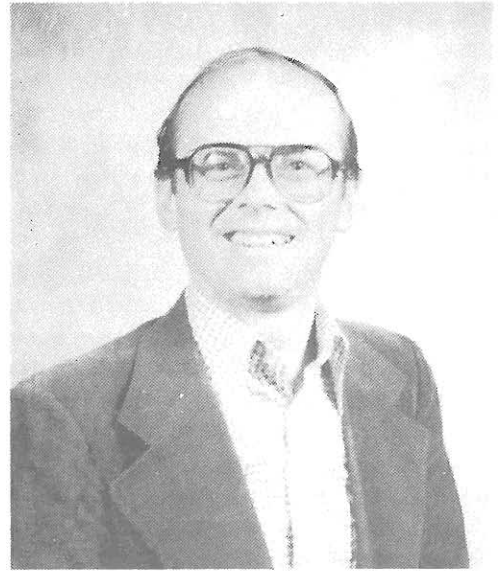


J. Donald Wilson

"THE CANADIAN SOJOURN OF A FINNISH-AMERICAN RADICAL"



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John Wiita, alias Henry Puro, was not a major figure in Finnish-Canadian radical circles when compared with the likes of J.W. Ahlqvist and A.T. Hill, both leading Canadian communists. But he was intimately involved in the founding of the Workers' Party of Canada in 1921-1922 which eventually became the Communist Party of Canada (CPC)¹, and editor of the Finnish socialist newspaper *Vapaus* (Liberty) from 1919 to 1923. In the United States where he spent most of his life after arriving from Finland at the age of seventeen, Wiita was, according to one scholar, "perhaps the most prominent of Finnish-American leaders in the 1920's and 1930's" and "the leading figure of the first decade of the Finnish-American communist movement."²

Although Wiita was clearly a "leader", his lifetime experiences were typical for many Finnish immigrants to North America:

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arrival as a young man, unskilled in industrial occupations; work on railroads, in logging camps, on coal and ore docks; transiency and economic insecurity; saloon and tavern life in the evenings; drift into socialism, first "hall socialism" for its spiritual succour and later, for a minority, dedication to socialist revolution. As Wiita himself put it: "I know that my joining the membership and activities of the Finnish Socialist Branch in Superior (Wisconsin), lifted my morale, gave purpose to my life, raised my cultural level, and aroused my eagerness to study and to understand social and political questions." Meeting such personalities as Eugene V. Debs and "Big Bill" Haywood "lifted our spirits and strengthened our belief in the cause of the working people."³ Like many others, converted to socialism in the United States, Wiita eventually became so disillusioned with the Communist Party that he deserted it and retreated from political life altogether. Finally, Wiita was typical of the fairly extensive crossborder movement of hundreds of Canadian and American Finns in the first three decades of this century.

Escaping the American draft in the spring

of 1918, Wiita headed north for Canada. There he settled with a fellow socialist, newspaper editor and draft evader, Elis Sulkanen on a farm in Finland, Ontario, west of present-day Thunder Bay. After the armistice was declared in November, 1918, he surfaced in Port Arthur briefly, then proceeded to Toronto where he met J.W. Ahlqvist, secretary of the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada (FSOC). Ahlqvist and an executive member John Latva, later the chief organizer of the exodus of Finnish-Canadians to Soviet Karelia in 1931-32, befriended Wiita, no doubt familiar with his previous editorial work on the American socialist newspapers **Työmies** (The Worker) and **Sosialisti** (The Socialist), in Superior, Wisconsin, and Duluth, Minnesota, respectively. Within a few months Wiita was called upon to become editor of **Vapaus**, the organ of the FSOC and from 1924 closely linked with the Communist Party of Canada. In that capacity Wiita in effect served two masters: the left-wing Finnish-Canadian social and cultural organization (FSOC which went through successive name changes, the last being the Finnish Organization of Canada), and the Communist Party of Canada of which Finns made up a large component of the rank-and-file membership. In addition because of his former qualified support of the IWW cause (Industrial Workers of the World), it is not surprising that Wiita used the pages of **Vapaus** to give "all possible publicity to OBU organizational work." The One Big Union was in a sense the counterpart of the IWW in Canada with its vision of industrial unionism and "social transformation being attained through a general strike that would leave the workers in control of production."⁴ In the early 1920's the OBU was particularly strong among lumber workers in Northern Ontario, and Wiita's account which follows makes ample reference to this fact.

Although he made common cause with local Finnish IWW branches, Wiita was not an unqualified supporter of that organization.⁵ He agreed with the principle of in-

dustrial unionism but he opposed the IWW's anarchosindicalist hopes of solving the problems of society through a general strike. For him political action directed against capitalism was the answer, namely organizing a political party and running candidates for office. His heavy accent and broken English militated against his running for office during his active years with the Communist Party of the United States. After World War II and his departure from the Party, he briefly entertained vain hopes of running as a Democrat, but his Communist background precluded such a development.⁶

John Higham has argued that "ethnic groups in an open society are, in some degree yet to be specified, the creation of their leaders."⁷ For the left-wing Finnish community in the United States, and to a lesser degree in Canada, John Wiita was such a person. But, amazingly, several other Finnish immigrants assumed leadership roles in both the U.S. and Canada. One thinks of Matti Kurikka and A.B. Mäkelä who at the beginning of the century became known continent-wide because of their utopian socialist settlement at Sointula, British Columbia and their newspaper **Aika** (Time). Both edited newspapers in the United States (**New Yorkin Uutiset** and **Toveri**, respectively) and travelled widely in that country.⁸ Similarly, Moses Hahl, one of the early socialist agitators among American Finns, was editorial staff member of **Raivaaja** (The Pioneer) and **Työmies** in the United States as well as **Työkassa** (Working People) in Port Arthur just before World War I. Frans Josef Syrjälä, a tailor, immigrated first to Toronto in 1903, helped to set up the "**Iso Paja** (Big Shop) of socialist-minded tailors there, before migrating to the United States where as editor-in-chief of **Raivaaja** in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, he became the leading figure in the Finnish-American social democratic movement for about two decades. Wiita's friend-in-exile Elis Sulkanen, was a well-established editor for **Työmies** and **Sosialisti** before moving to Canada in 1916-1919 and then became the editor of **Eteenpäin** (Forward) and **Raivaaja**

thereafter.

John Wiita was born in Vaasa province in western Finland in 1888. He attended public school and worked on his father's farm until at the age of seventeen he set sail for the United States. Landing via Canada in Superior, Wisconsin late in 1905, he began working on a railroad maintenance crew and then switched to the Coal Docks area where the pay was better. His life in those days was a combination of long work days and long drinking bouts in the evening. "This was the only kind of recreation and social life," Wiita reported, "unless you wanted to go to rotten movies (silent at that time) or the 'live' show places where the girls were showing their legs as they danced and sang."⁹

Born and raised in a "deeply religious home" in a rural area of Finland, this style of living was entirely new to the young Wiita. An even greater change, indeed a turning point, occurred through a friendship he developed with a Victor Staudinger who through working in Alberta coal mines had become attracted to socialist ideas. Through his influence Wiita began subscribing to the newspaper *Työmies* then published in Hancock, Michigan, and later in Superior. Soon thereafter in April 1907 Wiita joined the Superior branch of the Finnish Socialist Federation's (FSF) Midwest District. "This was the beginning of the transformation of my life. No longer was I to spend my free time in saloons. Instead I was beginning to think about social, political, and economic matters, and self-education of myself on the problems of the working people."¹⁰

Then for a few months in the fall and winter of 1907-08, Wiita in the company of a few Finnish friends became a "blanketstiff" and headed west for the lumber camps of eastern Washington and Montana. There he also worked for a spell with a construction gang on the Northern Pacific Railroad. The work was hard, the living conditions difficult and unpleasant (the men had to carry their blankets and personal effects from camp to camp), and one day when he was caught sitting down for a moment to rest, he was

fired on the spot. Heading into the nearest Montana town to cash his last pay check, he "found out that there was no money in circulation, only local 'crips' (he means "scrips") that were good only in local stores for supplies." Eventually a bout of "fever" and a period of hospitalization prompted Wiita to write his uncle in Superior for train fare "home". Back in familiar surroundings he became "more and more a convinced socialist and saw the needs of working people to educate and organize themselves, in order to improve their conditions, especially recalling my recent experiences and conditions at the Western lumber and railroad camps."¹¹

Wiita's conviction about the need to "educate and organize" led him in two directions at once. First, he became more and more active in the Superior branch of the FSF, eventually in August 1910 being elected secretary of the Central District which comprised the Upper Midwest states. Secondly, he began to attend the Work People's College (*Työväen Opisto*) in Duluth, which had been founded in 1903 by the Finnish evangelical Lutheran National Church as a "Folk School" but which by 1907 had been taken over by socialists and converted into a Marxist adult education school.¹² Beginning as a student Wiita became in succession secretary of the College and an assistant instructor in 1910, director of the Correspondence School (*Kirjeenvaihtokoulu*) in 1912 and eventually from late 1914 to 1916 Dean of Faculty succeeding Leo Lauki, the brilliant teacher, orator, newspaper editor, and later, in exile, university lecturer in Leningrad and *Tass* correspondent in Tashkent.¹³ The years spent at Work People's College left Wiita with an excellent reading comprehension of English although his spoken English was affected adversely by the many years during which he spent most of his time with Finns.¹⁴ Wiita credits the College with directing "the future course of my life and prepar(ing) me for many of those responsible positions of the Finnish-American labor movement, which my fellow workers entrusted to me."¹⁵ In the mean-

time Wiita had served for a brief time on the editorial staff and as editor-in-chief of *Toveri* (Comrade) in Astoria, Oregon, and in June 1915 was named chief editor of *Sosialisti* in Duluth until it became later in the year under Leo Laukki a "pure and simple IWW organ with all its syndicalist theories and practices".¹⁶

From early 1916 until February of the next year Wiita worked in automobile factories and machine shops in Detroit. He took night courses and participated in activities of the Socialist Party of America, returning eventually to Duluth/Superior where he took up an editorial position with *Työmies*. With the U.S. entry into the war and the prospect of the draft Wiita then fled to Canada in the spring of 1918, following a pattern already established by hundreds (Wiita says "thousands") of other Finnish socialists and IWW supporters. As George Bowering reminds us, "Refugees from the military situations in the United States have always formed an important part of Canadian immigration."¹⁷ Wiita's reasons for fleeing, he told his son later, were political not pacifist, part of the radical socialists' overall opposition to the war as an imperialist venture.¹⁸

Once in Canada Wiita settled on a farm in Finland, Ontario, with his friend and fellow editor, Elis Sulkanen and his wife. It is not clear whether by "Finland" Wiita meant a small rural community by that name north and west of International Falls/Fort Frances near the Minnesota border, or perhaps the community of Suomi (the Finnish word for Finland) located some forty miles southwest of present-day Thunder Bay (then Fort William and Port Arthur). Circumstantial evidence suggests it might have been the latter. Its isolation, reachable only by train from the Canadian Lakehead (Port Arthur, Duluth and Western Railway), made it an ideal hideaway for the likes of Wiita and Sulkanen. The railway, torn up in the 1930's, continued only as far west as Gunflint Lake six miles beyond the U.S. border. The region around Suomi is dotted with lakes - Wiita mentions five in the vicinity of their

farm - and the most notable industry up to the 1930's was lumber and silver mining. Wiita mentions working at a lumber camp making railroad ties. Also, when he left for Port Arthur he says they took the train. A further point of interest is the fact that Suomi was, according to one account, "a storm centre of Finnish left-wing political activity."¹⁹ There were active branches of the Finnish Organization of Canada and the IWW in the community as late as the 1930's and not one church.²⁰

During his stay in Canada Wiita assumed the name Henry Puro. Arja Pilli recounts how in the summer of 1919 the RCMP were suspicious that Henry Puro was John Wiita, but abandoned investigations because of confusion about Finnish names: the police had confused John **Wiita** with John **Wirta**, another man who did not resemble Puro.²¹ Wiita's recollection of his Canadian sojourn in the excerpt which follows includes reference to his associations in Toronto with J.W. Ahlqvist and John Latva. Ahlqvist was the most prominent and powerful member of the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada (later Finnish Organization of Canada) at that time. He was one of the original members of "Iso Paja" (the Big Shop) a collective workshop of Finnish tailors in Toronto, and was instrumental in forming a Finnish socialist club there in 1905 which then joined the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC). In 1910, when a split occurred in the SPC, Ahlqvist led a great many Finns to the Social Democratic Party of Canada the next year. In the early 1920's he was active in the formation of the Workers' (Communist) Party of Canada and the Finnish Organization of Canada in 1923. He worked hard for both until his death in 1940, although for a brief period in 1929 he was suspended from the party. John Latva was the main Canadian organizer of the migration of Finnish-Canadians to Soviet Karelia in 1931-32. Recruiting was conducted through a Toronto office known as Technical Aid to Soviet Karelia.²²

Another Finnish-Canadian Communist whom Wiita (Puro) met at this time was

A.T. (Tom) Hill. Born in 1897, Hill was a leading young Communist and in 1921-24 and 1926-1929 he was secretary of the FSOC (or the FOC). In 1922 Hill became secretary of the Young Workers' Party of Canada, and in 1924 went to Moscow to attend the Fifth Comintern Congress. After his return he became a Communist Party organizer. Throughout his life until his death in 1978 he served as a liaison between the Party and its Finnish members and sympathizers.

Wiita stayed on in Canada until 1923 busying himself as he recounts with his duties as editor of **Vapaus** and his work on behalf of FSOC. When he reentered the United States, he gave his real name and simply told U.S. Immigration authorities he was returning home. There was no trouble.²³ He immediately resumed (until 1925) his newspaper career on the editorial staff of **Eteenpäin** in Worcester, Massachusetts, where coincidentally his old friend Elis Sulkanen was editor-in-chief. He became active in the local branch of the Workers' (Communist) Party thus launching two decades of devoted membership in the Communist Party of the U.S.A. Wiita "actually became the leading figure of the Finnish-American communist movement in the 1920's," according to one historian.²⁴ At the 1925 convention of the Workers' Party held in Chicago Wiita was elected to the Party's Central Committee and became director of the move to reorganize the Finnish Federation of the party during the famous "Bolshevization" crisis (1924-25) when the party's various language federations were abolished and the autonomous Finnish Federation was dissolved and replaced by the Center of Finnish Workers' Clubs.²⁵ Wiita (Puro) thus became an important cog in Bolshevization among the Finns, a process that saw the number of Finnish party members decline from 6,410 in June 1925 to a membership on only 2,000 in the newly formed shop and street cells.²⁶

Wiita was a principal organizer of the later Finnish Workers' Federation which

was founded in 1927. Between that date and 1932 his importance to the party was reflected in the fact that he served as National Secretary then National Chairman of the Finnish Workers' Federation. In 1929 the Workers' Party assigned him the task of heading up the agrarian department, a post he held until 1935 when he became District Secretary for Upper Michigan.

After devoting most of his efforts to Communist Party activities for a decade and a half, Wiita returned to 1939 to his first love -- newspaper work -- again as editor of **Eteenpäin**, a position he held until the fall of 1943 when he left to work in an airplane factory in North Tarrytown, New York. The move was symptomatic of a much greater change in Wiita's life. "Quietly without any fanfare," he dropped his membership in the Communist Party.²⁷ A series of events had been weighing on his mind -- the treatment of American Finns in Soviet Karelia,²⁸ Stalin's purges, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Soviet annexation of Karelia from Finland in the Winter War -- all played a role in leading the fifty-five year old man to make a momentous decision: to forsake his beloved party.

At war's end he moved his family to Brooklyn, Connecticut, "because many Finns were settled there or in nearby towns."²⁹ After a difficult period of adjustment he eventually entered the real estate business rising in the esteem of his colleagues to the point where he was named president of the Northeastern Connecticut Board of Realtors. He retired at the age of ninety in August, 1978. His death occurred as a result of lung cancer on July 27, 1981 in Mystic, Connecticut, in a convalescent home.

In the late sixties, Wiita contemplated making a visit to the place of his upbringing in Finland. His nephews still ran the family farm and a sister of his still lived in the house his father had built. His daughter and her family had visited them in the summer of 1968, and his son offered to accompany him for a two-or three-week visit the following summer. He considered it but later re-

fused. His son now speculates: "I think that he feared that Immigration authorities would not allow him to return. He had been forced to testify in two or three deportation hearings on trials in the early fifties involving old acquaintances in the Party. At least one was denied readmission after a visit to relatives in Finland."³⁰ Wiita obviously feared the same might happen to him, and he clearly wished to live out his life in the United States.

Wiita began writing his memoirs, from which the following excerpt is taken, in the spring of 1974. Without telling his wife, he worked late at night until he had finished. The original was written in Finnish, and is longer than the English version (although not in the section dealing with his years in Canada). The English version, from which the following excerpt is taken, was written at the request of the Immigration History Research Center to facilitate the research of non-Finnish-speaking scholars. Wiita did his own typing, but his son, who holds a doctorate in mediaeval history, would proofread the account "correcting the spelling and numerous typos and the use of definite and indefinite articles (his main grammatical problem), and occasionally altering the tense of a verb."³¹ Both memoirs, Finnish and English, are in the possession of the Immigration History Research Center Collection (IHRC 49 W5) at the University of Minnesota, which kindly made the English version available to me in photocopy and granted permission to reprint the following from Folder no. 3. The Department of History Archives at Turku University possesses a microfilm copy of the memoirs.

A note on terminology may aid the reader. When Wiita speaks of the "Finnish Federation" he undoubtedly had in mind the translation commonly used in the United States for the comparable organization there, "Suomalainen Järjestö." In Canada the usual translation for **Canadian Suomalainen Järjestö** was, however, not "Canadian Finnish Federation" but "Finnish Organization of Canada" (FOC). Secondly, as mentioned

above, the FOC went through a series of name changes from its origins in 1911. These were as follows: Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada (1911-1918), (provisional) Finnish Organization of Canada (1918-1919, when the former organization was declared illegal), Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada (1919-1922), Finnish Socialist Section of the Workers' Party of Canada (1922-1923), Finnish Section of the WPC (1923-1924), Finnish Section of the Communist Party of Canada (1924-1925), and Finnish Organization of Canada, Inc. (which was established in 1923).³²

Again, when Wiita speaks of ideological splits among Finnish-Canadian socialists in the early 1920's, the reader should be aware that Finnish socialists in Canada were at that point divided into two main factions. The minority joined the syndicalists who advocated "direct action" and were represented in Canada and the United States by the Industrial workers of the World (IWW) and in Canada for a brief period by the One Big Union (OBU). The larger faction held firm with the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada which, in 1922, became successively an integral part of the WPC and the CPC. With the dissolution of the "language federations" - in particular the "Finnish Section" - of the CPC in 1925, the Finns transferred their allegiance to the autonomous Finnish Organization of Canada, Inc., which had been established by the FS/WPC in 1923 to take title of the properties that had been legally held in the name of the FSOC.

"A Finnish-American in Canada 1918-23"

President Woodrow Wilson was re-elected for a second term in November 1916, with the slogan "He kept us out of war." However in April 2, 1917 he asked Congress to declare war against Germany, and on April 6th Congress did declare war. The United States Socialist Party had called a special convention to meet at St. Louis and in that

Convention on April 7, 1917 it adopted a strong resolution against the war, militarism, and war propaganda. Morris Hillquit, national chairman of the Party, made a strong speech against the war.

The U.S. Congress adopted the strong espionage law, that was used against those that were opposed to the war, but especially socialists and Industrial Workers of the World. In that situation a large number of Finnish members of the Socialist Party and the members of IWW drifted into Canada in 1917 and the early part of 1918 in order to avoid the draft. I was one of them, leaving my position on the *Työmies* editorial staff late in the spring of 1918. In Canada I assumed the name, Henry Puro, which I retained until some years after my return to the U.S.

Elis Sulkanen, who had gone to Canada earlier and had acquired a homestead in Finland, Ontario, found that I had come to Canada too and invited me to his small farm to spend the summer with him and his wife. I accepted as we knew each other from *Työväen Opisto* and had worked together as editors of *Sosialisti*, a Finnish left-wing daily in Duluth, Minnesota. There were five fairly large lakes nearby. We did a great deal of fishing and hunting that summer.

In the fall, I together with a few other Finns went to a nearby lumber camp to make railroad ties. It was hard work, but soon I was able to make a man's quota of 50 ties per day.

After being at the lumber camp a little over one month, we heard that the armistice had been declared. I together with two other Finnish fellows quit and went to the nearest railroad station and took the train to Port Arthur. There I worked in a fishing boat that had a Finn captain. After working about 10 days, I took the train to Toronto, Ontario. That was the headquarters city of the Canadian Finnish Socialist Organization (i.e. Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada), which had been suppressed by the Canadian government.³³ Its paper, *Vapaus* (The Liberty) had also been suppressed, but

its local branches were functioning as cultural clubs.

In Toronto I met the veteran Canadian Finnish Organization (FSOC) secretary J.V. Ahlqvist and also several of its Executive Board member, John Latva and others.

John Latva invited me to stay at his home. And he inquired what were my plans. I told him that I intended to go back to the U.S. But he persuaded me to stay for awhile anyhow, and indicated that he might be able to get me a job at the local shipyard where he was working as a riveter. I had my doubts about getting the job, as Toronto papers repeated daily with big headlines urging that all foreigners should be discharged and replaced by (war) veterans. However one day John asked me to go with him, as he went to get his pay. And he introduced me as his good friend and asked if he can hire me as a riveter. And to my surprise he said yes, and asked me to start work tomorrow.

After about three months, towards the end of March 1919, I was called to the meeting of the Finnish Federation ("provisional" Finnish Organization of Canada which was to replace the FSOC for the period of the latter's suppression) Executive Committee at the Ahlqvist home. They had sent a delegation with legal aid to the appropriate government officials and had gotten permission to review (revive?) the Finnish Federation and also to re-publish *Vapaus*.³⁴ And they asked me to become editor of *Vapaus*. I thanked them for their offer, but said that I intended to go back to the U.S. But they insisted, and I promised to take the position temporarily until they found someone else. They said, "Forget about temporary," and that they wanted me to consider the job as permanent. In the same meeting they elected Harry Juntunen, the former editor of *Vapaus*, as business manager.

I went to Sudbury, Ontario, the nickel mining center and we started to publish *Vapaus* twice per week. The paper was still under war-time censorship. And after a few weeks I got a letter from the government censor, who was a retired colonel,³⁵ that

if he again found me using the words "revolution" or "revolutionary," he would immediately suppress **Vapaus**. However after a few weeks the Canadian parliament abolished censorship.

* * * * *

The Canadian Finnish Federation (FSOC) had been affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, which went to pieces during the war and could not revive. Supporters of the Russian revolution and its ideas organized an underground Communist Party, which later was replaced by a legal Workers Party, just as in the U.S. When it was established, the Finnish Federation (FSOC) joined it on a federated basis (as the Finnish Section of the WPC), retaining its own local branches and their cultural activities.

The Canadian government denied entrance to **Työmies, Raivaaja** and **Toveri**³⁶ not only during the war but several years after the war. But **Industrialisti**,³⁷ even more antiwar than the socialist papers mentioned, was admitted to Canada all those years. So we were very much isolated from the like-minded leftwing Finnish movement in the U.S. Therefore I as editor of **Vapaus** had to hold my own counsel and formulate the policy of the paper in all important questions, domestic as well as international matters. And so I did. I went to Toronto about twice a year to report to the Finnish Federation executive committee. They usually accepted my editorial policy without criticism. They had complete confidence in me. That was greatly helpful in my work.

My main sources of news were two Toronto dailies, the **Toronto Mail** and **Toronto Globe**, and in addition to some extent, the **Toronto Star** and **New York Times**. I usually took those papers, as they arrived in the evening in Sudbury, to my bed chamber, looked them over while lying in bed propped up by pillows and marked important items for translation. This was a great help in my editorial work the next day.

We did extend **Vapaus** from twice weekly

to thrice weekly and I was given an editorial assistant. However the 1921-22 depression when there was much unemployment, affected our paper too. And our business manager, who was now John V. Kannasto,³⁸ disclosed to me that our paper was running into a deficit. I proposed to him that we both take a voluntary cut in our salaries, and that I would edit the paper alone without assistance and asked if he could let one of his office help go. Kannasto agreed but was wondering if it was possible for me to edit thrice weekly alone. I assured him that I would be able to do that. When these proposals were agreed to, I went to Toronto to submit them to the Federation executive committee. They also questioned if I would be able to edit the paper alone. When I assured them on that, they accepted our proposals. And the result was that we brought **Vapaus** to a self-sustaining basis.

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The Canadian lumber industry was hardly affected by the depression. And thousands of Finns were working in the lumber camps. And several leaders of the now defunct Canadian Socialist Party plus some former followers of Keir Hardie's Independent Labor Party from Great Britain on the West Coast in Vancouver, established One Big Union, on the model of IWW except that they regarded an independent political action of the working class necessary and did not accept the syndicalist theories of the IWW. OBU started to organize lumber workers in British Columbia. The organization drive was so successful that in a short period OBU was able to gain recognition from the lumber industry in that province and gained rapidly an improvement of the wages and conditions of the workers.

OBU soon extended its organization drive to Ontario where the majority of the lumber workers were Finnish. As editor of **Vapaus**, I gave all possible publicity to OBU organization work. And Finnish-Canadian lumber workers welcomed OBU as an organ-

ization that suited their conditions and had confidence that it would be able to improve their wages and conditions in the lumber camps. For a long period **Vapaus** received so many letters from lumber camps, that they filled a large part of our paper. The OBU national office (in Winnipeg) sent Walter Gowan as its District organizer and secretary to Ontario. He established his District Office in Sudbury. He was a former British socialist, very well read and an able organizer. We soon became very close friends.

In recognition of my contribution as editor of **Vapaus** to the OBU organization drive, I was invited to the OBU national convention that was to be held at Vancouver, British Columbia, as a special guest. I traveled there with Walter Gowan and was well received. Walter did not come back as he wanted to stay in his home area. In his place OBU sent Harry Bryan from Port Arthur.³⁹ We developed the same friendly relations we had had with Walter Gowan. And the organization drive developed further under the able leadership of Harry Bryan.

Some months after Bryan's arrival, the OBU District convention was called to meet in Sudbury. Now IWWites that had come from the U.S. in large numbers, had a majority of the delegates in the District convention. And they were very active and had organized their supporters. They voted to recognize **Industrialisti** as an official organ of the OBU Ontario District. This was a slap in the face to **Vapaus**, which had played a major role in helping to organize lumber workers in Ontario. But, however, I did not mind that, because after all **Vapaus** was an organ of the Finnish Federation and its local branches, and should devote its main services to them. However I did not regret that I had devoted **Vapaus** to the worthy cause of organizing lumber workers. But IWWites in their narrow mindedness were hostile to **Vapaus** and to me and my good friend Harry Bryan. He did not like the atmosphere and did resign as District secretary.

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Besides the lumber industry, a large number of Finnish Canadians worked in the nickel mines of the Sudbury-Copper Cliff area, which was one of the richest nickel locations in the world, and dominated by the International Nickel Trust (now INCO). There were a number of Finnish workers at shipyards in Port Arthur/Fort William, Sault Ste. Marie and Vancouver, B.C. Others were working in scattered trades, as tailors, carpenters, painters, longshoremen, domestic workers (mostly women). And there was a growing number of small farmers around industrial towns.

U.S. draft evaders provided thousands of Finns as able manpower for Canadian industry during World War I, when its own able-bodied men were drafted for the war. Many of them remained in Canada after the war, others drifted back to the U.S. Draft evaders were not harassed by the Canadian government for the very reason that they needed manpower. And also as the negotiation to return resisters to U.S. was dragging and the decision to turn them over was reached only when the armistice was declared.

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The Canadian Finnish Federation (Finnish Organization of Canada after 1923) was a nationwide organization of the Finnish workers. Of course there was also a growing number of Finnish IWW groups, whose main activity was to support their paper **Industrialisti** and to devote their energy to cultural activity, which has been typical of all Finnish groups in the U.S. and in Canada. To be sure there were also Finnish church groups. But it is not an exaggeration to say that the Finnish Federation was the strongest and best organized body.

In those years (1919 through the early part of 1923) when I was editor of **Vapaus**, the Finnish Federation was wholly unified, there were no factional struggles of any kind, neither on the national nor local scale.

Sometimes the question is asked: "What was the relation between the Finnish Socialist (later Workers) Federation in the U.S. and its Canadian counterpart?" They were ideologically and even in organizational structure identical, and their activity very much similar. However, they were entirely independent of each other, although they had brotherly relations, sending fraternal delegates to each other's National Conventions. And perhaps Canadian Finns were looking to their U.S. Finnish counterpart as their "older brother." But in the war time and for a few years after in abnormal conditions, we were entirely isolated.

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Emigration from Finland to Canada, which had been entirely at a standstill, was beginning to revive early in 1923, giving new blood to Finnish settlements and their organizations, although many of them later drifted into the United States, especially those that had relatives there.

If I remember correctly, toward the end of 1922, Oscar Tokoi, a prominent figure in Finland's Social Democratic movement and in the civil war on the workers' side (and first prime minister of Finland), who had gone to the Soviet Union with the others at the defeat of the Reds in the civil war, came to Canada with a group of about 25 of his followers.⁴⁰ Tokoi had deserted the Finnish Reds in the Soviet Union and had joined the British expeditionary forces, the so-called Murmansk Legion, to fight against the Red Army.⁴¹ When the British evacuated the Murmansk Legion, Tokoi and his followers could not go to Finland, as they had taken part in the civil war on the Red side, nor could they go back to the Soviet Union. Therefore, the British government sent them to Canada. On their arrival in Canada, they were sent to work at a lumber camp north of Sudbury (near New Liskeard). After working there about three months, Tokoi went directly to Fitchburg, Massachusetts and joined the **Raivaaja** editorial

staff. Others came to Sudbury. They contacted us and wanted to join the Finnish Federation Sudbury branch. There were some objections as to whether they should be admitted. I interviewed them and recommended their admittance as they were ordinary workers but had been misled by Tokoi to join the British Murmansk Legion.⁴²

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In the spring of 1923, the Finnish Federation national convention was held in Toronto. In that convention one delegate demagogically began to criticize the **Vapaus** editor and business manager as being paid too high salaries and wanted to reduce them. Others joined to support him, and I regret to say that none of the more responsible delegates, nor the Executive Board members of the Federation, rose to repudiate them. I did not say anything. But I felt very bitter about it, as I have explained earlier in this narrative, that it was through my proposal and my recommendation of a voluntary cut in mine and the business manager's salaries and reducing our staff and taking over a heavier work load, that we saved **Vapaus** from a deficit and carried it through depression times. Besides our salaries were way below respective salaries of U.S. newspaper editors and business managers. I told Ahlqvist and other Executive Board members that I was going to resign and left the convention. When I returned to **Vapaus**, I told business manager Kannasto (who had not attended the convention) what had happened, he was bitter too. He said he would resign too, but could not because he had a family.

At my recommendation, my old friend and co-editor in **Socialisti** and **Työmies**, Onni Saari from **Eteenpäin** staff, was appointed to my place in **Vapaus**. And I joined the **Eteenpäin** editorial staff in Worcester, Massachusetts where Elis Sulkanen was editor-in-chief.⁴³ Onni Saari did not last long in **Vapaus**, as he expressed his admiration for Leon Trotsky, who was

the chief rival of Josef Stalin.⁴⁴ Several times in the years after I had left *Vapaus*, they asked me to come back. Evidently I was still somewhat bitter, as I did not even answer those invitations, and of course I was very busy with my responsible work.

A few years after I left Canada, there was a serious split in the Canadian leftwing movement. Some editors of *Vapaus*, who had come from Finland after World War I and were evidently more social democratic in their politics than communist, established their own paper *Vapaa Sana* in Toronto (in fact originally in Sudbury). I do not know the details of this split as I was too busy with our affairs in U.S.⁴⁵

Notes

1. William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), pp. 46, 51.
2. Auvo Kostiainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism, 1917-1924* (Migration Studies C 4, Turku 1978), pp. 35, 223.
3. "Autobiography," John Wiita Papers. Immigration History Research Center Collection, University of Minnesota (IHRC 49W5). (Hereafter "J.W."). Folder 12, "My Early Years in the United States," p. 10.
4. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), p. 167. For a history of the OBU, see David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978).
5. Auvo Kostiainen points out that Wiita, Sulkanen, Leo Laukki and others were never orthodox industrial unionists and were therefore at times "favourite targets of criticism by other Wobblies." p. 137
6. Letter of John Wiita, Jr. to author, August 22, 1984.
7. John Higham (ed.), *Ethnic Leadership in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. ix.
8. J. Donald Wilson, "Matti Kurikka and A.B. Mäkelä: Socialist Thought Among Finns in Canada, 1900-1932," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1978), pp. 9-21
9. J.W., folder 12, "My Early Years," p. 2.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 7.
12. For details, see Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "The Work People's College: Immigrant Education for Adjustment and Solidarity," in Michael Karni and Douglas Ollila, Jr. (eds.), *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America* (Superior: Työmies Society, 1977), pp. 87-118.
13. Laukki died in a prison camp during the Stalin purges, probably in 1939. Kostiainen, p. 223.
14. Letter of John Wiita, Jr., Brooklyn, Conn., to author, June 6, 1984.
15. J.W., folder 14, "Työväen Opisto -- Working People's College, p. 2.
16. J.W., folder 4, "Leo Laukki," p. 3.
17. George Bowering, "Home Away: A Thematic Study of Some British Columbia Novels," *B.C. Studies*, no. 62 (Summer 1984), p. 25.
18. Letter of John Wiita, Jr. to author, July 24, 1984. For the larger picture at the time, see Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "Defects in the Melting Pot: Finnish-American Response to the Loyalty Issue, 1917-1920," *Turun Historiallinen Arkisto* (Turku Historical Society), vol. 31 (1976), pp. 397-413.
19. Bay Street Project, no. 2, *A Chronicle of Finnish Settlement in Rural Thunder Bay* (Thunder Bay: Finnish Canadian Historical Society, 1976), p. 129.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.
21. Arja Pilli, *The Finnish-Language Press in Canada, 1901-1939* (Migration Studies C 6. Institute of Migration, Turku, 1982), p. 129 fn.
22. For details on "Karelia fever," see Reino Kero, "Emigration of Finns from North America to Soviet Karelia in the Early 1930's," in Karni, Kaups and Ollila (eds.), *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives*, Migration Studies C 3, Vammala 1975, pp. 212-21; Kero, "The Canadian Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930's" in Michael G. Karni (ed.), *Finnish Diaspora*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981), pp. 203-13.
23. Letter of John Wiita, Jr. to author, June 6, 1984.
24. Kostiainen, p. 136
25. For details on this significant issue for Finnish American and Canadian socialists, see Auvo Kostiainen, "The Finns and the Crisis Over 'Bolshevization' in the Workers' Party, 1924-25," in Michael Karni, Matti Kaups and Douglas Ollila, Jr. (eds.), *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives* Migration Studies C 3, Vammala 1975, pp. 171-85.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

27. J.W., folder 10, "Biographical Sketch," p. 5.
28. J.W., folder 8, "In Memory of Yrjö Sirola," p. 8; folder 14, "Working People's College," p. 15.
29. Letter of John Wiita, Jr. to author, August 22, 1984.
30. Letter of John Wiita, Jr. to author, July 24, 1984.
31. Letter of John Wiita, Jr. to author, August 22, 1984.
32. For a discussion of this complicated matter, see the draft introduction to Edward W. Laine's finding aid to the Finnish Organization of Canada Collection at the Public Archives of Canada. For the FOC's own interpretation, see William Eklund, *Canadian Rakentajia: Canadian Suomalaisen Järjestön Historia vu. 1911-1971* (Toronto: Vapaus Publishing, 1983).
33. For details, see J. Donald Wilson, "The Finnish Organization of Canada, The 'Language Barrier', and the Assimilation Process," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. IX, no. 2 (1977), pp. 105-116. For a survey of Finnish-Canadian radicalism, see Edward W. Laine, "Finnish-Canadian Radicalism and Canadian Politics: The First Forty Years, 1900-1940," in Dahlie and Fernando (eds.), *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*, (Toronto: Methuen, 1980), pp. 94-112.
34. *Vapaus* and several other foreign-language papers had been banned as "enemy language" publications on September 25, 1918. The main objective of the ban seems to have been to curb the spread of socialist propaganda. With the war over there was no longer any formal justification for maintaining the Orders-in-Council and so the ban was removed on April 2, 1919. The first issue of a restored *Vapaus* was published under the editorship of Puro (Wiita) on April 23, 1919. Ironically the masthead of the first issue read "1918" instead of "1919".
35. The Chief Press Censor, operating under the Department of the Secretary of State, was Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest J. Chambers, assisted by a small staff of journalists.
36. All Finnish socialist papers published respectively, in Superior, Wisconsin, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and Astoria, Oregon.
37. Organ of the Finnish supporters of the IWW in the United States, *Industrialisti* was published in Duluth and ceased publication only in 1975.
38. J.V. Kannasto, who had worked on *Työkansa*, was business manager for *Vapaus* from 1919-1929. He was married ("a Port Arthur kind of marriage" - common-law) to Sanna Kannasto, probably the most prominent woman among the Finnish socialists. However the marriage had pretty well broken up by 1920 and Sanna did not follow him to Sudbury. Information provided by Varpu Lindström-Best, Atkinson College, York University, August 12, 1984.
39. Harry Bryan was a leading socialist in Port Arthur even before World War I. In 1921 he was named secretary-organizer of the Lumber Workers Industrial Union of Canada, an OBU-affiliated union.
40. The figure forty-six is more generally accepted. See Tokoi's autobiography *Sisu: "Even Through a Stone Wall."* The *Autobiography of Oskari Tokoi* (New York, 1957). Anthony Upton describes Tokoi as "a windbag and a weathercock." *The Finnish Revolution, 1917-1918* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).
41. Actually the Murmansk Legion was recruited to fight against the Germans. But the general perception of the Legion here in Canada was as Wiita perceived it to be.
42. Screening committees (Tutkijakomiteat - "Investigation Committees") were set up by left-wing Finns to ensure that newcomers in the wake of the Finnish Civil War (1918) were indeed loyal to the "Red" cause and thus trustworthy, and at the very least were not identified with the "White butchers." The "Whites" in Canada increasingly created similar problems for the "Reds" they encountered.
43. *Eteenpäin* has now been merged with *Työmies* to form *Työmies-Eteenpäin* published weekly in Superior, Wisconsin. Similarly in 1974 *Vapaus* merged with the literary weekly *Liekki* (The Flame) to form *Viikkosanomat*, now published weekly in Toronto.
44. After the period with *Vapaus*, Saari returned to the United States where he was expelled from the Finnish Federation in conjunction with the crisis over Bolshevization which he opposed. Pilli, p. 157.
45. In 1930-31 a considerable number of moderate leftists broke away from the FOC. They founded a rival newspaper, *Vapaa Sana* (free Press), and soon pledged their support to the newly formed Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Now without political allegiance, *Vapaa Sana*, published weekly in Toronto, is the largest Finnish language newspapers in North America.