

GONE TO REMAIN

In memoriam Kirstin Casemir

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The onomastic community across many countries was deeply shocked by the untimely death of Dr Kirstin Casemir. Her boundless energy, extraordinary productivity, and immense contribution to research on the German onomasticon had made her one of the most active and widely respected scholars in the field. She seemed to be everywhere – collaborating with onomasticians from numerous countries dear to her heart, while devoting

particular attention to the onomasticon of her native Germany and of Europe as a whole.

Kirstin celebrated her fifty-eighth birthday in hospital, already gravely ill. She was a maximalist by nature; for her, nothing seemed impossible to overcome. The early loss of such a creative, inspired, and idea-filled scholar profoundly affected not only her colleagues working on the twenty-five-year project “Toponyms between the Rhine and the Elbe”, initiated by the Lower Saxony Academy of Sciences in Göttingen, but also the broader scholarly community.

The German Academy of Sciences are renowned for supporting long-term research projects. One of them, “Hydronymia Europaea”, was also familiar to the author of these lines, who contributed to the project by preparing two monographs between 1995 and 2005. The project was led by Wolfgang P. Schmid, who was later elected a foreign member of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences and awarded an honorary doctorate by Vilnius University. Schmid maintained a close and respectful relationship with Kirstin Casemir, whose doctoral

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dissertation was written within the seminar of historical-comparative and general linguistics under his supervision.

Kirstin often spoke warmly of her mentor. In the introduction to her published dissertation, *Toponyms of the County of Wolfenbüttel and the City of Salzgitter*, she described studying under such a professor as a privilege she deeply appreciated, emphasising his patience and benevolence. In Germany, a doctoral dissertation also requires a second reviewer, and this role was fulfilled by Professor Jürgen Udolph, a scholar renowned for his tireless willingness to discuss even a single oikonym of uncertain origin. Kirstin became both his like-minded colleague and collaborator. Her dissertation was later published as a separate volume in Bielefeld in 2003, reflecting Germany's strong tradition of regional historical publishing houses – institutions we unfortunately cannot claim to possess to the same extent.

Kirstin's death was especially devastating for her closest colleague, co-author, assistant, and husband, the talented historian Uwe Ohainski. He accompanied her through every stage of her life and scholarly career; together they worked on numerous projects and shared a deep intellectual partnership. All who had the privilege of knowing and communicating with her felt the magnitude of this loss.

For Kirstin, place names were not merely an academic subject – they became her life and identity. Through them, she sought to understand and reveal the history of her homeland, its people, and its language. She participated in the Second International Aleksandras Vanagas Conference, "Name in Language, History and Self-Consciousness", held in Vilnius on October 24–26, 2007. Her presentation, "Ortsname und Ortsnamengeber" ("Place Name and Place-Name Giver"), emphasised the importance of reliable and accurate information about place names.

Kirstin also contributed to the volume *Namen und Appellative der älteren Sprachschichten (Names and Appellatives of Older Language Strata)*, a publication she herself had initiated. The book, published in Germany in 2015, includes her article "Altpreußische Toponymie als Gegenstand selbstständiger Untersuchungen" ("Old Prussian Toponymy as an Object of Independent Research").

Kirstin Casemir possessed an exceptional sense of responsibility. She approached people with openness and generosity, encouraging others, inspiring cooperation, and at the same time carrying an enormous scholarly workload herself. Her memory will remain inseparable from the field of onomastics to which she devoted her life with such passion and dedication.

Already during her studies, Kirstin Casemir worked as an assistant. Soon afterwards, she was invited to join the German dictionary project initiated by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm at the Göttingen Academy of Sciences, where she was entrusted with preparing a revised version of the dictionary's oldest sections.

In 2007, she began work on the Academy project "Place Names between the Rhine and the Elbe – Onomastics in the European Area" ("Ortsnamen zwischen Rhein und Elbe – Onomastik im europäischen Raum"). By that time, her workplace had moved to Münster in Westphalia. She eventually became the project's director and remained in this position until her death.

Together with her colleagues, Kirstin Casemir published volumes in two major series: the *Westphalian Place Name Dictionary (Westfälisches Ortsnamenbuch)* and the *Lower Saxon Place Name Dictionary (Niedersächsisches Ortsnamenbuch)*. She co-authored several volumes and wrote not only on questions of Lower German onomastics, but also on broader issues within the field. The author of these lines was once invited to Münster to provide expert consultation for the project. The scholarly atmosphere there was exemplary: colleagues and members of the academic community never obstructed the work, yet everything was expected to be completed with precision and on time.

Kirstin was actively involved in several associations of linguists, onomasticians, and historians, and she also collaborated in the publication of the journal “Beiträge zur Namenforschung” (“Contributions to Onomastic Research”). In 2019, her scholarly achievements were recognised with the prestigious Henning Kaufmann Prize.

German onomastics has lost an exceptional scholar – someone who did not work for passing academic fashions or short-lived intellectual trends, but for a kind of onomastics that would endure long after we ourselves are gone. Kirstin Casemir also devoted time and attention to students. Since 2002, she had worked at the University of Göttingen, and from 2007 onward she taught onomastics at the University of Münster.

The traces she leaves behind are deep and lasting. There was no bitterness in her work, no aggressive insistence on proving herself right. Kirstin Casemir was a free and independent person who knew clearly what mattered most to her, to her scholarship, and to her country.

Translated by dr. Pavel Skorupa