

Reflections on the 25th Anniversary Conference of the Grand Lodge of Estonia

Introduction

On May 3, 2024, we started the celebrations of the 25th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Estonia with an international conference at the Estonian Film Museum in the Maarjamäe Palace complex in Tallinn. It was a landmark event attended by around 100 honoured guests and brethren. The organising of the event took around 9 months and was headed by Grand Master Kalle Küttis and past Grand Master and the Chairman of the Org Committee Anti Oidsalu. Valuable contributions on behalf of the Grand Lodge of Estonia also included from Lauri Tabur, Ain Roost, Reljo Saarepera and Andrus Alev.

Distinguished brethren from Scotland, England, Sweden, and Estonia delivered high-quality presentations, each contributing rich and unique insights to our collective Masonic journey. The Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Estonia, Kalle Küttis, welcomed attendees with opening words that set the tone for reflection, learning, and camaraderie. The conference was moderated by Meelis Roosimägi as the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Estonia.

Honoured with the opportunity to write about the event, I shall do my best to provide an engaging report. Given the breadth of content—161 minutes of presentations and 60 minutes of Q&A—this summary will however touch mostly on the highlights. For those interested in more details – video recordings, transcripts, and an extended summary of the conference are available on the Grand Lodge of Estonia's website at www.eestisl.ee/esl25/

Past Grand Master William Ramsay McGhee (Scotland): A Perspective of Scottish Freemasonry

William Ramsay McGhee, the 111th Grand Master Mason of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, affirmed Scotland as the birthplace of modern freemasonry. Despite England and Ireland forming Grand Lodges earlier, Scotland prioritized lodge autonomy until 1736. He highlighted evidence of Scottish freemasonry dating back to the 16th century, with the 1598 and 1599 Schaw Statutes emphasizing record-keeping and scheduled meetings among other relevant.

McGhee outlined how Scottish freemasonry now spans over 40 countries, with 32 provincial Grand Lodges in Scotland, 26 District Grand Lodges worldwide, and 4 Grand Superintendencies. Each lodge retains its unique procedures, colourful regalia (very colourful examples), and various rituals (today 8), contributing to a vibrant and nuanced tradition.

Notably, the Grand Lodge of Scotland has heavily supported Prostate Cancer Scotland, raising £1,125,000 during McGhee's tenure. The organization also funds the Prospack Initiative and Prostate Champions, raising awareness and support for prostate cancer. McGhee finished his talk with a memorable story about a charity event with the Lord Lyon King of Arms, Joseph John Morrow, zip sliding to raise funds, rescheduled due to the Queen's passing.

Under McGhee's leadership, the Grand Lodge underwent significant restructuring, revising its constitution and laws to become more dynamic. And focused on membership growth, international expansion, and enhanced communication. An interesting development mentioned was the digital Grand Lodge Masonic Passport, providing member benefits and connecting each member directly with the Grand Lodge.

The most important change to take place during my term as Grand Master has been the restructuring of the Grand Lodge. Some of which has been somewhat radical.

– William Ramsay McGhee

During the Q&A, we learned about the nuances of the colourful regalia used in Scottish masonry, more details about the charity initiatives, insights about life in the overseas district lodges and that the 5th International Scottish Freemasonry Conference will take place in Zambia next year and all the Tallinn conference attendees were invited.

Past Grand Secretary James W. Daniel (England): The Context and Conditions of the UGLE's Recognition of the Grand Lodge of Estonia:

Dr. James W. Daniel, with a rich Masonic background since 1961, delivered a compelling presentation. Starting his speech in Estonian, he flavoured his presentation with anecdotes and historical references, ending with the joint singing of "Enter'd Prentices Song" from Anderson's Constitutions of 1723.

Daniel highlighted the importance of the Old Charges and Constitutions in maintaining the significance of Masonic principles over time. Quoting texts (e.g. "Summary of the Antient Charges and Regulations" and "Charge After Initiation") which are also familiar to the brethren in the Hackney Brook Lodge 14 in Estonia – as they follow the emulation ritual that is widely practiced by lodges of the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE). He elaborated on the 8 principles of Grand Lodge recognition approved by UGLE in 1924 and traced the journey of the Grand Lodge of Estonia, recognized by UGLE in 2000, through its lineage from the Grand Lodge of Finland and the Grand Lodge of New York.

Despite a decline in membership numbers in England, the global recognition of regular Grand Lodges has increased, underscoring the persistent influence of freemasonry's foundational tenets. Daniel emphasized the enduring relevance of Anderson's Constitutions, which laid the foundation for religious tolerance, meritocracy, and societal improvement among others.

"The core principles and tenets – they are as relevant today as they ever have been"

– Dr. James W. Daniel

During the Q&A, we learned about the valuable tripartite meetings between the English, Scottish, and Irish Grand Lodges, strategies to increase membership at UGLE, and how Grand Lodge recognition is handled with authoritarian regimes.

Andreas Önnarfors (Sweden): Freemasonry as a Tool in European Diplomacy History

Dr. Andreas Önnarfors from the Swedish Order of Freemasons discussed freemasonry's role in European diplomacy, focusing on its organisational culture and the tension between bottom-up and top-down governance.

Is freemasonry actually an organisation made of bottom up organisations or is it a top down understanding?

– Dr. Andreas Önnarfors

Next he presented a case of the Swedish-Anglo relations around 1800, highlighting how freemasonry facilitated diplomatic interactions, particularly between the Prince of Wales and Duke Charles of Sweden. Including the interesting and intricate details around Göran Ulrik Silfverhielm, a Swedish diplomat with an important role. This whole part of the

presentation together with a historic recap of the Swedish-Anglo relations during the 18th century until 1813, included a vivid array of pivotal European diplomats who were also freemasons.

Önnerfors recounted the impact of anti-Masonic legislation in Britain and the subsequent negotiations that exempted freemasonry from the Unlawful Societies Act. This period saw freemasonry playing a significant role in soft diplomacy, with Swedish efforts contributing to the normalization of relations and the preservation of Masonic freedoms. He also noted the geopolitical aspects of that time, including the alliance that was formed against Napoleon between Sweden and England.

He concluded with an example of generative AI depicting freemasonry in an evil shade and emphasized the importance of freemasonry in fostering better relations between individuals, cultures, and nations, echoing the principles laid out in Anderson's Constitutions.

During the Q&A, we heard about Jacob Gustaf Pontusson De la Gardie and an interesting story from James W. Daniel about the Grand Sword of the Grand Lodge of UGLE and a meeting between the Duke of Kent and the King of Sweden during the 200th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Sweden.

David Ryan Jenkins (Estonia): Freemasonry's Role in the History of Estonia

David Ryan Jenkins of the Grand Lodge of Estonia provided an insightful exploration of the role of freemasonry in shaping Estonia's national identity. He highlighted the contributions of notable freemasons and the influence of Masonic principles on the country's development. Listening to the presentation was like being in a class of Estonian history, except that all the well-known events and happenings were explained from the perspective of how the freemasons played significant roles in shaping these miracles of their time.

“Masonry gave a format for discussion and friendship to decision makers from all different fields who otherwise perhaps did not agree on politics or economics, who otherwise would have remained at a perpetual distance.”

– David Ryan Jenkins

It was a journey of a strong and sustainable ethnic culture being developed through Enlightenment. He described how it started with interest in local folk stories (propagated by J.G. Herder), how the local speech was formalized as a written language (contributions of O.W. Masing and D.F. Lenz), how literature began to flourish along with theatre (A. von Kotzebue), how education in the local language was cultivated (J.F.E. von Ungern-Sternberg), and how history became more valued and started being preserved both in books and museums (K.S. Morgenstern, J. VIII Burchard). Eventually, laws were passed (starting from B. VII von Uexküll and the Vigala Peasant Law of 1789, The Codex of Rights of “Iggäüks” of 1802, and the Peasants Act of 1816) favouring local people, ending serfdom, promoting local education. These developments happened without significant bloodshed, unlike in the United States and France.

During the Q&A, we learned that Estonian freemasonry is experiencing growth, attracting younger members who are active and engaged. Being myself one, I can totally relate. We also learned that no university in Estonia currently includes lessons about freemasonry, there are around 20-25 books on the subject in Estonian, and that Estonian freemasonry conducts a good mix of smaller and bigger charity projects through its Pelikan Foundation.

Conclusion

The 25th Anniversary Conference of the Grand Lodge of Estonia was a well-organized and insightful event. The presentations offered fascinating perspectives on the history of freemasonry from both global and local viewpoints.

Each presenter brought unique insights, from the broader context provided by McGhee and Daniel to the detailed historical accounts by Önnersfors and Jenkins.

Perhaps equally memorable were the presenters – brother William from Scotland bearing the most esteemed title of former Grand Master (or Grand Master Mason, as they say in Scotland), brother James from England being the most colourful personality, brother Andreas from Sweden being referred to as The Professor on a few occasions, and brother Ryan from Estonia (albeit an American) being perhaps the most modest, as he rhetorically cast doubt at the beginning of his talk on whether it would be interesting, yet his address turned out to be the favourite among several attendees I spoke with at the event.

As the Grand Master, Kalle Küttis, aptly noted with Juhan Liiv's words, "Those who do not remember the past live without the future." This gathering reinforced the importance of historical memory in shaping a meaningful and vibrant future for freemasonry in Estonia and beyond. Despite the official 25th Anniversary of the local Grand Lodge, the heritage and legacy of freemasonry in Estonia are deeply rooted and extend far beyond this milestone.

I join the brethren in wishing the Grand Lodge of Estonia a happy anniversary and look forward to its future celebrations and events. Let us embrace the challenges and opportunities with the same spirit of brotherly love, relief, and truth that has guided us thus far.

Written by

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