

Motivations and expectations of potential ethnic return migrants from Western countries to Finland



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While other research has been completed on ethnic return migration to Finland, particularly on Ingrian Finns, very little attention has been paid to the remigration of ethnic Finns born and raised abroad in Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, and other European states. This article takes an exploratory approach and seeks to shed light on why people with Finnish roots born and raised in other Western countries seek to (re)migrate, as well as what they hope and expect of life in Finland. Results from focus group data collected at a Finnish language and culture course suggest that these individuals view their ethnic homeland very positively prior to migration, and consider the (re)migration process as natural or inevitable as a result of having Finnish roots. Participants expected to adapt to life in Finland with ease and discussed the benefits of having Finnish roots as a newcomer in the country.

Key words in English: immigration, pre-migration stage, expectations

Key words in Finnish: paluumuuttajat, maahanmuuttoa edeltävä vaihe, odotukset.

Introduction

Developments in information technologies and transportation in the last century have allowed for increased connectedness and movement between villages, cities

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and continents. Countries that were once marked by an outflow of citizens are now immigrant-receiving societies. In some cases, the descendents of those who left choose to (re)migrate to the ethnic homeland, a phenomenon called “ethnic return migration” (Tsuda 2009A). Since the 1990s, Finland has seen the massive ethnic return migration of a specific group of remigrants, i.e., Ingrian Finns from the former Soviet Union. However, there has been an overall lack of attention towards the return of descendents of Finnish emigrants who have been born and raised in the Finnish diasporas of other Western societies, including the United States, Canada, and other European countries. This paper seeks to shed light on the possible motivations, hopes and expectations of potential ethnic return migrants from such countries, where most Finnish immigrants settled after leaving Finland.

Literature

The phenomenon of ethnic (re)migration has received increased attention over the last decades, as such movement has become more and more evident. In his edited book on the topic, Tsuda (2009A) describes two types of return of diasporic peoples: the return of first-generation migrants to their country of birth and ethnic return migration, when second- and later-generation descendents ‘return’ to their countries of ancestral origin after living outside their ethnic homelands for generations.

Without any experience of living in the country of ethnic origin before migration, the return of second- or subsequent generation migrants to their ancestral homeland is a unique point of cultural re-entry (Szkudlarek 2010). These individuals may hold many connections to their homeland through name, appear-

ance, citizenship, language, and/or family members. These ties may be extensive and may provide a sense of belonging and connection to the country and culture for subsequent generations, without ever having lived there. For example, Ien Ang (2001), an ethnic Chinese, Indonesian-born and European-educated academic explains that, even before her first visit to China, she felt as though she knew the country and culture. This familiarity was possible through her family connections and aspects of Chinese culture practiced through her life, including intimate and special family rituals, as well as media and popular culture. She writes of her first experience visiting her ethnic homeland, stating that “I felt I already ‘knew’ China, albeit a mythic China, a fetishized China, when I went there for that one day visit” (Ang 2001, 31).

Motivations for ethnic return migration

It has been suggested that for most ethnic migrants, the motivating reason for migration is economic, and that ethnicity is but a guiding factor in decision to migrate; but in the case of ethnic migrants from developed, diverse countries, such as Canada and the United States, ethnicity may play a greater role in the decision to return (Tsuda, 2009B). These societies, which have long been destinations of immigration rather than countries of departure, do not lack for opportunities in the way that might inspire more traditional desires of emigration. As Noguchi (2005) found, none of the ethnic return migrants interviewed in her research indicated a deep alienation from North American culture and society, but rather felt “drawn” to their ethnic homeland, Japan. Indeed, in Tartakovsky and Schwartz’s (2003) study of potential Jewish migrants in Russia, those that chose their ethnic homeland country Israel were more likely to rank highly in the motivation to preserve one’s personal and social identities. As Tsuda (2009B) asserts, jobs and increases to the overall quality of life are not the driving force—as these are available in their home countries—but rather new opportunities, including professional, education or business investments, and a desire to connect to one’s roots may be key in returning the ethnic homeland. In addition, he suggests that ethnic return migration policies in various European countries—which assume that ethnic group members will be culturally alike due

to their common heritage—may also contribute to the decision to remigrate, as they facilitate the return in, at least, a legal sense.

Challenges of ethnic return migration

One of the challenges faced by ethnic returnees is finding their place in the new society. While individuals may be considered to be ethnic minorities in one country, they may not fit into the majority group in their ethnic homeland, particularly if the group as a whole is perceived by the majority to be different. For example, in the case of Japanese-Brazilians (re)migrating to Japan, “Whereas in Brazil they were perceived as culturally ‘Japanese,’ in Japan they become an ethnic minority because they are seen as so culturally ‘Brazilian’” (Tsuda 2003, 103). Group members may not expect to be considered as part of a minority group in the ethnic homeland, and, furthermore, may not be prepared for coinciding status changes. For example, the Japanese-Brazilians in Tsuda’s research are a respected part of the middle-class in Brazil, but often take blue-collar factory jobs and face prejudice in mainstream Japanese society.

In addition to changes of social status, ethnic return migrants’ sense of belonging to their ancestral country and culture may also shift during the migration process. Research from a social psychological perspective has shown that, even before migration, ethnic returnees may hold more positive attitudes towards—and identify more with the people of—their ethnic homeland as compared to their countries of birth (Tartakovsky 2008). They also have formed ideas of how life in the new society will be. Research on Ingrian Finns intending to (re)migrate to Finland has suggested that these individuals have already developed expectations of how they will adapt to life in the ethnic homeland before they move (Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti 2010).

However, how ethnic migrants feel *before* migration may not match how they feel afterwards. In Tartakovsky’s research (2009), although attitudes towards the ethnic homeland were most positive before the move, attitudes worsened and a sense of belonging to the country of birth rose sharply in the first year after migration—possibly due to difficulties in adjusting to the new environment or a resistance of the

new society to accept their other identity. It may also be due to an idealization of the ethnic homeland before moving that may not ring true. As Bürgelt, Morgan, and Pernice (2008) found, migrants who are critical of their birth country and accept only positive images of the new society may not have a realistic image of what life will be like, which may result in disappointment and a desire to return “home”.

Finnish context

Due to differences in how countries collect data on ethnicity, it is difficult to pinpoint just how many people of Finnish origin outside of Finland. In North America, statistics are based on self-identification, with 131,040 people claiming Finnish as at least part of their ethnic origin in Canada in 2006 (Statistics Canada 2008A) and 624,000 individuals identifying themselves as having Finnish ethnic background in the United States (Korkiasaari and Roinila 2005). In their countries, for example Sweden, data is collected on the basis of one’s parents and grandparents countries’ of birth. A reasonable estimate based on the information available is that there are approximately 1.4 to 1.8 million people of Finnish ethnic origin residing in countries other than Finland. This is roughly equivalent to one quarter or one third of the country’s population today.

As Finland shifted from a country of emigration to a country of immigration in the 1980s (Korkiasaari & Söderling 2003), a good portion of ethnic Finns living abroad consists of the children and grandchildren of Finnish emigrants. With the occasion to study at Finnish universities and colleges, as well as work at Finnish and international companies, opportunities to spend time in Finland over the long-term have increased over recent decades, and may be very attractive to those Finnish roots looking for new experiences and opportunities.¹

While other research has been completed on ethnic return migration to Finland, particularly on Ingrian Finns, very little attention has been paid to the remigration of ethnic Finns born and raised abroad in Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, and other European states, including Sweden. This is a significant omission in the literature on ethnic return migration to Finland, as these countries are where

the most Finnish emigrants have settled. The social and historical contexts of these countries differ greatly from the former Soviet Union, where the Ingrian Finns are located, as Ingrian Finnish roots date back to the 17th century and lack connections to an independent Finland. Further, Ingrian Finns migrate from Russia, a country that is negatively viewed in Finland, making the group highly stigmatized in the Finnish context. Ethnic return migrants from Western countries may not face this same issue, but may rather encounter other challenges over the migration process, particularly because their main objective is not economic gain but rather cultural experiences. As such, this article takes an exploratory approach and seeks to shed light on why ethnic Finns born and raised in other Western countries seek to (re)migrate to Finland. More specifically,

What are the motivations of ethnic Finns born and raised abroad in Western countries for migrating to Finland?

What are the hopes and expectations held by these individuals of life in Finland?

Data and Method

This article presents results from preliminary focus group data and is part of a larger research project underway on ethnic return migration to Finland at the Department of Social Research, Social Psychology, University of Helsinki. As Millward (2000) asserts, focus groups are used to explore participants’ opinions, attitudes, beliefs, values, discourses and understandings. One of the strengths of using focus group data is that participants not only respond to an interviewer’s questions but also to each other, thereby encouraging a variety of responses. In addition, focus group data also provides a sense of the degree to which participants agree and disagree on matters (Morgan, 1996).

Participants

The data was collected at an intensive Finnish language and culture course held in Helsinki in summer 2010. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 48, and were born and raised in the United States, Canada,

Australia and two western European countries. Of the seven participants, three were male and four were female. Their links to the emigrant generation (i.e., to those that left Finland) were through one or both of their parents, or their grandparent(s). Their Finnish language skills ranged from beginner to advanced, but none discussed Finnish as a home or mother tongue. All expected to move to Finland in the future, although none had immediate plans to do so.

Results

The data was analysed following Wilkinson's (2008) content analysis approach, which summarizes and systematizes focus group data. The following section outlines the main themes and topics discussed during the focus group session, as they related to the reasons for remigration, as well as the hopes and expectations of life in Finland. The benefits of having Finnish roots as discussed by participants are also presented.

Motivations for moving to Finland

There were many reasons given for why participants wanted to move to Finland. A common response was a general love of Finland, often formed while previously visiting the country. For example, one participant explained that he visited Finland for the first time with his uncle, after graduating from high school. Over the course of several weeks, he met many of his family members and made Finnish friends, whom he visited on subsequent visits to the country. Similarly, another visited Finland almost every summer and said that he had spent six months studying in Helsinki. During this time, he developed a love for Finland, but also noticed a comfort with Finnish culture.

Others also noted a level of familiarity and comfort with Finnish culture and people in addition to, in some respects, difference between their home countries' cultures. One participant acknowledged that by following Finnish customs, including Christmas traditions and foods, she was familiar with some aspects of Finnish culture. However, she also noted that the culture was very different from that of where she grew up in Australia. Moving to Finland then brought some level of intrigue or excitement, as it was so far away

from Australia, both in distance and many cultural aspects. In the same vein, another participant noted that Finland, though familiar and similar to Canadian culture, was different in a social sense, but that this difference was part of the appeal of moving to Finland. Another participant also emphasized the difference between his home country and Finland, and stated that after visiting Finland several times with his father, he realized how much he disliked living in his home country. As a result, he stated that, "pretty much, everything here appeals to me... I feel like I belong here a lot more than anywhere else I've been" (male, 19).

One participant described a sadness due the distance between her family in Canada and Finland and a lack of Finnish language skills. She explained that even though she had many connections to Finland, including citizenship, she felt the need to spend time in Finland to build more personal, rather than familial, ties to the country, culture, as well as her family members in Finland. She stated that moving to Finland "feels like it's something I need to do, and, it feels like something I've always wanted to do" (female, 31). Building personal ties was also important to another participant, who explained that there were actually very few family members left in Finland as many had emigrated from the country. As a result, he felt that there was a danger of losing the Finnish family tree, and felt a strong pull to continue the family tradition in the region where his grandfather lives.

In the session, moving to Finland was often described as a natural action or inevitable. Many participants discussed an attraction to the country. One stated that others might wonder why he would not be happy with life in the United States if he was born and raised in the there. He explained that it was not like that at all, but rather he felt a pull towards Finland. In the same way, when asked what kind of feelings were elicited when thinking about moving to Finland, one answered, "excited, happy, like fulfilling some sort of... almost destiny but like, yeah, something that feels really exciting and [I'm] really wanting to do to, more so than a lot of things that I've ever wanted to do" (female, 22). Another agreed, stating that she felt an inherent connection to Finland and identified with "everything" in the country (female, 18).

For some participants, taking part in the Finnish language and culture course enhanced their desire to move to Finland. One explained that while it had al-

ways been at the back of her mind, participating in the course had solidified her desire to remigrate. Another participant from Sweden but living in Western Europe said that visiting Finland made her miss the Nordic lifestyle and was considering moving to Finland sooner than originally planned.

Expectations and hopes for life in Finland

There were various changes expected by participants as a result of the move to Finland. Practical matters, such as experiencing a colder climate and darkness in the wintertime, were cited by some participants. Cultural differences between participants' country of birth and Finland were also discussed by some. For example, one participant said that she was warned by her (Finnish-born) mother that Finns were culturally different and that this might be surprising. However, the participant stated that her experience in Finland was actually quite different than what her mother had warned about, and that she felt that, at least among younger people, it was a rather friendly place.

When participants were asked what kind of changes they thought moving to Finland would bring to their lives, a quieter, calmer, slower-paced lifestyle was suggested. In line with the idea that Finland was a natural place for them to live, several also answered that they would be happier, more at peace, and relaxed.

Participants generally expected to have the support of their families and friends in their move to Finland, both those in their countries of origin and those in Finland. In particular, having family in Finland was cited by one participant to be a positive aspect of moving the country, as there would be provide help if it was needed. As one participant explained, "there is someone I can go to, which is a nice thought, [you're] not just out there on your own" (female, 22).

A topic of much discussion during the focus group session was that of Finland being a natural choice for the participants to choose to live. As mentioned before, many discussed moving to Finland as a natural step, and that they felt a pull felt towards the country. In the same vein, some shared that there would no big changes needed to live in Finland because they were already Finnish on the inside. As one noted, "it's less adaptation and more being in an environment that suits whatever you, like, you don't have to adapt... a

lot of it too is internal, it's just the mindset but if you're already, in the mindset then, not adapting" (male, 19). Another agreed, stating that if you "already have the Finnish way then you just come and you're in the right place" (female, 24).

Some participants discussed the challenges they expecting in moving to, and living in, Finland; however, this was not the focus of the discussion. Only one expressed concern over finding employment in his field, as well as being accepted in Finland as a foreigner, which was something he noted that he would always be in Finland. As none were native Finnish speakers, learning the language was also mentioned by several participants; however, this was discussed as something that would take time but was possible, given motivation. It was almost stated to be important, and part of the experience of moving to a new country. Only one participant mentioned the Swedish language, as moving to a Swedish-speaking area would provide a smoother transition for her, as a Swede. However, she stated that it was important that she learn the main official language of the country.

Benefits of having Finnish roots

When asked if having a Finnish background would make living in Finland easier, as compared to other foreigners or immigrants, there was an agreement among participants that having a Finnish background would be beneficial. One reason given was that, having existing links to Finland, they were already familiar with many aspects of the culture, so they would have some type of "head start" when compared to other migrants arriving in the country (female, 22). One participant recalled a story from a previous visit to relatives, where an accompanying friend had misunderstood a situation with his relatives. He explained that after that experience, "I realized that I'm so used to this [culture] already, and he would have thought he did something wrong. But it was for me totally normal" (male, 31).

Another cited advantage of having Finnish roots was shared values. As one participant indicated, "Just the way my dad raised me... it was like, don't accept anything around you, no, we think like this" as Finns (male, 19). Another noted, "if you have some kind of connection to the country, it's a lot easier to actually

stay motivated to learn and to adapt and, you know, get into society. So I think that will make it a lot easier” (female, 24). This resonated with several other participants, who also shared that moving to Finland “makes sense” for them and that doing so was “going with the grain” rather than against it.

One participant in particular discussed the small amount of migration to Finland and that she still saw evidence of xenophobia, racism and prejudice in the country. She explained that while attitudes towards immigration were shifting, she had been advised by Finns to emphasize her Finnish roots. “Even when I was looking for places to stay, I had people who would be like, ‘mention that you’re of Finnish descent, mention that’s why you’re coming here, mention that your family’s Finn, you’ll have an easier time’” (female, 31). Similarly, one participant stated that people would be more accepting if they were that a person was even just a little bit Finnish. In the same vein, another shared that “if you come, and then you say ‘I’m first of all half Finnish, or totally Finnish, and then I’m speaking a little bit and then trying to learn more,’ it’s definitely better than [if] you can from an Arabian country saying ‘I don’t know even English’” (male, 31).

Discussion and Conclusions

Although the data presented in this paper is small, it provides the first information about potential ethnic return migrants to Finland from Western countries, including the United States and Canada. The aim was to shed light on the possible motivations held by ethnic Finns born and raised abroad in (re)migration to Finland, as well as their hopes and expectations of life in Finland.

Overall, these findings are in line with the notion that ethnic return migrants—who have a pre-existing sense of belonging to the society and people—may idealize life in the ethnic homeland, at least at the pre-migration stage (e.g., Tartakovsky 2008). While challenges of adjusting to life in Finland were mentioned, the migration itself was described as natural, magnetic and even inevitable, as participants are—following some criteria, such as citizenship, ethnicity and/or family roots—Finnish. Indeed, the participants’ emphasis of their Finnish roots, and the benefits in having them, indicate that although some of these individuals envi-

sioned some kinds of challenges, they generally expected their Finnish roots would eliminate difficulties typically experienced by other newcomers in Finland.

In their model of migration change, Tabor and Milfont’s (2010) propose four stages of the migration process: precontemplation, contemplation, action and acculturation. In particular, they suggest that potential migrants contemplate the issues involved in a potential migration (i.e., they develop expectations of how they life will be in the new society), and once the decision to migrate is made, they begin acting on the decision—a stage that presents psychological stress and coping demands. The individuals in this study had clearly contemplated the migration process and were geared towards a successful adaptation process as they anticipated their future lives in Finland to be positive. Based on the data collected, the migration was not seen to be highly stressful, although this may be due to the fact that none of the participants had actively taken steps to move by, for example, buying travel tickets or finding employment. It may also be due to participant’s expectations of a straight-forward (or non-existent) adaptation process. In their study of factors influencing pre-migration stress among potential ethnic return migrants, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Yijälä (in press) found that expected sociocultural difficulties and expected duration of adaptation were directly related to premigration stress. Since the participants did not expect adaptation difficulties, it follows that they did not suffer from high levels of premigration stress. However, as the participants move forward in the departure process, they may face more stress from more practical matters, which may require coping mechanisms such as increased informational and social support (Tabor & Milfont 2010).

There may be also additional challenges upon arrival in Finland. Previous research on Ingrian Finn ethnic return migrants suggests that they may experience discrimination and its negative effects once in the country. For example, in their study of three immigrant groups, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola and Reuter (2006) found that—while they experienced less discrimination than younger immigrants, ethnic Russians and Russian speakers—ethnic return migrants still reported experiencing more discrimination than Estonians. Furthermore, perceived discrimination had a strong negative effect on psychological well-being in general—regardless of ethnicity. While

at the surface they may be considered as part of a common ingroup, cultural differences may become evident once ethnic return migrants arrive in the new society and interact with, and within, Finnish society (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horeczyk and Schmitz 2003).

As Bürgelt et al. (2008) point out, having an over-idealized picture of what life in the new society will be like may lead to disappointment and a desire to return home. The potential ethnic return migrants in this study may be disappointed if their migration does not go as smoothly as imagined, Finnish language acquisition is more challenging than expected, or they meet the reality of the international situation in Finland, where less than three percent of the population is born abroad. While the participants have visited Finland, only one had spent a longer-term sojourn in the country; as a result, it is quite possible that their expectations of living in Finland will differ from actual day-to-day life. Indeed, celebrating Christmas or other holidays with a Finnish twist is a long way from immersion in Finnish society over the long term. However, their familiarity with and ties to the culture and people, and pre-existing sense of belonging may assist in their adjustment in some ways. As one participant stated, having family in the country means that they have help available if they need it. Since the migration is fully voluntary—that is, driven from their own personal motivations and attraction to the ethnic homeland rather than provoked by some economic or other reason—they also likely come from middle-class backgrounds, with the financial means to take on such a migration project. Further, as some of the participants were citizens, they also have the right to work and study in Finland, as well as receive any other social benefits that other foreigners would not usually receive. They are, in this sense, privileged newcomers in the country.

Broader implications

While a specific type of migration, ethnic return migration may touch many people who have roots in societies other than where they are born. This may be particularly true for countries with a rich history of immigration, or those countries that have seen significant immigration increases over recent years. Of people 15 and older in Canada, for example, 24 per-

cent are first-generation immigrants, and 16 percent are second-generation immigrants (Statistics Canada 2008B). If even one percent of the current second-generation of adults were to seek out ethnic remigration at some point, this would translate to an outward migration of over 40,000 towards various ethnic homelands. If we consider second-generation children not counted in these statistics, as well as third- and subsequent-generations that may identify as having other ethnic roots, the potential for ethnic return migration from this one country may be much higher.

Perhaps the most significant implication of these findings is that, as the movement of people around the globe continues, and opportunities increase to spend time abroad for study, work or leisure, voluntary migrants now and in the future may have connections to multiple societies. The ethnic return migrants of this study expected to fit easily into their ethnic homeland and culture due to their Finnishness and ties to Finland, but connections to a society or group may be developed in other ways. For example, previous trips to a country may increase a migrant's familiarity and sense of belonging with the people, language and culture prior to migration—even without ethnic ties. Further, those migrating to and from a country within a particular region may have a sense of belonging to a superordinate group; for example, the Scandinavian countries, or as it grows older and strengthens as a political and social institution, the European Union. With this in mind, it is imperative that researchers look to how voluntary migrants identify with the new society already before migration (following emerging research from a social psychological perspective that emphasizes the pre-migration stage; e.g., Tartakovsky 2008, 2009, Yijälä & Jasinskaja-Lahti 2010, Jasinskaja-Lahti & Yijälä in press), and what their expectations and hopes of life are prior to migration.

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Journal of Intercultural Relations, 34(4), 326-339.
doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2009.09.002

Endnotes

- 1 While many opportunities exist to (re)migrate, the challenge in studying this group is that there are no official statistics concerning their return migration. In Finnish migration statistics, the yearly in- and out-flux is tracked by country of departure/destination, as well as by citizenship. However, Fin-

nish ethnic individuals born abroad may or may not be Finnish citizens, meaning that they may appear in migration data as Finnish nationals (if they have dual citizenship) or as citizens of other countries. Of course, citizens of other countries may enter Finland through other means—e.g., based on citizenship from a EU-member country, work permits, study permits, or residence permit based on Finnish roots—but there is no clear method of identifying who is an ethnic return migrant in official statistics, nor of knowing how many are currently in Finland.

Lotta Weckström

SUOMALAIKUUS ON KUIN VAHAKANGAS **Ruotsinsuomalaiset nuoret kertovat suomalaisuudestaan**

Tutkimuksia A 36. Vammala, 2011. 160 s.
ISBN 978-952-5889-09-3 (Suomi)
ISBN 978-952-5889-10-9 (pdf Suomi)
ISBN 978-91-971351-6-0 (Sverige)
ISSN 0356-9659

Ruotsissa asuu 675 000 suomalaisen taustan omaavaa ihmistä. Luvussa on mukana kolme sukupolvea. Enemmistön juuret ovat syvällä Ruotsissa ja Suomessa. Mikä on tämän päivän nuorten kuva ruotsalaisuudesta ja suomalaisuudesta? Mitä mahdollisuuksia heillä on yhdistää kaksi kulttuuria ja kieltä toisiinsa?

FT Lotta Weckström on haastatellut Ruotsissa kasvaneita kaupunkilaisnuoria, jotka arastelematta kertovat kipeistäkin tunteistaan, valtasuhteistaan ja arkipäivästään. Nuorten oman äänen kautta suomalaisuus muuttuu kaleidoskoopiksi tai vahakankaaksi. Nuorille suomalaisuus on jotakin, jota ei voi vangita tavanomaisin klisein viittaamalla vain tangoon, jääkiekkoon, puunhakuuseen, suomalaisten työhulluuteen tai vaitonaisuuteen. Mikä aluksi näytti suomalaisuudelta tai ruotsalaisuudelta, ei sitä olekaan.

Suomen kielen menetys toki koetaan kipeänä, mutta kaiken haihtuvan keskellä suomalaisuudesta jää sittenkin jäljelle jotakin. Erään haastateltavan sanoin: ”...keskellä talvea kävellä ilman hattua ja nahkatakki auki, se niin ku ettei kaiken tartte olla niin söpöä ja mysigt”.

Kirjassa nuoret kertovat kokemuksistaan ennakkoluuloista ja niiden ylittämistä. Se aika on jo kaukana, jolloin ympäristö määritteli heidän suomalaisuutensa. Häpeä on väistynyt. Suomalaisuus tai ruotsalaisuus ei ole enää haittatekijä.

FT Lotta Weckströmin teos tarjoaa tietoa vähän tunnetusta asiasta eli suomalaisuudesta Ruotsissa. Vaikenemisen aika on ohitettu peruuttamattomasti.

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