

Laurie Hertzell



Meeting a Child of the Karelian Fever

Kotkozero, U.S.S.R. — The road from Leningrad to the Soviet Karelian capital of Petrozavodsk was constructed, they say, the way a drunken Karelian walks.

If you follow this twisting, two-lane tar road as it winds through the forest, you will eventually reach Kotkozero, a town of hot, dusty paths, old women in knee-high rubber boots pumping past on heavy bicycles, cows grazing in the shade of green trees, and, in the city center — which is nothing more than a gravel pulloff in the tall grass — a bust of Lenin. Stern and unsmiling, he faces the unpainted wooden houses of the town, his back toward the lake.

On a hot day in early July, Elsa Mikkonen was in the village's only shop buying a loaf of bread. Though she has lived in the Soviet Union since 1933, she is a full-blooded Finn, and looks it. What may seem even stranger is the fact that she speaks perfect English.

—I am Russian now, Elsa will tell you with a sigh, but she wasn't always Russian. At one time, she was American.

A tiny woman wearing thick eyeglasses and an orange cloth cap, Elsa Mikkonen was born in Wareham, Mass., in 1920. But for nearly 60 years, she has lived in the Soviet Union, trapped inside a country she

wasn't born in and never intended to move to. Now, at 71, she has given up hope that she will ever be able to leave.

Mikkonen is not alone. There are hundreds more like her: aging, American-born children of Finns who emigrated here in the 1930s, socialist dreams in their hearts, capitalism behind them and doom awaiting them.

Elsa is the younger daughter of Finnish immigrants. Her father, Armas, was a laborer. At the beginning of the Depression, he lost his job and was unable to find another one. Elsa's mother, Helen, kept the family together by taking in washing and mending. Armas looked for work, but as the weeks turned into months and he still had no job, he began talking more and more of emigrating.

Like thousands of other Finnish immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s, Armas Mikkonen was already a strong socialist when he came to the United States. Disappointed by the American dream, he began looking with interest at the changes taking place in the fledgling Soviet Union.

Many of the Finns were attracted by the promise of full employment and free health care, a workers' paradise where there were no capitalist bosses or imperious czars to rule them and no class system to keep them down.

Their enthusiasm was fueled by fervent articles in the socialist Finnish-language newspaper, *Eteenpäin*, which was published in Massachusetts, and by speakers

Laurie Hertzell, a journalist, Duluth, Minnesota, is currently working, with Mayme Sevander, on a book about the emigration of American Finns to Soviet Karelia in the 1930s.



Elsa Mikkonen in her one-room apartment in Kotkozero, Karelia, USSR.

from Karelian Technical Aid. These speakers traveled the country, speaking at Finn Halls and urging the immigrants to move to the Finnish-speaking region of Soviet Karelia.

In the early 1930s, Karelia was in desperate need of workers. It needed loggers, fishermen and farmers, people to help settle the land, teach the native Russians to be lumberjacks and help the region meet the goals of its first Five-Year Plan.

Between 1930 and 1934, thousands of American Finns — upwards of 6,000 people, mostly from Massachusetts, northern Minnesota, Upper Michigan, Ohio and Oregon — sold their farms, quit their jobs, packed up children and belongings and sailed away to help build a new society, a workers' paradise in the Soviet Union.

Not all of them were unemployed laborers, like Mikkonen. On the contrary, most of them had left behind jobs, homes and profitable farms. They brought machinery and logging equipment and tractors and plows and cash with them; most of them were able to afford the \$400 entrance fee to the Soviet Union charged by Karelian Technical Aid.

To Mikkonen, an unemployed laborer with a large family, the full-employment and free health care of the Soviet Union sounded attractive. To a Finnish-speaking immigrant lonely for his homeland, Soviet Karelia, which borders Finland, sounded particularly alluring.

In 1933, after being out of work for two years, Armas Mikkonen made up his mind. He sold his Cape Cod home and moved his family into his brother's house while they made arrangements to leave. One of Elsa's uncles disapproved of the family's plan, but another uncle, her Uncle Eino, understood why they were going and eventually joined them in Karelia.

—In America, we were afraid to tell people we were going to the USSR, Elsa said.

—These were the days of the Red Scare, so we told them we were going to Finland, instead. They had a big going-away party for us at the Finn Hall, but the Ku Klux Klan had burned a cross on a Communist's lawn not too long before. So all night long, during the party, my uncle stood guard with a shotgun.

The family sailed to Leningrad via Germany and then traveled by train to Petrozavodsk. They were members of one of the last big group of American Finns to emigrate; since 1930, groups of 50, 100, 200 and even 300 American and Canadian Finns had been pouring into Soviet Karelia. By 1934, the emigration had slowed to a trickle and by 1935, it was over.

From Petrozavodsk, the Mikkonens took a bus to Uhtua, a small Finnish-

speaking community in northern Karelia. It was beautiful there, Elsa said, but primitive. Houses had no electric lights or indoor plumbing. There were no automobiles. Streets were cobblestone or dirt, and there were no sidewalks.

-We were met there by one family we knew from America. She said, 'Come, come, come to our house. Don't be afraid of our domestic animals', by which she meant her cockroaches.

Still, the village was deep among the pines and birches of the Karelian forest, right on a river, and it was a very beautiful place to live. Elsa and her brother fished in the river and wove birchbark baskets for berrying in the summer. Uhtua was much more a Finnish town than a Russian one, and Elsa attended a Finnish-speaking school and her parents read a local Finnish-language newspaper.

The first few years there were happy, if primitive, and month by month conditions improved. Finns began teaching their superior logging methods to the local loggers, and production soared. Finnish fishermen from Oregon and farmers from the Midwest began producing food for the people to eat. And in Petrozavodsk, Finns constructed sidewalks, plumbing, a ski factory, a concert hall, a theater and a school. And then the purges began.

-They began to arrest the people, Elsa recalled, rocking back and forth in her chair by the window.

-Every night they took someone from Uhtua, it was terrible. There were so many Finns, they came from America, Finland, Sweden. They were all arrested. It was terrible. I don't know how we lived through that time.

The height of the purges came in 1937 and 1938. During that time, thousands of immigrants across Karelia — mostly Finnish men from America — were arrested in the dead of night, dragged off to prisons

in Petrozavodsk and surrounding areas, and executed. There were no formal complaints or charges — every person arrested was simply considered "an enemy of the people."

Families lived in terror. Some families slept with their bags already packed, anticipating that knock on the door. Others went into hiding in the forests and islands of Karelia. Across the Soviet Union, millions of people died in the purges, either by execution or starvation.

Elsa's father was a simple worker, she said, and she believes that's what saved him. One morning in 1938, he was called for an interview by the NKVD (now the KGB).

-My father said, 'I'm gone!' My mother packed him some underwear and tobacco. We thought we would never see him again. They asked him all kinds of questions: 'How did you get here? What brought you here? Who have you talked to?' But he was such a simple man. He said, 'I can't remember all that, ask my wife.' And they let him go.

But the purges didn't leave Elsa's family unscathed. Though her father was let go, her Uncle Eino was not.

-He had married a Karelian girl and they had a child. He was arrested. Years later, I got a certificate of death. It said — I cried when I got it — it said, 'Execution by shooting squad.' The Finns were all shot. We were all enemies. That's what we were, Elsa said. She rocked a little faster, then stopped.

-When men were arrested, families were left behind. Even families where the men weren't arrested were put out of work. We were told we could not speak English or Finnish in public. My mother said, 'I don't know any other language.' And she was put out of work.

-My father looked after horses. He was put out of work. I taught school. They put me out of work. We sat there. My mother, father, myself, out of work. It lasted two months.

Then they began taking away the families of the arrested men, trucking them off to exile in Kem, on the White Sea.

–My brother was older, and braver. He went to the NKVD and asked, 'What shall we do?' They said, 'It's better if you go away.' So we did. We had to hire trucks. Where could we go? We went to the same place they were sending the people in exile, to Kem. Only we had to pay for it.

In Kem, they lived in one crowded room with 40 other people.

–We were no better than prisoners. I lived in a big room, men and women and children all together. It was a bed, and another bed, all in a row. There was no privacy. I couldn't change my clothes at night. I was 17.

– We worked in the forest. My father and brother cut the trees. I sat in the forest and put the branches into the fire. I sat by the fire and cried.

– There was a nice old man, a party boss where they floated trees. He offered me office work in the city of Kem, and I took it gladly. And then one day I was called to the city committee of the Young Communist League. They asked me, if I wanted to be a Finnish teacher. I said yes, so they sent me to Petrozavodsk. They sent me there to teach Finnish, but when I got there they said they already had a Finnish teacher. So they told me to teach English, and I did.

Elsa taught English in Petrozavodsk until 1955, when she was transferred to Kotkozero. She has lived there ever since. She has never returned to the United States.

–Sometimes I think I would like to go back to America to see how people live. But I cannot. I'm too old and too crippled. My

time is done. I have to stay here. This is my home now. This is my new fatherland.

In this fatherland, Elsa Mikkonen has endured exile, evacuation, and forced labor. She has watched her friends' fathers and brothers be arrested and hauled away, one by one. She has spent her life in the Soviet Union, and she has done all she could to make it the best life she could. But she says quite freely that it is not the life she would have chosen. It is not the life her parents wanted her to lead.

–My mother said before she died we should have stayed in America. And I say we should have stayed.

She looked out the window and smiled her sad smile.

–I was once an American, she said, *her eyes misting over.*

– I was once a Finn. But I am Russian now.

End Note

Since hearing of the plights of Mikkonen and other American Finns, a Duluth, Minnesota-based group is seeking donations to bring some of these Americans back to the United States for next summer's Finn Fest, which will take place in Duluth. For more information, contact Brooks Anderson at the Duluth International Peace Center, DeWitt-Seitz Marketplace, 394 S. Lake Avenue, Duluth, Minnesota 55802, U.S.A., or call him at 1-(218)722-5404.

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Lars Hulden

Tulla takaisin

*Kun tulet takaisin kylään,
josta olet ollut kauan poissa,
et tule niinkuin tulisit vaan.
Sinä muistat, millainen se oli ennen,
siis millainen luulet sen olleen joskus,
kuin olisit kiiltopaperista leikannut siitä muistiäsi kuvan.
Ja onhan rannalla kaunista
ja on toki metsässä hiljaista
ja kyllä sinut otetaan vastaan
kun tulet takaisin.
Mutta ihmisiä ne ovat sielläkin,
eivät sen parempia, eivät sen huonompia.
Siellä sun täällä tuttavissa
ole varovainen käännteissäsi
ettet liikoja leventele.
Kyllä täällä on kateutta siinä kuin isommissakin paikoissa.
Omansa jokaisella
mitäpä muutakaan.
Niin, tervetuloa kotiin nyt sitten!*

(kokoelmasta Heim 1977, suomentanut Pentti Saaritsa)