

Memorial Resolution
FELIX J. OINAS
(16 March 1911 – 25 September 2004)

Professor Felix J. Oinas passed away at his home in Bloomington, on September 25, 2004, at the age of 93. He was born on March 16, 1911, in Tartu, Estonia. He was a world-renowned scholar with many areas of expertise. At Indiana University, this was reflected in the fact that he taught courses in three diverse departments: the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, the Uralic- Altaic Department (now the Central Eurasian Studies Department), and the Folklore Institute. He was considered the first pioneer of Estonian folklore and is credited with upholding the high scholarly standards of the study of Estonian folklore during the period of Soviet rule in Estonia.

Fortunately for Felix Oinas' intellectual development, he was able to attend Tartu University in the early 1930's, during the period of Estonia's independence. He specialized in the Finno-Ugric languages, including their folklore, ethnography, and literature. In 1935, he was able to spend a year abroad, in Budapest, and deepened his knowledge of Slavic linguistics, which he had begun in Tartu. In 1938 he was awarded an M.A. from Tartu University in Finno-Ugric, comparative literature, and folklore. In the late 1930's, he taught Estonian in Hungary, also completing research projects in the field of Hungarian literature and working on Hungarian-Estonian translations. He remained in Estonia during the 1940-41 Soviet occupation and the 1941-44 German occupation, leaving for Germany soon before the entry of Soviet forces, in 1944. While in Germany, he studied Slavic linguistics and literature at the University of Heidelberg.

In September, 1949, the Oinas family sailed to the United States, first living in Detroit and later moving to Bloomington, Indiana, in 1950. In 1952, Oinas successfully defended his Indiana University Ph.D. in the field of Balto-Finnic linguistics. While at IU, he also worked as a lecturer of Russian. In 1955, he received a tenure-track appointment as Assistant Professor of Slavic Studies (the forerunner of the current Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures). His promotion to Associate Professor took place in 1961, and in 1965 he was promoted to full rank, with affiliations in three areas: Slavic, Uralic-Altaic, and Folklore. His emeritus period began in 1981.

Professor Oinas received many honors during his life, which are too numerous to mention in full. In 1977, he was elected as a foreign member of the Finnish Academy of Sciences. In 1985, he received the Kalevala medal from the Finnish government. In 1986, he was made an honorary member of the Folklore Institute of Pázmány Péter University in Budapest, Hungary. He was honored by many more organizations in many countries. He had many visiting and guest appointments in such institutions as the University of California at Berkeley (1976), various Finnish universities (1962), Stockholm (1962), and Belgrade University (1974). He also gave lectures at numerous other universities across the United States. He participated in many international conferences and was active in professional organizations, such as the Modern Language Teachers Association. He played a major editorial role as review editor and board member at the *Slavic and East European Journal*, the journal of AATSEEL, the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. On the occasion of his 70th birthday Oinas was honored with an international *Festschrift* edited by V.E.Zygas and Peter Voorheis, *Folklorica: Festschrift for Felix J. Oinas*. Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series vol.141 (Bloomington, 1982).

His colleagues in each of Professor Oinas' departments at Indiana University remember his unique and special contribution. In the Slavic Department, former students still recall the high standards of Professor Oinas' course in Old Church Slavonic, which was taught with intellectual rigor, but also a sense of humor. His unique courses in Slavic folklore are fondly remembered, especially since they have never been replaced since his retirement. Folklorists recall the unique role played by Professor Oinas, who served as a window into the folklore studies of Eastern Europe, thanks to his fluent knowledge of many of the languages of that region. Since his first training was as a Finno-Ugrist, his years in the Uralic- Altaic Department were an opportunity for him to make another unique contribution to Indiana University.

There were many basic themes of Felix Oinas' research. Some of the most important included Balto-Finnic and Slavic folklore, the relation of Balto-Finnic folklore as compared to Baltic (Lithuanian and Latvian) folklore, the Estonian epic *Kalevipoeg* (including the study of Slavic parallels to that epic), mythology (including the study of spirits, ghosts, devils, and vampires), and the study of Slavic and Finnic etymologies.

A summary such as this cannot do justice to the image represented by Felix Oinas to those who knew him. People marveled at how he could put so much energy, enthusiasm, and hard work into each of the specialized areas of Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and folklore, let alone attain great renown in all of these areas. This combination, like Felix Oinas the man, was a truly unique entity, not likely to be repeated again. Those who knew him count themselves as very fortunate to have had the rare opportunity to have known a scholar of such uncommon breadth and knowledge.

Ronald F. Feldstein, Revised July 25, 2005