

Professor Voldemar Ilja (1922–2010)

Researcher of the Moravian Church in Estonia

von Juko Talonen

Estonian church historian, professor and parson Voldemar Ilja died on December 16th 2010 in Tallinn. Well-known in Finland, Ilja was in a way already a legend in the Evangelical-Lutheran church of Estonia.

Ilja was born in 1922 in Vasteliina parish in Southern Estonia. He lived in the spiritual landscape of Moravian Church since childhood. From the parish it was a shorter trip to Riga than to Tallinn. The area was strongly influenced by Moravian revivalism. The first messengers of the Moravian Church arrived in Estonia from Germany already in 1730.

Voldemar Ilja lived the fate of Estonians' of the period in his own life. During the Second World War he escaped from the German army of occupation into the forest. During the communist dictatorship he again lived 'hidden in the forest'. In 1953 Ilja was caught and condemned to a concentration camp in the area of Archangel. The 'enemy of the people' was released during the Soviet Union's 'thaw' of the next years. He started theology studies in the church's seminary, but due to the priest shortage he was appointed to the office already next year in Pester, East Estonia. Ilja started to serve Ingrians of the Soviet Union in the next years together with the parson of Narva, Elmar Kull.

His theological studies continued, and Ilja also advanced to church seminary teacher. In the 1960s the church of Estonia was driven more and more into a ghetto. Nikita Khrushchev had launched an anti-religion campaign and the fight was at its worst in the 60s, but the Estonian church had the Moravian tradition to draw strength from. Of the church seminary students, half were from Moravian families. In some congregations of Tallinn the role of layman became essential. It was natural that Ilja's interest was directed to the old revivalist movement.

A ship connection between Tallinn and Helsinki was opened in 1965. President Urho Kekkonen had visited Soviet Estonia the previous year. Professor of Church History Kauko Pirinen took a group of theology students from the University of Helsinki to Tallinn in the spring of 1966. For Ilja, this visit by Finns marked two turning points in his life. First, the over 40-year-old bachelor became acquainted with a Finnish theological student, Elli Huuhtanen, and a romance led quickly to marriage. Second, Professor Pirinen became a tutor for Ilja's studies of the Moravian Church.

The bridge of research over the Gulf of Finland was one-sided for the next 15 years though. Voldemar Ilja was not able to visit Finland until 1980. Travel to the archives of the Moravian Church in East Germany (Unitätsarchiv der Evangelischen Brüder-Unität) was not possible until the time of

Gorbatshev in 1988. But the parson of the Nomme, District of Tallinn since 1978 and later the director of the Theology Institute of Tallinn, a seasoned, influential person, did not give up. Ilja defended his doctoral thesis on the early stage of the Moravian Church in Estonia in his study “Vennestakoguduse (herrnhutluse) ajagulu Eestimaal (Põhja- Eesti) 1730–1743” in the Theology Department of the University of Helsinki in March 1995.

Ilja’s research meant a new beginning to theological and church-historical research, which had been stagnant under the Soviet Government. The dissertation was likewise a victory for Kauko Pirinen, who had tutored Ilja’s research for long and was also his opponent in the dissertation. Ilja had collected a whole range of material that he did not just leave for his research archives. Ilja retired from the position of parson of Nomme in 1999 and was released from the tasks of the Theology Institute, which gave him more time for his research.

Over the years 2000–2010, Ilja published five monographs on the Moravian Church in Estonia. His sequel to the dissertation, “Vennestakoguduse (herrnhutluse) ajagulu Eestimaal (Põhja- Eesti) 1744–1764” (“The Moravian Church in Estonia in the years 1744–1764”), appeared in 2000. A couple of years later, “Vennestakoguduse (herrnhutluse) ajagulu Liivimaal (Lõuna-Eesti) 1729–1750” (“The History of the Moravian Church in Livonia of Estonia in 1729–1750”) appeared. In 2005, Ilja’s fourth monograph of Moravian studies was published and it dealt with the vicissitudes of the revivalist movement in the Estonian areas of the old Livonia 1750–1765. Two years later, Ilja published a sequel to it in which he developed the topic until 1817 when Czar Alexander I of Russia published a well-known manifest that set great store by the Moravian Church. At the end of the book, in its epilogue (Järelsona), Ilja also discussed the movement’s state of development in the 20th century.

Ilja’s final research, the book “Vennastekoguduse (herrnhutluse) ajagulu Eestimaal (Põhja-Eesti) Palvemajad. VI.”, appeared in the spring of 2010. The book covered Moravian prayer houses in the Estonian area. It also included valuable pictorial material. I received the book from Ilja as an Easter greeting that was dated March 24, 2010.

Ilja’s researches and descriptions of the history of the Moravian Church in Estonia are valuable sources for future researchers. There is a massive amount of knowledge and information collected in the books. Future critical research naturally has to approach the topic analytically and with a stronger methodical approach, but Ilja has nonetheless cleared the way for new lines of research. In assessing the historical impact of the Moravian Church, Ilja concurred with Olaf Sild (1879–1944), the leading church historian and the creator of national church history with his view of the Moravian Church as a determining factor in Christianizing Estonia. Voldemar Ilja was in a rare way able to finish his life work. The professor who had been walking into the wind and storm all his life remained lively and kept his peculiar sense of humor to the end. He was not stopped just like that.

Ilja spoke for the last time in the Moravian prayer house in Tallinn on the first advent on 28th November in 2010. His spiritual values carried through to the end.

Translation from Finnish by Student of Theology Raakel Koittola. Dr. Robert Whiting revise the English text.