

The History of the Estonian House Co-operative Ltd
Matti Kiviväli
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“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 organisation of social and cultural activities for the aged, invalid and the staging of other essential cultural activities.”

This was an excerpt of the speech presented at the Estonian Society Annual General meeting held on 22 July 1951 where it was 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. The first meeting of the commission occurred on 7 August 1951 at St John’s church in LaTrobe St Melbourne. The commission comprised Messrs. K.A.Nõmmisto, V. Marder, U. Stockholm, E.Kesa and M.V.Ots.

From this group roles were decided with the following outcome:

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 organisation of related events was left to this group (the Estonian Society Community Centre Commission). With this in mind it was agreed to operate under the title of “Ühistu – Victoria Co-operative Society Limited – Eesti Maja Melbourne”.

In designing the constitution many questions were discussed. Mr. K.A. Nõmmisto was left with the responsibility of drafting a guiding principles document on behalf of the group. As it was difficult to provide a home address for the Co-operative due to the group having to use various addresses for its activities, it was decided to use the society's address for the time being at Temperance Hall, South Melbourne.

It was hoped that the Co-operative could generate £5,000 through a capital drive from the community. This would involve about 1000 Estonians living in Victoria. Share certificates would be £5 value each. The shareholder must also be able to pay the total amount of the share. To commence the process the Estonian Society in Melbourne was asked to contribute £30 to the fund.

18 September 1951 the Estonian Society Community Centre Commission met. The chairman K.A.Nõmmisto provided an update on the constitution and registration of the organisation. For the registration of the group as a co-operative it would need to meet Australian requirements so it was decided to use the Rules of Mary's Co-operative Society Ltd as a guide, modifying it to incorporate the requirements for the Estonian community. It was determined that the Co-operative's Board required 6 members.

It was unanimously agreed to approach the Estonian Society of Melbourne to have Mr Robert Jakobson to join this group. It was also decided to register the committee under the title of Victoria Co-operative Society Ltd. The address of the organisation was to use 1 Jepson St Yarraville which was M.V. Ots' home address.

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

A number of community members were given the responsibility and authority to collect shares on behalf of the Estonian Society

Community Centre Commission prior to the conduct of the first annual general meeting of the Victoria Co-operative Society Ltd. This meeting was to occur on 17 February 1952 at the Temperance Hall. Chairman K.A. Nõmmisto suggested that a function be organized to help raise funds. The event would involve the presentation of a play "Rahvamaja". Mr L. Piik to be the producer/director.

The annual general meeting was conducted and registration of the Co-operative discussed. At the time 50 shareholders had been registered along with the release of 53 shares. 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.

From this time on the Co-operative would continue to accept new shareholders and organize many functions to help raise money for the purchase of a building.

(From MEIE KODU Article 30 Sept 1954). "The Board of the Estonian House Co- operative Ltd has been trying to solve the issue of acquiring a centre for the Estonian community for a long time. It considered constructing a new building or alternatively purchasing a suitable prefabricated house, provided that it contains the necessary premises for club activities, choir, drama, folk dance, rehearsals, etc. and where it is also possible to build a suitable hall for functions. There have been several attempts to buy a suitable house, but the lack of funds for a reasonable deposit has still been an obstacle.

So far, in South Melbourne, there was a former church building for sale, where there was a perfectly suitable hall with sufficient alternative rooms. All that was needed was to build a stage for the hall. The building was bought by the Ukrainians as a community center and they paid £ 12,000 for it, with a downpayment of

£5,000. With a few repairs, this building has now been converted by the Ukrainians into a fairly suitable community center. The co-operative had to withdraw from the purchase of this suitable building due to their lack of funds for a deposit.

Another good example where the Estonian House Co-op Ltd again was thwarted due to the lack of finances involved the sale of an older stone building at Parkville on Royal Parade. The property was located on a large plot and contained seven rooms, including one larger hall-like room. The location was extremely suitable and the prospects for future construction were favourable. This purchase also failed and the Melbourne University acquired the property for around £12,000 to build a student dormitory.

A third attempt was made to acquire real estate in North Melbourne where a larger plot of land with an older stone building was for sale. This property was ideally located next to the city centre and in the immediate vicinity of trams and railways. The owner demanded at least seven thousand pounds, which would actually be the amount required to purchase the land only as the building was of relatively little value. After further consideration, this purchase had to be abandoned as the price was considered to be too expensive.

The Board of the Estonian House Cooperative Ltd always keeps in mind suitable objects in order to solve the much-needed issue of the community centre. It is more than clear from the experience so far that it is essential that the Co-operative needs to collect sums from fellow Estonians in order to have something to operate with.

Considering the number of Estonians living in Melbourne, there would be no special effort or anxiety to get the necessary amount if every profitable Estonian man and woman contributed even a few tens of pounds to this event. Let's ask ourselves whether or not we are really worse off or weaker than the Ukrainians who have already resolved this issue here with national certainty and determination”.

After much searching a suitable location was 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 first Co operative meeting held at the new headquarters occurred on 20 May 1955. 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. It was hoped that the shopfront of the building could be rented out to help pay for the Co-operatives ongoing upkeep of the building but this never eventuated. 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.

At the ceremony the opening speech was conducted by Dr, Elmar Kiiver followed by the blessing by Pastor Ilmar Ainsaar. The main speech of the evening was presented by the A.E.S.L. chairman Villem Maidre. Following many short speeches by community representative the Segakoor sang two songs which were quite powerfully delivered as the first time any form of performance had occurred in the building. The entire program was recorded on film and tape by Messrs Kartus & Purje. *Einelaud* (smorgasbord) provided by Pr H Neeme.

The building became the headquarters for the Estonian Community in Melbourne and was in constant use by the M.E.Ü. KODU Ladies

Choir, M.E.Ü KODU folkdancing group, and E.M.S.M. Men's choir for rehearsals and weekend meetings of the Täienduskool (Estonian Children's Language School), the Estonian Scouting and Guide groups, Women's associations and the M.E.Ü. Sports Club (Spordiring). 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 larger venue for the community to move to 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 current Estonian House at 67 Sydney Rd, Coburg was put up for sale with the assistance of Mr Arnold Mikkor and sold for \$22,000

At the following AGM for the Estonian House Co-operative the Board comprising of Heino Raadik, Kasper Maidre, Helmar Kiiver, Juhan Meltsar, Meinhard Ots and Villem Maidre vacated their positions for a new Board to be elected to take on the new task of rejuvenating the building in West Brunswick. A new Board was elected at this meeting comprising 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.

Article by Meinhard .V.Ots MEIE KODU Newspaper 14 October 1971:

Former spacious cinema, 41 – 45 Melville Rd, West Brunswick. Vic is being carefully altered to become a beautiful and spacious Estonian House in Melbourne. This new Estonian House committee consists of some very talented Estonian men, who together with their good helpers with all their knowledge and effort have been able to implement appropriate changes according to the requirements of the community.

The Estonian House Executive comprises: Chairman: Arnold Mikkor; Secretary: Evald Mõisa; Assistant secretary: Aleksander Tamm; Treasurer: Bruno Metsar; Assistant Treasurer: August Freymuth; and member Hendrik Maar. As this reporter steps into this fresh new Estonian House on Sunday I am welcomed by the name of the building, ESTONIAN HOUSE, as designed by Mr A Seliste. Inside the building work is being undertaken as if in a bee hive with every person inside attending to their particular role and specific task.

I seek out the chairperson, Mr Arnold Mikkor, who is also the site manager for the renovation to provide me with a brief overview. He advises that since the 3

July 1971 there are approximately 25 to 30 men at work on the renovation every weekend. Many of these men also work at the site during the week when they have days off their normal jobs (strikes). Further information is shared that next week painters will come on board to paint inside and once their job is completed the parquetry floor will be put down. I can see that on the open stage there are a great number of new floor boards to be put down and I ask how much did they cost? The answer provided indicated that these boards are not purchased but have been made by Hugo Tõnisson and Aleksander Tamm, who were also assisted by A Tammark and J Männits in this undertaking. By utilising their skills and the self sacrifice of these people in the interest of the community, we are able to solve some of these issues without having to deal with the scarcity of money.

I am past by Kalju Pilliste and Roa Ole, who are tasked with ensuring that our new Estonian House has an up to date sound system. At the saw horse is August Freymuth who is measuring and calculating to solve building issues. I am reminded by something that his wife, Lydia Freymuth said to me once beforehand that even she attended these working bees to help with the feeding of the workforce as well as chat to her husband. He no longer has any spare time. Goes to his day job in the morning; from there to Estonian House and then late at night home to rest.

On the ground floor you can have 600 seats set up to view performances. Together with tables you can accommodate up to 400 people.

I then move up to the top floor where some of the theatre seats have been removed and the floor levelled. On one side will be the library with a size of 22 x24 feet. On the other side two rooms will be constructed. The balcony seating (217) will remain as it was during the time of the cinema. So total number of people able to be accommodated for a concert is 817.

Question: How many working hours thus far have been undertaken by these good Estonian men whose handiwork has enabled this great task to be taken so far? Very many have provided assistance. Those who have worked here every weekend are: A Esimäe, A Freymuth, K Heil, A Kalasim, R Koort, H Kiiver, S Kiviväli, S Kangru, E Kütt, B Linnusaar, A Mikkor, V Metsar, H Maar, J Männits, H Mitt, A Nigol, A Nõmm, O Põldma, E Põldoja, A Rannu, E Taves, A Tamm, A Tammark, J Tõnumaa, Hugo Tõnisson, Heino Tõnisson, E Tuvike, A Seliste, E Varbo, E Valling, H Vann, and then some whose names don't come to mind at the moment. These men have given given close to 200 hours of their time.

Hearing this triggers a thought in my head. The time of miracles is not over and neither the desire or the spirit of the Estonian men to build a dignified Estonian home where their social and spiritual self-activity of free Estonians can grow and flourish.

The chairman goes on to say that a great deal of thanks needs to also go to our women folk. Every Sunday they provide the workers with a tasty home cooked lunch. Today's lunch is provided by Mrs Niina Ratsep-Ots. Cakes and coffee are provided by Mrs Lydia Freymuth. Assisting in the lunch is the kitchen co-ordinator Mrs Hilda Hallang, who is always on site and never seems to tire from assisting others. After the lunch break the workers are again ushered together so that Viktor Metsar, who has been busy working on the library, can take pictures with his movie camera so that there is a record of the transformation of this movie house to the Estonian House for the archives.

I thank the chairman for his time and wish him all the best in this undertaking.

MVO (Meinhard Ots)

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. He was followed by A. Mikkor (Ühistu Eesti Maja chairman), H. Somer (Adelaide Eesti Maja chairman), Pr. T. Kroll (Sydney Estonian Society chairperson) and V. Ojamets (Estonian Society in Thirlmere chairman). The final word was had by the Chairman of M.E.Ü. KODU Mr R. Koort. The official part of the ceremony was 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. This was followed by closing remarks by A. Tamm who indicated that whether or not you were a shareholder in the building you would always be welcome to attend.

With the formal part over the ball commenced. Pr Hilja Neeme together with the Naisklubi (Womens 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 piano accordion, 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 Kiviväli – 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 server 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 folk dancing 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 due to delays influenced by the COVID lockdowns. 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.

The Board at the time of the sale of the building comprised

Matti Kivivali (chairman), Gabry Mikkor (Dep Chair), Vanessa Roosmets (Treasurer), Rein Valling, (Secretary) Michael Payne (Dep Secretary) & Linda Taimre (Dep Treasurer). Matti Kiviväli having been in the chairman's role from August 2008.