



Ants Viires (1918–2015)

Ants Viires was born in Tartu on the 23rd of December in 1918. He completed his schooling at the Hugo Treffner Gymnasium in 1937, and in the following years, 1937–1945, he studied Estonian language and literature, English philology and folklore at the University of Tartu. His interest in ethnology was awoken as the result of a series of lectures by Professor Gustav Ränk during the years 1939–1944. Viires graduated from the university in 1946 and conducted his research as a doctoral candidate — or *aspirant* — while also lecturing.

During his studies, Viires worked in the National Museum of Estonia (Eesti Rahva Muuseum) – the centre for ethnological research. However, the times were tumultuous. During the occupation by the Soviet Union, the National Museum was criticised severely for being a ‘nationalist’ institution, its operations were interrupted and even the name of the museum was changed to the ‘Ethnographic Museum’ (Etnograafiamuuseum). The museum’s director, Ferdinand Linnus, was sent to a prison camp, where he perished in 1942, and in years 1943–1944 the subsequent museum director Eerik Laid and Professor Gustav Ränk fled the German and Soviet occupations to Sweden, where they were later followed by other ethnologists, including Ilmar Talve.

During the Nazi-German occupation, Ants Viires worked as a translator for the Security Service, which later had a negative effect on his career. In 1949, during the Soviet re-occupation, the Chair of Ethnology at the University of Tartu was suspended and Estonia saw the beginnings of a widespread anti-nationalist movement. Consequently, in the years 1952–1956, Ants Viires had to find work outside academia – as a school teacher, amongst other jobs.

Viires finished his candidate thesis (*Eesti rahvapärane puutööndus*) in 1955 and became the first Estonian ethnologist to receive his degree during the Soviet Period. Afterwards, he received a position at the Academy of Science’s Institute of History, where he worked as a researcher in the Department of Archaeology and Ethnography, directed by an open-minded archaeologist named Harri Moora. In the post-Stalin era, Viires was appointed as a senior researcher (1961–1968) and later as the director of the ethnographic research group. The Department of Ethnography was founded in 1977 and the Department of Cultural History and Ethnography in 1983; ultimately, it went on to become the independent Department of Ethnology. Ants Viires was appointed head of the new department, and he held this position until his retirement in 1998.

Ants Viires was a quite versatile researcher. Whereas his candidate thesis was on woodwork, his doctoral dissertation was on vehicles (*Talurahva veovahendid*, 1980). Both of these opuses have later become classics of Estonian ethnological research, and they have been re-published several times. The fact that one-third of the articles in the *Lexicon of Estonian Folk Culture* (Eesti rahvakultuuri leksikon, 2000, 2007) are from Ants Viires’ hand is also proof of his versatility.

In the Soviet Union, ethnological research focused on ethnic history, which was known as ethnogenetical studies. The Estonian researchers, however, mapped out phenomena of the peasant culture piece by piece in their cultural-historical and geographical contexts. Ants Viires also adopted the historical-geographical method from his teacher Gustav Ränk, and his primary research topics were related to material culture.

Ränk was a pupil of Ilmari Manninen, the Finnish ethnologist and Professor of the Ethnology at the University in Tartu, and therefore Manninen's historical and artefact-centred research approach also indirectly influenced Ants Viires' work. In 1925, Manninen published an encyclopaedia of Estonian culture (*Etnografline sõnastik*), and in 1932 he produced a handbook on Estonian material culture (*Die Sachkultur Estlands*). In his own comprehensive book on Estonian folk culture (*Eesti rahvakultuur*, 1998 & 2008; co-edited with Elle Vunder), Viires updated and complemented these studies. In the preface, Viires emphasises that he was also inspired by a book called *Viron perinnekuultuuri* (Estonian Traditional Culture, 1997), which had been published in Finland.

Ants Viires has written several articles for Finnish publications. The journal *Kotiseutu* (*Heimat*), edited by Maija-Liisa Heikinmäki, published Viires' articles on the history of Baltic vehicles (1965), home industry in the Estonian archipelago (1969), the history of bread and baking ovens (1969), and a review of the state of Estonian ethnological research (1969). In *Viron perinnekuultuuri* (1997), edited by Ilmari Vesterinen, Viires' articles covered research history and vehicles and included an overview of Estonian folk culture. In various international publications, he dealt with such topics as 'Identity Problems in Present-Day Estonia' (*Ethnologia Europaea* 29:2, 1999) and 'Semantic Interpretation of Estonian Folk Art' (*Mémoires de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 193, 1983). Viires published not only books, articles, reports and reviews, but also poetry.

Ants Viires was an internationally appreciated and esteemed researcher. He was granted honorary doctorates by the University of Moscow in 1980 and the University of Helsinki in 1982, and he became a member of the Gustav Adolf Academy for Folk-Life Research in 1989. In Finland, he was a member of the Kalevala Society (1964), the Finno-Ugrian Society (1963), the Finnish Literature Society (1981) and the Finnish Antiquarian Society (1970). He also had connections to Hungary, where he was appointed an honorary

member of the Ethnological Society. In 1996, to honour his work in the field of Estonian ethnographical research, Ants Viires was granted decorations of the 4th class by the Estonian Order of the National Coat of Arms.

Viires encouraged researchers to engage with the field of Finno-Ugrian research. Since 1955, he took part in research projects conducted by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in Moscow often together with senior researcher Natalia Shlygina. They were both members of the Finnish-Soviet Committee on Scientific-Technological Cooperation, which organised scientific conferences, field trips and other projects. Because of Ants Viires, there was also an Estonian representation of urban ethnology as part of a Finnish-Russian-Estonian research project, which resulted in the publication 'Everyday life and ethnicity: urban families in Loviisa and Võru 1988–1991' in *Studia Fennica Ethnologica* (1994/2). Viires also took part in organising the 3rd international Congress for Finno-Ugrian studies in Tartu in 1970. After that, in 1974, for the first time he had the possibility to visit Finland and he gave lectures at the Universities of Helsinki, Turku, Oulu and Jyväskylä.

For the celebration of Ants Viires' 80th birthday, the 4th issue of *Scripta Ethnologia*, 'Kultuuri mõista püüdes – Trying to Understand Culture', was dedicated to studies of Europe and Estonia. In 2003, the Institute of History in Tallinn organised an international congress with the theme 'Culture and Tradition' (*Kultuur ja traditsioon*) in honour of his 85th birthday. In recognition of his life's work, the second edition of *Eesti rahvakultuur* was dedicated to Ants Viires for his 90th birthday, in 2008.

Ants Viires was a leading figure in Estonian ethnological research. His efforts as a coordinator of ethnological research and supervisor for doctoral candidates were significant. He was known internationally for his far-reaching efforts, but also for his versatile language skills and his optimistic outlook on life.

Ildikó Lehtinen