

FELLOW TRAVELLER'S LOOK AT HELJE KAARMA'S CREATIVE LIFE

ENE-MARGIT TIIT

Professor Emerita of Mathematics, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

Late autumn 1944. The occupying power in Tallinn has changed; red flags are flying in the town again, without a circle with a swastika in the middle. The flags of some economical landladies in Nõmme district of Tallinn show an unfaded circle in the middle of the flag.

For children, it is essential that the long school holiday, which began on 9 March, has finally ended. They were eagerly waiting for returning to school and seeing their friends. The children of Pääsküla and Kivimäe – the most distant neighbourhoods of Nõmme – could return to their schoolhouse which the Germans had meanwhile converted into a military hospital. Instead of the sign “Kivimäe Primary School”, the cosy schoolhouse under pines, built about a decade ago, had received the sign “Kivimäe Incomplete Secondary School”.

One of the fifth-form students at this school was Helje Laane, a tall 11-year girl who lived nearby.

It could have also happened otherwise. Theodor Laane, the father of the family, had worked for the police of the Republic of Estonia (Figure 1), and the family was preparing to leave for abroad to escape the occupation. The suitcases had been packed, but father said at the last moment, “We are not going to leave Estonia for anywhere. I have no blood on my hands and no reason to flee from my homeland.” Helje, being excited about travel, was a little disappointed, but mother who was worried about the son Toivo who was only a few months old could breathe a sigh of relief. But in the complicated post-war situation, she had to keep up the family almost alone for thirteen years. Father went to his parents' farm in Lääne-Virumaa County and disappeared without a trace. According to official documents, he was dead.



Figure 1. Helje Kaarma with her parents in 1936 (Photo by Walter Lember, Tallinn).

Helje had a talent for music, and she attended two schools in parallel – the ordinary school and music school where she learned to play the piano. This means that there was no party at Kivimäe school where she did not play – either solo or as a piano accompanist or both. There were also other piano players at school, but usually Helje was chosen to perform as she was the best. Her obligations at school parties, however, did not end with performing as a pianist. There were no school bands or DJs then; schoolchildren danced to piano music. Later, Helje said, “I got used to never having an opportunity to dance as I always had to play to dance.” Despite beautiful appearance, Helje did not shine on the dance floor of school parties; she was serious and hard-working, a successful student. And no one knew that she hid a shocking secret – now and then, she met a man who was officially dead – his father.

Helje successfully completed Tallinn Secondary School No. 7 and Tallinn Music School; so, at the early age of 18, she already had a profession – the qualification of a music teacher. But this was not her way. After a year of searches, she became convinced that she should continue her studies at the Faculty of

Medicine at Tartu State University. She graduated from the university *cum laude* in 1958 and started working as a gynaecologist at Tartu maternity hospital. With her help, many little citizens of Tartu were born to this world; the older of them are already parents or grandparents.

Already as a student, Helje married Arvid Kaarma, a student of veterinary science, and lived together with him for nearly half a century, until Arvid's death. Their friendly and hard-working family brought up two daughters, but Helje also offered her home to her parents at the end of their life. About twenty years ago, Helje took care of even two wheelchair gentlemen – her husband and father who passed away at nearly the same time.

A characteristic of the family of Kaarmas was their orientation to science. Their main hobby was research, writing and publication of articles. For a long time, Helje worked as a lecturer at the University of Tartu, being an associate professor and, having achieved the highly esteemed professor's qualifications from the Higher Attestation Commission in Moscow, was an extraordinary professor at the University of Tartu for a number of years.

Being appreciated as a wise and experienced gynaecologist, Helje supported all her friends and their daughters in their worries during pregnancy and childbirth. In her research, however, although it began from pregnant women, she dealt with broader issues. Having noticed that pregnant women with different body build experienced different problems at childbirth, she began to research the impact of body build on the course of pregnancy as a potential risk factor. Among other things, she was interested in the possibility to predict the child's weight and body measurements by measuring the mother during pregnancy – this theme was topical before the ultrasound research of the foetus became part of everyday medical practice.

Scientific treatment of all these themes required detailed anthropological measuring. Helje acquired the methodology of anthropological measuring, studied the works of the father of Estonian anthropology Juhan Aul and got acquainted with him in person and trained assistants who could collect reliable data about various body measurements (Figure 2).

To store the collected data and make them available for use, Helje Kaarma founded the Estonian Anthropological Register where the results of all the anthropometric measurements were saved in a unified system. This became a small centre; an overview of their activities was published in print for several years in the *Yearbook of the Estonian Anthropometric Register*. This was a remarkable step towards the mainstay of top-level present-day science – data science.



Figure 2. Helje Kaarma addressing Juhan Aul at the opening of Juhan Aul's 90th jubilee exhibition at the Library of the University of Tartu (October 14, 1987).

In her doctoral thesis, Helje analysed comparatively pregnant and non-pregnant women's body build. For this, considering the abundance of measurements, an appropriate system of measurements was needed. This laid the basis for one of Helje's most essential research results – creation of an original system of body measurements which was based on the statistical values of height and weight. This “Estonian measurement system” has even been internationally commented and used.

Helje found applications for her measurement system in many areas. It was also suitable for describing the body build of men, schoolchildren and people of any age; it could be used for analysing athletes' performance (in the doctoral thesis of her daughter Raini Stamm).

Considering the putative correlation between body build and nutrition, Helje and her students devised a methodology for assessment and measuring of nutrition decades before it became a fad in the society, and she received interesting and innovative results in this area too.

Helje was an excellent organiser; she knew how to gather a team around her who appreciated her efforts and supported her devotedly. So, she could achieve the creation of the Centre for Physical Anthropology at the Institute of Anatomy of the University of Tartu and the revitalisation of the Anthropology Section at the Estonian Naturalists' Society, which also celebrated Juhan Aul's birth anniversary each year with a seminar or conference (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Helje Kaarma speaking at the conference dedicated to the 110th birth anniversary of Juhan Aul (April 2007, Tartu).

At that, Helje was a scientist of international renown and considered this very important. She was a member of the European Anthropological Association and participated in several international anthropological conferences and also arranged them in Estonia. She methodically submitted the results of the members of her school to the best and most famous international academic journals. Thanks to her contribution, a number of young researchers have obtained doctoral degrees under her supervision. Helje should be recognised for initiating studies in areas whose significance the research community has noticed only decades later.

In the late 1980s, Helje Kaarma started to take care of publishing of anthropological research papers. Until then, collections of articles on anthropology had appeared irregularly as collections in the series *Transactions of Tartu State University*. They contained mainly J. Aul's research results in Estonian (with summaries in Russian and German). The collection edited by Helje Kaarma, *Topical Issues of Anthropology*, published in 1988 in Russian on J. Aul's 90th birthday, was already a respectable international collection which contained, along with Estonian authors, articles by Lithuanian, Russian and Belarusian scientists. The fifth collection, which was dedicated to J. Aul's 95th birthday, was

already published in English under the title *Papers on Anthropology*. H. Kaarma founded a dignified international editorial board for the collection, and from that time onwards it has appeared consistently every year and is cited in representative international databases. Since 2014, the publication has appeared twice a year in the capacity of a journal.

Along with the voluminous research work that continued until her last breath, Helje was a loving grandmother to her eleven grandchildren. She followed the endeavours of each of them with interest and tried to contribute to their wellbeing. Helje's large family unanimously supported their dignified grandmother to the end of her long and productive life.

The present writer has been Helje's companion from primary school at Kivimäe and colleague and co-author at many of her later doings.

Address for correspondence:

Ene-Margit Tiit

Institute of Mathematics and Statistics, University of Tartu

Narva 18, 50409, Tartu, Estonia

E-mail: ene.tiit@ut.ee