

Becoming the fortress

Let me introduce myself. I'm Julian, 27, White, Male, German and Heterosexual. I want to tell you about the entity of the fortress.

The first time I saw this place was on a map, roughly a month before I arrived here. I was surprised, that not only were the medieval citywalls still intact but also fortification constructed at a much later date than those initial defenses.

Back then I couldn't know how relicts would surround me, invade me, and slowly implicate me in the historic events that would follow.

Since my research generally focuses on conflict, it is not surprising that this one became apparent to me at the very beginning of my residence in Tallinn. So it came that this one teacher, a very famous artist here, yelled at me: „*You are the most privileged creature in the world.*“

Beside the still strong impulse to counter this verbal barrage, I tried to take these words in my stride, a reviewing my value system, constructing a new point of view. This time I could not seek out the conflict at a state level, but on a much more concerned scale with the individual in focus. So how did I come to be here?

My Grandfather's professor was born here, there is still a statue of him in the city archives. As a Historian in post-war Germany, he wrote about the history of the city.

One of his students took the subject of him, he was also a refugee from the east, just not so far. Grandpa

Then there was another student, the student of the student, who is now here, teaching the history of this place even if he was not born here.

Now I'm here, as a student in this line of German historians learning and documenting the history of this place. I'm white, male, and German just like those who came before me.

It would be inconsequential if there would have not been 700 years of German oppression in this place, all of this before any of those individuals were born.

One evening, whilst sitting around and drinking vodka, an Estonian friend announced to me: "we were peasants". Instantly I retorted: "I was not here"

This was the first time I cared about my grandmother's Lithuanian origin.

Somehow, I became a conqueror, a colonialist maybe even an oppressor.

I'm not only me but also a historical person, my identity is made up of more than just the events that occurred during my lifetime.

The old documents here are written primarily in German.

I use them to write about the history of this place, this act of writing someone's history, rewriting the records of another country, is violent, this violence comes through in my being here, by virtue of being raised speaking the language of this land's overlords. It's not easy to notice, but I'm walking in colonial footsteps.

Time to take a breath of fresh air, escaping to another sphere of influence.

This was in Helsinki, at the Theatre academy.

It was a group in which I was the only White, Male, German... With the thoughts mentioned before in my head I feel like the people were staring at me. Further I feel the weight of their expectations, that I would take an aggressive role in this group. I don't know if anyone really expected this, but I did regardless.

As we got split into smaller groups to discuss and present our conclusions afterwards, my group decided not to follow this route.

The course was about occupation, these were master's students in performance, and we decided to occupy their study space.

Following this our group had to present the results, we began discussing how to occupy this course, and this lasted the entire school day. In this way our small group took over the time and momentum of the whole course, giving me relief by settling on this oppressive role: Isn't that what they expected of me?

Somehow it was the same situation as here, getting into a role of an oppressor and occupier. In a way, I attempted to take this situation and try to experience it in more depth. I'm writing about one of the sieges of Tallinn, a turning point in history, one oppressor changed for another, strangely enough the Germans stayed and ruled on.

„In the hands of certain people, pens, rulers, and showcases are as dangerous as armies. It was with quiet instruments that Europe conducted history's greatest war of occupation: colonialism. It conquered the rest of the world with maps, museum archives, and international legal documents, the modern weaponry of bureaucracy and organizational reason.”

So, to go deeper into the topic, I went to the city archives, where the Statue of my grandfather's tutor stands, in order to find antiquated maps of this place. They told me that if I want to use one of these maps in an exhibition, I must ask the government for permission, but not the one from here, the Swedish one.

And so, I started to draw the maps of the fortress myself. The fortress in which a plague struck in a time of siege.

Shut down.

This plague which killed more than sixty people a day.

Once I went outside and was greeted by the sight of a group six to eight strong, huddled together, it cannot have been later than week one of the lockdown, but it was already an unusual thing to see. Two of them were wearing masks, the people in the group looked scared and two were leaving as they saw the cart, on it were speakers and they spoke.

The doubts as to my standing in this society are gone for now because the society in question has died in the last few weeks. Nobody is permitted to leave the house. The questions become less general and more personal. Which people do I need to have contact with? And do I need to have contact with anyone?

By now I do not like any interruptions to my solitude. I leave the fortress less often, have less contact and prefer it to stay that way. I even ask myself, if the fear of being lonely any other time, is simply just a reflection of the outer world? Somehow the fortress becomes a deeper Symbol.

„how, in order to take precautions against any break-in by the enemy forces, we are constantly forced to surround ourselves with protective structures in successive phases until the idea of concentric rings, which move outwards, reach their natural limits.”

A fortress, unlike a castle has multiple lines of defence, it is more flexible and complex. There are ditches and tunnels, forms, and different material.

In this case it is not only about blocking off the outer world. In between the multiple defence lines there is movement; Inside these concentric rings there is space. In this huge space opened during the first weeks of the Plague, I got lost.

They just finished the Contrescarpe, I feel safer now, the distance to other people increases even more.

I had been getting to know this fortress quite well in my head.

Today for the first time in some weeks, I was outside having a walk, for something other than fetching groceries.

I went around the whole fortification to let it become a bodily-experience. Trying not to dwell on thoughts, but watching myself observing, focussed on trying not to miss the slightest detail which might hint at the time I`m talking about. Trying not to speak to myself while being physically in the outside world.

On one of the last remaining spots of the former fortifications I see survey points in the ground, a few next to each other, a prove that I`m not the only one who has problems mapping these construction. I am mistaken however: they are just bottle caps. Maybe it is not possible to map myself, is that why?

There is a gate bricked up.

Halfway round I could smell the burned juniper they use for disinfection. Towards the end disinfectant reached my nose in an oppressive way.

For twenty-two days I have lived in this fortress. Now I`m afraid of losing all contact to the outer world.

It`s comfortable in here.

Have I already begun to romanticise these weeks of isolation before they`ve even ended?

The situation is like in the time I try to describe, the enemy was simply waiting outside to let the plague do the job; In my case it didn`t.

The ancient Conflict broke in like waves flushing over the fortress. What reason is there for building up a fortification over many years, constructing a life and identity in these walls, for them to give way to that which you have been trying to escape all along? The enemy arrives, and the fortress is only holding off the very first wave. I have been flushed out

Now I`m not afraid of losing touch anymore, I`m starving for it.

Not being in the Fortress anymore but also not having any replacement, causes a situation of deepest melancholy. I installed Tinder to get to know people somehow in this extraordinary situation in between these two worlds. A Russian Girl born here matched me. Maybe this is a way back to the society? Her being here is like mine a postcolonial existence. But it is hard to think about a society which disappeared. Still hanging in between the dissolved Fortress and a society where I don`t even have a place as a colonialist anymore.

“The castle, the outlines of which were already beginning to dissolve, was as quiet as ever, K. had never seen the slightest sign of life there, perhaps it was not possible to see anything from this distance, and yet the eyes asked for it and wanted it, do not tolerate silence.” To use Kafka`s words.

It is loud again in my head, extraordinary days these are.