

Living in Kalamaja

I live in the Kalamaja district in Tallinn, Estonia. The word Kalamaja means fish district and is near the harbor. It consists of old wooden Estonian houses, many in very bad disrepair, and is the poorest district of the city. When people hear I live there, they frown. Embassy people worry about me and my safety. My host told me never to walk alone after dark.

None of these people live here. They live in improved sections of the city, some in very large modern apartments. They drive cars with security systems and have secure parking arrangements. I don't know if any of them have even been in Kalamaja as it is not in the busy section of the city.

I live in Kalamaja and here is my experience. My street Suur Patarei is a pleasant street lined with new apartment buildings and old Estonian houses. The wooden houses are, for the most part, unpainted, and many have old windows and doors. Out of these houses come families on their way to work. Few have cars and most ride the tram. There is a prison in this district and some burned out houses that stand blackened and empty two years after the fire. As you walk into the center of the district the sidewalks become bumpy and hazardous. There are few shops and many of the buildings that used to hold shops are abandoned and boarded up or have burned. I walk through this area on my way to the post office and bank. There are neighborhood bars open at 9am and visited by men. Unemployment is high and there are many old people living here. Most are Russian. On the street I hear only Russian being spoken.

The center of Kalamaja has the post office, a branch of hansapank, a pharmacy (apteek), a liquor store and a small local grocery store. Near the center is a good sauna, a large stone building with many expensive cars parked outside. It is considered clean by the locals. Past the center is the train station and a Russian outdoor market. Almost no Estonians shop at the outdoor market. It is peopled chiefly by Russian sellers and buyers. I love these markets. The food is fresh, right from the gardens. There are many choices on display so you can walk about until you find just what you want. The prices are lower than in the stores. Business is conducted in Russian.

On one visit I saw an old woman hooking rugs. They sold for about \$1.50 or 25 k. The one on top was beautiful. I wanted it. She said "Nye Nada" no never! It was the best one and she had it for display only. So I moved on. I still want one of those rugs so I will have to go back another day and look for her. As poor as she was, she wouldn't sell that one. Perhaps she made it for her children or someone special.

While everything else is outside, meat is sold in the meat room and all of the sellers have their choices displayed in standard meat coolers with prices. It looks well maintained and clean. If you ask, they will cut you a slice of sausage to taste before you buy. I found my favorite Ukrainian garlic sausage and bought 300 grams or "tree sto". If people don't speak English, they have electronic calculators and they show you the amount. There is skinless, boneless chicken parts costing more, but the standard price of chicken is about \$1.40/kilo. A kilo is 2.2 lbs. Meat is fresh, in fact there are hog carcasses lying on boxes next to the seller's area for butchering. And large parts of steers waiting as well. What is surprising is that the place smells fresh and clean, with no spoiled meat smell.

I like this farmer's market concept. No middle men, no plastic packaging separate the buyer from the seller. Meat is inspected and stamped. One of the sellers advertises Estonian meat. I buy there.

Outside of the meat room, the sellers have laurel leaves which we call bay leaves, parsley, dill, pickles, sauerkraut, beets, and cabbage. These are for making borscht and olivia, two popular Ukrainian/Russian dishes. Few Estonians even know how to make borscht. They eat meat and potatoes and veggies and salad like we do.

I am shopping to get the ingredients for chicken soup. So I buy chicken, onions, garlic, small leafed parsley (wide leafed is popular here), carrots, and mushrooms. I'm out of pepper, "peretz" but I forget to get some. I have laurel leaf and salt and rice at home.

There is the hustle and bustle of a busy place. You have to bring your own plastic bag or "pocket" for your purchases. There are flowers and baked goods, delicious smelling breads of all types, and a wide selection of cheeses.

On the way out I buy some heather and flowers to make my flat more beautiful. Life is simple here, buying and selling, walking and eating. I hope that when Kalamaja is upgraded, the market remains.

I've heard there were plans to improve Kalamaja, but the money ran out before they could be implemented. Many of the houses are subsidized by the state and the rent is so low they cannot be improved. There are just no economic reasons to spend money here. It will have to be the private person who takes responsibility and invests in property on one of the dusty streets.

As I walk home, I notice the contrasts between the wooden houses and some modern brick and stucco apartment houses near the center. And even near my house, there is a family improving an old stone single family house. Here and there are sparks of investments and people working to upgrade the district.

Because it is such a poor district housing is very inexpensive. My house for instance sells one-room flats for about \$5000 unimproved. It costs another \$4000 to improve them. So you have a modern little apartment at very low cost. Many Estonians own their flats and pay many hundred's of thousands of EEK (Estonian Krone's) for them. But, in fact, in my building two of the flats are owned by Dutch businessmen who travel to Estonian a few weeks a year. They keep these nice flats waiting for when they need them. My neighbor looks after them and keeps them from piling up too much dust.

Perhaps there are bad elements in this district. I am careful and don't walk alone after dark here or anywhere in the city. Suur Patarei, is a neighborhood street with families who fly the Estonian flag to celebrate winning a gold medal at the Olympics. It is a quiet street and relatively clean. I can't say it is safe nor is it a rumbling hotbed of crack houses and drive-by shootings. It has more dignity than that.

I have often asked myself why I chose to live in an old section of Tallinn. I've done it in all the cities I've lived in. When I was first married, my husband and I lived on the second floor of an old house in the warehouse district of Ypsilanti, Michigan. Many times each day a train engine would move boxcars down the center of my street. The force of those cars would shake the house and the noise was distracting. Often men would stand on the tops of the boxcars and look into my living room window as they rumbled by. We grew used to it and barely noticed it, but when we had friends over, they were always shocked and looked at us as though we were crazy to live there. I remember

thinking it was the crazy 60's when we were wearing our hair long over peasant dresses and bare feet and everyone was doing odd things. I was in love and it was part of an eccentric lifestyle.

When I moved to Bemidji as a single mother with two children, I had to live in a modest home in the city. But I don't have any regrets. Instead I found it interesting that there were social services in my neighborhood. I was happy when families moved in and fixed up their homes. My home was of good quality and when I redecorated it, I could afford to redesign the interior with some unique features. It is lovely and close to the University and downtown. The police are down the street as is the fire station. The library is within easy walking distance. My children walked to neighborhood schools. From my perspective these were all good features.

And I never forget that there are homeless people and poor people living nearby. That US society is a series of shocking contrasts. It is important to see them and remember that things are not all fine. That people are worth a second look regardless of income and race. These are core value issues. And, even in childhood, there were remnants of this orientation in my personal life. That we must see everyone for who they are not how beautiful they are or how fancy their neighborhood is or how much wealth they've accumulated.

I remember having a repetitive dream in childhood that has stayed with me all of my life. I am travelling with my parents and we can't find a place to stay for the night. There is only one old decrepit motel down the road. We are forced by circumstance to choose this one. It is so old, the paint has worn off and the wooden exterior is weathered and badly in need of repair. The windows are dark and uninviting. We get out of our car and walk into the office to register. And inside, it is bright and completely beautiful, fresh and clean! We were so happy we chose this old ugly one. I remember the feeling of intense satisfaction over that dream. The ugly was the most beautiful. Further analysis might suggest that this is a theme of my own life. As a child I was my brother's little sister, chubby, unattractive, and invisible. He was the outstanding one, so bright, articulate, creative, funny, and thin. I remember thinking that if people would only look more closely they would find a lovely little person inside.

I live in the Kalamaja district and I feel right at home.