

IN MEMORIAM

Vaina Mälk

December 10, 1922 – April 7, 2004

On April 7, Vaina Mälk, the reputed scholar of Estonian folklore studies, departed at the age of 81.

Vaina Mälk (nee Kukk) was born in the family of a schoolteacher in Kehtna. Her school years passed in Pärnu. During the war she worked as a teacher, after which she entered the Tartu State University and in 1950 received her degree in folklore studies. After a few years of lecturing at the Tallinn Pedagogical University, she dedicated herself to pursuing an academic career and became a member of the Folklore Department of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature in 1952.

Vaina Mälk received her PhD degree in 1963 for the study into the history of folkloristics *Eesti Kirjameeste Seltsi osa eesti folkloristika arengus* 'The role of Society of Estonian Literati in the development of Estonian folkloristics'. The thesis made use of very many facts and sources, and is still used as a reference material by folklorists studying the 19th century recordings in Estonian archives.

Vaina Mälk was closely connected with the routine activities of the folklore department, and participated in compiling a number of overviews and treatments. She wrote chapters on historiography, riddles and several folksong types in the overview of Estonian folklore *Eesti rahvaluule ülevaade*, 1959, an edited and improved version of which was published in Russian in 1980. Then followed the anthology of Estonian folk tales *Eesti muinasjutud*, 1967, which Vaina Mälk helped to compile and comment. The publication, which was later translated into German (1980), introduced Estonian folktales in the whole world. Vaina Mälk also wrote a treatment of international proletarian battle songs and reflections of revolutionary events in folklore, which was published in the collection *Priiusel raiume rada...* ('For Freedom We Axe Path', 1970).

Vaina Mälk's major achievement in folklore studies was the publication of Balto-Finnic proverbs, which was compiled together with the academic



publication of Estonian proverbs in the framework of the Balto-Finnic proverb project in cooperation with Finnish folklorists. According to the project agreement the Estonians were to publish Votian, Livonian and Veps proverb anthologies. The Tartu research group set out to prepare the Estonian proverb materials, and Vaina Mälk's task was to compile the material of the smaller Balto-Finnic peoples and prepare the publication. With immense dedication and enthusiasm Vaina Mälk browsed through random manuscripts and unread archive materials in search of proverbs of our kinsfolk. She also had two opportunities, rare in the Soviet times, to work at the folklore archives of the Finnish Literary Society in Helsinki. In four years Vaina Mälk also conducted fieldwork in Votian villages in search of materials and returned with more than 500 proverbs. Considering the compiler's dedication and thoroughness in collecting and handling the material, the publications exceeded the original deadlines, but ultimately resulted in three monumental academic publications in Estonian folklore studies.

The published collections of Votian proverbs with Estonian, Finnish, Karelian and Russian equivalents (*Vadja vanasõnad eesti, soome, karjala ja vene vastetega*, 1976), volumes 1–2 of Livonian proverbs with Estonian, Votian and Latvian equivalents (*Liivi vanasõnad eesti, vadja ja läti vastetega*, 1981) and volumes 1–2 of Veps proverbs with Estonian, Votian, Livonian, Karelian and Russian equivalents (*Vepsa vanasõnad eesti, vadja, liivi, karjala ja vene vastetega*, 1992) are more than comprehensive collections of proverb material. All three collections have introductory chapters (in Estonian, Russian and German) and several registers providing the reader important and interesting additional information. Type articles are analogous to the ones in the academic collection of Estonian proverbs, but with translations into the Estonian language and equivalents and parallel forms in other related languages. Considering the specific nature of this task and striving for the maximum result, Vaina Mälk also cooperated with scholars of Finno-Ugrian studies, dialect researchers and other folklorists. The most important aspects of collective work are organisational skills and motivation. Vaina Mälk was good at coordinating the work of her team and was able to finish all these three projects. Due to the poor printing technology at the time and the use of rota print with metal binding these publications are uncomfortable to use, and owing to the small print run have become rather rare. In the joint proverb project, however, the Estonians fulfilled their task, and the project resulted in the publication of *Proverbia septentrionalia* in Helsinki in 1985. Among the compilers, Vaina Mälk was undoubtedly the best expert in the material of our smaller kinsfolk.

In retrospect, we must not forget Vaina Mälk's work as the secretary of degree thesis defence committee. In the Soviet republic of Estonia defend-

ing dissertations was an altogether different matter than it is now. For a while the nearest committees were located at the Universities of Moscow and Leningrad, where waiting lists were long, bureaucracy complicated and the whole procedure took place in Russian. In 1982 it became possible to establish a defence committee for degree theses in literature and folklore at the Institute of Estonian Literature and Language in Tallinn. All defence materials still had to be in Russian and confirmed in Moscow, but defences could now be held in Tallinn. The committee enabled many scholars from Estonia and elsewhere from the territory of the Soviet Union, who did not have such committees in their republic, to maintain their theses here. This, in turn, resulted in theses from authors of different background. As the secretary of the defence committee, Vaina Mälk had to deal with the organisational workload of the committee.

Vaina Mälk worked at the Folklore Department of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature all her life. In these days people who kept their position for a long time were highly valued, and Vaina Mälk worked there for 40 years in a row (1952–1992), in 1979–1992 as senior researcher.

Being a hardworking and consistent researcher, Vaina Mälk's contribution to the Estonian folkloristics was monumental. Her thesis on the role of the Estonian Society of Literati in Estonian folkloristics is an important reference book for the younger generation of folklorists. Even after her retirement in 1992, Vaina Mälk continued to look for parallels for the forthcoming Balto-Finnic project. Her very last research results are waiting to be published in the additional volume to *Proverbia septentrionalia*.

Anne Hussar