

IN MEMORIAM

Professor Erast Parmasto (1928-2012)



Photo: Bellis Kullman

On April 24th Erast Parmasto died at the age of 83. He was the distinguished senior mycologist in Tartu and an honorary member of various Mycological Societies. With his death the mycological community lost a highly regarded international figure. His personality enabled Erast Parmasto to establish an active and highly efficient group around him, interested in the study of fungi. It is quite remarkable that this research on fungi was performed so well and in such a way that its high reputation value was acknowledged in the East as well as in the West. This is even more remarkable since Estonia is only a small country which has been subjected to foreign political influence by the world powers for very many years.

At the time when Erast was born on October 23rd, 1928, in Nõmme, a suburb of Tallinn, as a son of a carpenter, Estonia had been independent for just eight years. The young state then reorganized its educational system which had been under Swedish, Russian and German influence for a very long time. Due to the forceful incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union in 1940 and because of the final establishment of Soviet Power following the war, which had itself been imposed on the country by Germany, the education of a young person had to be adapted according to the prevailing circumstances. Erast was able to attend the gymnasium from which he graduated with exceptional success in 1947. It is surprising that he managed to complete his education in school without delay in a time of radical change and despite the turmoil caused by the war. He continued his education by studying Biology at the University of Tartu until 1952. People outside Estonia might not be aware of the fact that the Swedish King Gustav Adolf had founded the University of Tartu in 1632.

The Mycologist Bondartsev (1877–1968) – the fungal genus *Bondarzewia* was named after him – worked as a phytopathologist in Leningrad (now renamed Petersburg) at that time. He was also interested in the Aphyllophorales of the Soviet Union. Bondartsev had already collaborated with the well known mycologist Rolf Singer and he gave Erast Parmasto the opportunity to continue his education in Mycology using the modern methods available at that time. Erast specialized in Aphyllophorales and contributed substantially to the knowledge of this fungal group. In Tartu he was awarded several academic ranks comparable to a doctoral degree (1955) and to the German “habilitation” (1969).

In Soviet times the Estonians had to suffer from several constraints concerning their national interests and their ethnic identity. On the positive side Erast could travel through the vast areas of Eurasia belonging to the Soviet Union – from the Baltic satellite republics all the way to Siberia and the Far East (Kamtschatka, Sachalin), collecting and researching fungi. He participated in a total of 63 mycological expeditions. In this way, over the decades, one of the largest collections of fungi in the whole of the Soviet Union was established in Estonian Tartu. This developed into a unique facility for research on the systematics of fungi and their distribution in the Eurasian area, an area which is perhaps nowadays even more difficult to access than it was for a citizen of the Soviet Union in the times of the Soviet Union.

PROFESSOR ERAST PARMASTO

During his lifetime Erast remained connected with the same institute in Estonia. He was affiliated with the Institute of Zoology and Botany at the Estonian Academy of Sciences from 1950 until his death. The institution changed its name several times over the years depending on the requirements of the times (nowadays its name is Institute of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Estonian University of Life Sciences). The fungal herbarium (TAAM), where Erast’s wife, Ilmi Parmasto is the curator, is located in this institute. Erast’s professional employment was extensive,



Collection areas of fungi in the herbarium of Tartu. Blue dots = more than 5 expeditions, red dots = 2–4 expeditions, green = one expedition. Erast Parmasto participated in many of these expeditions and collected 37,000 samples out of 160,000 deposited in the herbarium of Tartu.

ranging from gardener to scientific assistant up to director of the Institute of Zoology and Botany (1985–1990). Since 1972 Erast Parmasto was a member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. Between 1973 and 1981 he was also the academic secretary in the Department of Chemical, Geological and Biological Sciences of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. In addition to his affiliation with these institutions, Erast was engaged as a professor of Botany and Ecology at the University of Tartu (1987–1995) offering various lectures on Mycology and Scientific Methodology. He served as the president of the Estonian Naturalist’s Society (1973–1976) and was an honorary member of the society from 1988.

It was a constant concern of Erast to popularise mycological science. This was shown by his numerous popular articles on fungi and other topics, as well as his commitment as an editor (1958–1960) of the popular magazine *Eesti Loodus* (Nature of Estonia). The Estonians always kept their national identity in spite of the constraints of foreign rule. This is demonstrated very well, not only by the national singing festivals but also by attention to art and ethnic traditions, identification with its own history and by the care of Estonians for their countryside. In this connection it has to be mentioned that the first National Park of the Soviet Union was established in Estonia (Lahemaa), despite the ambivalent position of the central government that did not recognize the word “national”.

Taking all of this into account it seems that the Estonians were very well prepared to establish their independence once again when circumstances became favourable. Erast Parmasto played an important role in this process. On the occasion of the European Mycological Congress 1989 in Tallinn, which he had organised, the participants from the West were welcomed in an unofficial manner by Lennart Meri, who was to become President of independent Estonia. The presence of Lennart Meri to

welcome some of the participants was achieved by the influence of his friend Erast Parmasto. It was the year of the human chain in the Baltic States with the cry for freedom.

Erast Parmasto's high reputation both national and international came about as a result of several factors – professional competence and intelligence, the ability to work beyond ideological boundaries and last but not least his remarkable linguistic ability. His mother tongue was Estonian, a Finnish-Ugric language. His popular scientific articles have mostly been published in this language. He also took care that mycological publications in foreign languages were translated into Estonian. In Soviet times there was a considerable pressure to publish scientific papers predominantly in Russian. In the course of liberalization and of the independence movement Erast used English more and more as the language of science. Erast was able to write as well as speak English fluently; therefore he had no difficulty in communicating with the “Scientific Community” outside Russia. He did this so well that he was appointed as an honorary member of the American Society of Mycology in 1993. His recognition in his own country could not have been better expressed than through his appointment as an honorary citizen of Tartu and by his nomination as one of the 100 most important personalities in Estonia.

Erast Parmasto has left us the legacy of a large body of scientific work. A complete bibliography has been published in *Folia Cryptogamica Estonica* 49: 1–18, 2012. Only few examples out of this list may be mentioned here. It was a special concern of Erast to evaluate the size and variation of spore dimensions as important parameters for the delimitation of species within the Hymenomycetes (Parmasto, E., Parmasto, I., 1987: Variation of Basidiospores in the Hymenomycetes and its significance to their taxonomy. *Bibliotheca Mycologica* 115, 168 S.). This important study should be regularly consulted in taxonomic research on fungi, since spore size is almost always significant. As an example of his research on Aphyllophorales of Eurasia, his monograph on the Lachnocladiaceae of the Soviet Union, published in 1970, has to be mentioned. He is also the author of an extensive study of the hymenochaetoid fungi of North America (*Mycotaxon* 2001, 79: 107–176). Out of the great number of publications on fungi in Estonia, the checklist of fungi in this country and the distribution maps are noteworthy. He also established several data bases, for instance the one on corticioid fungi (CORTBASE). Erast Parmasto also contributed to the higher-level phylogenetic classification of fungi within an international team of scientists (Hibbet, D.S. & al. 2007, *Mycol. Res.* 111: 509–547).

The fungal genera *Erastia* and *Parmastomyces* have been named in honor of his efforts as a taxonomist.

Personally I got to know Erast as a warm hearted, educated man, interested in many fields who made it possible for me to visit my country of birth after decades of absence. His achievements for mycology and for his country will last for a long time.

Andreas Bresinsky (Regensburg)

[By courtesy of the Editor in Chief of *Folia Cryptogamica Estonica*]
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