



Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

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Speech by the President of Latvia, Dr.Vaira Vike-Freiberga In memory of President Lennart Meri Tallinn, Kadriorg museum, 26th March, 2006

Mr. President,

Mrs. Rüütel,

Dear fellow mourners,

We have gathered here, from near and far, to pay homage to the memory of a great man, a great Estonian, a great statesman and a great European.

We have shared our grief and offer our sympathies to his widow, his children, to his family and those who have shared part of his life, either in his private or in his public capacity.

And I offer you especially the sympathies of the people of Latvia, who saw in Lennart Meri a champion of the cause of liberty, a defender of the rights of small nations and above all, a man who understood deeply and cared about the unity of the Baltic nations.

Lennart Meri was born in a newly created and free Estonia in a Europe that had been freed from the tyranny of old empires, a Europe that saw the birth of many nations and a growth of many peoples that had known oppression in the past. Those hopes were dashed by the events of the Second World War, by the criminal joining forces of two totalitarians Hitler and Stalin in Molotov- Ribbentropp pact. And Estonia, along with other nations, saw its liberty trampled, its people humiliated, deported, killed, tortured and kept under tyranny for so many years.

Lennart Meri, as son of a diplomat, had grown to know Europe and its culture, from inside out as a child does when growing up.

Lennart Meri was to know the other side of Europe, the Europe of totality, the Europe of terror, the Europe that we thought we had left behind us, with the wars of religion, with the tortures of the inquisition, with the fall of the empires that had been fighting among each other for more and more territory.

It was not to be over and from that far way silence of Siberia he came to look at his nation not as a broken man, not as one born down and broken by his burdens, but rather like one who, like tempered steel, becomes stronger and stronger with every experience that fate brought his way.

He saw his nation from the distance and a perspective of far away of Siberia. He saw it from the perspective of time. He took solace and joy in the beauties of the nature of Siberia. When he was able, he travelled to many other lands, those hidden from most and inaccessible in many ways.

He got to know many peoples. Fellow peoples and the Finno-Ugrian people, he saw the similarities of a past going back long distant centuries and millennia, the beginning of time.

He saw sister nations, even smaller than his own, that have kept their ancient heritage, that had kept alive, each in its own way, their cultural treasures, their language and their individuality.

And when he came back to his land, he was able to put his experience to use, first of all a dissident in a totalitarian system, able to pass a message of hope and liberty to a

nation under constant surveillance, under constant censorship. He learned the language of symbols, of riddles, of mythology. He reached the hearts and minds of his people and was helped to kindle in them the flame of liberty.

Lennart Meri was privileged in being able to lead his nation in its recovered independence. But he would never admit it that it was a new nation that had entered the European stage. He would not suffer the supercilious tendency of older nations to be patronising towards these new democracies, to act as if they were babes barely out of swaddling clothes.

He liked to remember and remind the world that Estonia had been a nation before the war and the Estonians had a culture going back to great antiquity.

He did not suffer fools gladly, he would puncture them with a bar of his wit and of his humour. He had a way of being noticed, of being seen, his experience in drama and in theatre was of help in there.

No one who ever met Lennart Meri would forget either him or the Estonian people. And was precisely what he meant to do.

He was able to lead his people by the strength of his convictions, by the integrity and purity of his character and by the brilliance of his oratory, the brilliance of his wit.

We, who are left behind, have in his heritage something as a model of what a small nation can do, a small nation, that, as he always reminded us, has its own worth and value. That worth and value are not matters of mere size, of brute strength, of oppression by the force of arms. That greatness is a matter of the mind and of the spirit. Small nations and the members of small nations can be great as well.

Lennart Meri was a great man and invited his people, the Estonian people to remember the potential of greatness that resides within them.

He was also a great European, and as such he shall be missed by us all. But he showed that the Europe that we are looking forward, the Europe that we want to build together now, is one different from the past - one free from the tyrants, one freed from oppression, one freed of brutal narrow ideologies. It is not here quite yet, but we see it coming. We in the Baltic nations have taken steps to bring it closer. Other nations stand next in line. We hope that they too will see a path of liberty, that they too will see that the freedom of the human spirit cannot live long be under oppression, censure and tyranny.

We look forward to that Europe, which Lennart Meri hoped to see achieved in his lifetime. We, who are left with his legacy, have a task of carrying on to see that it comes true.

But the Estonian people would forever have his memory, his thoughts and his love for his people.

May he rest in peace.