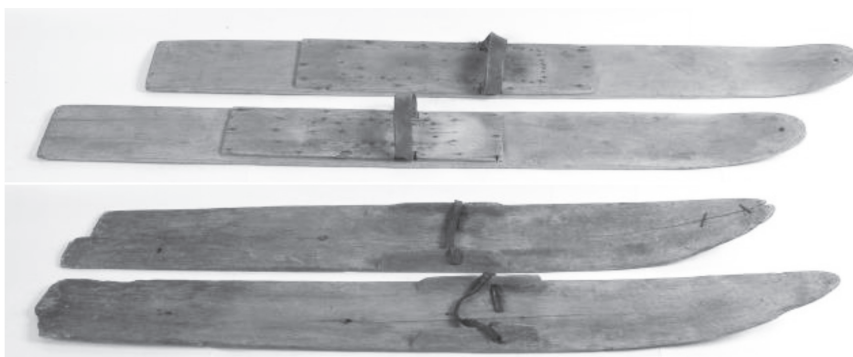


Emm Mainla

The Estonians as Apprentices at the World Championships in Lahti 1938

In Estonia the skills of moving around on snow reach back centuries like in other northern countries, among hunters and foresters, but in terms of athletic skiing we can talk about a mere century. The honour of bringing the first modern pair of skis to Estonia has been attributed to Oskar Kallas, the later philologist and diplomat who studied at the University of Helsinki in 1892–1893. He himself really used the skis while living in Narva in 1893 to 1895 and drew attention this way. It is also known that the Krasnojarsk regiment of the Russian army that was brought to Tartu from Finland in 1894, carried with them skis as well as skiing skills, which undoubtedly impressed the townspeople. Skiing as a Sunday activity spread little by little, especially in Tartu, where in 1912 the first skiing competitions were held among the students of the local Sports society with the same name. The first ski rental station that opened up in Tartu during the world war years bears witness to a rising interest towards skiing.¹



Tens of ski pairs made before the 20th century are preserved in the storage of the Estonian National Museum. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

In January 1921 the Tartu “Kalev“ arranged skiing competitions on the smooth ice of River Embach; the distances were 1500 and 5000 metres for men and 1500 metres for women.² One month later the distance of 25 kilometres was measured up on the river ice and the first Estonian champions were crowned in cross-country skiing. As the champion Arnold Veiss (Veimre) emerged.

From now on it became a yearly tradition to crown the national champions but in fact the circle of practitioners remained rather narrow. Actually, skiing was initially a somewhat more common activity in the army, considering the practical side of it, as it enabled to move faster ahead in terrain covered by snow.

Oskar Kallas in 1938 with his wife Aino in their summer home in Kassari. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.



The years 1927–1932 witnessed a thorough turnaround in the direction of sports for the masses. Namely, in 1927 in the rural town of Tapa the first military championships were arranged with more than a hundred participants. In the early spring of the same year, on the initiative of the Estonian Central Sports Federation and the support of the Defence League, the Finnish ski champion and teacher Armas Palmros was invited to Estonia, and during courses lasting a fortnight he schooled pretty many instructors, whose work would later on bear good fruit. He also gave useful tips regarding choosing skis, which meant considerably shorter cross-country skis than those used hitherto, and instead of nosebands he recommended to procure bandages that keep the foot steadier upon the ski.³

In 1928 the second military championships took place in Tapa, where 120 men took off at the same time, a true mass start. Much attention was paid to the best skiers of the Defence League and the Järvepojad sports society and their 100 kilometres long journey from Paide to Tallinn.⁴



The first skiing competitions in Tartu were organized by the students' sports society Sport. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.



Skiing competitions of the sports society Tartu Kalev on the ice of River Embach took place also in 1922. Starting men ... Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

Hitherto, skiing competition had been held on flat land or even upon the icy rivers or lakes but from 1929 on, the Defence organizations' championships in Rakvere were for the first time held in cross-country terrain. The skiers who had all started side by side were on the third kilometre confronted with – by today's standards harmless – slopes, which made the descending men fall by the dozens and many also broke their skis. However, five visiting skiers from Finland whom the reporters compared to “flying birds over our little slopes“, set a good example. Another first-timer were the “airborne“ Finns on Kõrgemäe near Rakvere, where a few weeks earlier Estonia's first wooden take-off spring-



... and women. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

board was constructed. The jumps of the Finnish guests Pekka Kuvaja and Toivo Nykänen reached to 20 metres, while the Estonians had to battle with the ten metre mark.⁵

Nevertheless, the same winter of 1929 the Estonians thought themselves prepared to crown the Estonian champion among themselves in the hilly landscape of Otepää. The sparse experience of skiing in a little bumpier terrain explains why Theodor Anderson who was the first to compete at the Defence League's meet in Finland and Artur Veborn



Military Academy's team, the winner of the Estonian defence organizations' championships in Rakvere in 1929. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

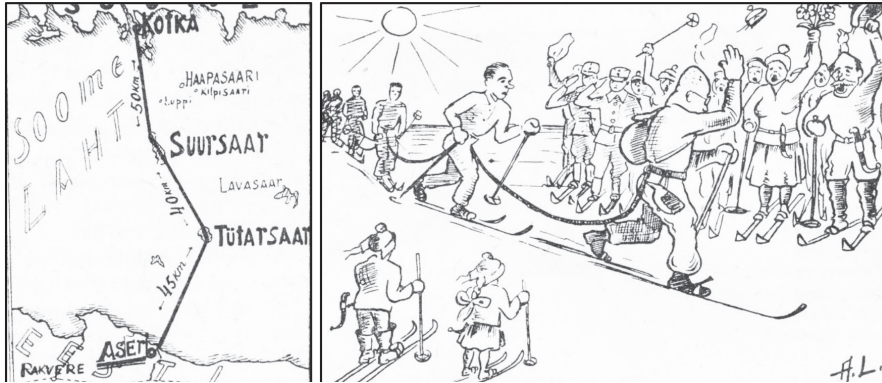


Toivo Nykänen on Rakvere
Tõrma ski jump in 1929.
Photo: Eesti, Spordi
muuseum.

who had joined a military meet, quitted. Our men who were used to moving along pretty well on Estonia's flat skitracks, had simply given up because of the severe surface in Finland.⁶

In 1931 the Defence League carried out a skiing relay race around Estonia. Altogether, 224 skiers covered the distance of 1129 kilometres.⁷ In Viljandi in the presence of Finnish representatives a veritable cross-country skiing competition for the defence organizations was held, whereas two and two started every half minute out into a rather harsh scenery.⁸ Yet a third event of this ski-winter drew attention – a three-day journey by nine Defence League skiers across the Finnish Gulf with stops on Tytärsaari and Suursaari (Hogland).⁹

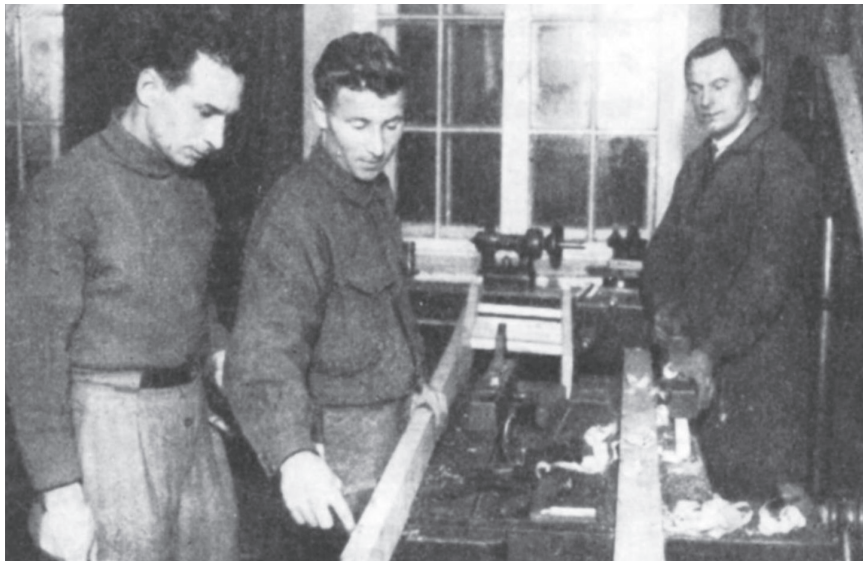
One impelling force for propagating skiing among the people was the skimakers' courses in Tallinn, Tartu and Paide, led by Eino Sipola, ski instructor of the Finnish Defence League, who was invited to Estonia by our Defence League in November 1931. Educated instructors arranged courses in turn in their home neighbourhood. The number of participants during three years numbered over three thousand, and



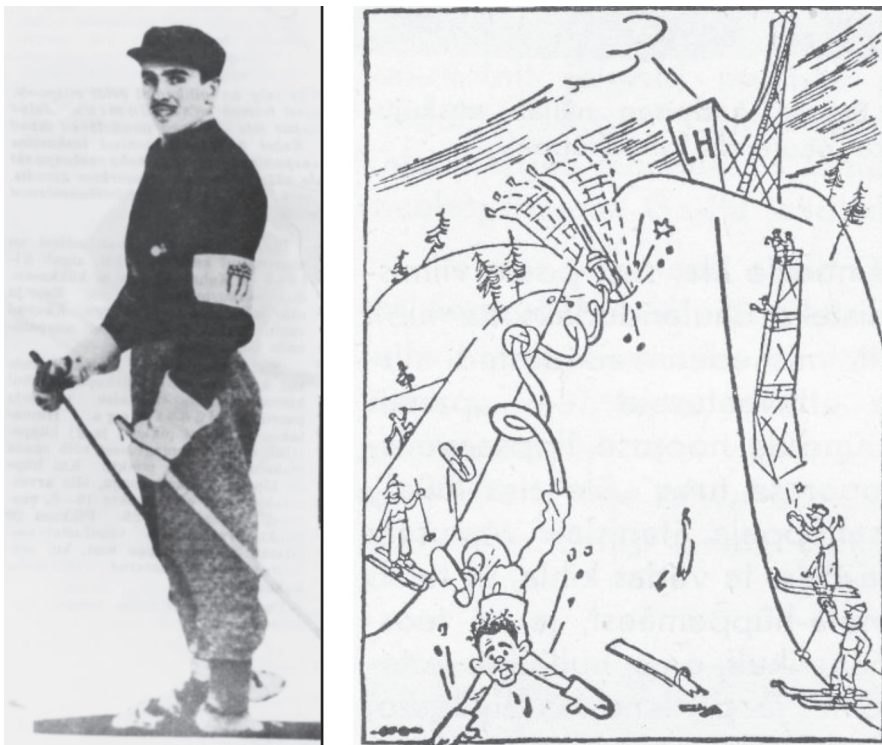
Defence League's skiing trip in 1931 across the Gulf of Finland from Aseri to Kotka with stops at Tytärsaari and Suursaari. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

each participant made at least one pair of skis. At home of course nobody concealed his skills, and one could figure out that at the time of the Estonian Winter Games in 1935 there must have existed close to 50 thousand pairs of skis in the country.¹⁰

This time period included the first serious skijumping tests. From the springboard built within the Viljandi castle hill in the winter of 1931 the



Skimakers' courses led by the ski instructor of the Finnish Defence League, Eino Sipola (in the middle) in 1931. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.



Oskar Veldeman and his unlucky jump in Lahti pictured by himself. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

first ski jumps had been executed, and at one competition Toivo Nykänen of Finland showed up again, flying upon his own suggestion from a somewhat amended (shortened) take-off board a record 23 metres.¹¹ At the same jumping hill Oskar Veldeman was crowned the first Estonian champion of 1933 with a jump of 21 and a half metre.¹²

In 1934 the Estonian Winter Sports Union became a member of the FIS, which paved the way to the international arena. The same year Estonian skiers could for the first time take on foes in Lahti at the Salpausselkä Games, where on the 17 kilometres distance Edgar Siitan managed to place 67th as the best Estonian among 123 competitors, and Jakob Tartu 71st at the 50 km marathon and Vassili Krassikov 74th among 161 competitors. In the ski jumping of the games Oskar Veldeman took upon himself the role of Estonian pioneer at the Lahti springboard, but his endeavour had a sad end. At the second attempt Veldeman's ski pene-

trated the snow and he fell and twisted his leg by the knee. Realizing the fact that our top skiers were presently no match for the best of Finland, Sweden and Norway, the Estonians had to admit being novices in the skisport, coupled with having meagre winter seasons.¹³

Also in 1935 Lahti was visited by Vassili Krassikov, Edgar Siitan, Voldemar Särak, Jakob Tartu and Voldemar Treinberg. Of these, only Treinberg reached the finish, while all others either broke their skis or just gave up.¹⁴

In 1936 at the Garmisch-Partenkirchen Winter Olympics the only Estonian cross-country skier to participate, Vassili Krassikov (who later changed his name to Vello Kaaristo) finished the 18 km distance 30th and the 50 km marathon 23rd, which was considered promising. This encouraged the Estonian Winter Sports Federation to send a more numerous team to the World Championships in Lahti 1938: six cross-country skiers, two ski jumpers and one man in the Nordic biathlon.

Their journey to Finland started in Tallinn onboard the steamship “Oihonna“. In Helsinki they were met by a dispatched old Ford, on



Estonian team before departure for Lahti world championships (1938) in Tallinn port (from left): F. Kuljus (delegate), Elmar Pransa, Voldemar Särak, Edgar Siitan, Jakob Tartu, Raimund Kasikov, Vello Kaaristo, Eduard Raidla, Aleksander Peepre and Oskar Veldeman. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.



At the opening parade Edgar Kolmpere in front carrying the flag, behind him (from left) Aleksander Peepre, Eduard Raidla and Oskar Veldeman. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

which in addition to the men also an old-fashioned coffin with food supplies and other stuff had to fit in. They were headed for the railway station, and further by train to Lahti. There they were met by the Finnish representative Anto Mäkinen, who remained at the disposal of the Estonians for the rest of the time. As night-quarters they got a holiday home on one of the islands in the lake.¹⁵

On day one the men went to check out the cross-country tracks while the jumpers familiarized themselves with the 40 m springboard. Their trial jumps measured over 30 metres without any falls. Next day they had an appetite for trying the huge 65 m hill. For those used to the 20 m hills of their home district, the climb up in such a high tower was quite an experience. Although the first jump in high speed forced Eduard Raidla on his buttocks, they dared to go for a second and third round of jumps. However, the jumps remained short, some 40 metres.¹⁶

On the day prior to the Championships the official trial jumps did not succeed very well. Eduard Raidla lost his balance because of a too early take-off, leaned to the left and landed on his side. He lost his consciousness and did not regain it before reaching the hospital. He had bruises and scratches,

his hand ached, but the bones were luckily saved.¹⁷ Next day the story of his fall was headlined in the newspapers, while the fate of the other Estonians was not mentioned at all. On the day of the competition Oskar Veldeman got a special prize from the organizers as the best Estonian. His jumps measured 50 and 52.5 metres, respectively, but the using of his hands at both landings in the snow disqualified his jumps.¹⁸ Veldeman's comment after the competition: "There is no sense of competing when we have got a hill back home for barely 40 m jumps."¹⁹

But alas! The skills of the Estonians turned out to be far below the standards of the world's best, and also our cross-country skiers had to satisfy with the ranks in the end of the line. In the 4 x 10 km relay they managed among the eleven teams to beat only their southern neighbours, the Latvians. A better rank could not be received because of Elmar Pransa's fall and finishing his leg of the relay with one ski broken. Of the four men Vello Kaaristo had the best time of 44.08, Edgar Siitan finished at 44.20 and Voldemar Särak 47.58.²⁰

On the 18 km distance Estonia's best skier Edgar Siitan finished 109th, losing to the winner by more than nine minutes. The others finished further back, also Vello Kaaristo was no better than 125th. He was



Raimund Kasikov at the start of the 18 km distance at the Lahti World Championships in 1938. Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

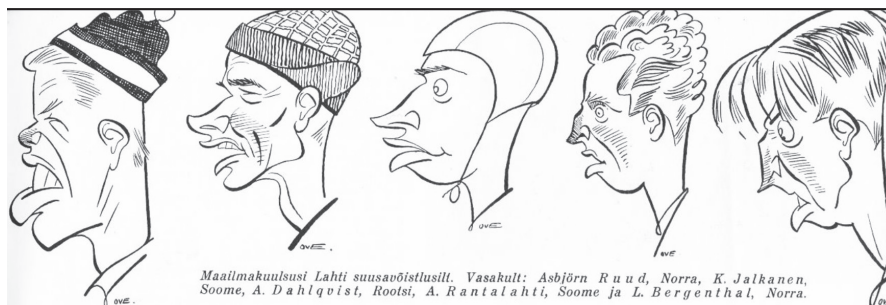
followed by Voldemar Särak who was 155th, Raimund Kasikov 158th, Jakob Tartu 168th and Elmar Pransa 174th.²¹

Of all starters the very last man to finish as 187th was the biathloneer Aleksander Peepre whose jumps were short (38 and 42.5 m, respectively) and did not raise his combined rank.²²

Only two Estonians ventured at the 50 km distance. Voldemar Särak was forced to quit already after five kilometres, as he had damaged both skis in a fall. Edgar Siitan was stricken with a similar accident on the most difficult stretch of the track at the 18th km, when he fell and broke a ski. A Finnish spectator kindly offered one of his, but it was completely ungreased. Siitan somehow managed to partially cover about 10 km half-limping and tramping, but realized that further competition did not make sense, so he too preferred to quit.²³

A surprise was arranged halfway into the Championships' program, namely a 5 km race for reporters. This was sort of a consolation as Henn Arvo of the Viljandi newspaper finished second.²⁴

In conclusion it must be stressed that in the early development of Estonian skisport the Finns played a central role. The Finnish instructors' and skimasters' courses, the Finnish skiers' instructive competition



– these world-famous skiers, from whom Estonians had to learn so much in Lahti in 1938, were portrayed by OVE (Oskar Veldeman). Photo: Eesti, Spordi muuseum.

in Estonia and the Estonians' trips across the gulf to get acquainted with the Finnish skiing, all this helped the Estonians to quicker grasp the secrets of the skisport, injected optimism and self-esteem for times to come. However, from Lahti the hoped-for success did not come yet, but the experience and observations gained were promising for the future.

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