

Gift parcel post for Finland after World War 2



Martin Wallenius

Finland's situation in the war

In August 1939 Germany and the Soviet Union signed the infamous Ribbentrop pact which sprung up the gates for World War 2. Stalin gave Hitler free access to Poland. The price for this treaty was the eastern part of Poland, Finland, the Baltic states etc. When the Poles were fighting for their lives against the invading German armies, Stalin's forces stabbed them in the back. The Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had no way of defending themselves between the two aggressors, and were swallowed up by the Soviet Union. For Finland Stalin had the same destiny in mind. Finland, a Scandinavian style democracy, held fast to its rights for freedom and independence. On November 30, 1939 the Russian armies tried by force to take what it could not get through blackmail. In a three

and a half month long furious struggle Finland fended off the invading enemy with practically no help from the outside. On March 13, 1940 Finland had to give up and signed a peace treaty, surrendering approximately one tenth of its territory. Already during and after the fighting, the war meant a ruthless ethnic cleansing in which over 400.000 Finns had to leave their homes, farms, industries and livelihood and take to the road with their livestock and only few necessities, all this in a hard semi-arctic winter and harassed by Russian bombs.

There was an interval when the victorious German armies took over most of Europe and then in 1941 turned themselves against Russia. For Finland there was little chance for neutrality. At the time we had little knowledge of what nazi-Germany actually stood for but we had first hand knowledge of Stalin's Russia. Now, there was also the possibility of taking back what we had lost. So, tragically, Finland was again involved in a war which initially succeeded but when spreading to a whole world embracing conflict became a burden from which the country had no way out. The Ger-

man defeat became inevitable with the western powers succeeding in their D-day invasion to Normandy. However, instead of joining full scale in the eastern front to put pressure on Germany and assisting the western allies, Stalin used the opportunity to attack Finland. Again the Finns had to fight to stop the Red Army and finally succeeded. When it became clear that the western allies were gaining territory liberating large areas, Stalin withdrew his forces from the Finnish front and started his large offensives against Germany. Peace became finally possible.

The peace treaty called for Finland to forsake even more ancient Finnish territory, and to pay heavy war reparations to Russia. An "allied" control commission headed by communist Russia was put up to monitor democracy in Finland. Besides Finland was to oust the remaining German forces (mainly Austrian mountain troops) from Lapland with the result that the retreating troops destroyed large areas of northern Finland.

The future of the country seemed desperately gloomy. There followed precarious years

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Discharging U.S. parcelpost in Helsinki at Katajanokka 1949. – Kuva: Posti- ja telemuseo.

of uncertainty. The threat prevailed. In this almost impossible situation and against all odds Finland had to rebuild holding fast to its western values and its democratic society.

Gradually conditions improved. In this respect also American Liberty and Victory ships played their part arriving in Finnish ports carrying in their holds also a precious cargo of parcel post sent by Finnish-American immigrants to their relatives and friends in the old country. This article is, with a sense of deep gratitude, dedicated to these self-sacrificing

people who hastened to help their loved ones and their country of birth, but also to the U.S. Postal Service for a great job executed in handling and expediting a great charitable work not only for Finland but worldwide.

Finnish immigrants in the United States

The first Finnish immigrants arrived already in the year 1638, from at the time eastern part of the Kingdom of Sweden, to the Delaware valley to form the short lived

New Sweden colony. Although these first immigrants soon integrated with English, Dutch and other settlers, they had their early influence on what was to become the American way of life. They were to be followed by others, the biggest wave arriving during the great years of immigration in the turn of the century. The latter immigrants, most arriving via New York, spread all over the United States and latter to Canada. Some settled in the greater New York area or went further to places where nature was more reminiscent of the old country like New England and the Great Lakes area or moved further all the way to the Pacific Coast and Alaska. They made up their lives from modest beginnings, and with hard work fared mostly very well building up their homes and farms and educating their children to become good Americans.

However, they could never forget the modest but beautiful surrounding from whence they came, the small homes, the fields and woods, the shining lakes and free flowing rivers, the coasts and isles, the small towns and villages, the emerging modern industries, but most of all the family members left behind, the relatives and friends.

The unbroken ties

During the war they anxiously worried about what was going to happen, about the ravages of war, the destinies of their families and friends and very much about the freedom of their native country. When peace finally settled over war-torn Europe there was an urge

on both sides of the Atlantic to re-open the connections. It was a great day when mail again started to flow in both direction. Families and friends sought contact, which was not always easy. So many addresses had been lost, people resettled and moved, especially from the ethnically cleansed areas occupied by the Russians, that finding each other was often a very difficult task. Voluntary organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army did their best. In this respect also the Post Offices played their vital role.

After contact had been made a large scale relief work grew up spontaneously. The closets were combed for all good quality but surplus clothing. Coffee, sugar, flour, canned food and other necessities were bought and packed for sending. In this extensive voluntary work participated not only the people born in Finland but also the younger generation, who helped in shopping, packing and writing addresses, sometimes without being asked bringing home a case of this or that and paying of their own money.

Not only Finnish Americans but also others participated. Meeting a Finnish friend they could ask:

- Are you still sending packages to Finland?
- Yes, I do.
- Oh, I'll see what I can do.

Then they brought things of their own or gave a sum of money. In one case, a Hollywood cinema magnate, who had a Finnish housekeeper, asked her every now and then if she continued sending parcels to her relatives in Finland and then opened his wallet and

gave a generous banknote or two for the purpose. A special mention is herewith due to Mr. Basil Robert McAllister, a New Yorker who on a clerks salary arranged an extensive relief work sending hundreds of parcels. For this extraordinary work he merited in August 1948 a special article in TIME-magazine entitled "Uncle Bob and Finland".

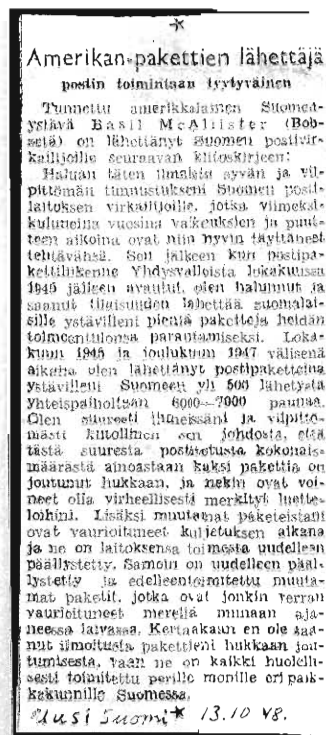
Altogether more than 2 million parcels were mailed this way in the years up to 1952, the year of the Helsinki Olympic Games, when the most difficult times were over.

The role of the U.S. Postal Service

The United States Post Office did in those years a tremendous job already initially at receipt in small rural post offices and in large entities handling, transporting and dispatching millions of relief parcels to all corners of the world. In the case of Europe most of these parcels were directed via the New York Morgan Annex postal terminal. In the case of Finland smaller numbers were also directed via Boston, Mass. and occasionally through other offices of exchange.

The bulk, however, was handled in New York, where the personnel sorted, sacked and dispatched the mails, and considering the huge numbers with sometimes handwritten addresses hard to construe, only a minor number of parcels or bags were misdirected to another country.

To begin with the U.S. Post Office used burlap-bags packing as a rule three parcels in each. With the



severe shortage of mailbags these burlap-bags could be used also for onward transport inland. Latter the strong much larger proper canvas mailbags were introduced.

In New York the mails were trucked mostly to the 31st Street Pier in Brooklyn were the major transporter agency Moore-McCormack Lines took over, or to other piers nearby for the Swedish or occasional Finnish ships.

Moore-McCormack ships carried mail not only to Finland but on the way also to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Poland as well as mails transiting Finland for the U.S.S.R.. The times of arrival varied depending on the number of ports to be called. Thus unavoidably the regularity of arrival suffered. Also time and again long-

shoremen's strikes on both sides of the Atlantic caused heavy accumulations and jammed the flow. Normally the transportation time from New York to Helsinki or occasionally to some other Finnish port was approximately one month sometimes less sometimes more.

The arrival

The mails were received at port by postal personnel. The actual heavy work from hatch to reeling and on to the waiting trucks or to the pier for temporary stowage into harbour warehouses was done by longshoremen. The check-up and monitoring was done by postal employees, who also participated in the heavy work. Very often the ships arrived at odd hours, had to be waited for by the pier as the discharge started immediately regardless of the time of day or night.

The heaviest accumulation was in July 1947 when we had several ships arriving with mail - a total of 55.000 bags of parcel post. Especially in summertime the work under good conditions could be very swift. Then again in the semi-arctic winter when heavy winds blew over the Baltic bringing sleet and rain the work could be rather unpleasant. One such night the second mate in charge of one American ship came down to the hold carrying his mug of hot coffee. He noticed some friendly grumbling among the longshoremen, asked what was the trouble and disappeared, returning after a while with a large can of hot coffee that then went around from man to man.

A more sinister situation appeared on another American ship arriving late, and the waiting longshoremen to keep from the cold had fetched themselves with vodka from nearby ships and were on a lousy mood being required to hurry as the ship had to hurry to Leningrad for some demonstration. For several reasons the whole climate in the ships holds was nervous and irritating, nearly explosive. One of the worst troublemakers had got the ship's fire-axe in his hands playing with it. The ship's mate came down to the hold and coolly took the axe away and circulating it over his head throw it with a heavy bang up to the upper tween-deck. The situation calmed down immediately.

The ship personnel were always very cooperative which was also enhanced by the personal interest shown by the Head Postmaster of Helsinki, who liked to come over to follow receipt of mails.

Worth mentioning also was the case when the author of this article was directed to receive a large shipment of mails for both Finland and the U.S.S.R. arriving at a provincial port. I had telephoned the local postmaster asking him to provide the necessary personnel to assist me. He may not have understood the extent of the task or he simply had only one elderly postman to spare. Also in this case it was a Moore-McCormack ship. I stood at the railing wondering how to manage the operation of checking, receiving and directing several box-cars of mail and redirecting them to Helsinki on one hand and to the U.S.S.R. at the other hand. I must have looked

worried since one of the mates passing by asked me what was the trouble. I told him. Nothing to worry about, was his answer, and then he ordered the ships crew to assist. Everything went fine but I had no way but to give my most cordial thanks.

Unavoidably every now and then pilferage occurred in the ports of call causing extra work in preparing reports and collecting contents loose spread around. The ripped up bags and parcels were handled separately with the intention to minimize damage trying to match contents loose to the respective customs declarations. Fortunately the damages as a whole were after all minimal.

A heavy part of work was also the handling of transiting mails to the U.S.S.R. In cases of accumulations several boxcars were despatched over the border to their destinations Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk or Kiev.

Handling the mails at the post office in Helsinki

Post Office trucks brought in the mails daily according to capacity of handling. At times of heavy accumulations overtime work was done extensively. The gift parcel posts from the United States and Canada were handled separately from other foreign mail. The opening of the bags were done by two teams of one customs officer and two to three postmen. The parcels were lifted on a table and stamped free of customs by the customs officer. A visiting high official from the Customs Administration asked:

- How do you discern in that speed if there are commercial parcels?
- By how heavily they fly! was the immediate reply given by the customs officer busy stamping "Free of customs".

Actually the commercial parcels were normally rather easy to separate because of their outlook and if occasionally sent onward they tended to be returned to the office of exchange for proper inspection, being also in interest of the respective addressee. Initially during the first years of greater need for relief no Customs clearance fee was levied on these parcels which were handed to their addressees free of all charges. Although most parcels were well packed, the rough handling and transport caused a certain number of parcels to arrive broken. A special team of officials were assigned to repack parcels. Also this service was offered free to the addressees.

Also a number of parcels were insufficiently or incorrectly addressed. Some times parcels addressed to people evacuated from the territories ceded to the U.S.S.R. were addressed to the former locations from where the Finns had been forcibly moved. Great care was taken to find the whereabouts and the new addresses where they had been relocated. Equally if the addresses were

wrongly or illegibly written. Even sometimes the slight differences in alphabetical characters could present even funny difficulties. One example was a parcel addressed:

*Hilma Jokinen
Manta Hakinen
Finland.*

At first glance it seemed that the parcel was addressed to two ladies. By the doubling the consonants in the lower name and adding dots used in the Finnish language for some vowels we arrived at a post office name Mänttä. A note was sent to that post office inquiring whether there eventually was a village named Häkkinen, and if so also an address with the name Hilma Jokinen also asking if she had relatives or friends in the United States that might have sent a parcel. With confirmation on all counts the parcel reached its destination as intended.

After finish of work at the office of exchange the parcels dropped through a conveyor slide down to the domestic department where, after finished handling of the inland parcel mails, new teams started sorting and directing the gift parcels to their respective destinations. Here again the work was mostly done by teams of personnel from other branches having the knowledge and capacity for

the task. The work was done as overtime, and only at low periods the parcels were sent onward in the normal flow together with other parcel post. At late evening the parcels were loaded into mail-coaches or in a large extent due to the lack of capacity into box-cars either directly to the office of destination or railroad junctions for onward transport.

The impact

The arrival of the first parcels was a feast and a moment of great joy. To be mentioned only the tins of coffee, foodstuffs, sweets for children, toys and clothing. They were messengers of hope in an otherwise gloomy and triste time of an uncertain future. While not all had the benefit of receiving parcels some contents were handed to good neighbours and friends who thus at least partly becoming beneficiaries.

The struggle in guarding the nation's freedom, democracy and Scandinavian heritage proved successful and despite heavy losses Finland could stand on its own as the only eastern European country. In this respect the American gift parcel post played a notable role that requires our sincere respect and gratitude due to all who in this way participated in assisting a small nation in its darkest hour.