

## NÄKÖKULMA

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# COMMENTARY ON “ARGENTIINAN JA PARAGUAYN SUOMALAISSIIRTOKUNNAT” [ARGENTINA’S AND PARAGUAY’S FINNISH SETTLEMENTS]

In her commentary, Saramo analyses Pärssinen’s text through the sociopolitical relationship between the Finnish state and Finnish emigrants.

Keywords: Argentina, Finnish Emigrants, Paraguay, Social Welfare

Fifty years ago, in 1974, Pastor Ilkka Pärssinen alerted readers of the first issue of (then called) *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* journal of the difficult social and economic position of many Finnish settlers in Argentina and Paraguay. Drawing on the work of researcher Olavi Lähteenmäki, the article emphasized how Finnish settlers in South America had been pushed into a “state of distress, at the same time as development in Finland has led to increasingly better wellbeing and social security.” As the pastor of the Finnish Seamen’s Mission in Buenos Aires – and at times the only Finnish pastor in South America –, Pärssinen was closely involved in establishing the Mission’s Social Work Committee and in lobbying the Finnish government to provide assistance to its citizens abroad. In his *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* article, Pärssinen briefly outlined the history of Finnish settlers in Argentina and Paraguay, the state of the communities at the time of writing, and efforts to alleviate the hardships of the settlers. Reading the article now provides an opportunity to reflect on the current state of services to Finnish citizens abroad.

While hundreds of Finns had made their way to the Misiones province of Argentina in the first decades of the twentieth century, by 1974, according to Pärssinen, the old “Colonia Finlandesa” area had only about twenty families. Even fewer Finns remained across the border in Paraguay. Pärssinen particularly emphasized the advanced age of the majority of the Finns. He bemoaned the economic hardships these elders faced, unable to continue physical labour in the agricultural or forest sectors, with very limited social services and language skills, and no pensions to rely on.

While Pärssinen noted that living conditions varied greatly from region to region, the article painted a very grim portrait of the settlers’ lives. Their communities were described as being “at the brink of destruction,” and their lives as ones of “scrapped dreams.” The current situation was framed as a “social emergency.” Indeed, the restriction of yerba mate cultivation in 1967 devastated numerous small-scale farmers – many Finns and Swedes among them – who relied on the crop for their primary income.

Yet, the highly negative portrayal of Finnish life most likely served the key purpose of Pärssinen’s writing. He identified the early 1970s and particularly the work of Olavi Lähteenmäki and recent Finnish TV coverage as bringing the plight of Finnish settlers in Argentina and Paraguay to broad audiences in Finland. The work of the Finnish Seamen’s Mission, however, was to bring concrete and material benefit to the elderly Finns and their descendants in South America. In part, this was through on-the-ground work (albeit out of Buenos Aires), including church services, home visits, clothing drives, and magazine and book sales. This work was further aided by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission, the Sävellahja YLE program, Suomi-Seura, and the Finnish Red Cross. The money they raised in Finland was used to directly fund the work of Pärssinen’s Social Work Committee in Argentina, which issued aid to Finnish settlers so they could cover living expenses, medicine, adequate beds, and other such needs. Suomi-Seura took the lead in drafting a proposal for the Finnish parliament’s State Council that would provide Finnish citizens living abroad with state pensions.



Eino Saarinen. Penedo, Brasilia. Siirtolaisuusinstituutin kuva-arkisto.

At the time of writing, Ilkka Pärssinen awaited a decision on the proposal. The effort resulted in some emergency aid grants, but also in extending access to Finnish old-age pension to Finns living in certain cooperating countries. Suomi-Seura has continued to play a key role in helping Finnish citizens navigate access to pensions (foremost those accrued through working years in Finland) and advocating on their behalf. In April 2024, however, the government of Finland announced that it will eliminate access to national old-age pensions to Finns living abroad. According to Kela, this will impact about 25 000 people, the majority of whom are living in Sweden. In the worst case, this change will result in a significant raise in the number of Finnish elderly living in poverty abroad and will require new, urgent efforts to alleviate their strain.

The Seamen’s Mission, along with the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church’s Mission to Finns Abroad, have, likewise, continued to offer important support to many Finns worldwide. Their activities include religious and cultural activities, as well as crucial social work and crisis supports. From the beginning of 2025, the churches will consolidate their missions to Finns abroad, in an effort to “clarify communication, simplify administration, and save money.” The new combined work will be administered through the Seamen’s Mission, allowing the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church to cut administration costs, rather than reducing its mission work. There is great potential for this new cooperative form of service to Finnish communities worldwide.

Pärssinen’s concern about the aging Finnish population in South America continues to resonate

today. In 2024, a major concern is ensuring that aging Finns abroad can access the information and services they are entitled to, despite the obstacles posed by the increasingly digitalized nature of access. The electronic secure authorization systems required to access government and banking services in Finland remain out of grasp for many. The expense of obtaining Finnish passports – often requiring extensive travel to get to the nearest embassy or consulate – remains another significant challenge, one further exacerbated by age, income status, and health. The Finnish Seniors Abroad (Suomalaiset seniorit maailmalla) working group, which is a collaboration between Suomi-Seura, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church’s Mission to Finns Abroad, the Seamen’s Mission, and the Migration Institute of Finland, aims to identify these service gaps, provide training and information to seniors, and advocate on their behalf.

The Finnish Ministry of the Interior’s 2022–2026 Strategy on Expatriate Finns signalled a new turn for the government, one which centered the voices of Finnish citizens living abroad. Additionally, key organizations supporting these communities also had an opportunity to impact the strategy, the Migration Institute of Finland among them. With government cuts to pensions paid abroad, the upcoming Strategy will need to ensure that substantial social welfare gaps do not (re-)form between elderly Finns living in Finland and those living abroad. As at the time of Pärssinen’s writing, the churches’ (newly merged) missions to Finns abroad and Suomi-Seura, along with the Migration Institute of Finland, will surely continue to support and advocate for Finnish communities abroad.

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