

Farewell to Melbourne Estonian House

Speech delivered at the Last Hurrah

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Melbourne Estonian House

43 Melville Road, West Brunswick

24 May 2026

I would like to thank you all for attending today to formally bid farewell to the Estonian House in Melville Rd West Brunswick that has served the Estonian Community in Melbourne so well for almost 55 years.

This occasion deserves a little history lesson of how this location and the Estonian House Co-operative that looks after the building, came about. So here it goes.

The Estonian community in Melbourne dates back to 1914 when the first society was officially recognized in Melbourne. At the time it was made up of a small group of families that held various events to speak their language and sing their songs. Most gatherings occurred in individual homes. It wasn't until the late 1940's that the community grew with the arrival of many displaced persons of Estonian origin finding new homes in Australia and wanting to continue their cultural activities.

In July 1951 at the Estonian Society AGM it was declared that

"The Estonian Society in Melbourne requires its own home for the preservation of the Estonian language for those fellow countrymen who wish to continue to speak the language, the organization of social and cultural activities for the aged, invalid and the staging of other essential cultural activities."

It was therefore decided to form a Community Centre Commission. This commission was tasked with the responsibility of identifying a building that could become the home for the Estonian people in Victoria. This commission comprised

Chairman – K.A. Nõmmisto

Secretary – M.V. Ots

Treasurer – V. Marder

Commission members – E. Kesa, U. Stockholm.

As the Estonian Society was not a registered legal entity and was therefore unable to own real estate in its own name, the search and ownership of a new headquarters and organization of related events was left to this group.

A constitution was designed, capital was generated through the issuing of shares from the community and the Estonian Society in Melbourne. This raised £5,000.

On 9 October 1951 the Rules of Victoria Co-operative Society Ltd were presented and agreed to by the Estonian Society Community Centre Commission

The first annual general meeting of the Victoria Co-operative Society (Ühistu Eesti Maja) Ltd. was held on 17 February 1952 at the Temperance Hall in South Melbourne. At that time 50 shareholders had been registered. The constitution required that 25% of shareholders must be in attendance for AGM to proceed. As there were 14 in attendance the meeting could be officially conducted. Getting quorum's to important meetings seems to be a long running theme for the community.

The search for a new home was difficult due to the Co-operatives limited funds. A former church was identified in South Melbourne but this was acquired by the Ukranian Community for £ 12,000. Another building in Royal Parade Parkville was also chosen but was purchased by Melbourne University also for £ 12,000 as student accommodation. A third option was attempted in North Melbourne but this time for the land only. The asking price of £ 7,000 was

considered too expensive for the Co-operative to then find the money to build their own building.

After much searching a suitable location was finally identified in December 1954 at 67 Sydney Rd, Coburg. The building was operating as a business premises. On 7 January 1955 it was unanimously agreed by the Board to purchase this building for the sum of £5.500. The purchase of this building required the Co-operative to take out a loan for £3000. Work then needed to be undertaken to renovate the building to meet the requirements of the community. The Melbourne Estonian Society was responsible for the fit out of furniture and the Co-operative responsible for payment of the renovations. Renovations remained ongoing by the many volunteers of the community under the direction of Robert Jacobson who was known as “the boss”. This included the creation of a small hall at the rear of the property and meeting spaces upstairs. After much toil and effort the official opening of ‘Eesti Maja’ occurred on 4 December 1955 on the day of the 4th anniversary of the Estonian House Co-operative Ltd.

This building became the headquarters for the Estonian Community in Melbourne and was in constant use by all the sub organisations for rehearsals, lessons and meetings. The building was also used for a number of smaller scale events that could snugly hold about 100 to 150 people.

Unfortunately the larger scale events organized by the Estonian Community needed to be held at various other locations around the city due to capacity limits. (Melbourne Town Hall Lower hall, South Melbourne, Kensington, Northcote, Brunswick Town Halls). This was obviously a very expensive exercise for the community which didn’t have too much money in reserve and relied on large scale events to raise money. It also required a great deal of effort on behalf of volunteers to move community assets (crockery, cutlery, theatre props, etc.) to and from these venues.

So in advance of the 1972 Eesti Päevad in Melbourne it was decided to seek a more suitable venue for the community to move to, one that would cater for larger events and be more convenient for the sub organisations to undertake their activities.

In early 1971 an old picture theatre was identified on Melville Road West Brunswick by the Estonian House Working Group chaired by Arnold Mikkor. This building was sadly in need of repair and still configured with cinema seating and slanted floor. However the structure was sound so on 4 July 1971 the Estonian House Coop Board agreed unanimously to purchase the site at 41,43,45 Melville Rd, West Brunswick for \$55,000.

A loan from the ANZ bank for \$15,000 was secured to assist in the purchase. Henrick Puksmann was assigned to assist as solicitor in the purchase. Also included were Estonian House Working Group chair Arnold Mikkor and Vice Chairman of the Estonian Society in Melbourne, Kasper Maidre. Repair and renovation of the new building left in the responsibility of the working group.

The old Estonian House at 67 Sydney Rd, Coburg was put up for sale and sold for \$22,000.

At the following AGM for the Estonian House Co-operative the existing Board vacated their positions for a new Board to be elected to take on the new task of rejuvenating the building in West Brunswick. This newly elected Board comprised Arnold Mikkor, August Freymuth, Bruno Metsar, Evald Mõisa, Aleksander Tamm, Heinard Maar, Andres Kalasim and Karl Heil. Arnold Mikkor was elected chairman and remained in his role until 13 August 2008.

Upon the acquisition of the building renovation work commenced immediately by community members under the guidance of builder and project manager Arnold Mikkor and architect Heino Raadik.

The official opening of the building occurred on 29 January 1972. This event involved the blessing of the building by Pastor A. Meeksi. Then followed speeches from A. Perendi A.E.S.L. chairman, who declared the building to be able to be considered one of the best Eesti Maja's in the world. Further speeches were conducted by significant Estonian community representatives from across the country and the official part of the ceremony completed with the M.E.Ü. KODU Womens' choir along with the E.M.S.M Male choir singing together on the stage for the very first time.

With the formal part over the ball commenced. Pr Hilja Neeme together with the Naisklubi (Women's club) had organised a sumptuous smorgasbord for over 400 guests.

The entertainment for the evening involved Toivo & Susan Taves with a ballet performance, Martin Lukas on the saxophone, the women's choir quartet 'Neljakesi' (Juta Haller, Juta Mõisa, Ausma Taves ja Maila Taimre – Ilmar Taimre accompanying) and local mixed quartet Vilma Kiviväli, Asta Ole, Edmund Taves ja Sven Kivivali – Ausma Taves accompanying. Following this the party went on well into the morning with dancing and frivolity.

From here on the hall was in constant use. Meetings, choir, folkdance and play rehearsals, gatherings involving the Returned Servicemen's League, scouts and guides and their support group, ethnographic groups, Lutheran Church committees, chess clubs, bridge clubs, target shooters, University Fraternity's, and women's groups. Then there were also balls, parties, concerts, official events and Estonian National and Baltic festivals.

In 1987 further improvements to the hall were undertaken in advance of ESTO88 - the international world festival of Estonians that was to be held in Melbourne. This alteration involved the addition of a bar servery to the main hall, improvements to the women's and men's toilets as well as doubling the size of the clubrooms under the

stage. Project manager for the exercise was again Arnold Mikkor and architect Heino Raadik.

Activities in the building continued into the 2000s but by the end of the decade the use of the hall had started a steady decline. By about 2018 the number of community activities had reduced to three functions per year and only the choir and folkdancing groups rehearsing spasmodically. A decision was initiated by the Estonian House Co-operative Ltd Board to create a working party to determine the future need for such a large hall for so few events. This decision was supported by the shareholders at the 2018 AGM. Due to the nature and size of the exercise the Estonian Society of Melbourne became a co-sponsor.

This working group was formed in early 2019 comprising Mrs Bernadette Pilli, Ms Imbi Knappstein, Ms Kersti Nõgeste, Mr Ain Upps, Mr Lembit Marder and Mr Michael Payne. The working group consulted widely with members of the community in Melbourne and identified options for a future Estonian House that would serve the community into the future. The findings of this exercise were presented in 2022. The Working Group determined that the current building was too large for the current requirements of the community and came up with five options for a path forwards. After careful consideration the Working Group recommended two options both which involved the sale of the current building and either purchase or lease a new smaller venue. These options were presented to the Estonian House Co-operative Ltd shareholders and agreed to in a formal mail vote.

The building was placed on the market and finally sold on 13 August 2025 for \$3,250,000 to a group specialising in the restaurant and bar trade. This means that the building will remain in its current configuration for the foreseeable future. The community still has until 13 August 2026 to finalise the sale and find a new location.

We now need to find a new home. This task is quite onerous and could benefit from assistance from all of you here today who would still like to have a home for the Estonian Community in Melbourne. If you have time and interest please approach any of the Estonian Society Leadership group here today to offer your help.

So let's bid this wonderful building goodbye. A place that has seen festivals, weddings, funerals, significant birthdays, significant events such as the parliamentary elections for the second independence of Estonia, and countless activities. In the words of Arnold Mikkor "without this building the Estonian community in Melbourne would most likely not be here today."

Thank you for listening.