

## Meet Leili Reimann

The new book "Pitsilised koekirjad" by Leili Reimann appeared in our book stores at the end of last year, a beautiful and precious Christmas gift to knitting enthusiasts. The book was published by Monokkel publishing company. Those who have been interested in lace knitting are already familiar with the name of Leili Reimann. However, it is not likely that one knows a lot about the author because she is an extremely modest person who is scared by all kinds of publicity.

The book has been written by a handicraft teacher from Kehra high school. It does not happen every day that a teacher with both work and family obligations finds a spare time for writing such a comprehensive book.

This is the reason why I firstly asked: **where does a handicraft teacher, mother of three boys, find the time to write a book for lace knitters?**

„From cutting my beauty sleep short”, answered Leili with a smile. She also added that she is a person who mostly stays at home, especially in winter when travelling is more difficult. In summer she takes her car and drives wherever she wants to go. If she finds something that sparks an interest in her, she goes no matter the weather conditions.

It should be mentioned that Leili's home is in Harjumaa, at Mikumardi farm whose owner's son she, a Viljandi-born young woman married after graduating from Tallinn Pedagogical Institute. Back then farms and their names were not much discussed and it was only later that they realized that they had named the boys similar to the farm name: Mart, Margus and Mihkel. The two older sons have already graduated from high school; the youngest son is in the 4th grade.

Jaan Reimann, previously the head agronomist in a former kolkhoz, is now a farmer. The farm has 68 ha of land, and the main income comes from growing potatoes. There are 10 milk cows and about 20 sheep. Leili does not want to talk much about farming; that's more of a men's thing. However, she plans to become more involved in shepherding because she needs good yarn for knitting.

Actually, swift Leili is highly needed in every kind of farmwork, starting from mowing and ending with picking potatoes; thus from spring 'til autumn she does not have much time for knitting. All the farm work is done by their family.

Leili has surely inherited her handicraft abilities and interest from her mother. When the children were little, their mother did not work but earned money for her family while staying at home, making dresses and embroidery on order.

Already at the age of six Leili became a serious assistant to her mother. The first task assigned by her mother was finishing the hem of a full skirted dress. Mother showed her the stitches and left her alone for an hour. When mother returned to see the progress, she was really astounded by the high quality of the work. Since that time stitching the hem became Leili's job. Later they discussed that as a primary school girl Leili must have stitched dozens of kilometers of hem. Leili says that her mother is a person who is capable of doing all kinds of work and whom she does not dare oppose or say she doesn't know how to do something.

Handicraft lessons at school were not hard for Leili but posed problems nevertheless. She used to complete all assignments fast and properly and was extremely hurt when the teacher suspected that it was her mother who had done it. Such things probably happened even during her Pedagogical Institute training. When it took her co-students a week to crochet a scarf, Leili would have a whole coat ready during that time. It was all the same, the instructors would think that it had been completed by her mother. This is precisely the reason why she never dares to believe that the work has been done by mother rather than by a schoolchild; she is afraid of hurting the student.

### **How did you come up with the thought of writing a book on lace knitting?**

The idea came to me during the last year at the Institute or, to be more precise, it developed from my graduation thesis. The teacher Laine Aarne discovered that Leili was swift at knitting and suggested lace knitting as a topic. She sent Leili to Haapsalu to visit the local lace knitters. The renowned Haapsalu knitters were not familiar with chart signs conventions, so the patterns were being exchanged in the form of swatches and finished scarves. Writing down the patterns from the scarves was a rather time-consuming work. Everything that got written down had to be tested in order to be sure that the result is the same as the original. Some chart signs have been derived from photographs as well. So the genuine interest towards lace knitting appeared through the involvement in this work.

For her graduation work, she prepared approximately fifty swatches together with the pattern charts and explanations and also a wonderfully thin lace-weight yarn scarf that could be drawn through a wedding ring. All this toil was awarded with a cum laude diploma and the teacher's recommendation to proceed with the work and to publish a book. The first book "Pitsilised koekirjad" appeared under the name of Leili Lehismets in 1978.

Thus, knitting and charting has become a habit that sometimes turned into obsession. Having spotted a person in the street wearing something knitted in an unknown pattern, Leili would follow the person as long as required for memorizing the pattern and would jot it down at the first opportunity. Once she probably even caused a scandal in a family. Namely, she took an interest in a man's cardigan but the man was accompanied by his spouse. Leili was not disturbed by the fact and with determination followed them across Tallinn until she realized that the woman had noticed her and probably was making a scene in front of her husband. This was the last chance to leave and the pattern was already figured out.

Nowadays Leili does not merely reproduce patterns made by others but has derived a whole lot of them by herself. Her husband the agronomist provides names for the patterns from the flora he knows so well. For instance, pasqueflower (*Pulsatilla* sp.), primula (*Primula veris*), ladybug, butterfly, lily (*Lilium* sp.), snow-balls, dung beetle.

### **What has been intriguing in this work, what have you discovered?**

The diploma scarf was a derivation from folk patterns. The second big derivation was an evening dress whose pattern is created completely by me. While preparing the first edition, the publisher suddenly refused to publish the description and the pattern for the dress. Their reason was that Leili was not a fashion designer and thus not capable of making patterns. The complete instructions for the dress are included only in the recent third edition. The dress (see Pitsilised

koekirjad 1995, p. 98) was knitted by the author in two weeks' time. By the way, the model wearing the dress is Leili herself.

All three sons have appeared as models as well. Actually, the edition published by Monokkel is the first one that pleases the author. Only there a pattern (chart) and the actual photo are printed side by side. Previously the photos were placed in a different section of the book. That was not because of the author's wish but rather due to the publishing house consideration that otherwise much paper would have been wasted. The first and second editions are not user-friendly. The reason for publishing the second edition was the fact that at a book exhibition publishers from Bratislava chose that particular book. When foreigners are interested, a reprint is justified. In 1985 the book appeared in the Slovak language in Bratislava. In 1986 the publishing house Valgus issued the second edition with corrections and additions along with the Russian translation in 1987.

“The most interesting stories are about historical shawls”, Leili explains. “After graduation I was invited to hold a talk at Student Scientific Association conferences a couple of times. The public was interested in whether I knew anything about the patterns of the scarves given as a present to Greta Garbo and the Swedish crown-prince. I became interested in this and started exploring. At that time my brother was in Haapsalu. With his help I succeeded in trading the Greta Garbo scarf pattern from an old lady for a truck of firewood in return. The very same lady gave me the pattern of the scarf for the Swedish crown-prince but the pattern turned out to be half wrong”.

The fact is widely known that the Swedish crown-prince who later became the king Gustav Adolf VI visited Estonia in 1932. Leili found a photo of the scarf in an old issue of the magazine “Nõukogude Naine” and with the help of a magnifying glass figured the pattern out. But when she wished to mention in her book that a scarf with that pattern was presented by Haapsalu women to the Swedish crown-prince in 1932, the censorship interfered: it was not allowed to mention the name of a king because it supposedly involved politics. She was not allowed to write that this was Gustav Adolf VI, the grandfather of the present king (Thus, there are only crown and star-motive patterns in the second edition. In the third edition the scarf is presented fully (p. 285) with both patterns and charts. The scarf has a broad edge that is not present in the photograph (of course, Leili did the swatch herself but she simply did not like the edge).

However, Leili was not satisfied with this solution and promised to prove that it had nothing to do with politics. In the 1984 she sent a query to Sweden whether the present king knew anything about the large lace scarf presented to his grandfather. She wrote the address as follows: Stockholm, the King. Of course, she became a laughing stock for all her family because of that letter. Everybody was sure that the letter was sitting somewhere in a waste-bin in Moscow, end of story. Nevertheless, the husband and the sons laughed at her whenever a letter arrived: here is the response from the king. Exactly three months had passed and Leili received a reply. To this day she remembers the astonished expression of her husband. Ms Lis Grandlung from the royal administration responded. Unfortunately, the destiny of the scarf was unknown in the royal house. The letter also contained the photos of the royal family. One photo featured the old king Gustav Adolf IV together with his grandchild, the present king. The letter was printed on royal paper and smelled incredibly nice. Naturally, today this is a family treasure.

**Nowadays one cannot ignore the question whether this kind of work is rewarding.**

“It is not in the terms of money but when one’s profession and hobby coincide that much, the joy of creativity is the reward”, Leili Reimann answers. “For the sake of comparison, the publisher paid for the book exactly as much as a truck of potatoes would cost in autumn. Only the Slovak language edition was profitable. The publisher paid 10 000 rubles, from which I got 3000 and Moscow got 7000 as “commission fee”. When I learned of this, I felt a pang. But thanks to the book I was able to travel abroad for the first time. In 1986 I went to Czechoslovakia as a tourist and met the translator and the publisher in Bratislava”.

**You have no daughter, who will inherit your knowledge and skills?**

“Probably, my students. I have a plan to go into plant-dyeing mysteries with them and other things as well. Still, I cannot say that the sons just ignore their mother’s work. When Margus was a student at a high school, he asked me to give some knitting tips and taught them to the girls in his class. Both Margus and Mihkel have an excellent color perception and they belong to my “art advisory board”.

**How many schoolgirls, your former students, have chosen the profession of handicraft teacher?**

Five or six girls. I was able to help one of them with my letter of recommendation. In the photos in the recent book there are some students in lace blouses knitted by themselves.

**Will you continue in the same spirit?**

There are plans for the following book but this is still a secret, Leili smiles. Leili Reimann is one of the people who talk little but do a lot. Knowing this, one can safely claim that the next book will appear indeed. There are other things to be written about Leili, for instance, her interest in tapestries but this is another story altogether.

Interview by Anne Oruaas, a teacher at Kehra high school.

Translation from Estonian by Mercar and Kuduja.