

The Witch of Äksi – Clairvoyant Person and Soviet Time

Abstract: This article is about constellations in which communities accept extraordinary personalities and the traditional clairvoyant/witchcraft narratives. The person under discussion is the witch of Äksi, Hermine Elisabeth Jürgens (1892–1976), one of the best known Estonian 20th-century clairvoyants. In Estonian, the word *nõid* ('witch') is still used by the general public (a witch is a person with extraordinary powers, a healer, a wise(wo)man). During the Soviet period and later the term *nõid* ('witch') was interpreted as an important keeper and interpreter of national knowledge. The article focuses at the life of the witch of Äksi, and the corpus of narratives that talk about her, focusing on the most common subtopics of narratives and motifs that lead to the folklorisation or narrativisation of her life. The narratives are divided into oral biographies, patient or client narratives (among which stories of divination stand out), and a smaller corpus, which contains the occurrences of narrativisation the person. The witch of Äksi was a city-born urbanite, she adapted to country life and unfamiliar socio-political circumstances. Narratives reflect the traditional duties of witch/clairvoyant person: the looking for missing family members; searching for criminals or suddenly missing people in co-operation with authorities; looking for stolen goods and animals; helping with matters of love and family relations; divining one's future and fate; healing, and single political prophesies.

Keywords: Äksi witch, Hermine Jürgens, clairvoyant, narratives about divination, modern witchcraft

Introduction

This article is about constellations in which communities, groups, local residents (not people who believe in witchcraft and the paranormal) accept extraordinary personalities and the traditional clairvoyant/witchcraft narratives. The belief narratives reflect the real experience, people's opinions and feelings when they are exposed to magical practices, their real results. At the same time the experiences touches their lives far more emotionally and immediately than a mere narrative is able to do.

The article is the first step to analyse stories about the witches and witchcraft connected with the 20th-century influential personalities. The person under discussion is the witch of Äksi, Hermine Elisabeth Jürgens (1892–1976), one of the best known Estonian 20th-century clairvoyants. Her life was shaped by the unstable course of the 20th century, as she moved from St. Petersburg, Russia, to Estonia, where she lived in various places. She spent most of her life in Estonia, “in a foreign land in a foreign setting”. The majority of the stories that are concerned with her originate from the post-Second World War period when she was already well known for her extraordinary talents.

In Estonian, the word *nõid* ('witch') is still used by the general public. A witch is a person with extraordinary powers, a healer, a wise(woman); in this meaning, the word has different connotations, which are not negative, but rather indicate unknown powers. Just as many other phenomena, magic, witchcraft, and witches are not free from international cultural influences. For example, such idiomatic expressions as *damn witch* and *old witch* represent an evil or a spiteful individual, also someone with skills of worming things out (Justkui 2002, keyword *witch*). In the older idioms, the sex of the subject is not explicit; in the newer recordings it seems that it is rather a female person. There are also examples of literary works, in which the witch's identity is associated with healing but also with malicious magic. During the 19th and 20th centuries, ethnography (folklore studies, ethnology) used the linguistic etymological interpretation, according to which the word's semantic meaning is *the wise, the shaman*. It coincides with the popular way of explanation, in which the word *witch* combines a whole complex, an orchestration of semantic discourses, which associated with the

witch's person an individual who is wise and has unconventional abilities. The word *witch* also means someone who is a borderline person or who communicates with feared forces; according to the agrarian peasant, often has the qualities of someone eloquent and good at manipulating, and much more. The importance of the role of the witch as an important wise person and the one associated with ethnic mentality was stressed by both the national movement predecessors (Jakobson 1991 [1870] in his *Three Patriotic Speeches* [Kolm isamaa kõnet], which gave meaning to the history of Estonians) and by the spokesmen of the national movement, the first archaeologists, collectors and interpreters of folklore, authors of textbooks and writings that appeared in journals (Jaan Jung, Jaan Jõgever and others), as well as by the learned representatives of folklore studies (cf. Oskar Loorits 1928, III: 11, 67 ff.; 1952: 476–480).¹

The same attitude resounded in the interpretations of the Soviet period and during 1990s, in which the witch was an important keeper and interpreter of national knowledge. The term lived an independent life in villages and towns, where the use of the name continued in spite of the new different cultural interpretations.² Even today, famous sensitives and healers are called witches. Earning this title means earning the respect of the people.

Below, I will have a brief look at the life of the witch of Äksi, and then the corpus of narratives that talk about her, focusing on the most common subtopics of narratives and motifs that lead to the folklorisation or narrativisation of her life story and personal events.

Biography of the Äksi Witch

Hermine Jürgens (née Blaubrück) was a moderately well-educated woman. She was born in Saint-Petersburg, Russia, into the family of a piano manufactory owner, in 1892. Her father was born on Topa farm, in Kärevere village, near Tartu³. She went to high school in St. Petersburg, where she acquired excellent Russian and German, while her Estonian retained an accent until the end of her days. Hermine Jürgens graduated from the Viiburi⁴ Music School (*Musiikkiopisto*). She married a long-distance captain, Gustav Jürgens, when she was 18. They

had two sons, Karl and Artur. When the family got into financial trouble, they came to live on her uncle's farm in Kärevere, Estonia. They returned to Estonia when it was still part of the Russian Empire. Her husband developed increasing alcohol problems and finally he left to live in the capital city, Tallinn.

Hermine Jürgens was very active during her youth. She took part in the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920) as a frontline nurse. Prior to the Second World War, Hermine Jürgens lived in Tartu, earning her living by providing piano accompaniment to mute films, giving piano lessons, but mostly by fortune-telling. For some time, she lived with Harri Lindner, a famous illusionist at the time. When Hermine came to Estonia, she had two pianos with her, and she used the Bechstein concert grand piano until her old age to make a living.

Later on, Hermine Jürgens lived in the countryside in Tartu County, in different places with different men. Jürgens herself claimed that her innate clairvoyant powers had strengthened during her thirties. The reason was a period of clairvoyance in 1935, when she saw her current partner (the forest warden of Ahja) together with another woman. Stories from Ahja tell of how the man was in trouble with his evil clairvoyant wife.

Although the folk stories picture her as a good-hearted woman, her biography points to a complicated and unusual (even for a city woman) type – a fervent smoker, passionate coffee-drinker, sometimes quarrelsome (lost the leader position in the women's home defence organisation due to a quarrel).

In the 1940s, Hermine moved to the neighbourhood of Äksi⁵ and became known as the witch of Äksi. She lived in a small house and had a library of several hundred books; she read and wrote avidly. She was also one of those who consistently kept a diary (Grünfeldt 2004).⁶

In Äksi, she earned her living by giving piano lessons and playing the church organ. Her fame for finding lost people started during the Second World War, and later came to include finding stolen goods and healing people. The archived descriptions and recorded interviews speak of her as a clairvoyant; there are fewer stories of her as a herbalist and a healer. The special personality and city-like manners of the Äksi witch, however, are often emphasised. This list includes her love for coffee and smoking, trips to cafés in Tartu, and the furnishings of her home, which

follow the pre-war style. The descriptions of Hermine Jürgens's appearance are vivid and indicate that she followed the pre-war, first Republic era style. The stories project good relations with the local authorities, which spared her trouble, as well as cooperation with those representatives of militia who acknowledged supernatural powers in finding missing persons.

In the 1960s–1970s, she was often visited by artists, Tartu University professors and students as well as those interested in mental phenomena. It is the students who arrived from farther away, intellectuals and artists that, in her lifetime, but especially about twenty years after the death of the Äksi witch, published memories of their encounters with her and pointed out her brilliant personality (Suuman 1974, 2001; Paju 1994; Truus 1999; Talva 2011). Comprehensive biographical material was collated and published as a book, for example, by Kalle Truus, a well-known chemist, who, as a student, had had a personal contact with the Äksi witch. Into this publication the author of the article added the texts that by that time had been collected into



Hermine Jürgens in her early years.



Hermine Jürgens on the doorstep of her last home. This is one of the last pictures taken of the famous Äksi witch. Photo by Kalle Truus.

the Estonian Folklore Archives. In the 1990s, the Äksi witch was presented in a lengthy television broadcast. It should be noted that the pre-independence time and the following decades are characterised by an awed and reverent attitude towards witch doctors. It was a new process of giving meaning to ethnic values, identity, and history, in which witch doctors were promoted to stars of ethnic culture by various movements.⁷

The witch of Äksi used to visit the Werner Café in Tartu, which was legendary for its elite clients.⁸ There she met, for example, the linguist and polyglot professor Paul Ariste, with whom an interesting dialogue lasted through decades. In 1980s Paul Ariste held a presentation in the Academic Folklore Society on the powers of the Äksi witch and on some of his experiments with her. He used to call and ask the Äksi witch to describe, for example, what his wife was doing at the time. According to Ariste, the description might have been accurate, but sometimes she also failed. Unfortunately, during the Soviet period, there were fewer opportunities for publishing than for performing, which is why the treatments and material collections of the crossing themes of folklore and paranormal phenomena were left unpublished. The same is valid for presentations on eminent clairvoyants.⁹ Linguist Eduard Vääri and sculptor Aulin Rimm can also be mentioned as café acquaintances and friends of the Äksi witch (interview RKM Mng II 4306 < Tartu (1991), Talva 2011).

Her relations with partners and sons were aloof. She died in the Kastre nursing home on July 1, 1976, was buried in Äksi,



*Hermine Jürgens
at the Werner Café
in Tartu.*



Folklorist Mare Kõiva recording memories of the Äksi witch in the summer of 1999, on the day that a memorial stone was opened on the site of the witch's last home in Puhtaleiva village.

and in accordance with her wishes, her grave has a limestone slate engraved with “Äksi nõid” – Witch of Äksi. Her last place of residence, a small house in the middle of a grain field near a highway, was destroyed after her death during undertakings typical of the Soviet way of life: it was set on fire and burnt down during civil defence exercises.

In July 11, 1999, the locals and her clients unveiled a big commemorative stone in her last place of residence. The author of the memorial was sculptor Ado Koch from the capital (also had had a personal contact with the witch), who prepared several drafts. Librarian Eve Toots, who had taken a responsible attitude towards maintaining local culture, assisted in the process of creating the memorial in every way. The local people, municipality government and various funds contributed to the creation of the monument as well as media (Jõesaar 1996; Piller 1998; Taal 1999), The whole process of setting up a memorial stone is a great example of an informal initiative by the local people and those belonging to the so-called outer circle, an action that honoured a prominent figure in the 20th century alternative culture.

Stories about the Witch of Äksi

The narratives about the witch of Äksi form an interesting corpus featuring the witch's biography, her work as a witch or clairvoyant, as well as completely fictional tales. A bigger part of the corpus was recorded after her death, during expeditions in various parishes near her place of residence. Local people were questioned in more depth, for example, by folklorist Anu Korb, who lived in Äksi. The corpus of texts also includes stories told in common situations, sent by local correspondents, and recollections of their contacts with her by people who visited the Literary Museum for interviews. At the opening of the memorial in 1999, local people reminisced about a woman who was accustomed to city-living, yet came to live in the countryside; various patient or client narratives were also told. Some of the motifs were unique, which was another example of the importance of the correspondents and nearby residents, with their insider's view of what was happening. It also showed clearly that at an event dedicated to a local resident, one can hear and collect a wide range of various stories and significantly supplement the subject material.

Here I leave aside the intellectuals who came into contact with her, and concentrate on the corpus of narratives collected by recording folklore, or narratives available through audio interviews. It is the narratives of people who went to her for help. Such narratives are divided into oral biographies, patient or client narratives (among which stories of divination stand out), and a smaller corpus, which contains the occurrences of narrating and mythologizing the person, including, for example, a transfer of familiar motifs from legends and vernacular religion.

These are shorter and generally single-episode informative patient or client stories. Each of these narratives will be regarded as a version of a true story. They are believed to be true and reflect concrete events and experiences of concrete people. The tellers and witnesses have used highly similar kinds of narratives, which are closely connected with the similar historical and socio-cultural settings. Although the Äksi witch used to earn a living by divination already before the war, the situation changed dramatically before, during, and after the Second World War. The Soviet era trips to clairvoyants in the city or countryside were actually a follow-up phenomenon of practices of the 19th and especially of the beginning of the 20th century. Turning to clairvoyants and seers

acquired wider dimensions after the Second World War, when the predominant issue was searching for missing persons, rather than seeking aid for troubles related to one's own person. Such visits were a chance to get answers to the questions of whether relatives and acquaintances were still alive and in which part of the world they were located. The Soviet-time practice of limited and segmented information dissemination and manipulation of information raised the prestige of alternative sources of information.

Let us have a look at the prototype situations in the given settings. Extensive changes in the population and economic and political systems over a very short period explain the importance of people like Hermine Jürgens in society. After twenty years of the independent Republic of Estonia, the Russian troops entered in 1940. The loss of independence was a sad experience, but deeper wounds were afflicted by the big deportation to Siberia in June 1941. Mainly intellectuals, military people, government officials and wealthy people were deported. This was one reason why during the Second World War nearly one third of the population migrated from Estonia. After the Second World War the Soviet regime was restored, and in March 1949 the second deportation to Siberia followed. Rapid restructuring took place in the economy: farmsteads were deconstructed, private property was abolished, and the cooperative system was changed. The end of the 1940s saw a coerced transition to collective farms (kolkhozes or sovkhozes).

Every family had members who went missing in the deportations. Often, it was only known through hearsay that the person ended up in prison or on a trial, as there was no further information. Traces of men vanished during military service, and many went missing during war-time escapes. Even the fate of the so-called Forest Brothers, who had hidden in the forests of Estonia to escape different mobilisations, was unknown. So, for decades after the Second World War, people searched for their relatives through the Red Cross and non-formal organisations.

A. Biographical Stories

Above I pointed out the three types of stories related to the Äksi witch, which I will describe in more detail at the respective sub-categories. Biographies stand out as a special genre. During expeditions folklorists come into contact with storytellers, whose



Hermine Jürgens spent her last years in a nursing home; her house by the road, under a big willow, became dilapidated over time.



best type of story is a(n) (oral) biography that includes the ability to highlight some details in the biography, a character trait or reactions, an ability to analyse the subject's personality, to generalise the human behaviour. Such oral biographies (or, in a wider sense, genealogies) are probably one of the oldest genre of spontaneous narrating. Even today, there are people in almost every family who are able to recite lengthy genealogies and biographies of specific people. The oral tradition of these men and women includes a wide range of stories, but the core genre of traditional communication is the biography. Such biographies are presented in different discourses. This may be an oral history or folklore discourse; the biography is either based on history and events or governed by experiences, allegory and traditional motifs. Biographies are used in the family internal and territorial communication; they are recited at parties and gatherings, during communication between generations, in everyday communication. Often the folklorist must break through

the biography to reach the traditional stories, songs, or expressions created in the community.

Collectors prefer the biographies in which events acquire a narrative outlet following traditional models, or the ones that at least include interpretations, comments on what happened (for example, a personal meeting with a ghost), which are connected with folklore or provide additional information about it. In such a case, the biography is like a cloud or warp that holds together various tales about a personality. At the same time, oral biographies are exactly an indispensable genre if you look for information on onetime bards and musicians, healers or local correspondents.¹⁰

Biographies are definitely an important source for obtaining additional data. Obviously, the descriptions of a person's life are shorter, they focus more on some facts, and sometimes luckily concentrate on his or her experiences, generalising the personality. They tell of the appearance of clairvoyant abilities after personal suffering: a child left unjustly at home by its parents during his or her childhood decides to look at what the parents are doing and discovers the powers. Common motifs speak of an unexpected appearance of clairvoyance that became known in connection with discovering the spouse's infidelity.

I will next present some of the typical biographical stories that were spontaneously narrated in a storytelling milieu. They were told in response to the interviewer's question: Did you know the witch of Äksi? The biographies that villagers tell about each other are certainly an interesting folklore genre, containing intriguing schemes of fictionality and truthfulness. These stories are quite close to actual biography. Although the witch of Äksi did not always get along with the village people, she must have told them about her life. Both examples are recorded four years after her death, in the parish that she lived in.

Äksi witch. Jürgens was her name. Died a few years ago. She was often sought, even after her death. Now this has stopped. Her father was a piano-maker. Gave the church a piano. Also played very nicely. Spoke German, Russian, English and French languages. She had a big library.

She used to go to sauna in Tartu. Whisked her hands in hot steam to keep them nimble. It was about 1935–36 when she appeared in the Äksi neighbourhood. Lived on various farms. She did not have many friends here.

She also went to Valga County and the city of Tartu, received people there. They brought foodstuffs. Later also money.

She was a wise person. Her knowledge of herbs was great. Turned the legless into walkers. Knew the wild herbs. [A list of diseases and herbs used to heal them.] She was a clairvoyant. Missing people and stolen things were sought with her help. Girls also asked help in matters of love (RKM II 348, 474/5 (31) < Äksi parish (1980)).

The second story blends a divination episode into the biography.

Äksi witch. She had higher education. Graduated from St. Petersburg conservatory. Her father owned a piano factory. She gave piano lessons. She had education in astrology and a good memory. Spoke languages (Finnish, German, French, Russian), Estonian with a little accent. Her mother was Estonian, father I don't know about. Her husband was a ship captain. Two sons as well. Husband died long before she moved here, to Äksi (about 1934–35). Income mainly from fortune telling and piano lessons.

She had many visitors. My mother-in-law also believed, went to her. She did not charge much. You had to bring a pack of cigarettes. People brought foodstuffs (flour, honey, fat and eggs). She baked cakes in the morning and evening. That was her food. When someone asked her of news about the missing, she started to meditate. Looked at the ceiling. Then spoke. For example, is making a spade handle, thin in the face, with perhaps two weeks' beard.

I, too, asked her for a divination. She told me that my husband was alive, my son was alive. Both were actually long dead. When I later told her she was wrong, she said: "Would it have been better if I had said that they were dead?"

Actually, she knew zilch, but people believed. In the end she was living alone, in a small house outside Lähthe (RKM II 348, 477/9 (1) < Äksi parish and village (1980)).

B. Visits to the Witch of Äksi

A larger portion of stories concerning the witch of Äksi describe visits to her or meeting her. As a rule, the storyteller's narrative presents one incident; talking about several experiences is rarer. The corpus of narratives describes different motives for vis-



Initially, there was a simple white wooden cross on Hermine Jürgens's (died in 1976) grave (above); in 1996 it was replaced by a memorial stone (below).

its and aims at the situations due to which the witch of Äksi was visited. The following list shows whether the cases ended with a positive result and are so-called success stories, or whether they failed or had an unwanted outcome for the narrator. (Sample texts are presented for some subclasses.) The corpus, however, includes relatively few stories about failed visits.

- A. First of all, looking for missing family members both during the Second World War and after that, up until she

went to the nursing home. People lost their relatives in the tides of war and deportations; most recorded stories are about fulfilled and true prophesies, whereas some turned out to be wrong.

- B. Some of the stories are concerned (mostly in cooperation with the militia) with searching for criminals, killers or suddenly missing people: with varying success.
- C. Stolen goods and animals was the third popular topic. Both common people and the militia ask for help; most stories are about success.
- D. Help in matters of love and family relations; with varying success, the witch often desists giving advice or help.
- E. Divining one's future and fate as well as diseases with cards; mostly successful.
- F. Narratives and data about healing.
- G. Single political prophesies.

In addition to first person narratives or memorates, there are a number of mediated, second or third person narratives. Typically the narrative has three or two main actors: the narrator, the visitor, and the witch of Äksi – the “hero” or principal character. Usually the relation between the narrator and central character is distinguished. Sometimes the narrator is the central person – the autobiographical “I”. But the narrative takes on a more complicated structure if another person is introduced as the main character, which is more common in fictional stories.

The general motive is divination. The main conversation style of narration is close to the basic form of divination: this means that the arrived person presents their question, to which they receive a reply in symbols, in the so-called language of symbols, and must find a more precise interpretation to the reply themselves. An interesting aspect of narratives is also the spatial relations within the stories: the story gives a general description of the physical space of the witch's place of residence, which contrasts the place depicted through symbols, in which the person, on account of whom one came to the witch, is situated. This description is a vague and general divination, mostly using the deictics *far away, in the village, in the forest, somewhere in a big building, in a factory, over the sea*, etc. To interpret this, one need to, in part, know the models used to spell out divinations, dream interpretations, and faith narratives. The storytellers and experiencers

define and explain, often retrospectively, the existing geographical space the divination is concerned with. The most important marker of a respective resolution is often *alive or dead*.

Armilde Pajo and her parents were deported to Siberia on June 14, 1941, but her brother Ants was not at home at the time and was spared from deportation. Once, during the German rule, the brother went to see the Äksi witch in hopes that she might know the fate of the deported. They talked for a while and in the end the witch started to stare into a corner of the room. Stares and stares and then finally says: "I see two grave mounds and a person between black currant bushes." At the time the brother visited the Äksi witch, the parents had died and been buried in Siberia; therefore the two graves. And the person in the black currant bushes was Armilde Pajo, still alive of that family, and when she was by the River Ob, there were indeed black currant bushes there (RKM II 438, 34/5 (23) < Põltsamaa parish (1990)).

Often, varied additional information about the Äksi witch's way of life is added to the narrative as in the following story:

It was around the year 1965. At that time I was studying in Tallinn and I needed to...er... go to a doctor... er... because I had face surgery. It was a trivial thing but as a result, the face was covered in band aids and. And then when I had to get all kinds of pills to prevent blood poisoning from developing and. One day, when I had taken the pills again and I was at the Werner Café, an old lady turned to me asking what was wrong with me then. Well, I then explained to her what was wrong with me, because I knew the lady's face and she knew me too. We had often been on Saadjärve, Jõgeva, and all those busses to Tartu together. And so I, for the first time, got personally acquainted with Mrs Hermine Elisabeth Jürgens or, as the locals called her, the Äksi witch. Every Friday Mrs Jürgens visited the Werner Café and from there left for the Emajõe sauna. It was a full, total tradition, which she never violated, except, of course, when she was already so old that she was unable to do it. At the Werner Café, her closest acquaintances were waiting for her: Paul Ariste... er... then there was Eduard Vääri and artist Aulin Rimm. They then came up, greeted, chatted, and treated her with utmost respect (RKM Mng II 4306 < Tartu (1991)).

Next to missing people, missing animals and precious objects were also important reasons for visiting the witch. For these divinations, the stressing of details is also characteristic:

The Äksi witch also helped with cases of theft. Right here on the farm. A cow was stolen at Västriku. The militia was used to search. The cow was supposed to give birth soon. Old Mann went to the witch. The witch spoke and saw: a woman wearing a white scarf on the head is milking in a clay cowshed.

Outside Tartu, where the cow was, a woman wearing a white scarf was indeed milking. The militia brought the cow and the calf back (RKM II 348, 443 (39) < Äksi parish (1980)).

Descriptions of Hermine Jürgens's abilities have been added to the following story, whereby the narrator's use of words is characteristic. Every era characterises clairvoyants, healers and witches using particular concepts. One stock expression of the Soviet period for someone with supernatural abilities or psychic people was the sixth sense, possession of it. Several tales describe in more detail the divination practices and her explanations of her abilities and their limitations. According to the explanations of the Äksi witch, divining information about people located far away tires her; she says she is unable to see the dead. Reports about family quarrels and predicting the future spouse are mixed: she was said to have assisted, yet, on the other hand, her customary answer is said to have been: "That you have to know yourself."

Indeed, she had that sixth sense. In her mind's eye she saw what others do not see. Help about finding missing people was sought from her, as well as about thefts.

If the one consulted about was very far away (for example, in Japan), the witch would say: "It affects my health. It exhausts me."

If the one consulted about was dead, the Äksi witch would reply: "I don't see them" (RKM II 348, 443/6 (1) < Äksi parish (1980)).

Considering the education of the Äksi witch and her urban background, it can be presumed that her knowledge is related to publications. After such a long time, it is impossible to determine the composition of her home library, but there have been hints in in-

terviews about her possessing books on magic and other practical literature: "She had a lot of books. There was one book about the left hand (palm reading) in French." In the Estonian publications palm reading knowledge was published, handbooks on herbalism, magic, and astrology were printed, etc. (cf for example, Anus 1993, 1995 bibliographies). Next to palm reading, she was also said to have been able to read cards (this ability is denied by several informants, card readers are evidently regarded as belonging to a lower category), know astrology and draw up horoscopes. This skill was valued during the Soviet period as very few knew how to draw up a detailed personal horoscope.

Two emerging indicator themes are relationships with doctors, which are assessed as being good, as she was even placed in the role of an expert,¹¹ and the question of payment made to her. As oral regulations limit thanking for healing and prescribe acceptance of payment/donation but prohibit asking for payment, the reports about the Äksi witch reflect it. Primarily, there are references to accepting foodstuff (accepted food, mainly bread, milk, eggs) and packages of cigarettes. It is emphasised that sometimes she sent back some of what was brought, such as baked cakes and some other foodstuffs.

The healing of diseases, especially with herbal remedies, constitutes a modest part of the corpus, time wise dated to after the Second World War. The stories vary: she was considered an herbalist, her healing methods are described and the use of verbal charms is also indicated.

The Äksi witch did everything. She also healed people. Read some witching words onto you. It helped. Kokuta Marie got that knowledge of cards from the Äksi witch. The Äksi witch was nearly 90 when she died (RKM II 430, 432 (20) < Kursi (1989)).

Her plant gathering skills are described in more detail: how she chose suitable time for it, considering the phases of the moon and part of the day; also, houseplants and other themes are discussed.

Knew folk medicine. Used to dry medicinal herbs in her home, pressed juices out of them. Knew when to collect, when a plant was in its prime blooming period. One of her rooms was full of all sorts of roots, buds and leaves. The Äksi witch used to say that a drop of her medicine is better

than a litre of that picked at the wrong time. For collecting medicinal herbs the phase of the moon, and time of the day were said to be important. If necessary, she would even gather at night (RKM II 480, 123 (11) < Tartu (1983)).

There are also descriptions of fooling incidents, where the locals went to tell the Äksi witch that someone was waiting for her at the station and then giggled, while the seer searched for non-existent visitors. Experiments to test her clairvoyant abilities – mainly initiated by curious guests or famous contemporaries – were both successful and failures, as we demonstrated earlier. Sceptical stories of her failures are part of the normal heritage surrounding every wise(wo)man.

C. Fictional Stories in Which Well-known Folklore Motifs Are Transferred to a Specific Person

Stories concerned with the fate of a witch tell of supernatural incidences and extraordinary expression of talents, presume a punishment for their actions, but also include the motifs of loneliness and dying alone, a difficult death, and many more (cf. Loorits 1951: 482 ff.). Below, I will provide a few examples from that part of the corpus.

The first example originally appeared in connection with one of the most famous south-Estonian witches¹² (the male witch Suri). The patient is reluctant to pay for services with the eggs he has taken with him and the eggs turn into snakes. Significantly, since the 1970s the same story has become associated also with the witch of Äksi, often told as a first person memorate.

My uncle, my mother's brother, went to the Äksi witch, we went by horse. I and my mother went along; I must have been six years old. She had hen's eggs with her and my uncle said not to take eggs to the witch. Put these under the bridge; let us first hear what the witch tells us. After the witch had told them everything, she added that when we went back, we should take that snake parcel along, too. We went back and there were snakes in the bundle. Mother went to take the eggs and shrieked. (RKM II 447, 121 (8) < Torma parish (1991)).

One of the best known social prophecies that the witch of Äksi made was: "Estonia will become independent. Russia will be-



Memorial stone designed by sculptor Ado Koch, on the site of the last home of the Äksi witch in Puhtaleiva village, Äksi parish, Tartu County.

come so small that you can see the Russian border from a window of the Kremlin.” The exact words vary and it was one of the leitmotifs about her in the 1980s–1990s. In fact, these prophesy was made by a famous 19th-century south-Estonian prophet who voiced a number of social prophesies (Kõiva 2010).¹³

There are also widespread motifs that are attributed to her death. She had two sons but stories tell of her wish to be buried together with her daughter:

Äksi witch. When she fell ill, she was visiting somebody. She told her host: “When I die, you [will have to] bury me and my daughter beside me.”

The man replied: “Your daughter still lives, she will bury you!”

The witch insisted: “No, you bury! I cannot die if you don’t promise to!” The man then made the promise.

The daughter went to get a coffin for her mother. She was killed on the way. They were buried in the same grave. (RKM II 431, 140a/1a (52) < Palamuse parish (1989)).

Conclusion

Clearly, the role of a witch was voluntarily chosen by Hermine Jürgens, but there was also the will of the community to remember her as such. The stories telling of the life and actions of the witch of Äksi blend fiction with non-fiction, and are adapted to fit the stereotypical image of a witch and her fate. At the same time, the corpus of stories surrounding the witch of Äksi is an interesting insight into life during the Soviet period, of how one could make a living as a fortune teller and healer as many did.

We find therein indirect reports of how a city-born urbanite adapts to country life and unfamiliar socio-political circumstances. We see in the corpus some of the strategies that people apply in crises, clairvoyance as an opportunity to cooperate with the authorities, and transmigration of witch story motifs to the witch of Äksi.

The narrative corpus offers an interesting view of the biographical stories, prophecies and transmigration of widespread motifs. In the majority of divination stories, the narrators have had to face difficulties or loss of relatives; the stories reflect the social situation. The positive image of witchdoctors trumps the negative.

The descriptions of her appearance include variously worded references, such as: short with curly hair and wearing a hat, she looked like a *tante*.¹⁴ In addition, smoking, which at the time was not common among women, musical skills, and good relations with various scholars, townsmen and authorities are highlighted. Among quaint set habits are classified visiting the café and sauna in the city of Tartu. For sure, sauna would also have been available in Äksi, but perhaps it was an opportunity to meet old acquaintances in the Emajõe sauna? Maybe these visits and meetings with different people were a breath of fresh air for her? The Äksi witch not only continued the pre-Second World War tradition of clairvoyants, but she also learned a variety of new techniques and expanded her skills. At the same time, in her attitudes and behaviour, she continued to represent the pre-war Estonia. She was both an adapter to social settings and a maintainer of her own agenda.

There are two important sides to everyone in such a profession: their motivation and contribution to the community as

well as personal ethics. As was pointed out above, decades later it is difficult to answer many of the questions. But her motivation was certainly wider than earning a living. Her contribution to the community was important as a healer, but, above all, as a clairvoyant and as someone offering stability to people. It is also impossible to make clear decisions about her ethical credo.

People's faith in her is expressed in tying motifs to her person, attributing a prediction of the end of the Soviet Union to her, the memory of her in the community as a seer and a miraculous locator of missing people. It is really great if a community can boast a personality different from others, who makes one contemplate the spiritual issues.

Comments

¹ Oskar Loorits differentiates terms *witch/charmer* and *witch doctor, wise (wo)man, doctor*; he concludes that the term *witch* marked previously male person, close to shaman (Loorits 1952: 480).

² A typical generalised point of views was the following: "In Estonian, witch used to be a synonym for a wise person," he begins obscurely. "Only in Medieval Times, thanks to Christianity, did the word gain negative connotations. I am no witch or wiseman, I have only read a little more" (Kulli 2001). The connotations of witch and related historical arguments need further exploration. The witch figure in the centre of the New Age movement fits perfectly with the Estonian national interpretations, both with the learned and popular ways of explanation.

³ At that time, the town of Tartu, situated in Estonia, was part of the Russian empire.

⁴ Vyborg, Wiburg, Karelian and Finnish area belongs to Russia, 130 km from St. Petersburg.

⁵ Äksi is a parish centre in Tartu County. It is located on the southern shore of Lake Saadjärv, some 20 km from Tartu. Äksi had a population of 300 people during WW2 period.

⁶ Journalist Inna Grünfeldt's interview with biochemist Aili Paju reveals that the latter appears to have brought to the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu microfilms of the Äksi witch's diaries, which went missing. It is possible that they were not included in inventory during the Soviet period; microfilming it; however, was at that time regulated and required good contacts with laboratories. There are also other reports of reading the diaries of the Äksi witch.

- ⁷ The biographical facts of the article are based on the database Geni.com (Hermine Jürgens) and on Kalle Truus's book. The television broadcast took place in the Werner Café setting and contained memories of the visits of the Äksi witch as a famous café frequenter.
- ⁸ Werner Café has been operating as a café since 1895.
- ⁹ One of the grandest examples of a collection of material on paranormal phenomena was that of paranormal cases started at the beginning of the 1970s by psychiatrist Ilmar Soomere (born 1942), who had a diverse set of interests, which developed into an extensive manuscript, entitled *1000 parajuhtumit Eestis* [1000 Paranormal Cases in Estonia]. It appeared in print only in 1997, under the title *800 parajuhtumit Eestis* [800 Paranormal Cases in Estonia].
- ¹⁰ During the history of folklore collection, the local correspondents have repeatedly been asked for autobiographies and portraits. The first to ask for autobiographies was the great folklore collector Jakob Hurt. The received (in particular the ones received at the end of the 19th century) shorter written autobiographies form an extensive collection of self-written autobiographies, which is especially interesting due to the choices, motives, and values noted down by the people themselves. The later institutions to collect folklore also asked for biographies to be sent in, and additional questions about collecting strategies were asked.
- ¹¹ "Even the doctors recognised her knowledge. She was asked to come to Tartu to see patients with bile, bladder, and kidney illnesses" – typical conclusion in the interviews.
- ¹² Estonian language does not have sexes; *witch* marks male or female person.
- ¹³ Several versions of the augury exist: „The brightest pearl of Äksi witch's foretelling powers is undoubtedly her prediction that Estonia will become independent soon after the Germany reunites" (Luhaäär 2014).
- ¹⁴ *Tante, tanta* – German loan signifying the word 'lady', in common language meaning a (city) aunt.

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RKM MGN – sound recordings, Manuscripts of Estonian Folklore Archives.

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