

IN MEMORIAM

Anu Vissel

December 16, 1952 – September 6, 2005

It was even not that long ago – on an early spring afternoon in 1977 when Kristi Salve, the scholar of the Department of Folkloristics at the Fr. R. Kreutzwald Literary Museum of the Academy of Sciences of the then Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, with happy excitement announced us: “The philology department graduates were transferred today. Zirk was transferred to our department.” This was a decisive moment in Anu Vissel’s (Zirk by maiden name) future – the narrow choice of academic career of a philology student, who was actively involved in folk dance and music, had brought her to the scholarly research work which she pursued for the rest of her life, unfortunately lasting for less than three decades.



Having born and lived in Nõo, a borough near Tartu, Anu Vissel attended the local school which has generally been considered the best secondary school in the sciences (especially mathematics and physics) in Estonia. As Anu Vissel was more interested in folk dancing and the humanities, she chose a parallel class which focused less on the sciences; this, however, does not mean that the secondary education she received was of lesser value. Anu Vissel came to the Estonian folklore studies with happy excitement and somehow managed to retain it all through her research years. She always found new and interesting topics to study and was one of the few who managed to describe and record the manifestations and changes in contemporary folklore.

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Anu Zirk (Vissel) who had previously studied music started her academic career in the Ethnomusicology Section at the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum. She soon moved on to work as a junior researcher at the Ethnomusicology Section of the Estonian Institute of Language and Literature. The section, newly established on the initiative of ethnomusicologist Ingrid Rütel, included a number of young scholars with good prospects. Some of them left, as it is often the case with complicated and long-term projects. But Anu continued with the topic that she had taken up already in her student years – the Estonian herding songs. The four volumes of the anthology of Estonian herding songs (*Eesti karjaselaulud 1-4*) was published during 1982–1992 in the *Ars musicae popularis* series. (Five of the fifteen volumes published in this series so far, i.e. one third of the total, was either edited or authored by Anu Vissel.)

Research in musicology inevitably led to the study of folk dance. Folk dancing was not merely a topic of research for Anu Vissel, it was also a way of self-expression for her. She danced at the local female folk dance group *Madelin*, and supervised the authentic folklore ensemble *Anurin*. Her national costume was always ready for the next performance in her office wardrobe. In addition to her many activities, she was also a prolific folklore collector and recorder. She collected folklore until the end of her life, adjusting her work with the progress in recording technology – from ordinary tape recorders to minidisk recorders and camcorders.

Anu Vissel's scholarly activities were not limited solely to studying ethnomusicology and folk dance. These activities and the need to handle modern technological equipment led her to recording and studying contemporary folklore. In 1993, after the collection campaign for school lore in Estonian and Russian, Anu Vissel and Mare Kõiva published and edited a collection of school lore with parallel Estonian and Russian texts. This publication (*Koolipärimus* 'School Lore') was the first in the *Pro folkloristica* publication series. Since then, school lore and children's lore became Anu Vissel's primary research topics next to ethnomusicology and the study of folk dance. She was among the first folklorists to study cultural changes by means of experimental questionnaires. Over nearly ten years she observed the transformation of tradition in the Estonian regions

particularly rich in lore – the Kihnu island and the Setu region – and conducting comparative interviews in regions where lore tradition is less conspicuous. Filing questionnaire answers and statistical processing of data provided evidence of the changes in black and white, and indicated the deep influence exerted by the media. An important byproduct of the research was understanding the importance of abundant innovative creativity and improvising while communicating with children. These were also the first studies of repertoire, which observed children's lore as a whole, without excluding material of literary origin or non-folkloric material.

Anu Vissel's MA thesis on the traditional and innovative elements in Estonian moving games was a clear indicator of the importance of children's lore among her research topics. The focus of her research was on the renewing of game tradition and musical culture, including children's song repertoire. Anu Vissel explored in more length the changes in swinging culture from its beginning to its present manifestations in Estonia, such as the kiiking (a sports activity invented in Estonia and involving swinging over the spindle). The results of this study were published in a lengthy article in the 21st issue of journal *Mäetagused* (*Eestlaste kiigekultuurist enne ja nüüd* 'On the Swing Tradition of Estonians Before and Now'). Research in swinging tradition became a part of Anu Vissel's PhD thesis on the changes of children's lore over the times, which was published as the 15th volume in the *Ars musicae popularis* series in 2004 and which she defended on October 25 the same year at the defence committee of the University of Tartu. Next to the Ph.D. thesis she published articles on the history of Estonian music (e.g. on Cyrillus Kreek, the collection of folk tunes, and coastal Swedish, published in issue no. 23 of *Mäetagused*). This continued the long line of research results of the study conducted by the Estonian school of charting, and studies into the history and schools of Estonian ethnomusicology. Anu Vissel participated in Estonian and international academic panels and was actively involved in popularising folklore.

The professional work, which she carried out next to schooling her two sons through university, was also publicly recognised. In 2001 she was awarded the Prize of Cultural Heritage by the Estonian National Folklore Council for her research activities and supervis-

ing the folklore ensemble *Anurin*, in 2004 she was awarded the Kristjan Torop's prize by the Foundation of Cultural Heritage, and the annual prize of the Endowment of Folk Culture by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia.

Anu Vissel's academic career was going upwards until September 2005. On the evening of September 1, her way home from Tartu to Nõo, which she usually passed on bicycle, was fatally disrupted, and five days later Anu Vissel, so cheerful and fond of dancing, was no more. Her research work, such as an article on the Estonian artisans' society *Uku* based on her family recollections, and the observation of changes in children's lore, and Anu's overview of the activities and importance in ethnomusicological research of her long term supervisor, teacher and colleague Ingrid Rüütel were left unfinished. Her first independent grant topic on the study of Estonian folk dance was left without a grant holder.

The Editors