

REMARKS FOR ESTONIAN MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY BY KAJA WEEKS

English Translation

VEMU Museum of Estonians Abroad, Virtual Program, March 14, 2022

Hello, everyone! I am thankful, especially in the current circumstances, to be together with you to celebrate Estonian Mother Language Day, and also for the opportunity to share some of my poems with you.

Many thanks to the participants: Janika, Triinu and Madli, Kaja Telmet and Inga and especially Piret, to you for creating such a rich program – and to all of you who have joined virtually.

So, I will talk a little about my background and how the Estonian language gave special strength to my poems. My book, *Mouth Quill – Poems with Ancestral Roots* – consists of twenty-one poems. It is a relatively short book, and still, it took ten years to compose. It tells the story of my personal journey over the years – and includes personal and historical events, as well as some poems inspired by Estonian runic songs (*regilaul*).

I was born in America as the youngest child in an Estonian family of World War II refugees. In addition to my parents, I had two older brothers, Tõnu and Priit Parming and I have an older sister, Anu Ojamaa. Our family members were all very active in Estonian society, and each of them – parents, brothers, and my sister – had some very strong interests and contribution to make. I, myself, was charmed by music at an early age. I went on to study music, become a classically trained singer, teach and eventually work with special needs children using music.

You may be familiar with these lines from the song *Lauliku Lapsepõli* (A Singer's Childhood):

Kui ma olin väiksekene,
kasvasin ma siis, kaunikene
olin ühe öö vanune,
peale kahe päeva vanune

ema viis kiigu kesa peale,
pani hälli palu peale,
pani pardi kiigutama,
suvelinnu liigutama.

Pardil oli palju sõnu
suvelinnul liialt laule,
part seal juures mulle palju laulis,
suvelind liialt kõneles.

Sealt mina, laps, siis laulud õppisin,
hullukene sõnad oskasin,
kõik mina panin paberisse,
kõik mina raiusin raamatusse

When I was little
I grew beautifully.
I was one night old
after two days old

mother took a swing to the summer meadow,
put the cradle on fallow land,
made the duck swing,
the summer birds to move.

The duck had lots of words,
so many songs in the summer bird.
The duck sang a lot to me there,
the summer bird spoke much.

From there I, a child, learned the songs,
silly child, learned the words.
All I put on paper
All I carved into a book

I didn't have an actual cradle or a swing in the Estonian meadow; but the influences that passed on – the Estonian language we spoke at home and the songs from the memories of our parents and their community – all of those I too "put on paper, carved into a book."

As a very young child, I heard a singer, Estonian-born Ellen Parve Valdsaar, whose singing left an indelible mark on me, and to whom I dedicated my poem, *The Songstress*. Ellen vocalized, called, sang songs in the old tradition – herding songs, wedding songs, lullabies, swinging songs, and more. This was completely unique for us.

While growing up in exile, it was not easy to access Estonian archaic music. I only had a few records from Estonia and a few books. When I was in college, Ellen gave me my first *regilaulu* song book, which Veljo Tormis and Ülo Tedre had just published.

You may already know some about *regilaulud* – they are the oldest folk song in Estonia, that has survived for centuries by oral tradition. In the words of Jakob Hurt, "through *regilaul* we look into our ancestors mouths and hearts." *Regilaul* has a special verse measure, language tools, world of thought and form of song performance. You will hear more about what characterizes it when Jaanika speaks a little later.

Towards the end of high school, I started singing *regilaul* and sometimes leading others in an ensemble. I visited the Helsinki archives in Finland, where I could listen to recordings of old Estonian songs.

However, the biggest breakthrough came with Estonia's restoration of independence. Then I gained access to an amazing amount of material in web archives. I got to read so much, look at the sheet music. I was helped to understand the meaning of ancient words. I was able to access research materials from field expeditions – see how these songs were collected and recorded. It was wonderful! It brings tears to me, thinking about this heritage and its preservation.

How did I get to write these poems, and what especially attracted me these songs, *regilaulud*?

Although I started writing early, I did not pursue essays and poetry seriously until I was middle-aged. Although Estonian is my mother tongue and I still try to read and speak it, inevitably English became my everyday language and the one in which my most complex thinking took place.

But by the time I realized that I wanted to explore the culture of my ancestors and my identity – specifically through poetry – *regilaul* was a natural source of inspiration. (At the end of the book are the songs/verses that particularly influenced me in this collection.)

Regilaulud generally had a lot of qualities that fascinated me. Of course, while singing myself or listening, I was drawn to a primordial sense of rhythm that emerges from the structure of the text, and the unique uninterrupted flow – Veljo Tormis described it as “a flowing river of song ... everyone breathes in, but when the air runs out, the song rolls forward.” Further, he remarked: “The real discovery was once for me when I noticed this phenomenon in a solo singer. The singer tries to sing the verses for as long as the breath lasts. ” So, I, too, tried to sing like that ... by myself, in North America.

But while writing, other specific qualities became important to me: rhetorical devices, how ideas were expressed and worldviews. I did not try to repeat these things in exactly the same way in English, which would be impossible, but I found inspiration through them. What reached my poems is such a small amount, and I also know that although I have tried for years to delve into this source material, I understand only a tiny part of it.

However, as I wrote, I felt I was making a bow before this legacy – and I hoped to arouse the interest of non-Estonians, as well. Really, it felt as if I was unwinding a thread – saying, *this is where the journey back to something old, beautiful, and meaningful in our culture begins.*

Some examples of what inspired me and which I wove:

- **The beauty of words!** Alliteration, consonance and assonance are powerful and magical in the lyrics of *regilaulud*. For example, lines that you may even be familiar with: *Sinikirja linnukene, sinikirja, siidikirja ... kolmas kulla kuusemetsa* (*Bluestriped bird*,

bluestriped, silkenstriped ... the third one in the golden spruce forest.) One does not often find such sounds in English.

- **Sound paintings** – or better-known expression: onomatopoeia – words that reflect sounds, such as the sounds and movements of nature. Some of them, of course, matched my poems, the voices of the birds: *kukukuu, vaak vaak vaa, piiri-pääri, vurr.*
- **Calls, song refrains**, were appropriate – *Ae, Kiigele, Ollalii-lellalii, and Kaasike*, which is associated with the wedding singers called *Kaasitajad*.
- **Symbols and metaphors** about nature, song and the power of the singer played an important role.

For example, the title of the collection (and its title poem) *Mouth Quill* is taken from the Estonian language, *suude sulg*. I immediately quote in the preface of the book: *Bring me my mouth quill ... Then I shall sing in the voice of birds.* We understand the mouth quill to be one of the singer's magical tools. Tales about the mouth quill are found in the *regilaul*, *The Village Tells Me*, in which the singer asks her dear brothers to ride their horses back home to retrieve her mouth quill and for other aids, such as the *pajatimisvaip* (storytelling carpet), and *keelekõlks* (tongue jingle). And believe me! Those kinds of words were equally challenging and delightful for me to come to understand.

Some texts came into use quite directly, for example, *Emakene, hellekene, mesimarja memmeke*, which I found in different variations. One, from Southern Tartu Parish, referred in the archive document to being at Mother's graveside.

Another had such a gentle beginning: *Imekene helläkene, mesimarja maamakõno, kui see ime minno hoisi, kui see kandja minno kasudi.* (Mother dear, honeymama berry, when that mother held me, when she cuddled me.) There was nowhere to find more true words and feelings to capture those moments with my mother at the end of her life – that, in fact, in the poem, *Mouth Quill*, I had to turn from English to Estonian.

- **The power of some of the phrases** was incredible, like – *Äiu, äiu, kussu, kussu* In the darkened bedroom, on the edge of the bed, my mother sang a lullaby in Estonian with just such sounds. Even as a small child, I was very musical. Although my mother was very rhythmic, she was never very melodically precise – thus I

describe in *The Rise* the “hazy edges” of her singing – but my mother's loving care persisted in these lyrics, and I never forgot them. Consider... such small seeds.

Much later in life, I heard for the first time this childhood-remembered motif that then appeared in the whole song, *Uni Tule* (Sleep, Come), and in which also stood the words *sleep falls under the eyebrows, on the eye of the child*, and that phrase can also be found in translation in this collection.

Oral communication is of such great significance and power – that song and the words passed down from generation to generation. My mother would have learned this from her mother and her mother, and so on. How far into the past do effects of our roots go?

Closing Remarks

This collection of poetry covers a huge time scale. Almost beyond imagination! But it certainly demanded my imagination, because in my imagination I traveled back to a time before my ancestral land, culture, and people existed.

To discover the knowledge of the past and to feel myself, I started from something so far and deep, that, metaphorically, it was under the ice – something that is yet to be born!

Finally, I will read to you the poems *Ancestral Journey*, which I present here in its entirety. *Ancestral Journey I* is from the section *Under the Ice Sheets* and *Ancestral Journey II* from the section *The Milky Way*.

Ancestral Journey – Beneath Ice Sheets

My ancestors migrated forward in time,
but I migrate backward –

back to the Baltic Ice Lake, melting,
overflowing with spectacular rivers of waterfalls.

Through a chink in cosmic space,
I enter, dive below refrozen melt.

Beneath ice sheets, lies land mother will call home,
and I will plummet to find my origins.

My imagination lacks the capacity
to go back as far as the Silurian time,

when this northland lay at the equator,
before everything broke and shifted,

though it flows through my dreams
like annihilation at the edge of time.

I will anchor to these instead:

Saaremaa island will emerge from a crystalline basin,
crushed remnants of sea life
adhering to her granite cliffs.

Pärnu will appear like a miracle on a bay,
sail-way to *Saaremaa* by summer,
ice-crossings, meters-deep, by winter.

Just south, *Liivimaa's* thawed sea waves
will scatter amber
at our ancestor's feet.

Ancestral Journey – The Milky-Way

Over bog spirits and sacred groves,
our songs will enshrine air.
But first, in the vaults of time and space,
I will begin as the spirit of an egg,

carried by the sea to Iberia.
Here, I will land on a branch
of the daughters of Eve,
and their hunter gatherer men.

As the glacier melts,
plants sprout northward,
and we will move toward the Urals,
threading mountain edges,

tundra and colossal rivers.
Through a thousand summers and winters,
some will be left in river-bends,
some follow the reindeer north.

Some will look heavenward at traces of bird-flight,
some walk a milky star-path westward.
Dreams float through moonlit nights,
enter open windows,

land upon our sleepy brows:
Uni tule, uni tule lapse silma pääle.
Metrical pulses move our language,
first syllables drum the words,

forward, until we reach the sea – *Eesti*.

* * *

(Poetry from the book *Mouth Quill—Poems with Ancestral Roots* by Kaja Weeks. Published by The Poetry Box, Portland, Oregon, 2020.)

VEMU, Museum of Estonians Abroad, Toronto, Canada. **Virtual Program, for Emakeelepäev** (Mother Language Day): **“Sõna võtad siita maalta, tõise teisesta ilmasta”** (One word you take from this land, another from another.”). *Presenters: Kaja Weeks (USA), Janika Oras (Estonia), Kaja Telme (Canada), Inga Eichenbaum (Canada), Triinu Villukas (Vienna, Austria), Madli Oras (Vienna, Austria). Moderator: Piret Noorhani (Canada)*