

# Sisters Across the Gulf

## Transnational Connections and Frictions in Estonian–Finnish Lesbian Networks of the Early 1990s

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the connections between Estonian and Finnish lesbian communities in the early 1990s, based on oral history interviews along with media and archival sources. The Estonian lesbian community formed very quickly in the spring and summer of 1990 and from the very start developed a strong bond with the Finnish lesbian community that then lasted for several years. We have interviewed both Finnish and Estonian lesbian women about the period to learn about the activities of this transnational network and the meaning it carried for its members. In our analysis, we focus on personal and social challenges and tensions, national differences and diverse identities and ways of living as a lesbian woman, but also on the fun and rewarding connections. Our study portrays the transnational network as an example of a relatively equal community, despite the stark economic differences, and addresses how the translocal connections formed as a natural, important and integral part of the development of both these communities.

**Keywords:** transnational queer history, translocality, lesbian oral history, Estonian Lesbian Union, Finnish-Estonian relations, LGBT community and activism

**TRANSLOCAL RELATIONS AND** communities are a common practice of queer communities around the world (see Szulc 2018, ix; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013), and the Baltics and Scandinavia are no exception. Since men have often been more mobile than women, it is remarkable to find traces of transnational lesbian communities. When Rebeka

Pöldsam started interviewing Estonian lesbian women in 2020, the narrators often mentioned the particular significance of the Finnish lesbian community in the early 1990s. The Estonian narrators fondly remembered their relations with Finnish women as a meaningful part of the local lesbian community life. The period was characterized by mutual visits to homes, parties, seminars and other events, friendship-building and Finns support for the emerging Estonian lesbian community. In this article, we address these connections across the Gulf of Finland from the perspective of community-building, and discuss how the particular historical context of the restoration of Estonian independence shaped the Finnish-Estonian relations.

Finnish-Estonian relations have a long history, and during the Cold War they were significantly and extensively shaped by television. Particularly from 1971 onwards – and despite Soviet authorities’ attempts to prevent it – Finnish national television was one of the channels that offered Estonians a view across the Iron Curtain (Lepp & Pantti 2013, 76). Sexuality in general, and queer sexualities in particular, were not frequent topics in Finnish television productions of the era, partly due to the legal restrictions that banned “encouragement” of homosexuality and the resulting self-censorship that prevented a positive, or even neutral, public discussion of the topics (Mustola 2007, 235–241). That said, for some Estonians, Finnish television was still one of the few sources that provided at least some content about homosexuality (Nögel 1991, 115). One well-remembered moment is the screening of the French erotic film *Emmanuelle* (1974) on Finnish television in the summer of 1987. Estonians across the country traveled to friends and family in northern Estonia to see the film (Lepp & Pantti 2013, 80). For some of the interviewed women, this was the first time they saw a portrayal of sexual desire between women.

The connections between Estonia and Finland were facilitated not only by television but also through traveling. In the 1980s, tens of thousands of Finns visited Estonia each year (Pagel 2019) and some of the Finnish travelers had a strong personal relationship to the country and long-term friendships with Estonians (Laurén 2014, 1130). Our inter-

viewee Ursula tells of the start of one such friendship with an Estonian couple:<sup>1</sup>

I met them the first time in '87. And the background was that Pille was at the time [an instrument] player at the Tallinn opera. And back then, all instruments were owned by, well, the state or someone. So the players did not own their instruments. By coincidence, I had stopped playing my [the same instrument]. [...] I don't really remember the background, how anyone found out that I had [an instrument] or how I found out that Pille wanted [one].

When first meeting Pille in Tallinn, behind the Estonia opera house, Ursula did not know that she was in a relationship with another woman. Even though Pille and Ursula did not have a mutual language, they went for a cup of coffee at Pille's place, and her partner was home: "it was just obvious", Ursula describes: "I have never asked Pille if she knew what sort of a woman I was, or if she thought of me only as an [instrument] owner. That, I have never found out, and it does not matter at all." In this story about a burgeoning friendship, Ursula eloquently describes how the lack of a mutual language was a challenge to the relations between Estonians and Finns, but how this did not stop the women from finding ways to communicate. Through this friendship, Ursula already had a connection to Estonia when, a few years later, a wider network of women started to form across the Gulf of Finland.

The focus of our study is the translocal connections emanating from shared interests and tensions around differences between Estonian and Finnish lesbians in the early 1990s. The concept of translocality addresses the circulation of ideas and identities that result from networks of people moving between several locations, such as countries or cities (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013, 375). In studies of queer organizing, the focus on translocality emphasizes the multiscalarity of connections: queer communities exist and are organized on a local level, often within a particular city, but also form transnational networks which allow the quick transfer of information (Grundy & Smith 2005; Gonsalves &

Velasco 2022). The framework of translocality helps us describe a period in the early 1990s when the Estonian lesbian community was interwoven with the Finnish lesbian community through regular group trips and exchanges between the two countries and in particular their capital areas. As our analysis shows, the network that formed in Tallinn and Helsinki, through get-togethers with an ever-changing set of participants, resulted in an extension of the local communities and the creation of a translocal community. The Estonian-Finnish lesbian network did not exist in either one of the two countries, it was located in between, or wherever the women met.

In addition to translocality, we focus our attention on transnational aspects of the network. As noted by Peter Edelberg (2024), a focus on transnational relations can help us overcome the limitations of the national lens. The studied network created a community where national identities on the one hand significantly contributed to distinguishing the women from one another, and on the other hand were insignificant, in that the women were joined in their excitement over sharing similar desires. The importance of national belonging was enhanced by the historical moment: in the early 1990s, Estonian independence was restored and questions regarding nationality were thus highly topical. As pointed out by Tara Gonsalves and Kristopher Velasco (2022, 93), transnational queer group networks often connect more established groups in countries open to LGBT rights to groups struggling in more closed societies. While the imbalance that this created was certainly visible in our case, our study also demonstrates how the intense transnational connections enhanced the exchange of ideas and information and how this exchange contributed to shaping the communities. Unlike Edelberg and Gonsalves and Velasco, who focus on LGBT rights advocacy work, we address an organically grown network not driven by a clearly stated political agenda, but nonetheless important in shaping local queer communities. We take particular interest in the memories of everyday encounters and contact, where the lack of a shared language might have provided a challenge. Our article demonstrates how the connections between the lesbian communities of two countries were meaningful for

the development of both communities and our study thus contributes to transnational queer history by considering how connections across national borders shaped national developments.

To analyze the relationship between the communities, we employ the metaphor of big sister and little sister. This metaphor echoes the notion of Estonia and Finland as brother nations that originates in the rise of nationalism in the two countries during the late nineteenth century (e.g., Alenius 2002, 55–59). By replacing brothers with sisters, we – in addition to emphasizing that we are studying women – want to point out how the focus on “brotherhood” has sidelined some groups and topics, such as queer people and the development of lesbian identities. For example, while the extensive contacts between the two countries during the era of restoration of Estonian national independence are well known and have also been addressed in research (e.g., Rausmaa 2013), the way in which queer networks were a part of these contacts has remained unexplored. We describe the development of the network, starting in the spring of 1990, when the Estonian lesbian community first emerged. We then direct our attention to issues related to national differences, opportunities and frictions in the transnational contacts, and how understandings of lesbianism were developed in the network. Finally, we address how the period of active contact came to an end. Before moving on to our discussion of the network, we will discuss our methods and sources and situate our study within the debates on queer oral history.

### **Oral histories of a transnational network**

The article is based on a joint research project in which we have conducted oral history interviews and studies of archives and media sources. As lesbian historians Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madelaine D. Davis (1993, 23) attest, the view on the history of a community starts to stabilize after approximately five interviews, and additional interviews will not change the picture entirely. Rebeka Põldsam has conducted six interviews with Estonian women and draws on two earlier interviews by other researchers (Atso 2022; Ester 2015); Riikka Taavetti has conducted four individual interviews with Finnish women and one group

interview with three Finnish women, in which Pöldsam also partook. In addition to the interviews, we have studied *SETA* magazine, the only Finnish LGBT magazine of the time, which covered connections with Estonia in several articles, and we utilized Finnish LGBTIQ rights organization Seta's archives, stored at the Labour Archives in Helsinki. The archival material helped us place the connections within the broader framework of Seta's international activities during the time period. On the Estonian side, we have studied the Eesti Lesbiliit (Estonian Lesbian Union, ELU) newsletters (1995–1998) and the press clip collection from 1995 compiled by the ELU, which helped us get a picture of how women's same-sex desires were publicly depicted in Estonia during the first half of the 1990s (on this topic, see Kurvinen 2007).

Since our study to a large part relies on oral histories, it contributes to the academic discussion on the role of oral histories in queer historiography (e.g., Boyd & Roque Ramírez 2012; Summerskill, Tooth Murphy & Vickers 2022). Within the field of queer oral history, our study positions itself as part of activism studies, while also acknowledging the importance of the role the transnational network played in the personal lives and identities of the narrators. The topics covered in the interviews are not particularly intimate or painful for the participants and the period is generally remembered rather positively. In the interviews, we focused on establishing an understanding of how the network developed and what its activities were like that went beyond what we were able to learn from archival and media sources. We used contemporary documentation both to complement the oral history narratives and to refresh the narrators' memory during the interviews (on using documents in queer oral history interviews, see Riseman 2022). This may have resulted in that some memories which would have contradicted the views conveyed in the documents did not surface.

One essential element of queer oral history studies is locating potential narrators. As Nan Alamilla Boyd (2008, 179–180) describes, there is an inherent contradiction in the queer theoretical view of identities as fluid and of how fixed identity constructions shape autobiographical narration. Moreover, there is also a need for identifiable labels when

inviting narrators to participate in oral history interviews. We found our narrators through personal networks, asking around about the period when the contacts between Estonian and Finnish lesbian women were most active. Like Kennedy and Davis (1993, 185), we are aware of having mainly reached women who were actively engaged during the studied time period and who are more or less still in contact with the lesbian networks.

Pöldsam conducted the interviews with Estonian lesbian women between 2020 and 2023 as part of her doctoral research on Estonian non-normative sex-gender history. Compared to the Finnish respondents, who all lived in Finland and of whom many had worked in academia, the Estonian respondents varied more in their positions. Three Estonian respondents lived in Estonia, others lived in Spain, Belgium and Finland, and none of the Estonian respondents worked in academia. Four Estonian respondents had acquired higher education after the studied period, three respondents had children from heterosexual relationships, and one was married to a man at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in Estonian and took place at Pöldsam's or the respondent's home, over video call or at a public café. Five of the Finnish respondents were known to Taavetti beforehand, and the other two were women with whom she shared common connections. Most of Taavetti's respondents had a background in queer studies or queer history themselves, either inside and outside of academia. The interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023 in university spaces, libraries, respondents' homes or workplaces and all interviews were conducted in Finnish.

Participants were offered the choice of using either their own first name (Kati, Livia, Tarja, Terhi, Tuula, Ursula, and Virva from Finland and Lilian from Estonia) or a pseudonym and most of the Estonian participants preferred pseudonyms (Lii, Linda, Maria, Lembe, and Ülle) to avoid the risk of being identified through internet search. Several Finnish respondents were activists and participated under their own names in the 1990s and have since also written about their experiences in lesbian and gay media or elsewhere. Of the Estonians, this applied only to

Lilian. All the names of people mentioned by the narrators have been changed in order to protect the privacy of these individuals as they have not consented to participating in the study; we have edited the interview quotes and removed details that would involve risk of direct identification. However, persons familiar with the events discussed in the interviews will inevitably be able to recognize narrators, as is often the case in queer oral history studies (e.g., Juvonen 2017), and this has also been acknowledged by the narrators. Prior to publication, respondents were offered the opportunity to comment on the text. All interpretations in the article are however solely the authors' and not all respondents fully agree with them or the memories recounted by other informants.

### **The long year of 1990**

In previous research, Sara Arumetsa and Rebeka Põldsam (2023) and Taavi Koppel (2022) have reconstructed the line of events 1987–1994 that led to the forming of a lesbian and gay community and activist groups in Estonia. Glasnost and perestroika brought freedom of speech to Soviet Estonian media in the late 1980s, and consequently, a wide variety of topics related to sexuality started to appear in the public discussion (Kurvinen 2007). The discussion on decriminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union started in 1989 through a series of media debates and articles on AIDS (Arumetsa & Põldsam 2023). Some of the lesbian and gay rights advocates in these debates came to lead the gay and lesbian community building and they initiated both the social and the historical research on homosexuality in Estonia. In 1990, most of the women in the then newly formed Estonian Lesbian Union had prior to organization not known anyone like themselves, and no traces of any pre-existing wider lesbian groups in the Soviet Baltics have yet been found.

The Estonian and Finnish lesbian network was formed on May 28–30, 1990, when Estonian historians Lilian Kotter and Teet Veispak, and gay activist Udo (Dodo) Parikas, who was from Sweden but had Estonian roots, organized an international conference, “Sexual Minorities and Society: The Changing Attitudes towards Homosexuality in the 20th



Century Europe”, at the Soviet Estonian Institute of History in Tallinn and the University of Tartu library. The conference was supported by Swedish gay and lesbian organization RFSL and other Swedish organizations (Weeks 1990, 226). The event attracted nearly a hundred participants and featured around fifteen speakers (Krickler 1990). The purpose of the conference was to draw public attention to the discriminatory Soviet legislation and to campaign for the decriminalization of male homosexual relations. One of the speakers at the conference, Kati, recounts her impressions of how the event was initiated:

Well, Dodo and Teet Veispak, they knew each other. And Dodo has told me that he had these long walks around Tallinn, thinking about what could be done as something must be done. And since Teet was a researcher at the history institute, that “something” was organizing a conference. It was, like, their first thought. So, if it would have been someone else, it would have been about organizing a party, inviting some band.

Kati’s description demonstrates the importance of the preferences of the single individual as well as the significance of existing personal contacts in the formation of activism and community.

The dozen Estonian women who participated in the conference had got to know each other only shortly beforehand, by responding to a newspaper ad inquiring after “elderly lesbian ladies” (Koppel 2022, 127). In March, Veispak and Kotter had published the ad in search of oral accounts of Estonian lesbian history, which Kotter wanted to present in a paper during the conference. In an interview, Lilian described how the ad was answered mostly by men seeking sexual adventures, but also by several women still too young to remember much further back than she herself did. The women quickly formed a small group who collectively responded to further correspondence, organized regular gatherings and parties, and soon started a phoneline for lesbians, which contributed to the growth of the community. The information about the conference reached lesbian group Akanat in Helsinki, “and everyone was excited to finally reach across to the other side of the Iron Curtain”, as Ursula

remembers it. Although the conference was initiated by two men, it was two women, Lilian and her junior researcher colleague, who took care of most of the practicalities, down to the level of doing the dishes after coffee breaks, as Kati remembers it.

The conference afterparty, at Glehni Castle, is generally remembered as the first public event of the Estonian lesbian community. According to a Finnish commentator, Leena Tamminen (1990), fifteen women from across Estonia turned up to the conference, accompanied by the same number of women from Finland. The Finnish participants recognized the party as a historical moment, but were unsure whether it was their place to intervene. Terhi described her feelings: “Perhaps it was this sociologist in me noticing, that oh, something is starting here, but that is their history.” Seeing the active participation of Estonian women, Kati started encouraging Lilian to organize the women, but echoing Terhi, she felt torn between on the one hand not wanting to interfere, and her willingness to help on the other:

[Another western participant] said to me that let’s go, what are we doing here. And she probably left the basement and tried to get me to leave, but Lilian drew me back saying “don’t go, we don’t know [what to do]”. And when I imagine that situation, they had never been in any NGO, they didn’t have that concept. History was just those state-run [organizations], that you had to be involved in, like pioneers and so forth. Although by then it had started, the song movement and other forms of organizing. [...] I stayed there as moral support.

Kati’s account demonstrates that the year 1990 was indeed a period of rapid political mobilization in Estonia, shaped by both the Soviet forms of official organizing, and the history of dissident and civil society movements (see Lagerspetz 2000). Her account depicts the relationship between Estonians and Finns as one in which Estonians are asking for support. Furthermore, in relation to Estonians, Finns did not identify with the East–West power dynamics characteristic to the Cold War period. Interestingly, despite the significance of the event, Lilian is the

only one of the Estonian interviewees who describes the conference; the others were either unable to distinguish this afterparty from other parties at the same venue or had not attended it.

The conference was followed by mutual visits across the Gulf of Finland. In September 1990, a lesbian studies weekend was organized in Helsinki and according to the program, Lilian Kotter spoke there about lesbian generations in Estonia.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) funded activist visits to seminars and conferences.<sup>3</sup> These activist events would however attract only a few Estonian lesbian community members since, as Lembe commented, firstly, the focus of conference papers was mostly on men, and secondly:

being a theoretical lesbian is not really what excites the young ones seeking relationships. [...] Inevitably when you have traveled with your Estonian group, as we did, you hang out with them. There sure were those who networked internationally, but I already enjoyed our own group.

That said, just a month after the conference, one gay and two lesbian activists from Estonia participated in an ILGA conference in Stockholm (Wockner 1990). This shows how quickly the Estonian lesbian and gay activists were incorporated into transnational networks encouraging further organization (see Gonsalves & Velasco 2022 for a broader discussion on transnational queer networks). As forming a registered organization enabled the women to apply to Tallinn city for a meeting place (Tamminen 1990), Eesti Lesbiliit was registered on October 13, 1990. The organization could now also receive funding from ILGA for a project twinning the Tallinn and Helsinki lesbian communities.

### **Political upheavals and transnational imbalances**

The political turbulence of the early 1990s in Estonia also affected this network. In connection to our group interview, Kati wrote about her memories of how a group of Estonian women happened to be visiting Helsinki to attend Vapautuspäivät, the Pride event back then, during the days of communist coup attempt in Moscow in August 1991:

We listened in disbelief to the news on the radio, partly from the Finnish broadcasting company, partly from Tallinn. [...] I immediately remembered the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the military coup in Chile. Those Czechoslovakians or Chileans who happened to be abroad had to decide whether to return to their home country, which they probably would no longer be able to leave, or stay as refugees where they happened to be. I thought that they [the Estonian women] should not run to the ship but think and decide in which country they would want to spend the rest of their lives.

Linda, too, remembers how Estonian women were stuck in Helsinki, because the port of Tallinn was closed. The women stayed at Finnish women's homes, watched TV, ate soup made by Kati and lived through a spectrum of emotions. Linda remembers how two or three women applied for asylum in Finland and received state support for a few months before Finland denied them asylum as Estonian independence was restored.

Most interviewees had memories of the Tallinn–Helsinki trips, parties in Tallinn and visiting markets in Helsinki. Sometimes, the parties were organized in impressive settings, such as Glehni Castle – remembered by many interviewees – or an Old Town location, here described by Virva: “There was this amazing inner yard, this ancient, convent-system era building and there we walked through a mysterious garden to a gloomy place that held almost like a medieval atmosphere.” What made the parties so special, however, was often something other than the physical settings, as Ursula describes:

It was a wonderful atmosphere there, at the parties, as everyone came because it was like the only thing there was. [...] And they [the Estonian women] came from places far off, like, they traveled for hours with a bus or on a moped, or whatever means of transportation they used to get to Tallinn. You could see that it was really important that they got there.

Estonian interviewee Ülle similarly has very fond memories of the atmosphere of the parties:

We danced and we would understand each other as much as we could. But because I didn't speak [Finnish or English] I didn't even start any conversations. Still, there was this special warm and friendly, tolerant environment. I don't mean only Finns, but also Estonians. [...] We were all very different people, but we were united by the fact that we had just met each other. Everything was so new and exciting. [...] Can you imagine living in a society, where you don't see people like you – in general, a very closed society – and then suddenly you meet people who think like you, feel like you. It was such a revelation!

Ülle's account demonstrates the importance of a common space for constructing a lesbian identity and community (see Juvonen 2022). For Maria, the parties with Finns in the first years of the 1990s were the most fun: Finns were "highly sympathetic" to her and she enjoyed these new friendships. On the Finnish side, visiting the Estonian women was exciting and fun and an opportunity to make connections abroad. The motivation of the Finns in this twin community was discussed during the group interview:

Tuula: I was thinking, was it that we went from here to teach the Estonians how things are and should be handled, or what was it that the Finns got out of it? Cheap booze or –

Kati: Good parties.

Terhi: No, I don't think it was about cheap booze. I think it was just fun to visit Estonia. I too, went there a lot in the nineties. It was Tallinn and all.

In addition to the novelty of visiting Estonia, Ursula mentions how nice it was to feel exotic: "You can admit that part of the fun was to be marveled at by the Estonian lesbians." All in all, it seems that for the Finns, Estonia was now open in a new way and its quickly emerging lesbian community was exciting. As noted in studies on organization of transnational LGBT rights (Gonsalves & Velasco 2022), it is often difficult to find one clear reason for why the groups from open societies wish to

network with those from more closed societies. The recollections of the Finnish participants are testimony to the entangled nature of interest, curiosity, solidarity and affinity.

A majority of the Finnish women in the translocal network were based in Helsinki, where traveling to Tallinn was easy, but trips were also made from other Finnish cities. In the spring of 1992, Turku activist Hannele (Haski) Lehtikuusi invited Estonian artists to take part in a film festival (Haski 1992). The preparations and contacts leading up to the festival resulted in the arranging of a trip to Tallinn in February 1992, which our interviewee Tarja participated in. The weekend included a women-only overnight party with a record attendance of one hundred women, and a joint party with both men and women at Glehni Castle (“Turkulaiset lesbot Tallinnassa”).

While the Finns definitely got their share of experiences, adventures and fun out of the translocal community, the continuous visits were sometimes too much, as evident from the travel guidelines handed out to travelers from Turku, shown to us by Tarja:

Helsinki lesbians have asked you not to invite anyone who says they just need the invitation [for visa] and have acquaintances in Helsinki. Helsinki lesbians are rather fed up at the moment.

The fact that this aspect of the sometimes laborious hosting does not come up in the interviews might be indicative of how it is easier to address the more positive sides when describing community events of the past, but it might also signify that those who grew tired are not among our interviewees.

The same travel guidelines instructed travelers to bring everyday items such as soap as gifts and also to leave Estonian hosts some money. This shows how the stark economic differences between Estonia and Finland were negotiated among the women. According to our narrators, the income gap was not much discussed among the Finnish women; it was simply considered obvious that guests must be mindful of the fact. Livia remembers one incident when one of the Finns broke the silent

agreement on tactfulness by pointing out the lack of fresh vegetables she had experienced in Tallinn, and how uncomfortable that made everyone feel. Livia contemplates how the fact that this incident has stayed in her mind points to its exceptionality.

Although the Estonian lesbian community was financially self-sustaining, as Lilian and Linda point out, it also benefited from Finnish resources. These included financial support and things like books and magazines, but also, and perhaps more importantly, moral and emotional support, as described by Livia:

But it was also just that we existed and that you could discuss and party with us and get some view of how Seta operated and how women's organizations operated and of how to build a lesbian identity. Because they were in quite a hurry to get a feel of the field that had been, well, underground, quite frozen.

Indeed, while it is impossible to completely separate the financial help from the emotional support, from the accounts of the interviewees it seems clear that, in retrospect, the emotional support and kindness were the most important.

### **Building diverse ways of being a lesbian**

The Finnish-Estonian twin community offered women new ways of defining their lesbianism. This is most markedly demonstrated in a discussion article on lesbian identity published in *SETA* magazine (Hekanaaho 1992). The article was titled “Fuck a Duck”, which according to one of the discussion participants had nothing to do with lesbianism – it was just a phrase that one of the Finnish women kept repeating during one Tallinn trip, so that it became an inside joke and everyone remembered the trip as the “Fuck a Duck” trip. The discussion article addressed contrasting forms of gender normativity among Estonian and Finnish lesbians, a topic which also repeatedly came up in our interviews, for example in Lilian's description of the first joint party in September 1990:

There might have been twenty [...] Finns coming from the port as a group, to the Soviet Union! [*laughs*] On entering [the party premises], they suddenly took a step back: “They’re all heteros here! We’ve been invited to the wrong place!” – Estonian women had simply done themselves up for the party. [...] Later, Estonians started to look different, too.

Virva linked her first impressions of Estonian women to bisexuality: “I think we wondered if they were bi women out for an adventure, because the looks were overall so different.” Long-time lesbian bar owner Sirje Atso (2022) also described her impressions of Estonian women as remarkably feminine and heterosexual looking (*meeste naine*) compared to short-haired Finnish *rekkalesbot* (dykes, literally “truck lesbians”). Livia remembers the “only beautiful bald-headed lesbian in Tallinn” whom quite a few of the Finns had a crush on, and describes her recollections of the differences between Finns and Estonians:

We were all bald and had pilot jackets. And that was the thing. But there, they were all either butches or women. And women were like real women. And I remember this was something of which we talked about a lot. They wondered why a lesbian had to look ugly: why do you all look so terrible, isn’t a lesbian a woman who loves beautiful women?

Livia also describes how the question of femininity not only related to looks: “One thing was why do you want to drink beer straight from the bottle, for example.” Ülle, however, argued that the main difference between the Estonians and the Finns was that the Estonians “were like calves on spring pasture, while the Finns were already much calmer.”

While visual differences were mostly tied to national belonging – Finns being more androgynous and Estonians more feminine – the contrast could also be framed as tied to differences between capitalism and state socialism. In the period of national revival, 1988–1992, a majority of Estonians expressed resistance to all possible forms of Soviet norms (Kasekamp 2010, 147–171). In this context, by performing Western standards of femininity, Estonian lesbians defied Soviet gender



norms (see Lepp & Pantti 2013, 84). The fact that the Estonian lesbian community members' appearances changed very quickly, towards the more androgynous, demonstrates how Estonian lesbians distanced themselves from local gender norms. In a group interview, Kati and Tuula, who had previous experiences – from different sides – of the lesbian scene in Germany, contemplated how this background explained their different reactions to seeing feminine Estonian lesbians:

Kati: For me, there was nothing odd about feminine lesbians with skirts, I did not wonder about that. Or perhaps it was because I had experience of the scene in GDR, where you did not want to look different from the others. Or if you looked different, you ended up in trouble. So of course, lesbians look feminine.

Tuula: I, conversely, had this Western German lesbian upbringing.

Among some of the Finnish women, gender, womanhood and the issue of how – or if – a lesbian is a woman, were central themes at the time. For Estonians, these issues did not seem as relevant, but were considered as issues that might grow more important as the lesbian culture grew stronger (Hekanaho 1992). In the 1990s, Estonian media heavily oversexualized lesbians. Out of thirty-two media articles in ELU's fifth anniversary album, eleven contained pornographic photos of women, despite the fact that the texts discussed lesbian everyday lives. Discomfort with such imagery was vocalized in an interview with Ester (2015), who commented on the ELU album by stating that nowadays, such photos would be too offensive for mainstream media.

It seems that for Estonians, the struggle with heterosexism dominated over issues of feminism and heteronormative social structures. As an example of heteronormativity within the lesbian community, Livia remembers an Estonian butch–femme couple in which the femme was a beautiful woman, “a goddess” who worked as a stripper “because you had to make a living”. Sirje Atso (2022), the butch part of the couple, has described how Neiu Eva (Mademoiselle Eva) – a dancer with a snake – was part of the late-Soviet entertainment scene, and how that allowed

the couple to travel across the Union. Later, staging shows with the snakes became a part of the lesbian parties – something fun and perhaps *queer*. Livia describes one of those parties and the Finnish reactions to the show:

We probably made polite faces and applauded and so on. They put on the most spectacular show for us, [...] this goddess performing strip tease. And she had this Cleopatra bikini on, and performed with a big snake. And we were confused.

Livia further contemplates the Finnish women's thoughts on the situation: "You had to be able to appreciate the gesture of friendliness, appreciation and politeness. You don't start to lecture about patriarchy and the male gaze [at a party]." Moreover, Estonian sex workers were a part of the national stereotypic discourse that the Finnish-Estonian lesbian community was well aware of and could take advantage of. This is evident in a story that Linda had heard from a friend:

An unemployed Finn earned five times more than a working Estonian. What happens when people have inconceivable amounts of money? [...] There were still some Finns and Estonians left towards the end of some party. They didn't want to leave, but what to do? Someone had an idea: let's order a prostitute! [...] Her name was Olga. But what to do with her? She had half an hour. Let's ask her to sing! When she sang, others had sung along and it had been super fun.

Linda's account suggests that the Finns would initiate so-called masculine deeds by using spare money for ventures that would otherwise not have been accessible to the working-class dominated Estonian community. This anecdote, together with Lilian's remark in a discussion on lesbian identity (Hekanaho 1992) – that not accepting feminine women as lesbians is to comply to heteronormative expectations – demonstrates the frictions in lesbian imaginations. These accounts contradicted with the idealized expectations that all Finns would be critical towards patri-

archal structures and act as feminists at all times. The fact that these kinds of stories did not surface in the Finnish interviews demonstrates, on the one hand, that not all perspectives from the period were present in our study, and on the other hand that taking into account views from both sides enriches the picture.

Another way to approach the topic of lesbian identity could be found in a book project that Kati initiated at a summer solstice party in 1993. Kati presented Estonian lesbians with the idea of interviewing lesbians of all ages and publishing the interviews as a book, similar to *Toisenlaisia naisia* (Kaartinen et al. 1992) – a collection of lesbian life stories that had just been published in Finland. Kati provided the volunteers with recording equipment and cassettes. Several women were interviewed, yet little is remembered about the process. Unfortunately, the recording equipment was at the time so valuable that it was stolen from the apartment of one of the women. Consequently, we only have transcript drafts of two of the interviews, stored in the LGBT collection in Harju County Museum.<sup>4</sup> This is a great loss, as the interviews contained invaluable material through which we would have known more about how Estonian lesbians perceived themselves thirty years ago.

### **The end of the fuck a duck phase**

Obviously, it was difficult for interviewees to recall exactly what they talked about and what kind of topics were vital in the network, as Ülle describes:

We definitely did something together, but I don't remember what. Somehow the group was distributed among hosts who would accommodate them. I also participated in that. [...] But what was there to do back then? Go to a museum?

More than in recalling factual events, the power of oral history lies in the possibility of interpreting events of the time as part of one's life story. This was reflected in various ways in the narrators' responses. Ülle recalls:

I was in a different place back then. I was so young, stupid, naive, that I don't know if I even knew the word "identity" at the time. Of course, we discussed how we discovered our sexuality, at what age etc., but I don't remember any specific conversations.

Virva, too, describes the difficulty of separating the events of the twin community from everything else that was going on at the time: "It was that kind of phase in my life when I was really active and moved frequently and changed girlfriends [*laughs*]. So, in that same happy mess were the Estonian contacts."

After the initial wave of organizing, the Estonian lesbian community started to rather rapidly dissolve. Although Ülle was actively involved in ELU activities only in 1990, she commented that, "At first, everything was highly exciting. Everybody was friendly and tolerant, but then – so people were in couples, too, as you can imagine – intrigues and breakups between the couples started a wider disbandment." One of the very final events of the transnational network, mentioned in the interviews and other sources, was the ILGA conference held in Helsinki in December 1994, and the conference afterparty on New Year's Eve, which was held in Tallinn. During the conference, Kati characterized the Estonian-Finnish case of "twinning" as different, in that it lacked the often colonizing attitude that Western Europeans might otherwise have towards their Eastern European counterparts in lesbian and gay circles.<sup>5</sup> None of the interviewees remember any particular reasons for why the connections between Estonian and Finnish women loosened in the mid-1990s. Partly, this might be a consequence of the inevitable partiality of oral history: those who had friendship ties did not necessarily feel that much changed when the group traveling ended, and those who attended only one or two events might not have considered themselves as part of the community in the first place. However, Livia remembers that when she returned to Finland in 1995, after spending some time abroad, there were no longer active connections with the Estonians. Some people, of course, maintained their personal friendships:

But somehow this 'Fuck a Duck' phase of ours had completely ended. It was not even talked about and people had totally moved on to think about what was going on in the Anglo-American world.

Livia contemplates how one factor behind the change may have been the development in Estonia, and that there was now less need for exchange of knowledge and support – the Estonian organizations in their connection-making turned more towards institutional cooperation. Indeed, 1995 marks a turn in the professionalization of the Estonian lesbian and gay community, as that year the EU funding program Phare financed a one-year anti-discrimination campaign in Estonia. At these events alcohol was forbidden, which according to Linda led to a decrease in participation in community events. Instead, women divided into their own groups, and activism focused on NGO work, such as public awareness-raising.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have covered the formation of an Estonian-Finnish translocal and transnational lesbian network started in 1990, in connection to the first public gathering of the Estonian lesbian community, and ended around 1995, with the professionalization of Estonian lesbian and gay activism and life changes of the key members of the community. While the oral histories do not reveal exact details of the discussions held at past community events, they convey the atmosphere of the network and how its meaning is understood in retrospect by the interviewees. The accounts we have collected highlight national differences, but also underline the strong sense of solidarity within the network. We have addressed how the turbulent era and economic imbalances shaped the network and how it formed a space in which to address different ways of being a lesbian. To sum up our study, we would like to address how the network was a distinctly lesbian network, how the studied time period fits into Estonian and Finnish queer histories and how our analysis adds to the understanding of the importance of transnational connections in queer history.

The Finnish-Estonian lesbian community was one in a diverse set of civil society ties that formed a bond across the Gulf of Finland when Estonian independence was restored. Finns could act as the big sister, introducing her Estonian little sister to lesbian feminist thinking, while the Estonian little sister could present Finns with ways of seeking enjoyment and resistance in the context of liberation after decades-long censorship of sexuality. While the women carried their national contexts with them, their network created a space centered on mutual excitement, which could balance the everyday outsider position of lesbians in both countries. In addition, the network fits within the broader patterns of Finnish grass-roots movements that supported the emerging Estonian civil society. Even though these queer connections seem to have gone unnoticed at the time, it is from the present perspective important to acknowledge how lesbian communities were also a part of the wider civil society movement.

Reading the accounts of Estonian and Finnish women together opens a new perspective on both local debates of the period and shows how the mutual relations between the two communities supported the women in finding livable positions as lesbians. That the interviewed women do not remember much about the discussions they had with women from the opposite shore of the Gulf of Finland does not mean that the discussions were not significant at the time. All the respondents remember the special, elevated feeling and the excitement around the parties and gatherings that served as a safe space for thinking freely about oneself and being acknowledged as a lesbian or bisexual woman.

These everyday-level connections and their significance for community-building is what our study adds to the existing research on the history of queer transnational connections. The dancing – and sometimes too much drinking – supported the feeling of community. Despite the lack of a common language, the opportunity to simply be in a shared space with other lesbian women provided the women with a community-forming experience. Focusing on transnational connections between LGBTQ organizations, Gonsalves and Velasco (2022, 93) describe the density and diversity within organization networks. Our study demon-

strates the significance of the same aspects on the level of personal ties, where transnational connection importantly helps to acknowledge the similarities and differences within the network.

While many long-term friendships were formed through the network, the interviewees recall only a few sexual or romantic relationships between Estonian and Finnish women. That, seemingly, few such relationships were formed may have been due to economic inequalities, issues around living out or in the closet, or to that the mutual admiration and exotization that the women found amusing did not contribute to the building of more serious relationships. Another reason may be that our narrators did not have any such stories to share or that they did not want to share them with us. The community was, however, intimate in other ways, as women stayed at each other's homes and for short periods of time were able to share in each other's everyday lives. Moreover, forming a community was a way of building lesbian identity, described by Terhi as a way "to exist as a lesbian woman."

In the history of the Estonian lesbian community, the early 1990s was the period when the community first formed as a publicly visible entity. Placing the network in the context of Finnish queer activism history, it is notable that it consisted only of women. In Seta's international cooperation initiatives, a majority of the activists were often men, and this community was thus an exception. That said, this kind of women's activism was a logical continuation of the lesbian activism of the 1980s, which can be exemplified by the women's group *Akanat* which was invited to Estonia in the spring of 1990. This development towards a separate lesbian activism was supported by Estonian forms of organizing, as it was natural for *Eesti Lesbiliit* to cooperate with women. In this way, the connections to Estonia also shaped the Finnish community, by offering a framework for women-only activities.

A special feature of the community is that transnational contacts formed a natural part of the activism and community of the time. The "Fuck a Duck Phase" is not remembered as a separate phase, but as a part of the community activism as well as the personal lives of the members. It is only in retrospect that it seems extraordinary. Moreover, the

transnational friendships that were formed back then have continued for decades. Ursula and her friend in Tallinn still call each other every Christmas Eve, even if they have not been in contact during the year. In addition to the personal contacts, the Finnish queer travels to Estonia and vice versa continued, as remembered by Tarja, who later in the 1990s traveled to Tallinn with a queer student organization. Also, Virva describes how she continues to make sure that larger women's parties organized in Helsinki are advertised on the other side of the Gulf of Finland. In a way, this article, too, fits into the continuum of Estonian-Finnish cooperation among queer women.

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Lii (1972–2022) July 6, 2020, Tallinn.  
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Maria (b. 1961) April 6, 2021, Tallinn.  
Lilian (b. 1956) August 5, 2021, Tallinn.  
Linda (b. 1962) May 19, 2022, Helsinki.  
Ülle (b. 1970) May 1, 2023, Tallinn.

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## NOTES

1. Translations by the authors. The names mentioned have been changed and some identifying details removed.
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