

Herbert S. Gott: Building Civil Society in Estonia, 1920-1932



In his memoirs, U.S. diplomat George Kennan describes his time in Tallinn in 1928 thus: “My recollection is that Estonia harbored, at that time, a total of nine native-born Americans, five of whom – the consul and his wife, a YMCA couple, and myself – lived in Tallinn.” Kennan's impromptu census did not seem to have included any children – neither U.S. Consul Harry E. Carlson and his wife Laura's son (Harry Jr. born in Tallinn on October 21, 1927) nor YMCA Director Herbert S. Gott and his wife XXXX's twin daughters (Gladys and XXXX). Like the Carlsons, the Gotts adapted very well to life in Estonia. A February 17, 1929 article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* stated that Gott is reported “to be the only American who has learned the Estonian language. His work is equally successful.”

In addition to establishing the Estonian Young Christian Men's Association (YMCA) in 1920, Gott became the organization's director the following year. Under his stewardship, Estonia's YMCA

grew over the next eleven years to include 21 associated groups and over 5,500 members all across the country, including Estonian-, Russian-, and German-language speakers. Thanks to his efforts, the Estonian YMCA became a model self-supporting, non-governmental organization (NGO) which helped integrate different elements of Estonian society. Gott's YMCA was also responsible for introducing two major new sports to Estonia: basketball (invented at the YMCA's Springfield College in 1891) and volleyball (also invented by the YMCA in 1895). For his work building Estonia's YMCA, Gott received the Order of the Estonian Red Cross in 1937 "for aid given in the rehabilitation of Estonia." Tartu University awarded him an honorary degree in 19XX.

Not content with setting up just one Estonian NGO, Gott was also one of the seven men who founded Estonia's Rotary Club in 1929. His six partners included: General Johan Laidoner (Commander of the Estonian Army), Ants Piip (who served at different times as the Estonian State Elder, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, War Minister, and Ambassador to the United States), Juhan Kukk (who served at different times as the Estonian State Elder, Prime Minister, Finance Minister, Commerce Minister, and Chairman of the Estonian Central Bank), Joakim Puhk (owner of one of Estonia's largest companies), Claus Scheel (Executive Director of Estonia's largest private bank), and U.S. Consul Harry E. Carlson.

Joining the YMCA

Herbert S. Gott was born in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 188X. After attending school in the United States and Ireland, Gott graduated from the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1910. He was active in both the student YMCA and intramural athletics where he served as the captain of MIT's gymnastics team and as a member of the rowing team (crew). An engineer by training, Gott went to work first for the Metropolitan Street Railway Company in New York City and then for Hitchings & Co. (a manufacturer of greenhouses) where he worked as a district manager. But after his early experiences in the world of business, Gott decided that working in the private sector was not his true calling. So in 1913 Gott found a job running programs for young men at New York City's famous 86th Street YMCA. After a year in New York, he transferred to the Boston YMCA where he worked until 1916.

The YMCA – sometimes simply known as *The Y* – began in London, England in 1844. Founded by a young man named George Williams, the YMCA's original goal was to put Christian principles into practice at a time when the Industrial Revolution was uprooting age-old traditions. The YMCA's mission has since evolved to include a holistic approach to both individuals and their social environments which focuses on physical, intellectual, as well as spiritual development. The YMCA encourages sports and fitness in the belief that a healthy mind and spirit should

reside in a healthy body. Today, the YMCA has over 45 million members around the world in 124 different countries including Estonia. From its inception, the YMCA began to break down barriers between different social classes and religious denominations. Following in these traditions, today's YMCAs tend to be open to everyone regardless of gender, class, age, nationality, and even faith.

Working in Russia, Manchuria, and then Estonia

While Gott was working at the Boston Y – the oldest in the United States (est. 1851), the Great War broke out in Europe. In 1916, Gott answered the call to duty by volunteering to help German prisoners of war held in Russian camps. For the next year, Gott – with his wife and twin daughters in tow – worked to help war prisoners from Petrograd to Irkutsk. He witnessed the February Revolution in Petrograd and was caught in the cross-fire of the Bolshevik's October Revolution while in Siberia. Along with numerous White Russian refugees, the Gotts eventually made it to Harbin in Manchuria where he would spend 1918 and part of 1919 setting up the local branch of the YMCA. From Harbin, Gott returned to New York City with his family and completed additional YMCA training.

Always ready to help others in need, Gott volunteered next for duty in Estonia, arriving in Reval (Tallinn) with his family in March 1920 right after the War of Independence ended. He began to work among the 20,000 Russian refugees. For the next twelve years, Gott helped Estonia build a civil society – even while Estonia's harsh climate ruined his health. After a dozen years in Estonia, Gott spent several years seeking treatment in Switzerland before moving to La Jolla, California for the good weather.

By 1937, Gott's health had deteriorated to the point that he was unable to attend the awards ceremony where he was to receive the Order of the Estonian Red Cross at the R.C.A. Building in New York City. As a result, Eugene Barrett, the YMCA's Executive Secretary, accepted the Order from Estonian Consul General Karl Kuusik on Gott's behalf. Gott's successor as the Secretary General of the Estonian YMCA Herbert Tõnissoo traveled all the way from Tallinn just to be at the awards ceremony. Gott died on January 29, 1941, while being treated at a Flagler Hospital in St. Augustine, Florida. Several months earlier, the Red Army forces occupying Estonia began to shut down the YMCA as an “anti-Soviet” organization.

Building the Estonian YMCA in the 1920s

A “snap shot” of YMCA activities taken on March 10, 1924 showed dozens of scheduled classes with almost 500 participants. In addition to giving lectures, showing movies, hosting Bible study

sessions, and teaching sports in order to build the body, mind, and spirit, the YMCA also conducted very practical real life training for its Estonian, Russian, and Baltic German members. There were English classes for everyone, Estonian classes for Russians and Germans, and German classes for Estonians and Russians. The Y also taught courses in basic business skills (including shorthand and bookkeeping), machining, auto repair, and even how to drive a car. Working together with an unidentified member of the Riigikogu (probably Jaan Hünerson), the YMCA taught public speaking skills. Other activities included a boxing club, sporting events and competitions, a drama club, various church clubs, an orchestra, and, of course, a choir. The Y was home to several Scout troops.

The Tallinn YMCA was headquartered at Toom-Kooli 17 and at first made use of the gymnasium at the nearby German School up on Toompea. In 1924, Estonia's Lutheran Church gave the YMCA another building in Tallinn for its long-term use. Not long afterwards, the Y managed to build one of the first purpose built sports facilities in Tallinn in 1925. In addition to these buildings, various large factories around Tallinn also provided the Y with meeting rooms and encouraged their workers to take part. One such outside location was at the Northern Paper and Pulp Mills owned by YMCA sponsor W. Fahle. By 1925, the Y was conducting programs for up to 3,000 young people a week. In keeping with its sporting traditions, the YMCA even helped provide training facilities for Estonian athletes competing in the 1924 Paris Olympics.

Before the Estonian YMCA became self-financing around 1925, Gott served as the main fundraiser, soliciting over 200,000 EEK in donations from the United States alone. The YMCA Fundraising Committee listed such notable Estonian members as Konstantin Päts (a State Elder), Friedrich Karel Akel (another State Elder), Arthur Lossmann (the major general in charge of the Estonian Army's medical corps), and W. Fahle (a businessman) all working under the chairmanship of Georg Vestel (a finance minister). Members of the YMCA's Board included Jaan Hünerson (an MP, agricultural minister, and editor of *Kaja*), Leo Sepp (an economics minister), Ilja Jevsejev (a former member of the Russian Duma living in exile), as well as the Bishop of Estonia, Jakob Kukk. The YMCA appears to have been very popular among Estonia's elite because of its positive "character building" approach to life. As Gott noted in his 1925 status report on Estonia, "It seems to be generally agreed that drinking is the greatest danger to young men." The YMCA provided the perfect antidote.

The Estonian YMCA was also active around the country, purchasing a building at Vallikraavi 23 in Tartu in order to open the first YMCA in Estonia's second city. The YMCA even ran a series of summer camps on the Baltic shores from 1925 for 1939 where boys engaged in a variety of sporting activities including swimming as well as attending Bible classes. William Orr, who wrote one of the first evaluation reports of the Estonian Y, noted the cyclical nature of the Y's

work in Estonia. While everyone was happy with all the various indoor activities that the YMCA provided during the colder months of the year, in the summer everyone wanted to spend all their time outdoors. Thanks to their network of summer camps, the YMCA was able to work around the year.

Evaluating Gott's Work in Estonia

After his 1924 visit to evaluate the work of the Estonian YMCA, William Orr wrote a letter to a colleague with the following observation: “By the way, Gott is doing one of the cleanest cut pieces of Y.M.C.A. engineering that I have seen anywhere in Europe. He is winning one element after another of the Estonian population while retaining his hold on the Russian minority. Lately even the German Balts have begun to show an interest in the work of the Estonian Y.M.C.A. in spite of their having a German Association I sometimes wonder if Gott is fully appreciated by the [American Y.M.C.A.] Association.”

In another letter, Orr wrote: “Gott is making steady and consistent progress in establishing the Association in Reval on the basis of trained staff, devoted members and community confidence and support [The members are] largely Estonian, but include also some Russians and Germans, so here the three elements in Estonia are meeting on common ground. One could not ask for a finer spirit, not only of fellowship but determination to serve that these fine Y.M.C.A. men show. Then the influential members of the community are increasingly coming to the support of the Association. Hats off to Herbert Gott.”

In 1927, Tartu University Professor Hugo Bernhard Rahamägi – who served as Estonia's Minister of Education from 1924 to 1925 – provided the YMCA with a letter of endorsement. Worried about the future of Estonia's youth, Professor Rahamägi wrote: “For young men to gather together, we must provide such possibilities and such places where they can develop their inner lives, find spiritual and moral support, inspiration, and where they can also use and develop their physical forces. The Young Men's Christian Associations are such places of nurture.”

A YMCA biography of Gott dated 1929 stated that Estonian “[g]overnmental and civil leaders have welcomed Mr. Gott and his associates with their character-building program. Mr. Gott has been signally successful in his leadership of the young Estonian Y.M.C.A. Movement. He has been responsible for rooting many features of the Y.M.C.A. program, boys' clubs, recreative games, religious work adapted to personal needs, to national life He has established a model camp on the shores of the Baltic, initiated several industrial branches in Reval factories, and put the infant [Y.M.C.A.] Movement on a basis of complete self-support The Estonian Association Movement is the first one in Europe aided from America to attain 100% self-support.”

Towards the end of his tenure in Tallinn, Gott returned to the United States on leave and agreed to give a lecture at MIT on November 23, 1931 on his experiences in Estonia called "Rebuilding a Nation." MIT's newspaper *The Tech* reported two days later that "his greatest task, Mr Gott declared, was to teach the youths the idea of fair play and tolerance." In the same article, Gott was quoted as saying: "You can't build a civilization on only a material basis." Even before his talk, the November 20 edition of *The Tech* included a letter by Gott's friend HR. Kurrelmeyer who drew attention to Gott's successful efforts to promote integration in Estonia with the words: "He is leading the warring races to a better understanding of each other."

Gott was not the only YMCA activist recognized by the Estonian Government. Dr. Lawrence Locke Doggett, the director of the YMCA's Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts, arranged for several Estonian YMCA students to study at his teacher-training college in order to become physical education teachers. For his close cooperation with the Estonian YMCA, Dr. Doggett also received the Order of the Estonian Red Cross in the same 1937 ceremony as Gott. In 1938, three other YMCA activists received the Order of the Estonian Red Cross: YMCA President John R. Mott, YWCA activist Lois Diehl, and YMCA activist Martha Finley. Both Diehl and Finley played an important part in launching Estonia's Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

Estonia's YMCA Today

After it was re-established in 1990, Estonia's YMCA organization has grown to include five chapters and over 600 active members. It has been a member of the World Alliance of YMCA's since 1991. One of the YMCA's goals as described in its Mission Statement is "to integrate Russian-speaking inhabitants to Estonian society through the programs" that it sponsors. Some of these programs include: promoting diversity by introducing other cultures in Estonia; forming partnerships with churches and other non-governmental organizations devoted to promoting youth, education, culture, and health; as well as engaging in charitable work by helping orphans, senior citizens, and the disabled. As a result of the good work of the current generation of volunteers, Gott's legacy lives on in Estonia today.