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A Schoolteacher with a Mission

Gustav Vilbaste (1885–1967) and ethnobotany in Estonia

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»*Kaebtus* (evil eye) [*Polygala amarella*]. There are three kinds – with blue, red and white flowers. In Torma they are called *sebililled* (soapflower), because they are used for washing hands. This plant is used if the milk of a cow goes bad, becomes watery – that means some stranger has looked at the milk or the cow with an evil eye, which has made the milk go bad. Then the *kaebtus* is used to wash or steam the milk churns: *kaebtus* is boiled in a pot and then the steam or the hot water is used to heat the churn. Also cows are given the decoctions to drink and people use it against internal diseases« (Vilgaste TN 1, 302(2)).

This is a small part of a report sent in 1929 by a correspondent Mihkel Sild from Torma parish in answer to the request to collect data about folk use of plants made by a man we now know as Gustav Vilbaste. However, most of his life he was known as Gustav Vilberg. The name-change took place during the nation-wide campaign of Estonification in 1935. Gustav was born on the 3 September 1885 in Kuusalu parish, Northern Estonia, as the fifth child in a family of tenant peasant fishermen. He received his primary education in the four-year school in his home village, Saunja. At twelve Gustav had to start working, but he returned to school when he was fifteen, graduating in 1903 with a teacher's diploma. For ten years he worked as a teacher and later attended high-school in Tartu, interrupted by the mobilization for the First World War.

As a Student in Tartu

He went to Tartu with a clear goal: to become a university student. He was already attending lectures at the University of Tartu while still at high school, at the

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age of 32. Before matriculation he fought in the Estonian War of Independence in the school teachers company. Only after the war ended, in 1919, was he able to start his studies at the University of Tartu in the department of mathematics and life sciences. He studied there until 1926. In addition to all this, he found time to travel in the space of a few years through all of Estonia. He also promptly reported the results of his journey to the readers of the national newspaper *Postimees* and later published a three-volume illustrated book. This was the beginning of Estonian nature tourism (Vilbaste and Sarv 2005). At the same time, to pay for his living expenses and studies, he continued working as 1) a language teacher (1919–1920), 2) a private teacher, 3) a junior assistant at the Institute of Botany of the University of Tartu (1920–1923), 4) the editor and later senior editor of *Loodus* ('Nature'), then the first and only Estonian journal of natural sciences, published 1922–1924, and 5) finally the director of the Virumaa Public University (1925–1927).

Later, Vilbaste continued his botanical education at his own expense at the University of Vienna, where he graduated and some months later received his doctorate degree in botany with the dissertation *Erneuerung der Loodvegetation durch Keimlinge in Ost-Harrien (Estland)* (1929). By this time he had already become the best specialist in Estonian vegetation and on returning home was awarded a scholarship from the University of Tartu to prepare himself for future work at the University. He used this scholarship to study floristic works and vegetation in Sweden, Finland and Latvia. He also had a chance to take part in expeditions in Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany and Lithuania in the 1920s and 1930s. However, after the end of the scholarship he was not offered the job he hoped for despite the support of the Baltic German professors. The job was given instead to another candidate, supported by Estonians at the University.

Frustrated by such a setback, Vilbaste never applied for a university position again. Instead, he returned to his old profession and served as a teacher in natural sciences and geography in two high schools in Tartu in between 1931 and 1936. To publish his works, which often were in disagreement with mainstream academic thinking in Estonia, Vilbaste established his own publishing house *Loodusevaatleja* ('Nature Observer'). Here he published a popular-scientific journal from 1930 until it closed down in 1938 due to financial problems. This journal and (ethno)botanical and other books on natural sciences published by *Loodusevaatleja* had a great impact on the formation of Estonians' cognition of nature, the understanding of natural sciences and their study.

A great change in Vilbaste's life occurred in 1936, when he was chosen, from among 22 candidates, as the first and the only inspector of nature conservation in Estonia. He served in this position, supported by a network of volunteer trustees all across Estonia. The nearly ten years in this position were Vilbaste's most

productive years. His important contribution to nature conservation in Estonia included the compilation of the inventory of protected species and objects, the popularisation of nature conservation and other activities, including participation in the establishment of Tallinn Zoo in 1939 (Hang 1985, 1986, Tõnisson 2010). The Soviet regime closed the position for the first time in 1940 and Vilbaste had to work at a high school in Tallinn for a short time (1941–42), until the Nazi German occupation regime reopened the position.

In 1945 the position was ultimately closed by the Soviet regime and Vilbaste worked in some temporary positions until the botany department of the Estonian Museum of Natural History was established and he was asked to become its director. Although this was his last position before retirement in 1950, he started several practices there that still continue to this day, gave numerous lectures, curated many exhibitions about nature and was one of the most popular lecturers on nature and nature conservation (Jõe 1991, 1994). Those last five years of his professional career (1945–1950) were the only time in his life when he was working as a professional botanist.

The First Steps in Ethnobotany

Already in his childhood, Vilbaste was interested in folk songs. So, until 1916 Vilbaste mostly collected folk songs and this aspect of his life is well researched (Oras 2006, see also Vilbaste 1965). He recalled that three languages were spoken in his home: his mother spoke *maakeel* (inland language), his father spoke the coastal dialect and a housemaid, originating from Kolga, spoke *the* Kolga dialect. In addition, his paternal grandmother also spoke the northern coastal dialect. He noticed and learned to appreciate such a difference in dialects (Vilbaste 1965). In his teens he wrote down several stories retold in different dialects in his home and sent them to the Estonian folklorist Matthias Johann Eisen. His first installment bears the date 20. September 1902 (Hiimäe 2005).

Vilbaste was fond of his native region, which can be extended to include the whole of Eastern Harjumaa, North Estonia. He became the most productive correspondent from this region. Collecting folklore in his long summer vacation (teachers were employed only from October until April), he compiled a dictionary of the coast dialect.

Until the very end of his life, his greatest passion and hobby was vernacular names of plants. He started to systematically collect plant names in 1907 in response to national vernacular plant name collecting campaigns organised by the Estonian Students' Society (cf Postimees 1907, Postimees 1912). The idea of the campaign was to create in Estonian a unified list of plant names derived from the binominal system. Vilbaste became one of the most productive correspondents for the Estonian Students' Society for this call. Although he lacked botanical

education, his self-learning abilities helped him learn how to identify plants in the field using a Russian translation of the plant atlas by the botanist Heinrich Moritz Willkomm (Laasimer et al. 1994).

By 1915 he had gained enough self-confidence to discuss in public the etymology and use of the seaweed *Fucus vesiculosus* in a respectable journal *Eesti Kirjandus* ('Estonian Literature'). He suggested using the generic names *atru*, *adru* for seaweed, but not *muda* [mud], by which it was known to this time in literature. Later during the same year he already published a follow-up article about his research, which he had conducted among schoolteachers in the region, on the suitability of this name (Vilberg 1915a, 1915b). He preserved the letter of a schoolteacher, V. Oja, sent in response to his questionnaire. Those were his first insights in the field of ethnobotany and also a valuable contribution to the development of Estonian botanical vocabulary. Before immatriculation to the University of Tartu he also managed to publish ethnobotanical articles on birch sap (Vilberg 1918).

The first list of Estonian plant names for official use was published in 1917, as a supplement of the journal *Eesti Kirjandus*. In the foreword to this list, Vilbaste was listed among the four most productive correspondents. The publication also contained a new appeal for future contributions and corrections. Vilbaste responded to this as well, and his contribution is mentioned also in the foreword to the final list (KT 1918, Nenjukov 1928).

He had himself characterized the end of this period with the following words: »In language studies there is enough manpower to conduct research in dialects and collect the corresponding data. I can now proceed to my most direct task [as a botanist], but for my hobby I have selected a task needing philological knowledge as well. This is the collecting of plant names« (Mäger 1967).

A Network for Collecting Plant Names

The Estonian Mother Tongue Society was created in 1920 and Vilbaste promptly became its member. Participation in the society increased his professionalism in collecting dialects and research on them, although at that time he mostly concentrated on research and collection of vernacular plant names.

A great change in his ethnobotanical collecting activities came with the calls he published in nation-wide periodicals: *Vikerkaar* ('Rainbow'), *Eesti Mets* ('Estonian Forest'), *Loodus* ('Nature') and *Kasvatus* ('Education') (Vilberg 1923a–d). In his first calls he was asking for vernacular names and their equivalents in Latin, German or Russian and suggested the use of his key book published the year before (Vilberg 1922). The call ended with the first report, in which he acknowledged help from two correspondents. This call was also published in the nation-wide newspaper *Postimees* in the abridged form (Postimees 1923).

Vilbaste repeated his call after about five years in the journals *Eesti Keel* ('Estonian Language'), *Eesti Kirjandus* ('Estonian Literature'), *Noorusmaa* ('Land of youth'), as well in the nation-wide newspapers *Postimees* (Vilberg 1928c) and *Päevaleht* (Vilberg 1928a–e). In the journal *Noorusmaa* he also published a list of vernacular names of plants common in his native village, for 215 taxa altogether. In this article he recognized that pupils know 50–100 plants, and only few, the ones most interested in the plants, knew more than 100 taxa (Vilberg 1928f).

Already next year he published in the journal *Eesti Mets* (Vilberg 1929a) and the newspaper *Postimees* (Vilberg 1929b) a new, improved questionnaire, in which the emphasis had moved from plant names to the use of the plants. He asked detailed questions on the following subjects: for what purpose the plants were used in previous times (for medicine, dyeing, witchcraft, food etc), what fairytales are known about the plants, what work is done while plants are blooming or ripen, etc. In this call he already sets higher standard for the correspondents. Now he was asking not only for vernacular, Estonian and Latin names, but also for a voucher specimen. He also mentioned in this call that his new and improved key book could be used for better identification of the plants (Vilberg 1925). It is difficult to say how many voucher specimens he received, since he combined them with his own herbaria of about 14,000 specimens, which in turn is now combined with the Estonian Herbarium in the Herbaria of the Estonian University of Life Sciences. Small plant parts that correspondents glued or sewed on the side of their reports were left in the manuscripts and some of them are still preserved. Some of the correspondents added, for better recognition, drawings of the plants, some of them quite recognizable.

The next call and the report were published two years later in the journal *Eesti Kirjandus* (Vilberg 1930a) and the newspaper *Postimees* (Vilberg 1930b). He started this report on a pessimistic note: »Written language powerfully invades every scientific field and destroys carelessly all that is indigenous in the expressions of ones thoughts. School unifies the language, literature supports it and the naming of all that appears becomes slowly homogenous/unvaried, book like, where ancient words alternate with artificially modified words« (Vilberg 1930a). As usual in his reports, he gave an overview of how many data he had already received (Table 1). He structured his report according to schools, stating the name of the teacher and the number of pupils responding to him. According to this report, the most productive schools were Kohtla-Järve school (29 pupils), Silla school (22), Valtu school (20), Rootsiküla school (19), Jõhvi school (17), Anija school (16), Narva-Jõesuu school (16) etc. There is no correlation between the size of the school and the number of pupils sending plant-lore, as small village-schools sent in similar amounts as city schools.

Vilbaste also published a separate call for children in a journal addressed to them, *Eesti Noorus* ('Estonian Youth') (Vilberg 1933d). From 1934 onwards Vilbaste sent his correspondents the third, updated version of his questionnaire, published in full in his book (for example see Vilberg 1934c, 1935a). The next report was published in 1934, mostly listing correspondents sending plant-lore for the second or the third time (Vilberg 1934a). This was to be expected, as Vilbaste's manuscript reveals that he responded even to small messages, commenting on every note, identifying every vernacular name sent to him (indicating Latin and Estonian official names) and thanking the correspondent. If, with the data received, identification was not possible, he asked for additional information and a voucher specimen. All his letters ended with the request to send more.

The participation of pupils in the process of the collecting plant-lore depended greatly on the activity of the teacher. In Vilbaste's manuscript we can find dozens of answers where teachers have responded to personal requests just saying that, unfortunately, in their region people do not know plants.

The pupils' responses can be roughly divided into two groups. Most of the responses bear the heading »In our area plants are named«, which is followed by a long list of plants, divided into such categories as trees, bushes, herbaceous plants, food plants etc. They generally contain very little information on plant use, if at all. Such responses were sent mostly as an answer to the earlier calls. Another group of pupils' letters can be characterized by the heading »The use of plants in previous times«, in which greater emphasis is placed on the medical and food, as well as dyeing, magical and ceremonial use of plants. Those responses were, as a rule, not accompanied with a separate plant list. The responses with such a structure were usually a follow-up to the previous plant-list or a single response to the later questionnaire. Vilbaste acknowledged and expressed gratitude for even a small contribution and teachers communicated this to the pupils. Often this gave great outcomes, resulting in a second response from the same school.

From the 1930s, when he started to publish his journal *Loodusevaatleja* ('Nature Observer') he also added to his responses a fresh number of the journal. If he had recently published something related to ethnobotany, he also sent out an offprint of it, to show how important the contributions of the pupils are. Such targeted distribution of the journal served three purposes: as advertising for the journal, as an inspiration for future collecting and as a means to increase interest toward nature. As a sort of reward, Vilbaste sent his publications on plants to his collectors as well.

To collect ethnobotanical resources, he also used his position as a teacher, giving the collection of plant names as homework to his pupils in both Tartu high schools where he was teaching. With this he gathered several manuscripts worth

of more data (for example see Vilbaste, TN 5), and the reports from his own students are detailed than the responses from other schools.

Vilbaste acquired almost half of the correspondents through a personal approach. It is difficult to tell how long the list of the teachers was to whom he initially sent requests for collaboration, as he did not archive the fruitless correspondence of the first years of collecting. We only know that in 1929 he sent a repeat call to more than 60 teachers, who did not answer to his first letter.

Through the personal approach he got data from well-known folklore collectors who had already sent data to other collectors of folklore (like Jakob Hurt, Matthias Johann Eisen and the Estonian Folklore Archives). Other collectors first sent the original data to Vilbaste, but later resent it to the Archives as well. For example, the plant lore sent by the school teacher Julius Lunts to Vilbaste in 1931 is duplicated in the material sent to the Estonian Folklore Archives in 1937. The number of active people in every society is limited and at this time there was no guarantee that one or another archive will survive.

All of Vilbaste’s ethnobotanical correspondence is preserved, according to his will, in the Estonian Folklore Archives in 11 manuscript volumes as a part of the fund bearing Vilbaste’s name (Vilbaste TN), altogether 8319 pages. Vilbaste collected plant-lore until the end of his days and stayed in touch with his correspondents, who numbered up to 1500 (including pupils). The list of correspondents, provided in the first volume of his TN manuscript, might even be longer, as Vilbaste did not always preserve data on the information source, sometimes adding to the data only general information like »women selling at Tallinn market« (see also Vilberg 1935e). This list written by Vilbaste also contains reference to other literature, including other manuscripts, and archive data copied. Table 1 indicates the amount of ethnobotanical data in specific moments of the collecting process.

Table 1. Amount of ethnobotanical data in specific moments of the collecting process. Composed according to the data presented on pages 1205–1284 of Vilbaste TN 1. The numbers are cumulative. ERA – data copied from manuscripts of Estonian Folklore Archives

Date	1.II.30	27.XI.30	10.XII.33	20.I.37	ERA	31.V.39	1944	24.VI.66	1967
Plant uses	4562	6381	8227	13305	3129	14540	15168	16885	16891
Plant names	23839	28228	31086	36521	168	46643	79966	100790	100842

Publisher of Ethnobotanical Data since 1930

By the 1930ies Vilbaste already had a considerable collection of ethnobotanical data and, as could be expected, he started to analyse and publish this data. The most important bibliography of Gustav Vilbaste in botany, ethnobotany and natural sciences in general is published in the book written by botanist Toomas Kukk (Kukk 1999: 440–443). It contains altogether 175 records. For this overview we have selected only those works that reflect on the use and naming of the plants. Vilbaste's full bibliography reaches over 1400 items (Hang 1985: 410).

The first article »Taimed arstirohuna aegade kestes« ('Plants as a medicine in the course of times') (Vilberg 1932a) integrated the knowledge he received from his correspondents with already published data: works concerning Estonian data, like a book by doctor and writer Johann Wilhelm Ludwig von Luce (*Topographische Nachrichten von der Insel Oesel...*, 1823) and an article by ethnographer Ilmari Manninen (*Üldjooni meie rahvameditsiinist*, 1925), but also old international publications on the use of medicinal plants, such as Otto Brunfels's *Contrafayt Kreuterbuch nach rechter vollkommener Art* (1532) and Gaius Plinius the Elder's *Historia naturalis* from 78 A.D. The article is easy to read and greatly generalizing.

Already next year he published two ethnographic articles in the journal *Eesti Kirjandus*. The first analysed names of *Primula veris* (Vilberg 1933a) and is based on the data collected mostly through a personal approach to schoolteachers, of whom he asked just one question: How is *P. veris* named in your region? Over 40 teachers throughout Estonia answered this question.

He seemed to be using the linguistic-geographic method created by the linguist Andrus Saareste to arrange the data on the genus *Primula*, proof for which can be found in the draft pages of this article (Vilbaste, TN 1, 1195–1201). With this thorough research Vilbaste received over 100 vernacular names for *P. veris*, which is a record in the Estonian context. It has remained unclear why he chose this specific plant and why such a method of data collection. Probably he wanted to get quickly all the information about one specific feature of one plant, which was an impossible task with the wide-based collecting methodology he generally used.

In the next issue of *Eesti Kirjandus* Vilbaste published an article about the origin of Estonian plant names (Vilberg 1933b). This article has not lost its actuality and use even now; it was later partially re-published in the introduction of his monograph *Eesti taimenimetused* ('Estonian Plant Names') (Vilbaste 1993).

His next article, about the plants cultivated over 300 years ago, he published in his own journal *Loodusevaatleja*. There he explored which Estonian plant names were present in the three earliest Estonian vocabularies and grammar books published in the mid-seventeenth century and suggested that if the name existed, then the plant was also cultivated, although in manor and church gardens, since

peasants had no access to nor knowledge of exotic plants. The main goal of the article was to give a good overview of the history of the names of cultivated plants; although the compilers of those grammars, not the peasants, have created quite a large number of those names (Vilberg 1934b: 14). The limited number of grammars used indicates that Vilbaste did not intend to give a fundamental overview of an actual history of the use of cultivated plants. Estonian science historian Vaike Hang commented on the great number of Vilbaste's articles, that »every born idea, research result, interesting observation had to reach the wide circle of interested readers as soon as possible« (Hang 1985: 409–410). Probably he was keeping the same in mind when writing the abovementioned article as well.

In the same year he published two sections (first volume) of his planned five-volume grand ethnobotany book *Meie kodumaa taimi rahva käsitluses* ('Popular views on plants native to Estonia') (Vilberg 1934c). The next volume was published in the following year (Vilberg 1935a). In those two volumes he gave an overview of the herbaceous plants growing in meadows. Unfortunately, due to financial problems he was not able to publish the last three volumes (about trees, bushes, forest and bog plants etc). Those self-published and self-financed books were very thorough and contained a chapter for every plant, with detailed ethnobotanical explanation of the plant's use in Estonia and abroad, its vernacular names, the origin of the names, legends about the plant, chemical compounds of the plant and their use in medicine, and its cultural importance. Plant chapters also contained detailed plant descriptions, drawings and data on plant geography; also other, less known members of the family were named. The published first two volumes received positive reviews (for example Hindrey 1934, Reebe 1934).

In addition to this, Vilbaste also wrote numerous smaller articles in newspapers, educating a wider audience. Before Christmas he wrote about the ethnobotany of nuts, including a description of the kind of games played with nuts during the holidays, an overview of the nuts available in the local markets and shops and also explained the origins and botanical features (Vilberg 1934d). Although this newspaper article was a shorter version of an already published article, it contained more of ethnobotany and less of botany (Vilbaste 1937).

In fact, he published articles in newspapers rather often; for example, in 1935 he wrote two overview articles about plants used for witchcraft in Estonia (Vilberg 1935b, 1935c). The last article ended with: »using plants for witchcraft makes no-one happy, their user becomes ill-intended and others start to hate and despise them and their end is miserable. Let's also finish dealing with witchcraft plants this time, because it also probably won't lead to anything good«.

To counterbalance the article on witchcraft, Vilbaste gave a presentation »Where to find happiness. Plants as foretellers of happiness and the future« at a meeting of the Academic Folklore Society. This presentation was transcribed

by a journalist and published between two articles on witchcraft (Postimees 1935). Later, Vilbaste himself wrote a scientific article about fortune and foretelling plants in the yearbook of the Estonian National Museum (Vilbaste-Vilberg 1937). This article explains that among Estonians the best-known fortuneteller plant is the blue fleabane, *Erigeron acer*, although its use is unknown in other countries. Altogether he gave an overview of eight plants or plant products. Vilbaste also often published shorter one-plant or one phenomenon describing articles in newspapers and journals (for example see Vilberg 1933c, 1935d, e).

His wider interest toward the interaction of humans and plants was also demonstrated through the publication of two articles in his journal. The first, 'Plants in proverbs' (Vilbaste 1937), analyses the presence of plants in proverbs. Some of those proverbs were already published in earlier literature, but some of them were collected by Vilbaste himself. Another article, published a year later, explores plants in riddles (Vilbaste 1938b). In it he refers to Matthias Johann Eisen's riddle book from 1890, containing 35 plant taxa. He finds that the plants most often featured in riddles were nuts, hops, cabbages, strawberries, lentils, linen, cranberries, and beans; the samples provided in the articles are just a few examples of the numerous texts.

Vilbaste published a scientific article about dyeing with plants in the yearbook of the Estonian National Museum (Vilbaste 1939). He described numerous possibilities for dyeing with native and cultivated plants, dyeing technology, colour tones, mordant etc. For this research he studied all the available literature and his own ethnobotanical collection as well. It is still the most important work in this field in Estonia.

During the Second World War, he received a scholarship from the Estonian Learned Society and the Society of Nature Researchers in 1942 to update and improve his manuscript on plant names. He used this scholarship to partially cover the expenses of his fieldworks conducted all over Estonia, most of the cost of which he still had to pay himself. The idea of the fieldworks was to check and identify the plant names sent to him earlier. Because of the wartime, he needed a special permit for such a journey. He travelled by bike and bus, covering over 4000 km and collecting almost 25,000 plant names and over 300 uses in two years (EKLA f 152, M 67:4). The first draft of his most important book was ready in 1944.

Linguist and Ethnographer

Although in Vilbaste's own opinion the monograph was ready, the war and the difficult times following it in Estonia did not permit publication on ethnobotanical subjects. Thus he continued to improve the manuscript until the end of the 1950s. Later, with the help of the Estonian Mother Tongue Society, the original

manuscript was reproduced in five typewritten copies, bearing the date 1960. One copy is stored in the Folklore Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum in the fund bearing his name and contains 1227+54 typewritten pages (Vilbaste, T). In 1959 the Estonian Mother Tongue Society formed a commission to edit this voluminous manuscript. The commission consisted of well-known linguists and natural scientists, but their resources were limited. Only for nine months in 1961 did they have funds to employ someone for the editing work. The manuscript turned out to be more complicated than originally thought, and the editing lasted for more than thirty years. Finally, the manuscript was published in 1993. Twenty recognized Estonian scientists edited it altogether. It is difficult to tell what exactly was edited. The greater changes carried out by the editing committee are discussed in the first chapter of the book composed by the chief editors: linguist Heino Ahven and natural scientist and academician Erast Parmasto (Vilbaste 1993: 7–14).

The committee decided to take out of the manuscript plant names used by ethnic minorities in Estonia (Russian, German, Latvian, Swedish, Romanic, and Yiddish), and even Estonian kindred languages (Finnish, Izhorian and Votic) although Vilbaste also collected all of them. In addition, the list of mushrooms, mosses, lichens and algae, collected and composed by Vilbaste, have never made into print. Both omitted subjects are stored in the Estonian Mother Tongue Society as well as in the Estonian Literary Museum (Vilbaste, T).

After retirement he returned to the hobby of his twenties: collecting folklore and linguistic research in Kuusalu parish. He stated: »I am one of those people who cannot be without work, so I had to find some task for myself. I was convinced at my last place of work at the Museum of Natural History that in my profession (botany), I can achieve quite little, because botany as a science has changed; young botanists have created new methods to study vegetation and I can not imagine myself applying them with full enthusiasm« (Mäger 1997).

Regardless of his age, after retirement, he took part in several expeditions to Estonian settlements dispersed in the Soviet Union. Academician Paul Ariste invited him in 1956 to the Leningrad region where the Izhorians and Votes lived. This expedition was followed by a report with plant vernacular names and other Votic botanical vocabulary (Vilbaste 1957a). Izhorian plant names are preserved in manuscripts stored in the Estonian Literary Museum and dated 1956, altogether 362 pages (Vilbaste, T). In 1956 Vilbaste published voluminous research about the attempts to collect plant names in the previous centuries (Vilbaste 1956). Here he stated that the most astute peasants in the second part of the nineteenth century knew at least 200–250 plants. The main emphasis of the article, however, is to give an overview of the occurrence of Estonian plant names in the works of Baltic Germans from the seventeenth until the twentieth century,

the relations of the authors to botany and the evolution and change of the plant names in their writings. This article was later republished in full (Vilbaste 1993)

He also did research on the plants mentioned in the national epos *Kalevipoeg*, indicating not only trees and plants, but also their habitats and other botanical terminology (Vilbaste 1957b). This manuscript is also preserved, is dated 1952, and contains 46 pages. In addition, Vilbaste studied plant names listed in Estonian folk songs; the 104 page manuscript's titlepage is dated 1953 (Vilbaste, T).

His last expedition was in 1959, when he was already 74 years old, to Estonian villages in the Northern Caucasus, for research on the vocabulary of Caucasian Estonians. Before the trip he confessed: »I have travelled criss-cross through Estonia, but have never visited the Estonians in Caucasus! Now I have to go!« Later he wrote a report on this expedition and an article (Vilbaste 1960). The voluminous research contained not only the results of the fieldwork, but also the analysis of available literature, archival data and Vilbaste's personal correspondence (Ahven 1965, Ahven 1968).

The most important co-authored book during his retirement was the only herbal published in the Soviet period (Kook and Vilbaste 1962). For this book, Vilbaste wrote the botanical descriptions of the plants, vernacular names, and the use in folk medicine. By that time most of the numerous vernacular names given there were already forgotten, but now they are remembered and partially in use just thanks to this book. The book was re-published in five editions, but only the fifth contained the whole chapter on non-official medicinal plants (Tammeorg et al. 1984). Vilbaste wrote this chapter already for the first edition, but since the academic opinion regarding medicinal plants in the Soviet Union was rather negative, this chapter was in disgrace until the very end of the Soviet Era.

Being a freelance collector and researcher of folk heritage, folk botanical knowledge, and Estonian dialects, he was a long time correspondent of the Estonian Mother Tongue Society and the Estonia National Museum, and also took many photographs. He stayed in touch with his correspondents until the end of his life. Vilbaste's photo archive in the Estonian National Museum contains 6,145 pictures, negatives and postcards; 1,156 of them he took himself on expeditions and trips abroad, 846 pictures were taken already in the 1920s. His collection is outstanding because he photographed natural objects and landscapes, botanical objects (remarkable trees, marsh meadows, flood plains etc), places of cultural importance, architectural and ethnographical objects, ethnobiological activities (like hay-making, mushroom picking), etc. His contemporaries rarely noticed such subjects, so now his pictures are very popular and rare.

Bridging Science and Simple People

The beginning of Vilbaste's collecting activities coincides with the time when young urban intellectuals began to discover and value folk heritage. In the search for their roots, they began to participate in fieldworks to collect folklore. On the other hand, the rural population had rather despising attitude toward folklore collectors and often did not welcome them. Vilbaste stood out from the locals, as he was an intellectual and teacher, but also from other collectors, because he lived in the community; thus he received the best results. The longer he worked on collecting, the better his methods and analytical abilities became.

To become a grand master it is not enough to be hard-working, educated and enthusiastic, the times also have to support your endeavours. Vilbaste's lifetime encompassed several important dates in Estonian history, affecting the course of science and culture in the country. The establishment of the Estonian National Museum, the development of Estonian botanical nomenclature, establishment of the practice of nature conservation in Estonia, the first nature journals in Estonian, to name only some, in which Vilbaste participated in full.

Vilbaste's contribution to the collecting of Estonian local plant names and to research in this field is invaluable. Although most of his life he was a simple schoolteacher, he influenced through his publications the knowledge of nature of at least one generation of Estonians. Estonian Academician Viktor Masing points out that linguists would never be able to feel the meaning of dialectal plant names, in the same way that Vilbaste was able to do with his botanical background. Vilbaste collected plant names until the end of his life, understanding well the never-ending character of such an activity (Vilbaste 1962). Even his last call was published after his death (Vilbaste 1968).

Being most of his life only a humble schoolteacher, he nevertheless had a very high scientific qualification. The integration of scientific knowledge into everyday life and the popularisation of such integration could be named the mission of his life. Nature conservators have to learn how to broadcast their activities and the need to protect nature to simple people, and Vilbaste knew how to do that. He noted that he had two goals in his life: to learn to know the nature of his homeland and give back the knowledge he gained in a way that even his father, a simple villager, would understand (EKLA f 152 M 139:5, 1).

Ethnobotany is a good tool for explaining how a lay-person understands and approaches nature. Although in his lifetime the popularisation of science was an unknown concept, he was able to make understandable even the most modern scientific news of his time and integrate this in his everyday activities. His work as a teacher helped him in this task even more than if he had been just a scientist.

With his activities Vilbaste emphasized the ecological relations between humans and nature, preceding, with this, all his contemporaries. Unfortunately,

there were no followers among linguists or botanist willing to take over his work. We want to end our insight with a citation from Viktor Masing:

»He succeeded to collect and document with the help of correspondents at the last moment before its disappearance the plant knowledge of Estonians, although as often happens, much was already gone. If someone would now wish to find and record the old plant knowledge, it would no longer be possible. Old folk heritage has disappeared together with the folk plant knowledge that was transmitted from generation to generation. Even the oldest people today have gained their knowledge about plants from school or work, doctor or pharmacist, but mostly from books, radio and other mass media and all this has suppressed and modified oral tradition in the places where it was still present. /---/ For many nations, who have not had their own Vilbaste, such knowledge, which was part of life and the general worldview, has been hopelessly lost« (Masing 1985: 599).

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