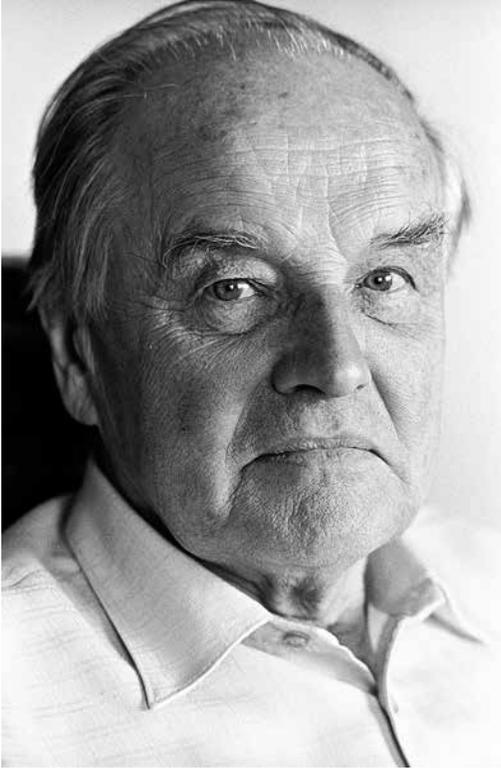


THE DEPARTURE OF AN ERA IN ESTONIAN ETHNOLOGY

Commemorating Dr Ants Viires (December 23, 1918 – March 18, 2015)

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Many years ago, people started calling Ants Viires the grand old man of Estonian ethnology. This was certainly motivated by his comprehensive approach to the subject. For him, folk culture was an integrated whole and everything was worth studying – the material as well as the spiritual culture, social relations, linguistic aspects and the questions of identity and mentality that pervade many topics, along with the themes of cultural continuity and innovation. During his long career as a scholar, Ants Viires was able to deal with all this. He was supported on the one hand by his broad-based education – having started his university studies as a philologist, he graduated as an ethnographer. And on the

other hand, there was his vast interest in the humanities, which through the decades was converted into deep encyclopaedic erudition. It is no wonder that Ants Viires was an active contributor to journals dealing with language, history, folklore, and naturally, ethnology. It is also no wonder that the works completed under his direction include extensive encyclopaedic anthologies about Estonian folk culture (Viires and Vunder 1998; 2008), lexicons (Viires 1995; 2007), works of popular science that presented a synthesised version of folk culture (Viires 2004a; 2004b). It is probably no exaggeration to say that 20th-century Estonian ethnology is hard to imagine without Ants Viires – the best part of it mostly looks like him.

The 20th century was a century of political and ideological somersaults which significantly determined the fate of Estonia's humanities and the scientists dealing with it. In the whirlwind of World War I, the large European empires collapsed, and many new nation-states rose from their ruins. Among others, the Russian Tsarist state also fell, and the Republic of Estonia was born on its western edge in 1918. In that same year, Ants Viires was born in Tartu, the most important city in the southern part of the Estonian Republic. In retrospect this coincidence seems very symbolic, considering Ants Viires's contribution to the elucidation of Estonian folk culture. Within a few years, Estonian ethnography became an academic discipline in the new republic. And by the 1930s, when Ants Viires graduated from secondary school, it had reached an international level.

If the Estonians acquired their own state in World War I, then they lost it again in World War II. If during the pre-war era, Estonian ethnology was one of the impor-

tant branches of national culture research, the Soviet authorities immediately started to bring pressure to bear on this research. The pressure extended to terminology: the name of the Estonian National Museum, the main Estonian ethnology centre, was changed to the State Ethnographic Museum – the old name seemed too nationalistic to the new authorities. Many research topics had become objectionable; and a large number of the Estonian ethnologists and folklorists had escaped across the sea to foreign countries in fear of the approaching Soviet forces (Gustav Ränk, Oskar Loorits, Eerik Laid, Ilmar Talve, and Helmut Hagar). The borders were closed, and the development of Estonian ethnology was split into two branches, one that was under ideological pressure in Estonia, and the other in the free world, but separated from its people and research materials.

Ants Viires started his studies at the University of Tartu in 1937, but due to the war he did not graduate until 1945. During this time, the regime in Estonia changed several times – in 1940, the Soviet occupation liquidated the Republic of Estonia; in 1941, the German occupation liquidated the Soviet occupation; and in 1944, the Soviet occupation in turn replaced the Germany occupation. During those uncertain times, Ants Viires managed to work at the Estonian National Museum, and after the war, to start his postgraduate studies at the Tartu State University. But now the new authorities revealed their repressive countenance. During the German occupation, as a good linguist Ants Viires had been recruited into the German Army for a few months and worked as a translator, which ended up creating a blemish on the young ethnologist's CV. It was impossible for him to find work in his speciality. Incidental non-staff positions at several research institutions, language lessons at a technical school – and he was able to get by. However, this series of misadventures did not dampen his interest in research, quite the opposite. In 1955, Ants Viires defended his scientific degree at the Tartu State University with a research paper on traditional Estonian woodworking. This

study in one of the most important handicraft fields was published in 1960 and is still a significant milestone in Estonian ethnological research (the second edition, with high-quality photographic material, appeared quite recently in 2006).

In the meanwhile, a change of direction occurred in Soviet society (the so-called Khrushchev Thaw), bringing fresh winds and somewhat loosening the ideological grip on research. It opened up new prospects for those who had been forced out of their beloved specialities for political reasons. In the interim, at the initiative of broadminded archaeologist Harri Moora, a working group of ethnographers was formed in the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences in Tallinn. Starting in 1956, we can find Ants Viires's name on the Institute of History payroll. The Institute of History became Ants Viires's place of employment for many decades, initially in the archaeological section, and starting in 1968, as the leader of the team of ethnographers.

In 1977, when an independent ethnography sector was established at the Institute of History, Ants Viires was named acting head until a competition could be organised. However, someone in the institute's Communist Party bureau remembered Ants Viires's wartime translating work, and also the fact that he was not a member of the Communist Party and it was decided that, despite his high scientific qualifications, such a person could not be allowed to manage Soviet social science. However, Ants Viires was undoubtedly the leader of Estonian ethnological research and had acquired an international reputation. Thus, he still became the head of the ethnographic sector in 1983, a position that he held until 1996, when he had reached a ripe old age.

These facts about his career are not just the chronology of a person's life – here we see conflict between power and spirit; we see choices that barely existed; the devastating dogmatic hurdles that the unintelligent authorities set in the path of a talented and principled person. And we see people who

did not even think about going along with a stupid self-important ideology.

The opportunities at the time were limited – during the Soviet years, ethnologists did not go on field trips to South America or Australia; neither were students or scientists offered scholarships in Western universities where they could participate in the fresh currents of the scientific world. I remember when I was a doctoral candidate about 15 years ago and was given the opportunity to spend several years, with only short intervening gaps, at different foreign universities, Ants Viires, the supervisor of my doctoral thesis, gave me every encouragement. Naturally he knew my foreign curators and naturally they knew him, because, in the slightly freer atmosphere that had developed during the previous decades, the possibility to attend international conferences had developed. Yes, but he was still sorry that he had not had the opportunities in his youth that were suddenly opening up in the 1990s. His youth coincided with the war years, and later the era of Stalinist repressions. He has written how the “repulsively vile word usage” that he encountered while reading a supposedly respectable historical work on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dissuaded him. And he realised that it would not be possible to go along with such an ideology.

One can imagine that for many nationally minded people, traditional culture provided an opportunity to escape the repugnant political reality. Traditional culture and national thought have gone hand-in-hand throughout the history of ethnology; the most famous researchers of traditional culture both in Estonia and elsewhere have also been the most charismatic carriers of the nationalist spirit, like bridges between the past and present. For me, the bridge between the pre-war Republic of Estonia and the present Republic of Estonia has always been comprised of the people who came out of the intervening ‘red muck’ without losing their dignity. Ants Viires is undoubtedly one of those people.

Ants Viires was also a bridge in the context of his speciality. In the Soviet period,

a clear distinction was made between ethnography and the study of folklore. In 1940, part of the Estonian National Museum was made into the State Literary Museum, and the Estonian Folklore Archives were moved to the new museum. However the material culture stayed at the Ethnographic Museum. Researchers of folk culture were also educated separately – for decades the future ethnographers were taught in the university’s history department, and studied ethnography as an ‘auxiliary science’ and folk culture in the form of material culture, while the folklorists were taught folklore along with the Estonian language and literature in the philology department. The sister sciences were separated from each other and practitioners knew little about what was going on in the other. Ants Viires was one of the few people for whom folk culture was always one integrated whole. On the one hand he has written articles about the fields related to traditional material culture like tools, vehicles, fishing tools, folk architecture, food and agriculture, etc. At the same time, he has compiled numerous interesting studies about folk religion, including the possible shamanist aspects of the Estonian ethnic religion. Being able to orientate equally well in the material and spiritual culture of the nation has enabled him to reach original conclusions, to notice things that a researcher with a more one-sided education and interests would not notice. It is quite natural that a scholar with such great erudition would be considered a valued professional adviser in Estonia and abroad. For a long time, he was a member of the Research Council of the Estonian National Museum (from 1957 until his death), the Open Air Museum (from 1957) and the Institute of History (from 1969). Most prominent internationally is his involvement with the research council of *Ethnologia Europaea*, Europe’s most important journal of ethnology (1983).

Ants Viires’s outstanding scientific achievements have been recognised by many foreign scientific organisations. In Finland, the Finno-Ugric Society (1964), Kalevala Society (1965), Archaeological Society of Fin-

land (1970), and Finnish Literature Society (1981) all invited him to be a foreign member; and the Hungarian Ethnographic Society made him an honorary member. In 1982, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Helsinki. He was also a foreign member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences and Letters and a member, and later honorary member, of the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy in Sweden.

He has also been named an honorary member of the University of Tartu. In 1996, Dr Ants Viires was awarded the Order of the National Coat of Arms, 4th class for his outstanding achievements in the promotion of Estonian ethnology. For his great contribution to Estonian science, Ants Viires has been recognised by the Open Estonia Foundation, the Estonian National Culture Foundation and the Cultural Endowment of Estonia. For his lifetime achievements, he received the Estonian State Cultural Award in 2007 and the University of Tartu's Contribution to Estonian National Identity Award in 2009.

Finally, there is one more memory that shows that ethnology is not an insignificant matter and, if taken in hand by a thorough knowledgeable scientist with an erudite background, even something small can be investigated and become something great. At meetings, Ants Viires often recalled how some time around 1940, the linguist professor Paul Ariste had told him how important it was to write – he told the young ethnologist to write about whatever came to mind, even about pants buttons, just to write. The idea germinated and Ants wrote. He wrote a long and thorough article about buttons, going back to Viking-era buttons, medieval buttons and finally ending with the modern buttons from later centuries.

Ants Viires's erudition has benefited many young colleagues; he has dispensed practical advice to ethnologists, folklorists, historians, linguists and others. As the supervisor of my doctoral thesis, he helped me with objective critical comments and directed my attention to nuances that would otherwise have been overlooked. His thorough knowledge of Esto-

nian culture helped me to tighten up the thesis in many ways. Afterwards, when researching various topics, I also turned to him for advice and always received pragmatic help.

In a scientific journal it is appropriate to speak about the departed primarily in a scientific context. Ants Viires comprised an entire epoch and his unusually long life and a mind that was alert until the end, allowed him to participate in practically an entire century – an extremely eventful and complicated century. This century influenced him, but in his field – in ethnology – he significantly influenced the century. However, Ants Viires was much more than a scientist. He translated many interesting and even sensational literary works (for example, Aldous Huxley's psychedelic *Doors of Perception*). He has written and published poetry, including the voluminous *Seitsme maa ja seitsme mere taha* (Beyond the Seven Lands and Seven Seas; Viires 1991). And we should not overlook that he was a bicycle enthusiast – and, as we know, riding a bicycle impacts mental creation in some mysterious way.

Farewell, Ants Viires – a great scientist and all-around creator!

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