Ilse Lehiste's Contributions to the Estonian Community
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Among those mourning the loss of our colleague and friend Ilse Lehiste, there are many pointing out her great accomplishments and international renown as a linguist, as well as her enthusiasm for collaborative work, openness to new ideas and technology, and encouragement of younger scholars in the field. In this tribute, the focus is on remembrance of her efforts on behalf of her own Estonian ethnic community. She is fondly remembered by fellow refugees who fled the wartime turmoil and invasion of her homeland, by their descendants, and by colleagues in Estonia.

1. Activities in Columbus, Ohio

Shortly after her arrival at The Ohio State University, Ilse Lehiste became a central figure in the small Estonian community of Columbus, Ohio. Alek Toivo Siitam, chairman of the Columbus Estonian Society, recalls her arrival in the city in the 1960s, when he was a child. In his eulogy, he notes, "I would often see her at parties and at the most important annual event for our group..., which was our [Estonian] [I]ndependence [D]ay. On these occasions Ilse was often asked to speak to our group."

She was also quite involved in activities in other Estonian communities of Ohio--i.e., in Cleveland and Cincinnati. Siitam recalls her being part of a carload of Estonians making a road trip to Cleveland in October of 2010, just a couple of months before she died. This was "on the occasion of the 85th anniversary of Cleveland's Estonian Society [Clevelandi Eesti Ühing <<Arendaja>>], which is the oldest non-religious Estonian organization in the US." He notes that she usually drove to such events by herself, but was happy to let someone else do it this time, so that she could enjoy watching the scenery.

On the way back to Columbus that day, her commentary turned to an Estonian word that the second-generation immigrant speaker at the ceremony had used.

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According to Siitam, she said something along these lines:

> That particular word...came into Estonian from another language by means of a third language at a certain time in history and originally the meaning was quite different, but now it has come to take on this newer connotation... [T]he speaker...put the stress on the second syllable instead of the first and thereby changed the meaning.

Siitam gives his own reaction to the linguist's observation:

> I imagine that most of the people present that day missed this nuance[,] but when Ilse presented us with a minimal pair--that is, the short phrase...spoken both ways--with the stress in one word on the first syllable and then on the second syllable--it was obvious. So she was quite observant and analytical in that way.

Her comments about word origins, meanings, usages, and misusages did not come across as nit-picking or showing off, because she was quite forthright about not being a specialist in etymology. She delivered her remarks with objectivity and good-natured humor, rather than with any hypercritical or condescending tone. One could tell that she was just being enthusiastic about contemplating such things and eager to share her insights with others. If her Estonian listeners were not initially intrigued by such revelations, she had a way of imparting to them her sense of excitement about these discoveries. She heightened their awareness of the roots, patterns, and trends in the Estonian language. She deepened their appreciation and even love of their native tongue.

To give a specific example of the kind of commentary that fascinated native speakers of Estonian like myself, I offer this excerpt from an e-mail message that Ilse Lehiste originally sent to Peter Brown, President of the Finno-Ugric Studies Association of Canada on April 13, 2009. Although this was not addressed to a fellow Estonian, it is an extensive comment in her original formulation (not someone's hazy recollection) that illustrates the kind of information that she readily shared with Estonian audiences or conversation partners. A non-Estonian speaker will surely find this interesting, but for a native speaker it is downright fascinating to find out how a commonly used word for a staple in their diet connects to terms and concepts in other, rather distant languages:

> It is possible to date sound changes on the basis of given dates like the publication of Wiedemann's dictionary. But it is also possible to trace the direction of cultural influences... I cannot resist giving you my favorite

example. This concerns the vocabulary used to refer to potatoes. We know that the item came from America after 1492. There was a need for a word to refer to them. *Potato* is close to the American-Indian *batata* [the Caribbean Taino word for 'sweet potato']. But the French created *pommes de terre* [apples of the ground]. The Germans translated it to *Erdapfel* [earth apple]. But the Holy Roman Empire created a parallel form - *Grundbirne* [ground pear]. [This] moved to the Balkans - SCR [Serbo-Croatian] has *krompir*, Hungarian has *krumpli* - which could not be etymologized unless one knows that the source was *Grundbirne*. Now northern Germany has *Kartoffel*, and this came from Italy - the Italians knew truffles, and potato became--by analogy--*tartuffolo*. But Estonian has stress on the first syllable, so two words started competing - *kartulid* ja *tuhlid* [plural forms of *kartul* and *tuhhel*]. *Kartul* won out - the *[Estonian] Correct [U]sage [D]ictionary [Eesti õigekeelsussõnaraamat]* also has *tuhlid* [for 'potatoes'], but the latter term is discriminated against and called "dialectal".

Ilse Lehiste also made a commitment to help students of Estonian heritage learn the tongue of their elders through instruction in an Estonian language course. Siitam reports that "here in Columbus maybe 20 to 25 years ago[,] Ilse held courses in [B]eginning Estonian for some of the young people here who had not learned the language at home or who, by the time they were young adults, had lost their proficiency."

Her importance to local Estonians in her city of Columbus and the high esteem in which she was held there is evident in the fact that Toivo Siitam made two trips to Estonia in connection with her burial. Representing the Estonian community of Columbus, he travelled there in January 2011, when there was a funeral service at Kaarli Church in Tallinn and she was interred at the Metsakalmistu Cemetery. He returned there in September of that year, when her gravestone was put in place.

2. Serving the Wider Community of Exiles

Ilse Lehiste had extensive contacts with Estonian refugees beyond her own Mid-Ohio area. She was a regular lecturer at conferences of Kesk-Lääne Eesti Noorte Koondis (KLENK) [Midwest Estonian Youth Association]. Such conferences began in 1958 as assemblies of Estonian students scattered among various colleges and universities in the center of the United States, who kept gathering annually (usually on Thanksgiving weekend) even into their senior years. In addition to music performances, films, and other types of entertainment, KLENK meetings featured a

two-day program of academic lectures and panel discussions, primarily in the Estonian language. From my own first attendance at such a gathering in 1984, the conference rotated between the urban areas of Chicago (Illinois), Detroit/Ann Arbor (Michigan), Indianapolis (Indiana), Cleveland (Ohio), and Toronto (Ontario, Canada). This provided a superb opportunity to learn academic vocabulary in Estonian, to become acquainted with scholarly research on a great variety of topics related to Estonian heritage, and to get connected to an international network of Estonian scholars.

Serving as an organizer for several of these Midwest Estonian conferences myself, I always appreciated Ilse Lehiste's gracious acceptance of repeated invitations to join the roster of speakers, to drive the long distances from Columbus, and to pay for her own lodging and most of her meals at these events. (Speakers were offered a free banquet meal as a token of appreciation for their efforts.) Her reticence about asking for any compensation for her expenses meant that the organizers could afford to offer other speakers, particularly those visiting from Estonia, some funds to defray transportation and hotel costs.

Among her lectures at KLENK gatherings was this humorously titled talk on colloquial expressions: "Suured ninad murdsid päid: Vanu ja uusi fraseologisme eesti keeles" [Big Noses Broke Heads (= Big Shots Worried): Old and New Phraseologisms in the Estonian Language]. Her other talks had titles like these: "Mõnede eesti kõnekäändude ajalooline tagapõhi" [The Historical Background of Some Estonian Expressions], "Keel ja identiteet" [Language and Identity], and "Tallinna koolinoorte släng" [Tallinn Students' Slang].

Epp Annus reports in the Estonian-Canadian newspaper *Eesti elu [Estonian Life = Estonian World Review]* that Ilse Lehiste was looking at the Estonian language of Internet forum users (January 7, 2011 issue, published in Toronto). This is a great example of how Ilse Lehiste combined profound knowledge of the distant past with a keen interest in current social trends and modern technology. The same paradoxical combination is seen in her application of the most modern research methods (e.g., computer analysis of tape-recorded verbalizations) to study aspects of the Estonian linguistic and cultural heritage. Long before she published the book *The Temporal Structure of Estonian Runic Songs* (2001), co-authored with Tartu University musicologist Jaan Ross, she shared with Estonian audiences some of the findings from their analysis of the Estonian language's distinctive three degrees of quantity (length) for both vowel and consonant sounds (prosodic system), in archaic-style folk songs (as recorded in the early 20th century), poetry, and conversation. She pointed out that a comparison of the Estonian pattern to the simpler two-quantity system of Finnish suggests that Estonian's three-quantity system developed some time after the emergence of the runic (Kalevala-style) folk song traditions the two groups had in common and after the separation of the two languages.

While she encouraged Estonians to reflect on the distinctive features of their language, she did not hesitate to deflate overblown claims of uniqueness by those eager to see something special or unprecedented in it. She made them aware that the kindred language of Livonian had something analogous to Estonian's three-quantity system (Lehiste 2007 & 2008). She noted that the unusual vowel sound *õ* is not a purely Estonian invention, but also appears in Korean and some other languages. Curiosity about comparative material and objective assessment of observed differences were hallmarks of her intellectual style, and made us more mindful of the importance of being accurate when making claims about our heritage.

Another venue where Ilse Lehiste spoke about such topics for an Estonian audience was Metsaülikool [University of the Woods], a week-long seminar that takes place in the late summer at the Estonian scout camp known as Kotkajärve [Eagle Lake], in a Muskoka District forest, two hours north of Toronto. Toivo Siitam characterizes the experience as follows:

> "[Kotkajärve Metsaülikool] is intended for the children of immigrant Estonians who already had some proficiency in the language[,] as an opportunity to practice and improve their skills. Each day lectures would be held in Estonian on various topic[s] ranging from history to literature, music, science, current events and so on. Afterwards there would be further discussion in small groups and in the evenings people would often sit and sing around a campfire."

The accommodations are quite spartan, with guests sleeping in barracks or tents. Participants have to be on guard against mosquitoes and bears. So serving as a lecturer at the camp involves a considerable sacrifice of creature comforts, and demonstrates a serious commitment to educating young people as Estonians.

My own encounters with Ilse Lehiste, although they did not begin until I was in my mid-thirties, were crucial to my socialization as an Estonian academic. I found her to be eminently approachable and extremely supportive. When I was applying for the first Fulbright grant to Estonia in order to lecture in Estonian and English at the new School of Social Sciences set up at Tartu University by the political scientist Rein Taagepera from the University of California at Irvine, I expressed reservations about my command of Estonian grammar and academic jargon. Ilse Lehiste was most encouraging on this score, pointing out that the KLENK experience had been a useful introduction to an Estonian academic milieu and that I could fill remaining gaps in my knowledge once I was immersed in the setting of Tartu. She readily agreed to serve as one of my references with regard to Estonian language proficiency, and followed up with a memorable dinner conversation when she gave me more useful advice during my Winter 1993 stay in Tartu. Afterward we had to hike

through the snow in the dark over Toomemägi [Dome Hill], the large steep hill in the middle of the campus and city. I was most impressed by her stamina, orientation ability, and lighthearted mood under such adverse circumstances, when she had already reached the age of 71!

Another noteworthy form of Ilse Lehiste's service to the exile Estonian community can be put under the category of outreach, or helping non-Estonians get acquainted with the Estonian language and literature. In her numerous scholarly publications, she used examples from the Estonian language to illustrate patterns or phenomena of general interest to researchers and students of linguistics. The co-authored book on runic songs gives an overview of Estonian oral traditions and history for English-speaking readers. She translated the Estonian-Canadian author Arved Viirlaid's novel *Ristideta hauad [Graves without Crosses]* (1952) into the English version published in 1972. It gives a very realistic account of the motivations, dilemmas, and hardships of the Estonian resistance fighters (*metsavennad* 'forest brothers'), who opposed the Soviet occupation at the end of World War II. She also publicized many Estonian works through her reviews for *World Literature Today*, the periodical edited by the Estonian-Latvian scholar Ivar Ivask at the University of Oklahoma.

3. Building a Bridge between East and West

Compared to most Estonians in exile, Ilse Lehiste first returned to visit her homeland relatively early, in 1970. Other prominent scholars of her generation hesitated to do so at that time, fearing that such a visit would be interpreted as some kind of endorsement of the Soviet occupation, both by the Soviet authorities and by other exiles. In smaller exile communities, such early visits seemed to be less controversial than in larger ones. In my study of the small Estonian community of Indianapolis (Haas 1991 & 1994), I suggested that in such a place Estonian immigrants are assimilating rapidly due to their small numbers, lack of opportunities for ethnic endogamy, and lack of participants and resources to support various cultural activities. These problems were even more acute in Columbus, Ohio, where only a few dozen Estonians ever resided. It is not surprising that someone interested in maintaining Estonian heritage and living far from any large center of ethnic activity (i.e., in a city without an Estonian House) would want to experience various aspects of that heritage in the original homeland, especially if it could be done without overt cooptation by the Soviet regime or entanglement in a propaganda ploy to its benefit. Visitors also had to be wary about entrapment in an embarrassing situation in Soviet

Estonia, which could make them vulnerable to blackmail, in the form of pressure to spy on fellow exiles or other targets in the West.

Despite such risks, Ilse Lehiste not only visited her homeland before it was generally considered safe to do so, but she also developed professional contacts with scholars in Soviet Estonia and worked on joint research projects with them. There was an especially fruitful and mutually beneficial cooperation with two scholars in Estonia: the linguist Karl Pajusalu and the musicologist and phonetics researcher Jaan Ross, both professors at Tartu University. Ross is also a professor at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater in Tallinn. The former was one of the principal eulogy speakers at the funeral service for Ilse Lehiste in Tallinn on January 21, 2011. The latter travelled from Estonia to play the same kind of role at the funeral service in Columbus on December 30, 2010. Ross emphasized in his eulogy the trailblazing role that his departed colleague and co-author had played in bridging the gap between scholars in Soviet Estonia and their counterparts in the West. He notes the opposition to such contacts, from hardliners on both sides, and the challenge of getting permission to publish in Soviet Estonia a *festschrift* or anthology to honor Ilse Lehiste on the occasion of her 60th birthday in 1982:

> There were hardly any legal contacts possible between the Estonian diaspora and population in the native country during the years of the [C]old [W]ar. It was only in the 1960s when correspondence and rare visits were permitted to emerge between family members or friends separated by the ideological divide between the two world's superpowers. Ilse first visited Estonia in 1970 after the 2nd World War. Her step was not met with enthusiasm by some members of the diaspora, who considered visiting Estonia equivalent to recognizing its occupation by the Soviet Union (which the United States government never did).
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> My first encounter with Ilse occurred in early 1980 during one of her visits to Estonia. At that time, I was employed by a research group in phonetics at the Estonian Academy of Sciences. We managed to publish a *festschrift* in honor of Ilse when she became 60 years old in 1982. This enterprise was a bit tricky[,] because contacts with members of the diaspora were not favored by authorities on that side of the [I]ron [C]urtain either.

During the regime of the reform-minded Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the impediments to East-West contact began to fall away. Ilse Lehiste played an important role in accelerating this process in her own field of expertise, by helping to arrange an international congress of phoneticians in her homeland, according to Ross:

> The eleventh [quadrennial] [C]ongress of [P]honetic [S]ciences took place in Tallinn in 1987, organized by our research group and attracting more than 600 participants from all over the world. It could not have happened without Ilse's active support, as she was a member of the permanent international committee for [C]ongress of [P]honetic [S]ciences and had influence on decision-making in the committee.

After Estonia regained its independence in 1991, there were no longer any politically based hindrances to overcome, but it would be several years until the new market-based economy would yield the resources to support much international travel by Estonia's scholars or their adoption of the most modern technology for doing research. Ilse Lehiste strove to remove these economic barriers and to encourage Estonian scholars to participate fully in the international network of phonetic scholars. She helped arrange her Linguistic Department's hosting of Jaan Ross, when he received a Fulbright Scholar Award in 1992 for a semester-long project at The Ohio State University. In that same year, she donated both the computer hardware and sound processing software for a new speech analysis workstation at Tartu University. This made possible the careful measurement and study of archival recordings that led to numerous publications with her co-authors based in Estonia.

This donation also facilitated the training of a new generation of phonetic researchers in her homeland, who could use advanced equipment to make discoveries about Estonian and related languages that would meet the highest scientific standards of the discipline, impress linguist colleagues abroad, and enlighten Estonians and Estophiles about aspects of the language that they might not have paid attention to before. Her impact on the students at Tartu was described in the memorial tribute of Pire Teras, Lecturer at the University of Helsinki and Research Fellow of Estonian Phonetics at Tartu University, in a memorial tribute published in *Linguistica Uralica* (Teras 2011). Teras recalls how the special course in Estonian phonetics that Ilse Lehiste taught at Tartu in Spring 1993, in conjunction with her donation of the speech analyzer equipment and software, "involved fascinating lectures and exciting practical training, which aroused in me a great interest in acoustic phonetics." Teras also recalls that when Ilse Lehiste began her work on the prosody of other Finno-Ugric languages in 1998, many students benefitted from her collaboration with the local researchers at Tartu and the opportunity to engage in acoustic analysis of speech. With regard to several master's theses and doctoral dissertations that drew on this experience, Teras notes:

> All those studies have benefitted from her inspiring, supportive, advising, and critical presence. One could hardly avoid being impressed by her enthusiasm in linguistic discussions.

Ross ended his eulogy with a similar remark, about how her "generous help and support to her colleagues at home contributed to the development of research and training in Estonia."

Ilse Lehiste also served as a link between the residents of her homeland and Estonians abroad in her capacity as an interpreter and analyst of colloquial expressions, which evolved somewhat differently on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In her lecturing and commentary at the Midwest Estonian meetings, for example, she once explained how when Soviet Estonians talked about the *karkass* of a building, a Western Estonian might envision some kind of dilapidated structure that was about to collapse, since the word 'carcass' is a synonym for 'corpse' or 'dead body'. In Estonia, however, the word has the Russian meaning of 'skeleton' or 'framework', and is not associated any kind of death, demise, or destruction. Another example is her explanation of the meaning of *avati roheline tee millelegi/millekski* 'a green road was opened for something'. A Western Estonian might envision some kind of grass path, but it seems to be a Russian expression referring to a green traffic light, with the meaning of getting a go-ahead signal. One wonders what sorts of expressions or other peculiarities of Western Estonians were explained by her to mystified residents of her homeland, but as an early and frequent visitor to Estonia, she was in a great position to be this kind of mediator.

4. Conclusion

Ilse Lehiste showed us how someone can reach the highest pinnacle in her profession without forgetting where she came from. She remained firmly rooted in her own ethnic group and rendered a tremendous service to it, while doing the scientific linguistic research that gave her a stellar international reputation and lasting impact in her field of expertise. She also personified a memorable paradox in other ways. She combined objectivity and patriotism, a commitment to scientific principles with love of poetry and music, rigorous research with a sunny disposition. Instead of the glum countenance one finds too often in the photographs of other prominent personages, her photos radiate an infectious enthusiasm, friendliness, and contentment. It was a real pleasure to know her, both as a Finno-Ugric researcher and member of the global Estonian community.

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