

## Nails and Mortar – an Immigrant Story

“Hey, watch it!” Pirkko squealed as a piece of old mortar grazed her flushed cheek.

“So, Soooorry”, I shouted, above the din of hammers, old bricks and flying mortar. We had been told to chip off cement from discarded bricks. It was our father’s idea of saving money as we built our first home in Canada.

Two years prior our family of eight had touched Canadian soil in Gander Newfoundland. The date was April 4, 1957. Next day we were to fly to Toronto and then on to Sudbury, Ontario. A storm diverted our flight to Buffalo, New York. From Buffalo a long bus ride to Toronto saw our weary and disheveled family enter the regal lobby of the Royal York Hotel. Thanks to Pan American Airways and the Royal York, we experienced for the first time in our lives, ice cream and television.

The next morning Father and Mother were standing in line at the airport, six children and five bulging duffel bags in tow. Father, who was a tentmaker, had sewn the bags himself. These worked well as luggage. A short flight on a propeller driven plane landed us in Sudbury-our new Canadian home.

Building a house for our large family was Father’s first priority. He worked three jobs and scrounged demolition sites for cheap building material. Eero, our oldest brother, pulled nails from used boards. Pirkko and I did brick duty. When it was time to begin building, neighbours came to help.

Meanwhile Mother kept our youngest siblings, Asko, Lauri and Inkeri, away from the building site. We were living next door in an apartment which our neighbor farmer had remodeled out of a large chicken house. All three apartment units which made up the ‘remodeled chicken coop’ housed immigrant families. Our apartment had three rooms. One had to step down a couple of stairs from the living room into the kitchen. A manual water pump stood next to the kitchen sink. Blue flowered linoleum covered the slightly slanting floor. Working in that small apartment, Mother no doubt dreamed about the added space a new home would provide for her large brood. Ever the story teller, she would gather us around her full skirts and tell us about the wonderful Pastor Kyllonen who welcomed us at the Sudbury Airport, found a job for our dad at a steel foundry, and accommodation for us in an upstairs flat on Lorne Street. We were never to forget the goodness of those who

went out of their way to make us comfortable in Canada, our new home. If we complained that everything was better in Finland Mother would say, “We chose to come to Canada and this is where we will stay.” End of conversation. No more doubts.

We knew that there were no problems our dad could not solve. He was a draftsman by trade, a builder by choice and an inventor of machines. He believed that work could always be done more efficiently. There was the automatic berry cleaner, the truck axle powered cement mixer and basement blocks made of aerated lightweight cement. If being an inventor and a draftsman were not enough for one man, our father was also an artist. And so he turned his creativity to masonry, building a retaining wall that would curve around and to the front of our house. It would be an artistic touch to an otherwise modest home. With that river stone wall we could almost forget that the house was made of used building materials. We were proud of our ingenious father!

But our faith was about to be shattered. At the end of one exhausting day Mother ran over to the retaining wall to find Father slumped over his mortar trowel. He had suffered a massive heart attack. Our tower of strength had toppled. Our world screeched to a halt. Now who was going to solve this problem?

Once again, Mother gathered her ‘chicks’ around her ample bosom. With tears staining her apron she whispered, “It will be alright. God will take care of us.” That faith soon materialized in the form of food and clothes from the wonderful people of Sudbury Sion Finnish Church. We children drew strength from mother’s optimism and watched as she, for the first time in her life, went to work cleaning a large local bakery. With the job came a perk. Mother would bring home loaves of free, day-old sliced white bread. What a treat on Sunday mornings as Eero toasted a whole loaf of fluffy white bread. Compared to the dark and heavy rye bread we were used to, white bread was soft and above all, Canadian.

Miraculously, Father recovered and completed the stone wall. But building no longer had the same allure for him. He now wanted to give back, to serve. A new phase began in our lives as Father who was a trained pastor accepted the position of shepherding a small church in Montreal-Betania Finnish Church. So we moved. Our dream home was rent-

ed out and once again five duffle bags were loaded.

We lived in a row house in St. Henri, a multicultural ghetto by the CN rail yards. Greeks ran the gas station at the end of the street. Our neighbours were Italian and school buddies Barbadians. We learned to balance on railway tracks, joke with the factory workers on their lunch breaks, and marvel at the cycling grocery boys whose baskets teetered with delivery goods. Dill pickles swimming in oak caskets sold for a penny At Dino's Grocery Store. An 'Oh Henry' chocolate bar, a favourite, was ours for five cents at Miss Valentine's café.

So we flourished as the immigrant community of Montreal opened their homes to our large family. Memories of Mrs. Sillanpaa's macaroni casserole and pickled beets still cause my salivary glands to drip! Friends who had saunas treated us to Saturday evenings of this very Finnish tradition. The Finnish community had become our 'family'. We were touched when one of the church elders declared, "Pastor Sorila, your family is growing and you need to move to a larger apartment." Everyone helped as we moved to a second storey row house in an area of Montreal called

Notre Dame de Grace. Our new home had six rooms and a basement. Mother now had the space that she had so craved back in Sudbury.

Of course there were hardships but in their midst Mother's joy of life infected us all. She always saw 'the glass half full'. I can still hear her say, "With every new day comes new strength". And what about Father? He tended to be more serious. But when a smile broke through on his face it was like the sun had just risen. His bright blue eyes twinkled and the corners of his mouth creased. He was our pillar of strength.

Through those years when we were new immigrants, Father had gently guided us to acknowledge that there is One whose care and compassion eclipses that of earthly parents. Even ours. He is the One who had been strong when Father was not. The One who had provided when father could not. Whether conscious of it or not, we had been carried by invisible arms. Whether we were chipping mortar, pulling nails or quarreling when mother was cleaning the bakery, God had been there all along. We were in good hands.

*Mirjam (Sorila) Rand*

## To a New Life, To a New Country called Canada

*Father broke the News,....  
We're going to move,  
To a New Life,  
To a New Country.*

*My brother cried,  
My Mother died a little death to all things familiar  
Held in her heart a little longer,  
Forsaking all others,  
Sisters and brothers,  
Kids' grandfathers and grandmothers,  
To the unknown march forward.*

*Uncles and Aunts, crowd the bus to the brim,  
Transported to the Airport, saying God Bless you sweet things  
Filing into a plane,  
All eight of this family –  
Father touches Mothers' shoulder,  
This isn't the end, it's a new beginning.  
Forever the optimist, he consoles  
the smaller frame of the realist,  
She nods with a sigh, Yes dear, I'll try,  
And with a new bolstered posture,  
The children she ushers  
To the kind airline people  
Who seat us all proper,  
One in a basket,  
In the luggage rack over, gets  
Washed in the lavatory sink,*

*So small – it's a wonder I fit,  
And don't cry, I think: The youngest of six, at 10 weeks old,  
all I know is to fly – and to stink!*

*We refuel in Gander,  
A snowstorm for the wanderers  
Which blinds the view to the continent new,  
Another storm in Toronto lands us in Buffalo,  
And we're bundled back North  
To overnight in the Royal York  
Where an overflow of delicious delicacies abound,  
But only deep sleep there is found.  
The weary travellers lay their heads on soft pillows,  
Dreaming what the next leg of the journey will winnow out  
From their frames  
What strength remains?*

*Now a shuttle to the plane  
And to Northern Ontario  
The big bird is directed  
A sleepy bunch awake – their destiny detected  
A Maroon Mercedes, a light blue VW Bug,  
Bulging with people and packs,  
The Pastor has come to bring us to town,  
A town of mines, immigrants, and black rocks.*

*But a job is in the offing,  
2 weeks from arriving!  
Dad now a Draftsman for Noront Steel,  
When earnings are not a great deal,  
But every dollar won, will add to the sum  
And slowly but surely we'll have all we need,  
Now all we need is patience, endurance, hope for things new,  
And education & prosperity for our children to pursue.  
Little tow-heads in a row, encircled by Mother,  
look up to their Father,  
Protector, provider.  
Energy is a plenty  
To clothe his little family,  
And build a house on the lake  
With sunsets to take in with  
Fellow citizens from Finland  
Who've pitched in to help.  
We're in the same boat ---  
So we all help each other one way or another,  
Yes, to settle in  
To the new world that's open  
Before us, to be made ours,  
To make it a better place for us,  
For our neighbours.  
We all know what it's like  
This starting all over,  
So love and help one another  
Give a lift where it's needed  
And a helping of food to feed  
The struggling families,  
Proud in their roots, – they dig new foundations  
Work and sweat hard to grow and to flourish  
In the end it will pay, so we don't have to look back  
But look forward to stay:  
For a New Life,  
For a New Country!*

*Inkeri Sorila*