

Random Call from Estonian Embassy: Hon. Peter F. Lane

John Caher: Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from New York Courts. I'm John Caher.

Shortly after Peter F. Lane took office as a New York City Civil Court judge in January, he was surprised to get a call from the Estonian Embassy. He assumed it was a wrong number. Regardless, he picked it up and learned that he's apparently the first and only judge in the nation of Estonian descent. In this program, we'll explore Judge Lane's background and learn a little about a country in Northern Europe that I suspect some of us may have heard of, but most of us could never pinpoint on a map.

Judge, thank you for coming on the program. So where in the world is Estonia?

Judge Lane: Thanks for having me, John. Tere, as I say "hello" in Estonian!

Estonia is in Northeastern Europe. The capital city is Tallinn, and it's hard for people to picture this, so I'll just paint it a little bit. It's across the Baltic Sea from Helsinki. Finland is north. There's about 2,300 plus islands scattered around the Baltic Sea that make up Estonia as well as its mainland. It's in the middle of the Baltic Sea, surrounded to the south by Latvia and Lithuania below it. To the east is Russia, and St. Petersburg is closest. To the north is Finland. And if you go across the Baltic Sea, northwest is Sweden. Coming down Denmark, Germany and Poland are southwest.

There's 1.3 million people and only 70% of them are ethnic Estonians. There's a lot of Russians who've been moved in due to history there. But the Estonians themselves, it's a Stone Age culture from 10,000 years ago. They were native peoples outside of the western world in the first century. Tacitus, the Roman philosopher or historian, wrote about them. And they knew that these people lived in the forests up there and on the islands. So that's where it is,

John Caher: What is it known for?

Judge Lane: It is a parliamentary republic and a constitutional-based democracy, and based on law and dignity. It's the world's first digital society. They have an e-residency program, so you can live anywhere in the world. If you open a business and a bank account legally and adhere to its business practice, you can become a citizen that way. They have ID cards that they're given, they're encrypted. You can do everything. I have one somewhere here. You can vote, you can buy your groceries, you can take a bus, you can pay your taxes that way, you can log on. It's all on the ID card. So they're very high measures of liberty and freedom. They're always in the top of the list.

Surprising, there's about 220 ethnic groups living there. They have two world heritage sites. One is the capital city of Tallinn, which is on the Baltic. The other is an island called Kihnu. It's the island of women, the last maternal society in Europe. It's a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity site. These people and their traditions go back a long way. Basically, the men go out to sea and fish, and the women run everything over there. The children, the teenagers always rank number one in Math and Science in the European sector now. They always have some interesting entries in the Eurovision.

But on the other side of history, it's the resilience throughout history. Since about the 1200s, since they were first known about, they've been consistently conquered or militarily subjugated by foreign rulers.

So the people have been under the rule of the Crusaders, the Teutonic Order, the Danish crown, Sweden, the Lithuanian Duchy of Livonia, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Russian Empire, you name it. And it was only until 1918, the famous part of history where they were able to repel a Russian communist invasion and have independence, which only lasted for 22 years. And this is entering one of the darkest periods of history where in 1940, the Soviet Red Army came in again and took them over and they were then pushed out in 1941 by Nazi Germany only to be reoccupied in 1944 all the way to 1991 by the Soviet Union. And the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. But getting to the positive part of this, they had what's called the "singing revolution." You'll get 30,000 Estonians singing and holding hands across the country and the three Baltic States. And basically they just said, "What can we do with these people?" They withdrew the tanks, and they went away, and they peacefully acquired their freedom.

John Caher: So that's probably what keeps them in existence after all that conquering and all that oppression, and all those invasions and all that switching hands as to who is in control of it, right?

Judge Lane: Yeah. It definitely has an effect on, as you say, the Estonian consciousness there. And they're really on the very edge of, they've always been a mercantile, enterprising, free enterprise, democratic people. They haven't been able to express themselves always because of their strategic location up in the Baltic, which was a prized area for so many. But they have their cultural traditions left.

As a population, think about it, they have less population in the country than they do in Queens. And ethnically around what they have is probably a small fraction of Queens in the world. I'm talking 700,000 people or something like that. So there they are, but they punch far above their weight. Their contribution to NATO, these are things that are never mentioned, what they've brought to the world with their digital. They've invented things like Skype. This technology was started in Estonia.

John Caher: Now with 200, I think you said 200 ethnic groups, what is their predominant language?

Judge Lane: Their predominant language is Estonian. So it's a very interesting language.

It's about 2000 years old. There were Finno-Ugric peoples and tribes then. It has absolutely no relationship to Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, or any other European language. It doesn't even sound European to your ears. As a kid who's thoroughly American and a New Yorker and a Queensite, and from the town of Flushing, to my ears it sounds something like my Japanese friends and add in a lot of double and triple vowels, AEs and Os and U's, and a couple of idioms, perhaps. So that's their language. And it's been preserved. It's an old language, and it's related mostly to Finnish.

But second most in the country, of course, they have a large Russian population that had migrated in over those years in the 20th century, and so they speak Russian. But my grandfather, for instance, who was from there, spoke eight languages. And many of them you'll find speak four or five languages because you have to.

John Caher: So your connection to Estonia is your grandfather, your maternal grandfather, is it?

Judge Lane: That's my maternal grandfather. And I've got a lot of immigration on the side. So I'll just map that and you can focus on the Estonian.

Maternal grandfather from Estonia is an immigrant. Maternal grandmother Polish. Of course, that's a whole other history. Not much is known. She had many brothers who were in World War II when she was here. My father's side, his father was an orphan. So he was born in Red Hook, Brooklyn, but sent back to an orphanage in Ireland. Somehow, he made it back to the US. That's a miracle. And then the mother's side, 1850 about, they left and then 1870 again from the potato famine off of Cobh in the south of Ireland. And my wife's from South Africa, by the way. So she's a fresh immigrant OTB, off the boat as they say.

John Caher: Do you know when and why your grandfather came here?

Judge Lane: Yeah. So he came of age as a teenager about that 1918 time, and he had some education in University of Tartu in the sciences. He was also in the navy, Estonian Navy. He came here in 1922 on the SS Paris, which is through Ellis Island, and he's on the Wall of Honor in Ellis Island having come through there. I think he saw an opening as a young man to get to a new world. There's a saying by Ernest Hemingway that in every port in the world, there's at least two Estonians. I think it was that kind of generation. So I think he saw that window of opportunity, and

this country aligned with his ideals of democracy and free enterprise and things like that.

John Caher: I assume that one of the eight languages he spoke was English?

Judge Lane: It was, yes.

John Caher: So he came over here knowing the language, but what did he do when he got here? Did he go to school? Did he work? Where did he live? How did he support himself?

Judge Lane: It's a good question. So both my grandfathers passed before I died. They were born in the late 1890s. I heard he did lots of jobs, but he had some kind of education. Even then, Estonia had good education at two universities, and it seemed to be in something in Pharmacology. So what his trade here was is he made false teeth. He was a dental technician, and he worked with chemicals and mixtures in fashioning and making teeth. And he got a job on Broadway in New York City, and then he lived up in The Bronx, where my mother was born, until they were going to run the Cross Bronx right through where he lived, and then had to move out of there. And he died in his mid 60s, not too much older than I am now. His dream was to have a family, have work, and have some freedom and not have to look over his shoulder and think that it was fear all the way around.

John Caher: So both of your grandparents were immigrants. How do you think that affected your parents, or your mother, I suppose, in this context, and the way that she raised you?

Judge Lane: Well, definitely with my mother, she was affected by this. And this is something that's also well-known. You may have heard it from people, say, in Holocaust situations, it's a similar thing, although my grandparents weren't Jewish, but they've had the entirety of their family in Poland killed. Here's a story with my grandfather: His sister and brother-in-law and their children were all killed. His father was executed when the Nazis came back in there. Sorry, it's kind of tough for me to talk about that stuff.

I could see my mother, this affected her deeply. There are Red Cross letters trying to get the grandmother out, first after the Russian occupation, then the Nazi occupation, then to the Soviet occupation. They wouldn't let the great-grandmother...her grandmother's the only one who lived. The indignity of it is then you couldn't have private property. So her property was seized in Haapsalu, and she was made a servant to the very soldiers who had killed her family, which is a great indignity.

And in some of the last letters that were written to my grandfather, she writes how she hadn't been rationed protein for a month and her teeth were falling out. And the next letter, this is what you got from the Soviet Union, if you can look closely, "mother died." It's a Western Union Man-Gram in 1955. That's it.

And then following that was the repatriation of her land, which my grandfather tried to fight saying that this person, I won't use his name, who they put in there was a murderer, and they were demanding return of their land. And I asked the Haapsalu branch, the public courts to place the property in our names. Any determination would be a miscarriage of justice, and as the word he uses "undemocratic."

John Caher: Wow.

Judge Lane: She died, so that's how she died. He was naturalized as a US citizen. And right attached to that is his draft card as he enrolled in the Selective Service.

John Caher: Was he in the American army for World War II?

Judge Lane: No, he was too old. But my mother, I think she was affected. She talked about his father's crying episodes and her mother's as well. And she had to be a bit of a parent to her parents with the things that they went through. So she became very self-sufficient. And of course, as a mom was very resilient herself, persistent and resilient, and very modest and humble too as a person. It still grabs me.

John Caher: So you were born in New York City?

Judge Lane: Yeah, Greenwich Village.

John Caher: Your mother was born in the United States?

Judge Lane: Mm-hmm.

John Caher: So you're one or two generations removed from immigrants. Yet you've made clear that your mother was profoundly impacted by their experience. And I can tell looking at your face and how you got emotional talking about your grandfather. How do you think the immigrant experience that's part of your DNA affected your life, your choice of careers, and your way of looking at the world?

Judge Lane: Look, my wife is an immigrant, South Africa. So someday the question may better be posed to my children who were South African- Estonia-Irish- Polish to New York City kids, I don't know what to call them.

John Caher: Walking melting pots?

Judge Lane: Right. Look, I love growing up in the city. For me, it was great. It affected me because I said, "Let me take advantage of everything I have here in the city." And I worked as many jobs as I possibly could get my hands on. I did music for a long time. My dad listened to, from the '20s, he had jazz on the radio all the time, as he'd say, the greats from the '20s and the '30s. He'll have Count Basie and the Dorsey Brothers, and Jimmie Lunsford, and Duke Ellington, and all that. So I grew up listening to that. I played drums from a young age.

I was very musical because my parents, they encouraged that. So I grew up playing jazz. I was in a citywide high school jazz band at 15, sponsored by Con Edison. We played all those songs, *Jumping at the Woodside*, *April In Paris*, *Shiny Stockings*, *Sophisticated Lady*. I loved it. I really wanted to be a musician. But another thing I really liked doing was fighting. So I did martial arts, and I used to pick up a few bucks in my teenage up to 20 something years, 50 bucks. I was very adept. I did that about for eight years, three days a week, and sometimes weekends.

John Caher: Wow!

Judge Lane: So the law, to me, is something of a merger of the adversarialness of the ring together with the theater of the music. There's a theater to the courtroom, which I love. And I found this out in a strange way, John.

I took an internship in my 2L from St. Johns, and it was no pay, but I got to work at the US Attorney's Office of the Southern District in New York. And when I got there, I was really scared. The US Attorney then was Otto Obermaier and they asked for a volunteer to work on a very important case. It's my instinct [to volunteer]. Somebody offered me a paper route. I took a paper route. If they offered me a maintenance job, I took a maintenance job, I'd say, "How hard could this be?" Well, it was a big organized trial going on in 1990, and my job was to read the FBI wire tap transcripts into evidence to the jury before a federal judge. And I was sweating through my palms until I got up to the podium and I realized, "Oh, I'm so familiar with this place" — the theater of the courtroom, the adversarialness. There was six defendants and two prosecutors, and six attorneys. I said, "I love the energy here." And it's also, this is democracy at work, our jury system. And I just felt so proud. It's a culmination, excuse me, of things I don't think I could have dreamed of.

John Caher: Was your legal career as a prosecutor?

Judge Lane: No. I wanted to do that at first. And there was a huge recession in 1991 when I got out of law school. They weren't hiring, neither was Legal Aid. So I took a job on Queens Boulevard. They called it the "Boulevard of Broken Dreams," but it really wasn't. I was doing landlord-tenant work for a while, and so it got me into

the courtroom right away. Day one, I was in the courtroom. And I did that for close to two years, and I staved off on my own, and then something hit me: Nobody who I knew in my family had business connections or instinct. Where they came from, they always worked for somebody else, so it was very difficult. And I was lucky enough, I had done some things in the community, in the neighborhood, and the Supreme Court judge had heard of me, and he interviewed me, and he said, "I saw something in you, Peter." I was 12 years with Judge Thomas Polizzi, a wonderful man. And I learned so much. I was so lucky. And I kept thinking I was going to leave the court system. He said, "Pete, stay with me, see how you like it at the end of the year." Then he said, "Three years I'm going to go." "I'll be 70 in another year, so we're going to go." Then he got certificated. He says, "I've got to stay another six years." So then he was leaving and I went out to get jobs elsewhere, and I was picking up other stuff. And then I got a call the day after Thanksgiving from the Surrogate. He said, "People speak highly of you, Pete. Would you come up and be my law clerk?" I said, "Well, let me talk to you first."

So I went in and saw him, and he hired me and he was there for a few years. And then I transitioned into the union, and I was a referee doing the trials up there. And then after 29 years or so, I was promoted to the supervising attorney there. And so I spent 30 years in the courthouse in Jamaica, Queens, the same one. And I had just the absolute blessing of being able to be in a courtroom and dealing with the people of Queens County every day, who I love. I love this place dearly.

John Caher: So were you a law clerk?

Judge Lane: Principal law clerk, a referee and referee in Supreme Court, as well as a principal law clerk, a referee and a supervising attorney in the Surrogate's Court over a 30-year career. So I pretty much occupied all those positions. During that time, I was president of the Law Secretary's Association to the Justice of the Supreme Court in the City of New York. And also, I wound up in the executive board for the Union of Court Attorneys and Referees in the city of New York where I was on the collective bargaining committee and I deal with OCA over the contracts and things like that. So I really wanted to make an impact to help my fellow workers and employees. They're such terrific employees, clerks, court officers, a lot of dedication here. And a lot of it it's not seen or known the things people do and sacrifice, but there's some good people. It's been an honor, and I'm glad to have been able to have served them in those capacities. A

I was going to leave because, frankly, I've got two kids going to college, and I just thought, 30 years, it's time to change buildings, try another slice. And I was going to go into a large firm doing litigation practice, and then out of nowhere, lightning struck and I was nominated for Civil Court. And then lightning struck twice when, I think, I came in with over a half million votes, first out of eighth.

And now I'm sitting in Queens Civil Court, which has been a blessing. It's very nice, wonderful people here. I love the process and I do my best, my level best, to be a good judge and to give them clarity, clear opinions and information, and decisions, and move the work for the court system.

John Caher: Tell me about that out-of-the-blue call you got one day from the Estonian Embassy.

Judge Lane: Oh, goodness, John. Oh, goodness. My heart jumped. I was sitting here at my desk in this room, and I looked over at the phone and it just said, "Embassy." I didn't know what that was. I figured it was spam. And then I said, "The court system, they're pretty good at screening their calls. Let me pick it up." And I said, "Hello." And they said, someone with an accent, "Peter Lane, Lane?" I said, "Yes." "Estonian Embassy calling." It was the counselor for Justice and Home Affairs.

I'm also a citizen of Estonian, you see. Through their repatriation project after their revolution, they were desperately trying to find what happened to the diaspora and the scatterings of Estonia.

Anyhow, she said, "This is the first time we've had an elected judge in the United States of America, as far as we know." I didn't think it was that much at first. But then I started to think of my mother and to think of their struggle, and to think of how closely aligned in principles they really are as a people to the United States, how very much this meant to them. And the fact that they would call, I was absolutely flattered. And so she was basically calling on behalf of the embassy staff to congratulate me. It really meant much for them. For me, I'm a bit of an embodiment of what they've aspired to do is to further their impact and standing in the world of free democracies and the principles of freedom they believe in. And to have somebody here in the United States, they're very proud of it. It's hard for me to digest, John.

John Caher: Have you been to Estonia?

Judge Lane: Sure, yeah. Beautiful. It's a beautiful country. About half of it is forested. It's really a beautiful country. It's got some of the cleanest air in the world, along with Iceland and some other places. You get Wi-Fi in the bus stop. The language will drive you crazy, but enough people speak English now that you'll get around. You're not going to be eating McDonald's or any franchise. These are food that's coming from the earth and from the sea. They have fish and potatoes, and soups, and all different type of food, which is Northern Baltic. Not quite Scandinavian, but very healthy and fresh food. It's a nice place to visit.

John Caher: Do you think your immigrant roots or your knowledge of the experience of immigrants is reflected in the way you approach your job as a judge?

Judge Lane: Yes. Queens is, as you know, the crossroads of the world. This is the county of immigrants. This is the county of so many people of so many backgrounds and cultures, and that's what's wonderful about it. And I feel comfortable because I don't feel unique. I'm just one of 2 million stories of people here in Queens. And when people come in, it affects me because I want to show the respect and understanding to the people of all of the great diversity there is here in Queens.

This is a working-class borough. How hard many of these people work and struggle to put their kids through school and even to find a job and do things. So there's a level of empathy and a level of understanding. And they may come in with a, "Here we are, we're in America, we're in Queens, there is justice here." So, cognizant that I'm representing that idea that's in their head. I think that the immigrant connection is really vital. And I also say this too, it's at the current time being, it's probably fairly unique.

There is no Estonian Bar Association, you know. It doesn't exist here. I am not backed up by a 4- 500-member organization there to run out into the streets and do that. So to get honored and elevated to this position by the people of Queens, for me is really extra special and something I will always think is one of the highlights of my life.

John Caher: And on that note, Judge, thank you so much for your time and for your service.

Judge Lane: John, thank you. And as they say in Estonia, aitäh!