

## Part 3/3:

# Memoirs of Matti Hopia: 1948–1951

Edited by Jenn Ashton

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*...Continued from the previous issue*

One day when the airport building began, we went to look for work. There were four of us men, who took our direction from a compass, and tromped through swampland. (All of a sudden) we heard strange noises, but couldn't see anything because of the fog. Finally we began to see what resembled 2–3 year old children on the cliffs. When we got a bit closer, it became apparent that there were about 20 monkeys. When we approached them about 20 metres, they slowly trudged into the bushes. They seemed to be having some kind of meeting, and were making a great deal of noise.

We couldn't get work though, as they told us no white man is going to work there, so our job hunt ended there, as far as Africa goes. We didn't bother looking elsewhere. Job supervisor positions were open, but one had to speak French for them.

Pantus and Kolu, both Estonian boys stayed there, but no one has heard from them since. The black people hated the whites already then. When the boys went to the dances and asked the negro girls to dance, they spat into their eyes, so that's where the acquaintance efforts ended. But the Arabs liked them and they were good friends. The water sale boy at the harbor was an Arab boy. He always gave us water for free and admired my son Pentti's hair that was pure white as snow. He brought fruit for us on the ship. He also spoke a bit of Finnish, saying that the Foreign Legion had some Finns who had taught him. We often visited the Legion, but there was no one that spoke Finnish there at the time. They bragged that the Finns were never afraid of anything, and never tired of marching. It seems they always got their strength from somewhere. They were a rowdy lot when they got their pay, but it was to end the following day. They had three days off, and then the practicing began and the guard duty started. They waited to see where help was needed because the blacks were boiling with anger in

every direction. I saw this for myself. And this is how the days and weeks were spent.

We were in Dakar for four months. We went swimming everyday, and sunbathed. But one time it so happened that we swam far from the shore. All of a sudden we heard a whistle or warning siren go off and we didn't know what for. Then we saw the ocean raging out at sea, and a swarm of sharks swam towards us. We were certainly in a hurry to swim back to shore. But we would never have made it to shore if the guards hadn't fired the cannon at the shark swarm. Two of them died, and the rest turned back to sea. But again we heard someone mention our names, and hint that we were nothing but trouble, and that we don't even read the signs. How are you supposed to read, if you don't know a thing about the French language? But soon we learned through our many experiences to be cautious about everything.

On Anja we had a few incidents that are worth mentioning.

Once Niemi had a bit too much wine to drink and started making advances to Viren's wife. But she rejected him, so he went on the dock and started throwing rocks on the ship's deck. He tried to aim at the people too. A black policeman saw this and phoned for help. Six policemen came and a 'mustamija', but Niemi ran into his own cabin, pulling out a knife. Then the police left, calling another four and they call came with machine guns. The police chief had given instructions to shoot if he (came) out. Then I got worried thinking that we really don't need this, a murder on the ship, so I got the doors open and socked Niemi on the chin, and in the diaphragm, and the knife flew under the bed. I gave a third blow, so good that the boy silenced, and I picked him up and (took) him to the police car. They handcuffed him so he wouldn't get away. Once again we had peace and quiet.

It's good that I had been in sergeant training and took boxing lessons from Mononen who was the master

of his craft. But the black policeman had told the police chief how I had gone in with bare hands towards a knife and wasn't afraid of death. It seemed everyone knew me from then on. They honored me when they saw me, I don't know if they had a dread of knives.

I'll also tell you of a certain black policeman who was on guard near Anja. He was there only in the daytime. He was a Christian, but I don't know what denomination he was. He took his shoes off his feet and gun and hat, and put them in a pile on the dock. He knelt down in a pile of sand. Maybe that's why he didn't hear or see anything. He laid his head on the white sand and lifted his face towards heaven. This lasted about half an hour. Once when he did this, I went and took his gun belt and gun out of its case and looked at it, but he wasn't at all aware of it. He did this every time he was on guard duty, but I wasn't curious any more after this.

My wife Elma was angry with me, because I was always too curious. She pointed out that the policeman had been a good friend, and had been to Finland too. He spoke French, English and German. He told us, "Don't stay here, because Africa will have bloody times.". He didn't want us to suffer anymore, since we (were) good people, and had suffered a lot, according to him. And Africa certainly has raged since, so he spoke the truth.

Then a ship came that took passengers to Venezuela, so I paid (for) four adults and half for Pentti. Altogether 50,000 'Rankia', and (I) reserved all the good tobacco, stored meat and wieners and candies, because I didn't trust the ship's food. I reserved our own so we wouldn't go hungry. I felt that the food would not agree with us, seeing it was a Spanish ship. It certainly was not a luxury ship, with a refugee base and a simple sail. It wasn't really a small ship, (but) I trusted its sailing. There were 70 people on it.

Then came time to leave Dakar and say goodbye to the police chief and to all the friends. There were quite a few of them. It was a nice morning, and for us it was on to the moving ship, that had instructions to bring us to Venezuela. We left about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The journey that would take us 48 days had begun. It felt like we would never see land again. A black passenger got on at Dakar, that no one was aware of until we were a few miles from shore. The black boy climbed over the edge and didn't go back, so we had a black passenger in our midst, who they unfortunately terrified the whole way. First they wrapped themselves in a white sheet and put coal on their faces.



Matti, Elma and Pentti Hopia, Dakar Africa, 1949.

He came out of his room at night and he almost went crazy. He was in bed for two days and didn't eat a thing. I guess they have superstitious beliefs that the ghosts of the dead will haunt you if you do something you shouldn't, as he had done, by coming on the ship without permission.

It was time once again to watch the sea life. The sharks were seen in the daytime and at night, (they) circled the ship for hours. Mostly at night though. At night the water of the Atlantic was like 'vasvori', when the lights of the ship gleamed over the water. The ship's bow cut into the waves, and it looked like the sea was lighted up. Then there were flying fish that flew onto the deck. They only fly about a hundred metres and then land in the water.

We also fished twice. The ship stayed in one spot for two days, when some old wires shook from their places. I thought the whole thing would fall apart. That's when we were able to fish in the daytime. The biggest fish was 40 kg, and (was) probably the sand

shark type, which we eventually ate when the ship's food supplies dwindled.

They didn't believe that it would take so long to cross the Atlantic. When we left, they had said 30 days. It took us 48. During this time it was calm and peaceful sailing. One night a storm broke the main bar, split it in half. It made a loud bang when we were sleeping in the cabin, I thought we had had a collision. But they had a spare one with them and it didn't take long to replace it, and so we continued on.

I'll tell you a bit about the translator who came along with us. He never accepted pay for his services, so I paid for his trip. He was always with us and translated wherever needed. Even in Venezuela he was with me when we were put in quarantine and needed our shots and x-rays.

It was a beautiful autumn morning when the day came that we began to make out the islands of the Caribbean. Everyone screamed in delight, that the land was finally in sight. It was a big moment for all, and we were eager to see the new land. We were allowed to anchor down for a week in the harbor, before we were able to get to land. All the places were filled, but a week later a bus came to get us, and took us about 50 kilometers to the capital city of Caracas. There we had to go for medical checkups and get our vaccinations and all of that stuff. We also got a type of visa that had to be renewed every six months. They just stamped it, and that was all. But there were long line-ups, that kept some waiting until the next day. If you worked for the government, you were given first place in line, and I was working for two years at the government work site. I just showed my card to the police and got in the front of the line right away, even though they paid you anyway if you had to run your affairs during work hours.

When we were released from quarantine, I got a room from a hotel, and left the free lodging quarters where we had been allowed to stay until work was found. But we didn't want to stay there any more. Then we had to find a house, and I put an advertisement in the paper, stating that my wife would clean and do housework in place of rent. I was at the press office at the till, (putting) the ad in, and at (that time) I forgot my wallet at the till. I didn't realize this until I had returned to the hotel. My wallet had all my papers in it, and my possessions, including about 2 thousand dollars. I (didn't) know where I had lost it and I had no job, no home and Elma had only 2 dollars.

It seemed hopeless now to do anything, but my wife Elma was full of life's faith and hope and comforted me that she would take a job. She was sure that we would pull out of this yet, but I wasn't able to get any sleep for many nights. The next day we got a phone call at the hotel, and someone asked for Mrs. Hopia in clear Finnish language. It was unbelievable but true. I had put in the ad that it was a 'Finnish family' that needed a house, and that my wife would clean. That's why Mrs. Haiti's eyes noticed that particular ad, and phoned to talk in Finnish. So we moved that very day. A car came to get us, and we found a pretty two-room house, where we stayed for two years.

I can be grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Haiti, that they were able to put us up, and I was able to withstand the troubles of the time, and the accusations towards me when I forgot everything that was left.

Then we got to the year 1949.

I want to thank my dear wife Elma most of all, for her great love and faithfulness to God and me. She believed, she trusted, she hoped and God helped us in our difficulties.

We found a place to live and I got a job immediately when we moved. The address, ' Sakariitto Kinta Lyytia, Caracas, Venezuela, was with us all the time until we moved onto a new land, that was Canada.

The work ended in Venezuela, and the Italians cut the wages down to almost nothing. A laborer in '49, got 15 'polives' a day. In '51, 6 polives a day. That means it was 9 polives less. This was despite the fact that the standard of living had risen considerably, even over there. About a thousand men came every month and a ship traveled this distance on a regular basis. We certainly were lucky, that life one day seemed totally hopeless, and went so well the next. We had found a home, and work and were quite happy.

Then one day we got a letter from a total stranger, who asked us to come visit in another section of the city. We went, even though we had no idea what it was all about. He was a Hungarian businessman whose name I can't remember, but he took us in, as if we were the best of friends. He asked us to sit down in his beautiful livingroom, and he asked me how to spell my name, and to write it down for him. He asked me if I had lost anything, so I told him I had lost everything. I told him that I had lost my wallet and everything that was in it. That had been the last of my possessions, and (that) I didn't have anything left. He told me then, that it was in

his safe, but (that) he couldn't open it until his treasurer came. He asked us to wait for a while, and offered us the best of everything that a person could hope for. We had enjoyed the contents of the table set before us, when another man came in and opened the safe, and brought me the long hoped for wallet. It had everything in it, including the 52 pints and 300 dollars and the cheque.

It had my Finnish official driver's license, my army badge and Venezuela's passport with picture and signature in my own handwriting. He was certain that I was the right person. When I held it in my hands, we all started crying. It was in joy of course, both the finder and all of us who were there. It was the happiest moment in my life that I can remember. I offered him a finder's reward, but he didn't want anything. On the contrary, he gave me two cartons of cigarettes, bananas, and a lot of other good stuff, a whole box full. He said we were brother countries and he was glad that he had come to the till after me that day. He had seen my name and address in the paper so he had written to invite us over to see him. We will never forget that person. He came to (take us to) his house, several times, so he could give us something good.

And so life continued on it's own trail. It was a hot land, but Caracas was 1200 metres above sea level so it suited us much better than the lowlands, like La Guaira, Maracay and the others, where one sweated continuously, and the water was so hot you could take

a shower only when it cooled down a bit in the evening. It was strange too, that darkness fell suddenly at 7 or 8 o'clock, and there were no night lights. Of course everything was different there anyways. The people didn't care much for work or anything else.

There were carpenters at work with five helpers, but I had to carry the wood myself anyway, to where it was needed. As soon as they got their names in the book the boys went to sleep. The boss once asked me why I carried the wood myself, and asked if I had any helpers. I told him I had five, but I didn't know where they were. He offered me more, but I didn't want them. I'm sure there was plenty of room for them in the bush to sleep though.

The work was run in the American fashion, that the contractor got a certain percentage of the profit, and the government with a lot of oil, backed them up, so it really didn't matter much if they worked or not. But the workers from Europe did all the more and there were many Finns who did the work well. There were all kinds of trades among us, all the way from masons to the soldiers and to the officers. I won't mention all of them, but the dentists and opticians were all represented as well as the women.

At that time, there were about 300 Finnish people, in 1972, probably only 10 left. The reason for leaving was probably the same for all of us. It was an uncertain security. During the two years there was one bloody



Pentti Hopia's School in Caracas, Venezuela, 1950.

coupe. The president lost his life, and there were two assassination attempts.

One in which a Finn was recommended, for protecting an airport and empty barracks by himself, because the army had fled. There was only one entrance to the place, which stored a lot of ammunition and artillery supplies. He held up a good fight so the rebellion didn't get ahead until the armed forces came to help. Subsequently this government won this time and Vaisanen got thanks from the President himself, as well as a fully paid holiday. He was given free tickets to and from Finland, and also (for) his mother, who he brought back with him to Venezuela.

The third rebellion, or revolution succeeded. The President was murdered and his testicles torn out while he was alive, and then he was shot. I heard the shots that ended the life of this noble and wise man in such a cruel way. They were to have supposedly been his best friends. He had been the wisest man and the others, were no doubt, provoked by jealousy, and cleared this man out of the way. These kinds of incidents obviously did not encourage us to stay in this land.

Then I went to Canada first, and the others to America and some to Finland. So our group shriveled up. We decided to go by ship, and got places on one by the name of Vereite, an Italian company ship. But we had a lot of adversities, when the forces of nature did their destruction. Great rains built up water in the mountains causing a giant landslide from Caracas to La Guaira. It cut off roads and communication for a month, and the only way out was to travel this distance by airplane. That was about 50 km.

La Guaira's harbor couldn't be used at all for a long time, because the landslide took the houses and hundreds of cars that were parked, or happened to be there at the time. No one knows how many hundreds of people it took with it. It was a great disaster for this land, (and) I have no idea how much it lost. So we had to go a distance of 250km to another harbor.

We left Caracas in a rental car, but the ships had been late all week. I almost missed the ship, because in less than two hours, one paper would have expired. I wouldn't have been able to then leave the country. It was granted (for) an eight day period and reapplication would have to be done in Caracas, and also a payment of 20 polvies tax. But the ship came in good time and we left Venezuela.

20.3.51 To all my good friends and friends of the same fate. I miss Eino Jaakkola the most. It's because we were together for a few years and he gave me a ride all the time, so I didn't have to ride the bus. Sometimes that would take 2 hours, when he drove it in 20 minutes. Not to mention the two transfers on the bus and (the) half hours wait in between. Jaakkola's moved to America too and are there now and a many good friends are there. I would have a lot to tell of happenings in Venezuela, but I'll leave it for now.

We started the trip to Canada, which was also a good vacation. We passed a lot of little countries like Cuba, Panama, Columbia and all the little countries in between. In Mexico it was Acapulco and three American harbors. There was good food on the ship and first class service. The time was long, but not boring. We arrived in Vancouver 1.5.1951.

*Pentti & Rose Hopia*