

## Leif Rantala 1947–2015

Born in a Swedish-speaking rural family in Liljendal, eastern Nyland, southern Finland, Leif Rantala was an unlikely candidate to become a professional specialist on Sámi (Saami) language and culture. In his home region he rarely heard a Finnish word, and up to the present day, Liljendal remains one of the most thoroughly Swedish-speaking parts of Finland. Indeed, he often mentioned that he started speaking Finnish only when he entered the University of Helsinki with Finno-Ugrian Studies as his major in 1968. By this time, however, his special interest in Sámi had already arisen, and he was regularly visiting Lapland in order to get oral practice in Northern Sámi. His place of choice for Sámi field studies was Polmak (Buolbmát), the village where Konrad Nielsen had also had a residence. After spending several summers in the Polmak region, Leif completed his MA thesis on local Saami toponyms. In due time, he even built a small hut in the wilderness surrounding Lake Polmak at the Finno-Norwegian border.

Even before graduation, Leif initiated his academic career when Aulis J. Joki, his supervisor, appointed him – together with the present author – to succeed Pekka Sammallahti in the position of university assistant in Finno-Ugrian Studies in the autumn of 1973. As early as 1971, Leif had been a member of the small team of scholars and students who, under Joki's leadership, had visited the Northern Faculty of the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad for linguistic fieldwork. During the visit Leif had intended to study Kola Sámi, but since no Sámi speakers were available, he rapidly transformed himself into a Tungusologist and worked with two Lamut (Ewen) speakers. At this time, Leif was already fluent in Russian, a language he had studied under Igor Vahros and Valentin Kiparsky. In later life, Leif's combined competence in Swedish, Finnish, Sámi and Russian proved to be exceptionally useful, and he was appointed innumerable times to act as interpreter between official delegations communicating across the state borders that divide Saamiland between Russia, Finland, Sweden and Norway.

Thanks to his communicative skills, but also because of his peaceful character and wide scope of interests, Leif soon became involved in various types of Sámi activities. In Helsinki, in the 1970s, he was active in the subsequently defunct Sámi Čuvgehussearvi (Lapin Sivistysseura) and its journal *Sábmelaš* (later *Sápmelaš*). In the late 1970s he moved to Ohcejohka (Utsjoki) to become the secretary general of the international non-governmental cultural and political body *Sámiráđđi* (Saami Council), which was exactly the type of organization where Leif's skills could be put to use. The house where Leif lived in Ohcejohka, and where the office of the *Sámiráđđi* was also located, became an important centre for Sámi activities. As a Sámi-speaking non-Sámi individual Leif often had to play the role of a neutral mediator between the different local interest groups of Sámi and non-Sámi across the state borders in Saamiland.

In 1984, Leif moved back to an academic environment and became the first permanent university lecturer in Sámi language at the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi (Roavvenjárga). This position he held for a quarter of a century, until his retirement in 2010, training many generations of students specializing in Sámi language and culture. At the same time, he acted as a bridge between his university and the various Sámi communities and organizations in the Nordic countries, as well as Russian Lapland. As a university teacher Leif started his regular trips to the Russian side, first only to Murmansk but later also to Lujávri (Lovozero) and other Sámi centres on the Kola Peninsula. On these trips he established close ties with Russian specialists working on Kola Sámi and local history, but also with many non-academic ethnic Sámi individuals.

Although his teaching work was mainly concerned with Northern Sámi and its use in the Nordic countries, Leif's academic research became increasingly strongly focused on the Kola Peninsula and the Sámi populations there. A major achievement was his documentation of the final stages of Akkala Sámi, a little known variety of Kola Sámi, whose last fluent speaker – Maria Sergina – died in 2003. As a keen collector, Leif brought back souvenirs, historical objects and ethnographic curiosities, which gradually filled his office at the university and even his apartment and garage in Rovaniemi. Of greatest value was his collection of publications – books, journals, newspapers, maps and ephemera – relating to the Kola Peninsula and the Kola Sámi. Although in Rovaniemi there are large collections of literature on Arctic and Sámi issues at both the Arctic Centre and the Lap-

ponica Section of the Provincial Library, Leif's private Kola collection was the best in the world, and he had reason to be proud it.

Leif himself was also an active author, editor and translator of both scholarly and popular publications. Although he declined to complete his formal academic qualifications with a doctoral degree, his publications could easily have earned him a degree had he so wished. Following his MA thesis *De samiska ortnamnen i Polmak* [Sámi toponyms in Polmak] (1975), he continued working on toponymy and published a general list of Sámi place names under the title *Sámegiell báikenammalogahallan* [1988]. Later, the history of scholarship, especially with regard to the Kola Peninsula, became his major focus. His publications in this field include, among others, *Dokument om de ryska samerna och Kolahalvön* [Documents concerning the Russian-side Sámi and the Kola Peninsula] (2006) and *Kuolaan: Venäjän vallan aikana Kuolan niemimaalla käyneet suomalaiset tiedemiehet ja heidän kirjoituksensa* [Finnish scholars on the Kola Peninsula during the Russian rule of Finland] (2008/2010). In many articles he also dealt with the impact of the Stalinist purges and wartime vicissitudes on the Kola Peninsula.

Leif Stefan Rantala was born on 26 December 1947. In spite of conspicuous health problems, his death on 8 January 2015 at the age of only 67 was entirely unexpected and left many plans and publications uncompleted. The numerous obituaries published in various languages after his death (many of them available also on the internet) illustrate the wide scope and range of his interests and influence. Leif is survived by his son Kim, whom Leif – largely as a single parent – brought up in the Swedish language in the totally Finnish-speaking environment of Rovaniemi. In homage to his father, Kim Rantala donated Leif's collection of curiosities to the Sámi Museum Siida in Anár (Inari), where a memorial symposium in Leif's honour will take place in the autumn of 2017. The best parts of Leif's library went to the Lapponica Section of the Provincial Library in Rovaniemi. A full bibliography of Leif's own publications remains to be compiled.

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