

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### **22nd Annual Perspectives on Contemporary Legend Conference at the University of Wales in a small Welsh resort town Aberystwyth, 21-24 July 2004**

The Conference of Contemporary Legend Research was held for the 22<sup>nd</sup> time, thus evidencing the vitality of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR), established already in 1982. The society brings together mostly Anglophone legend researchers from America and Europe. Most meetings so far have been held in the States, Canada or England. Active promoters of the society in Scandinavia are Reimund Kvideland, Carsten Bregenhøj and Bengt af Klintberg. In recent years new members from Eastern European countries have joined the society. The very first article on AIDS lore in Estonia by the author of this overview was published in the society's newsletter FoafTale News (FTN) in 2001. On the Aberystwyth conference Estonia was represented by Mare Kõiva and the author, other participants came from the Netherlands, Malta, India, Slovenia, Sweden, France, Germany, Canada, the United States and Great Britain.

Research into urban and contemporary legends became fashionable after the publication of Jan Harold Brunvald's monograph *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* in 1981. Contemporary media-ridden world appears to offer plenty material for folkloristic legend research. The series of article collections *Contemporary Legend*, published by the society, publishes analyses of individual cases as well as consequential theoretical articles influencing the trends of contemporary narrative research from the leading older-generation narrative researchers like Gillian Bennett, Paul Smith, Mark Glazer, Bill Ellis, Sandy Hobbs, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, and others.

The peaceful, benevolent and stimulating environment of the Welsh conference (the time reserved for each presentation was 30 minutes plus question time) did not offer new brilliant findings in theoretical research, but most presentations were based on solid research by leading experts in the field. Presentations were held on an array of topics. The conference included 33 presentations from 36 delegates on topics ranging from new interpretations of old legends and regional legends (narratives) to legends connected with the cinema and advertising sphere. Conference participants were provided an overview of all the topics pertaining to legend research in the world.

The conference programme and abstracts were published in the May (no. 58, 2004) and August (no. 59, 2004) issues of the FTN newsletter, available also on the ISCLR Web site (see <http://users.aber.ac.uk/mikstaff>).

In the following I will discuss some of the many memorable presentations.



*Contemporary legend? Or maybe the fisherman's tale? Jan Harold Brunvand telling, (from left) Eda Kalmre, Véronique Champion-Vincent, Monika Kropcejlisjetning. Photo by Blaz Telban.*

Mikel J. Koven, main organiser of the conference, from the Department of Theatre, Film and Television at the University of Wales, delivered an intriguing lecture on how *The X-Files* feed on folklore. Kirsten Hardie from Arts Institute at Bournemouth discussed the real and unreal people/characters in international packaging design. Her presentation relied on the history of design and marketing, advertising, cultural and media research. The presenter observed the establishment of connection between the advertisement and consumer and product, and how and whether these so-called faces of product cross cultural boundaries.

Elissa Henken from the University of Georgia discussed the legends on body modification based on the material collected by her students. The author argued that colouring, tanning, tattooing, piercing, etc. are linked with cultural aesthetics and personal statement. Sometimes these two may stand in conflict. Narratives on this topic express fears connected with modern technology and biology. The legends under discussion included beliefs that women who visit tanning salons may burn their internal organs, people also believe that several body modifications may cause blindness or even death. Tattooing, for example, is believed to be the cause of AIDS and hepatitis, etc.

Bill Ellis, narrative researcher from America, delivered a brilliant lecture *Footless Ghost, Demon Dolls, and the Internet: The Dialectic of Traditional*

*and Contemporary Legend in Japanese Visual Storytelling*. An introduction of the traditional Japanese legend-telling from manga led to the influences of European culture and especially the Internet. The many visual examples accompanying the presentation brought to mind the global nature of folklore: most examples provided by Bill Ellis have parallels in the 1960s-1970s horror-tale tradition of Estonian children. Several presentations discussed AIDS; a topical presentation on the SARS virus was made by Jon Lee from Canada, *Public Reactions to the SARS Virus: Rumours, Panics, and Pseudo-Preventatives*. Mark Glazer has conducted gender studies on narratives of AIDS legends. While studying the AIDS legends circulating in South Texas, he has observed the preference of legend themes by gender, and has concluded that more women tend to believe that the events in such stories are true than males.

Several studies on older local legend tradition analysed the association of a local legend with the identity and tourism attraction of the place in the present day. Karen Baldwin from the East Carolina University talked about *Piratelore and Touristure in Legendary Coastal North Carolina*, John Ashton from Canada discussed the relationships of landscape and legend in Newfoundland. The legends are based on the strong winds obstructing railway traffic in Newfoundland, and the “guardian of the winds”, an old man who once regulated the traffic in the area.

Psychologist David Main from the University of Paisley delivered the presentation “*Waiter, there’s something disgusting in my legend*”: *Food Contamination, Disgust and the Recall of Contemporary Legends*. The author analysed a psychological experiment aiming to find out how legends are remembered. The study used Angyal’s theory from 1941 that feelings of disgust increase in relation to the contact with the human body or contaminated food. Experiment subjects listened to 12 stories, and a while later were asked to recall the story. The results confirmed the author’s expectations that the stories of higher level of disgust were better remembered.

Contemporary legends mediate the world as we perceive it, bringing out our greatest fears and problems. We, living in the Baltic area, appear to be less aware of the dangers in the world after September 11, whereas in the western world these problems are considerably more acute. The balance and tolerance towards the Islamic world is lost. While before September 11 these two major world communities largely kept to themselves, then contemporary legends and narratives clearly manifest the fear that immigrants arriving at the western countries pose a danger to the native population, and soon will take over their world. The most memorable presentations prompting much speculation were held on the topic of ethnic legends. Dutch journalist Peter Burger from Leiden University and Theo Meder from Meertens Institute discussed legends connected with immigrants.

Burger's *From FOAFtale to media legend: the case of the Smiley Gang* analysed the spread of a legend about a reportedly criminal gang. The legend about a group of foreigners who abused women first circulated orally and later via mass media in the Netherlands. Theo Meder's presentation *They are among us and they are against us: Contemporary horror-stories about Muslims and immigrants in the Netherlands* pointed out something that I myself have mentioned in relation to AIDS legends – namely, that legends are not merely stories, but also behaviour. The legend concerning the reported act of violence broadcast in the Dutch media provoked copy-cat behaviour, or proto-ostentation (pretentious behaviour). Many narrators claimed having experienced this act of violence. While generally legends imitate reality, then in this case, real life began to imitate legends.

On this conference, legend researchers also touched upon the intriguing topics of the ancient beliefs in witches and banshees, relationships of legends and fairylore, the phenomenon of contemporary ghost stories, heroes created by pop culture and media, etc. In retrospect, I again remember the tinge of regret that I experienced in Wales – namely, that here folklore manifesting the social, psychological, economic and political life of the contemporary individual and society is rarely ever studied. Unfortunately, Estonian folklorists tend to discard contemporary topics as populism and prefer Finno-Ugric and runo song traditions. Western scholars do not fear populism – the next meeting of legend researchers will be organised already next summer in Georgia, the United States.

Next to the interesting and stimulating conference, the good old Wales surprised me with the extreme modesty of student dorms and the chaotic railway traffic. But the Estonian tricolour, hoisted among other national and ethnic flags on the coastal university town in Wales, was very heart-warming.

Eda Kalmre

## **10TH BRITISH UNIVERSITIES SIBERIAN STUDIES SEMINAR. UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, APRIL 7-11, 2004**

BUSSS is a conference on the Siberian studies which is held at a different location in every fourth year. The conference aims to combine different fields, which either study Siberia or are active in the region. The Houston conference brought together representatives of Siberian oil companies, ecologists, historians, anthropologists, representatives of the indigenous peoples and linguists.

The conference presentations discussed a wide variety of topics, which made the event even more interesting. The purpose of BUSSS is not only to bring together people from different fields of life, but to promote the Siberian Studies to a wider public. The event received much publicity on

different levels and the floor was given to high officials from the city of Houston, the University of Houston and the U.S. government (among others, for example, to the former U.S. military attaché in Moscow).

The presentations that I personally found most interesting discussed the issues of environmental protection and the use of natural resources, since these materials are hardly available to the general public. Overviews of the ecological situation and progress in the Sayan and the Altai regions, and the policies of the Western as well as Russian oil companies were most informative.

It was also a great pleasure to meet geographers, linguists and historians from different U.S. universities. This is an area which is less known in Europe, thus it was particularly interesting to learn about the activities of American scholars. It is also positive that conference organisers had invited scholars from different universities in the Siberian region, instead of the more common practice of inviting scholars from Moscow and St. Petersburg only. The level of research in Siberia (in this case, of Novosibirsk) is high; I had interesting conversations with linguists of the region and decided to maintain these contacts.

One of the organisers, Alan Wood from the Lancaster University is also the editor of a scientific journal of increasing popularity, *Sibirica*. The conference proceedings will be published in a special issue of *Sibirica*. It was interesting to talk about publications and the issuing of academic journals in general with editors of the journal.

My presentation *The State's Indigenous Policy, the Centrally Planned Cultural Revival and Native Strategies of Survival* focused on comparing two different conceptions of tradition (the state's conceptions versus individual conceptions). The indigenous people of Siberia exploit the State's policy on preserving traditional culture for economic purposes, as their own understanding of tradition differs considerably from that of the government officials.

Aimar Ventsel

## **FOLKLORE COLLECTION CAMPAIGN: BIOGRAPHIES OF ESTONIANS IN RUSSIA**

Biographies have been systematically collected in the Culture Historical Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum for the past ten years, and the announced campaigns for collecting biographies are still highly popular. The presentable three-volume *Eesti rahva elulood* ('Estonian Biographies') and a number of thematic collections have already been published.

During the newly established Republic of Estonia one of collection and research foci of the Estonian Folklore Archives has been the lore of Estoni-

ans in Russia. Next to my yearly fieldwork trips to Russia since autumn 1993 I have also actively interviewed Estonian emigrants who have returned to homeland. Many of these people have preserved old photographs, taken in the golden days of settlements or collective farms, descriptions of life in the Estonian villages, lists of members of the settlement community, etc. Artur Kergand has, for example, compiled a study on his home village *The birth and fall of the Estono-Semenovka village*. Unfortunately I managed to visit only a small part of Siberian-born Estonians, and most of the material on settlements still remains to be collected.

On the event dedicated to the Estonians in Russia, held in autumn 2003, I asked the participants to record their own history and heritage. In spring 2004, the Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum and the Society *Estonian Life Stories* announced the collection campaign *Emigration and life in the new homeland*. The call was intended for a relatively narrow group of people and was targeted at descendants of the Estonian emigrants in Russia who have returned to their native land. We accepted biographies written down by the descendants themselves or their relatives or acquaintances. One of our hopes was to acquire additional information on the existing and also perished Estonian settlements.

As a response to the calls published in the press I, the initiator of the campaign, received very many phone calls. Most inquiries concerned the form as well as the content of the required piece of writing. I forwarded a detailed questionnaire, compiled by myself, to anyone interested. Some callers also recognised us for taking up the issue of Estonians in Russia, many remained sceptical though, saying that “*this time, the dead and distant relatives, former generations, are forced to write something down*”. Some called me to interview them orally, saying that “*I can tell you, I know a great deal about it, but I’m not a writer*”. Some people came to me in the museum to tell their story. I perfectly understand that not all people are good at writing. The older generation of Estonians in Russia include many of inadequate education: when times were hard, every pair of hands was needed at home, educating girls was often considered unnecessary, the school was located too far from home, others dropped out of school because of inadequate command of Russian, etc. Those who were educated in Russian language often experience difficulties in expressing themselves in Estonian literary language, therefore some biographies were written down in Russian.

We received the first materials soon after the announcement of the campaign. These were mostly village and personal histories written down beforehand, such as the history of Estonians in Samara, accompanied with the layout of Estonian villages in the Koshki region, and the list of farm owners by villages, compiled by Aleksander Timberg. More biographies were contributed in the autumn: some, like the one sent by Loreida Heinma,

were carefully revised and rewritten during the half-year period. Next to manuscripts, we received biographies laid out on computer and illustrated with numerous old photographs, such as the history of the Dzhurtshi village in the Crimea by Liina Treimann. The length of the contributed materials ranged between single-page short overviews to more than 130 pages long works. Most of the compilers were representatives of the older generation, though some works were contributed by younger people, some even by schoolchildren, e.g. *The Estonian Settlements along the Coast of the Black Sea* by Tagne Täht from the Vastseliina Secondary School (2002, supervised by teacher Tiiu Ojala), and *The Life of My Grandparents since the Day They Married to the Beginning of Their Retirement* by a pupil of the Võru Kreutzwald Secondary School (2004, supervised by Merle Sulg).

There were others who discovered the call on the eleventh hour and asked permission to write down the life story of village history after the campaign's deadline.

Some works were sent as printed publications: *Liisa Karoliina raamat* 'Book of Liisa Karoliina' by Ell Maanso, and *Eesti rahvakild Siberimaal* 'The Estonian Group in Siberia'. *Estonia küla arenguaastad* ('Development Years of the Village Estonia', 2004) by Lembit Sirge, discussing the history and fate of an Estonian village in Siberia. On several occasions the written biography was accompanied by newspaper articles about the settlement and unique photographs.

Next to traditional biographies among the works contributed by Estonians in Siberia, many accounted the history of the Estonians in a specific settlement or region. People, who treasured the history of their birth place, helped me in actively encouraging their fellow villagers to put down their biographies. Aleksander Timberg, for example, wrote that Richard Rästas was compiling materials for the reunion of Estonians of Samara, Robert Ropsu informed me of other people who might have information about the Estonian settlements in Northern Caucasus, etc. I sensed people's genuine interest in the biographies of people of their region, and was often required to answer the questions whether anyone from this or that village/region has already sent his or her biography, and to encourage writers in that everybody's story is worth recording.

No doubt, the most active recorders of family and village history were born in the close vicinity of Estonia, in the Pskov and St. Petersburg Oblasts, and also in the Oparino district in the Vyatka region and the Samara Oblast. For the present moment the collection campaign is over; overviews and results will be made on the next event of the Estonians in Siberia that will be held in the hall of Estonian Literary Museum in the first quarter of the year 2005. Hopefully, the collected material will be later published in a book.

Anu Korb