

# Russians tending to the burial place of Estonia's former head of state

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“Yes, of course we know! He was the President of Estonia!” Veronika, Anton, Nastja and Ksenja shout almost in unison. “The anniversary of his death is coming up,” Anton adds after a short pause.



Konstantin Pätsi hauapaik Buraševos. Foto: Jaanus Piirsalu

I am not in a history class in a school in Ida-Virumaa county somewhere where the life of Konstantin Päts is being taught. I am in [Russia](#). These children are 10<sup>th</sup> grade students of Burashevo Secondary School in Tver oblast, not far from Moscow.

Amazing! How many Estonian students could tell me that on 18 January of this year, 60 years will have passed since the death of one of the founders and the first President of the Republic of Estonia, Konstantin Päts?

Burashevo village with its population of about 2,000 people lies close to the city of Tver, 850 km from Tallinn, and is the place where 81-year-old Päts died completely alone in the local psychiatric hospital after 15 years of incarceration, a victim of the Soviet regime. Päts was buried in an unmarked grave in the woods near the hospital, just like hundreds of other patients in the asylum. Henn Latt and Valdur Timusk searched for the approximate location of Päts' grave 32 years after his death. The exact grave was located after a long search by an Estonian Heritage Society expedition in 1990. That same year, Päts' remains were reburied in the Metsakalmistu cemetery in Tallinn.

## **A miracle of sorts**

The logical thing to do from the point of view of the locals would have been to end the story of Päts in Burashevo there and forget it.

But local enthusiasts, ordinary Russians, decided otherwise and they have been keeping the memory of Päts alive in Burashevo together with Henn Latt in spite of everything.

This is a small miracle.

Even more surprising to me is the fact that the Estonian state has not provided a cent to mark the place of death of one of its founders and first president, and its entire contribution amounts to no more than a letter of thanks to the locals from our ambassador in Moscow.

There are a little over 200 students in the Burashevo school. The school has a small local history museum, mostly dedicated to the Second World War (or the Great Patriotic War as the Russians call it).

Three years ago, a corner dedicated to Päts was opened in the museum on the initiative of the current head pedagogue Valentina Solovjova, history teacher Olga Gontarova and former history teacher Natalya Grigorjeva. It mostly has books about Päts and some photos, it looks briefly at the history of Estonia and it also displays student papers on the life of Päts, most of them well-designed printouts from Wikipedia. The corner also has some video films about memorial services for Päts and meetings with guests from Estonia.

History teacher Gontarova takes the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to that corner and spends the whole lesson, 45 minutes, telling them about the first President of Estonia whose fate it was to die in the still-active psychiatric hospital about 2 kilometres from their school. "This is local history, and you can't erase or forget history," the school's headmaster Alexei Zinkejev tells *Postimees*. "Päts is our little connection to Estonia. We try to keep it."

The headmaster hints that their school wouldn't mind having a twinning school in Estonia, especially in a location with a connection to Päts. So far, they have not been able to find such a school.

Päts' former grave is even closer to the school than the hospital. Older students go there on 23 February every year to celebrate Päts' birthday. They even know that 24 February is Estonia's Independence Day and that Päts was involved in the proclamation of independence.

## **The only one cared for**

The former grave of Päts in Burashevo lies virtually in the middle of a forest. It is quite a surrealistic picture: a sparse forest reminiscent of a park, and a grave with a large natural stone and a cross. Actually, the whole forest is full of graves – patients from the psychiatric hospital used to be buried there in unmarked graves by the hundreds. Nameless mounds have sunk into the ground over the decades. The old burial place of Päts is the only one that is tended to by the locals.

The memorial stone was brought to Päts' burial place by local businessman Nikolai Pankratjev (53). He found the stone, arranged its transport with a tractor and together with Henn Latt added a plaque with an inscription in Estonian and Russian. All for their own money. That's what people's diplomacy can do. This is how Latt likes to refer to himself – a people's diplomat.

“This is an expression of tolerance by the Russian people,” Pankratjev tells me without a hint of humour. Maybe he is half-joking, but at least it sounds nice.

Nikolai Pankratjev is a large-scale businessman by Tver standards, employing close to 350 people in his IT company, furniture factory, a factory producing construction materials and fire extinguishers, and several shops. He was the local village mayor of Burashevo who issued the permit to exhume the remains of Päts in 1990, which was still during the Soviet time. A few months later he was expelled from the Communist Party for doing so, and he lost his job as the village mayor.

The former militiaman, criminal investigator Pankratjev took offence and decided to start a business. “Yes, you can say that I became a businessman thanks to Päts,” he agrees, when I say that Päts continued to influence people's lives, even decades after his death. Estonians owe Pankratjev a lot in matters related to Päts. How many people in the world have lost their jobs because of a former president of Estonia?

The present village mayor of Burashevo, Sergey Rumjantsev, says that everybody dies; there are no exceptions. “And if the former Estonian president died in our village, there is no difference, we have to remember him,” he says.

The head of Burashevo municipality council and one of the leading car salesmen of the Tver region, Sergei Rozhkov, says that commemorating Päts is “just a human tradition”. And it makes Burashevo better known, he says. “Not every village can say that a president has died there,” he adds.

Sergey Rozhkov has an important message for the state and people of Estonia.

“People's diplomacy is nice and all, but it would be great if the Estonian Embassy paid more attention to remembering Päts,” he says frankly. “A decent illuminated walkway to the grave would be nice, along with a bench and a real monument. It's your president that was resting there, after all!”

“That's true. Estonia should pay more attention to maintaining the surroundings of the burial place of their former president,” echoes the village mayor Rumjantsev, stepping in. “Building a walkway and keeping it tidy would not be very difficult; we could take care of the paperwork ourselves.”

That's a nice promise for a start. Real life in Russia is definitely not that simple, even if the Estonian Embassy in Moscow were to take action.

However, the men have a point. Although there is no doubt that people's diplomacy has done its best, the burial place of one of the initiators of proclaiming Estonian independence clearly deserves a better memorial. This is a matter of honour for Estonians before the centenary of the republic, even if the state does not have the will or the means.

There are no plans for any special events to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Päts in the municipality. “Celebrating and commemorating – that should be the responsibility of Estonians. If a delegation arrives from Estonia or some event is proposed, we will of course support it,” Nikolai Rozhkov says.

A long time ago, Rozhkov's grandmother used to live in Õismäe in Tallinn. It is clear that the man would be happy to see more interaction between his municipality and Estonia.

“Interaction would bring people closer together, for one,” he says. “Communication between people is the most important thing after all; it would show people that life is not always like what is shown on TV.”

I think his wish is sincere.

## **A reason to communicate**

Former Burashevo municipality deputy and editor of the local newspaper, Nadezhda Isidorova, is a great example of a person who became a fan of Estonia thanks to dealing with Päts.

Isidorova vividly describes how she personally came to Estonia to get the memorial plaque for Päts' burial place from Henn Latt. "I was really nervous about whether I would have problems on the border! You of course know why! Thank God, nobody was interested." It sounds like one of the greatest adventures of her life.

Isidorova, who has already been to Estonia on ten occasions, says that people should still communicate, regardless of the political relations between the countries. "Päts has been a good reason for us to establish relations with Estonia, schools, young people, various associations and in terms of business," she says. "For me, this has become very interesting."

Isidorova tells a most wonderful story about how members of the Estonian Armenian Society visited them last winter as part of a delegation from the EVA-Studiorum Foundation. "What do they have to do with Päts? And yet we became friends through Päts when we visited them in Estonia," Isidorova tells me.

"You see? But you, Estonians – you are hard to get going even with the help of a hurricane, although this is your business!" Nikolay Pankratjev chips in.

The EVA-Studiorum Foundation is the main partner and supporter of the Burashevians in Estonia at present, and it is in touch with them on an ongoing basis.

With the active Nadezhda Isidorova, we return to the same topic we already discussed in the Burashevo school – why couldn't a school in the Pärnu region where Päts was born have some closer relations with the local kids. "I'm sure you know it all depends on the people," she says.

Do I indeed! I decide it is better not to tell her that even in my wildest dreams I cannot imagine the parents of children in a school in Estonia raising funds today for their children to go on a trip to Russia.

## **The only Estonian in the village**

I pay a visit to the only local Estonian in Burashevo to check if the positive attitude towards Päts is general.

78-year old Venjamin Kulla, son of Robert, is a pure Estonian, although he has long since forgotten the Estonian language. His parents come from two adjacent Estonian villages near the source of the Volga. Kulla is a retired captain who has spent most of his life teaching physics in Suvorov schools (military boarding schools - J.P.). After retiring a decade ago, he moved to Burashevo and now teaches physics there in the school.

Kulla is mainly responsible for tending to the gravesite of Päts with his grandchildren.

At the time of Päts' birthday, the snow there tends to be chest-high. "So the boys take their shovels in their Physical Education lesson and clear a walkway from the road to the grave," he says resolutely.

"It must be 200 metres at least," I estimate.

"It's more, at least 500 metres," he retorts.

Kulla tells me about the local celebrations for the birthday of Päts at his gravesite. "Our clergyman always holds a service; then our municipality leaders say a few words, followed by the history teacher. If there are visitors from Estonia, they also get to say a few words. The meeting is always interesting, and children listen with their mouths open.

Candles. Flowers. Everything as it should be!” Kulla describes, as he shares his meal of fried potatoes with eggs and sausage with me.

There are 50-60 people present always, most of them pupils. “For the older classes, the two last lessons that day are cancelled and they go to the grave of Päts. They like to go there,” the old teacher assures me, as he muses for a moment and then bursts into laughter: “I’m not sure though, maybe the fact that the lessons get cancelled is more important to them!”

Besides the birthday, Kulla also takes the children to Päts’ gravesite on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May when the whole of Russia celebrates victory over Germany in World War II.

“What is the connection between Päts and May 9th?” I cannot help wondering aloud. “Päts was a victim of repressions and of the great war!” the former officer answers. I ask Venjamin Kulla if the local psychiatric hospital has any plans to put up a plaque to commemorate Päts’ stay there. “There is no such plan. To tell you the truth, the hospital is in such a bad shape today that it would hardly be an honour to Päts,” he says.

I find it wiser not to start a discussion on whether it would be a great honour for Päts if the hospital was “thriving” as it did in the 1950s. Estonians should feel honoured that there are a lot of good people living in Burashevo who take care of the burial place of our first president. It wouldn’t take much for the former grave of Päts to fall into oblivion.

This is almost the fate that has befallen the presumed grave in Turkmenistan of Päts’ contemporary, Kārlis Ulmanis, who served as president of Latvia at the same time Päts served as president of Estonia. Ulmanis, imprisoned by the Soviets, died in 1942 in Krasnovodsk (present-day Türkmenbaşy). In the early 2000s, Latvians placed a memorial plaque to Ulmanis at the local cemetery, but Latvian media recently reported that the probable gravesite as well as the surroundings of the memorial plaque are overgrown and generally neglected.

Source: [Jaanus Piirsalu, Burashevo, Tver oblast](#), Postimees