

A shared history

A flight from a dictatorial regime, a family's struggle to make a better life — similarities that imbued two men with a personal understanding of the Rule of Law — one became a CEO; the other president of Estonia. Read more...



On the tiny island of Saaremaa, just off the Estonian coast, a couple fled their childhood home to escape an oppressive government and build a better life for their children. As many Estonians did, they commissioned a boat in late 1944 to take them to Sweden. The lucky ones made it to Sweden.

This couple wasn't among them.

Instead, when the boat began to sink, they were spotted by the German navy. Rather than reveal their true destination of Sweden, when asked, they said they were bound for Germany. And that's where they were taken, ending up in the city of Kempten run by the Third Reich, in the final days of World War II.

Andy gave an account of his parent's struggles at a recent [Atlantic Council Global Leadership Series event](#). Andy had been asked to give the introduction of President of the Republic of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves. Their backgrounds are similar – both families left Estonia by boat to escape an oppressive regime with little respect for the Rule of Law.

Andy said, "I grew up...looking forward to the day where we could see Saaremaa... but, also, with a very fervent understanding of what the Rule of Law meant and what it didn't mean."

He said he grew up believing that Saaremaa was the greatest place in the world but also "believing that I was never going to see it."

He gave a brief glimpse into how hard life was in his parent's homeland. "... most of the letters that we got from Estonia had sections that were blacked out by the censors. If we wanted to send a pair of shoes to our relatives in Estonia, I had to take them down to the pond and rub them with mud because new shoes would be intercepted before they ever reached my relatives."

President Ilves' family experienced some of the same struggles as Andy with one exception – his family made it to Sweden. His parents met as exiles there and Ilves was born there. His family immigrated to the U.S. in 1956, settling in Leonia, New Jersey. Ilves learned Estonian from his parents as well the same lessons about the Rule of Law that Andy's parents taught him.

Ilves grew up listening to his parents and visiting fellow exiles voice their anger about the Soviet and German occupation of Estonia.

Meanwhile, Estonians were beginning to test the limits of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's Glasnot policy. The year was 1988. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell signaling the beginning of the end of the U.S.S.R.

After independence had been declared Ilves was asked to join the Estonian government and became ambassador to North America. He said, "I was one of the few people who knew something about Estonia and the U.S. [but] who did not have a background in the KGB." Ilves became president of Estonia in 2006.

Two men, one common background. One became a CEO; the other the Estonian president. Their family's struggles bred a strong sense of right and wrong and led them to champion the Rule of Law around the world.

Related links

- [Full transcript of speech](#)
- [Audio of speech](#) (.mp3)
- President Ilves: "[The Future of NATO](#)"
- About [Rule of Law](#)

Next week on LNG Central: As LexisNexis CEO, Andy Prozes comes full circle – delivering a speech on the Rule of Law in Tallinn, Estonia. Andy's speech to approximately 200 lawyers from around the globe is part of the Lex Mundi Europe, Africa and Middle Eastern Regional Conference. Lex Mundi is the world's leading association of independent law firms.