

## ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF ACADEMICIAN ARVO KRIKMANN ON HIS 70TH BIRTHDAY

*Mari Sarv*

The 70th birthday of Arvo Krikmann, Estonian academician, folklorist, paremiologist and scholar of humour, is a fine moment to offer the readers of *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* a bit more thorough overview of his life and activities. For me, personally, Krikmann has been the most important teacher in folklore studies and during university studies and later the supervisor of my master's and doctor's theses. Krikmann's lectures have been the most systematic and condensed ones I have ever attended, his methods and way of thinking have been appealing, and his work *Sissevaateid folkloori lühivormidesse. Põhimõisteid, žanrisuhteid, üldprobleeme* ('Introspections into Minor Forms of Folklore (*IMFF*), Vol. 1. Basic Concepts, Genre Relations, General Issues')



has been an important reference source for discovering the original truths hidden in the folklore archive collections. In the following I have presented a rather eclectic combination of his academic career and memoirs, composed of different sources starting from Krikmann's patient replies to my questions (Krikmann's words are featured in italics throughout the text) about the beginning of things all the way to the previous reports of birthdays and Krikmann's curriculum vitae on the Estonian digital research portal.

Arvo Krikmann was born on 21 July, 1939, in Pudivere village (*or, more precisely, in Liinemõisa*), Simuna parish, Viru County, Northeast Estonia. *In the manor times there had been a typical long farm-hand house to the west of our apple-tree and berry orchard. My paternal grandfather Mihkel had lived there with his family, but when I lived there only small heaps were discernible through the turf at the place where a stove or oven and the foundation had once been. When the lands of Pudivere manor were allotted and my parents got married, my father had some local craftsmen construct new buildings – a barn, stables and byres, and the house.* This was where Krikmann spent most of his

youth and where he experienced various types of folklore. *I've written down the proverbs and proverbial sayings that I heard at home already a long ago (ca 1,700 texts of proverbial sayings has been recorded in Simuna parish, ca 800 of these came from my home, Pudivere). Somewhere in the album collection of the folklore archives there should be a song book of my maternal grandmother Pauliine Kääpa; I've heard most of these songs sung at home and I still remember the tunes that the songs were sung to. But I almost can't recall any local legends, except for one which related that there had once been an old and famous Tantavere farm (the place name cannot be found in KNAB<sup>1</sup>), somewhere to the south of us, in Võivere forest. When the gates of this farm were opened and shut, on windless days the creaking of the hinges could be heard from far away, and, reportedly, there was a golden ox yoke laying in the well of this farm; many went to search for the yoke but could not find the well site. The jokes and swearwords were mostly obtained from Pudivere and Simuna school-boys.*

But probably not only from them: *Eedu of Kääpa, uncle from my mother's side, was a stout man, with a morbid sense of humour, who liked to tell me all kinds of irritating things. I remember that once (I was in the first or second grade then) I started interrogating him about what is christening and how I was christened. Uncle made a serious face and told me something like this, "Well, this is how it was: You had... a large sugarloaf in your mouth and with a knife blade people made cross-signs all over you." I wasn't at all happy with this explanation, because I didn't know what a sugarloaf was and I had found no traces of cross-signs on my body, even though the scars of pox vaccination were clearly seen on my left arm.*

Krikmann attended elementary school in his home village, Pudivere, and then continued at the 7-grade Simuna School. *In the summer of 1952, I begged to be taken along to the 7th-graders' trip to South Estonia. For the first time I saw there the suspension bridge of Viljandi town, dinosaur skeleton replicas in the Zoology Museum in Tartu and the impressive view from the top of the Suur Munamägi Hill.<sup>2</sup> In Tartu I had my very first ice-cream, which tasted like ordinary insipid icicle. The [undulating] South-Estonian landscape was unfamiliar for us and, as it turned out, conformed to specific stereotypes. As soon as the car took another plunge downhill, the passengers screamed in unison: "Downhill... curve...bridge!!!" This was the inside joke throughout the trip, because the prediction nearly always came true. Krikmann continued his education at Väike-Maarja Secondary School in 1953, from which he graduated with honours in 1957, and the same year he started his studies at the University of Tartu. His entering the university put the beginning to a series of random occurrences which pushed Krikmann, going with the flow, with unwavering*

constancy towards his later works and activities. His choice of university major was partly a coincidence (honour students admitted to Estonian Language and Literature did not have to pass admittance exams); he decided to specialise in folklore studies upon Prof. Eduard Laugaste's proposition, which the latter planned cleverly before giving Krikmann an examination grade; and he chose folk humour as his subject of course papers and later diploma thesis from Prof. Laugaste's recommended topics list.

In 1962, Krikmann moved to the researcher position at the department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum. His first task was the systematisation of folk humour files and compiling questionnaires for folk humour collection. Already in 1963, the Finnish folklorist Matti Kuusi initiated the research project for the study of North-European proverbs, and the first stage of this project comprised the compilation of the academic edition of Estonian proverbs. The work group of proverbs was quickly established and Arvo Krikmann was invited to join (*dragged by the hair*). Proverbs became his main subject of work and research for the decades to come. In the course of the project, the typology of Estonian proverbs was reorganised and the authenticity of proverbs was meticulously checked. The academic edition of Estonian proverbs was published in the academic source publication series *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae* in 1980–1988, edited by Arvo Krikmann and Ingrid Sarv. The outcome of the work also rendered material for popular editions, perhaps the most important of which is *Vanasõnaraamat* ('Proverb Book', 1984) by Anne Hussar, Arvo Krikmann and Ingrid Sarv. In the course of the Estonian-Finnish joint project the edition of popular Baltic-Finnic proverbs *Proverbia Septentrionalia* (1985) was published in the FFC series (No. 236) in Finland. The opening chapters of this publication included Krikmann's statistical analysis of the relations of the proverbs of different Balto-Finnic peoples.

Krikmann started publishing articles on proverbs in parallel with working on the academic edition. In 1970, he left his researcher position at the Estonian Literary Museum and continued postgraduate studies at the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature. His Candidate's thesis on issues of the study of the contents and worldview of proverbs was completed in 1973. On the topics discussed in his thesis Krikmann also published several articles in the international journal *Proverbum* and the *Preprint* series of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature. *In June 1975, when I defended my dissertation, I had three examiners, all favourable. I was polite with everyone, but the defence committee (which at the time included ex-officio local representatives of the Communist Party) deliberated and voted (probably for ideological reasons) so that I almost failed: three of the committee's members voted unacceptable and one vote was spoilt.* In the Candidate's thesis (and partly before that) Krik-

mann laid the foundation for the topic of the structure of figurative speech and proverbs in his research activities.

In 1973–1977 Krikmann continued as junior researcher at the folklore section of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature (*de facto* at the Estonian Literary Museum, in Tartu) and since 1977 as senior researcher of the section of computer linguistics of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature (*de facto* behind his home desk). All the means for computerised data processing were available in this section and data on the geographical distribution of proverb types were entered in a computer that filled an entire room in those days. Further data analysis enabled researchers to estimate the proximity of relations in different parishes, delineate the main folkloric regions in Estonia on the basis of statistical data, and observe the uniqueness or stereotypicality of the material of certain regions. Krikmann introduced the methods and results of his work at the 1980 Congress of Fenno-Ugric Studies in Turku, also in *Preprint* No. 16 of the Institute of Estonian Language and Literature (1980) and the treatment was also incorporated in Krikmann's PhD thesis. By using more or less the same methods, Krikmann has later analysed the spread of riddles, and together with Karl Pajusalu, also the distribution of dialectal vocabulary. In 1986, Krikmann published his monograph on phraseological material in the earliest Estonian grammar books and dictionaries, *Fraseoloogiline aines eesti vanimais grammatikates ja sõnastikes*. There he reviewed the earliest corpora of Estonian short forms, analysed the relationships and explored (again on the basis of statistical analysis) the geographical origin of proverb corpora. This (and a lot of other) material is included also in Vol. 2 of *Sissevaateid folkloori lühivormidesse. Eesti lühivormide allikaloost (IMFF, 'On the Source History of Estonian Minor Forms of Folklore')*; available online at <http://www.haldjas.folklore.ee/~kriku/ALLIK/>.

At the end of the Soviet period, Krikmann started working at his PhD thesis. *In the second half of the 1980s, when I attempted to write my doctoral thesis in Russian on animal proverbs, I found myself at a dead end. Once, when describing my concerns in detail to Peeter Tulviste and, among other things, mentioned Captain Robert Scott who died of hunger only a dozen miles from a depot, Peeter told me something in the lines of, "I think you're already sitting in the depot... stretch out your hand and start devouring!"* For some reasons, the doctoral thesis was left unfinished at this point, *only a dozen miles* away, but Krikmann later published several articles on this subject in Estonian and in English (e.g., Krikmann, Arvo 2001. Proverbs on Animal Identity. Typological Memoirs. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 17, pp. 7–84).

After the section of computer linguistics was closed down in 1990, Krikmann joined the Department of Folkloristics of the Institute of Estonian Language

and Literature. In 2000, the department was fully incorporated in the Estonian Literary Museum. In this department, Krikmann has been senior researcher and principal researcher; he has been active as head of the research group of minor forms of folklore, has supervised research programme and several research and publication projects. In 2001–2005 Krikmann was mostly engaged as head of the Centre of Cultural History and Folkloristics, the first centre of excellence in the humanities, in Estonia. He was one of the founders of the national funding program Estonian Language and National Culture (1998–2002), and has been an active member of the executive committee of this and the continued funding program Estonian Language and National Memory (2003–2008). Krikmann's academic activities also include his participation in the Expert Commission of Culture and Society of the Estonian Science Foundation. In 1997, he was elected full member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences.

At the Estonian Literary Museum, Krikmann and others started to compile the academic edition of Estonian riddles in 1990. The main volumes were published in 2001 and 2002. Krikmann compiled the systematised material into a digital anthology *Mõista-mõista, mölle-rõlle* ('Guess What?'), complete with distribution maps of riddle types (available in Estonian at <http://haldjas.folklore.ee/~kriku/MOISTA/>) and the anthology of South-Estonian riddles (*Tere teeles, tere meeles, tere egalõ talõlõ*, 2000). In 1994, Krikmann launched the Estonian Science Foundation grant project for systematising and studying Estonian phrases and idioms. Asta Õim became the new head of the project and one of its major outcomes is the database of Estonian phrases and idioms (<http://www.folklore.ee/justkui/>). Young researchers Piret Voolaid, Katre Õim and Anneli Baran, who started working in the research group of minor forms of folklore, have already defended their PHD degrees under Krikmann's supervision or are about to in the nearest future. In 1992, Krikmann became professor extraordinaire at the Chair of Estonian and Comparative Folklore of the University of Tartu. *I started to lecture at the university as late as in spring 1992. [...] In this poverty trap, right before Estonian kroon was adopted, everything was so weird and confusing. I was dead frightened of the first lecture; afraid that the students will start booing me within the first five minutes, and so on. I started out by lecturing on proverbs: I felt confident in this area and in the winter of 1991–1992 I tried to systematise my knowledge in this area. This endeavour exceeded all the time limits from the very start. I had to put together and copy all kinds of handouts, the earliest ones were typewritten and copied in secrecy, because in these days Xeroxes were deficit goods and their use was strictly limited. Proverb lectures later crumbled into lectures on different subjects; along came folk humour and later figurative speech.* Krikmann started to publish the materials of his lectures on minor forms, and also the cross-section and summary of his studies in

the area in the series *IMFF*. On the material published as the first volume of this series (in 1997) Krikmann defended his PhD degree.

In the following period, Krikmann's studies focused at greater length on figurative speech theories; a more thorough treatment of the topic was published in the opening issue of the publication series *Reetor* (2003). This series publishes academic studies on minor forms of folklore, figurative speech theory and short forms of humour twice a year. Arvo Krikmann is the editor-in-chief of the series, was responsible for its launch, and has furthermore authored a monograph about Estonian phrases and idioms connected with beating and hitting in this series (*Reetor*, Vol. 3, 2004).

In the past ten years, Krikmann has returned to the study of humour and jokelore. *One summer (in 2000, I think) a girl entered our room and told me that she is Liisi Joon [now Laineste], she has BA in Psychology, has tried to study expressions of verbal aggression and would like to continue on the topic of humour. And so we did. We submitted a grant application to the Estonian Science Foundation this very autumn and got the grant. After a year of pause, we got another grant and now Liisi has a PhD degree. To be able to cope as her supervisor, I started to read and write about humour as well.* Krikmann's most recent works include several articles on this topic and a thorough overview of recent developments in linguistic theories of humour in the fourth volume of *Reetor* (2004), studies of the structure of jokes, similarities of humour and figurative speech, the ethnic jokelore of our neighbouring countries and the anthology *Internet Humour about Stalin* (2004). Liisi Laineste and Arvo Krikmann co-edited the collection *Permitted Laughter: Socialist, Post-Socialist and Never-Socialist Humour* (2009). Krikmann's articles on problems of proverb semantics were published in the collection *Proverb Semantics: Studies in Structure, Logic and Metaphor* (2009), edited by Wolfgang Mieder.

The list of Krikmann's work to come seems endless, ranging from the finishing of monumental works like the publications of Estonian riddles and the Balto-Finnic proverb project to writing new research articles.

Many happy returns, the best of luck and a long life, Arvo Krikmann!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> KNAB – The place name database of Estonian Language Institute, available at <http://www.eki.ee/knab/knab.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Suur Munamägi, 'Great Egg Hill', is the highest peak in Estonia.