

# ALEKSEI PETERSON IN THE SOUTHERN VEPS VILLAGES IN 1965–1969: A CHAPTER FROM THE HISTORY OF SOVIET ESTONIAN ETHNOGRAPHY

*Indrek Jääts*

*Senior Researcher*

*Estonian National Museum, Estonia*

*indrek.jaats@erm.ee*

**Abstract:** The article examines the five expeditions made by Aleksei Peterson, director of the Estonian Ethnography Museum, and his colleagues to the Southern Veps villages (Leningrad Oblast, northeastern Russia) in the late 1960s. These research trips marking the rebirth of the Finno-Ugric direction in Estonian ethnography (ethnology) constitute an important part of disciplinary history. The article, based mainly on fieldwork diaries, focuses on the everyday life during the research trips (logistic challenges, relations with local authorities and the Veps) and analyses the attitudes and knowledge production practices of Soviet Estonian ethnographers interested, above all, in traditional peasant culture.

**Keywords:** Veps, Estonia, ethnography, fieldwork, Soviet Union

## INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on five research trips to the Southern Veps organised by Aleksei Peterson and his colleagues between 1965 and 1969. These expeditions are an important part of disciplinary history because they mark the rebirth of the Finno-Ugric direction in Estonian ethnography<sup>1</sup> after World War II (see Jääts 2021). Here I would like to focus on the everyday reality of this fieldwork, analyse the knowledge production practices of Soviet Estonian ethnographers and shed light on Peterson's motivation to undertake those journeys to the land of the Veps.

What were the goals of these research trips and how were they related to the other activities of Estonian ethnographers? What were the logistical challenges faced on the Veps journeys? What about the personnel of the expeditions and their mutual relations? What were the relations with the local authorities? How did relations develop between the Estonian ethnographers and the Veps

villagers? What were the work methods and results (ethnographic descriptions and collected items, film, photographs, drawings) of the trips? Why were Estonian ethnographers always interested in old things and phenomena instead of contemporaneity?

Estonian ethnographers had visited the Northern and Central Veps on a few occasions before 1965 and the Veps trips continued after 1969 (including those to the Southern Veps). And yet, the five research trips under examination comprise a separate whole. All of them are connected by the person of Aleksei Peterson, director of the Estonian National Museum (ENM)<sup>2</sup> in 1958–1992. He simply came along on the first trip, but in subsequent years, he was the initiator and leader of the expeditions. The impressions of the first Veps trip discussed here were so vivid and strong that Peterson initiated a series of research trips that continued until 1983. In 1970, Peterson expanded the former study area to the Central Veps in Vologda Oblast. However, in subsequent years he returned to the Southern Veps repeatedly.

The main source for the article is the fieldwork diaries. It was considered self-evident that ethnographers keep a diary during fieldwork, but there were no strict guidelines for how to do it. Diaries had to be handed over to the archive of the institution organising the fieldwork. Thus, they were a kind of public documents and ethnographers had to decide what sort of information to include or omit. All the diaries studied here, except for Viires 1965, were kept collectively, taking turns. There was no intimacy in them. Every line was visible to everybody and obviously it had its impact on what was written and what was not. Keeping a diary was one of the fieldworkers' duties, but also a social activity. Daily events were often recorded a day or two later, when they were probably already partly forgotten. Therefore, it is important to examine the diaries side by side with other sources. I examined the photographs, film clips, and drawings originating from that period, as well as the collected items and ethnographic descriptions. I also analysed the academic and popular texts based on the material collected on these research trips, as well as reports of the expeditions in Estonian media at the time. In addition, I interviewed some of the people who participated in these trips.

I also partook in fieldwork in the Southern Veps' villages in 2014 and 2015. That is why I became interested in the activities of my former colleagues in these places. I believe that personal experience helps me to better understand those earlier expeditions. I can confirm that the Estonian researchers are still remembered in the Veps villages. The trips that took place in the 1960s have merged in the local memory with the later ones and ethnographers with folklorists, but Aleksei Peterson's name is still familiar to many members of the older generation.

## **BACKGROUND IN DISCIPLINARY HISTORY**

In the wake of World War II, Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union and Estonian ethnography was made a part of Soviet ethnography in the late 1940s. By that time, Soviet ethnography had become a well-controlled and centralised system culminating, at the apex of the pyramid, in the Institute of Ethnography at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Moscow. In the Soviet Union, the branch of scholarship dealing with peoples and their cultures was called ethnography,<sup>3</sup> and it was treated as a sub-discipline of history. Its theoretical foundation was historical materialism. The basis was the evolutionist ideas of Lewis Henry Morgan and Friedrich Engels, which held that the development of human society is driven by progress occurring in the production of material benefits. Estonian ethnography, defined in the 1920s by its founding father Ilmari Manninen as a science that mainly investigated the material side of traditional peasant culture, was able to find its niche in Soviet ethnography (see Jääts 2019).

The primary object of study of the Soviet (and former Russian) ethnography was peoples and one of the main research topics since the 1930s had been ethnogenesis – the birth and evolution of ethnic units at different levels of development (tribes, peoples, nationalities). It was studied in cooperation with archaeology, history, linguistics, folkloristics, and physical anthropology. The role of the ethnographers was to study traditional folk culture in detail, in order to ascertain the ethnic history of peoples and their cultural ties to their neighbours. Ethnogenesis studies made Soviet ethnographers investigate the past.

A new direction that was added in the late 1940s was the study of contemporary processes related to culture and everyday life (including ethnic processes). The socioeconomic changes that occurred under Soviet rule had to be reflected in a positive way. Estonian researchers participated actively and effectively in the study of ethnogenesis but were not willing to deal much with the socialist present for ideological reasons. Heirs of the pre-war national school of ethnography, they preferred to keep their gaze focused on the relatively apolitical past (Konksi 2009: 311–326; Jääts 2019: 8–10).

Estonian ethnographers focused mainly on studying Estonians but had always been interested in other Finno-Ugrians as well. The political border that had separated Estonian ethnographers from their eastern linguistic relatives in the 1920s and 1930s disappeared after World War II, but this did not automatically mean that conditions were created for Finno-Ugric studies to flourish. The concept of linguistic relatives, which had influenced Estonian ethnography before the war, was condemned as being ‘bourgeois’ in the 1940s under the impact of teachings promulgated by Nikolai Marr (Japhetic theory) and

supported by the Soviet leadership. Besides, the Estonian National Museum, the main institution of ethnography in the late 1940s, went through troubled and difficult times (see Astel 2009). There was no sufficient energy for doing fieldwork even in Estonia, not to mention the Finno-Ugric areas. However, things started to improve in the 1950s.

Stalin renounced his support for Marr's teachings in the summer of 1950, and they were quickly abandoned. One could again talk about Finno-Ugrians and their linguistic kinship. Paul Ariste, an influential linguist from the Department of Finno-Ugric Languages at the University of Tartu, and his colleagues started to organise research trips to the Finno-Ugric peoples (Ariste 2008: 290, 295). In addition to languages, they were also interested in traditional folk culture and brought some ethnographic items from their expeditions for the ENM. Ariste tried to inspire ethnographers (and folklorists) to join linguists in their Finno-Ugric studies and finally he succeeded.

The ENM was subordinated to the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR (today the Estonian Academy of Sciences – EAS) in 1946–1963. The academy – meaning first of all academicians of the field, archaeologist Harri Moora and linguist Paul Ariste, both leading the study of Estonian ethnogenesis – started to stress the need to collect ethnographic objects in danger of quick vanishing in 1957, and do this not only in Estonia but also in neighbouring territories (EAS 1/10/65, lists 4–6; 1/1/376, lists 186, 190, 192). The way for ethnographic fieldwork in the areas of eastern Baltic Finns, including the Veps, was open. Ethnographic data from neighbouring areas and the closest linguistic relatives had to be taken into account when studying Estonian ethnogenesis.

According to the leading theoreticians of Soviet ethnography, the main contemporary ethnic process occurring in the Soviet Union was inter-ethnic integration, which meant cultural convergence of various peoples. In the field of material culture, this meant the abandonment of archaic traditional cultural elements in favour of modern standardised industrial production (Bromlei & Kozlov 1975: 535–536). For researchers who were interested in traditional forms of culture, for example, in the context of ethnogenesis research, this meant they needed to take quick action.

Aleksei Peterson, a young and energetic ethnographer, was appointed director of the ENM in the summer of 1958 to achieve the goals proposed by the Academy. Peterson was born in southern Estonia in 1931, into an Estonian peasant family belonging to the Orthodox Church (hence the Orthodox first name). He studied history and ethnography at the sovietised University of Tartu and joined the Communist Party in 1957 – an important prerequisite for becoming director of a big museum. Yet, on the other hand, he was an Estonian-minded

man, indirectly linked to the pre-war national school of ethnography through his mentors (Harri Moora, Ants Viires).

The ENM was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR in 1963. This meant that since then cultural activities and collecting started to be stressed rather than academic research. However, on Peterson's initiative, an effort was made to continue as a research institution.

## **THE GENERAL OUTLINES OF THE EXPEDITIONS AND THE REPORTING IN THE MEDIA**

The first research trip discussed here took place from 9 June to 4 July 1965 (Viires 1965). Visits were made to the Southern and Central Veps villages of Boksitogorsk, Tikhvin and Podporozhye districts in the Leningrad Oblast. The expedition was organised by the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR, and led by Karin Mark, a well-known scientist studying the physical anthropology of the Finno-Ugric peoples. The trip was made in a van belonging to the Academy, and since there were some vacant seats available, a few ethnographers (Ants Viires, Aleksei Peterson, and artist Evi Tihemets) were also taken along.

Peterson was studying old Estonian farm buildings back then and joined the expedition probably out of general interest in the field. This was his first trip to the Veps. He had probably read Aino Voolmaa's (one of his colleagues at the ENM) report on her research trip to the Central Veps in 1963. Voolmaa had written, "There is plenty of ethnographic material here. It's a fairy tale land. Such antiquities have been preserved here that we will never find in our own country anymore" (ERM TAp 544; see also ERM EA 97: 129). These impressions probably inspired Aleksei Peterson to seize the opportunity and visit the Veps area himself.

During the first stage of the expedition, the Estonians' base camp was in Sidorovo (Sodjärvi in Veps) in the Boksitogorsk district, and then in Ozyora (Järved in Veps) in the Podporozhye district. It was impossible to travel by a motor vehicle directly from one region to the other and so a long detour had to be made. Instead, Viires, Tihemets and Peterson undertook a five-day hike (about 80 km) through small and remote Veps villages and thereafter reunited with the main part of the expedition. Sixteen items and 135 photographs by Peterson accrued to the ENM Veps collection as a result of this expedition.

What Peterson saw in the Veps villages provided such inspiration that he decided to return with a film camera the next summer. When he returned from the trip, Peterson gave an interview to the *Edasi* newspaper. It was primarily

archaic features that enchanted him. He affirmed that this journey would not be the last one and stressed that ethnographers had to hurry because old phenomena were quickly disappearing as a result of modernization (Vajakas 1965; see also Peterson 1969: 319; 1970a: 10–11).<sup>4</sup>

In August 1965, soon after the first expedition under observation here, the 2nd International Congress of Finno-Ugric Studies took place in Helsinki. For the first time, it was attended by a large delegation from the Estonian SSR, including Peterson and other ethnographers. Harri Moora made one of four plenary presentations, dedicated to the early history of agriculture in Estonia and neighbouring areas. Finnish ethnologist Kustaa Vilkuna spoke about Finnish plough types (Hallap & Tedre 1965: 698, 700–701). Peterson was apparently listening with great attention.

Attending such a large international academic event definitely had an inspiring impact on the Estonians, including ethnographers, working in the field of Finno-Ugric studies. They saw that foreigners, mainly of course the Finns and Hungarians, were also interested in the Finno-Ugric peoples and languages. However, as a rule, foreigners were not allowed to participate in fieldwork in the Soviet Union. Thus, the Estonians had an advantage and they made use of it in the subsequent decades. Finno-Ugric studies were a welcomed way to international academic communication for Estonian scholars who had been quite isolated from the world outside the Soviet Union since the end of the war.

Soviet Russian ethnographer Vladimir Pimenov published his monograph *Вепсы: Очерк этнической истории и генезиса культуры* (Vepsy: Oчерk etnicheskoi istorii i genezisa kul'tury (The Veps: A Study of Ethnic History and Genesis of Culture)) in 1965. The book dealt primarily with the ethnogenesis of the Veps, and Peterson read it carefully. He found that Pimenov had mainly based his study on archaeology and folkloristics, and his treatment of the Veps' material culture remained superficial. Peterson believed that the Veps' material culture, which had received scant academic attention until that time, was of key importance in studying the ethnogenesis of all Baltic Finns (Peterson 1970a: 10–14). Thus, he saw his opportunity there in the field of Veps studies.

The second research trip under observation here was the first one organised by the ENM and took place from 30 May to 20 June 1966 (ERM TAp 565). Two men participated – Aleksei Peterson and Toivo Pedak, camera operator and photographer. They worked in the Veps villages in the Boksitogorsk district. The main purpose of the trip was to film the slash-and-burn agriculture. Three items, 274 photographs, and about 1000 m of film were added to the ENM Veps collection as a result of this expedition.

The Estonian public was informed about the expedition shortly after by the newspaper *Edasi* (Luts 1966). Peterson spoke about the trip on Estonian

Television on 20 September 1966 (ERM A 1/1/225, sheet 32; Linnus 1967: 347). Unfortunately, no recording of the interview has survived.

The third expedition took place from 21 August to 20 September 1967 (ERM TAp 573). This time, it was a larger undertaking and more people participated. Naturally, the expedition was led by Peterson. Toivo Pedak went along to film and photograph the project, and Lembit Lepp was the artist. Two ethnography students, Lembit Võime and Hugo Puss, worked as assistants. Again, they visited the Veps villages in the Boksitogorsk district, most of which were already familiar to them. They went in the autumn because they wanted to record the harvesting and threshing methods.

Seventy-two items, 83 sheets of drawings, 199 pages of ethnographic descriptions, 351 photographs, and about 3000 m of film accrued to the ENM Veps collection as a result of this expedition.

A short note was published about the research trip in the newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* (Lepp 1967). Later, a five-part series of articles about the expedition ran in the newspaper *Edasi* between April 2nd and 6th in 1968 (Lepp et al. 1968).

The fourth research trip took place from 10 July to 1 August 1968 (ERM TAp 574). This time, in addition to Peterson, the team also included camera operator Toivo Pedak, photographer Vello Kutsar and artist Erika Järvekülg (as of 1972 Pedak). Again, they travelled to the Boksitogorsk district, to the places that had already been visited.

Twenty-nine items, 50 drawings, 284 photographs, and about 2500 m of film were added to the ENM Veps collection as a result of this expedition.

The fifth and last expedition discussed here took place between 28 August and 12 September 1969 (ERM TAp 575). Peterson was the leader again and the team included Toivo Pedak as a camera operator, Vello Kutsar as a photographer and Erika Järvekülg as an artist. A student named Ene Ammer accompanied them as a second artist. This time they travelled in a van that had been acquired by the museum, and a bus driver went with them. They visited the Southern Veps' villages in the Boksitogorsk district, where they had not been before. The autumn rains hampered the work of the expedition.

This time the outcome was 51 items, 98 drawings, 245 photographs, and an unknown amount of film.

## **THE LOGISTICS AND EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE EXPEDITIONS**

Perhaps the greatest problem in the Southern Veps' area in the 1960s was the bad condition of the roads. This meant that the connection with the rest of the world was poor. However, the archaic nature of the Southern Veps' villages

had been preserved due to their relative isolation. The roads connecting the villages were also in a poor state. The network of roads in the Southern Veps' area dated back to the time before motorised transportation. One could get through on foot or on horseback, but not always in a wagon. Sleighs were used also in the summertime. In some places, log pathways led through the bogs. Collective farms had some trucks and tractors that could get through when it was dry, but during the wet season they damaged the road to the point that it was even difficult to use horse transport. The more remote villages could only be accessed by trucks or tractors in the wintertime. There were no passenger cars in the Southern Veps' villages at that time.

For the Estonian ethnographers, the roads posed constant logistical challenges. In 1965, an Academy of Sciences' UAZ-450 van, which had four-wheel drive, made it all the way to Sidorovo. Between 1966 and 1968, the trips were made by a K-750 motorcycle with a sidecar. The journey from Estonia was quite long and arduous and required physical toughness and patience. Even the highways that led to the last larger settlements before the Southern Veps' villages were very bad in places but were being repaired over the years. Tens of kilometres of especially bad roads separated Southern Veps' villages from the Leningrad-Vologda railway. It was possible to travel this distance on a narrow-gauge railway that had been built for transporting timber from the forest. The motorcycle was loaded on a platform car, and then slowly moved through the forests and bogs separating the Southern Veps from the rest of the world.

The motorcycle was needed for travelling between the villages. The film equipment weighed about 50 kilos and it could not be carried far by hand. At least two people had to travel on the motorcycle because one would not be able to push it out of the mud holes. But getting stuck in the mud was quite common. The overloaded Soviet motorcycle broke down quickly on the bad roads and often needed to be repaired. Some places were not accessible by motorcycle. In these cases, one moved on horseback or on foot. Sometimes a sovkhos truck or a tractor would give a lift. Occasionally, boats were used. The rivers and lakes were the oldest routes in the forest zone.

In 1969, the expedition used a UAZ-452 van acquired for the museum along with a trailer for transporting the collected objects. Previously, most of them had been sent to Estonia by mail. Although the van was brand new, it still needed to be repaired from time to time. And it repeatedly got stuck in the autumn mud.

In the land of the Veps, the ethnographers always had one place where they stayed longer, a starting point for their excursions – the expedition's base camp. Between 1965 and 1968, this was in Sidorovo, and in 1969 in Radogoshch (Arskahť). In Sidorovo, which the Estonians often called the unofficial capital of the Southern Veps, they usually lived in a school dormitory. After all, they

travelled mostly during the summer months, during the school holiday. It was the common practice of Soviet ethnographers – fieldwork, mostly collective, was carried out in the summertime (see Dragadze 1978: 66). On the way to and back from the land of the Veps, and when making excursions from the base camp, they overnighted in people's homes or in empty houses, which the local authorities permitted to use. Sometimes, they also had a tent with them, but they seldom used it.

On the long trips to and from the land of the Veps, they mostly ate in cafeterias, where they existed. There were no cafeterias in the villages, but the Veps were generally hospitable, and often the ethnographers were fed by the people they were interviewing. Sometimes, they were also offered vodka and home-brewed beer. The food selection in the small village stores was quite meagre, but something could still be picked up for a small group of travellers. On a few occasions, they also purchased food and drink from the village people, and fishing and mushroom picking provided additional nourishment.

They ate what there was and when they had the time. The work was of primary importance, at least as far as Peterson was concerned. When the group was larger, they formed informal kitchen crews.

In the case of larger expeditions, quite a lively social life developed. In the evening, they had drinks, went to the sauna, joked around, and kidded each other. Often, they watched movies or attended dances at the village club.

In 1965, Ants Viires as the oldest and most experienced one, was the leader of a small group of Estonian ethnographers. From that trip, Evi Tihemets remembers Peterson as a nice and helpful companion, with good abilities to find and carry objects (Tihemets, personal communication, 5 May 2015). Starting in 1966, Aleksei Peterson was the indisputable leader of the expeditions, and in the collective diaries, he is called the 'leader' or the 'chief'. He gave assignments and organised the work. But Toivo Pedak also participated in four of the trips discussed here. He was irreplaceable as the camera operator and technician, and his experience in the Veps area almost equalled that of Peterson's. From the diary, it appears that he viewed Peterson's role as the leader with some irony and allowed himself some wilfulness. Some competitiveness seemed to have existed between the two about who was more skilful, cleverer, and stronger (Võime, personal communication, 29 November 2017; Pedak, personal communication, 1 February 2018). Nevertheless, generally, Pedak was a trustworthy and responsible companion. Otherwise, he would not have been asked to come along repeatedly. Pedak's Russian was not good, but he was there to work, not talk.

Women came along on the last two expeditions. Peterson had quite a traditional and patriarchal understanding of the roles and jobs of men and women. He believed, for example, that cooking and cleaning were women's jobs, whereas

dealing with machinery and boats was men's area of expertise. Generally, they managed. The men cooked when necessary and mended their own clothes if needed.

The ethnographers tried to organise their work as rationally as possible and often agreed on their visits to local people in advance. At the same time, they were also opportunists and had always to be ready. When it rained, they busied themselves indoors, conducted interviews, made drawings and took photographs, rummaged around attics looking for old items, organised their notes, and kept diaries.

## **RELATIONS WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES**

Few foreigners moved around the remote corners of the Leningrad Oblast. They were quickly noticed and caused distrust in the local authorities. The paranoid vigilance regarding spies that dated back to the 1930s was still there in the 1960s. To dispel the suspicions, the new arrivals had to have a legitimate reason for being there, and to prove it by documents. When it became clear that they were scholars from Soviet Estonia, a brotherly republic, the locals offered to help as much as they could. After all, science had to be supported. Expeditions fitted well with the spirit of the era.

First, one had to visit the regional committee of the Communist Party with one's letters of recommendation (from the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR, later the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR). Those visits were primarily courtesy calls. The ethnographers wished to operate in the 'domains' of the local authorities, and not notifying them would have been frowned at. If the documents were in order, getting a permit was actually no problem. From the regional level, the approvals moved downward to the directors of collective farms and chairmen of village councils. The regional committee also provided authoritative information about the local conditions.

In Sidorovo, the most influential contact for the scholars was Aleksei Mikhailovich, the chairman of the collective farm called *Druzhba* (Friendship). Vladimir Stepanovich, the director of the primary school in Sidorovo, was also a very useful figure. He provided lodgings in the school dormitory. Warm relations with these men existed for years. The ethnographers went fishing with them, drank with them, and helped them when possible. For example, the expedition photographer took pictures of the spring graduations and first schoolday events. In 1967, Peterson and Puss made a presentation about ethnography at Sidorovo school and explained their goals and activities.

In addition, there were the lower-level authorities, for example, the farm brigade leaders. They helped if needed and organised transport and lodgings if possible.

In later decades, when doing fieldwork among bigger Finno-Ugric peoples having Soviet-style territorial autonomy, Estonian ethnographers usually had a regional museum as the local institutional partner and mediator with villagers. The Veps did not enjoy even the lowest level of autonomy, nor did they have a regional museum of their own. Thus, Estonian ethnographers had to address the Veps directly.

## **INTERACTION WITH THE VEPS**

In the backwoods villages that the ethnographers visited for the first time, they were often initially greeted with great distrust. The locals, frightened by the repressions of the late 1930s, were afraid of strangers and did not want to be photographed. They hid in their houses, locked the doors, and demanded to see documents. After all, who knew who might have been lurking about? Often, the work and activities of the ethnographers initially seemed incomprehensible to the locals. On their first trip, the Estonians were thought to be German spies, because of the baseball cap that Peterson wore. Explanations had to be provided (Tihemets, personal communication, 5 May 2015).

But once they became acquainted, local people were usually very friendly and hospitable. They offered the visitors food, drink, and sometimes even lodgings, and invited them to have a sauna. The Veps and Estonian languages are quite similar, and when the Veps discovered this, common words were often found together. They rejoiced in the linguistic kinship and a sense of brotherhood developed. In some cases, they spoke about the Estonians being 'like old relatives' (Tihemets, personal communication, 5 May 2015).

The fieldwork diaries reveal that the Veps were generally quiet and hard-working. They spent plenty of time in the forest – fishing, gathering mushrooms and berries, making hay. They did not always have time to talk with the ethnographers, but if it did not disturb their own work and activities, they were usually ready to help. Sometimes the Estonians also lent them a helping hand. This helped to develop mutual understanding.

The ethnographers' equipment – film and photo cameras, and tape recorders – were quite extraordinary in this remote area and caused excitement in the villages. During holidays, the Veps drank for days, especially the men. And this significantly hindered the work of the ethnographers, because the intoxicated

men did not provide reliable information. They were just offering vodka and their home-brewed beer, asking to be photographed and talking nonsense.

After years of visiting the same places, close acquaintances and friendships developed. The Estonians were accepted almost as part of the community in Sidorovo. They joined in the celebrations at the club, visited acquaintances, and helped fix their radios and boat engines. Romances also developed between young Estonian men and local maids.

Based on their research interests and goals (traditional peasant culture, ethnogenesis studies), the Estonian ethnographers went to the Veps villages primarily in search of the old and archaic. For example, Toivo Pedak, who travelled around the environs of Radogoshch, writes about a beautiful view of an even more beautiful village – “like an old fairy tale” (31 August 1969, ERM TAp 575).

Lepp et al. (1968) view the people in the Southern Veps’ villages as “something resembling an ancient community” (2 April). The meals were conducted “according to the old customs – a bowl in the middle of the table, with everyone taking a spoonful and putting it in their mouth” (5 April).

For the Estonian ethnographers, the land of the Southern Veps was like a living open-air museum, a window to the Veps’ past, but also to the Estonians’ own past. This view was rooted in the concept of the evolutionist ladder of linear development inherent both in old-school Finno-Ugric studies (the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and in Soviet ethnography. It was believed that the Veps were a bit behind Estonians and what had already disappeared in Estonia could still be seen and studied in the remote Veps villages, at least in part.

The contemporary land of the Southern Veps was seen as a backward province and observed through the eyes of civilised city people. For instance, in the diaries, there are many critical comments about the way the locals dance at the village clubs. Estonian ethnographers were not interested in modern Soviet phenomena in the land of the Veps. In fact, they disliked them, because they were spoiling the ideal picture of ancient villages of the Baltic Finns.

The great similarity between southern Estonia and the land of the Southern Veps is often mentioned in the diaries. For Peterson, who came from southern Estonia, this concurrence apparently made a significant impact during his first trip. In some sense, it was as if he had ended up back in his own rural childhood.

## **ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS**

Estonian ethnographers were mainly interested in the past and they worked with their ears rather than their eyes (see Dragadze 1978: 66). They sought to interview older people who remembered the old times. The ideal interviewee was an old, but still clear-thinking, sober, intelligent, and talkative Veps. A man rather than a woman, because of the ‘manly’ research topics (transport, buildings, agriculture) of male ethnographers. The conversations could last for hours. Notes were taken, and on the last three visits, some talks were recorded on tape. The interviews were conducted in a mixture of Russian and Veps. The ethnographers asked their questions in Russian, at least at first, before they got used to the Veps language. The answers were in either Russian or Veps. “At first, we could not understand what they were saying, but by the end of the expedition, we were slowly starting to become oriented” (Lepp et al. 1968, 5 April).

One way that the Veps language entered the conversation was through the names of the items the ethnographers were interested in because this was important when studying cultural contacts and ethnogenesis. Their ethnographic notes overflow with Veps words and terms. According to Vöime (personal communication, 29 November 2017), Peterson often emphasised the necessity to write down the correct Veps names of objects.

## **COLLECTION OF OBJECTS**

On the first two expeditions being examined here, the collection of objects was not a separate goal, but some objects of interest were received as gifts or found in abandoned buildings – mostly tools and items made of birch bark, also some items of clothing. In subsequent years, serious attention was turned to collecting objects, and this was quite successful. More than half were received as gifts, and the rest were bought. It seems that people were quite willing to give up their old tools and items they did not really need any more. But they asked to be paid for clothing. Weaving cloth at home was very time-consuming and the product was considered precious. However, much depended on the specific person, and his or her character. Generally, it seemed that men were more generous, and women more practically minded. However, the Veps were not willing to give away, or even sell, everything that the ethnographers were interested in. In those cases, drawings or photographs were made of the objects.

The collected objects were registered and packed for transport. Most of the goods acquired were sent to the museum by post. Very large objects (ploughs,

wagons, sleighs) were not yet being collected at that time, because it would have been too difficult to transport them to Estonia (Lepp et al. 1968, 2 April). The more distant goal, which was kept in mind right from the start, was to achieve a representative material overview of traditional Veps folk culture (see Linnus 1970: 245). The ethnographic items were seen as objects of study. It was hoped that careful analysis of the collected things would help to answer the raised research questions. On the other hand, the objects also had an illustrative and popularising function – they could be displayed in future exhibitions.

Laura Siragusa and Madis Arukask (2017: 76–78, 81–87) examined the fieldwork led by Peterson in Vologda Oblast (visits to Pätzhar and Pondal) in the 1970s. They acknowledge Peterson's achievements in collecting objects but blame him for his view that “the objects have much more value than the people”, whom Peterson perceived “mostly as keepers and potential donators of traditional, local materials” (ibid.: 86). True enough, Peterson's goal was to accumulate and study the material peasant culture within the context of the then Estonian and Soviet ethnography (ethnogenesis, ethnic history, cultural relations). At the time, Peterson and other ethnographers primarily focused on peoples and their history, and contemporary individuals were of less concern. For Peterson, the people, mostly older Veps, served, above all, as informants, a door into the past. However, this did not hinder him from treating the Veps with sympathy and respect, as well as forming long-term friendships with some of them. A similar attitude of regarding people as mere “informants” is also clearly expressed by Vladimir Pimenov in his memoirs (2015: 209–210).

Collecting Orthodox icons was an interesting subtopic of those expeditions. In Soviet academia, religion was considered a topic of folklorists rather than ethnographers. However, Estonian fieldworkers were interested in icons, and it was relatively easy to get some from abandoned houses or from people turned away from Christianity under pressure of Soviet ideology. Very few of the acquired icons ended up at the museum (not interested in religious items, as a rule). Icons were kept for oneself, as they were somewhat in fashion among the intelligentsia of those times.

## **PHOTOGRAPHING**

Photographs were taken during all the expeditions under discussion here. This was a relatively fast and easy way to record what one had seen. In 1965, both Viires and Peterson took pictures. Later, a special photographer always travelled with the expedition (T. Pedak, V. Kutsar). Photographs were taken of the ethnographic items, means of transportation, buildings and their details,

tools, village scenes, as well as local people and events. The expedition members and their fieldwork, their adventure, was also photographed. The photographer was generally welcomed at village festivals, and there were always many inebriated men who wanted to be photographed. Soviet photo equipment was what it was, and the picture could also be ruined by a defective film. Mistakes could also be made in developing the photographs. Therefore, the quality of the hundreds of black-and-white photographs made on these expeditions fluctuates and is sometimes poor.

## **DRAWING**

The artists often worked apart from the others, at their own pace. They made drawings of ethnographic objects, buildings and their details, and sometimes people. Thus, their work partially overlapped with that of the photographers, but they were much less efficient. However, a drawing of an object or building that includes measurements is usually much more informative than a photograph. Basically, the artist followed the orders of the expedition leader but also showed personal initiative when finding something inspiring. The artist's job description also included measuring the buildings and drawing their plans. As a rule, an assistant helped with this work. When it rained, the artist might be found sitting in a friendly home or empty house, drawing household utensils and furnishing. According to Erika Pedak (Järvekülg at the time), the expeditions were the main reason why she worked at the museum for years for such a low salary (Pedak, personal communication, 1 February 2018).

## **FILMING**

During the expeditions to the Southern Veps between 1966 and 1969, special emphasis was placed on recording the old, and quickly disappearing, work methods and customs on film.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of ethnographic films was discussed at the 2nd International Congress of Finno-Ugric Studies in Helsinki in 1965, which Peterson attended (Hallap & Tedre 1965: 700). At the same time, the idea of producing a joint Estonian-Finnish film on the Finno-Ugric peoples was born (Lõhmus 2011). Thus, an interest in the Finno-Ugric peoples and in the ethnographic film was in the air, and in the early summer of 1966, Peterson and Pedak went to the land of the Veps with the museum's professional 35 mm Konvas camera. The main focus was on slash-and-burn agriculture. The year before, this archaic

way of cultivation had still been practiced on the collective farm and Peterson definitely wanted to record it.

The slash-and-burn technic was no longer practised that year. But the people who knew how to do it and the necessary tools were still available. With persistent organisation, Peterson was able to arrange a small enactment of slash-and-burn cultivation, which was carefully recorded.

In addition, that year and the following years, a series of activities were filmed, including harvesting with sickles, threshing with flails, haymaking, planting potatoes, letting the herd out to pasture and bringing it home, traditional cooking and beer brewing, having a sauna in the oven, doing the laundry, building a dug-out boat, making birch-bark shoes, swingling flax, and spinning with a spindle. Religious activities were also filmed in some cases; for example, a village festival in Sidorovo and commemoration of the dead in Pelushi (Peloo) graveyard, where Orthodox Christianity merged with remnants of animist beliefs.

As a rule, the filming was not spontaneous, but planned very carefully, mainly because of technical restrictions. Film was always in short supply. Since the sensitivity of the film was low, the filming had to be done outdoors in bright sunlight, and often the cameraman had to wait for a cloud to get the shot. For the indoor shooting, the lighting was carefully arranged before the camera started to roll (e.g., 3 September 1967, ERM TAp 565). It was unthinkable just to observe local everyday life with the camera, as it is often done in visual anthropology today.

As mentioned above, Peterson was interested in the past, in traditional peasant culture, and he wanted to show it on film too. When possible, the signs of modernity (power lines, tractors, asbestos cement roof tiles) were left out of the shot as they ruined the picture. Peterson made ethnographic films in almost the same way as feature films are made. But instead of the actors, he had the villagers, wearing old-fashioned clothes and holding old-fashioned tools. It was important to depict the work process or other activity as accurately, authentically and scientifically as possible (Peterson 1975; 1983).

As the museum director, Peterson was not obligated to deal with filmmaking, which was quite troublesome. However, for him, this was part of his self-realisation. It was not common at all in the Soviet Union during those times that an ethnography museum was making films. In fact, it was a grey zone – not officially stipulated, but not directly prohibited either. Peterson was one of the pioneers in this field in the Soviet Union and was proud of that. The material that was filmed in the Veps villages between 1966 and 1969, as well as in subsequent years, was later made into two films – *The Making of Dugout Boats* (1980) and *Vepsians at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (1981).<sup>6</sup>

## THE MAIN ACADEMIC RESULTS OF THE EXPEDITIONS

The 3rd International Congress of Finno-Ugric Studies took place in Tallinn in August 1970. This was a great event, for which Estonian scholars had prepared for years, and it did not leave the ethnographers untouched.

On the occasion of the congress, the ENM published a volume entitled *Läänemeresoomlaste rahvakultuurist* (On the Folk Culture of the Baltic-Finns) (1970). Peterson was represented with two articles in this book. The first, opening article, “Eesti etnograafide ülesandeid läänemeresoomlaste uurimisel” (The Assignments of Estonian Ethnographers in the Study of the Baltic-Finns) (Peterson 1970a), was already quoted above. The second one was dedicated to the development of the forked plough in Estonia and the Veps’ area and was based mainly on the material collected during the fieldwork in the Southern and Central Veps’ areas between 1966 and 1968 (Peterson 1970b). Many well-known scholars (incl. I. Manninen, G. Ränk, K. Vilkuna, and H. Moora) had dealt or were dealing with the history of agriculture and farming tools. It was somewhat risky to intrude with one’s own ideas, which had not been completely considered and justified from every angle. But it was not Peterson’s style to keep his ideas hidden. Previously it had been thought that the forked plough was a relatively late (beginning of the 2nd millennium AD) loan from the Eastern Slavs or Balts. However, when researching the Veps’ forked plough, Peterson found that it was closely related to slash-and-burn cultivation, and surmised that the plough was invented on the mainland of Estonia at the beginning of the 1st millennium AD and then quickly spread to the Veps (Peterson 1970b).

Peterson published his article “Vepsa ait” (The Veps Storehouse) in volume 24 of the ENM’s Yearbook (1969, actually in the summer of 1970) dedicated to the congress. He used storehouses as a probe into the distant past to explore the ethnic history of the Baltic Finns (Peterson 1969).

Peterson’s article “Lõunavepsa linandusest” (On the Flax Production of the Southern Veps) was published in the next volume of the ENM’s Yearbook (1971) and was also based primarily on the fieldwork material. Peterson claimed that the growing of flax was a very old phenomenon among the Baltic Finns and closely related to slash-and-burn agriculture (Peterson 1971).

In summary, it can be said that Peterson loved to emphasise the old age and local origin of the phenomena he studied. He tended to defend the creativity of the Baltic Finns and reject widespread theories of cultural loans from the Slavs and Balts. This may have been an expression of his Estonian, and more broadly, Baltic-Finnic mindset.

## CONCLUSION

This article examined the five expeditions made by Estonian ethnographers to the Southern Veps' villages between 1965 and 1969. At that time, the roads connecting the land of the Southern Veps and the rest of the world were in poor condition and posed constant logistical challenges for the Estonian scholars. The Southern Veps led a quite isolated life, and therefore much that was archaic and fascinated the ethnographers still survived there or had disappeared only recently. This remote corner of the then Leningrad Oblast was a kind of window to the past for the Estonian researchers who were mainly dealing with the issues of ethnogenesis at that time. They were interested in ethnic groups and their history rather than contemporary individuals. Influenced by the evolutionist concept of linear development, they tended to believe that old material still available in the Southern Veps' villages (but not in Estonia anymore) could shed light on the past of Estonia too.

The traditional material culture of the Veps had not been researched much and Aleksei Peterson saw his opportunity and mission there. Modernisation was already occurring and everything old was in danger of disappearing. The ethnographers who were interested in this had to hurry to save what was possible for science. The traditional peasant culture of the Veps was recorded on photographs and film; ethnographic interviews were conducted and drawings were made, and objects were eagerly collected. It required a team of two to six people. Fieldwork was collective and carried out in the summertime – as a rule in Soviet ethnography. The material gathered was quickly made available to academic circles in the form of presentations and articles. Reports on the expeditions appeared in the Estonian media. The public was apparently interested, and the research on the linguistic relatives received positive feedback because it was related to the Estonian national identity.

The attitude of the local authorities toward the ethnographers was generally positive. The spirit of the era favoured science and expeditions. Initially, the Veps were distrustful, especially those in the farthest and most isolated villages. The ethnographers had to explain their goals and prove them with documents. Later on, the estrangement dissipated, and when the kinship between the Veps and Estonian languages was discovered, the arrivals were greeted as long-lost relatives. As the years passed, the Estonians started to be treated almost as their own in Sidorovo, which was repeatedly the site for the ethnographers' base camp.

An important link between the five research trips under examination is the person of Aleksei Peterson. The first time, he was just a bystander, but what he saw and experienced in the Southern Veps' villages had such an impact on him

that he initiated an entire series of Veps expeditions. As the museum director, he was not obligated to research the Veps personally and to go on the quite tiring expeditions. However, Peterson was an ambitious man. He wanted to make a name for himself in science, including in the field of ethnographic films. He could have documented the socio-economic changes in the Veps' villages and applauded the Soviet-led progress, thereby promoting his career. His interest, however, lay in the past, in the traditional peasant culture and in ethnogenesis. In addition to everything else, these Veps trips were certainly an adventure, a welcome escape from the daily routine, not only for Peterson but also for his co-workers. People were usually happy to go on expeditions. They felt they were doing the right thing, promoting the Estonian cause in a way.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The discipline, mainly studying the material side of traditional peasant culture, was called 'ethnography' in Estonia up to the 1990s. Its counterpart in the Soviet Union was also labelled 'ethnography'. I use the term of the era under discussion in my article instead of 'ethnology'.
- <sup>2</sup> The official name of the Estonian National Museum (founded in 1909) was changed repeatedly during the Soviet period. I use the ENM throughout the article for the sake of simplicity.
- <sup>3</sup> The discipline had this name already in Tsarist Russia. The tradition continued in the Soviet Union and helped preserve the label in Estonia as well.
- <sup>4</sup> P. Ariste (1964: 5) gave a cause for studying the Veps much in the same vein. Peterson was probably familiar with his text.
- <sup>5</sup> On ethnographic films made at the ENM during the Soviet period see Niglas & Toulouze 2010.
- <sup>6</sup> The films have been issued on a DVD under the heading *Estonian Ethnographic Film III. The Vepsians* (ENM 2015).

## ARCHIVAL SOURCES

EAS – archive of the Estonian Academy of Sciences  
ERM A – archive of the Estonian National Museum  
ERM EA – ethnographic archive of the Estonian National Museum  
ERM TAp – fieldwork diaries of the Estonian National Museum  
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*Indrek Jääts*

**Indrek Jääts** (PhD) is an ethnologist educated at the University of Tartu, Estonia. His primary research interests have been ethnicity, nationalism and nationalities policy in Eastern Europe. More extensively, he has studied the Setos, Komi, Komi-Permyaks and Veps. Recently he has been interested in the history of Estonian ethnology.

indrek.jaats@erm.ee