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How Finnish Are The Thunder Bay Finns?

An ethnic community is made up of many individuals who, regardless of their personal differences, share something very important at the community level: their common roots. It is the common roots that bind together the Finnish population of 11,740 immigrants and their descendents living in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, (Census of Canada, 1986) even though the extent of the individuals' cultural and linguistic expression varies.

To find out the extent of cultural and linguistic retention of individuals within the Thunder Bay Finnish community, one hundred people over eighteen years old, both immigrants (38) and non-immigrants (62), were interviewed.

Regarding language, both Finnish and English language skills of those interviewed were determined; regarding culture, the extent of each person's active community involvement was determined, as well as the extent of retention of Finnish traditions in each individual's personal and home life.

Finally, the attitude of those interviewed, regarding the Finnish language

and culture was determined. The following is a summary of the study.

Findings Regarding Language Skills

Most of the Finnish immigrants in Thunder Bay have learned to speak English sufficiently well and make use of it daily. Almost all of the Canadian-born second and third generation informants have learned Finnish as their first language. They all speak English now, and all but two use it daily.

The retention of the Finnish language skills of the immigrants is high; however, the retention of the non-immigrants' skills except for the speaking skill is already quite low. All the immigrants (100%) speak Finnish daily, weekly or less; over half (68%) of the non-immigrants do so also. Most of the immigrants (95%) actively write Finnish; less than a half of the non-immigrants (45%) are able to do so.

The main reason for both groups to write Finnish is to keep contact with those in Finland. A large number of the immigrants (90%) and almost a half (48%) of the non-immigrants listen to Finnish actively through the local media.

Quite a few of the immigrants (76%) but only a small number of the non-immigrants (19%) read Finnish actively, subscribing to the Finnish-Canadian newspapers and/or borrowing Finnish books.

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Community Involvement

Neither the immigrant informants nor the Canadian-born Finns of Thunder Bay appear to be very active either in the community at large or the Finnish community. Only 42% of the immigrants and 48% of the Canadian Finns are actively involved in any community efforts, and only 29% of either group support the Finnish organizations.

The only really active immigrant group are those who came to Canada in the 1950's as children (under 15). Even they participate more in mainstream English-speaking organizations than in the Finnish-speaking ones. About half of them actively participate in an English church; the other half support a Finnish church. The other immigrants appear passive in comparison with this group, because even the most active of the older immigrants are beginning to experience the restrictions of age.

Characteristics, Traditions and Heritage

For the Finnish immigrant informants keeping the Finnish traditions and heritage comes naturally, as a characteristic part of their daily lives. Also the Canadian-born Finns still appear to live the Finnish culture to some extent or at least appreciate it. For example, all of the immigrants (100%) and 82% of the Canadian Finns buy Finnish products quite regularly. All the immigrants also prepare Finnish food, and this tradition has survived with 73% of the Canadian-born Finns as well.

Almost all the immigrants (95%) and many of the Canadian-born Finns (77%) celebrate Finnish festivals and holidays, most often Christmas Eve. Nearly all the immigrants (92%) and over a half of the

non-immigrants (65%) reflect their Finnish background in their homes with photographs of their Finnish ancestors on display as well as Finnish wallhangings and Finnish crystal, mainly Iittala glass. Many of them (84% of the immigrants and 61% of the non-immigrants) have a Finnish sauna. Most of the immigrants (90%) and nearly a half of the Canadian-born Finns (48%) listen to Finnish programs on the radio and television and many immigrants (74%) and almost a half of the Canadian-born informants (48%) listen to Finnish musical recordings at home. Most of the immigrants (89%) but only a small minority of the non-immigrants (21%) also visit Finland, over half of the immigrants (56%) quite regularly.

Attitudes toward the Finnish Language and Culture

All (100%) of the immigrant informants and most of the Canadian-born Finns (84%) consider the retention of the Finnish language important or very important. A great majority of the immigrants (92%) and well over a half of the Canadian-born Finns (69%) regard the keeping and maintaining of the Finnish culture and traditions to be either important or very important. A large number of the immigrants (84%) and over a half of the non-immigrants (53%) value the continuing of the Finnish churches as important or very important and almost as many immigrants (81%) and non-immigrants (52%) want to see the continuing of the Finnish organizations because it is important or very important to them.

Neither the immigrant Finns nor the non-immigrant Finns see much hope for the future of the Finnish organizations and churches, once the Finnish language is no longer used actively. Only 34% of the immigrants and 40% of the non-im-

migrants believe that the Finnish churches will continue and 28% of the immigrants and 44% of the non-immigrants believe that the secular Finnish organizations will continue regardless of the language.

Further Study on Attitudes

After the informants had voiced their opinions about the importance of retaining the Finnish language and culture and of continuing the Finnish clubs and churches, they were presented with a number of biased statements on the same topics, with which they had to either agree or disagree. In this way, hopefully, they were to reveal their real attitudes.

Although 100% of the immigrants and 84% of the Canadian-born Finns had considered the retention of the Finnish language important, now a somewhat lesser number, 77% of the immigrants and 69% of the non-immigrants showed some degree of positive attitude toward the Finnish language. In fact, 20% of the immigrants and 22% of the non-immigrants showed some degree of negative attitude, and 3% of the first group and 9% of the second did not answer either way.

As for their opinion about retaining the Finnish culture, 92% of the immigrant Finns and 69% of the Canadian-born had considered it important or very important. The new study on attitudes shows a spectacular change in the score of the immigrant Finns: only 69% have some degree of positive attitude toward this subject. The new study corroborates the score of the Canadian-born Finns, showing that 65% have a positive attitude toward the Finnish culture.

Twenty-two per cent (22%) of the immigrants and 25% of the Canadian-born Finns had a negative attitude and 9% of

the first group and 11% of the second did not answer.

Also the positive opinion of the 81% of immigrants who were for the continuing of the Finnish clubs and societies took a dive to 57% when tested through their attitudes. On the other hand, the score of the Canadian-born Finns (52%) was confirmed when 50% of them showed a positive attitude to this subject. Those who showed a negative attitude were 29% of the immigrant group and 18% of the Canadian-born group. The remaining 14% of the immigrants and 32% of the non-immigrants simply did not know enough about the organizations to answer. So although in the first study there were 48% of Canadian-born Finns who did not think the continuing of Finnish clubs and societies important, it was not necessarily because of a negative attitude but simply because they were too far removed from the Finnish organizations, and to them, personally, the organizations had no importance.

The most surprising result came from the last topic, the importance of continuing the Finnish churches. Whereas 84% of the immigrants and 53% of the Canadian-born Finns had said earlier it was important to them that the churches should continue, only 42% of the immigrants and 24% of the Canadian-born Finns showed a positive attitude toward this topic. Whereas, in the earlier study, 47% of the Canadian-born Finns had been against the continuing of the Finnish churches, now only 7% of them showed a negative attitude toward the topic. A great number (46% of immigrant Finns and 69% of Canadian-born) did not answer. They found it too difficult to give their opinions, because they do not go to a Finnish church and know very little about the activities of the Finnish churches.

Attitudes Regarding the Finnish Language

All the informants came across quite emphatically in favour of the Finnish language preservation. The first place to learn a language is the home and 90% of all the informants felt that it is the Finnish-Canadian parents' important responsibility to teach Finnish to their own children. They did realize that it is not always easy to do so, but 53% of the immigrants and 42% of the non-immigrants countered the suggestion that the maintenance of the Finnish language within the home should be too difficult.

The further suggestion that teaching Finnish to one's own children is downright impossible met with disagreement by 68% of the immigrant informants and 66% of the Canadian-born. It was then suggested that if one of the parents does not speak Finnish, the situation becomes much more difficult, even impossible. Although 42% of the immigrant Finns and 52% of the Canadian-born disagreed with this and pointed to example families whose parents have taught their children to become bilingual in the instance that one or the other does not speak Finnish, 37% of the immigrants and 44% of the non-immigrants agreed that without the support of both parents, teaching Finnish to one's own children is impossible.

All the informants felt that in the end it is up to the parents. If they perceive that knowing Finnish is important, they will undoubtedly teach it to their children. It was, however, the opinion of 39% of the immigrant informants and 26% of the Canadian-born Finns, that many parents do not want to speak Finnish to their children. This again was countered by a slight majority of 42% immigrants and 50% non-immigrants who could not im-

agine any parent capable of speaking Finnish not wanting to speak it to his/her children.

Although 63% of the immigrants and 65% of the non-immigrants felt that sending the children to Finnish language classes would be an important aid in their learning the language, some suggested, quite realistically, that it is still the home where the responsibility for language teaching lies; sending the children to learn Finnish in the language classes would be just "passing the buck".

A great majority of 87% immigrants and 84% non-immigrants agreed that it is important that the children be able to speak Finnish with their Finnish-speaking grandparents. To keep the communication going among the generations is an important motivating factor to promote the children's language learning.

The notion that Finnish language is hardly useful for the adult speaker in everyday life was countered by 55% of the immigrants and 47% non-immigrants who felt that in their daily lives it is a viable and important part. The immigrant informants agreed unanimously (100%) and the non-immigrants 87% that the Finnish language is the uniting factor among the Finns living in the Canadian environment. To 90% of the immigrant Finns and 84% of the non-immigrants, knowing the Finnish language was an inestimable asset and a good investment. In the experience of 65% of the immigrant Finns and 71% non-immigrants, their speaking of the Finnish language in public places had never caused any undue attention or negative reaction.

Attitudes Regarding the Finnish Background and Culture

Attitudes about the Finnish background and culture showed that 84% of the im-

migrant informants and 81% of the non-immigrants consider it "a great loss" if the Finnish-Canadian children should lose their Finnish identity. That the Finnish-Canadian parents should, at least, teach Finnish customs to their children was endorsed by 92% of the immigrant Finns and 69% of the non-immigrants.

The gradual assimilation of the adult Finnish-Canadians within the Canadian society was a negative matter for 50% of the immigrant informants and 31% of the non-immigrants. On the other hand, to 28% of the immigrants and 66% of the non-immigrants it was a totally positive matter. They thought it only natural and even desirable that assimilation should occur. In fact, many of them are contributing to the process by marrying non-Finns. Some have a non-Finnish parent or grandparent.

Looking at the Finnish-Canadian society as a whole, 55% of the immigrant informants and 32% of the non-immigrants agreed either totally or almost that "the Finns are too bound up within their society and customs." Conversely, 32% of the immigrants and 55% of the Canadian Finns disagreed. To them the Finnish society is not a closed society.

As many as 92% of the immigrants and 94% of the non-immigrants believed that Finnish-Canadians should be proud of their culture and heritage and not hide it. Furthermore, 81% of the immigrants and 89% of the non-immigrants were totally against the suggestion that the Finnish background could in any way be a burden or hindrance in their progress in the society at large. That it is, in fact, "a good idea" to let your co-workers know about your Finnish background was the opinion of 53% immigrants and 71% of the non-immigrants.

The suggestion that "it does not really matter even if the Finnish identity is lost during our time or our children's time" was obliterated with a strong vote to the contrary, because it does matter to 90% of the immigrant Finns and 81% of the non-immigrants. The opinion that Finnish-Canadians might be better than other Canadian minorities was refuted by 71% of the immigrant informants and 77% non-immigrants, often in a slightly embarrassed tone, suggesting that no human can possibly be better than any other. While another 5% of the immigrants and 3% of the non-immigrants were almost in agreement with them, 21% of the immigrants and 15% of the non-immigrants preferred not to commit themselves one way or another. Only 3% of the immigrants and 5% of the non-immigrants concurred with the opinion.

A majority of both the immigrant informants (76%) and the non-immigrants (79%) had never encountered cultural discrimination because of their Finnish background, in the Canadian society at large. Also cultural discrimination toward the Finnish Canadians by the Finnish people of Finland was unknown to 47% of the immigrant informants and 50% of the non-immigrants. A fair number of informants (24% immigrant and 34% non-immigrant) found it difficult to say whether or not they had experienced discrimination from the Finland Finns. Surprisingly, 26% of the immigrants and 16% of the non-immigrants had either experienced such discrimination or had heard of instances of it from others. That reverse discrimination might exist, i.e. Finnish-Canadians looking down on Finland Finns, was denied by a majority of 68% of the immigrant informants and 74% of the non-immigrants.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that the immigrant informants of Thunder Bay who participated in this study use their language skills quite extensively. Generally speaking, they have retained the Finnish language very well. The non-immigrants also use their Finnish speaking skill extensively, but the other language skills: listening, writing and especially reading are not used to a great extent and tend to be more passive than active.

The retention of Finnish culture and traditions is also high among the Thunder Bay Finnish community. The immigrants still live the culture daily; to them it is natural and unconscious. Among the non-immigrants the Finnish culture is retained to a greater extent than the language. Finnish holiday traditions, Christmas Eve in particular, are cele-

brated by a large number of non-immigrant informants. Quite a few also have some visual and concrete objects in their homes, which represent their Finnish background.

Although all the informants carry on with the Finnish traditions in their homes, very few participate in any community activities reflecting the Finnish culture.

On the whole, the attitude of the informants toward Finnish matters is positive. The farther removed they are from the Finnish social institutions, the less they are able to relate to them or form an opinion. Their positive attitude is translated into practical action, when so many of them, both immigrants and Canadian-born Finns, express their intent to keep following the Finnish traditions and passing them on to the future generations.

Tiivistelmä:

Tämä artikkeli on tiivistelmä tutkimuksestani, jonka aiheena on Thunder Bayn suomalaisten "suomalaisuus". Tarkoituksena on selvittää, kuinka paljon Thunder Bayn suomalaiset ja suomensukuiset vielä aktiivisesti käyttävät suomen kieltä ja osallistuvat suomalaiseen kulttuuritoimintaan sekä sisällyttävät suomalaisia tapoja ja perinteitä jokapäiväiseen elämäänsä. Tutkimus on tehty mielipide- ja asennekyselyn pohjalta, tarkoituksella saada esiin mahdollisimman autenttista materiaalia.

Tutkimuksen loppuarvio on, että Thunder Bayssa puhutaan suomea vielä verrattain aktiivisesti, mutta suomen kielen kirjoitus, kuuntelu ja lukeminen on jo huomattavasti passiivisempaa — etenkin Kanadassa syntyneiden keskuudessa.

Myös suomalainen kulttuuriperinne ja tavat ovat osa Thunder Bayn suomalaisten jokapäiväistä elämää; suomalainen kulttuuritoiminta (seurat ja seurakunnat) puolestaan on prosentuaalisesti pienen kannattajajoukon varassa. Haastateltavien asenne suomen kieltä ja suomalaisuutta kohtaan on enimmäkseen myönteinen.