

OBITUARY

Felix J. Oinas

Felix J. Oinas was born March 6, 1911 in Tartu, Estonia, and died September 25, 2004 in Bloomington, Indiana, at the age of 93. He had a rich, varied, and rewarding professional life and career.(1) He was a student at Tartu University where he received an MA in 1937. In 1935-1936 he studied at Budapest University and in 1942-1944 was a Fellow at Tartu University. After the Second World War he studied at the University of Heidelberg in 1946-1948, emigrating to the United States in 1949. In 1950 he became an instructor at Indiana University. After completing his Ph.D. in 1952, he remained at Indiana University, where he held a joint position in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and in Uralic-Altaic Studies. He also was named a Fellow of the Folklore Institute. He retired as Professor Emeritus in 1981.

Felix Oinas was a remarkable scholar and teacher. The designation of his scholarly specialties as Slavic and Finno-Ugric linguistics and folklore only hints at the breadth and diversity of his contributions to these fields. He was a member of many scholarly organizations, received numerous grants for research, travel, or teaching, attended international conferences on various subjects, was often invited to speak as a guest lecturer, was elected a fellow in the scholarly societies of several European countries, and was presented with many awards for his services and scholarship. The volume Folklorica: Festschrift for Felix J. Oinas (1982) represents a testimony on the part of twenty-six participating scholars.

Although he focused much of his scholarly efforts on his native Estonian folklore and on related Finnish folklore, Felix Oinas also maintained a continuing interest in Russian folklore. We will limit our comments to his activities in the Russian area. A survey of his publications on Russian folklore suggests that he devoted most of his attention to the epic (bylina) and to mythology. In regard to the bylina he wrote articles about the disputed aristocratic origin of the bylina, hunting in the bylina, and the song "Vavilo and the Skomorokhs" which had been collected only from the North Russian singer Krivopolenova. Scholars suspected that this song might have been an individual creation and thus did not belong to traditional folklore. However, in a comparative study Felix pointed out parallels with a Finnish song, thus showing that Krivopolenova's work was indeed traditional in origin. Together with Stephen Soudakoff he translated a collection of articles about Russian folklore (The Study of Russian Folklore, 1975), a volume which contributed much toward acquainting English readers with the research of Russian folklorists during the Soviet era. Felix's interest in epics is also reflected in the collection Heroic Epic and Saga (1978), which he edited. Here specialists provided introductions to fifteen different epic traditions; Felix contributed sections on the Russian bylina and on Balto-Finnic epics. The volume Essays on Russian Folklore and Mythology (1985) reflected several topics that attracted his attention in Russian folk mythology or beliefs. A few examples are: "The Russian *Golubec* 'Grave Marker,'" "Historical Reality and Russian Supernatural Beings," "The Devil in Russian Folklore," "Russian *Poludnica* 'Midday Spirit,'" and "Heretics as Vampires and Demons in Russia."

We have touched upon only the Russian aspect of Felix Oinas' wide and varied contributions to the study of folklore in several traditions. One could only wish that many of these scattered works would be published in a collection that would make them accessible to folklorists in many countries. And one can only be grateful to have had an opportunity to know him as a teacher, a scholar, a colleague, or a friend over many years. Felix Oinas was a generous person who was always willing to give help and advice to others who were involved in the study of folklore. Succinctly stated, he was a traditional philologist who acquired an international standing among folklorists.

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NOTES

1 Thanks are expressed to the following people for their help in preparing this obituary: J. Thomas Shaw who for several years was a colleague of Felix Oinas at Indiana University, and Ronald Feldstein, the present chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Indiana University.