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AGU AARNA - RECTOR OF TALLINN TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY

Engineering education in Estonia, offered in Estonian, dates back to September 1918, when Higher Engineering Courses were initiated by the Estonian Engineering Society to meet the needs of the newly independent state. This remarkable event is also considered as a starting point for Tallinn Technical University, although it acquired university status only in 1936 with Prof. Paul Kogerman as the first rector.

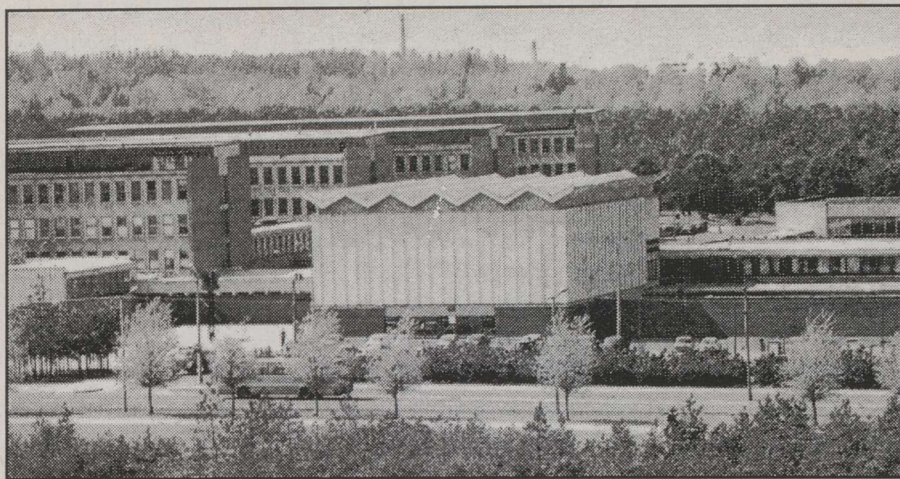
Tallinn Technical University (TTU) has always considered research of Estonian oil shales, studies in their mining, chemical processing and burning as an important part of its mission. Does this stem from the fact that several of TTU rectors have been intimately related to oil shale chemistry and technology, or from the fact that oil shale has been and still is the major mineral resource for Estonia? In this respect two rectors - Prof. Paul Kogerman (1936-1939) and Prof. Agu Aarna (1960-1976) come to mind. Two eminent oil shale chemists, a teacher and his student, and at the same time two rectors of TTU with very strong impact into its development. There is hardly any direct evidence of strong correlation between the profession of researcher in oil shale chemistry, and the mission of rector, but nevertheless it would be worthwhile to analyse the links between these two.

To be a rector is certainly a mission. A mission to define and follow the institution's strategic goals, to attract and integrate people, their intellectual potential, and available resources in pursuit of these goals. This sounds fairly simple but in practice can be extremely complicated, physically and emotionally exhaustive. Probably, to alleviate the pains caused by the burden of rector's mission one seeks and finds a compensation enjoying involvement in research and discussions with his students. Certainly, Agu Aarna found additional satisfaction from his different hobbies: music, singing, literature, history, and travelling, to mention the most important ones, and do hope - from his family and friends.

Despite commonalities in the rector's mission, specific features of the period of time also play a significant role. Agu Aarna started his rectorship at the apogee of the so-called Khrushchev's thaw, which also meant the dawn of mass higher education in Estonia as a part of then Soviet Union. During his rectorship the number of students at TTU increased from about 3,000 to nearly 10,000. At the same time also the profile of the university widened significantly. Probably, the most important monument of this period is the

new university campus in Mustamäe, the south-west suburb of Tallinn, now housing nearly two thirds of TTU.

During construction of this campus Agu Aarna displayed the full potential of his leadership and diplomatic capacities, the ability to find the proper approach to different persons, even to take advantage of the specificities of the Soviet bureaucracy. Let me recall that the construction of aula in Mustamäe was finished just the night before opening ceremony of the United Nations' symposium on oil shales and their processing held at TTU in August 1968. This was really an outstanding milestone in the history of oil shale research in Estonia, and at the same time one of the milestones in long-distance hurdle race for new TTU.



General view of Tallinn Technical University

During the Soviet rule the role of a particular institution of higher education in curriculum design was minimal. Nevertheless, these 5-15 % "free credit hours" could be used to give some individual flavour to the education, obtained according to very strict and mostly narrow-profiled curricula. In this respect one of Agu Aarna's major innovations during 1960's was introduction of engineering curricula with strong emphasis on modern mathematics and computer science. As a straight consequence of this innovation, nowadays majority of leading professors and researchers in engineering sciences in Estonia are TTU graduates, who took advantage of this option.

Inevitable decline of Soviet economy and Soviet society caused numerous grimaces of different types in 1970's and 1980's. From today's prospective it is even hard to imagine that in early 1970's the whole administration of TTU, first and foremost the rector, were heavily punished because their

students shouted with joy when Czechs and Slovaks destroyed the Soviet icehockey team in the World Championship finals.

For nearly six years already Agu Aarna is just a memory for his sons and grandchildren, for his colleagues, and last but not least - for Tallinn Technical University to whom he has devoted most of his talents and energy. Meanwhile I have been several times asked: Can the rectorship be inherited? The answer is certainly: "No". New challenges invite new mission statements but what we always lack is people with properly embedded sense of mission.

OLAV AARNA,

Rector of Tallinn Technical University 1991-...