

HEINO AHVEN (Tallinn)

FIFTY YEARS OF THE MOTHER TONGUE SOCIETY

Last spring, Estonian linguists celebrated a memorable occasion, the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the "Emakeele Selts" (The Mother Tongue Society), now affiliated to the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR. In the course of a half-century, the organization has been a centre of studies of the Estonian language, and has played a significant role in the development of linguistic thought.

The Mother Tongue Society started its activities at Tartu University in the spring of 1920. At that time, problems of the Estonian language were the concern of the Estonian Literary Society in Tartu. The agenda of that Society included, apart from the Estonian language, a wide range of subjects connected with Estonian national culture. The committee on the language dealt mainly with the regulation of the literary language, and, to a smaller extent, with creating new terms and collecting material on Estonian dialects. The work in the latter sphere was rather neglected, being partly of amateurish standards, and could not satisfy more serious demands. The need arose for an organization or institution that would concentrate upon the study and development of Estonian in a thorough manner.

The initiator of the new, specifically linguistic society was Professor Lauri Kettunen, a Finn, the then lecturer in Baltic-Fennic languages at Tartu University. On his initiative, eighteen people assembled at the foundation meeting on March 23, 1920. Those present included professors L. Kettunen, M. J. Eisen, J. Jõgever and M. Vasmer. The foundation of a linguistic society was declared necessary, and it was decided to give it the name of the Mother Tongue Society*. A month later, another foundation meeting was held, with the participation of thirty people. The meeting adopted the draft of the regulations. At the beginning, however, some papers were read, the first in the history of the Society. A. Saaberik (later Saareste) spoke about the "Study of Dialects", and L. Kettunen — on the "After-collection of Folklore". In the same spring, a third meeting was organized as well. On May 8, the participants (already 50 in number) listened to the reports made by Prof. L. Kettunen, Prof. M. Vasmer and Prof. M. J. Eisen. The meeting also elected the board of the Society. L. Kettunen was elected the first chairman, and J. V. Veski — deputy chairman. It is thus that the newly-established society began its activities.

According to the first regulations, the aims of the society were formulated modestly enough: "The Academic Mother Tongue Society,

* Some time later, the name was supplemented by the epithet "Academic" — "Akadeemiline Emakeele Selts" (The Academic Mother Tongue Society), abbreviated as AES. From 1950 onwards, the name "Emakeele Selts" (ES) has been re-adopted.

attached to Tartu University, aims at awakening an interest in the knowledge, development and study of the Estonian language, with due attention to literature, folklore, ethnology and related languages". Those aims have been borne in mind throughout the existence of the Mother Tongue Society, though formulated in a different way in subsequent versions of the regulations. In fact, however, the activities of the society soon went beyond the original narrow "interest-awakening" limits and turned to actual research work.

In the first year, the activities of the Society took the form of meetings where papers were read, the solution of various problems of correct linguistic usage, propaganda in favour of an Estonification of foreign-sounding surnames, and research into related languages (Livonian and Votic). In the second year (1921), publication activities were started. The third year saw the foundation of two publications which later proved of particular significance: the Society began publishing the journal "Eesti Keel" (The Estonian Language) and started a systematic collection of dialectal material. Since the very beginning, the range of the Society's interests has also included the related languages, folklore, and ethnography.

Thus, the activities of the Mother Tongue Society proceeded in several spheres, gaining in scope whenever possible. After the re-establishment of Soviet power in Estonia in 1940, the question arose of reorganizing linguistic research work on a large scale, within the framework of a research institute, and in the summer of 1941 the workers of the Society joined the staff of the research institute. The outbreak of war cancelled a number of large-scale plans. In 1941—1944, during the years of the fascist occupation of Estonia, the Mother Tongue Society was not given permission to work. Nevertheless, the existing dialect collections were taken care of, and some additional dialectal material was gathered.

In 1945, the Mother Tongue Society could resume its activities. In connection with the establishment of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR, it was decided to transfer the Society from Tartu University to the Academy of Sciences (1946). On the basis of the personnel and dialect collections of the Society, the Institute of Language and Literature founded a special Sector of Language Studies, which also carries out research into Estonian dialects. The tasks of both the Institute and the Society were clearly defined. The Society was entrusted with the tasks of popularizing the achievements of Soviet linguistics, organizing public meetings, collecting dialectal material, mainly with the assistance of local amateurs (dialect correspondents), providing advice on problems connected with the Estonian language, and of publishing language materials. In the following years, the Mother Tongue Society has successfully fulfilled these tasks.

The organization of public meetings has been one of the primary duties of the Society. In the early years of the Society's activities, this work was carried on rather intensively. For example, in 1920, 7 meetings were arranged, at which 19 reports were made, in 1921 — 8 meetings with 20 reports, and in 1922 — 10 meetings with 27 reports, etc. In later years, the number of the meetings was usually 6—8 a year, 3—4 each term. The meetings were held in Tartu and the papers were read mainly by faculty members of the University. It was only seldom that students or language teachers, or other persons interested in the language addressed such meetings.

From 1953 onwards, the Mother Tongue Society decided to arrange lecture meetings in Tallinn as well. The reason was, of course, the

transfer of the Institute of Language and Literature from Tartu to Tallinn in that year; in connection with that transfer, a large number of the members of the Society, workers of the Institute, had come to live in the capital. Since that time, the lecture meetings have been held both in Tartu (5—6 meetings a year) and Tallinn (2—4 lecture meetings a year). The range of the subject-matter discussed has been fairly wide. The most frequent themes have been connected with the current literary language and correct usage, but there have also been reports on the history of the language, dialects, the word stock, grammatical structure, related languages, both near and distant, general theoretical problems, reports on language expeditions, conferences, scientific congresses, etc. In the Sector of Folklore, which has been active since the autumn of 1966, a number of questions concerning folklore studies and ethnography have been dealt with.

In recent years, the Mother Tongue Society has been holding language meetings all over the Estonian SSR. Since 1961, so-called "language days" have been organized by the Society. The reason for their arrangement was the wish to intensify the propaganda of the language, by introducing topical linguistic problems to a wider public, including, first and foremost, teachers of the Estonian language, and by awakening a general interest in linguistics, and creating closer contacts with language amateurs. The first language day was held at Viljandi on October 7, 1961. It evoked a wide response, and, since that time, similar meetings have been held in other district centres as well. Up to the present the number of language days that have been held amounts to 28, and that of reports presented on those occasions — to 153.

On language days, the main stress has been laid on the culture of the language and problems of correct usage (there have been numerous discussions of the kind of language used in local papers, by institutions, trading organizations and by schoolchildren). There have also been numerous reports on Estonian dialects and dialectology, the history of the literary language, related languages as well as the work of the Mother Tongue Society, etc. Some special language days have been arranged for the pupils of secondary schools, and some days have been devoted to a focal theme. In 1968, the language day held in Tartu was devoted to proper names, and the Võru and Tõrva language days in 1969 — to problems of dialectology. At these meetings papers were read not only by philologists, but also by numerous teachers, journalists, and many amateur scholars. For example, the speakers at the language day in Kiviõli included workers of the local oil-shale and chemical industries, etc. At a number of language days, interesting papers were also read by senior pupils of secondary schools. The participants in the language days (mostly teachers and pupils) have been as a rule numerous, mostly exceeding 100, and sometimes amounting to 200—300. In the arrangement of such days, the local educational authorities have been of great assistance.

The Mother Tongue Society has also organized various conferences together with the Institute of Language and Literature and Tartu State University. In 1963 and 1964, in collaboration with the association "Science", two cycles of lectures were organized on the subject "About Language and Linguistics", etc. In commemoration of the late Academician J. V. Veski, long-time chairman and honorary member of the Society, a J. V. Veski Day was instituted in 1968, to be held every June on the Academician's birthday.

The main task of the Society has been the collection and study of dialectal material. In the second decade of the present century this work was to a certain extent performed by the Estonian Literary Society. In 1921, under a mutual agreement, the Mother Tongue Society assumed the entire responsibility for dialect studies. A special committee was organized, which drew up a detailed programme of systematic dialect studies. A. Saareste was to direct all the work on dialects. It was intended in the course of ten years to compile a full collection of the word stock of 30 parishes (which could serve as a basis for a future dictionary of the popular language or a dialect dictionary), and, in addition, to collect place-names, phonological surveys, dialect texts, and other materials. The first dialect-collector was dispatched on an expedition by the Society in 1921. Systematic work on dialect-collecting, however, began in 1922, when the Society organized an expedition of 12 members (A. Saareste and 11 students). In the following years, the annual expeditions consisted of 20 to 30 scholars, according to the possibilities available. The lexical material collected was mainly based on Wiedemann's "Estnisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch". In addition phonological materials and dialect texts were also collected. From time to time, the collecting methods and tasks were revised so as to obtain as exhaustive and diverse materials as possible. The work proceeded under the guidance of the Dialect Committee headed by Professor A. Saareste (chairman) and A. Kask (deputy chairman).

By the end of 1940, the total collection consisted of about 722,000 dialectal word cards, 56,000 place-names, over 6,400 pages of dialect texts from nearly all the parishes, as well as abundant phonological and morphological surveys of dialects, etc.

In addition to students and professional researchers, local language amateurs were also invited to assist in collecting dialectal material. In the very first years of the Society, A. Saareste, from time to time, published questionnaires in the press, requesting amateurs to send in their answers. Those questionnaires were mostly concerned with the occurrence of some dialectal words, their pronunciation and meaning. Towards the end of the 1930s, the Mother Tongue Society raised the question of the organization of a permanent network of correspondents. H. Keem, a student, took that task upon herself. She tackled the job with great enthusiasm, drawing up a set of instructions and a list of duties for correspondents. She asked beginners to send in their first work for inspection, revised those papers and returned them in a corrected form, and in case of need, requested that a new trial work be sent in. Thanks to her systematic and efficient supervision, a network of correspondents came into being. In 1940, the Society organized a competition in the collection of dialect texts by correspondents, and the results exceeded expectations. By January 1, 1941, the final date of the presentation of the works, 15 papers had been handed in, containing 894 pages of dialect texts on various themes: old tales, old-time farming, women's handiwork, old dishes, beverages, etc.

The next competitions also yielded good results, providing the Society with extremely valuable material, both verbal and textual (old buildings, the extraction of tar, charcoal-burning, land-cultivation and cattle-raising, men's and women's handiwork, ancient holidays and feasts, utilization of forests, etc). After the war, the network of correspondents had to be organized anew, and that work was entrusted to the author of the present paper, as part of his functions as managing secretary of the Mother Tongue Society.

At the present time, the number of correspondents exceeds 60. Since 1957, competitions have been started again, all of which have been successful. In addition to regular correspondents, other persons have also participated in the competitions, including numerous pupils of secondary schools. By means of competitions, and otherwise, the Society has obtained many dialect texts on a great number of subjects, dialect words, place-names, animal names, popular sayings, phraseological material, etc.

In the course of some thirty years (1940—1969), the amateur dialect-collectors have provided the Mother Tongue Society with 38,600 pages of dialectal materials and about 199,200 word cards. These materials include 22,240 pages of dialect texts, 67,476 cards with place-names, 7,636 cards of surnames, proper names and animal names, over 6,000 cards of argot words, etc.

We should like to mention here some particularly capable correspondents: Marta Mäesalu (born in 1893), a former primary-school teacher, now a pensioner, who has for 50 years been collecting vocabulary items, phraseological material and dialect texts from Häädemeeste; Aadu Toomessalu (born in 1916), a carpenter with an elementary education, resident of Saaremaa, who has provided the Society with approximately 4,000 pages of texts (dialectal and others) and over 19,000 word cards from Saaremaa; Eduard Leppik (born in 1924), a university graduate and teacher of Estonian, who has collected over 9,100 cards with place-names from Väike-Maarja; Gustav Vilbaste (1885—1967), a biologist, whose contribution amounts to about 6,000 pages (dialect texts, local lore descriptions, dialectal vocabulary material and place-names) and about 10,000 word cards, mainly from Kuusalu and Jõelähtme; Aino Källo (born in 1909), a housewife, secondary-school graduate, who has sent us over 1,200 pages and 14,800 word cards of diverse material from Lügánuse; Theodor Saar (born in 1906), a retired schoolteacher, whose rich contribution contains dialect texts, vocabulary material, place-names, etc., from the Island of Kihnu; Ernst Raudsepp (1909—1966), a gardener with a secondary-school education, who, in the course of a few years, managed to collect over 5,600 place-names from the Tori parish.

The activities of the network of correspondents are supervised by the Dialect Committee (M. Must, chairman, and H. Kaal, adviser).

The publishing activities of the Mother Tongue Society were started in 1921. In that year, the following brochures of the transactions of the Society were published: L. Kettunen "Nimede valik ja soetamine" (The Choice of Names and Their Acquisition), "Liivi lugemik" I (A Livonian Reader I), and a small collection of Finnish folk-tales "Valkea käärme" (The White Snake). The almanac "Akadeemilise Emakeele Seltsi Aastaraamat" (Year-Book of the Academic Mother Tongue Society) I, 1920, appeared in that year as well. Between 1921 and 1940, four more year-books were issued as well as 47 issues of transactions, the majority representing re-prints of other publications. Of the more substantial works published, the most significant were: A. Saareste, A. R. Cederberg "Valik eesti kirjakeele vanemaid mälestisi" (A Selection of the Oldest Sources of Literary Estonian) I—II, 1927—1937, J. Mägiste "Soome-eesti sõnaraamat" (Finnish-Estonian Dictionary), 1931, and V. Tauli "Õigekeelsuse ja keelekorralduse põhimõtted ja meetodid" (Principles and Methods of Orthology and Language Regulation), 1938.

"Eesti Keel" (The Estonian Language) was the organ of the Mother Tongue Society. It began appearing in 1922, and was published for 19 years running. The journal reflects the whole of Estonian linguistics during that period. The editors-in-chief of the journal were J. Mark (1922—1923), A. Saareste (1923—1931), J. Mägiste (1932—1935), and J. V. Veski (1936—1940).

After the war, the major publication of the Society has been the "Emakeele Seltsi Aastaraamat" (Year-Book of the Mother Tongue Society) published regularly since 1956, Editor-in-Chief — Academician P. Ariste.

The "Emakeele Seltsi Toimetised" (Transactions of the Mother Tongue Society) have appeared since 1958. They include 8 works: "Johannes Voldemar Veski keelilisi töid" (Linguistic Works of Johannes Voldemar Veski), 1958; A. Kask "Võitlus vana ja uue kirjaviisi vahel XIX sajandi eesti kirjakeeles" (The Struggle between the Old and the New Orthography in the Estonian Literary Language of the 19th Century), 1958; P. Palmeos "Karjala Valdai murrak" (The Valdaian Dialect of Karelian), 1962; three works by P. Ariste — "Vadjalaste laule" (Vote Songs), 1960, "Vadja muinasjutte" (Vote Folk-Tales), 1962, and "Vadja rahvakalender" (Vote People's Calendar), 1969. On the occasion of Academician J. V. Veski's 90th birthday the festschrift "Nonaginta" was published in 1963, and on Academician P. Ariste's 50th birthday — the collection "Sõna sõna kõrvale" (Word next to Word), 1965. The Mother Tongue Society has also published three volumes of dialect texts collected by correspondents: "Valimik Emakeele Seltsi korrespondentide murdetekste" (A Selection of Dialect Texts Collected by Correspondents of the Mother Tongue Society) 1, 1956; "Pajatusi põhjarannikult" (Tales from the Northern Coast), 1957; "Tuulik, kadakas ja leib" (Wind-Mill, Juniper, and Bread), 1969. The popular-scientific publication "Kodumurre" (The Native Dialect), 9 issues of which have appeared since 1960, has won wide-spread recognition. This publication also contains instructions and questionnaires for dialect-collectors. Its predecessor in 1949—1958 was "Kogumistöö juhendaja eesti keele alal" (A Guide to Work on Collecting Data about the Estonian Language), of which 7 issues appeared.

Finally, some general data on the Mother Tongue Society.

At the end of 1920, the year of the foundation, there were 43 members; at the end of 1940, their number also slightly exceeded 40. In some years before the war, the Society had a membership exceeding 100. At the present time, there are 245 active members and 2 honorary members, the latter being Friedebert Tuglas, writer, member of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR, and August Arnist, D. Sc. (Philology). Of the active members, about 52 per cent are research workers at scientific institutions and higher schools, 14 per cent — teachers of Estonian at schools, 11 per cent — editors and correctors, 11 per cent — pensioners, etc.

The Mother Tongue Society now has two permanent committees. These are the Language Committee (Chairman R. Kull), which deals with questions of correct usage, and the Dialect Committee (Chairman M. Must), which directs the activities of the network of correspondents. There is also a Sector of Folklore (Chairman U. Kolk).

The functions of Chairman of the Society have been entrusted to L. Kettunen (1920—1924), A. Saareste (1925—1933, 1935, 1936—1941), J. Mägiste (1934, 1936), J. V. Veski (1946—1968), and A. Kask (1944, 1968—1970).