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## The Sinking of the MS Estonia:

Risto Ojassaar's Story  
By Mihkel Tarm  
CITY PAPER-The Baltic States

TALLINN, Estonia - When 24-year-old Risto Ojassaar drives along the coast on his way to and from work every day, he casts his eyes out to sea and trembles.

What he sees is a nightmare: he's scrambling up a stairwell as water rushes in after him; he's drowning deeper and deeper into a frigid, watery abyss; then, like the climax of a bad dream right before you wake, he's watching as an enormous, building-sized ship rolls over and slips forever beneath the waves.

But it's not a dream.

Ojassaar is one of the few passengers who survived the sinking of the MS Estonia on September 28, 1994-one of Europe's worst ever shipping disasters-and for him, the horror of it all is still very real.

"It's just too close," said Ojassaar, pausing and staring down at his hands during a recent interview. "It's too close now and it will be too close ten years from now. It will always be too close."

That fateful autumn day started well enough.

A professional dancer, Ojassaar was performing with his nine-member troupe on board the Estonia, a luxury ship with several restaurants, discos and even an indoor pool. Their performance was the debut of what was suppose to be a three-month stint on the popular Tallinn-Stockholm ferry. They were thrilled to be there.

"The contract with the Estonia was our big break," said Ojassaar, a slender, soft-spoken man with thin, reddish-blond hair. "But it was our first and last performance."

Despite the heavy swaying of the ship, the show-featuring a newly choreographed, modern dance- went very well. It ended late in the evening to enthusiastic applause.

A few hours later, all hell broke loose.

"The waves were like, Boom!, Boom!, Boom!," recalled Ojassaar, drumming his hand hard against a glass-top coffee table. "They were amazing."

Investigators later concluded that enormous waves generated by one of the worst storms on the Baltic Sea in years had wrenched off the ferry's bow door, allowing water to flood onto the car deck and quickly through the rest of the ship.

Sipping a beer on a bar stool on an upper deck after midnight, Ojassaar pressed his nose up against a porthole to watch the stormy spectacle outside. He saw some waves that seemed to tower over the 20-meter-high ship. For the time being, he was having a ball.

"I had always loved sea storms," he said. "And I was sitting there thinking, 'Oh, look at that wave! This is great!'"

As Ojassaar retired to his cabin around 1:00 o'clock to read before going to sleep, he hardly gave the storm a second thought. There was certainly no hint anything was amiss-not, that is, until his legs flew above his head and he was suddenly staring at a wall, which was now his ceiling.

Recalled Ojassaar: "I thought, 'Okay, now the ship has tilted and it will tilt back.' "

It never did.

He crawled out of his cabin door and into the hallway. Panic had already set in. Frightened men, women and children, some clad only in their underwear, were bolting for the main stairs. Only later did Ojassaar realize that that meant almost certain death.

He was lucky. The manager of his dance troupe-who was in a cabin nearby-was thinking more clearly. She had been on the Estonia before and she understood that with the ship now on its side, the main stairwell would no longer lead them out of the ship.

"I started that way, too, but she grabbed me and shouted, 'No! This way!'," he said, then pausing. "She saved my life."

Pulling each other up steep, treacherous stairs, the two made their escape. At one point, Ojassaar fell back onto a glass door. As he looked down, he saw water rushing towards him-from below! It was only then that he fully understood he was in a battle for his life.

Other witnesses later described scenes of terror elsewhere inside the ship, with a crush of people fighting against hope to make it up increasingly impassable stairways. There were some 1000 passengers on the Estonia that night, but most of them never stood a chance.

"You had to be in good shape to get up those stairs," explained Ojassaar, brushing his hand across his closely-cropped beard. "We were. But others couldn't possibly make it, especially children and the elderly."

Because it all happened so fast, there was also no hope for hundreds of people sleeping in cabins on lower decks. In the end, over 850 people went down with the ship. Most of the 137 survivors were young men.

Emerging onto the side of the ship, Ojassaar and his manager barely had time to stop and think about what to do next. Within seconds, before even getting a chance to grab life jackets, the two were swept overboard by mammoth waves pounding the crippled ship.

The next time Ojassaar saw his manager was at her funeral. Five other members of his dance group also perished.

When Ojassaar hit the water, he plunged so far into the dark, icy sea he was sure he didn't have the strength to pull himself back up to the surface.

"I thought, 'I don't have any more air. I'm going to give up now-I'm going to die,'" Ojassaar remembered thinking, his arms and fingers stiffening from the cold. "Then I got a second wind."

Finally reaching the surface, he saw lots of life jackets, but nobody in them.

Of the several hundred passengers who managed to flee from the sinking ship, many couldn't make it into life rafts. They died quickly of exposure. Others froze to death inside their waterlogged rafts.

Ojassaar-again-was lucky.

After his frantic struggle to reach the surface, a lifeboat miraculously popped up from under the water right in front of him. It was waterlogged, but it was seaworthy and its roof was intact.

When he turned back to look, he saw a sight he's still trying to comprehend: some 30 minutes after he had kicked off his shoes and settled down to read the paper, the MS Estonia-which like Titanic was thought to be unsinkable-turned over on its back like a submerging whale and vanished into the raging sea.

For what seemed like forever, Ojassaar and two others in his raft braved the icy winds and unrelenting waves. They stood and held supports on the flimsy roof: they figured that if they sat in the knee-high water, they'd freeze to death.

"Cold water makes you feel so numb and comfortable that you feel like sleeping," Ojassaar explained. "That's the feeling you get right before you die."

Ironically, the stormy sea was now his friend.

"In calm weather you can fall asleep and die," said Ojassaar. But not when waves are crashing down on your head minute after minute.

"In a storm," he says with a grin, "you can't die."

During the next six hours, Ojassaar tried not to think about his wife and child. As news of the catastrophe broke back in Tallinn, he knew they'd be agonizing over whether he was alive or dead. He couldn't bear to think of what they were going through. At dawn, Finnish helicopters finally pulled Ojassaar to safety.

During nation-wide ceremonies marking the year anniversary of the tragedy, President Lennart Meri asked Estonians to remember "those whose memory will always be brought back to us by the eternal roar of the waves."

And he urged people to forgive what the sea had done.

"The sea has treated us severely," a solemn President Meri said at one public gathering. "But we are a maritime people and we have no life without the sea. We have to make our peace with the sea." But not Risto Ojassaar. He says he's not ready to forgive.

He says his life has been changed too much. He use to love the sea, for one thing; these days, he can't look at the sea without shuddering. He wouldn't think about getting on another ferry.

He also hasn't danced since the sinking of the MS Estonia and he says he'll probably never dance again.

Today, he works as a car salesman.

"Physically I can dance," said Ojassaar, flanked by a used Toyota Corolla at the Tallinn-based dealership where he's employed. "But mentally I can't. It reminds me of the accident. It reminds me of all the friends I lost."

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