

## IN MEMORIAM

**HARRY WILLIAM MÜRK (8 June 1954 – 24 February 2009)**

The sweetest postcard in our office was sent by Harry after one of his summer visits to Tartu, and like many other reminders that have been brought or sent from different parts of the world, it is now a treasured keepsake. This beautiful delicate postcard is in so many ways emblematic of Harry.



Some people will not become your acquaintances; they simply become friends and companions along the way. Long before Harry found his way to the Estonian Literary Museum, people talked about some guy who is a great

dancer and singer and can speak Estonian spectacularly well. This characterisation implied an artistic spirit, but was quite uncommon for an Estonian living abroad. Some had met Harry on expeditions to Khanty-Mansiisk, others had seen him at conferences. His proficiency in Finno-Ugric languages was exceptional, and his interest in kindred peoples' spiritual culture and situation was profound and personal. Injustice in language angered him. As a linguist who had studied language and literature at the universities of Helsinki and Toronto and defended PhD on Estonian morphology at the Indiana University in 1991 he understood the nature and dangers of language segregation. During his scholarly and teaching career he published a handbook of Estonian language in the Uralic and Altaic series at the Indiana University in 1997, and worked as professor and teacher of Estonian language and literature at the University of Toronto. Harry admirably passed on his love and interest in Estonia to students and the people he met.

Harry was superlative as a person: fast, good-humoured and smart. His summer visits to Estonia were spent at music concerts and theatre, the sacred sites in Estonia, on the Hiiumaa Island, and travelling between different Estonian towns. In addition to that he was a translator and editor, his sideline in both Canada and Estonia. Taking with him texts that needed translating and editing, he took off somewhere in Estonia. A few days later he told once about an article on Kalevala-metric songs: "I sat down under an oak tree and would not leave before I had retranslated the entire article from Estonian into English. Believe me – it's better than it was." There was no reason to doubt his words.

Harry arrived as unexpectedly as snow in late autumn and blended in the office as naturally as if he had been there all along, as if he had not been away. He brought with him Canada, India and the entire world where he had travelled, its similarities and differences. Having been brought up on the other side of the ocean, he once asked me

from where comes some people's arrogance to claim that linguistics is insignificant, and everyone who can speak some language is already an expert and has nothing to study or learn. It is a widely held common belief but a dangerous tool for those in power. Science policy makers in Estonia at the time were convinced that a linguist must be content with pencils and paper, perhaps would need a book, but what would they do with a computer? We agreed that the life of a linguist is never easy, not anywhere.

All our discussions and conversations, after they will have settled, will probably take on new dimensions, as has Harry's contribution to mediating Estonian culture. He translated fiction, the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg*, folk songs, and choir songs by Veljo Tormis, but translating and editing the monumental text anthology *Taevased kosilased / The Heavenly Suitors* must have crowned his work. The book was intended to centre on ancient Estonian folk songs: the core and guide to the mythical world. Harry completed the first part of this grand book. As a singer he was brilliant in translating song texts so that they could be sung, and his pliancy of expression and vast vocabulary delivered in studies about figurative speech and proverbs. Our cooperation started with the volumes of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, and later continued with working at the book on Estonian mythology in the *Mythologia Uralica* series. But then his life's thread was cut short.

It was an honour and pure joy to be with you.

Mare Kõiva