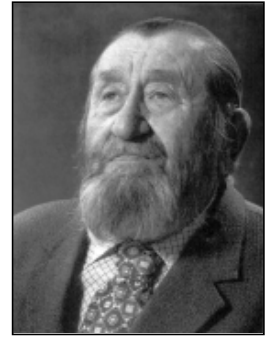


Part 1/3:

Memoirs of Matti Hopia: 1948–1951

Edited by Jenn Ashton



Matti Hopia was born on November 2nd, 1906 in Viipuri, Finland. He was one of nine children. Matti left home at an early age, and spent most of his young adult life serving in the Army. He was in two world wars, and one civil war. Matti married Elma Tanskanen and then in 1948, along with their 7 year old adopted son Pentti, and several other families, they bought a ship and fled Finland. They were in search of a free life in another country. After brief stops in Denmark, England and Africa, they reached the shores of Venezuela and stayed there for two years. By this time, most of the other families who had been on board, went back to Finland or moved to other countries. Matti worked as a laborer while in South America, and his wife Elma, worked as a domestic housekeeper. Pentti at this time attended school.

In 1951 Matti and his family arrived in Canada. They moved to Port Alberni, where Matti worked as a mill worker, farmer, carpenter and logger. In the early 60's Mattie and Elma moved to Campbell River and in 1967 Elma passed away.

Matti retired to Victoria, where he lived until his death in 1988 at the age of 82.

In the 1970's after more than 20 years of silence on the subject, Matti Hopia sat down to write out his memoirs. What he wrote was a tale of adventure, courage, suffering and hopes for his family's future, during a time when the world was in the midst of one of the largest changes in modern history.

The events that follow are not always in chronological order, but are laid out as Matti himself remembered them. They have been translated to English from Finnish, and edited for clarity and historical accuracy. I have remained as true as possible to Matti's original words.

Jenn Ashton

Memoirs of N.S. Anja. Adventure from Turku to Dakar port in South Africa. Departure 3.5.48 – leaving Nurmijärvi for Turku. Finland's uncertain times, 1939-48.

Wars, and Karjala's loss, caused many Karelians to seek out new houses and homesteads, which brought great troubles for the Finnish government. They had to find homes and jobs for nearly half a million people. Many people had to 'beat their brains' wondering if they would ever find a new start and a chance for safety. For me it was already the fourth time, I had already left all of my possessions behind me three times. They were tromped under by the war: 1939, 1941 and 1944. Permission was given to return back to my homeland. I had no opportunity to save anything since I had to serve in the army myself. My wife had to leave empty-handed, the only treasure being our three year old son whom she protected with her life, shielding him with her body from the fire of machine gun (from) the armed forces that threatened us day and night. This is recorded for you to see, so that once you've read this and wonder why I left, you'll understand, (as) you may ask, and think that I should have perhaps stayed in Finland.

A thought came to me one day. I wondered if I could find a place where one can live with out the constant fear of war. So in the early spring of 1948, I thought of leaving for Australia. In those days, emigration permission was not granted, in other words it was difficult to obtain passports and visas. In fact, it was daring to even begin to inquire for such, unless you wanted to get a 'shadow from Valpo', which was the dread of many. This applied especially to the Estonians and others who were in Finland and were Finnish citizens. The Finnish government was unable to protect anyone. They had to do as their neighbor commanded, and in the forefront among them, were

our own misled citizens. So, hundreds left, defying the dangers, going towards an uncertain future. So did the undersigned, who just took up his bed and walked and threw a few homespun quilts and mattresses into the waves at the port of Dakar, South Africa. There the black people gathered everything into safety.

Since there was no easy route to leave Finland, I got the idea that I would buy my own boat, or 'puatti' as Julkunen would say. I began following the radio and newspaper advertisements. I had heard of a boat for sale, so I asked and looked around at many places from Saima all the way to Vaasa. There were new ones and old ones, but the prices were too high for (just) one buyer. Then I ran across an ad in the paper for a shareholder for a ship, so I got in touch with the owner and went to see him right away. It was indeed a ship, and not (a) boat at all, by the name of N.S. Anja. It was a registered 100-ton ship, which in the long run, would have been better off left in Finland. It caused us so much sorrow and grief (and) it is a miracle that I am still here. (M)y wife tired out from that voyage. I was left alone at 57, after her death.

I probably would have been smarter if I had tried to fix up (the) wooden motorboat, which was a partially burned sea patrol boat. It would certainly have given me a cheaper trip. I had paid cash for it, about 30,000 at Kotka's port. To this day I don't know what happened to it. I had encouraged a friend to sell it, but it isn't clear if he ever did. I didn't have time to sell it because our departure was so sudden, so I ended up leaving (that) boat behind.

Returning to Anja's sorrow ship now. Before our departure it was owned by Kalle Viren from Turku and a meat merchant, Lehtonen from Turku's mall. He had a meat market there, I don't blame (him), he was innocent. He did not brag about the ship (nor) did he complain. He wanted to sell his share of it, so I decided to sacrifice what was left of my possessions, and embark on an adventure rich voyage. It is a trip on which I am still sorry, and probably always will be for the rest of my life. If someone were to ask me now if I would attempt such a trip again, I could assure you I wouldn't be so blind as to believe anyone again or trust the Finnish honesty, as I did then. Now I also have experience on the high seas, and I know that I would never attempt to leave with such a motor, out of the harbor; one that uses 14 litres an hour of diesel oil, and 5 litres of motor oil. In 20 days that's 25 tons.

Sweetened water had to be used to control the heat. It's an unbelievable thought, but that's exactly what we did, and that's as true as I am here.

I am unable to forgive Viren, because he wasn't straight with me. He had been in the ship before, and owned half of it. He told us this himself and we all blindly believed that we would be on our way to Australia. That was our first intention, but we changed our minds when we heard that Argentina was easier to get into and closer to land should trouble arise.

Captain Jussi Aholainen was paid as captain for this voyage, and was given 300,000 mk, which was the currency at that time. We didn't have a clue that the man was as crooked as could be. We also paid two machinists from Heino, brothers who were just as crooked as the captain. They escaped from the ship in Copenhagen and went back to Finland, leaving us stranded as teddy bears on a rock. We were deserted without (a) captain (or) machinists.

Getting back now to the departure preparations. The ship was to have been ready for sailing when I made the agreement and had paid the 500,000 cash. But when the time came to leave, we had to do repairs on the engine and the wings on the propeller had to be changed. First it was one thing and then another that needed tending to. It took us 3 weeks before we were ready to leave. All the time our hair stood up in suspense, wondering if the men from Valpo would take use away. But we must thank our good fortune that we were finally on our way.

The personnel, or how should I say it, the people on board upon departure from Finland (totaled) 22, (16 of whom) were adults. Six were children. Departure began on Pentecost morning, at five o'clock, from the harbor of Turku.

It was truly an exciting time. The women and children had to be hidden in the ship, in case the sea patrol became suspicious when the ship started tuning towards the border of Sweden. But we saw no one on the entire waters of Finland. Later we were told that the sea patrol were celebrating, possibly (the) 100 year celebration at that time. It was our good luck.

The plan at the beginning was to go to Stockholm and take on extra passengers, since there as room and we needed more manpower for the ship. But right near Stockholm, the captain of the ship changed course. When we asked him why, he said that the wind was too strong and that we would head for Copenhagen.

He made the turn so late, out to sea, that we were already in between the rocks and the rough seas stormed around us. Because the engine was so weak, the wind almost pushed the ship on a reef, but once again we had good luck. Anja was very low and dry rocks were on either side of the ship, but we didn't get stuck. That probably was the intention of the captain all along, to run Anja (onto) the reef (so) that they could have deserted the ship then.

As owners of the ship we raised an outcry, demanding to know what this was all about, with our own man at the wheel we were spared from disaster. But they devised a new scheme, which did succeed, and caused us more trouble and monstrous costs financially.

The machinists turned off the oil taps so the engine didn't get oil, and the rings and bearings got stuck. The motor jammed

and stopped. We were in the winds, between Sweden and Denmark, and the machinists wouldn't do a thing about it. The Captain insisted that it wasn't his affair. But I (had) read a bit myself about sea regulations and knowing that on seas the captain is like a god, especially if there is a question involving human lives. He even has the authority to use a weapon, should there be no other way. (But) by now we were able to see that the Captain too was in on the plot. So I, being an old mechanic, called the ship's crew and departments together for a short meeting. I informed them that we would now have to take over control of the machine room, and take the ship into our own hands, and we were all in agreement. So, the machinists got a vacation after only a few hours of work, getting a pay of 150,000 each. The money was left in Finland's bank to make sure that they would receive their pay.

After that, Urho Sorsa and I took the mechanic's tools and started to take apart an engine that I hadn't seen, even in the movies. The wind was awfully strong (and) threw Anja like a chip. Sometimes we flew from wall to wall, but (still) managed to free a bolt. I warned Sorsa not to lose a nut or bolt, as I wasn't sure we

would find to many ship motors in this state, but it had to be done and everything seemed to fall into place naturally. So we got Anja repaired and sailed on into Copenhagen's free port. One of the machinists came down, but didn't stay because he could no longer sabotage anything. Sorsa or I would remain behind, making sure that nothing was tampered with or sabotaged. I use this term (to mean) that nothing else is broken, that shouldn't be.



Matti, Elma and Pentti Hopia.

At last we got to the port and that's where many of our troubles and difficulties began. The captain laid blame right away, which was totally unfounded. He and the machinists wanted off the ship. It seemed easy enough for them as none of us knew any Danish, or any other language for that matter. We had no idea what he was saying. He insisted on going back to Finland immedi-

ately, and claimed that he had been forced to leave for this journey. That's how he got permission to leave the ship, however, I have no idea why they left at night, and no one knew where they had disappeared to.

Returning now to the time of arrival. As soon as we came into the harbor, the police came and took us all to prison. We weren't there for more than two days, when they found a translator. Almost immediately the doors opened for us, and for this I can be grateful to the translator. At this time the Captain and the brothers were still on the ship. I don't know what they were thinking, but perhaps they wanted to sell the ship. Even if they had (had) the opportunity, it wouldn't have worked because our stay was so short.

Then the Finnish Consulate came on board and told us that we had to go back to Finland. He (said) that whoever goes back voluntarily will get a free ride, but (those) who (are) forced to go back has to pay his own way and who knows what else. To my knowledge it was Leino that Finland sent to Denmark in 1948. As a result of this, Anja's group was split in half. Eight people went back (Sorsa, wife, girl, Lauri Virolainen, 4 people and Toivo's two people). So a small group of

us remained, but all decided to continue on, though the trip may cost us our lives.

We began preparations that cost us 8,000 crowns. New bearings and bolt rings had to be ordered from Sweden, for which we had to wait eight weeks. I don't know what the hold up for that was either, but we finally got the engine in order. During the wait, we (made) two large sails, which end(ed) up being a great help throughout the whole voyage. Sometimes we even got 15 knots speed, when the motor only gave us 5 knots without sails. Finally the moment came that everyone had been waiting for, like the rising of the sun.

Going back for a moment to the memories of Copenhagen. We had a chance to get acquainted with the city in those 8 weeks, it's conditions and traditions. We often watched the changing of the guard at the King's palace gates, where the soldiers stood in the heat of the summer, with black bearskin hats on their heads, and red coats on. They were like wooden men, not even an eye would blink, even though I coaxed a little boy to go and see if they were real. They didn't concern themselves with the boy at all. There were beautiful parks, and it was clean everywhere. There were swan and duck ponds, (and) every time we walked in the city we saw something new.

One Sunday morning something happened that remains vivid in my mind. It was a memory from the park. We heard beautiful music and singing in the park, so we (went) to look. It was a Salvation Army service. A tired out old man was sleeping on a park bench, very close to the orchestra. He had removed his dentures, and the children could not figure out how the teeth could come out. They (all) tried their own and said: 'Only his come out'.

It so happened that my wife and I were reading a book in the cabin on the ship, to pass the time. Our son was 7 years old and Viren's 2 boys were the same age. (They) had arranged to have a race on the dock at the harbor, one end of which ended up in the open water. My son Pentti was in the lead, racing at great speed, and happened to glance back to see how close his companions were. He ran right out into the waves of the harbor, where the water was 15 meters deep. The others panicked to get help for him, but Viren came by just in time to see Pentti sink to the bottom for the third time. He jumped in with his clothes on and pulled Pentti (onto) the dock. It was amazing that he didn't fill up with water. We changed him into dry

clothes, and for the first time in his life, I gave him a drink of real wine, so he wouldn't get chilled and sick. The boy didn't know what (had) happened. Twice I had to grab him by the hair when a wave washed over the ship, just as we were getting ready to eat, (and) once in the English Channel, and (another time) at Biscay Bay, where a giant wave almost toppled us. Later on I'll tell you about it.

I'll mention something about Anja's size. The ship itself was steel, and the top wood. The length of the ship was 32 metres; 5 metres in width and 2.10 metres deep. The frame was to have weighed in at 100 tons. Outside it was pale blue in color to the water line, and the bottom half was red. The cabins were pale blue at the top. The helm cabin was varnished pale brown. It was nice both inside and out. However, the motor was bad. It was a 50 horsepower, old Swedish Bolin, that was bullet powered, and very difficult to handle. We had to use sweetened water, heated to a certain temperature. The speed it gave was 5 knots in good weather, but 3-4 knots sailing against the wind.

Viren and I had to overcome all the troubles. We learned to read the sea charts. Since we didn't have a captain, we had to use the help of the navigation charts to direct the course of the ship. We used the 'Boluk' for measuring, this way, I was always aware of where we were. I had taken part in the direction competitions in the army, so the land maps were already familiar to me. I (found) the sea charts much easier to read than the land map, since you don't have to swerve past trees and rocks. On the lakes you can push on towards your destination, following the compass and lighthouse signals, if you're close by and can't see too far. We were aware of our whereabouts for the entire trip, so we didn't really lose much, even though the captain took off. We were spared a lot of hassle, not always having to wait on someone. We all agreed on reaching our destination.

I will mention the names of those who stayed on the ship and continued on the journey: Kalle Viren, wife and 2 boys, Mattie Hopia, Elma and Pentti boy, Elvie Hopia, Pertti Tanskan belonged to the Hopia group. Erkki Kamppi, Urho, Sorsa and two new Finnish boys who joined us in Copenhagen. They were on a tourist trip, but their visas had expired. The boys didn't want to return to Finland, and they didn't have too much money, so we took them on for extra manpower. One's name was Lauri Lyly who

was a tailor, and the other a furrier name(d) Timo Bjorn. That made 13 people all together leaving from Copenhagen.

In the early evening of the trip, the seas became stormy and the wind started blowing. Our direction was the North Sea. The new hardship began. A charge of electric current started on the frame and bled the batteries dry, which meant we had no lights. We tried oil lanterns, but they wouldn't burn because of the strong winds. We sailed mainly in the dark, but no accidents occurred since there seemed to be hardly any one else on the sea but us.

Anja's motor was exhausted, because it couldn't pump air into the reservoir tank, which operated the ships' siren, to warn oncommers. It had to be handled manually. It was of (the) utmost importance to watch carefully, especially in the narrow channel, in case someone came. During the night, two big ships came towards us, but we didn't really see anyone else because the fishing vessels wouldn't be out in such bad weather. We traveled peacefully through the dark.

In the morning we had just barely passed the Helsingor, when Anja's engine stopped. We were in a narrow straight. The sails didn't help at all, we had to anchor down and look for the trouble spot. As the motor heated up, the smoke pipe turned red, starting a fire on the wooden part of the ship, but we managed to extinguish it. It was good that no bigger problems developed.

Denmark's customs, wouldn't let us anchor down. They sent a tow ship, which took us near the war harbor, where we were left at peace to clean up and fix the faults. That's how we once again got a free ride from the Danish government. We arrived in Helsingborg. The fort of Jylha stood on our right, looking very dark and mysterious (and) a pretty street (wound) on our left, with houses like fairy tale castles and flowers (were) everywhere. The people were full of compassion when they heard of our fate. It had been so hard on us with all the opposition and problems all the time. But in some ways it was good too. At the time there was dredger work going on, so we got some extra bottom weight for the ship from there. It amounted to 60 tons of gravel that would weigh down Anja's bottom (so) that the propellers wouldn't hit the air. Given the bad storms and seas, it would have normally cost us a fortune, but we got it all for free now. The people were willing to give the children all kinds of good things, when they came on board to visit us.

Then we gave Anja a trial run, and came to the conclusion that the biggest problem occurred when the motor over heated. The propeller hit air and turned in circles at each wave, for nothing, thus slowing down the speed. The white gravel weighed Anja's bottom down about an extra 70 cm. this way the propeller worked better in Helsingborg. We had also heard of a few refugee ships, which were to leave in the next few days, from Cöteborg to South America. We checked to see if anyone was willing to join us, because our group was so small, but since no one came, we had to make do ourselves.

Anja seemed much better now. She was sea worthy and tugged along much better than she ever did, for a long time. Then Kalle V. got a bottle of wine and each man got a good sip. Then the Finnish style sports got started. It was an arm wrestling match at the mess table. Kalle had wrestled all except one man, who boasted that his arm hadn't been twisted yet, because he was a tinsmith. But then came the old warrior, who twisted it three times, because the first two had been faulty. By then, the fellow had to admit defeat. But, he had decided to do away with the better and took a knife from his leather jacket pocket, intending to secretly stab him. Someone happened to notice and yelled out "Watch out Matti, he's going to stab you with a knife!". I went up to him, telling him that if he wanted to challenge again, the knife would have to go, and I threw it into the sea and (then) we shook hands in peace. From then on we had no reason to be wary of him. I was an old athlete who was use to winning as well as losing, but I never dreamed of getting revenge on the winner.

So peace abided on board once again, and the incident was never repeated. Pertti though, was annoyed because two knives had been thrown into the sea. He counted that we could have gotten 10 crowns for them if we had sold them. So the trip continues at an even pace towards the North Sea.

Here green water changed to blue and there was no land in sight, except on the far shore. There must have been kilometers between us, because we could barely make it out. For two days we traveled without adversities on the North Sea. Then we hit such dense fog that we could not even see two meters ahead of us. There was the constant fear that someone would drive over us, because the siren didn't work. We used the manual one, but it's sound didn't carry very far. We decided to make a framework for a safety raft, out of wood. We

put all the empty oil barrels sideways, closing them tightly into a box, and bound them together with steel wire. We had a good safety raft there. And it certainly came in good time too, for two ships sailed quickly in front of us, at a tremendous speed, only about 4-5 metres away. We were certain of a collision, but since it wasn't meant to be, we just barely missed each other. We had to remain on guard another day, because the fog was so dense. But once again, we must have had good luck and a guardian angel.

The North Sea was difficult for us in the beginning. The waves were rough at first but then calmed down, and it was fun to watch the dolphins play. They swam in competition with Anja, and the herring swarms also interested us. When it's calm like that, you can see that there's a lot of life in the sea. You can see it all.

So we crossed the North Sea with very little adversity, the only hindrance being the dense fog. We could have done without it, but we made it safely across the bay.

3.8.1948 In the afternoon, we were on England's shore, probably around the vicinity of Lowestoft and Yarmouth. Anja was anchored down for the night near the lighthouse. No one came to inquire about the ship, so we were left in total peace for the evening and night. There was a bit of tenseness in the morning though, when we went into the fisherman's wharf.

We sailed through only a little opening and found room in the harbor. Fortunately the engine worked well. Now the new phases began. A new language in a strange land. Elvi, my brother's daughter, was a pretty good translator, because she had studied English in Finland already. Then the clearing up with the authorities began. We had to deal with a for-

eign language, but we were treated in a totally different manner than we were in Denmark. We requested permission to stay a while in England, which was granted right away. The passport(s) were arranged in two days and cost us nothing. They wouldn't even accept payment for the pictures. I, for one, will lift my hat to the British Authorities. No one called us enemies for three years, until close to America. There, although we were traveling through to Canada, and had our Visas and passports, we weren't even allowed to embark off the ship.

Now I'll return to events following permission to stay and work. First the news reporters and cameramen came to visit the ship. The newspapers began carrying articles on how daring the Finns were, and how they were now available for viewing. They made a short movie of us that was shown around. We were given a portion, 5 pounds, from the funds coming in, to support our voyage. Our bachelors had a rough time of it, when the girls were going to force them into marriage. So we lost both Lyly the tailor and the furrier Bjorn, who got jobs right away from the fathers of the girls.

Their homes and everything (were) ready for them. I guess they are still in England and doing well. Elvi Hoppa stayed to attend a nursing school, and became a nurse. She is married with two children there. I would have probably stayed there too, if I hadn't

(had) such a big investment in the ship. The others too, wanted to continue the voyage, so I had to cling to this devil of a ship, because everything I owned was at stake here.

To be continued in the next issue ...

ST 6. 1948

FINN REFUGEES AT LOWESTOFT

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WORK FOUND FOR FINNS HELPING WITH THE HARVEST

Yesterday arrangements were completed to place in employment all of the adults in the party of 13 Finnish refugees who have been in Lowestoft harbour on their 46-ton ship Anja for just over a month.

Five of them, four men and a woman, are helping with the harvest on a farm at Topcroft, the other two women in the party have been found domestic employment in Lowestoft institutions and the remaining three men will be starting work in agriculture on Monday.

The Finns have permission to stay in this country for another 12 weeks and it is expected that the Home Office and immigration authorities will raise no difficulty in securing an extension of this period so that they may not have to continue their journey to South America until the spring.

This week's donations—£2 2s. from Flood & Son Ltd. and £1 from Miss Madge Williams—bring the total of the Mayor's Finnish Refugee Fund to £63 9s.