



In Memoriam Laila Irmeli Vuorela 1938–2012

Towards the end of March the sad news came that Irmeli Vuorela had died on 16th of the month. To the majority of her friends and colleagues this was a great shock which was received by all with deep sorrow. As the information spread the comments circulating were ‘She was such an outstandingly lovely lady’, ‘When I think of her I always hear her captivating laughter’, ‘A very nice and so kind person’ and, ‘We will miss her greatly. Those copies of *Acta Botanica Fennica* that comprised her thesis research are precious to us all’. She is, indeed, sadly missed but universally the memories of Irmeli are happy ones and will stay with us always.

Laila Irmeli Vuorela, née Ståhlberg, known to us all as, Irmeli, was born in Helsinki on 23.04.1938, to the lawyer Juho Ståhlberg and his wife Mary, the middle child of three, and a granddaughter of Finland’s first president Kaarlo Juho Ståhlberg.

She received her basic schooling at the Helsingin Suomalainen Yhteiskoulu and then continued to Helsinki University in 1957, where she studied Geology and Palaeontology but also Botany and Geography, completing her Master’s degree in 1965. This was followed by a Licentiate degree in 1969 and a doctor’s degree in 1975. She was the second woman to receive a doctor’s degree in Geology and Palaeontology from Helsinki University. The topic of her thesis, ‘The influence of man on the vegetation of south-western Finland as shown by pollen diagrams’ set the scene for her life’s work; using the techni-

que of pollen analysis to investigate the activities of human settlers and the way in which they interacted with and changed their environment. It was a subject which, in the early 1970’s, was rapidly gaining in importance in Europe, but which had only just begun to be explored in detail in Finland. Through its inevitable interdisciplinary nature Irmeli’s work led to a long and fruitful interaction with archaeologists. Over the years she explored a great number of diverse ‘man and the environment’ situations, ranging from searching for the very earliest evidence of agriculture through to the establishment and development of urban settlements. As time went by she also extended her pollen analysis to include charcoal and phytolith records. To pick out just a few highlights we can mention an early paper based on modern experimental work where she used pollen traps to monitor the distribution of cereal pollen within the vicinity of the grain fields, a paper which is still one of the most quoted. A later publication included a map illustrating the likely timing of the spread of farming throughout Finland, based on the first occurrences of cereal pollen grains in published pollen diagrams; an illustration which was readily used by the National Museum of Finland in an exhibition at the time. Irmeli made a major contribution to our knowledge of the development of the cities of Turku, Helsinki and Porvoo where her pollen analysis results complemented and enlarged on the reconstructions based on plant macrofossils and archaeological remains. She also edi-

ted a whole volume of papers focusing on underwater archaeology. In 1983 she received the title of Docent. Over the almost 50 years of her career her scientific output was prodigious, comprising peer review articles, chapters in books and detailed reports in connection with archaeological investigations. Early on in her academic career, from her publications and through presentations at conferences, her work on early Finnish agriculture and settlement was recognized and respected by the international palaeoecology community, and she was soon asked to attend meetings and invited to join international research networks. She was not only able, but also happy and eager, to pass on her knowledge and skills to students both at the University of Helsinki, where she gave demonstrations and lectures for some 20 years, and internationally.

From the beginning of 1980's to the end of 1990's she was actively involved in the European Council Network PACT (a collaboration between archaeologists and natural scientists for the benefit of European culture) as coordinator of the Team for Biology, which later became the Environmental history and Palaeobotany Team, arranging seminars, courses and excursions for European post-graduates, mainly in Ravello, southern Italy but also in the Nordic and Baltic countries. In this connection the well-attended seminar in Hanko, on the then relatively new topic of underwater archaeology, should be mentioned.

In 1987 she left the university to move to the Geological Survey of Finland where she met both former fellow students and students whom she had herself taught. Throughout her time at the Survey she continued to work closely with archaeologists, unravelling the history of many dwelling sites in southern Finland. She still continued to teach occasional university courses through her position as docent but during the period 1990 – 2002 she was also active in a Nordic Council of Ministers, NorFA, post-graduate education initiative, where she was involved in research projects dealing with the environmental and cultural history of the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea.

Irmeli retired from the Geological Survey

in 2001 but continued to be involved in international interdisciplinary projects. In 2004 the European Science Foundation (ESF) started an extensive research programme named EARTH (Early Agricultural Remnants and Technical Heritage) where she was asked to be one of the members of the Steering Committee as the Finnish representative. The results of that programme will be published as three volumes later this year.

During this period she also became involved with the Red Cross to which she devoted many hours of voluntary work. She was elected chairperson of the local district committee and, among other things, was centrally involved in organizing the 'Hunger Day' collections.

Irmeli did not forget her colleagues and friends during her retirement years and many of us have enjoyed visiting exhibitions and museums, going to the theatre, or joining her for a meal; especially memorable is her generous hospitality when inviting people to her home. A group of her Geological Survey colleagues, the 'Perhokerho' as they called themselves, continued their friendship long after they had all retired. In fact one of Irmeli's last happiest and successful social occasions was to invite this group to a highly memorable midsummer get together celebration at her summer cottage last June. No one could think at that stage that she had such a short time left to live.

Irmeli had a very happy and warm family life. She married Pekka Vuorela in 1960 and they have two children, a daughter Auli and a son Arto, who now have their own families. Her grandchildren Erno, Heini, Noora and Samu were her beloved and valued treasures. The whole family misses her deeply.

In addition to being a solid pillar for her family Irmeli gave support to many friends and colleagues all over the world. We remember her for her stature and integrity but, even more so, for her kindness and thoughtful consideration. Her realistic sense of humour, her witty comments and infectious laughter will live on deep in our hearts and minds.

SHEILA HICKS
URVE MILLER