Although Ernest Hemingway once stated that in each port of the world you could meet at least one Estonian, it is a rare occurrence when the existence and achievements of great personalities originating from this 1 million strong nation are associated with their native country and nation in the minds of their foreign colleagues. In this sense Hilda Taba is not an exception. She is known worldwide as an outstanding American educator and curriculum theorist, but very few know that she was born, brought up and educated in Estonia. Probably, even more surprising is the fact that Taba, belonging to the list of the most outstanding educators of the twentieth century and whose academic work climaxed with the publication of the monograph *Curriculum development: theory and practice* (1962), remained unknown in her native country for decades. So, in spite of the fact that Taba’s approach to curriculum design spread throughout the world and her monograph took an honourable position on the bookshelves of European education libraries in the 1960s, her educational ideas reached Estonian educators only at the end of the 1980s.

The above-mentioned circumstance is one of the many controversial aspects in Hilda Taba’s life that evidently played an important role in her development as a scientist and gave a unique colouration to her educational ideas. Another controversy, undoubtedly playing a major role in the formation of Taba’s theoretical ideas and thinking, was the collision between German and American educational traditions that she experienced in her studies of pedagogy. For instance, the undergraduate educational preparation that she received at the University of Tartu had a strong disposition towards

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German didactics and educational philosophy. However, her subsequent post-graduate studies in the United States of America were strongly influenced by the ideas of progressive education, which she came to admire and which became a cornerstone of her educational thinking.

It remains unknown whether Taba had dreamed of pursuing her academic career in the United States or of returning to Estonia after her post-graduate studies abroad. However, the fact that she competed for the professorship in education at the University of Tartu in 1931 rather points to her intention to bind her working career and life to Estonia. These plans did not come about, as she was not selected for this position. But what is even more amazing was that she could not find any other job in Estonia worthy of her qualifications. So, the author of the doctoral dissertation The dynamics of education: a methodology of progressive educational thought (1932), which later earned wide recognition among educators, decided to return to North America. This unexpected change in her plans and the subsequent move caused Taba to experience serious difficulties and misery at the beginning of her career. Hilda Taba’s road to excellence was in some parts due to chance, her enormous desire to succeed and the favourable conditions for educational research in the United States, and she became one of the brightest stars in the educational constellation of the 1960s. Nowadays, her work in the field of curriculum design, alongside that of Ralph W. Tyler, belongs to the classics of pedagogy. Several contemporary authors still frequently refer to Hilda Taba’s ideas and base their work in the field of curriculum theory and practice on her conceptions developed decades ago (see, for example, articles in the handbooks edited by Shaver, 1991; and Leawy, 1991; and in academic journals by Klarin, 1992; Fraenkel, 1994; Parry, 2000). There are over 100 recent articles and monographs referring to the work of Taba in the ERIC database. Furthermore, countless references to her name and educational ideas on the Internet are additional proof that her academic contribution to the field of education has lasting value.

Some ideas about Hilda Taba as a person can be found in Elizabeth H. Brady’s (1992) commemorative article. Brady, one of her closest colleagues during the days of inter-group education projects (1945–1951), wrote: ‘Taba was very energetic, enthusiastic, active, seemingly tireless; she led life at a tempo which sometimes led to misunderstandings and often wore out friends and staff. She was small in stature, perky in manners and in dress, and always intent on the next thing’ (Brady, 1992, p. 9).

**Hilda Taba’s childhood and university studies**

The future prominent educator Hilda Taba was born in Kooraste, a small village in the present Pilva county, in south-east Estonia, on 7 December 1902. She was the first of nine children of Robert Taba, a schoolmaster. Hilda was first educated at her father’s elementary school, and then at the local parish school.

In 1921, after graduating from Viru High School for Girls, she decided to become an elementary school-teacher. In the autumn of the same year Hilda passed the final examination for elementary teacher certification at the Didactic Seminar of Tartu,