachments from the Catholic Church in Poland and, later, from the Russian Orthodox faith.

Only those who know their past can venture confidently into the future and help shape it. The political achievements of the Baltic Knighthoods are, without question, substantial. That said, we must not ignore the occasional lapses and failures, nor think so highly of our successes that we overlook giving our failures the careful critical examination they also deserve. Failures there were indeed. One such was in 1902, when Count Witte, Russia's then Minister of Finance, encouraged the Kurland Knighthood to buy up all the Crown lands and some further 200 or so smaller manors in Kurland, an amount of land of some 50,000 hectares. Unwilling to take on the debt such a purchase would have required, the Kurland Knighthood failed to take up the offer. Another failure was the attempt in 1905-07 by the then Estonian Captain of Nobility [*Ritterschafshauptmann*], Baron von Dellingshausen, to bring Estonian small landholders as well as the towns and cities into the Estland Knighthood's system for administering the Province. Count Hugo von Keyserling, as Kurland Captain of Nobility [*Landesbevollmächtigte*], had had no more success with a similar attempt in 1873. The Russian central government blocked every attempt the Estonian Knighthood made, and there were several, to include Estonian small landholders in the administration of the Province. The collapse of the German Empire in 1918, along with Estonia and Latvia becoming new nation states, put paid to all further such attempts.

---

<sup>18</sup> TN – known also as the Moravian Brethren or Moravian Church. They were a strong current in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century non-conformist Protestantism that also inspired John Wesley to found the English Methodist Church.

The willingness of our forefathers to always care for the wellbeing of others and to extend a helping hand to those who live in the Baltic lands we once called home remains a part of us today, even if the people who live there now are no longer the people of yore, and we no longer have the same political framework in which to offer our services and support. The responsibility we once felt has turned to empathy. That empathy continues. We express it through the large financial contributions we continue to make through the United Kurland Bequests (VKS), we express it through further gifts from other bequests managed by the Association of Baltic Knighthoods [*Verbandstiftungen*] and we express it through the private gift-giving of individuals and families from within our corps, or associated with it. You could say our political functioning remains a work in progress, shaped by our ongoing commitment, not unlike the imperfect tense. In that regard, it is quite distinct from actions we might have completed in the past and put behind us, things we might think of as being in the past perfect tense. Let us not forget the great achievements of the Baltic Knighthoods whilst also acknowledging their occasional lapses and failures. In so doing, we should do no less than draw on the sentiments our Estland brother-in-arms, Baron Otto von Taube, expressed so well in a sonnet he wrote while once living in Soest (Germany):

*I am not me, I am more than you might suppose  
I am of the blood of my forefathers and ancestors,  
Their love, their rage, it is  
In me, their achievements, their essence, and their longings too;  
Everything they've attempted is in me, their tears,  
Their joys, their mirth and their courage,  
Their failures too are in me, the things that sets them aflame,  
I am just that what once was in them,  
That's what I am. Neither less, nor more.  
Things of untold wealth were given me.  
What I do with them is up to me alone:  
Spare me, God, that I may not be unworthy of them!  
And help me in the course of my short life  
To live it always honourably, and as I should.*

*Translated by Jens von Brasch*

*February 2018*