



Gifts, Feasts, and the Surplus of Friendship: Practices in a Remembered Economy of Petty Trading

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The long tradition of trade between the areas of the contemporary states of Estonia and Finland has its roots in prehistoric times. This includes the freight trade of merchants of Tallinn (Reval) with Hanseatic connections and the trade of both Finnish and Baltic (Estonian-Livonian) nobles, who claimed the right to trade in the Gulf of Finland. However, such trade was not without conflicts, which show up in historical sources from the fourteenth century onwards.¹ Throughout the centuries, the whole region and parts of it had been ruled by different emerging countries, monarchies, and rulers, including Denmark, The Livonian Order of the Brothers of the Sword, the Teutonic Order, Novgorod, bishoprics and the city of Riga in Livonia, Poland-Lithuania, Russia, Sweden, and Livonia.² After the Second World War, Estonia was joined to the Soviet Union, until it again gained independence in 1991. From 1812 until the First World War, both Estonia

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and Finland were part of the Russian Empire, Finland being a Grand Duchy with separate laws.

In the nineteenth century, trade heavily depended on developing personal acquaintances with traders from the other side of the gulf. Petty trade across the Gulf of Finland was predominantly based on barter. The Gulf of Finland is about 40–80 miles (70–140 km) wide between its northern and southern shores. With good winds, crossing the gulf would take about one day of travel for a nineteenth-century sailing vessel. In bad weather, people could need to wait for good wind for days or even weeks. The Finnish coast in general has more archipelago islands than the Estonian side, but they are also smaller (see map in Fig. 6.1).

In the eastern parts of the gulf, peasants and fishermen from both areas traded directly with each other, crossing in small sailing boats. This was also helped by the Finnish and Estonian languages being almost mutually intelligible. Together people formed a sort of trade partnership called *sepra* (Estonian: *sõbra*), which could last for a season or even for years and decades.³ As a practice, the *sepra* included the giving of mutual gifts, social

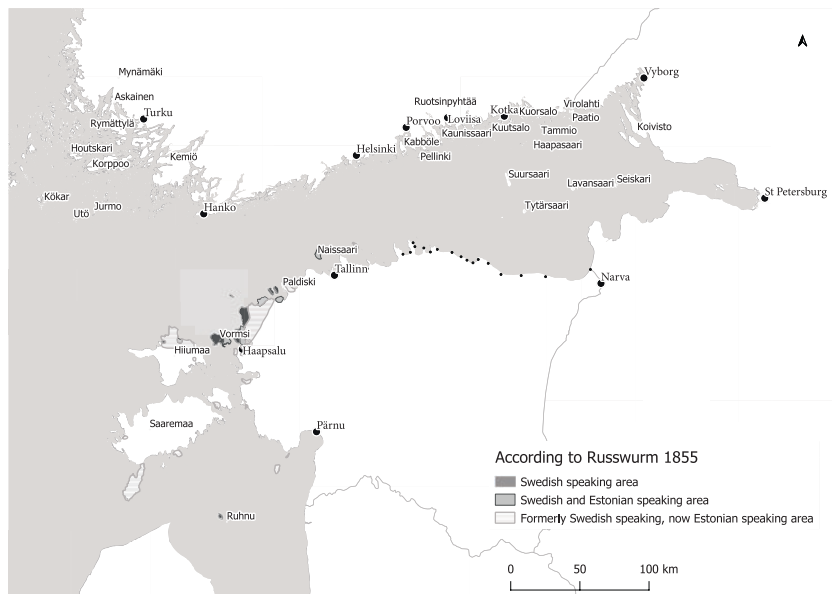


Fig. 6.1 Map of the Gulf of Finland. (Map by Niklas Huldén)

meetings, and even feasting and dancing. Moreover, family members of the trade partners often participated in the seasonal expeditions. Finnish traders mostly visited special fairs or marketplaces on the Estonian coast during specific seasons, mostly just before midsummer and during autumn. Most Finnish villages had their own Estonian target harbor. In turn, Estonians often went fishing along the Finnish coast, either on their own, paying some rent to the owners of the local water rights, or as hands for the Finnish fishermen. Living in small sheds erected by themselves or by Finns, the Estonians still participated in the local community life, sometimes arranging dances or other festivities. The giving of gifts was also included on these fishing expeditions.

This chapter concentrates on small-scale trade through the practice of *sepra* among the peasants, fishermen, and other coastal inhabitants of the area (see map in Fig. 6.1). Having a long tradition, the trade could have its origins in the settling of the coastline by the Finno-Ugric-speaking peoples in prehistoric times. Although such petty trade was declared illegal and the different rulers tried to direct all commerce to the cities, in practice it could not be prohibited.⁴ The aim here is to examine the practices that the ordinary traders engaged in to establish and maintain contact with each other in the different locales in the area. To this end, the chapter stresses the actual practices in actual trading encounters described through writings and answers to ethnographic questionnaires, as well as the previous literature. The descriptions include some of the diverse goods that were traded and the gift-giving tradition in the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland, compared to the somewhat differing customs in the western part.

RECIPROCAL TRADE, AUTHENTIC FRIENDSHIP, AND ETHNOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRES

From the western parts of the Gulf of Finland, peasants and fishermen mainly traveled to Tallinn and other well-known trading centers to sell or trade their salted herring for grain, which local merchants had traded from peasants and manors in the Estonian inland. This resulted in complex networks and dependencies between merchants and peasants, which also were incorporated in the cultural heritage of the *sepra* trade. In these situations, the traders also anticipated and received some gifts from the merchants, who in turn expected the traders to be loyal and trade their goods with the same merchants in the future.⁵ In the first half of the nineteenth

century in Estonia, only the gentry had possibilities to trade in any substantial way, and they also used bigger vessels for their sea traffic. When the system of serfdom was abolished in Estonia in 1858, commoners among the coastal dwellers could also participate in some trading. This usually started off with sales of their own products and crops, and then slowly developed into getting items from the interior of Estonia for transport and trade.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the trade became much more diverse, incorporating exports of lumber, firewood, potatoes, apples, and sometimes entirely new concepts, such as fish-canning industries. The area of trade could include the coastline down to Poland and westward to Sweden. The sizes of boats and vessels used in the trade grew larger during the late nineteenth century, but even in the 1920s they were still not usually motorized.⁶

The First World War struck this trading tradition hard. The independent new nation-states, Estonia, and Finland naturally tried to bind the market to bigger established merchants, and the small-scale (almost hidden) economy was not tolerated any more. By the Second World War, it had almost vanished, and after the war it would take until the 1990s before commerce picked up again to any significant extent.

Both Finnish and Estonian researchers, usually historians and ethnologists, have regarded *sepra* trade as positive, indicating an authentic friendship between the “peoples” involved. It has been described as mutually beneficial, since the parties could exchange their surplus stocks, exporting mainly salted herring from Finland and receiving grain products, mainly rye, from Estonia.⁷ Furthermore, *sepra* trade has also been used ideologically to bolster the idea of Finland and Estonia as brotherly nations. After Estonia gained independence for the second time in 1991, the *sepra* markets were revived in the form of trade festivals that alternated between the two countries.

I base my analysis on two ethnographic questionnaires. I mostly rely on a questionnaire sent out by Professor Helmer Tegengren from Åbo Akademi University in 1969–1970.⁸ The questionnaire received 176 answers from inhabitants in both Swedish- and Finnish-speaking areas along the southern Finnish coastline. The material has also partly been used in Tegengren’s own article.⁹ In the easternmost part of the Swedish-speaking area in Finland, the word *sepra* was also used in Swedish, but in western Finland the word was not generally known. The second questionnaire that I use is from the Institutet för språk och folkminnen (then called

Dialekt- och folkminnesarkivet) in Uppsala, Sweden. It was directed toward the Swedish-speaking Estonians with experience in petty trade, who had relocated to Sweden after the Second World War in 1946. Only two answers were received, but they include very long and thorough descriptions of the trade in northwestern Estonia.

The use of ethnographic questionnaires for ethnological investigations has been common since the 1950s, but the method developed throughout the twentieth century. In Finland, it was generally used to describe the past in a way that the “nation” wanted it to be. One has to consider that in the developing new nation, ethnology and folkloristics belonged to the cluster called “national sciences.” These had a mission in building the society, which incorporated the idea of a worthy past. Even when misery and defiance were found, they could be elevated into a representation of a common struggle for a better present. In short, ethnographical questionnaires often functioned as rescue operations, striving for a folk culture in the making. This continued well into the 1980s and to some extent is true even today. That said, making a questionnaire required great knowledge and investigation before it could be sent out. This made the dialogue between the responsible archive or scientist and the respondents somewhat skewed. The interest of the questions was clearly defined, which pointed the respondents toward giving the right answers. However, one frequently finds answers opposing the questions: “No it was not like that at all, it was like this.” Subsequently, the questionnaires became less leading and sought to give alternatives, to achieve greater variance and capture the respondents’ own words. Yet, it is inevitably the case that questionnaires are captives of their own time and should be studied in context, which in its turn demands education. This is something often discussed in contemporary literature regarding their use.¹⁰

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXCURSION

When investigating how the trading practices in the research area were established, varied, and evolved through time, it is necessary to define the terms in anthropological research concerning exchange economies regarding trade. Economic transactions in ethnographic records are often described in a simplistic way as consisting of two general types. The “vice versa” movement or transaction between two parties can be described as *reciprocity*. In our case, this includes the direct bartering between Finns

and Estonians—as in *sepra* trade—but in some ways it also concerns trading with various merchants in the cities.

The centralized movement or collection and redistribution of goods within members of a group is called *pooling*. The two types do merge, as pooling can be seen as a system of reciprocity but within relations.¹¹ Here, it would be represented by *sepra* or peasant traders that accumulated supplies and trade goods in their local community by means of pooling, sometimes stretching the local boundaries quite far. The goods would usually be transported and traded by a head trader and the providers would be paid according to their share, either in goods or in money. The pooling trader was required to have a good reputation and status in the community. Sometimes the traded goods were bought from the providers, and this can be seen as a step toward the freight trade that dominated the area in the late 1800s and early twentieth century.

The giving of gifts as an incentive to building trust is something that has received a great deal of attention in previous anthropological research. The complex practices of gift-giving as a whole have been studied by Marcel Mauss, for example, who pointed out that gifts are seldom purely altruistic by nature, and that they almost always demand a counter type of payback of some sort. He based his arguments on several complex institutional practices where the giving of gifts—in a broad sense—was crucial, from inherited belongings through the potlatch tradition to issues of early law in the West.¹² Unlike Mauss, Sahlins formulated his view on the basis of trading encounters in particular. He considered that the giving of gifts had a strong role as a startup practice for establishing a trade friendship or trade partnership. In a broad sense, one has to include the feast in this activity for building trust and barter, as it often represented a sort of payback for received gifts.¹³

Regarding reciprocity, one must distinguish some different categories that sometimes seem to blend in practice. While *generalized reciprocity* could be described as the solidary extreme, sometimes called the putatively altruistic “pure gift,” this type of gift or assistance always demands some sort of payback, although its actual expression is vague, varied, and can be postponed. In material form, it is sustained by prevailing social relations; it is especially common in close kin relationships but can also be seen in some forms in trade practices. Most trade practices, however, tend to follow the device of *balanced reciprocity*, which is a midpoint with ethnographic visions of trade, with gift-exchange, buying and selling, and payment involving “primitive-money.” Social relations hinge on material flow,

which has to be reciprocated within a set period of time. On the other side, we find *negative reciprocity* as the unsociable extreme. This is the attempt to get something for nothing, often with impunity. It comprises several forms of appropriation and transactions opened and conducted toward one's net utilitarian advantage. Inductive ethnographic terms include "haggling" or "barter," "gambling," "chicanery," "theft," and other varieties of seizure.¹⁴

These must be seen as a continuum, and some of the aspects will also be found in this material. Usually, one can see some combinations relating to kinship distance and rank, but trade between strangers needs to be constructed by different practices and means. All participants in trade, of course, are interested in gaining as much as possible in the exchange of goods. But to avoid negative reciprocity and strive toward balanced trade, some checks and balances have to be established. These consist of special and delicate institutional means regarding the exchange.

Common means are "trade-partnerships" and "trade-friendships," which can be initiated by "gift-giving." This may lead to a delay in reciprocity, as getting a direct return may be seen as unseemly. Hospitality is given by both parties on different occasions, and it seems to be a mentality of the marketplace. For example, food offered in a generalized way as a type of hospitality tends to lead to good relations.¹⁵

Therefore, most trading and exchanging of goods fall under the scheme of balanced reciprocity, following customs of formal friendship or kinship, that is, *trade partnerships*. The instigating mechanism for these, sometimes very long-lasting partnerships can be found in *gift-giving*. The friendships or alliances are then affirmed through various feasts and entertainments that the partners dispense to each other in turn for pleasure and amusement. Mechanisms for peacemaking and further affirmation through marital alliances, for instance, can also be coupled with these festivities. It is not uncommon, however, for a certain amount of imbalance to be embedded in the exchange of goods. This sustains the trade partnership by compelling another meeting. Of course, this imbalance can open up the trade to elements of negative reciprocity, as evidenced in the source material.¹⁶ In the following, I will mostly concentrate on the reciprocal practices through citations of the ethnographic questionnaires, while the larger concept of *sepra* and peasant trade are dealt with in more general terms.

REAL *SEPPRA* TRADE AND “PEASANT TRADE”

People living on the different islands in the eastern part of the gulf participated in *seppra* trade at least from the seventeenth century onward.¹⁷ The word *seppra* (or *sõppra*, *sõbra*), which can be found in different forms in the Baltic, Estonian, and Finnish languages (and as a loanword also in Russian), could have originally been translated as “team” or “teamwork,” but ultimately it became associated with “friendship.” According to ethnologist Kustaa Vilkkuna, the Finnish word *seura* (“company”) is close to the original meaning. The historian Seppo Zetterberg remarks that sources regarding merchants in Tallinn mention the so-called *sõbrerei* (German: *seppraing*) in Estonia/Livonia already in the fifteenth century. The city merchants tried to stress the point that this trading between peasants and common people in the countryside was in fact illegal. But in this regard, they had to fight with the Estonian/Livonian noblesse, who were also intertwined in massive trading in the countryside, leaving the official network of city traders aside. As the nobles had significant ruling power into the twentieth century, this kind of trade continued for hundreds of years.¹⁸

It is in this eastern area of the Gulf of Finland that one can still find a genuinely “positive” attitude toward the term and its use for trading between Finns and Estonians. The term was also used in the whole of Estonia and other Baltic countries as a description of the not always frictionless relationship between merchants and peasants/producers. The latter often fell into a lifelong reliance on the former, sometimes even with a vulnerable position due to debts, reflecting a situation that can be found in most societies that engage in this kind of trade.¹⁹

Many early ethnographers or lay collectors of folk traditions depicted the importance of having a *seppra* partner and how this relationship benefited both trading partners. One of them, Eljas Raussi, described the *seppra* as follows:

In a decent barter trade, both partners will win because they give away what they have too much of and take what they need, both at home and when traveling and peddling the goods.²⁰

This also emerges quite unprovoked in some answers to the questionnaire (Swedish-speaking 15 A) that did not even mention the word *seppra*. Such answers expressed that you do better trade if you have a *seppra*. That said, one must reflect on what barter trading really involved. The

anthropologist David Graeber argued that there is no society that locally depends on barter trade. He refuted the common idea of barter trade as the foundation of all economic transactions, and indeed he found amusing earlier anthropologists' fascination with everything containing reciprocity. According to Graeber, barter was linked to trade with strangers, and mostly in societies that already had monetary institutions or where people had developed the idea of financial value regarding traded goods.²¹ Anthropologists such as Marshal Sahlins prefer talking about exchange trade and reserve the word "barter" for more negative aspects of this trading.²²

In the case of Estonian-Finnish barter, most of the goods had a price that was valued in terms of money, which was recognized also in the actual barter event (see Fig. 6.2). The trade partners were strangers to one another, but they did bridge that fact by using, among other things, the means and practices of making gifts and affirming festivities, thereby building mutual trust in the form of a friendship that supported a continuing partnership. This partnership could also depend on debt, however, in

Products from Finland	Products from Estonia
Fish (mainly herring)	Grain (mainly rye)
Salt (due to custom charges contraband)	Potatoes
Matches	Apples
Tobacco	Salt
Butter	Hemp, linen
Firewood and woodwork	Smoke-cured meats
Cobblestones (for streets, mostly to St. Petersburg)	Spirits & liqueur
Innovations (shoes with heels, often called Finnish shoes in Estonia)	Fish
	Horses, piglets, sometimes cattle
	Wooden rowboats
	Innovations (fish-smoking and canning industries)
The trade evolved through pooling practices into regular freight trade in the latter half of the 1800s.	

Fig. 6.2 Products of trade in the Gulf of Finland ca. 1850–1930

which case delayed payments comprised a driving force in persistent business.

I am using relevant factors in the huge mutual relationship where almost any movement of people to one side of the gulf was mirrored by an equivalent but never identical movement to the other side.

BARTER AS RECIPROCAL TRUST

The Estonian temporary marketplaces of *sepra* trade were well known. Ships and vessels from certain Finnish areas used to dock in certain Estonian harbors (see map in Fig. 6.3). In the older tradition, it seems like the Estonian traders also had similar bases on the Finnish coast.²³ It appears that these steady base camps in Finland later became less steady and the Estonians fished and traded where they could, often shifting their selling of goods to the coastal areas in the countryside a bit further from the coast.²⁴



Fig. 6.3 Map of temporary marketplaces on the Estonian coast and the main places in Finland where the *sepra* traders came from. (Map by Niklas Huldén)

Answers to the questionnaire (KIVA 15a) describe the situation when Finns visited Estonia in the eastern part of the gulf. Two longer answers shed some light on the trade as a whole:

The sea trade to Estonia was carried out with small sailing vessels and was barter trade by nature. They traded salted herring to the Estonians. Due to the open coastline, the Estonians had difficulties catching [their own] herring with the fishing equipment of that time. The Finns brought back rye and potatoes. It was mostly the islanders [e.g., the inhabitants of the islands in the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland] that participated in this trade, but they in turn sold the [Estonian] products to other Finns. After the year 1866, when the law changed, they began bringing spirits from Estonia, too. Spirits were even brought over the ice with horse sleighs during winter. There were few usable harbors on the Estonian side; most used were the mouth of Narva River, Kunda (herring trade), and Loksa, whence the Finns also imported bricks.²⁵

A well-informed answer picks up the subject of trade a little further on in time, when it already involved bigger two-masted boats called *jaala*. These vessels would then get even larger, with multiple decks, after the 1880s. They were often built by the skippers themselves, sailed for about ten years, and then sold to Estonians. In this case, we can already see the freight trade taking shape. The following example tells the story of a relatively successful individual, traveling on a two-masted *jaala* as a freight trader doing business with merchants in the cities, but still maintaining a *sepra* network with 20–30 families in Estonia, with whom he traded at very special and joyful happenings two to three times a year:

All the *saarelaiset* [the inhabitants of the islands in the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland] had so-called *sepras* or trading partners in Estonia. They were treated almost like relatives, and the relationships could exist for generations. One family from the islands (in Finland) could have 10–30 *sepra* families in Estonia, who received salted herring twice a year from the Finnish fishermen. These transactions were always made as barter. The Estonian *sepras* gave 2 to 2.5 times rye to 1 measure of salted herring ... During these travels one always brought gifts to the *sepras* ... On these travels there were usually a lot more people aboard the ship. Usually, the women of the skipper's family and sometimes also neighbors that didn't have boats of their own. There could be 20–30 persons aboard. Especially on the midsummer travels, people used to camp in big tents made of the sails. They slept near the tent walls and in the middle was a big table with benches around. On the

outside was a fireplace where you made food and coffee. The *sepr*as were invited into the tent and offered food and tastings of herring and the coffee was fortified with something stronger. People talked about news and gossiped in mixed language. The *sepr*as also had their wives and often a couple of children with them. The *sepr*as arrived at the harbor with horse carts and often had foals running alongside, to the children's delight ... They also brought with them grain as payment for the fish received last season, as they were always in debt to the islanders ... There was no actual marketplace, but the beach was wide and open, and you could see as many as 300 horses with chariots at one time.²⁶

Many answers in the questionnaire mention 10–20 *sepr*as as a usual number, while some mention up to 40. The network size seems to have some correlation to how long each family had been in business. Some answers name three to four generations of trade partnerships.²⁷ Others had less experience.

We used to make these *sepra* travels three times a year from Tytärsaari. We went to Moksa and Purtse harbors. We traveled in June, September, and November.

We didn't have more than four *sepr*as, as we were beginners in the business. These *sepr*as were living about 40 km inland from the shore, and the older men [in the Finnish group] never bothered to walk all that way to tell [the *sepr*as] that the herring had arrived. Other people could have tens of *sepr*as.

The barter went as follows: when we brought a small barrel of herring in June, the *sepra* would give two small barrels of rye to us. The same procedure every time. If they did not have any rye, the payment would have to be postponed until the next journey.²⁸

Was *sepra* trade in any way biased in favor of any of the trading partners, such as to reflect the negative reciprocity in anthropological terms? The questionnaire does not explicitly bring up this theme, but some answers appear to refer to these aspects in a subtle way. The quite common reply "The Estonians were always in debt" seems to indicate that the Estonian *sepr*as always had to compensate for earlier trade. Moreover, the fact that the Finnish traders could have so many *sepra* families per trader seemed biased. Additionally, Estonian farmers had a less independent position regarding their ownership and rights to their land; only in the 1860s did they at last have the possibility to purchase land.²⁹ Indeed, *sepra* trade

seems to have partially depended on the fact that the manors in Estonia also had a need to trade with anyone they wanted to without having to depend on the city merchant houses. But most answers in the questionnaire—which consist of Finnish informants—seem to point to the equality and good terms in the trade: “The Estonians admired the Finns and were therefore very hospitable.”³⁰ “The spring-herring was often given to the *sepras* on credit [...] Then in August we started fishing again, and made the same trip as in spring, but now the *sepras* [Estonians] could give back what they had received on credit. Neither I or anybody else has ever found someone cheating in this matter.”³¹ “The spring herring was exchanged as one barrel herring for two barrels of rye or barley or three barrels of potatoes; the autumn herring was a little more expensive in price [...] The Estonians seldom haggled but if it sometimes happened, some fellow Estonian would quickly say ‘Kust tema Soome *sepra* leipä saap, kuita kive päällä elap?’” which can be interpreted as “How should this Finnish friend get his bread [otherwise], when he lives on a rock?”³²

The only negative comments concerning reciprocity in the Finnish answers seem to concentrate on the conditions when the wars started in 1914 and 1939. The border closed abruptly and the Finnish *sepras* could not get their remuneration, as it was always the Estonians who were in debt.³³ All the positive attitudes in the questionnaire responses can probably in some ways be attributed to the timing of the questionnaire (1969–1971). In the middle of the Cold War, with Estonia trapped behind the Iron Curtain, the past experiences being asked about may have been described in a shimmer of nostalgia. One also has to consider that all islands in the gulf’s eastern outer archipelago, inhabited by most of the people remembering the *sepra* trade, also were lost after the Second World War, thus forcing the inhabitants to migrate to mainland Finland.

In their answers, the islanders do stress that these *sepra* trading fairs often functioned as a type of family gathering, and they were in fact the only business travels in which the wives and younger children of the traders did participate. Other answers by people from the Finnish coast confirm this: “We did not take any family with us on the *sepra* travels. Only the islanders did that.”³⁴

Some details in the questionnaire responses stressed that the practices were not ideal all the time. The same answer as above continues: “The women mostly contributed to the trade by begging. Not all of the islanders had their own vessels, but they could still participate by traveling in other people’s boats. [...] We always picked up a fisherman’s family from

Suursaari on our travels.”³⁵ The wandering hordes of begging women were not particularly popular on the Estonian coast, and sometimes they traveled on foot to the Estonian villages inland. They were called “crows” by the Estonians.³⁶ But we also find examples of Finnish women trading with Estonian *sepras* on their own: “My father went to Estonia to trade salted herring for rye [and] they had companions there called *sepras*. When my father drowned when I was six years old, my mother went on the same trade when I was eight. It was the same barter trade with the Estonians. The yacht was called ‘Emigrant.’ We also sold firewood to Estonia.”³⁷

IN THE END, IT WAS BUSINESS

Keeping count of all the transactions made on credit could be a problem, and there are some surviving “*sepra* books” from Haapasari in Finland which seem to have been kept in order to address this matter. There is some debate if they were only retained as a way of remembering how much herring the Estonian *sepras* wanted in the autumn, or if they were indeed books tracking debt. The fact that there is no evidence of such books existing in Estonia may indicate the latter.³⁸

Overall, we can sum up the *sepra* trade in the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland as being an old tradition, which gave the fishermen from the Finnish coast and the outer islands a market for sometimes quite meager catches of spring herring. This product was harder to sell in Finland and in the Estonian city markets. Barter trade on credit—herring in spring for grain in the autumn—was in a way a good deal for both partners. By the second half of the nineteenth century, *sepra* trade was already mixing with more regular freight trade in bigger vessels. But many of the *sepras* from both sides of the gulf held these trading meetings in high regard well into the twentieth century.

Farther westwards of the Gulf of Finland, the form of trade was usually called “peasant trade” (Swedish: *allmogeseglation*, *bondeseglation*). The trading goods were much the same as in the *sepra* trade to the east. The main cargo the Finns brought to Estonia was salted herring in wooden barrels. The trade also evolved from personal trade journeys into pooling practices, where some trusted fisherman or trader collected fish from other fishermen in the area and paid them in cash after the journey. This evolution was also common in areas of *sepra* trade outside of the traditional *sepra* market seasons.

The main differences between *sepra* trade and the trade conducted with merchants in the cities, mainly in Tallinn but to some extent also in Paldiski and Hapsal, were that the bartering was less pronounced, and the fishermen usually got paid in cash. It was not uncommon, however, for the same merchant who bought the fish to pay in grain and flour from the firm's own supplies. Wives and children did not generally participate in these trade journeys, but there were exceptions. In particular, younger men could travel across the gulf as helping hands, and sometimes also wives or daughters came as cooks and maids, as the crew always slept in the boats during the trip. Due to the fire hazard, the actual cooking had to be done on shore in special cooking houses.

The cargo taken home back to Finland could be very varied: "We took back home flour, potatoes, horses, carriages, smoked ham, small amounts of Riga balsam and cheap butter for use at home."³⁹ But often only some homecoming gifts were purchased.

The practices that these journeys entailed can be seen in a longer response:

In the spring we sailed over to Estonia to Reval (Tallinn). One used all kinds of vessels, from smaller fishing boats to yachts and galleys, and went from Korpo, Nagu Hitis and Dragsfjärd parishes. In general, we had salted herring as cargo and went straight to the harbor in Tallinn. We sold the herring to different firms; one of them was called Roterman. The cargo was taken to the *vraggård* [storage yard] where it was measured, packed again in bigger containers and sent away. We were paid in cash and in flour. People spoke Russian, German, Estonian and some Swedish, so you got by. One stayed in Tallinn until the business was finished, could be a couple of days. The skipper usually had some helping hand with him on the travel and people usually slept on the boat in Tallinn.

You couldn't really afford to buy that much in Tallinn. Usually it was some *saijas* [wheat buns] that you could take as treats for the people at home. These travels lasted from the middle of the 1800s. When the First World War broke out, it was the end of it all.⁴⁰

If family members sometimes had the opportunity to travel with the skipper, it was seen as somewhat of a luxury experience, although they seldom took part in any of the cities' cultural life. Some responses remark that the common Estonians in Tallinn seemed poor, and that the city was shabby:

Some other family members could join the travels to Tallinn and Paldiski to make some small purchases. It was no tourist attraction, so to say; in fact, it was the opposite [...] The common people were badly clad and dwelled in sheds.⁴¹

In general, the respondents stressed in a positive manner the fact that people traded with the same merchant. It was a safe bet, and people could always rely on the same trading firm. But the herring sellers had to live with the general avarice that seems to have marked the trading partners. Especially the repackaging of the salted herring seems to have gotten on the nerves of the sellers.

However thoroughly you packed the herring in the containers, you had to have extra containers with herring and brine [as the traveling packed the herring still more]. The skipper had to open the wooden barrels, fill them up and then seal them again. A controller made tests of the goods and sometimes the herring was rejected or considered inferior. The price went from bad to worse and you also got a name of selling bad fish.⁴²

Another fisherman tells, “Any positive stories from these travels are few and mostly forgotten, as this herring trade was an emergency solution needed for the existence of the fishermen.” He goes on to rant about the scrupulous rejection of fish and the bad prices.⁴³ Some of the negative reciprocity in the trade can also be seen in responses that mention the possibility of getting in a debt cycle with the city merchants, so most preferred not to take any cargo back home on credit.⁴⁴ However, some of the trading practices did resemble the act of giving of gifts, which I discuss next.

THE CUSTOM OF TREATING AND THE FEAST

Before we consider the gifts described in the questionnaire responses, it makes sense to briefly look at some of the practices suggested as predecessors of those appearing in *sepra* trade. The ethnologist Sven Andersson suggested in 1953 that shared practices of the *sepra* “institution” could have their roots in the tradition of “treating,” which was common in temporary “fishing camps” along the Swedish coast of the northern Baltic Sea from medieval times onward. Simply put, this meant that people, mostly from more densely populated areas, traveled to fishing grounds where a multitude of fishermen had gathered for a specific seasonally recurring

catch. The “treaters” brought with them alcoholic beverages, which they offered to the fishermen in exchange for some fish. This often led to problems, as the drunken fishermen could fall into debt to the treaters, in the end losing the whole lot of their seasonal catch. This was a problem discussed in high societal institutions for hundreds of years, but the tradition never really got under control. Treating also spread to the east, along with the expansion of Sweden’s reign. According to Andersson, this could have triggered the practices of *sepra* trade.⁴⁵

Without doubt, treating with gifts in *sepra* trade was common. Ethnographer Elias Raussi (b. 1800) described such meetings in the 1840s in Virolahti, Eastern Finland. Reflecting how the Estonians were received on their arrival at the Finnish coast, he depicts how the old men from the village would rush down to the harbor to greet the Estonians with blessings and handshakes, and also to get tastings of the gifts and “freebies” the Estonians had brought with them. The women and children in their turn got wheat bread (*sarvisaija*) as gifts. In this situation, it was the Estonians who traveled to their *sepras* in Finland, but later the situation more or less reversed.⁴⁶

Almost all the questionnaire responses from the area of the eastern Gulf of Finland mention this kind of gift-giving half a decade later. From the viewpoint of the Finnish traders, we have a similar description:

During these travels the *sepra* were always at first treated with seasoned fish, so-called *parkkikalaa*, which was made of uncleaned, lightly salted [her-ring] baked on pieces of pine bark [cortex]. It was brown to the color and very tasty. The *sepras* [Estonians] responded with eggs, butter, and wool. [...] Outside of the tent [that the Finns made from sails] they had a stove where they made coffee and food. In the tent the *sepras* [Estonians] were offered food and herring and some stronger beverages put in the coffee, which was called *norri*. There was a lively discussion on all kinds of news and subjects, *rääkittiin* (Estonian: “we spoke”). [...] The *sepras* brought with them the flour [rye] to pay for the fish received on the previous visit.⁴⁷

The questionnaires also include questions about festivities and marriages between Finns and Estonians. The festivities were common but sometimes the question of marriages is dealt with: “it was common among the islanders,” who were often defined as “from the other islands.”

The social meetings were usually spiked with liquor in the boat cabin. Of course, young couples sometimes fell in love and then youngsters brought

home a wife from Estonia. From Tytärsaari I can remember four couples. But these *sepra* travels had to be made on a tight time schedule. We had big boats and the Estonian harbors were bad if the wind started to grow stormy. But youths also went to Estonia just for fun and then they used smaller motorboats. They could be there for weeks. Sometimes we performed some [theater] play. Oh, that joy! Sometimes we went and fetched youths from Estonia and had a feast on Tytärsaari.⁴⁸

Some similar practices appeared in the western peasant trade, too, although those seemed to be a bit more private. Almost all the responses dealing with the western peasant trade depict dealings with city merchants and firms, of which Roterman is mentioned most often. But some answers also disclose Estonian farmers coming to the harbor in Tallinn to sell their products directly to the Finnish herring traders. The language used in these transactions could be mixed; the responses mention Estonian, Finnish, Swedish, Russian, and German.⁴⁹ Some responses also mention women as traders, but in general they did not often travel for the western trade.

Sometimes women also participated in the trading travels to Tallinn. My grandmother went several times. She had families whom she knew and traded with. She had with her smoke-cured mutton and cheese to keep up the relationships. Also, some salted herring, but most of those goods were in the main cargo.⁵⁰

The peasant traders' practices in dealing with the city merchants also sometimes included gifts, but it was selectively the merchant who made the offers, which often represented payback for a trusted delivery of fish, coupled with purchasing from the same merchant the trade goods to be taken back home.

If one bought the whole cargo from the same merchant, the skipper was invited to the merchant's home for some drinks with snacks. He could also get some porcelain plates or coffee cups "on the trade" as gifts.⁵¹

Father told us that our grandfather on the evening before the departure [back to Finland] always went to the merchant's home dressed in his best clothes from his youth. He had knee-short trousers and a vest of homemade lambskin with brass buttons, white stockings, and shoes with brass buckles.

With that he wore a short, blue coat. It was always very late when he came back to the boat.⁵²

The use of alcohol in the peasant trading business was common, and both buyers and sellers thought it benefited the trade.

The people I spoke to never told of any other amusements than drinking. Especially Boberg said that the trading was much better if you drank alcohol with the other trader. [...] And there was the art form of stacking up the firewood in the measure, so that you filled it with as little wood as possible.⁵³

If the measuring of firewood was performed by the buyer, the people doing it had to be “greased” with alcohol. Otherwise, they would stack the firewood too tightly.⁵⁴

Here we do find some mention of the negative reciprocity that one would expect to be present in trading with strangers. But we also see the tactics that compel the forming of trade partnerships and friendships.

Some responses also mention Estonian traders visiting the Finnish archipelago and coast. The responses deal with practices in the end of the 1800s and in the beginning of the twentieth century. Estonians regularly bought living fish from fishermen in the Archipelago Sea in western Finland. They then sold the fish in Riga.⁵⁵ The inhabitants in western Estonia also started regular freight trade in the latter half of the nineteenth century, often visiting the Baltic countries and Finland and Sweden.⁵⁶

Questionnaire 15 A also mentions the movement of people from Finland to Estonia and vice versa, sometimes in connection to trading and fishing. Several responses from the Åland Islands describe a legendary “Russian” trader who established himself in Enklinge in the beginning of the twentieth century. “Jesmin” (or Jasmin) was probably a trader from Vormsi in Estonia. He traded grain and flour that he brought to Enklinge with his own ship, exchanging the grain directly for salted herring from fishermen. He had to leave some of his grain in storage in Enklinge and asked one of the local fishermen to keep it over the winter. The fisherman said he could not afford to buy that much, but Jesmin replied, “Trust is as good as money.” They shared companionship for many years, but after 1909 he was never seen again.⁵⁷

CONCLUSIONS

The ethnographic questionnaire material used in this chapter provides a colorful depiction of the clearly extensive petty trade engaged in about a hundred years ago, as remembered by the people involved in it. Barter trade was especially persistent in the *sepra* trade area in the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland. To some extent, the responses from the Finnish inhabitants idealize the trade as very friendly and an even exchange that benefited both trading partners in a long-term relationship. While the questionnaire directs the responses, in my opinion the questions asked in this case were quite skillfully formed and did lead to nuanced and reflective responses. The *sepra* trade may be a bit romanticized from the Finnish point of view at the time the questionnaire was sent out, yet I still think that the people involved in it were far more closely knit than those engaged in the peasant trade in the western part of the gulf. The responses regarding this latter form of trade also bring up more negative aspects of the different practices. Thus, one can say that balanced reciprocity, as described by Sahlins, functioned as the common field for the business transactions in *sepra* trade as well as in the eastern peasant trade.

The evolution of pooling practices also seems to have been concurrent in the whole area. According to the questionnaire responses, gift-giving and festivities functioned in a motivating and formative manner for trading partnerships. Friendships can also be seen in both variants of trade, although they played a greater social, collective role in the *sepra* tradition. The intertwined coherence of debt and trust to some extent also reveal constellations of negative reciprocity, as the business transactions show tendencies of inequality and cheating. But again, these seem to be indicated less in the responses from the *sepra* area.

It is, therefore, not so surprising that in the 1990s, when Estonia again became independent, the *sepra* trading contacts were once again celebrated in a symbolic way. Old fairgrounds and marketplaces were revived, and still-living tradesmen from before the Second World War met once again. This has now evolved to an annually arranged happening that still involves petty trade but more clearly celebrates the friendship of the two countries (see Fig. 6.4).

Trade between the countries is now massive, including tourism, working migration, mutual industries, and a planned tunnel or two. But the planned *sepra* festival in 2020 had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and symbolically this perhaps illustrates the changing status of



Fig. 6.4 Advertisement for a *seppä* festival. (Artist: Nina Halmetoja. Pro Kelkkaniemi & Municipality of Virolahti)

state borders. Crossing them once again has proven difficult, prohibiting much of the interaction that has characterized the development during the last decennia, but for an altogether different reason.

NOTES

1. Kerkkonen 1959, pp. 12–17.
2. Zetterberg 2017, pp. 37–42.
3. Kustaa Vilkuna. 1964a. *Kiblakunta ja häävuode. Tutkielmia suomalaisen yhteiskunnan järjestymisen vaiheilta.*
4. See Orrman 2003, p. 112.
5. Helmer Tegengren. 1974. “Bondeseglationen mellan Finland och Estland.”
6. Stahl 1964, pp. 196, 208.
7. See e.g., Arved Luts. 1960. “Rändpüügist Eesti merekalastuses”; Kustaa Vilkuna. 1964a. *Kiblakunta ja häävuode. Tutkielmia suomalaisen yhteiskunnan järjestymisen vaiheilta*; Yrjö Kaukiainen. 1970. *Suomen talonpoikaispurjehdus 1800-luvun alkupuoliskolla (1810–1853)*; Helmer Tegengren. 1974. “Bondeseglationen mellan Finland och Estland”; David Papp. 1977. *Åländsk allmogeseglation. Med särskild hänsyn till sjöfarten på Stockholm. Sjöfarten i Lemlands socken 1800–1940*; Arved Luts, Elle Vunder, and Ilmari Vesterinen. 1994. *Kaksi virolaista tutkielmaa*; Raimo Päiviö. 2009. *Mikä Tappoi Seprakaupan? Suomalaisten ja virolaisten harjoittamasta vaihto- eli seprakaupasta, sen siipumisesta 1800-luvun lopulta ensimmäiseen maailmansotaan ja sen loppumisesta 1920- ja 1930-luvuilla.*
8. Nr 15a “Allmogeseglation på Estland.”
9. Helmer Tegengren. 1974. “Bondeseglationen mellan Finland och Estland.”
10. See Pia Olsson. 2014. “Good Factual Knowledge” for Future Generations. Questionnaire Activity Defining Traditional Culture”; Pia Olsson and Eija Stark. 2014. “Making Cultural Heritage in Finland. The Production of and Challenge to Tradition”; Pirjo Korhokangas, Pia Olsson, Helena Ruotsala, and Anna-Maria Åström. 2016. *Kirjoittamalla kerrotut. Kansatieteelliset kyselyt tiedon lähteinä.*
11. E.g., Sahlins 1974, p. 188.
12. Mauss 1999, pp. 28–34.
13. Sahlins 1974, pp. 200–216.
14. Sahlins 1974, pp. 192–195.
15. Sahlins 1974, pp. 200–216.
16. Sahlins 1974, pp. 220–222.
17. Vilkuna 1964a, p. 155.

18. Zetterberg 2017, pp. 101–104.
19. Johan Ludvig Birck. 1961. *Bondeförplägningen och böndernas skuldsättning hos handelsmännen*; Graeber 2011, p. 107.
20. Päiviö 2009, p. 33, author's translation.
21. See discussion in Graeber 2011, pp. 21–36.
22. Sahlins 1974, p. 195.
23. Vilkuna 1964a, p. 153.
24. Vendell, SLS 182 c 1881.
25. KIVA FM 4709, Virolahti.
26. KIVA FM 4702, Suursaari/Strömfors.
27. KIVA FM 4718, Vehkalahti; FM 4719, Tytärsaari.
28. KIVA FM 4711, Tytärsaari.
29. Zetterberg 2017, pp. 158–162.
30. KIVA FM 4718, Vehkalahti/Hamina.
31. KIVA FM 4727, Tytärsaari/Loviisa.
32. KIVA FM 4730, Virolahti. This phrase in some sort of pidgin Estonian/Finnish (the phrase in Estonian being something like “Kust tema Soome söbra leiba saab, kui ta kive peal elab”) alludes to the fact that the Finns from the outer islands in the Gulf of Finland hardly had any possibilities to grow their own crops. It also illustrates the language use in the *sepra* trade. Almost all Finnish language answers in the questionnaire say that trade was done in Estonian, “which was easy to learn,” and “everybody from the islands understood Estonian” (KIVA FM 4727, 4737, 4739). According to Raimo Päiviö, the Estonians in turn said that they used many Finnish words when they traded (Päiviö 2009, p. 46). In the end, many words from each language were probably recognized as dialectal on both sides of the gulf.
33. KIVA FM 4713, Vehkalahti.
34. KIVA M2886, Pyhtää.
35. KIVA M2886, Pyhtää.
36. Päiviö 2009, pp. 71–73; Vilkuna 1964a, p. 72.
37. KIVA M2876, Pyhtää.
38. Päiviö 2009, pp. 43–45.
39. KIVA M 2897, Nagu.
40. KIVA M 2542.
41. KIVA M 2566, Helsinki.
42. KIVA M 2564, Vänö.
43. KIVA M 2557, Kökar.
44. E.g., KIVA FM 4635.
45. Andersson 1953, pp. 30–35.
46. Vilkuna 1964a, p. 153.
47. KIVA FM 4702, Suursaari/Strömfors.

48. FM 4711, Tytärsaari.
49. KIVA M 4109, Nagu.
50. KIVA M 2567, Kökar.
51. KIVA M 2549, Kökar.
52. KIVA M 2541, Snappertuna.
53. KIVA M 2553, Snappertuna.
54. KIVA M 2984, Nagu.
55. See David Papp. 1979. *Åländsk allmogeseglation. Med särskild hänsyn till sjöfarten på Stockholm. Sjöfarten i Lemlands socken 1800–1940*; KIVA M 2091, Hitis.
56. ISF Acc.nr 17927:1.
57. KIVA M 2892, Kumlinge, M 3004, Enklinge.

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