

Helmi Kurrik – a Female Ethnologist behind the Scenes

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Abstract

Helmi Kurrik (1883–1960) was the only female researcher who stood out in the Estonian ethnology of the 1930s. Yet she remained largely unknown in historiography until recently, associated only with the great handbook on Estonian folk costumes, published in 1938. Helmi Kurrik did not enter the academic world until she was in her forties. The twists and turns of her long life reflect the choices and constraints of Estonian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She made a career at the Estonian National Museum, the centre of the newly established discipline of ethnology. Both her research themes and theoretical approaches, as well as her work as a curator of folk art exhibitions abroad and her contacts with foreign colleagues, illustrate the international nature of ethnology at the time. Helmi Kurrik fled to the West after World War II and adapted to a new life in the USA, but she was unable to continue her research in exile, although fellow refugee ethnologists tried to find publication opportunities for her.

Keywords: female researchers, history of ethnology, folk art exhibition, applied ethnology, folk costumes, Helmi Kurrik

The writings, notes, and drawings of the Estonian ethnologist Helmi Kurrik (1883–1960) comprise 14 volumes and since the early 1980s they have been part of the Baltic Archives stored in the Swedish National Archives (SE-RA) in Stockholm. Most of the scientific materials that came to the archive were packed in suitcases which accompanied Helmi Kurrik when she fled her homeland to Germany in the autumn of 1944. Some of the materials were created in exile, initially in displaced-persons camps in Germany and later in California, USA, where she emigrated with her sister Elly Kurrik (1889–1981) in 1951. These materials arrived in Sweden by complex routes sometime around 1981, but the impetus was Helmi Kurrik's desire to have her legacy preserved in Europe.

Although Helmi Kurrik's writings have survived, few scholars have used them. She is little known and too temporally distant to have attracted much attention. For a long time, Helmi Kurrik was just a name in general

historiographies of Estonian ethnology, associated with the great handbook of Estonian folk costumes (Kurrik 1938). Male-centred disciplinary histories were common in general for a long time, with a change coming only towards the end of the twentieth century (Svanfeldt-Winter 2019:11–15). Although the role of women in ethnology has been important from the beginning, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that their share of researchers increased significantly, with a corresponding decline in the proportion of men (Klein 2013). Helmi Kurrik was a remarkable researcher whose scholarly contribution was confined to the 1930s by external circumstances. She did not publish much, but a closer analysis of her research activities reveals her important role in Estonian ethnology at that time. The twists and turns of her long life reflect the choices and constraints of Estonian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in other words, the impact of the political and social environment on individual self-determination.

I discuss some telling aspects of Helmi Kurrik's life, placing them in a historical context.¹ I take the view that scholarship should be considered a political and intellectual project (cf. Rogan 2012:598). Individual researchers are those who define, articulate, and reflect the field (Jacobsen 2005:171) but are at the same time embedded in given social and political surroundings. The treatment of the hitherto marginalized researcher opens up a broader view of the current historiography, helping us to understand that scholarship is much more than just about great studies and important men.

Helmi Kurrik was respected by her contemporaries but remained in the background in later historiography. I am interested in her as a female ethnologist who worked in a male-dominated academic world. Her long educational journey reflects the status of women at the time, while at the same time testifying to her extraordinary determination to chart her course in life. I will analyse the reasons why she was only able to pursue an academic career as a middle-aged woman, and I will describe the context of her university studies, which coincided with the beginning of the discipline of ethnology in Estonia. Her career as a researcher illustrates the development of Estonian ethnology and its interconnectedness with corresponding disciplines in other European countries. I will take a closer look at her curated folk art exhibitions in Europe and her participation in international conferences. I will also examine how Helmi Kurrik's work as a researcher related to the debates around the ideology of nationalism and cultural heritage. By the end of her time in Estonia, Helmi Kurrik had made a career for herself and reached the position of head of the Department of Ethnography at Eesti Rahva Muuseum (ERM; Estonian National Museum). I am interested in how this related to the male-centric society at the time. Through her person, I will delve into the situation of Estonian ethnology during World War II.

The article concludes with an analysis of her efforts to pursue research in exile, questioning the importance of (her own) academic community in her life as a scholar. My research draws on archival documents, correspondence, and the press, as well as Helmi Kurrik's research.

The Roughness of the Educational Path

Helmi Kurrik was born in 1883 in Tartu as a daughter of Juhan Kurrik (1849–1922), a well-known pedagogue and author of school textbooks. At the time, Tartu was a provincial town in the Livonia Governorate of the Russian Empire, administrated by Baltic German nobles, and home to the region's only (initially German but later Russian) university but also the centre of the Estonian national movement. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this national movement transformed Estonian society from a peasant population into a self-conscious nation, which achieved national independence in 1918. Juhan Kurrik, a schoolteacher, participated in this movement as an advocate of national education (Prints 1994) which suggests that the Kurrik family have a good knowledge of the ideas of Estonian nationalism, which they discussed with intellectuals who visited them.

Helmi Kurrik's childhood and adolescence coincided with the era of Russification in every sphere of life of the people living in the Russian Empire, which meant being educated in Russian (except for religious education and mother tongue classes) and restrictions on national activities. However, there is no precise information about Helmi Kurrik's early education. In 1900, she passed the professional examination before the committee of the St Petersburg School District, which permitted her to teach French and German.² For the next ten years, she worked as a home teacher in Russia, Finland, and France because initially it was not possible to find a formal teaching job in her homeland. Women were only given the right to teach in parish schools in Estonia in 1902. Before that year, Estonian society did not consider teaching as an appropriate activity for women, and even afterwards it was viewed with caution (Kirss 2018:456), although the families of Russians and Baltic Germans did respect and employ Estonian female home teachers (Hinrikus 2011:39).

History does not record whether Helmi Kurrik would have wanted to go on studying, which was probably impossible for financial reasons – there were six children in the family and Juhan Kurrik's schoolteacher's salary was not large.³ Women at the time could not pursue higher education in the Russian Empire. Many young Estonian women studied at universities in France, Switzerland, and the Nordic universities (Kivimäe & Tamul 1999). The University of Tartu (UT) did not allow women to take courses until 1905 and did not accept women as full-time students until 1915 (Tamul 1999).

In 1911 Helmi Kurrik returned to live in Estonia, working initially as a language teacher and later, during World War I and the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920) as a nurse in Tartu’s Red Cross hospital. The end of the war period marked the close of a major cultural shift in Estonian society, characterized by an accelerated transition from a predominantly oral peasant society to a modern written urban society (Kannike 2022:13; Kivimäe 2015). Women’s social activism had blossomed under wartime conditions because with men away on the front line, women had increasing roles to play. Helmi Kurrik was actively involved in the women’s movement. She belonged to many organizations that dealt with social and health issues (Tartu Women’s Society, Estonian Nurse Society, Tartu Estonian Kindergarten Society, and later also the Estonian Soroptimist Club). Unfortunately, after 1920 she could not work as a nurse for health reasons.

Helmi Kurrik represents the first generation of a “new” active woman in Estonian history, born in the 1880s (Kirss 2018:457). These were women who felt equal to men and behaved accordingly, although for most of them their main ideological foundation was not radical feminism, but cultural nationalism. Helmi Kurrik never married or had children, which probably made it easier for her to continue her studies and pursue a career. At the same time, she did not meet the norms of society. The opinion that women belong to the tripartite sphere of *Kinder-Küche-Kirche* (Children-Kitchen-Church) was stubbornly disappearing – a change that only took place in Estonia at the end of the 1930s (Kannike 2021). Women were widely expected to be married and quit work all over Europe until World War II (Svanfeldt-Winter 2019:225). It was still considered unusual for women to attend universities and claim economic independence (Mackinnon 1997:5).

Estonia emerged from the war years as an independent republic, which presaged a great political, societal, and cultural upheaval. The Estonian-language University of Tartu was opened to replace the older German and Russian ones. Several Estonian-based disciplines were founded, including folkloristics and ethnology to foster national feelings among new Estonian generations and in society in general. As the proportion of Estonian intellectuals in the society was small, several Finnish and Swedish professors and lecturers were invited to teach at the university.

Helmi Kurrik worked at the Tartu Meteorology Observatory in the first half of the 1920s as an office clerk. She had probably got the job thanks to her brother who worked in the same institution. Around this period, Helmi Kurrik realized she wanted to pursue higher education. To obtain the necessary qualifications, she first graduated from a local evening grammar school and in 1925 – at the age of 42 – started her studies at the university. Initially, she continued to work at the observatory to support her studies.⁴ Helmi Kurrik took courses in history, philology, ethnology, and archaeology. She was greatly influenced by Finnish scholars, such as the

historian Arno Rafael Cederberg (1885–1948)⁵ and the ethnographer Ilmari Manninen (1894–1935).⁶ Cederberg's methodologically sound seminars provided a basis for doing research (see fig. 1).⁷ Through the associate professor of ethnography I. Manninen, Helmi Kurrik established a connection with ERM, where Manninen was a director. She joined the museum at the beginning of 1928, starting her career as an assistant in the Department of Ethnography. According to her study book, she initially dedicated herself to history and language studies, but as her studies were prolonged and her work at the museum was intense and interesting, she finally chose ethnology as her main subject.⁸

The field of ethnology in the interwar period was newly established (with a docentship created in 1924) and learning was divided between UT and ERM (established in 1909). Under Manninen's leadership and following the example of neighbouring countries (Russia and Finland), peasant material culture was established as a central object of research, which was analysed based on typological, cartographic, and historical-geographical methods. Even before a place was created for ethnology as a separate discipline at UT and it was connected to the museum's artefact collections through both the teacher and the research area, the chair of folkloristics was also established at the university in 1919, with Walter Anderson (1885–1965)



Figure 1. Professor A. R. Cederberg with his history students. First row from the left: Wilhelm Jantra, Helmi Kurrik, Arno Rafael Cederberg, unknown woman, Evald Blumfeldt. Second row from the left: Ada Piirak, Aliide Vanak (Kaldre), Jaan Konks. ÜAM (University of Tartu Museum) F 165:29.

as professor (Jaago 2003). The two related subjects were taught separately, but ethnologists often used folkloristic sources in their research. The disciplines converged to some extent in the 1930s, when folkloristics tended to be more “ethnological” (Berg 2002:27), and ethnologists expanded their field of study to social and spiritual aspects of culture (Metslaid 2016a; 2022). Since UT and ERM were in the same town and the number of students was small, cooperation between the two institutions was very close. The museum provided a source base for ethnological studies and became a centre of learning, often hosting seminars and lectures, and in addition to its collections there was a specialized library. Bright students were quickly recruited to work at ERM, which determined the final career choice for many of them. Previously one discipline or another had been considered, but working at the museum often tipped the balance in favour of ethnology. Thus, education was seamlessly intertwined with practical professional knowledge.

In 1939, Helmi Kurrik defended her Master’s thesis in ethnology, entitled “Blood in the food economy” (*Veri söögimajanduses*, Kurrik 1939), the first woman in her field in Estonia, followed by Aita Hanko (1901–1979) and Ella Koern (1905–1971) in 1942.⁹ At that time, the study of food culture was not yet a significant phenomenon in European ethnology, although some studies had appeared. Food was mainly related to the study of other topics in culture and museums in different countries were still collecting material on food rather than developing a specific research theme.¹⁰ The rise to prominence of food research only from the 1970s onwards has also been attributed to the influence of feminism and women’s studies, which legitimized food as “a domain of human behaviour so heavily associated with women over time and across cultures” (Counihan & Van Esterik 2013:2).

Food was a new subject in Estonian ethnology, too. Manninen had seen food research as part of the study of folk culture as a whole – the pieces (different phenomena of folk culture) had to be put together (special studies) to achieve a holistic view of Estonian folk culture. The collection of information about food culture began already during his time in ERM and continued later in the 1930s when special questionnaires were compiled and sent to rural areas to collect reminiscences of food (Ränk 1971:146). Helmi Kurrik chose one particular phenomenon for her Master’s thesis – food made of blood – and succeeded. Her opponents, colleagues Ferdinand Linnus (1895–1942) and Gustav Ränk (1902–1998), praised the novelty and necessity of the work not only in the context of ethnology in Estonia but also of neighbouring countries.¹¹ Although they criticized some of her conclusions,¹² they were ultimately satisfied that her study is not only a description and systematization of Estonian material, but “has sought to penetrate deeper into the cultural-historical core of questions and problems using comparison of terminology and customs”.¹³ As the layer of food

studies in ethnology was thin at the time, Helmi Kurrik relied on the work of historians, doctors, biologists, folklorists, etc. from Sweden, Germany and Finland (e.g. Celander, Campell, Keyland, Kuusi, Lichtenfelt, Heyne, Strack). In addition, the specific topic (blood) made it necessary to draw on religious studies literature.

Finding a Professional Vocation

The pre-World War II academic world in the Nordic countries has been described as a very male-centred environment (Klein 2013; Karlsson, Minganti & Svanberg 2016). Estonian society was also male-dominated, women did not participate much in politics and social debate, and they were excluded from leading positions in state institutions (Mäelo 1999). Although women's role in society had been on the rise since the beginning of the twentieth century, for a long time their emancipation was still viewed with caution (Kannike 2021). ERM's history is somewhat exceptional in this context. Although working women were generally viewed with caution, the museum was a place where they could get a job and, in time, in the right circumstances, a career. This can be attributed to the shortage of professionals in the young republic.

Helmi Kurrik's linguistic skills probably played a decisive role in her recruitment at the beginning of 1928 (Ränk 1983). In addition to Estonian, she was fluent in French, German, and Russian, and also spoke (some) English, Finnish, Swedish, Italian, and Latin.¹⁴ Therefore, Helmi Kurrik became responsible for the ERM's correspondence and book exchanges with foreign institutions.¹⁵ She was also a guide for foreign guests at the museum. However, her main task was taking care of its textile collection. Helmi Kurrik has written that when Manninen invited her to work at the museum, he left these three areas under her responsibility.¹⁶

Director Manninen decided to leave Estonia at the end of 1928 and return to Finland, as did other Nordic scholars who had come to teach in Tartu (Talve 1992:65–66). He had taken the activities of the museum to a scientifically high level and laid the foundations for ethnology. A generation of Estonian scholars was growing up, albeit at an early stage and small in number. In addition to Helmi Kurrik, Ferdinand Linnus worked in the Department of Ethnography as head (he was hired in 1922) and Gustav Ränk as assistant (since 1926). Linnus also took over the Manninen's directorship. At the end of the 1920s, there were no other ethnologists working in Estonia. Aliise Moora (1900–1996) stayed at home and did not return to academic life until 1945.¹⁷ Helmi Kurrik fitted the profile of a museum worker and proved herself to be a talented researcher and popularizer.

Helmi Kurrik delved into the subject of folk textiles quickly and thoroughly. As early as 1930, a sliding-door display cabinet was installed in the

museum's permanent exhibition on Estonian folk culture.¹⁸ She had carefully selected some 2500 objects (e.g., belts, ribbons, embroidery, and lace) for the cabinet (Nõmmela 2009:34–35). Artefacts were arranged according to typology and geographical distribution. In line with the exhibition ideology of the time (Naguib 2007), the aim was to display as many scientifically arranged items as possible. The study of folk textiles based on the museum's collections had been pioneered by Manninen who published a book “The History of Estonian folk costumes” (*Eesti rahvariiete ajalugu*) in 1927 (Talve 1992:59). Helmi Kurrik took it upon herself to deal with the issue, as nobody else was interested in at the time. Subsequently, during the 1930s, she published a series of research articles on folk textiles in the museum's yearbook (Kurrik 1931; 1932a; 1934a; 1937a). She follows the theoretical and methodological foundations laid by Manninen, creating development series of individual objects and trying to explain their geographical distribution. She based her studies on the museum's collections and her fieldwork in several places in Estonia (Nõmmela 2009). At the same time, she sees the studied artefact as a part of folk culture and emphasizes the transience of the old peasant culture as an inevitability, something that was characteristic of all European ethnology at the time (see Löfgren 2008:122). Treatises analysed Estonian lace and various kinds of belts for the first time in local scholarship, which gives them a lasting value to this day.

Food economy also became a field of research for Helmi Kurrik, who began to study it soon after joining ERM. In ERM's 1929 yearbook, she published an article about a roasted-pulse mixture – *kama* in Estonian (Kurrik 1929). While doing fieldwork in western Estonia, she first heard about bloodless Christmas sausages, something unknown to her as a South Estonian. As an ethnologist, she set out to investigate the phenomenon, collecting material through questionnaires as well as in the field. First, an article was published in the museum's yearbook (Kurrik 1934b). By 1939, in addition to her stressful working life on the handbook of folk costumes (see below), she completed a comprehensive Master's thesis, “Blood in the Food Economy”, as mentioned above.

Manninen had started the yearbook in 1925 and it became the primary publication for ethnologists and representatives of related disciplines in those days.¹⁹ The circle of authors was not wide in the 1920s and 1930s, so every researcher could publish a new article in almost every issue. Helmi Kurrik was the only woman to publish multiple times in the yearbook – a total of seven articles, in each yearbook between 1928 and 1935, equal in number to Manninen (9), Linnus (6), and Ränk (8). Next to Helmi Kurrik, we find the names of other women – Helene Tõnson (later Master of Arts in Psychology), the folklorist and archaeologist Erna Ariste, the folklorist Menda Erenberg, the archaeologist Marta Schmiedehelm, of whom only the last one published two articles, the others limited to one.

When new students interested in ethnology appeared in the 1930s, most of them were women, many of them were taken on as simple assistants on temporary contracts (e.g. Hilja Sild, Ella Koern, Ida Kaldmaa).²⁰ The museum's ethnographic department needed staff, but it was not financially possible to increase the number of posts. However, when the situation changed during the war, it tended to be young men studying ethnology who got the secure posts (Helmut Hagar, Ilmar Talve). As an exception in the history of ERM, Helmi Üprus (1911–1978) stood out. She had studied art history and ethnology and applied for the post of museum secretary in 1935 and got the job a year later. She often deputized for the director and ran the museum reorganization during the Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941, after which she was appointed head of the museum's Department of Cultural History, a post she held until 1947 (Linnus 1988:64–67).

In 1939, Helmi Kurrik also had the opportunity to ascend the career ladder. She became assistant to the head of the Department of Ethnography, as Ränk moved to UT to become a professor. She had no rival: the circle of ethnologists was very small at that time, the researchers with degrees already had senior positions,²¹ and the rest were still studying at the university. The career upswing for Helmi Kurrik continued a year later – she became the head of the department, but now in, and partly due to, the changed political context. The Soviet Union occupied Estonia in August 1940 and began a



Figure 2. Helmi Kurrik (1950s-1960s).
ERM Fk 2926:208.

major transformation of Estonian society, including museums. Museums were nationalized, and their work was subordinated to Soviet ideology. At the same time, the number of posts was increased and the posts of Director and Head of the Department of Ethnography, which had been occupied by a single person since Manninen, were separated. Helmi Kurrik acted often also as director, while Linnus was actively involved in the restructuring of museums in Estonia. This remained the highest post of her career, which she held until her escape in 1944.

Obituaries written by her contemporaries and articles written on the occasion of anniversaries speak of Helmi Kurrik with great respect (see fig. 3). These texts highlight her extraordinary journey into ethnology and her great affection for the museum's textile collections. Eerik Laid, a colleague who had lived in exile in Sweden since 1944, considered her well-organized collections to be of a higher standard than corresponding collections in the leading Nordic museums (Laid 1960:207). At the same time, another colleague who lived in exile in Sweden after the war, Gustav Ränk brought in a gender perspective when talking about her and the textile collections: "as if it were self-evident that this female assistant was in charge of those collections and areas of activity that women also took care of in real life: knitwear, folk costumes and folk art, food economy" (Ränk 1983:10; cf. Counihan & Van Esterik 2013:2). As a woman, Helmi Kurrik was considered exceptional in a narrow circle of ethnologists at the

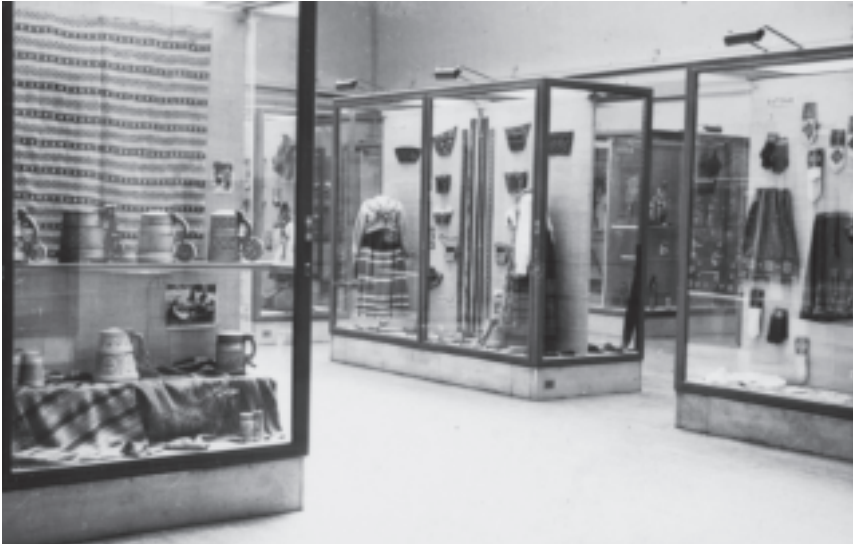


Figure 3. Tankards and folk costumes from Sörve and Muhu at the folk art exhibition in Paris, 1935. Photo: Valdemārs Ģinters, Helmi Kurrik. ERM Fk 722:5.

time. She had randomly started to study specifically feminine areas of folk culture, and Ränk noted this. Female ethnologists in the Nordic countries tended to study textiles and customs, too, as it was regarded as a suitable field of study for women (Klein 2013:136).

International Academic Communication

Although European ethnology from the outset has been highly national in essence, it has striven hard since the early twentieth century to become a comparative academic discipline. Its theoretical approach (diffusionism, the culture-historical school) necessitated an international perspective on study materials. The need for international cooperation grew steadily, starting from the need to make national materials available to a broad audience, and moved on to international projects on cartography and culture atlases, a European-wide bibliography, and terminology. However, Bjarne Rogan (2014) argues that international cooperation in the 1930s primarily meant comparison and charting of (historical) cultural areas.

Estonian ethnology was an integral part of international academic communication in Europe during the interwar period. It started with the exchange of ERM's yearbooks with other academic and cultural institutions in Europe, the USA, and Russia. As Helmi Kurrik spoke several languages, she started to coordinate such work at ERM and further, in the context of international exchanges, she arranged Estonian exhibitions abroad. In the summer of 1929, ERM sent her to Brussels to set up an exhibition on Estonian folk art. This was part of an international folk art exhibition that ran from June to October. Helmi Kurrik later wrote that it was the first time that Estonian folk art had reached such a wide Western European audience (Kurrik 1932b:16). She was impressed by the newly opened (in 1929) *Palais des Beaux-Arts*, which was primarily established for exhibitions, although she notes that the exposition could not have been "purely academic, i.e. the emphasis was also on the beauty of the exhibits, not so much on the details as the overall impression of the exhibits" (ibid.). There were 17 exhibitions representing countries from Europe, North America, and Asia. Estonia's exhibition (with minor changes) travelled further to other cities, such as Berlin, Cologne,²² and Vilnius in 1930. Helmi Kurrik was responsible for their correct setup. In 1935, the great Baltic folk art exhibition was held at the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro* (The Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum) in Paris for five months from 17 May to 15 October. She organized Estonia's part of the exhibition.²³

State and national interests drove ERM's activities abroad. Estonian authorities and diplomats wanted to introduce their country and one of the opportunities was to exhibit folk art, and at the same time there was interest from western European museums and their publics. As the coordinator of

ERM's exhibitions, Helmi Kurrik tried to maintain a scientific approach and achieve modern exhibition methods. In Brussels, for example, she had problems with local co-organizers, who not only considered a certain regional-specific coif (*mulgi tanu*) as a nappy but also wanted to achieve a more aesthetic overall impression with the objects (Nõmmela 2009:46). In Paris, together with co-organizers from Latvia and Lithuania, she had to push through an order for desperately needed mannequins so that the costumes could be properly displayed (*ibid.*:47–48, see fig. 3). According to Kurrik's reports, visitors' interest in Estonian exhibitions was high everywhere. Writing an overview of foreign exhibitions in 1932, she stressed the importance at the diplomatic level:

However, those persons who have had no relations with Estonia at all so far, prove that having become acquainted with Estonian folk art as one of the most important factors of the nation, they feel that Estonia itself is no longer a foreign country to them. This explains the importance of foreign exhibitions in international interaction, in creating and developing good relations. (Kurrik 1932b:17)

She placed foreign exhibitions in a national discourse, emphasizing the role of the museum and its collections in introducing Estonia and Estonian culture.

Curating exhibitions on the spot meant close contact with local colleagues and the possibility of introducing more widely the exhibition and Estonian folk culture in general. In the framework of the 1935 exhibition in Paris, Helmi Kurrik gave a lecture on Estonian folk art to the students of the ethnology department at the Sorbonne (Piiri 1990:191). In Paris, she also found herself in an unexpected situation, which she wrote about two decades later:

On the eve of the opening of the exhibition in Paris, I was suddenly asked to give a lecture on Estonian folklore. I was stunned. Back home, the two sciences of folklore and ethnography were quite separate, but the French meant both disciplines by this term. I was not aware of this at the time. Instinctively, I had the corresponding volume of the "Estonian encyclopaedia" with me from home. I put together what I was asked to do and for the first time in my life I gave a presentation in French on the radio about "Estonian folklore". And everything went well. (Helmi Kurrik's letter to O. A. Webermann, March 12, 1955, ERM Ak 12-59-10)

As in Finland and Sweden, ethnology and folklore were separate disciplines in Estonia, where they had diverged from each other long before institutionalization at the university level (Jaago 2003). Helmi Kurrik had not studied folklore and was only familiar with the field on a general cultural level. She defined herself as an ethnologist, a researcher on material folk culture. Communicating with foreign colleagues narrowly on the subject of folk textiles, it was easy to identify a common research discourse. However, even with this daunting task, she said she was able to cope well, despite the topic being outside the discourse.

Helmi Kurrik did not limit herself to curating exhibitions abroad; she was also eager to participate in international conferences. Just five years after starting at university, she wished to participate in CIAP's²⁴ second congress in 1930 in Antwerp, but due to shortage of money she could not travel and her paper was read out by the Central Secretariat (Metslaid 2016b:102).

Her second chance came years later. Thanks to her Paris connections, Helmi Kurrik was invited to attend the Congrès International de Folklore (the International Congress of Folklore) which was held in Paris in August 1937. She received a personal invitation from Georges Henri Rivière (1897–1985) – the renowned French innovator of France's ethnographic museology practices who had visited ERM among other Nordic museums²⁵ – to present a paper on Estonian folk costumes. Both the museum and Helmi Kurrik considered the invitation a great honour, but the economic aspect of participating in the conference caused confusion between her and her employer. Fifteen years later in exile, she wrote the following about what happened:

The invitation to this congress was not only a great honour for me personally but also, in my opinion, for our ERM. However, when I went to the director of the museum at the time [Ferdinand Linnus] to ask for travel expenses, the director replied that I should not expect any support from the museum, as the invitation was a private, personal one, and I should travel at my own expense if I wanted to take part. Even though it was difficult for me to make such a long trip on my small salary, and even though I had already been given the task of writing a book on Estonian folk costumes, which was in preparation, I did not hesitate to accept the invitation. Nor does the ERM's yearbook report mention by name my active participation in the congress. As proof of this, I have with me a silver congress badge. (Helmi Kurrik's letter to O. A. Webermann, 12 March 1955, ERM Ak 12-59-10)

Helmi Kurrik expressed serious disappointment in the letter to her close friend, the Estonian literary scholar Otto Alexander Webermann (1915–1971). However, the official archive of ERM reveals a different understanding of what happened. It turns out that the museum did not have the money to send her to the conference, but the Ministry of Education was repeatedly approached for this purpose. The director Linnus fully supported her. Before the definite answer came from there, Helmi Kurrik had already given her consent, so it was no longer possible to abandon the event if the state authorities refused. On the recommendation of the museum, she asked for support from the highest level afterwards, in the autumn of 1937, but in vain. In the summer of 1938, Linnus once again appealed to the ministry, but it seems that he failed to get support.²⁶ Otherwise, Helmi Kurrik would not have written to Webermann with such disappointment.

The 1937 Congrès International de Folklore is considered to be one of the most important on the road to a common ethnological discourse in Europe. There were over 300 participants from 26 countries all over Europe (Rogan

2008:305–309). Two sessions were organized, one for general ethnology and one for applied folklore.

The latter section was concerned with the use, or revitalization, of ethnology and folklore [...] in contemporary society, in leisure activities, in schools, and so on. [...] As for the scientific part of the programme, it covered both material and social culture and folklore proper. (Rogan 2008: 308)

Helmi Kurrik talked about the revitalization of Estonian folk costumes in the session for applied ethnology/folklore.²⁷ She later shared her experiences of the conference in the Estonian press, conveying the resolution adopted at the closing session of the event: “the need to revive old folk costumes by wearing them on holidays and festive occasions. The educational role of ethnographic museums in the practice of wearing folk costumes was also stressed” (Kurrik 1937b). The applied side of ethnology at the time and its connection with society and politics have been emphasized by later scholars as well (e.g. Rogan 2014). Presumably, Helmi Kurrik received confirmation from Paris that her work on the revitalization of folk costumes (see below) corresponded to pan-European trends in the discipline.

“The German problem” (Rogan 2008:309) emerged sharply at the Congress, illustrating the difficult political climate of the 1930s, which affected international academic communication. The Congress’s German delegation expressed both “rather aggressive Nazi sympathies” and a wish to “play a decisive role for future congresses” (ibid.:303). Researchers, especially the organizers of academic gatherings from democratic countries, had to decide how to deal with their colleagues from Nazi Germany during the second half of the 1930s. Many researchers from Nordic countries tried to pretend they were unaffected and to believe that science and politics were separate. Communication was not definitively ruled out, but at the same time, many refused to take part in academic events in Germany (Garberding 2012).

Helmi Kurrik was an exception. She travelled from Paris to Lübeck to take part in the Second Congress of Nordic Ethnologists, titled “Tracht und Schmuck” (Costume and Jewellery). The Nazi organization Nordische Gesellschaft (Nordic Society) arranged this meeting with participants from Germany, Iceland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, and Estonia. Kurrik did not seem to feel any ideological hesitation. She later told the press that although “40 presentations [from Germany] sought to clarify the creative spirit of primitive Germanic folk in the area of folk costume and jewellery from the Stone Age to the present and its expansion to the Far East”, the remaining participants from other countries were “objective and impartial” (Kurrik 1937b). She thus retrospectively recognizes the political bias of German scholars but believes in the possibility of neutral science. Sources do not provide answers to what may have been the

impetus for her journey to Lübeck. These may be her contacts from the time organizing exhibitions abroad, or the topic of the conference interested her as a scholar and she hoped that science and politics would be separate in Germany (cf. Garberding 2012; Weingand 2019). In one way or another, her going to Germany in 1937 was later known to the German occupation authorities and it was hoped that Helmi Kurrik would more readily agree to collaborate in scholarly work (Weiss-Wendt 2013:299, see below).

In a review published in the newspaper, Helmi Kurrik describes her experiences following the conference. The event continued with an excursion to the National Museum in Copenhagen. On her way back home she stopped for briefer periods in Stockholm, Turku, and Helsinki. She told the press that

most of the staff at the Nordic Museum/Swedish National Museum have visited ERM, and several of them go to Estonian resorts for holidays. The Turku Cultural History Museum, which includes some ethnography among other things, has a new director Nils Cleve²⁸ who has organized the museum's collections in a modern and comprehensive way. [...] In Helsinki this time, there was only time for a short visit to museum officials (Kurrik 1937b).

While this statement shows the close international communication between the academic circles of the time, it also reveals the important role of ethnology in Estonian society for a conference trip being the subject of a long newspaper article. For Helmi Kurrik, travelling alone in Europe was a familiar activity, something she must have been used to, having done it as a home tutor decades ago.

Applied Ethnology – Work on Folk Costumes in the 1930s

Ethnological research of the 1920s and 1930s in the Nordic countries and in Central and Eastern Europe was closely linked to state and national aspirations. For example, in the history of Swedish ethnology, research in the years 1930–1970, was not done for its own sake, but was directly in the service of society (Klein 2006:62). The discipline, which grew out of nineteenth-century national romanticism, had an inherent contradiction – to be scientific and international on the one hand, and purely national on the other (Löfgren 1996). Folk culture as an object of study was generally viewed as a treasure of cultural heritage, which is always ready to serve national, regional, and local interests (Slavec Gradišnik 2010:134). In the context of Helmi Kurrik's research, her connection with and awareness of the needs of her contemporary society was also strengthened by the institution where she worked. The applied side of the discipline was written into her work. Museum researchers were directly involved in the collections,

their organization, and (re)presentation. Furthermore, the staff of the ethnographic department controlled and guided the activities of other Estonian museums, thus reaching the regional level in the promotion and protection of cultural heritage.

The applied side of Estonian ethnology became more important and visible during the second half of the 1930s, which has been referred to as a period of authoritarianism. The coup d'état of 1934 introduced a new regime that valued étatism, solidarism and national integrity. For the new power, people were servants of the state (Karjahärm 2001:286). The promotion and appropriation of folk culture, especially its more beautiful and aesthetic aspects, was considered to be of particular importance. The National Propaganda Office (NPO) implemented several ventures, such as the revival of folk art and the folk costume campaign in 1937 (Vaan 2005:35–36). Helmi Kurrik was actively involved in that 1937 campaign. As an expert on folk textiles, she directed the promotion of the “right” folk costumes, as opposed to ‘popularized’, ‘low cost’, and ‘ungenuine’ (Nõmmela 2010a:54). Indeed, she had already begun this work earlier before it was formally directed by the state. In 1934–1935 Helmi Kurrik had served on the Commission on Folk Dress (CFD) where her responsibility was to compile “sets of folk costumes from the collection of [ERM] and deliver them to the Commission’s technical task force for their exact copying” (ibid.:56). The NPO took control of the CFD in 1937 and re-established it as the Committee on Folk Costume. Work on the promotion of folk costumes intensified. Helmi Kurrik served as an instructor on courses in folk costumes organized by the NPO. She became responsible not only for writing historical overviews of folk costumes for various magazines but also for giving thematic radio lectures (Nõmmela 2009:51).

The most ambitious task, in this context, was the publication of a comprehensive handbook of Estonian folk costumes (“Eesti rahvarõivad”) in 1938. Helmi Kurrik was appointed executive editor of the book project in 1936. The preparation of the book was very stressful and fast-paced as it was expected to come out in time for the twentieth anniversary of the Republic of Estonia (February 1938). Furthermore, the book was connected to the national song festival that was to be held in the summer of the same year.²⁹ The participants in the festival needed to wear the ‘right’ folk costumes. Ideologically the researchers at the museum agreed with the aims of the propaganda, but they were resistant to being hurried, and also to excessive pressuring. Ultimately, they had no choice but to submit to the urgency and pressure.

Ferdinand Linnus, ERM’s director, wrote a general introduction for the book. Helmi Kurrik wrote overviews of the regional peculiarities of folk costume and selected over one hundred costume sets and then described them in great detail (each element of the dress as well as the material and

technique of production, including the patterns and measurements). She also made drafts of technical drawings (in total 250 figures). The handbook came out only one month past the deadline and sold out quickly. The state publicized it throughout the country among all choirs, exercise clubs, etc. The second edition of the book was issued in 1939. It became a canonical work in the field. The third edition was published in 1979 in Sweden, after Helmi Kurrik's death. The handbook and courses in folk costume making, which drew on the collections and expertise of ERM, helped Estonians cement the knowledge of the "right" folk costume that would be characteristic of the nation.³⁰

Unfinished Research – Troubled War Years and Life in Exile

World War II hit Estonia hard. The first Soviet occupation (1940–1941) was followed by three years of German occupation, ended by the Soviet takeover in the autumn of 1944. Difficult times required people to adapt and make decisions while keeping their lives and sticking to their values. Peaceful research could not be talked about in those years, although efforts were made towards it. By using different strategies, scholars (as the representatives of so-called national sciences) tried to pursue the Estonian cause under conditions of occupation.

The Soviet power paralysed the entire field of science and culture in 1940, implementing restructurings according to Soviet ideology. Several cultural figures and scholars went along with the new power, while others remained silent and aloof (Karjahärm & Sirk 2007:182–189). Sovietization also affected the museums, which were reorganized according to instructions from Moscow. Workers were required to attend courses on Marxism-Leninism. The exhibitions had to show class antagonism and socialist reconstruction (Astel 2009). Instead of research, the time of ERM's staff was spent on reorganizing the collections and receiving the collections of liquidated societies. As the head of the Department of Ethnography and often as acting director, Helmi Kurrik had a great responsibility to make reasonable decisions within the limits of the possibilities. She also had plans to continue her research on folk textiles, but without result.³¹

The German power reversed the Soviet reorganization and Estonians were able to revert to the pre-war independence system, as far as the new civil and military authorities allowed (Karjahärm & Sirk 2007:191). The German invasion was welcomed by most Estonians as a liberation from the previous Soviet terror (Kasekamp 2005:196). The hope that Germany would allow Estonian independence to be restored receded slowly. Compared to other Eastern European countries, the German occupation proved relatively mild for Estonians, because according to the national-socialist racial theory they were considered fairly close to Germans in racial and cultural terms

(Weiss-Wendt 2013 302–303). Estonian-centred research was not banned, but it was not encouraged either, as evidenced by the collapse of publishing opportunities. Ideological pressures on science were nevertheless weaker than in the Soviet era (Vahtre 2005:209).

Like many of her contemporaries, Helmi Kurrik remained silent in 1940–1941 but returned to public life during the subsequent three years of German occupation. The German occupiers were more lenient than their Soviet predecessors, which enabled Estonians to view cooperating and collaborating with the Germans as an opportunity to stand up for Estonian national interests (Kalling & Tammiksaar 2021). Nazi-German authorities considered ethnology to be an ideologically important discipline and tried to establish contact with Estonian scholars. They realized the important role of ethnology (and other national disciplines) in maintaining the national identity of Estonians. To prevent the researchers from going to the opposition, they tried to win them over with promises to support their research. Estonian scholars promised to cooperate in return. In reality, this cooperation was not fully achieved (Weiss-Wendt 2013:298–300; see also Jääts 2022).

Helmi Kurrik's contribution to the Nazi German propaganda magazine can be mentioned here. Her article "Folk Costumes of the Estonian Islands" (*Volkstracht der estnischen Inselwelt*) was published in the journal *Ostland: Monatsschrift des Reichkommissars für das Ostland* in September 1943 (Kurrik 1943a). This is a short overview of the folk costumes of the Estonian islands, a neutral description whose ideological alignment is revealed only in the attached photos (taken by the Estonian German photographer Richard C. E. Kirchoff and the German sports photographer Hanns Spudich). Presumably, the magazine wanted to publish reviews of the folk costumes of the subjugated areas. Corresponding introductions for Latvia and Belarus can be found in previous issues (Ginters 1942; Jesowitov 1942). While the latter deals with the folk costumes of an entire nation, Helmi Kurrik has written about the peculiarities of only one region in Estonia. It seems that research interests exceeded magazine interests and she was able to write on a topic that interested her. She was certainly able to give an overview of Estonian folk costumes but decided not to. The decision to cooperate may have been a pragmatic one and not related to any ideological worldview (cf. Weingand 2019).

Ideological underpinning can be found in another wartime article, which characterizes staying true to the national ideology and following the national line even under conditions of occupation (cf. Kalling & Tammiksaar 2021). In 1943, an interview with Helmi Kurrik, the head of the Department of Ethnography, was published in the national newspaper *Postimees* on the centenary of the beginning of the collecting the cultural heritage of Estonia. She gives an overview of the history and adds:

It is impossible to have a sense of national identity without knowing the past of one's people. It is a search for links with one's past to build one's future on it. If in the past the family or society was the bearer of tradition, then nowadays our ethnographic museums and folklore archives have developed into repositories and centres of our old ways of life, customs, etc. However, once this vast and varied material has been expertly browsed and returned to the people, it is no longer dead material, but a link between the past and the present. (Kurrik 1943b)

Helmi Kurrik valued the importance of collecting, preserving, and presenting cultural heritage for Estonians in both the present and the future. She also experienced the applied side of ethnographic scholarship. At the time of the article published in September, Helmi Kurrik was the only senior ethnologist in the museum. Linnus was deported to the Soviet Union in 1941 and died there, Ränk worked as a professor at the UT. The new ethnologists working at ERM (Hagar, Talve, Koern) had defended their Master's degrees only the previous year.

One notable event in Helmi Kurrik's life happened also during the German occupation. In January 1943, her sixtieth birthday and fifteenth year of work at the museum was celebrated in ERM. For the occasion, a festive event was held at the museum, where several scientific institutions and various societies welcomed the jubilee at an official ceremony. Eerik Laid, the museum's acting director at the time, published an article dedicated to Helmi Kurrik in *Postimees*:

H. Kurrik is well known as a leading museum worker and researcher, not only in the narrow circle of the museum's associates and friends but also more generally to our public. Working productively [...] on research into ancient Estonian folk costumes, her work has acquired over the years both considerable scholarly weight and outstanding applied significance. [...] She is not only an outstanding theoretician-researcher, but also a good and thorough museum person-practitioner. (Laid 1943)

Laid considers her contribution even more remarkable because she only came to science when she was middle-aged. Despite this, Helmi Kurrik – working on topics that seriously interested her – had found a firm place in the small circle of male Estonian ethnological scholarship. Speaking of Helmi many years later, Elly Kurrik referred to her sister as “the soul of the museum”.³² The ceremonial act at the museum and a lengthy newspaper article in 1943 mark her recognition in Estonian academic and social spheres.

Sometime during the war years, Helmi Kurrik had lost her home to fire and with it “much of the scientific material she had collected”. But despite this, “Kurrik's enthusiastic will to work, her belief in the fundamental value of Estonian culture and her collegial willingness to help” survived, Laid declaimed, using national and wartime rhetoric, characterizing her as a citizen always ready for the good and defence of her country (Laid 1943).³³

In 1943, the Soviet bombing of Estonia (as well as the whole Baltic region) intensified, and the war front began to move westwards. From early 1944, the collections of ERM began to be evacuated to the countryside; the permanent exhibition was packed up and the exhibition rooms were reluctantly given over to the German army. Little is known about Helmi Kurrik's role in saving the collections, but she probably devoted herself to it as the last resort (Ränk 1962:169). At some point, however, she had to decide and save herself. Helmi Kurrik with her sister Elly fled to Germany, where their niece Nonna was awaiting them.³⁴

The Kurrik sisters were among 70,000–80,000 compatriots who fled westwards in the autumn of 1944 before the rapid advance of Soviet forces, in a mass migration which Estonian history knows as the Great Exodus. Of those who fled, some 40,000 managed to reach Germany, and 27,000 crossed the Baltic Sea to Sweden (Tammaru et al. 2010:1162). These were political refugees, fleeing from fear of the return of Soviet power. People had not forgotten their experiences of repressions during the first Soviet year and especially of the brutal deportations in June 1941. Among the Baltic refugees, there was a high percentage of urban intelligentsia, as roughly half of all Balts with higher education joined the flight to the West (Raun 2015:31). The majority of refugees hoped to return home soon after the Soviet Union had been pushed back to its former borders by the Western countries (Undusk 2015:324). As time passed, that hope faded. After a few years, all but 3,000 of the refugees based in Germany – where the immediate post-war living conditions were terrible – migrated for better living and working conditions to the UK (6,000 migrants), Australia (6,000 migrants), Canada (11,000 migrants), and the USA (12,000 migrants) (Tammaru et al.: 1167).³⁵

Helmi Kurrik took some scholarly materials with her to Germany with a wish to continue her research, but that initially proved to be impossible. Together with Elly, she stayed in Germany for several years, first they lived in Freiburg, and later in displaced persons' camps in Bad Rehburg, Hannover, and Oldenburg where they worked in hospitals run by the British Red Cross. They were also lecturers in the training of the nurses (Metslaid 2016b:114). In 1951, the sisters moved on to California, where Helmi lived for the rest of her life.³⁶

Correspondence that Helmi Kurrik conducted with various people helps to reveal her life and thoughts in exile. The most voluminous and heartfelt was her correspondence with a young literary scholar, also a refugee, Otto Alexander Webermann, who studied at Göttingen University after the war and had a wide circle of acquaintances, in Germany and Sweden, and was associated himself several exile scientific organizations. It is not known how and when Helmi Kurrik and Webermann, who come from different generations, met for the first time. It could have been between 1937 and 1942 when he was an undergraduate at the UT or in a post-war displaced

persons' camp in Germany. Webermann respected her as a researcher and tried to arrange publishing opportunities for her over the years, starting with offers in 1947.

Webermann encouraged Helmi Kurrik to reestablish contact with Per Wieselgren (1900–1989), a Swedish linguist and literary scholar, and professor of Swedish at the UT 1930–1941, who had left Estonia in 1944. Wieselgren was the editor of *Svio-Estonica*, a yearbook of the Swedish-Estonian academic society (Svensk-estniska samfundet). Webermann wrote to her in 1949:

Over a couple of years, I finally got so far as to write to Prof. Wieselgren. I also mentioned that you have notes on museum materials on Estonian-Swedish cultural relations. He immediately asked for your address and will probably write to you then. I am sure that this theme will be of interest to the Swedes. (O. A. Webermann to Helmi Kurrik, Apr 15, 1949, ERM Ak 12-59-9)

Some months later, Webermann wrote to Helmi Kurrik:

It is nice to hear that colleagues are finding you again and that Prof. Wieselgren is encouraging you to wake up the dormant fortunes. [...] Since the Swedish government has earmarked certain sums of money for the collection and research of Estonian-Swedish material, I believe they will find ways to support your work. (O. A. Webermann to Helmi Kurrik, July 24, 1949, ERM Ak 12-59-9)

Helmi Kurrik mentions Wieselgren in a letter to Webermann in 1952:

Neither have I written to Prof. Wieselgren, as the work did not progress while I was in Germany. However, I have drawn more than a hundred belt patterns with coloured pencils on squared paper, of which I had colored sketches and even some photos with me. I informed him that I have so many belt patterns, but because of my bad handwriting, he has read out “100 Gartenmuster” – instead of “Gurtenmuster” and he thought that these drawings might be of interest to Prof. Karling.³⁷ Since then, our correspondence has also stopped. (Helmi Kurrik to O. A. Webermann, 22 December 1952. ERM Ak 12-59-10)

There is no record of Helmi Kurrik's work having been published.

Correspondence reveals how difficult it was to carry out research in exile in a situation where most of the materials and books had been left behind in the home country. Helmi Kurrik repeatedly asked Webermann if he had found any works published by ERM. In 1952, she stated with regret that the institutions in New York, Washington, and Chicago with which the museum exchanged publications were too far from California for her to reach. In 1953, Helmi Kurrik wrote to Webermann:

Interest in my research has not faded, on the contrary – some questions have been clarified and crystallized. But to finally come out with some very bold statements from a completely new point of view, a lot of work still needs to be done. But I need

at least a limited number of handbooks to refine and check. (Helmi Kurrik to O. A. Webermann, October 1953, ERM Ak 12-59-10).

The situation was further complicated by Helmi Kurrik lacking an institution to rely on in her new country of residence, which did not compare with her colleagues who had fled to Sweden (see fig. 4). Gustav Ränk, Eerik Laid, Helmut Hagar, and Ilmar Talve all worked at the Institute of Folklife Studies (*Institutet för folklivsforskning*) in Stockholm.³⁸ As Professor Sigurd Erixon had needed collaborators for his massive atlas project, he hired these men who had suitable professional backgrounds. They had a relatively soft landing in exile, working for the Swedes but finding time to do their research (Viies 1998). Most importantly, refugee ethnologists in Stockholm formed a tight-knit group that at the same time belonged to a larger and culturally active community of refugee Estonians in Sweden. They belonged to refugee scientific societies and started to publish various journals, in which it was possible to publish Estonian-related studies. Some Swedish and Finnish academic journals also showed an interest in such studies (Metslaid 2022).

Eerik Laid wrote to Helmi Kurrik in March 1951, when she was still in Germany, and invited her to a congress of European ethnologists to be held in Stockholm in the autumn. He stressed that former colleagues from the



Figure 4. Helmi Kurrik in her garden in Fresno (USA), 1956. ERM Fk 2926:204.

museum would be very happy to see her and he was ready to find funds to support her trip: “And most importantly, we could exchange ideas about the challenges and future prospects of Estonian ethnography and feel like ERM’s family once again” (E. Laid to H. Kurrik, 28 March 1951, ERM Ak 12-59-6). But as the Kurrik sisters were preparing to migrate to the USA, she was unable to attend the congress and see her colleagues.

Once Helmi Kurrik was more settled in the USA, she let Laid know that she was still interested in scholarly work and looked into the possibility of publishing her research. Laid answered in 1952:

I believe that all scholarly works on Estonian folk culture could be published in either Sweden or Finland and I would personally be very happy to use all my old and new acquaintances to help with this. An overview of the folk costumes of the Estonian Swedes would certainly be of interest here and there would be publishing opportunities for that. (E. Laid to Helmi Kurrik, 7 July 1952, ERM Ak 12-59-6).

There is a record in her collection in the Swedish National Archives titled “My current intentions, 11.5.1959”. It contains 38 research titles referring to various topics, starting with folk textiles, food economy, diseases, and superstitions, but also various themes in history writing. Many of them are familiar plans from earlier years, and some of the titles reflect her articles published in Estonia. Besides them Helmi Kurrik considered it important to analyse socio-cultural relationships, for example, those between the manor and the farm and the town and the farm in Estonia. She also intended to study folk costumes in exile and write down her memories.³⁹ She died a year later, aged 77. Shortly after her sister’s death, Elly wrote a short biography of her sister, at the end of which she emphasized Helmi’s longing for her colleagues and her plans to continue with research.⁴⁰

When a Baltic Research Institute (Baltisches Forschungsinstitut), established in Bonn in 1953, asked refugee scholars from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to fill in a form to collect information about refugee scholars, then Helmi Kurrik wrote to Webermann, who was responsible for questionnaires from Estonian researchers:

This time I’m sending it back to you in full, but please note that I’m doing this for you personally, in a very private way, and on condition that I am not placed in some clever book, next to great men who, especially now in exile, have been extremely productive. (Helmi Kurrik to O. A. Webermann, 12 March 1955, ERM Ak 12-59-10).

Helmi Kurrik considered research to be the content of her life even in exile, but despite the publishing opportunities offered her, she did not manage to publish any of the planned works. It seems that she was highly self-critical, which combined with a lack of literature and sources led to failure in implementing her plans. An idea of her character is evident from Laid’s

description in the obituary published in the refugee magazine *Tulimuld* in 1960:

Helmi Kurrik's sanguine character, with her strong personal attachment to matter and people, was controlled by the demanding ethical notions that came with her upbringing. She was an aristocrat of spirit in the good sense of the word, and correspondingly she was pleasingly simple and unassuming in her conduct. (Laid 1960)

As the years went by, Helmi Kurrik faded into oblivion, remembered only in connection with the handbook of folk costumes. In Soviet Estonia, it was forbidden to write officially about scholars who went into exile. Their works could not be used for decades. When the grand old man of Estonian ethnology, Ants Viires (1918–2015), finally published an article about ethnologists in exile, he dealt only with colleagues who had worked in Sweden after the war, without mentioning the fate of Helmi Kurrik (Viires 1998). Her contribution to the discipline inevitably remained in the 1930s.

Conclusion

Helmi Kurrik was a woman who, in the course of her life, experienced Tsarist Russia, independent Estonia and its demise, survived both World Wars and her flight to the West, and finally adapted to a new life in the USA. At the same time, her life reflects the emergence of modern women in Estonia, who knew their vocation and were not afraid to embark on it, as Helmi Kurrik exemplified, starting in middle age and as a woman in a male-dominated society. For Helmi Kurrik, there was a free space in ERM and Estonian academic life in the late 1920s. She succeeded in claiming as her own a research topic which no one else was researching at that time, but which was also in demand in society.

Despite her late start, Helmi Kurrik was able to contribute to Estonian ethnology, cultural heritage research, and promotion. In just a few years, her thoroughness and analytical skills helped her to become an expert on folk textiles, and an acknowledged ethnologist who also participated in international research. Folk art exhibitions abroad helped to build relations with colleagues from other countries, which in turn enabled participation in several international congresses. Relations with colleagues from neighbouring countries were close, many of whom had visited ERM. They were united by a cultural-historical view of peasant material culture and a desire to trace the origins of cultural phenomena. Researchers at the time were also interested in the application of cultural heritage in the service of modern society. Helmi Kurrik's contribution was a handbook on Estonian folk costumes and tutoring in relevant courses in the 1930s. The handbook became a classic in Estonian ethnology.

Helmi Kurrik was regarded by her contemporaries with the respect she had earned through her devotion to museum and research work. They

remembered her as the head of the Department of Ethnography who guarded the valuable collections even during the difficult war years. Despite being a woman, Helmi Kurrik achieved this position due to the small circle of ethnologists in Estonia and the Soviet reorganization of museum work in 1940. She was unable to continue her research in exile, and perhaps that is why she was long referred to only by name in the history of Estonian ethnology.

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¹ I have written about Kurrik on several occasions (Nõmmela 2009, 2010a; Metslaid 2016).

² Helmi Kurrik's certificate, ERM A 1:540.

³ The extent to which family circumstances may have influenced women's life will be shown here by briefly introducing Helmi Kurrik's contemporary Helmi Reiman-Neggo (1892–1920). Her father was also active in the Estonian national movement. She was sent to study in Finland at the age of eight, where she finished high school. Reiman-Neggo continued her studies in 1911 at the University of Helsinki, where she studied ethnography and history under Uuno Taavi Sirelius and Kaarle Krohn and became the first Estonian professional ethnologist (Õunapuu 2004). Reiman-Neggo died young, so her scholarly legacy is not great. She did, however, become deeply involved in folk art, which later became Helmi Kurrik's main field of research.

⁴ Helmi Kurrik's certificate, ERM Ak 1:540

⁵ Arno Rafael Cederberg was the founder of the school of Estonian history studies at the University of Tartu. He worked in Estonia 1920–1928 (Rosenberg 1999).

⁶ Ilmari Manninen was the founder of Estonian academic ethnology, he worked in Estonia 1922–1928 (see e.g., Talve 1992).

⁷ When reviewing Helmi Kurrik's Master's thesis in 1939, the ethnologist Ferdinand Linnus referred to the influence of Cederberg's methodological school on her development as a researcher (Linnus's review of Helmi Kurrik's MA thesis, ERA EAA.2100.1.6348, pp. 57–59).

⁸ Helmi Kurrik's study book, ERA, EAA.2100.1.6348.

⁹ Three women defended Master's degrees in folklore in the 1930s: Erna Ariste (1931), Lucie Põdras (1932) and Aleksandra Aavik (1937).

¹⁰ For an example from Germany, see Wiegelmann 1971, from Finland, see Talve 1971.

¹¹ Linnus's review of Helmi Kurrik's MA thesis, ERA EAA.2100.1.6348, pp 57–59. Ränk's review of Helmi Kurrik's MA thesis, ERA EAA.2100.1.6348, pp. 55–56.

¹² Helmi Kurrik's most questioned result concerned the explanation of the spread of blood acidification in Estonia, Finland, Sweden, and the Chukchi in Siberia by the homogenous isotherms (similar climatic conditions) of these countries.

¹³ Ränk's review of Helmi Kurrik's MA thesis, ERA EAA.2100.1.6348, pp. 55–56.

¹⁴ Helmi Kurrik's letter of service, ERM Ak 1-540.

¹⁵ Helmi Kurrik's report for the working year 1929–1930, ERM A 1-515.

¹⁶ Helmi Kurrik's report for the working year 1929–1930, ERM A, 1-515.

¹⁷ See the article on Aliise Moora in the present issue of *Arv*.

¹⁸ The magnificent permanent exhibition at ERM was opened three years earlier, in 1927 (Nõmmela 2010b).

¹⁹ The ERM's yearbook continues to be published today.

²⁰ The situation was similar in other departments of ERM, such as the Estonian Folklore Archives, the Archival Library, the Cultural History Archives.

²¹ Next to Kurrik, Ränk, and Linnus (names already mentioned above), one can name a fourth student of Manninen – Eerik Laid (1904–1961) who had become a heritage protection inspector in Estonia in 1936. Laid was also an archaeologist.

²² Helmi Kurrik was not present there.

²³ See further Nõmmela 2009:45–50.

²⁴ La Commission Internationale des Arts et Traditions Populaires (the international organization for folklore and ethnology), a forerunner of SIEF (International Society for Ethnology and Folklore).

²⁵ Helmi Kurrik's letter to O. A. Webermann, 12 March 1955, ERM Ak 12-59-10.

²⁶ Linnus's letter to the director of the Department of Science and Arts of the Ministry of Education, 25 June 1937; Acting director Helmi Üprus's letter to the director of the Department of Science and Arts, 30 July 1937; Linnus's letter to the director of the Department of Science and Arts, 22 June 1938. ERM A 1: 80.

²⁷ Rivière used the French term *folklore* instead of ethnology that was common in Northern Europe.

²⁸ Nils Joachim Otto Cleve (1905–1988), Finnish archaeologist, the director of Turku Cultural History Museum 1934–1945.

²⁹ The importance of song festivals to Estonian history through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been analysed by Brüggemann and Kasekamp (Brüggemann & Kasekamp 2014).

³⁰ For further on the theme, see Nõmmela 2010b.

³¹ Miscellaneous correspondence, working reports, information. ERM A 1: 166.

³² Elly Kurrik on her sister, SE-RA-720989-1-1.

³³ It is not known whether the fire occurred in connection with the two-week bombardment of Tartu in July 1941 or sometime later. From the end of January 1943, the Soviet Union bombed Tartu and other Estonian towns with intermittent success. The major bombing of Tartu took place in late August-early September 1944. This was also the time when Raadi manor house, the home of ERM, on the outskirts of the city, was destroyed.

³⁴ Author's interview with Nonna Michel, 2007.

³⁵ For a better overview of the situation of Europe's displaced persons after World War II, see e.g. Cohen 2017.

³⁶ Elly moved back to Germany to live with her relatives in 1970.

³⁷ Sten Karling (1906-1987), a Swedish art scholar and art critic who was a professor of art history at the UT 1933-1941. He was later a professor of art history at the University of Stockholm.

³⁸ On the Baltic folklorists and ethnologists in Sweden, see Viires 1998; Klein 2017.

³⁹ „My current intentions”, 11.5.1959, SE-RA-720989-1-1.

⁴⁰ Elly Kurrik on her sister, SE-RA-720989-1-1.