

# DISCUSSION POINT

## INTERVIEW WITH GALIT HASAN-ROKEM AT THE 14TH CONGRESS OF THE ISFNR, 31 JULY 2005, TARTU

*Interviewed by Ave Tupits*

**AT: I know you were born in Finland so you have a very interesting background. Would you say a few words about your childhood?**

GHR: I was born in Helsinki, Finland and I grew up partly in Turku, between the age of a year and six I was living in Turku and then we moved back to Helsinki. My parents were born in Finland, my father was born in Turku, my mother was born in Helsinki. Even my grandmother was born in Finland. The Jews came to Finland in the mid-19th century and my great-great-grandfather was one of those people who served in the Czarist army for 25 years and then were allowed to stay in Finland, because the Jews were supposed to live only in very special areas in the Russian Empire of that time. So they were allowed to stay in Finland. And it was not very many people who stayed in Finland, there have never been more than 1500 Jews in Finland. I went to a Jewish school in Helsinki and grew up in the centre of Helsinki with very fond memories of the city.

I have a very special relationship to the nature and to the climate of this part of the world. I usually think of myself as somebody who moved from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. These are two very different cultures but I belong to both of them in a special way. Of course, I have lived, since 12 years old, in Israel. I'm perfectly Israeli, I write... my poetry is in Hebrew. But I love speaking Finnish— whenever I find anybody who speaks Finnish I just grab them, anywhere in the world and I speak with them. It's a special pleasure to be here and understand so much of the Estonian language, because it's so similar to Finnish, so it's a special place, to be in Tartu.

**AT: How many languages do you have? [GHR is counting on her fingers] Quite many, as I see.**

GHR: There's quite many, around ten. Depends on what you mean by 'have', I speak freely Hebrew, Finnish, Swedish, English, a little bit less feely German. I know Yiddish, I studied Arabic in school, I have French from the university, I studied Ancient Greek, some Latin. Aramaic is a language that I know well because the texts that I work with are Aramaic. I knew, for a couple of years, Georgian, because I was working on the proverbs of Georgian Jews in Israel. I published a book on that but I cannot say I know Georgian today. I have worked on Ladino, which is the Judeo-Spanish language, I have worked on proverbs in that language. So, you can know languages at very different levels.

**AT: How did you discover folklore?**

GHR: Oh, that's interesting. I came to the Hebrew University after graduating from school and short army service in the very late 1960s and wanted to study Hebrew literature and English. I thought I'd study English in order to have something to live off, I would become an English teacher in high school and so I would have something to do after I finish my studies; and Hebrew literature for the pleasure of it, I loved literature, I was already writing poetry. In Hebrew literature there was this class, introduction to folk literature, or to folk narrative, taught by Dov Noy, my teacher. And I became fascinated. And when he found out that I know Finnish, he said: "You have to become a folklorist, because Finland is the Mecca of folklore".

So when I finished my first undergraduate studies – three years – I applied for a scholarship to go to Finland, [in an] exchange program for a year and I landed at the Department of Finnish and Comparative Folklore. It was then called *Suomalaisen ja Vertailevan Kansanrunouden Tutkimuksen Laitos*. And I had the great privilege to study with Matti Kuusi, who turned me into a proverb scholar, and I had the great privilege to study with Lauri Honko, who was intellectually a very influential person for me. I think he was a role model also as the president of ISFNR. I admired Lauri Honko and his very deep international involvement in folklore, going to China and going to Africa and going to India and working in all those places.



*Photo 1. Galit Hasan-Rokem at the ISFNR 14th congress. Photo by Alar Madisson.*

So I became a folklorist. And Matti Kuusi's very deep textual – Matti Kuusi was also a poet – his very deep textual involvement made me want to work with proverbs, with these little forms of folk poetry, which make every person a poet, once in a while.

**AT: What are your main interests in folklore or in folk narrative?**

GHR: I think I have four major interests: one is proverbs, as I said, which was the topic of my dissertation and I still maintain an interest in proverb studies. That interest is today mainly expressed in the fact that I supervise doctoral dissertations of many students who work on proverbs in different cultures. The other one is the theory of folk narrative – questions of transmission, questions of typology, questions of identity and narrative etc. My major folkloristic research subject in the last fifteen years, even more, has been ancient folklore – that is, looking at ancient texts, often canonised ones like the Hebrew Bible, but especially Rabbinic literature of the late antiquity. That's the Hellenistic-Roman period and the Byzantine period in Palestine and Babylonia – [this] is a vast canon of texts which is usually considered a religious text and very patriarchal. I'm reading them from a folk narrative perspective, pointing at the fact that these texts are very often subversive, very often

relate to everyday life and pointing at the ethnographic aspects of these texts. And very often looking at them from a feminist point of view, because these texts are so patriarchal, the Rabbis are men, so it's the texts of the Rabbis.

But what I am trying to show is that very often there is the voice of the woman. And my paper actually here at the conference was about the female voice in such a Rabbinic... three Rabbinic texts that I tried to show. So that was three. The fourth subject that I was lucky to be introduced to in Helsinki when I studied there, is the Wandering Jew tradition of Europe – Ahasver, The Wandering Jew, “Jerusalem in Suutari” (in Finnish), the Cobbler of Jerusalem. I wrote my seminar paper for Matti Kuusi on that and then when I went to Berkeley, California in 1982 as a young PhD, Alan Dundes, the great folklorist – I only mention people who have passed away and it's sad, but all these people have really formed my way of working with folklore – so Alan Dundes invited me to do a collection of articles on The Wandering Jew.

And since then I have returned to it and this last year I was at the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* for a research period of seven months and I worked very much on reviewing my earlier view about The Wandering Jew tradition, which I thought was a projection of Europeans, of their instable elements on somebody else, so that the Europeans feel that they are very stable and indigenous. They projected their instability on the Jews. But today I think this is only a part of the story and I'm looking more at how the Jews themselves told stories about them as instable people, you know, from the Hebrew Bible onwards – Abraham goes from Mesopotamia to the Holy Land and goes to Egypt and goes back, etc. – I'm following that line in later narratives. Those are my research interests.

Of course, very much of my time is devoted to students, especially graduate students and I think I've been somehow involved with the work of many of the young folklorists in Israel today. And that's a great pleasure. And there were four of them here at the conference.

**AT: Is there a great interest in folklore in Israel or is it diminishing?**

GHR: No, no, it's a growing interest. In Jerusalem we have a full-fledged program, that is we have a BA and individual programs for

MA, and of course doctoral dissertations. We also attract students from abroad, one of my students here is from Japan, who lectured at this conference. I just had an excellent dissertation written by a Kenyan student. In Israel itself we have students from very different social and cultural backgrounds, Muslim, Christian as well as Jewish people who write about folklore.

I think that like Estonia, we are a small country which is constantly dealing with identity, and folklore is an important topic in such situations. Having said that, we have to say that the economic situation of the academy in the world in general creates a situation where small departments are in constant danger. So it's not a simple situation. But as to interest, there's a lot of interest. There are too few of us to teach all the people who would like to study with us.

**AT: How do you see the position of Jewish folklore in Israel and in the world? And how do you see folklore in general in the world? Is it strong? Where do you see it going?**

GHR: I think we have to divide this question into two. We have to talk about folklore as a phenomenon, which I think exists everywhere all the time. It's a question of definition – how we identify folklore: because of all the new media, etc., folklore is now situated in new channels, so that we have Internet folklore, we have television folklore, we have folklore in places we did not have them before. So we cannot limit ourselves to thinking of folklore in traditional terms of, you know, interpersonal contact, as we used to think of it. Although we may understand some of its forms as based on some kind of an interpersonal contact, like the historical texts that I study, where I'm looking for that kind of context in the ancient text, in order to identify where folklore in ancient texts is.

So, I think there is folklore all over the place. How much of it is recognised and dealt with as folklore? – I think in many parts of the world, especially where different group identities, national identity primarily, but not only national identity, also particular identities like gender or regional identity are important factors, folklore becomes something that is acknowledged and studied. You look at a country like India, for instance, there's a growing folklore study, or China – there has been a rise in folklore studies there. I think

American folklore is on its way back to some kind of a rejuvenation, there's been a great crisis, I think, in US especially. South America is also having a revival.

You know, places like Estonia and Finland have very well-rooted folklore traditions. We all look at your institution, for instance here in Tartu, with great admiration. But some places have suffered, like in Sweden – there has been a closure, I hear now that in Austria they are closing a department. So, we as an organisation – ISFNR – need to create a voice, in which we monitor and safeguard the institutions that exist and especially give everybody among ourselves a feeling that this is done in a very professional way, it's done by good people, it's on a very high level. We have to be very careful with the professional level of our work, especially because in academia, folklore is thought of as being outside of the academic. And you know, it is, because there is a logical clash between the university as a hierarchic form of knowledge and folklore as a radically non-hierarchic form of knowledge. So those two things clash.

**AT: You have been the president of the ISFNR for 7 years. Today [31 July 2005 – A.T.] is the last day of your presidency. Could you share some of your memories from these seven years?**

GHR: Oh, you know... Many of the memories are sort of personal, but many of them have to do with the fact that we went to all these countries. Since I became president, we have had a conference in Nairobi, Kenya; in Melbourne, Australia; on Gotland in Sweden and now here in Tartu. So you see that the spread is enormous. To Kenya I had to go myself a year before, in order to see and help. It was a fantastic experience to be in Africa and the warmth of the people and the need for help... Here, of course, I didn't have to come before to see if you can make this conference happen, you did it very well.

There's been a tremendous experience of solidarity and co-operation. We have an executive committee that represents all the continents and is very gender-equal also, women and men together. And I think there's been, for me, a tremendous feeling of support and working together with people and getting to know very interesting and professionally very accomplished people.

So, in a sense, coming to Tartu for this conference was like climbing up on a peak – it's been the best conference I've ever been to. And the feeling that we are doing something important, is very strong here. And I personally dislike this lamentary tendency that some folklorists, especially in the United States had in years in the past, you know, folklore is dying, folklore is disappearing, nobody wants us, etc., etc. I don't think that's very fruitful. We have to do things all the time and show ourselves that what we do is worthwhile.

**AT: I can say from my point of view that as a young and very green folklorist it's been a great pleasure for me to see, literally, some names from the paper become alive. And it's a wonderful opportunity for me to see so many people and talk to them. I have made some great contacts and all of you have really been widening my horizons. I mean, you have made, in one week, a young and green folklorist into a yellow one, as you could see from the colour of the T-shirts [worn by the organising staff – Editor's note]. And I'm sure that other students who have been helping here feel the same way. They have been able to listen to the presentations. And I think it's very important, that.. well, for me, I feel very lucky that this ISFNR [Congress] is taking place here and it's a huge leap forward for me as a young folklorist, because I lack the kind of life experience and research knowledge that most people here have and now I can see from all of you, where I can go and what lies ahead and it's just fantastic. I can't wait to be where you are.**

GHR: That's wonderful! It takes a little time, but it's a great way to walk on.

**AT: Just one last question – what are your words of advice for the next president of the ISFNR?**

GHR: Oh, I think there's much to do that I have left undone. I think a lot of the organisational... infrastructure needs to be strengthened – the website and the list of members, and I think there is an infrastructure here that will enable that, maybe... if the president becomes somebody from here, which I think will happen [Ülo Valk from the University of Tartu was indeed elected as the next president of the ISFNR at the General Assembly – A.T.]. I think the next

ISFNR president has to keep up the international character of the society, it's very important. We are an unusual society in the sense that we have so many people who are non-European and non-Western. I think that it will be necessary to develop contacts with places that have not been „discovered” yet by folklorists; basically to strengthen the ongoing communication between the conferences, between the members with some kind of a newsletter, with strong Internet connections, etc, etc. There's a lot to do, yes.

**AT: Well, thank you very much for coming here, thank you for your patience with the media, you know, from my area and thank you very much for this interview. And I can only wish you all the best in your future research and your personal life as well.**

GHR: Thank you very much, it's been a great pleasure!

**AT: Suur aitäh!**

GHR: Suur aitäh!