

**LIFE MOVING FORWARD:
SOVIET KARELIA IN THE LETTERS & MEMOIRS
OF FINNISH NORTH AMERICANS**

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Abstract

In the first years of the 1930s, some 6500 Finnish Canadians and Finnish Americans moved to Soviet Karelia, motivated by the economic depression and the dream of participating in the building of a Finnish-led workers' society, with employment, education, and healthcare for all. Their recruitment as "foreign specialists" who would modernize the Karelian economy secured for them preferential access to food, housing, and work postings, but life in Karelia was very different than what the immigrants had previously known. Despite difficulties and a heavy return migration, those who stayed threw themselves into the building of socialism. However, by 1936, the Stalinist regime viewed ethnic minorities and foreigners as threats to the Soviet order, and the Finnish leadership in Karelia was ousted and a violent attack on ethnic Finns and Finnish culture took over the region, shattering the dream of the 'Red Finn Haven.'

This dissertation examines letters written by Finnish North Americans in Karelia to friends and family remaining in Canada and the United States, as well as memoirs and retrospective letter collections that look back on life in Karelia in the 1930s. These sources, brought together under the umbrella of *life writing*, are analysed in two ways. They are used to construct a history of the immigrants' everyday life, with chapters exploring topics such as travel and first impressions, housing, food, health and hygiene, clothing, children's experiences, formal labour, political participation, celebrations, popular culture, sociability, and repression. The study of everyday life is grounded in the broader context of the immigrants' North American and Finnish backgrounds and the evolving realities and contestations of Karelian autonomy and life in the Soviet Union.

Life writing also offers opportunities to analyze the ways that individuals represent their experiences, form group identifications, and have used narratives to work through the emotional aftermath of the Great Terror. An examination of how gender and life cycle impact both experiences and their representations lies at the core of this work. Narrative analysis allows this dissertation to engage with the growing interdisciplinary field of scholarship that considers the form and applications of letters and memoirs.

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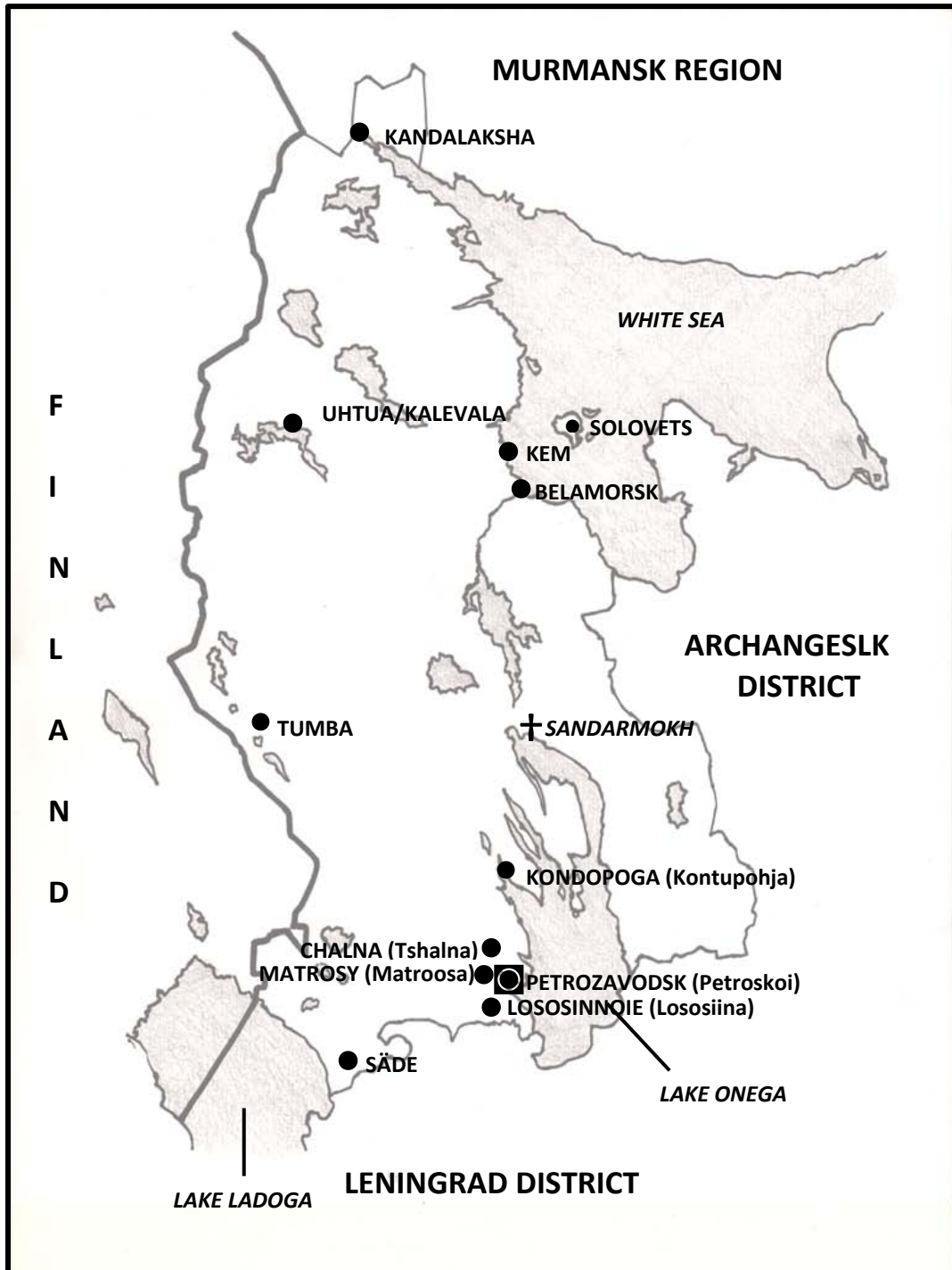
Finally, I dedicate this work to my husband, Luke Nicol, and our children, Azelia and Maeve. Oh the joy of learning the world through the eyes of Azelia and Maeve! Over the course of this project, a lot has changed, including the arrival of these two daughters. Through it all, I have had the peace of knowing that Luke is at my side, helping and cheering me along. It is not easy to live with someone else's work, but you have done it with love and laughs. I could not have done it without you. Thank you.

In memory of the Finnish North Americans who went to Karelia with the dream of building a better world.

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Map of Karelia in the 1930s



Credits: Luke Nicol and Samira Saramo, 2014.

INTRODUCTION

“Life is moving forward here... one can hardly keep up,” Karl Berg wrote to his daughter in March 1934 from Petrozavodsk, Soviet Karelia.¹ Berg’s casual statement, wrapped in Communist rhetoric, successfully captures the essence of the Finnish North American migration to Karelia in the 1930s. The Finnish North American settlement project in Karelia was, on several levels, absorbed in the idea of progress or life moving forward. Unemployment and underemployment, made more severe by the economic depression, left many Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States feeling as though they were unable to move on to the next phase of their lives. Increasing tensions and rifts in the Finnish immigrant Left combined with the hostile intolerance of socialism emanating from the growing Finnish conservative communities and Canadian and American governments made the achievement of workers’ rights – let alone revolution – seem far off. A spark of hope, however, came from the burgeoning socialist state in Soviet Russia. From 1931-1934 Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States were actively recruited to move to Soviet Karelia to build socialism in the haven for socialist ‘Red’ Finns. In Karelia, the immigrants’ Finnish language and work experience were desired assets. Karelia appeared as an opportunity to set into action their dreams of

¹ Karl Berg letter to Bertha, Petrozavodsk, 27 March 1934. Clara Thomas Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 025/042, File 11: Marilee Coughlin - Karl Berg correspondence. Original in Finnish: “Elämä menee eteen pain täällä... ei tahdo pysyä oikeen mukana.”

secure work, accessible education and healthcare, equality, and a chance to work for change and progress.

When Karl Berg wrote about rapidly changing life in Karelia in 1934, much had, indeed, changed since his arrival in 1931. Berg was one of some 6500 Finnish Canadians and Finnish Americans who moved to the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), caught up in the “Karelian Fever” of the early 1930s. In the recruitment rhetoric, Finnish North Americans were to become Karelia’s civilizers, bringing modernity and progress to the backwoods. The First Five Year Plan focused on moving the Soviet Union into industrial maturity at a pace intended to dazzle the world, and the development of Karelia’s lumber industry was of national significance. Finnish North Americans in Karelia threw themselves into the building of socialism, through formal employment, voluntary labour, and by participating in a growing, vibrant cultural life. In the process, they encountered difficult living and working conditions previously unknown to them, as well as peoples and cultures that often disapproved of the North Americans’ superior rations, privileges, and attitudes. While Finnish North American immigrants worked on realizing their utopia and overcoming challenges, the Soviet centre had already moved on.

In the early 1930s, Soviet culture transitioned from the revolutionary ideals that had been advocated in Finnish immigrant halls in North America to the Stalinist culture of hierarchy, privilege, traditional gender roles, and surveillance. In the Karelian hinterland, the newcomers were left with uncertain and improvised approaches to leading proper socialist lives. Although the Finnish settlement of Karelia initially served to

appease relations with Finland and the Finnish North Americans' lumber and mechanical expertise assured the region's economic development, Stalin's views on the role of Finns in the Karelian borderland quickly soured. As Finnish Canadians and Americans were just beginning their new Karelian lives, ethnic Finns began to be looked at with great suspicion. In 1937, as the Great Terror intensified throughout the Soviet Union, Finns became the primary targets for the region's arrests and executions. As the Terror subsided, Karelia was thrown into war preparations and then into battle against Finland, with much of the remaining population evacuated from the region. Those who made it through the Terror and the War were left wondering why they had survived and how to move on with life.

In the ever-changing and often uncertain sociopolitical world of the Soviet Union, it could be hard to "keep up." To best understand how Finnish North Americans negotiated their lives in a rapidly changing environment, we can turn to immigrants' own words. Thomas Couser has identified a "fundamental human activity: the narration of our lives in our own terms."² This process endows individuals with agency. Through the narration of personal experience, people begin to organize and make sense of their lives. Just as Karl Berg noted the progress and changes surrounding him, the narratives of other Finnish North Americans writing about Karelia offer additional insights into their daily lives and the ways that they perceived and portrayed their experiences. To gain entry into the Finnish North American community in Karelia in the 1930s and the unique experiences of individual immigrants, this study pairs an examination of personal letter

² G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

narratives from the 1930s and first years of the 1940s with an analysis of retrospective life writing, specifically letters and memoirs written after Stalin's death.

The two source types are brought together under the umbrella of *life writing*. Marlene Kadar defines life writing, in part, as “texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who also does not pretend to be absent from the text.”³ While memoirs, defined here as autobiographical narratives that focus on a specific period or event in one's life, have been accepted into the category of life writing quite naturally, a degree of unease accompanies the place of personal letters in the genre. For example, Kadar has noted that life writing can include “also the less ‘objective’ or more ‘personal’ genres such as letters and diaries.”⁴ If autobiographical narratives, as life writing, insist on the presence of the author and focus on the self, how can a letter be distinguished as any more subjective or personal? While differing in form, memoirs and personal letters share much in common. Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar further define autobiography as “a rendering, often in a single voice, of experience framed by time and place.”⁵ Such a definition extends itself perfectly to letters. By grounding the study of the Karelian narratives in the methodological dialogues concerning both autobiography and letters, the commonalities and peculiarities of both

³ Marlene Kadar, “Coming to Terms: Life Writing – from genre to Critical Practice,” in *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, ed. Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ Jeanne Perreault and Marlene Kadar, “Introduction. Tracing the Autobiographical: Unlikely Documents, Unexpected Places” in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, ed. Marlene Kadar et al. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 6.

source types can be brought together to expand the framework for the study of life writing.⁶

Traditionally, Western history has relied on personal letters and memoirs as a significant source for gaining new insights into, for example, individuals' backgrounds and, in the case of émigré narratives, group characteristics, settlement patterns, and occupational choices and strategies.⁷ In the past, historians tended to ignore the form of the source and how its unique characteristics may enhance historical enquiry. More recently, however, scholars, such as David Gerber, have responded to the lack of consideration of life writing's form by placing primary emphasis on analysing the narratives as texts constructed by individuals, revealing the work of identity formation and expression.⁸ Gerber recognized the "lack of an approach for analyzing personal correspondence, which is also a problem of comprehending... self-understandings and modes of self-expression."⁹ Gerber's work redresses the neglect of the individual, arguing that "analysis at the individual level [offers] a way of testing our generalizations about people in large groups."¹⁰ This study of Finnish North Americans' Karelian narratives contends that life writing has the most to contribute when it is used to allow individual voices to inform us of the world they lived in, to build a more dynamic view of

⁶ Royden Loewen has successfully brought together an analysis of diary, letter, and memoir narratives in the recent article, "Trains, Text, and Time: The Emigration of Canadian Mennonites to Latin America, 1922-1948" in *Place and Replace : Essays on Western Canada*, ed. Adele Perry et al., 123-138 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013).

⁷ See, for example, one of the foundational studies that used letters, Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

⁸ David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁹ Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

society and community, *and* when they are examined for the ways they teach us about self-representation, memory, and relationships with audiences.¹¹

The purpose of this study is two-fold. Firstly, the letters and memoirs provide an opportunity to develop a community history and contribute to our understanding of daily life in Karelia and in the Soviet Union, and, more broadly, about immigrant experiences. Individual life writers inform us of their unique experiences but also allow us to gain an appreciation for the commonalities shared by the migrants, with regard to background, travel to Karelia, housing, health, childhood, work, leisure, and repression. The life writers indicate the sites, both geographic and cultural, that framed their individual lives, which, then, taken together, create a map of Finnish North American Karelia. It is essential to situate the immigrant's narratives within the context of their Finnish and North American backgrounds, Finnish-Karelian history and its 1930s sociopolitical position, and Soviet culture, including its ideals, realities, and contestations. Using life writing as a tool for reconstructing community history also successfully informs us of the ways that gender and life cycle impacted both individuals' lives and also how their narratives were shaped. Letter and memoir narratives further reveal the ways that the immigrants began to form their sense of community in Karelia, and the establishment of community symbols and stories. An examination of the ways that individuals represent their lives through narratives forms the second purpose of this study. Life writing narratives demonstrate writers' working through and representing who they are in varied

¹¹ Laura Ishiguro has similarly approached letters by considering "not only what can be gleaned from the content of correspondence, but also about the significance of its form, function and materiality..." Laura Ishiguro, "Relative Distances: Family and Empire between Britain, British Columbia and India, 1858-1901" (PhD diss., University College London, 2011), 16.

and changing ways. Letters, specifically, must be considered in the particular context of who they were written by, whom they were written to, and when they were written, but the audience, purpose, and timing of memoir-writing are also important factors. Through an analysis of letters, we see relationships at work across distances. By examining the construction and presentation of life writing narratives, historians participate in the interdisciplinary work of expanding the boundaries of the analytical possibilities offered by these source types.¹² Allowing immigrants' voices to guide us through their experiences in 1930s Karelia makes a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on the nature of this migration. First taking stock of the historiography and elaborating on the main analytical approaches summarized above leads us to an introduction of the studied life writers and an outline of the chapters to follow.

Karelian Historiography

Perhaps fittingly for a study of personal narratives, the first non-partisan historical publication about the Finnish North American migration to Karelia was a biography, written in the voice of an émigré. Travel writer Christer Bucht's *Karjala Kutsu* (Karelia Called), published in 1973, is a popularized account that tells the story of Aino and Eino Streng, Finnish newlyweds, who moved to Karelia from Vancouver, British Columbia in 1931.¹³ It took some time, however, for academics to begin to seek out individual voices. The Finnish North American migration to Karelia appeared first in scholarly studies as a feature of Finnish immigrant – especially American – involvement in the Communist

¹² For example, this work has greatly benefitted from the folklore “vernacular writing” approach taken by Jennifer Eastman Attebery in the analysis of Swedish American letters. See *Up in the Rocky Mountains: Writing the Swedish Immigrant Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

¹³ Christer Bucht, *Karjala Kutsu* (Helsinki, Kirjayhtymä, 1973).

movement. Approaching Finnish radicalism from a political, primarily top-down perspective, “Karelian Fever” was initially presented as a contributing factor in the Finnish Left’s decline, and not considered in and of itself.¹⁴ However, the Karelian migration soon emerged as a standalone topic of study.¹⁵

The most significant early works on the topic can be attributed to Finnish historian Reino Kero. Though his early research appeared in several articles, beginning in 1975, Kero’s project culminated in the first scholarly monograph on the topic, with the 1983 publication of *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa* (Building Soviet Karelia).¹⁶ Kero’s socioeconomic history relied on newspapers, official government publications pertaining to Karelia, like forestry and agricultural manuals, and any relevant materials in the extensive Finnish Organization of Canada collection at the Library and Archives of Canada (then the National Archives). The work examines the origins of the migration, preparations for the move, the settlement and work of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, return migration, and the beginning of attacks on Finnish workers in the region. Though access to new archival materials and different research approaches, such as the

¹⁴ Most notably, Auvo Kostiaainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism, 1917-1924: A Study in Ethnic Radicalism* (Turku: Turun Yliopisto, 1978); David J. Ahola, “Finnish-Americans and International Communism: A Study of Finnish-American Communism from Bolshevization to the Demise of the Third Period” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1980); Peter Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists in the United States: The Case of Finns and the Left* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Including, David Ahola, “The Karelian Fever Episode of the 1930s,” *Finnish Americana*, 5 (1982-1983): 4-7; Michael Gelb, “‘Karelian Fever’: The Finnish Immigrant Community during Stalin’s Purges,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, 45, 6 (1993): 1091-1116; Auvo Kostiaainen, “Genocide in Soviet Karelia: Stalin’s Terror and the Finns of Soviet Karelia,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 21, 4 (1996): 332-341.

¹⁶ Reino Kero, “Emigration of North Americans to Soviet Karelia in the Early 1930s” in *The Finnish Experience in the Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives, Migration Studies*, C 3, ed. Michael G. Karni et al. (Turku: Institute for Migration, 1975): 212-221; Kero, “The Canadian Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s” in *The Finnish Diaspora*, Volume I, ed. Michael G. Karni (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981): 203-213; Kero, “The Tragedy of Joonas Harju of Hiilisuo Commune, Soviet Karelia, 1933-1936,” *Finnish Americana*, Volume 5 (1982-1983): 8-11; and Kero, *Neuvosto Karjalaa Rakentamassa: Pohjois-Amerikan suomalaiset tekniikan tuojina 1930-luvun Neuvosta-Karjalassa* (Helsinki: SHS, 1983).

study of life writing, have deepened our understanding of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa* has provided the strong foundation on which subsequent works have been built. Kero's thematic approach has been employed here as a model, contributing new voices and personal insights to the examination begun by Kero over thirty years ago. In addition to Reino Kero's detailed study, Varpu Lindström and Börje Vähämäki's 1988 research, collecting the oral histories of some of the Finnish North Americans remaining in Karelia, added a personalized dimension to the field, which has influenced this study.¹⁷

More recent works have elaborated on political, economic, industrial, and socio-cultural themes raised by the early studies, from the differing vantage points of North America, Finland, and Russia.¹⁸ Though having little to say about North Americans, specifically, Markku Kangaspuro's research has been instrumental in untangling the politics and aspirations that resulted in the establishment of the Red Finns' Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) and its ultimate downfall. Nick Baron's *Soviet Karelia: Politics, planning and terror in Stalin's Russia, 1920-1939* also merits

¹⁷ See the resulting article, Varpu Lindström and Börje Vähämäki, "Ethnicity Twice Removed: North American Finns in Soviet Karelia," *Finnish Americana*, Volume 9 (1992): 14-20.

¹⁸ Among the most notable are, in chronological order: Markku Kangaspuro, *Neuvosto-Karajan taistelu itsehallinnost: Nationalismi ja suomalaiset punaiset Neuvostoliiton vallankäytössä 1920-1939* (Helsinki: SKS, 2000); Eila Lahti-Argutina, *Olimme joukko vieras vaan. Venäjänsuomalaiset vainonuhrit Neuvostoliitossa 1930-luvun alusta 1950-luvun alkuun* (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2001); Sari Autio-Sarasma, *Suunnitelmatalous Neuvosto-Karjalassa 1928-1941. Paikallistason rooli Neuvostoliiton teollistamisessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 2002); Mikko Ylikangas, *Rivit Suoriksi!: Kaunokirjallisuuden poliittinen valvonta Neuvosto-Karjalassa 1917-1940* (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2004); the collected articles in ed. Ronald N. Harpelle et al., *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia During the Depression Era* (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, Inc., 2004); and the articles collected in Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch, eds., *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s* (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2008).

special mention.¹⁹ Baron's comprehensive examination of Karelia over a two decade period highlights the negotiations and tensions at play in the centre-periphery relationship and also locally, among the region's principal industrial and political actors. Baron's work firmly situates Karelia in the history of the Soviet Union, and, using the lens of spatial ordering, informs us of the nature of the Stalinist system, and its devastating impact on the regional population.

Irina Takala's research makes significant contributions to understanding the role of Finnish North Americans in Karelian society.²⁰ Approaching the topic from the Karelian perspective, Takala's work complements the study of Finnish North Americans' writings on daily life by providing a counterbalance that assesses local Russian and Karelian attitudes toward these migrants. Furthermore, through compilation and analysis, Takala and her Petrozavodsk State University colleagues, Alexey Golubev, in particular, have furthered knowledge about the extent of both the migration and of the region's repression. Golubev and Takala's forthcoming co-authored study about Finnish North Americans in Karelia will surely enrich the historiography.

The story of Finnish North Americans in Karelia was popularized in 2004 for Canadian and American audiences by the National Film Board of Canada's documentary *Letters from Karelia*, which featured the story of one of the letter writers examined here,

¹⁹ Nick Baron, *Soviet Karelia: Politics, Planning, and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1920-1939* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

²⁰ See for example, Irina Takala, "Eldoradoa etsimässä" *Carelia*, 3 (1993):4-26; Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire: North American Finns in Soviet Karelia" in *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia During the Depression Era*, ed. Ronald N. Harpelle et al. (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, Inc., 2004): 105-117; and Takala, "North American Finns as Viewed by the Population of Soviet Karelia in the 1930s" in *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s*, eds. Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2008): 190-212.

Aate Pitkänen. Returning to her Karelian research, the film catapulted Varpu Lindström into a new, collaborative study. Beginning in 2005, the “Missing in Karelia Research Project,” (MIK) headed by Lindström and Markku Kangaspuro, brought together researchers from Canada, Finland, and the Republic of Karelia to share knowledge and comb archival sources in all three countries. In 2011, the “Missing in Karelia” team published a collection of articles, *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*.²¹ Taken together, the collection brings together the various perspectives from which the Finnish North American migration to Karelia has been studied, from North American push factors and immigrant statistical analysis to Soviet nationalities policy, industrial development, standards of living, and experiences of repression and war. Much of the Project’s materials, in addition to a comprehensive collection of historic and secondary-source documents and literature on the topic, are now housed in the Varpu Lindström fonds at the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University. In response to the efforts of Karelian migrants’ descendants to find information about their long-missing relatives, MIK created an internet database of the emigrants and continues to include available biographical information on individuals.²² The community response to the project and website has been overwhelming, and many families have donated letters and other personal documents to the project. The “Missing in Karelia” documents form the core of source materials for this study. The existing scholarship, from the work of Reino Kero to the efforts of the “Missing in Karelia” researchers, has done much to illuminate

²¹ Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, eds., *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, *Journal of Finnish Studies*, Special Edition, 15, 1-2 (November 2011).

²² www.missinginkarelia.ca

the migration of Finnish Canadians and Americans to Soviet Karelia. The unique voices of individual immigrants and a focus on everyday Finnish North American life in Karelia now contribute a new and personalized perspective to the field.

Everyday Life

The study of everyday life is at the centre of this dissertation. Moving beyond analyses of Party politics and rhetoric, social historians of the Soviet Union often approach the field through the lens of everyday life. Scholars such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stephen Kotkin, and Timothy Johnston have influenced the way that the Karelian life writers' world has been envisioned and explored in this study.²³ Letters and memoirs prove an especially fruitful source for gaining insights into the daily life the writers participated in. Letter writers described their Karelian homes, foods, and material goods, as well as people they encountered, their work, and their pastimes, among many other topics. Such descriptions detail everyday life in ways that are not found in newspaper reporting or government documentation. Instead of disregarding descriptions of everyday life as banal, these details serve to ground history, allowing us to consider aspects of life that we take for granted. Thinking about items like furniture or clothing, for example, makes the past relatable and connects us with history. Kathy Mezei argues that we need "to recognize the domestic as monumental rather than merely incidental,

²³ For example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russian in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); Timothy Johnston, *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life under Stalin 1939-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also the collected articles in Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman, ed., *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

ornamental, and marginal in the life writing of both men and women.”²⁴ Descriptions of daily life indicate what came to a writer’s mind first when pausing to consider their life and setting pen to paper, and reveal their daily realities. For letter writers, separated by distance from their correspondents, and for memoirists, separated by time from their audience, the details of everyday life provide a way to create shared frames of reference.

Situating Finnish North Americans’ Karelian Narratives

With regard to the analysis of personal letters, David Fitzpatrick accurately notes: “One is uncomfortably aware that a further discovery might invalidate a vital interpretation, and that the laborious accumulation of personal background may raise more questions than it resolves.”²⁵ However, by combining a close reading of life writing with careful study of the broader contexts in which they were written and to which they refer, the historian can confidently piece together new and exciting ways of seeing everyday life, community, and human subjectivity. Specifically, the experiences of Finnish Canadian and American immigrants in Soviet Karelia must be considered within the contexts of their Finnish backgrounds, North American immigrant experiences, the Soviet and Karelian structures they lived within, and their transnational position. These dynamics played an important role in forming the identities of the writers and the society they wrote about. Taken together, the collective factors contribute a more rich and holistic view of Finnish North American life in Karelia, and entrench the topic in

²⁴ Kathy Mezei, “Domestic Space and the Idea of Home in Auto/biographical Practices,” in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, ed. Marlene Kadar et al. (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 82.

²⁵ David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 27.

the multiple geographic fields it pertains to, including Canadian, American, Soviet, Karelian, and Finnish histories.

Ethnicity is a crucial category for examining this migration. While David Gerber's approach to immigrant letter analysis has helped refine ideas and tools for best understanding the body of Finnish North American life writing, his views on the role of ethnicity in immigrant life fall short. Critiquing past historical study, Gerber asserts that "[e]thnicity has served to substitute analysis of the group for knowledge of the individual."²⁶ He further contends: "The relevance of ethnic identity to the daily lives of ordinary people seems at best episodic, especially to the significant extent that they are shaped by the need to give form and meaning to an imagined, abstract loyalty."²⁷ Gerber acknowledges that ethnicity may have mattered less to his subjects, as British immigrants in the United States, since they could quite easily relate to the American mainstream culture.²⁸ While few would likely argue that "ethnicity assume[s] the totality of an individual's personal identity,"²⁹ it is not a stretch to see that its role was much greater than "episodic" to many individuals living in ethnic enclaves throughout North America.³⁰ Ethnicity mattered for Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States, through daily encounters with the Finnish community at work sites, ethnic stores, and

²⁶ Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

³⁰ See for example, John Zucchi, "A History of Ethnic Enclaves in Canada," Canada's Ethnic Group Series, Booklet 31 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Society, 2007); Robert F. Harney, ed., *Gathering Places: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985).

cultural halls.³¹ Furthermore, while conceding to Gerber's point that ethnicity may inform us more about group identity than individual identity, the case of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia demonstrates that ethnicity was a significant and conscious part of the immigrants' understanding of their self, place, and role in the socialist project.

In Canada and the United States the immigrants very much identified with their Finnish backgrounds and stayed in close contact with the Finnish immigrant community, but their ethnic identification became complicated upon arrival in Karelia. In the Soviet Union, the immigrants came to identify – and be identified – with their North Americanness, as much as their Finnishness. Unlike other Finns in the region, the Finns from Canada and the United States received preferential treatment and access to food and housing specifically because of their North American background and work expertise. Bringing North American tools, automobiles, household goods, clothing, and experiences, the Finnish Americans and Canadians held on to the recruitment messages, which proclaimed them to be the bringers of Karelian modernity. Confronted with the large population of migrants from Finland, the Finnish Canadians' and Americans' sense of their own Finnishness was challenged. Their North American Finnish-English hybridized language and informal language education set them apart from Finland Finns and caused problems for many. Furthermore, the North American social and cultural

³¹ See for example, Varpu Lindström, "The Finnish Immigrant Community of Toronto, 1887-1913," *Occasional Papers in Ethnic and Immigration Studies* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1979) and Lindström, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada*, Third Edition (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2003); Ian Radforth, "Finnish Radicalism and Labour Activism in the Northern Ontario Woods" in *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s-1960s*, ed. Franca Iacovetta et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998): 293-316; Reino Kero, *Suureen Länteen: Siirtolaisuus Suomesta Pohjois-Amerikkaan* (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 1996).

landscape that the immigrants came from, even if they had been sheltered in the immigrant enclave, provided Finns from Canada and the United States with a different cultural outlook.³² Especially true of those born in North America, including children and youth was that their ethnic identity became increasingly bound to their North Americanness. However, this ethnic identification was not Finnish or North American at the expense of the other, but rather an integrated Finnish-North American sense of self. During the Great Terror, the immigrants' Finnishness and foreignness, as North Americans, were equally held against them.

The unique Finnish-North American identity of the immigrants, and the perceptions and realities of their formal recruitment, privileges, and work and cultural contributions make this small yet significant group merit analysis on their own. However, it is important to note that Karelia's Finnish population was primarily comprised immigrants from Finland and admittedly little is said of them here.³³ In addition to the North American immigrants, the region had three other distinct Finnish groups. There were ethnic Finns who had always lived in the Karelian territory and a small group of "Red Finn" intelligentsia who had been exiled to the region in the early 1920s, following the Finnish Civil War, and who were instrumental in the establishment

³² For examples of the socio-cultural factors impacting Finnish immigrants' worldviews, see Cynthia Comacchio, *The Infinite Bonds of Family: Domesticity in Canada, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004); Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Janey Canuck': Women in Canada, 1919-1939," Canadian Historical Association Booklet 53 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1994); Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

³³ For more about immigrants from Finland, see Eila Lahti-Argutina, *Olimme joukko vieras* and Hannu Rautkallio, *Suuri viha. Stalinin suomalsiet uhrin 1930-luvulla* (Helsinki-Porvoo-Juva: WSOY, 1995).

of the Red Finn-led Karelian ASSR. There were also a significant number of Finnish border hoppers (*loikkaarit*), who had illegally crossed the border to flee poverty and political persecution in Finland. Border hoppers, unlike Finnish North Americans, were an officially unwelcomed presence in Karelia and faced severe hardships in the USSR.³⁴

As indicated by the presence of four distinctive groups of Finns in the region, the idea of Karelia as a homeland for the Finnish people had a long history on both the Finnish and Russian sides of the border. Viewing the settlement of Finnish North Americans in the context of Karelian political aspirations, as outlined in Chapter II, demonstrates that the migration was a part of a broader struggle between the two nations, and that the region held – and continues to hold – a significant place in the Finnish collective identity. Nick Baron has demonstrated how Karelia existed as a periphery to Moscow’s Stalinist centre, with continuous struggles to assert its interests, to maintain a degree of economic control, and to meet the daily needs of its population, including securing food and housing. The study of the Finnish North American movement to Soviet Karelia in the first years of the 1930s provides an opportunity to examine important moments of change in the trajectory of Karelian autonomy and in Soviet culture and society.

Just as the migration needs to be viewed in light of the North American push factors and Karelian sociopolitical developments, the experiences of Finnish North American immigrants in Karelia must be considered in the broader context of life in the

³⁴ For more about the *loikkaarit*, see Auvo Kostiainen, *Loikkaarit: Suuren lamakauden laitton siirtolaisuus Neuvostoliittoon* (Keuruu, Finland: NP, 1988); Jukka Rislakki and Eila Lahti-Argutina. *No Home for Us Here: The Mass Annihilation of the Finnish Border-Hoppers in the Urals in 1938*, trans. Richard Impola (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press of St. Cloud, 2002); and the novel by Kaarlo Isotalo, *Loikkaarit* (Hämeenlinna, FI: Arvi A Karisto OY kirjapaino, 1969).

Soviet Union. The arrival of Finnish North Americans to Karelia coincided with a transition from the Soviet revolutionary life to a consolidated Stalinist culture. Finnish North Americans came armed with the revolutionary ideals of collectivity and equality. The Stalinist society that began to be shaped by the First Five Year Plan, however, was characterized by hierarchy, rewarded by privilege, and insistent on unwavering subservience to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. With a vast geographic territory and often ambiguous and rapidly changing official rhetoric, formal Soviet directives were applied inconsistently and unevenly across the Soviet Union. Finnish North Americans were caught in the midst of an ideological transformation that impacted many aspects of their daily lives. Such variations can be readily seen in life writing narratives regarding education, housing, access to food, work, and cultural activities, when contrasted with what is known about Soviet ideals.³⁵

Furthermore, the early years of Finnish North American settlement in Karelia also occurred as the Soviet centre disassembled its policies on minority accommodation, particularly the ideals of *korenizatsiia*, which had been crucial to the establishment of

³⁵ Informative works dealing with Soviet policy and ideals include Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2010); Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Berg, 2003); David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Richard Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Karelia as an ethnically-Finnish republic.³⁶ The 1930s witnessed increasing Russification, both in the Soviet Union's production of cultural symbols and its approach to local leadership. As we will see, the Finnish society North Americans came to build in Karelia rapidly transformed into a Russian-controlled one, which suppressed Finnish culture and the Finnish language. Viewing Finnish North American settlement experiences in the context of evolving Soviet politics and culture serves to situate the life writing narratives and the history of this migration into the broader body of knowledge about the twentieth-century world.

Thinking about the immigrants' ethnic identification, their North American backgrounds, and their position in Karelia extends to a consideration of transnationalism. The concept of transnationalism offers ways to see how people existed in more than one place at a time, most often mentally, emotionally, and materially.³⁷ Combining the study of both personal letters and memoirs expands the ways that we can analyze the transnational relationships and identities that additionally serve to situate individuals' experiences. Letters are an especially fruitful source for historians of migration, who are interested in the workings of kinship across distances.³⁸ Letters link physically separated

³⁶ For more on Soviet nationality policy, see Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

³⁷ Though working toward a definition of transnationalism that serves studies of international relations, institutional communities, conceptualization of nation-state, etc. Patricia Calvin usefully notes that "transnationalism, despite its early identification with the transfer or movement of money and goods, is first and foremost about people: the social space that they inhabit, the networks they form and the ideas they exchange." Calvin, "Defining Transnationalism," *Contemporary European History*, 14, 4 (November 2005), 422.

³⁸ For just a few recent examples, see Sonia Cancian, *Families, Lovers, and their Letters: Italian Postwar Migration to Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010); the collected articles in Bruce S. Elliott et al. ed., *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (Ottawa: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) and in Yves Frenette et al. ed., *Envoyer et recevoir. Lettres et correspondances*

family and friends through the shared touch of the paper, through the visible offerings of each other's handwriting, and mentally and emotionally through salutations, shared news, and reminiscences, making their impact multi-sensory. Letters serve as a bridge in the process of migration, addressing the points of origin and arrival and also the space in between.³⁹ However, memoirs, too, have a role to play in demonstrating how individuals define and portray home, belonging, and relation. Émigré memoirs often allow us to witness the life writers' fluid movement between times and places in their narrative. Though letters and memoirs differ in their temporal vantage points, both provide historians with first-hand accounts of the ways in which immigrants' thoughts and identity flowed between the community left behind and their solidifying place in their adopted home. Letters written by North Americans in Karelia demonstrate the transnational flow of goods, money, and ideas and reveal how many migrants continued to maintain a material presence in the home place, through, for example, the ownership of property. These intellectual and material transfers are also described and remembered in memoir narratives. Staying attuned to the ways that both memoirs and letters reveal migrants negotiating identities that co-existed in the home community, in the adopted community, and in the middle ground of migration further contextualizes the wider world that the Finnish North Americans' Karelian settlement occurred within.

Gender and Life Cycle

dans les diasporas francophones (Ville de Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006). A notable older example is Fitzpatrick's *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia*.

³⁹ Laura Ishiguro's "Relative Distance" does an excellent job of working through the ways that letters between relatives inform us of the multiple spaces, physical and mental, the correspondents occupy. See also Walter D. Kamphoefner et al., ed., *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), vii.

The analysis of Finnish North American memoirs and letters also has much to contribute to the fields of both gender and childhood and youth studies. The existing scholarship has had very little to say about how men and women, or adults, youth, and children experienced Karelian life differently. In fact, to date, no publications have specifically analysed Finnish North American women's or children's lives in Karelia. However, one's role in the building of socialism was defined, in part, by gender and one's place in the life cycle. Therefore, each topic in the coming chapters has been examined with a keen eye for how gender constructions impacted both daily experiences and how they have been narrated, as well as how children and youth would have experienced everyday life.

The studied memoirs and letters have been analyzed with attention to how the content of men's and women's narratives differ⁴⁰ – what is written about and what is not – and how, in the case of letters, one's correspondence with men and women differed. Additionally, life writing can be examined for how men and women are portrayed in narrative descriptions, and how further differences can be read in descriptions of men and women of other ethnicities. The narratives inform us about normative femininity and masculinity in the Finnish North American immigrant community. Women encountered the Soviet state and Soviet life in different ways than men, and women's experiences also varied considerably depending on factors including one's location, ethnicity, and position

⁴⁰ For an insightful consideration of women's letter-writing, from a late-medieval and early-modern perspective, see the collected articles in Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb, ed., *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). See also Victoria Stewart, *Women's Autobiography: War and Trauma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

in the Stalinist hierarchy.⁴¹ An examination of Finnish North American women in Karelia enriches the historiography of women under Stalinism. Women are difficult to trace in the Karelia immigration records, as they were often grouped namelessly with their husbands or fathers. Therefore, the analysis of life writing narratives, which allow women's own voices to inform us of their experiences and their perceptions on society and cultural gender constructions, root women in this history.⁴²

Just as men and women experienced and narrated Karelian life differently, viewing the migration and settlement through the eyes of children and youth enriches our understanding of the past. We gain insights into Finnish North American children's lives through the rare letters of one child immigrant, through descriptions of children in letters and memoirs, and through the remembrances of memoirists and oral history interviewees who were child émigrés.⁴³ As we will see, although children symbolized the hope for a new socialist future, both in North America and in the Soviet Union, the ideas and methods for how to shape children through upbringing and education changed over

⁴¹ In a review essay assessing a selection of secondary and memoir sources, Karen Petrone concludes "that women's aspirations and achievements in the Stalin era were variegated, complex, and often contradictory." Karen Petrone, "Soviet Women's Voices in the Stalin Era," *Journal of Women's History*, 16, 2 (Summer 2004), 207.

⁴² Some works that have influenced the approach to analyzing women's experiences include: Varpu Lindström, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada*; Carl Ross and K. Marianne Wargelin Brown, ed., *Women Who Dared: The History of Finnish American Women* (St. Paul, MN: Immigration History Research Center, 1986); Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); the collected articles in Marlene Epp et al., ed., *Sisters of Strangers?: Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) and in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, ed., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space*; and the collected articles in Melanie Ilic, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁴³ Regarding representations of childhood in written narratives, see John Hodgson, *The Search for the Self: Childhood in Autobiography and Fiction since 1940* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

time.⁴⁴ Many contestations of ethnicity and identity can be viewed through the experiences of Finnish North American children. While, in many ways, children had limited power over how their early lives played out, the significant population of teenagers and twenty-somethings in Karelia were able to shape their social lives through a diffusion of North American cultural practices and Soviet forms of leisure and political involvement. With a focus on the gendered constructions at play in the Finnish North American community in Karelia, and the varying experiences men, women, children, and youth, our view of the community history becomes more dynamic.

Collective Narratives

Though the studied letters and memoirs reveal much about the “I” – or individual – who narrates their experiences, the writers simultaneously inform us about their perceptions and relations with others and about the communities they saw themselves belonging to. Aleida Assmann has argued that “human beings do not only live in the first person singular, but also in various formats of the first person plural. They become part of different groups whose ‘we’ they adopt together with the respective ‘social frames’ that imply an implicit structure of shared concerns, values, experiences, and narratives.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Excellent studies include Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001); Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kenneth Teitelbaum, *Schooling for “Good Rebels”:* *Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Rhonda L. Hinthner, “Raised in the Spirit of the Class Struggle: Children, Youth, and the Interwar Ukrainian Left in Canada” in *Labour/Le Travail*, 60 (Fall 2007): 43–76. Regarding adolescence, see Cynthia R. Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2006).

⁴⁵ Aleida Assmann, “Re-Framing memory: Between Individuals and collective forms of constructing the past” in *The Performance of the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Karin Tilmans et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 37. Paul Connerton has

The Karelian life writers most often related with their immediate family, the community they left behind in North America, and the one they formed in Karelia. In telling their own stories, then, the life writers also offer the stories of their collectives.

Considering the letters and memoirs as a whole reveals three primary narratives that have come to represent the collective experience of Finnish North Americans in Karelia.

Firstly, the portrayal of Finnish North Americans as Karelian civilizers is repeated over decades. This trope can be traced from early Finnish nationalist rhetoric, to Finnish North American recruitment messaging, to 1930s letter narratives that serve to affirm the success of the migrants in the socialist project, through to the memoir narratives that, in part, find redemption and purpose in attributing modernity and civilization to the settlement of North Americans in Karelia. North American immigrants did bring new tools and work methods that increased Karelian productivity. Likewise, their imported experience enlivened the Karelian arts and culture scene. However, the repeating imagery of Finnish North Americans as civilizers may speak more directly to the internalization of the social hierarchy and the “psychological barrier” that existed between North Americans and the local population.⁴⁶ Secondly, the Karelian life writing demonstrates the establishment of symbols that stand for hardships and optimism in the migrants’ lives. These are most evident in an analysis of food, in the form of cross-cultural symbolic depictions of shortage and plenty. However, common narrative constructions representing the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ in the shared Finnish North American

similarly argued: “The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity.” Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 21.

⁴⁶ Takala, “From the Frying Pan Into the Fire,” 115.

experience are also brought to light through an examination of how broader everyday life has been written about.⁴⁷ Finally, the Karelian life writing serves to reinforce the migrants' group identity by allowing the individual to speak for the larger community through narrations of collective events (such the Great Terror and Katri Lammi's arrest, as we will see) and assertions of the communal 'truth', which tells the story of a devoted, hardworking people, attacked by the Soviet state. The analysis of life writing raises many opportunities to consider multiple constructions of 'truth'. While always historically contextualizing narratives to build a community history, this study takes Smith and Watson's observation to heart: regardless of factual truth, life writers are always telling a truth about themselves.⁴⁸

The Challenges of Life Writing Analysis

Memories conveyed through life writing play a significant role in this work. We encounter memories operating on three levels: memories of the home community and life in Canada or the United States, memories (though fresh recollections) of daily events in Karelia deemed appropriate to write about in letters, and, in the retrospective letters and memoirs, memories of the Karelian past, especially of the Great Terror and World War II.⁴⁹ With the study of a body of life writing, it is possible to identify the representation of both individual and collective memories within each work. Paul Antze and Michael

⁴⁷ For the role of symbols in collective memory see, for example, Jeffrey A. Barash, "Analyzing Collective Memory" in *On Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Doron Mendels (New York: Peter Lang AG, 2007), 102.

⁴⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 15-16.

⁴⁹ Janet Gurkin Altman has also discussed the "temporal polyvalence" of letters in epistolary fiction that extends usefully to analyzing life writing more broadly. Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 118, 131-132.

Lambek argue: “Memories are acts of commemoration, of testimony, of confession, of accusation.”⁵⁰ Through life writing and the negotiation of memory, individuals could formulate the “truth” of their experiences and sense of self.⁵¹ In this process “time-now and time-past can interpenetrate in ways that confuse the relationship of one time to another...”⁵² The researcher must pay attention to the ways that memories and time can become conflated, confused, and be used to serve the purpose of structuring peoples’ life narratives.

Life writing often flaunts the ‘flaws’ of memory and detail. Searching for the fine line between events as they ‘actually’ happened and how an individual may interpret and then present them can be jarring for the historian. Kerby A. Miller and his colleagues have noted that letters – just like memoirs - are “inevitably colored by [the writer’s] own expectations, emotions, and prejudices. In the process they are also creating images and constructing ‘selves’ for the edification of their correspondents or their posterity.”⁵³ Furthermore, in certain cases, little is known about the life writer beyond their own self-representation, and, in the case of letters, even less is often known about the relationship between correspondents and the two-directional flow of perceptions and interpretations. This leaves the researcher methodically considering the many ways that each line can be interpreted. However, while historically contextualizing the Karelian migration is an important part of this study, acknowledging and remaining open to the ways that

⁵⁰ Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, “Introduction” in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), xxv.

⁵¹ Also see Marlene Epp, “The Memory of Violence: Soviet and Eastern European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 9, 1 (Spring 1997): 58-87.

⁵² Smith and Watson, 93.

⁵³ Kerby A. Miller et al., ed., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.

individuals represent their lives is just as valid and significant. As Natalie Zemon Davis observes, “shaping choices of language, detail, and order are needed to present an account that seems to both writer and reader true, real, meaningful, and/or explanatory.”⁵⁴

The challenges inherent in the study of memoirs lie primarily with questions of analytical approach and how experience can be represented by the self and by the researcher. They usually pose few issues for basic comprehension, having typically been written in conventional prose-narrative form. In most cases, and especially with published memoirs, the text reveals the care of proof-reading and editing. Letters, however, raise many challenges of readability for the historian. Some of the obvious difficulties come from deciphering handwritten scrawl, missing and torn pages, unpunctuated, ungrammatical, and unconventional writing styles, the lack of biographical information and obvious context, and the frequent availability of only one side of the correspondence. Just as there is inherent value in allowing life writers to tell their stories without the sole judgement of ‘factuality’, the unique features of letters need not be viewed only as problematic. The historians’ task of working through letter collections allows us to further engage with the form and invites innovative approaches to gaining insights into the letter writers’ world.

Another practical challenge posed by the study of life writing comes from translation. Many of the letters and memoirs are in the Finnish language. The provided excerpts have been carefully translated to maintain the structure, form, and intention of the writer. The letters and memoirs used in this study have not been polished, and only

⁵⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3.

minor, clearly indicated edits have been made where necessary for comprehension. Following the anthropological adage that “language is culture,” uses of metaphor have been translated to best express the meaning and imagery of the Finnish, rather than the sometimes differing English equivalents. The original Finnish text can be found in the footnotes following translated passages to encourage an open dialogue about translation and representation. The voices of the life writers and their self-shaped narratives guide us through their own experiences and projections of self. This approach takes seriously David Gerber’s critique of the tendency of published collections to edit immigrant letters. As he explains: “The more we consider the language, form, and content ... as problems we must correct, rather than an opportunity to extend and deepen our understanding, the further we may drift from being able to have the letter instruct us on the mental worlds, experiences, and purposes of the letter-writers.”⁵⁵

Introducing the Life Writers

Claudia Mills has noted: “The beauty of sharing stories... is that we get a chance to know, or at least try to know, at least catch a glimpse of, the ‘whole person’ whose story it is.”⁵⁶ Each life writer set their story to paper, and, in the process, they informed us of their individual experiences and of the experiences of Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia more broadly. While the coming chapters build our knowledge of these individuals, it is useful to begin with a brief biographical sketch of the main writers, to contextualize their narratives.

⁵⁵Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 54-55.

⁵⁶ Claudia Mills, “Friendship, Fiction, and Memoirs: Trust and Betrayal in Writing from One’s Own Life” in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 112.

Elizabeth (Lisi) Mäntysaari Hilberg Hirvonen moved to Karelia from Duluth, Minnesota with her second husband, Eino Hirvonen, in March 1932.⁵⁷ Lisi Mäntysaari moved from Finland to Canada with her family as an eight year old in 1907. It is not known when she moved to the United States. Hirvonen had no known children and moved to Karelia at the relatively late age of thirty-three. Fourteen of Hirvonen's letters survive, spanning from 13 October 1932 to 19 July 1939, each written to her sister Anna Mattson, in Grove Park, Saskatchewan. The letters, all written in Finnish, show Hirvonen's early settlement in Vonganperä lumber camp in northern Karelia and glimpses of her daily life in Petrozavodsk, the Karelian capital, to where she moved in early 1933. The largely upbeat portrayals of Karelian life become tempered by the dissolution of her marriage, and the silences and anxieties of the Great Terror that ultimately lead to the end of both the correspondence and what is known of Lisi Hirvonen. The letters were recovered by family twenty-six years after Anna Mattson's death. Accomplished poet and writer Nancy Mattson, granddaughter of Anna Mattson, has since delved into Hirvonen's letters and her family history, which has led to *Lines from Karelia*, a collection of translated letters and poems inspired by Hirvonen's story, and the poetry collection *Finns and Amazons*.⁵⁸ Nancy Mattson donated Lisi Hirvonen's letters to the Missing in Karelia Research Project.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Sevander's lists of arrested Finnish North Americans dates Lisi and Eino Hirvonen's move as 03 March 1932. Mayme Sevander, *Vaeltajat* (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2000), 189.

⁵⁸ Nancy Mattson, *Lines from Karelia*, with letters by Lisi Hirvonen, translated by Iris Pursiainen (Durham, UK: Arrowhead Press, 2011) and Mattson, *Finns and Amazons* (Durham, UK: Arrowhead Press, 2012).

⁵⁹ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/042, Nancy Mattson Collection.

Aate Veli Pitkänen, born 30 January 1913, moved to Karelia in November 1931 from the Finnish-Canadian community of Kivikoski, in the rural Thunder Bay, Ontario area. Pitkänen, as we will see, came from a remarkably devoted Communist family. Arriving in Karelia right around his nineteenth birthday, Pitkänen quickly embraced Karelian community and political life. Pitkänen's available letters begin in November 1933 and end in June 1942.⁶⁰ Of the thirteen available letters, eight are addressed to his parents and written in Finnish, four English letters are to his sister and, later, brother-in-law, and one Finnish letter was addressed to his friends and neighbours as a group. These letters contribute to understandings of Karelian youth culture, the impact of return migration, Soviet athletics, and the role of Finnish North Americans in the Continuation War. The letters were saved by Pitkänen's sister Taimi Davis (nee Pitkänen), who received Aate's final letters sixty years after he had written them in a Finnish prisoner-of-war camp, where he was executed in 1942. This story was brought to the public in the documentary "Letters from Karelia."⁶¹

Aate Pitkänen's letters are complemented by a rich collection of biographical materials written and saved by Taimi Davis, as well as her letter correspondence with her parents, Kirsti and Antti Pitkänen, which refer to news from Aate in Karelia.⁶² Antti

⁶⁰ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/033, 14, Taimi Davis Collection.

⁶¹ "Letters from Karelia," directed by Kelly Saxberg, National Film Board of Canada, 2004.

⁶² The Pitkänen family materials were collected by Varpu Lindström and now reside in her collection at the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/033, 14-18 and 2009-025/034, 1-7. Furthermore, the Pitkänen family biography has been examined by Varpu Lindström and Anatoli Gordijenko. Varpu Lindström, "The Radicalization of Finnish Farm Women in Northwestern Ontario, 1910-1930" in *I Won't be a Slave: Selected Articles on Finnish Canadian Women's History* (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2010), 59-98 and Anatoli Gordijenko, "Aate Pitkäsen Elämä ja Kuolema." *Carelia* (7, 2006): 116-131. See also, Samira Saramo, unpublished article, "Committed to the Cause: A Finnish-Canadian Family's experiences in the Soviet Union," 2010.

Pitkänen followed his son to Karelia in the fall of 1934, but quickly returned to Canada in 1935. A letter from Antti Pitkänen to Davis, written 25 December 1933, provides a rare opportunity to analyse the process and decision-making involved in migrating to Karelia. Finally, the Pitkänen collection is completed by an astoundingly vivid and forthright letter by Aate Pitkänen's aunt Aino Pitkänen, which details the Great Terror in Karelia, after she and her husband fled to Finland in 1938.

The most challenging collection of letters, though very rewarding, is that of the Heino family, who moved to Kontupohja, Karelia from Menahga, Minnesota in October 1931. Frank and Justiina Heino, born in 1887 and 1882, respectively, had a mixed family of ten children at the time of their migration. Six of their children went to Karelia: Martta (Martha), born 1911; Kaarlo (Karl/Carl), born 1912; Walter (Valte/Walt), born 1916; Urho, born 1917; Arthur (Arte), born 1920; and Alisi (Alice), born in 1922. Martha moved with her parents and siblings, but also with her husband Arvo Nestor Tieva (1897-1956) and their daughters Florence (1928-1990) and Violet (1930-?).⁶³ Likewise, Kaarlo's wife, Helen (nee Niemi), was also in Karelia. However, it is unclear whether the couple, who both came from Menahga at the same time, were married before migrating or only once in Karelia, since Helen is found with her family in immigration records.⁶⁴ Both Martha and Kaarlo returned with their families to the United States,

⁶³ Martha's own recollections tell us that her parents paid for her family's passage. Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/034, 8, Heino Family Info, Martha's (partial) autobiographical sketch. Martha is listed among the Heino family in some records, and with Arvo Tieva's family in others. Compare "Missing in Karelia" database, where Martta is listed as a Tieva, with Mayme Sevander's compiled data in *Vaeltajat*, 188.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/036, 4, Rikhard Laiho : List of Finnish-American emigrants to Soviet Karelia. This source can also be found online on "Finland Genealogy Web," accessed 01 March 2014:

presumably in 1935.⁶⁵ The family experienced immense tragedy in Karelia: Urho and Arte died within three months of each other at the tender ages of fourteen and twelve; Frank Heino was arrested and executed in the Great Terror; and Walter was killed in action in the Siege of Leningrad.

The available letters were written by Justiina and Alice to the siblings in the United States, including Martha and Kaarlo after their return.⁶⁶ The collection poses significant difficulties because many of the letters are torn and missing pages, and very few are dated. What can be clearly discerned from the letters, however, make crucial contributions to an understanding of Finnish North American life in Karelia, and have, therefore, been included in the study and analyzed with great care. The missing context of partial letters is acknowledged and analysis of these parts is limited to completed sections that clearly address studied aspects of daily life. The letters have often been successfully dated to a year range using references to key events, such as birthdays, deaths, the return of Martha and Kaarlo, the arrest of Frank, and even films as markers. Together, the six letters by Justiina and five letters by Alice range from 1932 to 1941. Justiina Heino's letters discuss the work of caring for a large family separated by migration, her daily thoughts of work, Karelian life, and the children, and provide emotionally stirring glimpses of a woman whose heart is broken by the loss of her children, husband, and sense of safety and connection. Alice Heino's letters to her

www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~finwgv/FAEmigration.html (Rikhard Laiho and Rudy Pinola's combined database, "Finnish-American Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1930s").

⁶⁵ Based on family information and taped conversations with Martta Tieva. Samira Saramo correspondence with Leonore Heino, August 2013.

⁶⁶ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/034, 9, Heino collection.

siblings are rare first-hand accounts written by a child coming of age in Karelia. Justiina and Alice's fates are not known beyond the final 1941 letter.

The Heino collection also includes one letter written by Tauno Salo to Kaarlo Heino, written in November 1935.⁶⁷ Based on immigration lists, it is believed Tauno Salo moved to Karelia with his family from Balsam, Minnesota.⁶⁸ It is unclear from the available letter whether Kaarlo and Salo had known each other in the United States, or if they had become friends in Kondopoga, where both families lived. Just like Frank Heino, it seems Tauno Salo's father was arrested and executed in the Kondopoga Paper Factory purge in 1938.⁶⁹

Nine letters written by Kalle Heikki Korhonen to his daughter Aune Batson have also been analyzed in this study.⁷⁰ Korhonen, according to family history, was born in Finland in 1887 and moved to the United States in 1910.⁷¹ He moved throughout the United States and Canada looking for work, and moved to Soviet Karelia in 1930, leaving behind his second wife and sixteen-year-old daughter, whose mother had recently passed away. Korhonen's available letters begin in August 1935 and conclude in October 1939. Additionally, the collection contains one formal letter written by George Halonen to

⁶⁷ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/034, 14, Heino collection, Tauno Salo.

⁶⁸ Missing in Karelia database and "Finnish-American Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1930s." Because of the common occurrence of both the first name Tauno and the last name Salo, it has been difficult to pinpoint with certainty that Tauno Salo from Balsam, MN is the same as the letter writer.

⁶⁹ "Missing in Karelia" database, Kustaa Salo.

⁷⁰ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 4, Judith Batson Collection.

⁷¹ Judith D. Batson, "On Being Half-Finnished," unpublished personal essay, 2007. Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 5, Judith Batson Collection.

Aune Batson on Korhonen's behalf in April 1939, after correspondence between the father and daughter had broken off.

Compared with the incomplete biographical information of many of the studied letter writers, much is known about Enoch Nelson. Nelson's Karelian letters are a part of his brother's significant collection, the Arvid Nelson Papers, housed at the Immigration History Research Center, at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.⁷² What makes the Nelson letters especially unique is the fact that Arvid Nelson saved copies of the letters he wrote, providing both sides of the correspondence. Enoch Nelson's life has also been examined by his nephew, Allan Nelson, in *The Nelson Brothers: Finnish-American Radicals from the Mendocino Coast*, which includes translations of his Communist Party of the Soviet Union "Autobiographical Statement" and rehabilitation notices.⁷³ Nelson was a second-generation Finn, born in northern California in 1897. Unlike the other letter writers in this study, he moved to Karelia already in 1921. Nelson's early letters provide a useful background to Finnish North American involvement in Soviet Karelia. However, his letters from the early 1930s have been the primary focus. These seven English-language letters, written to his brother and sister Ida, offer a rare view of the newly arriving mass of Finnish North Americans from the perspective of someone already accustomed to Soviet life and speak to industry and employment at this time. Enoch Nelson became increasingly devoted to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but fell victim to its repressive nature in 1938. In January of

⁷² The Nelson, Arvid Papers, Finnish American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Box 5a, Folder 12.

⁷³ Allan Nelson, *The Nelson Brothers: Finnish-American Radicals from the Mendocino Coast* (Ukiah, CA: Mendocino Historical Society/IHRC, 2005).

that year he was expelled from the Party and on 5 March 1938 he was executed for alleged counter-revolutionary activities.⁷⁴

Seven letters written by Karl Berg to his daughter are available for analysis. Finnish-born Berg left for Karelia from Mather, Pennsylvania.⁷⁵ The first three letters, written between May 1932 and April 1935, describe Berg's daily life in Petrozavodsk and his longing to be near his daughter and new grandchild. A letter dated 29 October 1938 placed Berg in Finland, and referred to other letters that seem to have not made it to the United States. It appears he had asked his daughter to help him get out of the Soviet Union. Three final letters were written in Helsinki, with only one, written on 8 July 1940, dated. Allegedly, Berg's daughter received a letter from Helsinki that informed the family of Berg's suicide.⁷⁶ However, according to the family, the news was not believed to be true. Coming as a single, mature man, and escaping during the Great Terror, beyond the listing of a "Kaarlo Berg" emigrant, no further information about Karl Berg has been found to date.⁷⁷

The Arthur Koski Letter Collection, a part of the Missing in Karelia Research Project archival documents, contains six letters written by Terttu Kangas, nee Järvinen, and one written by her husband, Antti Kangas.⁷⁸ The Kangas family, including Terttu, Antti, and their three children, Martha, Olavi, and Urho, left behind the Finnish

⁷⁴ Rehabilitation letter from the Ministry of Security of the Republic of Karelia, reproduced in Nelson, *The Nelson Brothers*, Appendix C, 152.

⁷⁵ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/042, 11, Marilee Coughlin - Karl Berg correspondence.

⁷⁶ Marilee Coughlin letter to Varpu Lindström, Marietta, GA, 13 May 2009. Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/042, 11, Marilee Coughlin - Karl Berg correspondence.

⁷⁷ Missing in Karelia Research Project Online Database, www.missinginkarelia.ca

⁷⁸ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 6, Arthur Koski letter collection.

immigrant community of Drummond Island, Michigan in the fall of 1933. Very little is known about the Kangas family's background and life before their emigration.⁷⁹ They moved to the village of Lohijärvi, some 20 kilometres from Petrozavodsk, and most of what is known about their lives came from the letters written by Terttu to her sister, Toini. From these letters, which were written between November 1933 and January 1939, we know that Antti and the oldest son, Urho, worked in the lumber industry, Olavi struggled with schooling, Martha pursued teacher training, and that Terttu took on various odd jobs throughout the years. While Terttu's letters provide detailed descriptions of daily life, Antti Kangas' single letter, dated October 1934, is addressed to the "Comrades" of Drummond Island. This letter has a much more formal tone than Terttu's letters, and aimed to address questions and concerns about the Karelian project. It is optimistic in its portrayal of socialism at work and hoped to deflate rumours about Karelian life. Antti Kangas' letter demonstrates the rhetoric and ideology that accompanied the migration of Finnish North Americans, and the role of the personal letter in transferring information between the Soviet Union and North American socialist circles. Terttu Kangas's letters reveal that her family made it through the height of the Great Terror, with each member mentioned in her final letter, dated 30 January 1939. Beyond that, the only additional information about the family that has been found, to date, is that Urho Kangas died in a gulag in 1943.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ No substantial family history could be obtained from relatives and genealogical document searches did not turn up the members of the Kangas family with any certainty.

⁸⁰ Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 227.

Two letters written by Elis Ranta have been analyzed in this study.⁸¹ Ranta was born in Finland in 1891⁸², moved to the Great Lakes region of the United States as a young man, and met and married a nineteen-year-old Finnish immigrant, Alli, in 1916.⁸³ The couple moved from Waukegan, Illinois to Monessen, Pennsylvania, where their daughter Viola was born in 1918. The family set sail for Karelia onboard the *Gripsholm* on 30 July 1932. They were first sent to Uhtua, where Elis worked as a baker and Alli worked as a school manager. Viola left school and began work at the age of fourteen as a typist. The family moved to Petrozavodsk in the spring of 1933, when Ranta was employed as a professional musician, working with the radio orchestra and as the Ski Factory Orchestra's director. Ranta's letters are the only ones in the studied group whose letters were sent to Finland, rather than to Canada or the United States. Elis Ranta's letters to his brother in 1933 and 1934 demonstrate the struggle between his delight in being able to work as a full time musician and his lingering homesickness, as well as the contestations between a father and the will of his teenaged daughter. Elis Ranta was arrested during the Great Terror and died in a gulag in 1940.⁸⁴ Alli, Viola, and Viola's sick daughter, Lorein, whose father had also been taken in the purges, were sent to the Urals for the war years. They returned in late 1944. Alli died in Karelia in 1979 and Viola moved to Finland in the early 1990s after retiring. The Ranta family's biography is so rich because Elis Ranta's two 1930s letters are complemented by Viola's six-page,

⁸¹ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 17, Sinisalo collection.

⁸² Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 214.

⁸³ Pre-Karelian migration biography from Viola Ranta, untitled memoir, unpublished, 1992, 6 pages. Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 17, Sinisalo collection.

⁸⁴ Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 214.

unpublished memoir, written in 1992. This brief yet very powerful narrative depicts Viola's abhorrence for Soviet life from the first days of arrival through the ongoing struggles that confronted her life.

Reino Mäkelä's life writing makes a unique contribution to the study, since we have access to, not only four letters that he wrote shortly after moving to Karelia in 1931, but also fifty-six letters he wrote to his childhood friend between August 1958 and October 1979.⁸⁵ He was born in Ishpeming, Michigan on 19 April 1915, and moved with his parents and two brothers to Karelia in 1931. Mäkelä's letters from October 1931 to March 1932 provide insights into Finnish North American youth culture in Soviet Karelia. The large collection of letters written after Stalin's death focus primarily on day to day descriptions of life, and prove quite useful in considerations of what is *not* said when one narrates their life experiences. Mäkelä's collection at the Immigration History Research Center also contains two letters, dated 20 February 1932 and 5 April 1932, which are addressed to the same recipient, "Benny," but are written by a different Reino. Though these letters are attributed to Reino Mäkelä in the IHRC collection, the sources suggest that, instead, these letters were authored by Reino Hämäläinen, born in 1915 or 1916, who moved to Karelia from Waukegan, Illinois in 1932 with his parents and brother.⁸⁶ Like the 1930s letters from Reino Mäkelä, Hämäläinen's letters offer a unique view of youth culture and leisure in Soviet Karelia.

⁸⁵ The Makela, Reino, Papers, Finnish American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Folder 1-2.

⁸⁶ The signature clearly reads Reino Hämäläinen, rather than Mäkelä, and the handwriting differs. The letters further show the two young Reinos in contact in Karelia, and corresponding with the same friend in the United States. It has been very difficult to confirm with certainty who exactly Reino Hämäläinen was. A cross-examination of the following sources has led to this very basic sketch: Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 190,

The twenty-seven letters and two Christmas cards written by Jack Forsell to his niece, Janet, in Thunder Bay, Ontario represent a nearly twenty-five year long correspondence from February 1972 to December 1996.⁸⁷ Over the course of the years, Forsell shared much of his life story with Janet. Forsell was born in 1906 in the Dog River Valley (rural Thunder Bay, Ontario area), where many Finnish immigrants tried their hand at farming and forestry. He moved to Karelia in the fall of 1931. There, he married a Finnish North American, Elvie, in 1932, and they had two children, though he and Elvie outlived them both. Jack and Elvie spent the rest of their lives in Karelia. The remarkably rich letters slip between talk of daily life in a transforming USSR to memories of 1930s Karelia, war, and boyhood memories from the 1910s and 1920s, and leave the reader wanting to hear more. As Forsell aged, he lost his eyesight, and wrote blind in handwriting that became large, thick, and wayward by the final letters. On 23 June 1997, Elvie wrote to Janet that Jack Forsell had died.

Also providing an opportunity to analyse retrospective narratives are four letters written by Harold Hietala.⁸⁸ Hietala was born in Port Arthur, Ontario on 29 April 1918. He moved to Karelia with his family in 1931, where he married American Finn Leini Leipälä. Harold Hietala was captured by the Finns during the war, and when he was

“Yrjö Hämäläinen”; Missing in Karelia database, “Hämäläinen,”; “Finnish-American Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1930s” list, “Hämäläinen.” Current biographical leads include “Obituary of Reino Hämäläinen” <http://obits.dignitymemorial.com/dignity-memorial/obituary.aspx?n=Reino-Hamalainen&lc=2557&pid=146704248&mid=4444163> and “List of US Citizens,” recorded on board the SS *Britania*, which arrived from Southampton in New York on 5 October 1935. www.ancestry.ca

⁸⁷ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 13, Janet Lehto letter collection.

⁸⁸ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/037, 6, Leini and Harold Hietala correspondence.

returned to the Soviets, he was imprisoned for three years.⁸⁹ Harold and Leini Hietala participated in Varpu Lindström's Karelian research in August 1988. Leini Hietala's interview has also been used in this study.⁹⁰ The four letters were written to Lindström after participating in the research project, and Harold reflected on his role as interview subject. The couple returned to North America (Thunder Bay) in 1993. Harold Hietala died in December 2009. Both Jack and Elvie Forsell and Harold and Leini Hietala were interviewed by Paula Autio for the Karelian cultural publication, *Carelia*.⁹¹

Klaus Maunu was born in New York in 1924. He moved to Karelia as an eight-year-old from Pike Lake, Ontario (rural Thunder Bay). Maunu wrote his life story in three installments after moving to Finland in the 1990s.⁹² The first, which is of most interest to the present study, "Muistoja lapsuus ja poikavuosilta" ("Memories of childhood and bachelor years"), details his life in North America and Karelia up to the 1941 war evacuation of Karelia. This unpublished memoir provides insights into daily life and the perceptions of a child migrant, remembered decades later. The second installment focuses on his experience in evacuation in Archangel. The final and longest installment, "Piikilangan takana" ("Behind Barbed Wire") narrates his life in the "work army" (gulag) from 1942-1946.⁹³

⁸⁹ Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 234.

⁹⁰ Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collection, York University, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/038, 2009-025/038, 1 (Side B) and 2 (Side A), Leini Hietala interview, and 2009-025/037, 4, Leini Hietala interview transcript.

⁹¹ Paula Autio, "Haaveet jäivät haaveiksi," *Carelia*, 3 (1993): 37-43.

⁹² Maunu's memoirs have been accessed through the private collection of Mrs. Eini Tuomi in Thunder Bay, ON. Maunu's 2000 oral history interview with anthropologist Raija Warkentin has also been consulted. Raija Warkentin research materials, "Finnish-Canadian-American- Russians", Lakehead University.

⁹³ "Piikilangan Takana" was published by *Carelia* in three installments, Numbers 11-12 (2006) and Number 1 (2007), available online. <http://carelia.rkperiodika.ru/2006-11/46.html>; <http://carelia.rkperiodika.ru/2006-12/42.html>; and <http://carelia.rkperiodika.ru/2007-01/8.html>.

Paavo Alatalo moved to Karelia from Ohio in the spring of 1931 as an eleven-year-old boy. His unpublished life writing serves as auto/biography, narrating his own life, as well as his wife's story. Written between 1998 and 2002, "Paavo ja Sylvin Tarina" ("Paavo and Sylvi's Story") aimed to record family history for younger relatives.⁹⁴ The narrative further strikes readers as an outlet for dealing with the grief of his wife's death, which occurred just before he began writing. Like Klaus Maunu's narrative, the majority of the life writing is dedicated to the war years. However, the description of his early life adds to our understanding of the Finnish North American migration, the school experiences of children in Karelia, and the impact of the Great Terror as felt through the loss of his first love.

Allan Sihvola began to write his autobiography at the age of seventy-four.⁹⁵ Sihvola's family moved to Karelia from Warren, Ohio in 1933, when Allan was thirteen years old. Sihvola comes across as a very detail oriented person, as his life writing provides vivid descriptions of his everyday life beginning with his early years in the United States. This memoir contributes rich imagery of Finnish North American culture and leisure in Karelia, as Sihvola was himself an active musician. Sihvola's narrative addresses the Great Terror and the fears in the community quite openly, in contrast with other writers. In addition to the losses he endured in Karelia in the late 1930s, Sihvola, too, was sent to the gulag after being released from the army in 1943. Though captive in the Ukraine, Sihvola was assigned to the orchestra, and travelled to various camps and

⁹⁴ Paavo Alatalo, "Paavo ja Sylvin Tarina," 1. Raija Warkentin research materials, "Finnish-Canadian-American- Russians", Lakehead University.

⁹⁵ Allan Sihvola, "Elämäankeronta," Raija Warkentin research materials, "Finnish-Canadian-American- Russians", Lakehead University.

military operations for the next three years. He returned to Petrozavodsk in late 1946.

Like Ranta, Maunu, and Alatalo, Allan Sihvola also moved to Finland in the 1990s.

Kaarlo Tuomi moved to Karelia at the age of sixteen in 1933 with his parents and sister, leaving behind Rock, Michigan. Tuomi's short memoir appeared in *Finnish Americana* in 1980, and blends the community history with his own experience.⁹⁶ This personal account of the migration and the Great Terror was among the first published, and Tuomi acknowledged that the topic had been understudied because it was "too hot to handle."⁹⁷ Tuomi's "The Karelian 'Fever' of the Early 1930s," focuses on the period leading up to WWII. However, in 1984 Tuomi also published a memoir that described his work as a KGB spy in the 1950s, and later as an FBI double agent.⁹⁸ This work was translated from Finnish into English and republished in the United States in 2012, with an introduction by John Earl Haynes.⁹⁹ The focus in this study, however, has been on Tuomi's narration of the 1930s.

Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941 tells the story of Lauri and Sylvi (nee Kuusisto) Hokkanen's time in Soviet Karelia.¹⁰⁰ This memoir, published in 1991 in the United States, brought the personal narratives of Karelian return migrants to North American audiences. The newlyweds left Sugar Island, Michigan, Lauri aged 25 and Sylvi at the age of 21, and were among the last Finnish North

⁹⁶ Kaarlo R. Tuomi, "The Karelian 'Fever' of the Early 1930s," *Finnish Americana*, 3 (1980): 61-75.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61. Tuomi's step-father was arrested and executed during the Great Terror.

⁹⁸ Kaarlo R. Tuomi, *Isanmaattoman tarina: Amerikansuomalaisen vakoojan muistelmat* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1984).

⁹⁹ Kaarlo R. Tuomi, *Spy Lost: Caught between the KGB and the FBI* (New York: Enigma Books, 2012). John Earl Haynes has had an interest in the fate of Finnish Americans who moved to Soviet Karelia. See, especially, Haynes work with Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism & Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003).

¹⁰⁰ Lawrence and Sylvia Hokkanen with Anita Middleton, *Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941* (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 1991).

Americans to migrate to Karelia. Once the Hokkanens returned to the United States, they shared very little about their experiences in the Soviet Union, until their daughter, Anita Middleton, encouraged them to write a memoir. The memoir, written with the help of Middleton, moves back and forth between Lauri and Sylvi's narration. While little is known about how the couple's memories were divided into the resultant shared narrative, *Karelia* presents two very distinct voices and perspectives of their time building socialism in Soviet Karelia. Lauri Hokkanen died at the age of 93, in 2002, and Sylvi passed away a few months later in January 2003.

Mayme Sevander's name is closely linked to the story of Finnish North Americans in Karelia. Sevander, nee Corgan, moved to Karelia in 1934 from Superior, Wisconsin (via New York City) at the age of ten. Her father, Oscar Corgan, was an influential Finnish immigrant organizer and leader on the Left, and the long-time editor of *Työmies* newspaper. He served as the final Director of the Karelian Technical Aid, which oversaw the fundraising, recruitment, and transfer of Finnish North Americans to Karelia between 1931 and 1934. Believing in the Karelian project, and having sent thousands of people ahead, Corgan, his wife, and their three children moved there, too. The family embraced the building of socialism, but Oscar Corgan was arrested in 1937. The Corgan family, like others in Karelia and across the Soviet Union, faced significant hardships through the Great Terror and WWII. Mayme, however, came out well educated, employed at the national news bureau, married, and a mother. She even joined the Communist Party in 1960 because, in her words, she "believed in Krushchev's integrity, and I decided that to turn my back on the Soviet Union and the great

experiment of communism would be a betrayal of my father's memory.”¹⁰¹ The Corgan family did not know Oscar's fate until 1991: he had been shot two months after his arrest.

Mayme Sevander fervently believed in the idealism and socialist principles that Finnish North Americans – or “My People” as she referred to them – brought to Karelia, and so many died for. In 1992, Sevander published *They Took My Father: Finnish Americans in Stalin's Russia*. This memoir, written with American journalist Laurie Hertzell, tells the story of the Corgan family and Mayme's life in the Soviet Union. However, Sevander was not satisfied to end there; she committed to telling the story of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, as a whole. She researched, wrote, and published two more English language works, *Red Exodus* and *Of Soviet Bondage*, and the Finnish *Vaeltajat*, which synthesizes her other publications.¹⁰² While *Red Exodus*, *Of Soviet Bondage*, and *Vaeltajat* approach the topic of Finnish North Americans in Karelia as research subject, Sevander's personal involvement in this history results in chaotic, dynamic, emotional, and groundbreaking narratives that blur the autobiographical and the researcher's distance. Sevander's contribution to what is known about Finnish Americans and Canadians in Karelia has been invaluable. She died in 2003, still devoted to unearthing the history of ‘Her’ People.

Chapter Outline

¹⁰¹ Mayme Sevander with Lauri Hertzell, *They Took My Father: Finnish Americans in Stalin's Russia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), originally published in 1992 by Pfeifer-Hamilton, 180.

¹⁰² Mayme Sevander, *Red Exodus: Finnish-American Emigration to Russia* (Duluth, MN: OSCAT, 1993); Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage: Sequel to 'Red Exodus'* (Duluth, MN: OSCAT, 1996); Sevander, *Vaeltajat* (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2000).

Altogether, the voices of twenty-eight Finnish North Americans are represented through their life writing.¹⁰³ Collectively, the life writers show us Finnish North American life in Soviet Karelia. The study begins in North America.¹⁰⁴ The first chapter outlines the main features of Finnish North American life, with a primary focus on the Left community, through an examination of the key secondary literature in the field. By looking at Finnish immigrant life in Canada and the United States, we gain an appreciation for the established tradition of utopianism and idealism, and the socio-cultural and political trajectories that led to the “Karelian Fever.” A look at community life demonstrates how the migrants relied on the same strategies and models to form communal spaces and activities in Karelia, and provides an opportunity to analyze continuities and adaptations. Since images and memories of the home community were never far from the immigrant’s mind, and are a regular feature of both letters and memoirs, their study requires a solid understanding of Finnish North American history. Once grounded in the North American context, the second chapter outlines how Karelia came to be a Finnish-led autonomous region, welcoming thousands of North Americans. The chapter considers the “Question of *Karjala*” or the role Karelia has played in Finnish nationalism and independence, the region’s significance in Soviet-Finnish relations, the establishment of Karelia as the “Red Finn Homeland,” and the region’s changing cultural and economic needs. Looking at examples of early Finnish North American immigrants

¹⁰³ Further complemented by additional oral history interviews conducted by Varpu Lindström and Raija Warkentin.

¹⁰⁴ Two significant works which have demonstrated the importance of grounding immigrant histories in the home community include: Royden Loewen, *Family, Church Market: A Mennonite community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) and Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

in Karelia provides another way of demonstrating how the 1930s migration was one part of a much broader negotiation of both Finnish-socialist and Soviet identity.

With both the North American and Karelian backgrounds examined, the third chapter acts as a bridge between North America and Karelian settlement. Exploring the impact of the Depression, socialist conviction, and the mechanisms of formal recruitment, through the Karelian Technical Aid, then makes way for the life writing narratives. The letters and memoirs inform us about individual decisions to move, descriptions of travel, and first impressions of the Soviet Union and Karelia. Once in Karelia, the fourth chapter examines Finnish North American narratives surrounding housing, food, clothing, consumer goods, as well as health and hygiene. Mezei argues: “Interior domestic spaces (furniture, rooms, doors, windows, stairs, drawers – familiar everyday objects) which have and could be perceived as banal and ordinary, and hence insignificant, are vital to the shaping of our memories, our imaginations, and our ‘selves’.”¹⁰⁵ These themes demonstrate inter-ethnic tensions, bring collective identity formation to the surface, reveal the transnational flow of goods, and tell us much about gender roles and the gendered nature of narrative construction.

Chapter Five turns to the ways that immigrant children encountered the Karelian project. Contrasting the ideals of children’s socialist upbringing in the North American Left against the transforming Soviet methods further emphasizes how Finnish North Americans embraced the socialist spirit in their lives and how their migration to Karelia coincided with a moment of change in Soviet ideology. The challenges that North

¹⁰⁵Mezei, 82.

American children faced with language and schooling in Karelia, and their position vis-a-vis other children speak to questions of the immigrants' identity and place in Karelia. The examination of childhood shows that many children moved into the workforce quite early in Karelia, even though a main recruitment message had emphasized access to education.

The next chapter looks specifically at work in the Karelian life writing, with primary emphasis on how work has been written about. Letters and memoirs provide new insights into how the immigrants changed jobs and locations, their attitudes toward workers of other ethnicities, and the ways that masculinity was bound to work and comradeship. While Finnish North Americans were engaged in building Karelia's economy, they were also actively building Karelian political and cultural life. Chapter Seven examines both formal and grassroots cultural and leisure pursuits, including political volunteerism, music, theatre, movies, and athletics. Leisure and sociability provide an entry point for exploring youth culture, dating, drinking, and gender roles in the immigrant community.

The final chapter investigates the demise of the Finnish North Americans' socialist utopia: the Great Terror. First providing an overview of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union and its specific form in Karelia, the chapter focuses on the ways that the Terror has been written about both during the time and retrospectively. Looking for the purges in letters from the 1930s requires attentive close reading, and knowledge of the letter writer and their community. It is possible, however, to find multiple strategies used to confront the topic, including silence. As Karen Armstrong reminds us, writing is a

way to “recollect and *recollect*” or a “way to recollect the absent place and absent people and to relive what was lost.”¹⁰⁶ Questions about representation, “truth”, trauma, avoidance and distancing, making sense and working through, and the turn to collective experience are raised by the retrospective letters and memoir sources. The analysis of Great Terror narratives is conducted with an acknowledgement and openness to the role of both subject and researcher emotion in such work.¹⁰⁷

Together, the chapters provide a window into what life was like for the individuals who were a part of the Finnish North American migration to Soviet Karelia in the 1930s and what that migration has come to mean. This study takes on the challenge posed by Sara Jayne Steen, who asks us to: “dare to cross disciplinary boundaries and treat the biographical, historical, social, political, psychological, economic, and rhetorical contexts in which [life writing is] produced.”¹⁰⁸ Reading for both what is told and how it is told, it is possible to build a community history of everyday life, while simultaneously gaining an understanding of individual writers. Taken together, then, we may view Finnish North American Karelia through the life writers’ words.

¹⁰⁶ Karen Armstrong, *Remembering Karelia: A Family’s Story of Displacement during and after the Finnish Wars* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 133 and 20.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Merridale’s analysis of mourning and trauma, as well as her openness to emotions, including her own, have aided my approach to the narratives and experiences of Finnish North Americans in Karelia. See Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ Quoted by Couchman and Crabb, in the Introduction to *Women’s Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700*, 6.

Chapter I
ROAD TO UTOPIA: Finnish Communities in
North America up to ‘Karelian Fever’

The migration of 6500 Finnish North Americans to Soviet Karelia marks a significant moment in the trajectory of Finnish immigrant life in Canada and the United States. By joining in the “Karelian Fever,” the migrants became participants in an established tradition of radicalism and utopianism that can be traced from the early arrival of Finns in North America. Examining the various forms of Finnish immigrant involvement in Canadian and American Left political life demonstrates the many strategies that were employed with the hope of creating a new world order, where workers could live freely. In this context, the Karelian project can be viewed as another opportunity to enact change – one that was made especially timely by the economic crisis at hand. A synopsis of the Finnish Left in Canada and the United States in the decades leading up to the mass migration reveals the cultural and social institutions and traditions that the immigrants reproduced and drew upon in the Soviet Union. A history of Finnish immigrant life in North America also contextualizes the backgrounds of those who went to Karelia. In order to best analyze the letter and memoir narratives, it is crucial to understand the social worlds that the life writers thought back on and the institutions and traditions that formed their frames of reference and worldviews.

This chapter brings together the considerable body of available secondary literature to begin to explain why Finnish North Americans accepted the call to build a workers' society in Soviet Karelia and to contextualize the social and cultural structures that they established there. Before delving into the specifics of the Finnish North American road to utopia, a consideration of the field's historiographical conventions encourages us to keep in mind the entirety of Finnish immigrant experiences. Then, a brief look at the reasons for emigration from Finland and at the settlement and occupational choices of the immigrants makes way for an examination of the establishment of the elements of community life: the church, the temperance movement, the halls, and the Finnish role in the North American socialist and cooperative movements. Such an examination aids in understanding the social and cultural landscapes that formed the migrants' identities. When these aspects of community and political life are placed in the context of the social and economic climate at the beginning of the 1930s, the road to the Finnish North American exodus to Karelia becomes apparent.

Historiographical Divide

In compiling this sketch of the main Finnish cultural and organizational institutions, primary attention is directed to the activities of the Finnish immigrant Left wing. On one hand this focus is natural, as the Finnish North American migration to Soviet Karelia was fuelled by the Finnish Left movement and because Finns replicated in Karelia the social and cultural structures of their North American socialist institutions. On the other hand, though, the reliance on sources that examine the organizational

developments of socialist-minded Finns reflects the imbalanced historiography of Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States. Finnish North American history and its scholarship can be summarized as divided. Even though quite homogenous linguistically¹, in religious background, and in homeland custom, it is difficult to find comprehensive historical studies about Finns in Canada and the United States. By the early 1900s, Finns had become divided along political lines, resulting in the establishment of separate and competing ethno-cultural spaces. Historians have perpetuated the divisions in their scholarship, choosing to focus on one side over the other.

Ultimately, the history of the 'Red' Finns has become better known. Perhaps this is because Finnish Leftists in North America were more numerous than their religious and conservative counterparts. Or perhaps historians are drawn to the dramatic stories of Finnish radicals taking on the North American political system, women's rights activism, children's socialist education, and remarkable displays of artistic and athletic talent, all seemingly ahead of their time. However, without further research on the non-socialist Finnish immigrant population, the history of Finns in North America remains incomplete.

When it comes to the topic of so-called White Finns, it is difficult to even ascertain what is meant by the conservatism to which 'they' were to subscribe. It seems as though the political non-conformity of the Leftists makes them a worthwhile subject of study, while the non-radicalism of other Finns equates them with the North American

¹ Of course, one cannot overlook the Swedish-speaking Finnish population. For the most comprehensive history of Finland-Swedes in North America, see Mika Roinila, *Finland-Swedes in Canada: Migration, settlement, and ethnic relations* (Turku: Institute of Migration, 2000).

political status quo, and has, therefore, left non-socialist political, cultural, and social expressions and implications understudied. In the continuing absence of sufficient scholarly work on the history of non-socialist Finns, we are left with the impression that a fragmented Left struggled against a unified Finnish religious-conservative bloc. Interestingly, differences between the ideology of the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party, for example, are viewed as significant enough to merit thorough study, whereas the ideological differences between opposing Finnish religious denominations are largely disregarded as all ‘just’ Lutheranism.²

Beyond the unevenness of topics examined within the field of Finnish North American history, the more disturbing trend in the historiography is the lack of analysis that brings together the interactions of socialists and non-socialists. The works that do address the history of non-socialist Finns, like many works on socialists too, often lack the critical framework to explore the intricacies of the fractures, how self-identification with specific groups impacted a sense of belonging in the North American context, or how Finnish immigrants negotiated their intra-group encounters in common residential areas and work places. There are several fine studies on Finnish immigrant socialists, like Auvo Kostiaainen’s *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, Peter Kivisto’s *Immigrant Socialists in the United States*, and the works of William Høglund and Douglas Ollila³, but, while carefully tracing the divides within the ranks of the left, they

² In fact, taking just the Laestadians into account, Marvin Lamppa has shown that in the first half of the twentieth-century, five different factions competed for supremacy. See Lamppa, “Embers of Revival: Laestadian Schisms in Northeast Minnesota,” in *Finnish Diaspora II: United States*, ed. Michael Karni (Toronto: MHSO, 1981): 193-212.

³ Notably, all are focussed on Finns in the United States and all appeared decades ago, further speaking to the need to revitalize and redirect the study of Finnish immigrants in North America.

leave readers with the impression that socialist and non-socialist Finns lived in separate worlds. However, as Varpu Lindström has shown for Toronto Finns at the turn of the twentieth-century⁴, Finnish newcomers, like other immigrants, tended to live in close proximity to fellow nationals.⁵ Therefore, studying different types of Finns in interactions of either conflict or cooperation would complicate our understanding of the ways that the Karelian immigrants, and other Finns in North America, shaped their communal and personal identities and their sense of belonging amid the multiple communities in which they were actors.

Interestingly, the Finnish immigrant historiography has had an almost opposite trajectory than that of other groups. For example, in *Re-Imagining Ukrainian Canadians*, editors Rhonda Hinthel and Jim Mochoruk eloquently highlight the transitions of the Ukrainian Canadian historical literature over the years.⁶ Hinthel and Mochoruk identify a move away from the construction of a singular community history toward the proliferation of research on the varied and complex experiences of Ukrainian immigrants.⁷ Conversely, an examination of the Finnish immigrant scholarship demonstrates that the diverse experiences of Finns in Canada and the United States have not yet been synthesized to show how Finns of different political and religious beliefs

⁴ Lindström, “The Finnish Immigrant Community of Toronto, 1887-1913.”

⁵ John Zucchi, though, has emphasized that a central location, proximity to work, and transportation routes, in addition to being close to those with the same background, have also been crucial in immigrants’ decisions on where to settle. See Zucchi’s “The Italian Immigrants of the St. John’s Ward, 1875-1915,” *Occasional Papers in Ethnic and Immigration Studies* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981).

⁶ Rhonda Hinthel and Jim Mochoruk, *Re-Imagining Ukrainian Canadians: History, Politics, and Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁷ *Ibid.*, “Introduction,” see especially 5-12.

negotiated their way through their daily encounters in ‘Finntowns’, and how Finnishness was viewed and formed in the North American context.

Finns have often been compared with the fractured and very politically active Jewish immigrant communities in North America. Despite even further divides in national background and language, Jewish immigration history has produced some excellent comprehensive histories that ground the Jewish experience in the North American social and economic climate. Gerald Tulchinsky’s *Canada’s Jews* stands out as a recent model.⁸ Such synthesized accounts are rare in the Finnish immigrant historiography. Oiva Saarinen’s excellent study of Finns in the Sudbury area does attempt to join the experiences of socialist and non-socialist Finns.⁹ Saarinen reflects on how the history of Finnish immigrants’ numerous organizations have been the main focus of studies on the group, and how these divided institutions rarely interacted.¹⁰ The work then proceeds to present information on these different groups, one by one. It seems the problem with Finnish immigrant studies is laid out in Saarinen’s observation. If historians focus on institutions and their formal records, surely it would appear as though Finns were divided by political or religious lines and existed in separate realities. Perhaps with a switch in focus to the everyday lives and encounters occurring in Finnish communities in North America, scholars could go beyond the stark divisions.

⁸ Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada’s Jews: A People’s Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

⁹ Oiva W. Saarinen, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A Historical Geography of the Finns in the Sudbury Area* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

Among the Finnish North American literature, Varpu Lindström's *Defiant Sisters* and *From Heroes to Enemies*¹¹ stand out as exceptions, showing how, for example, family health and welfare and the perceptions of broader Canadian society and media impacted Finnish immigrants regardless of their position on the political spectrum. Taking works like Lindström's as models, the field of Finnish North American studies can proceed with an analysis of the intra-group workings and explore the different and overlapping understandings of what it was to be Finnish in North America. If, as we will hear so many of this work's subjects say, Finnish North American emigrants to Karelia did not specifically identify with the communist label, then we must look more closely at the Finnish Canadian and American experience historically to understand who these people saw themselves to be. While taking steps to synthesize the social and cultural climate, the following pages are admittedly Left-focussed and bear the mark of a divided historiography. This brief overview demonstrates the common directions taken in the historiography, presents the factors that swayed such a significant proportion of Finnish immigrants in North America toward the Left, and traces the institutional transitions that led so many to Karelia.

Reasons for Emigration from Finland

Finns were drawn to the westward journey across the Atlantic for a number of reasons. While a small group of early Finnish emigrants headed to Delaware already in 1637 as a part of a Swedish colonization effort¹², and others came to seek riches in

¹¹ Varpu Lindström, *From Heroes to Enemies: Finns in Canada, 1937-1947* (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2000).

¹² Kero, *Suureen Länteen*, 16-19; Eloise Engle, *Finns in North America* (Annapolis, MD: Leeward Publications, 1975), 15.

Alaska and California before the 1860s¹³, the major movement of Finns to North America occurred mainly between the 1880s and the beginning of the Second World War. Primarily at play in the mass migration was the exploding Finnish population, especially in the Ostrobothnia and Satakunta regions, from where migration was heaviest. With significant population growth, already limited agricultural space became unavailable and people were left landless. Many turned to the cities for employment, but found that a better life did not await them there. Finnish cities simply could not meet the employment and living needs of the rural exodus.¹⁴ The outcry over the Russian implementation of mandatory three-year military service in 1878 grew with the 1901 military conscription law, and many looked for an opportunity to escape the increasingly heavy-handed rule of Russia.¹⁵ From the 1870s onward, Canadian and American agents recruited Finns to work in agriculture, rail-road construction, and mining.¹⁶ While Finns certainly had many reasons to migrate and land and employment agents painted a rosy picture of North America as a destination, personal letters sent by fellow Finns who had already made the move proved to be very persuasive in encouraging further emigrants.¹⁷ Letters continued to play an important role in the lives of Finnish immigrants, even years

¹³Varpu Lindström, *Canada's Ethnic Groups: The Finns in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1985), 6; Reino Kero, *Migration from Finland to North America in the Years between the United States Civil War and the First World War* (Turku: Institute for Migration, 1974), 16.

¹⁴ Reino Kero, "The Background of Finnish Emigration," in *The Finns in North America: A Social Symposium*, ed. Ralph J. Jalkanen (Hanck, MI: Suomi College, 1969), 57.

¹⁵ Kero, "The Background of Finnish Emigration," 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59; Kero, *Suureen Länteen*, 39-41; Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 69.

¹⁷ See Reino Kero, "Kultaa vuolemassa ja 'kolia' kaivamassa – siirtolaiskirjeitä Pohjois-Amerikasta Suomeen" in *Maiten ja Merten Takaa: Vuosisata Suomalaisia Siirtolaiskirjeitä*, ed. Eero Kuparinen (Turku: Turun Historiallinen Arkisto-sarja, 1985): 9-135 and Marsha Penti-Vidutis, "The America Letter: Immigrant Accounts of Life Overseas," *Finnish Americana*, Volume 1 (1978): 22-40.

after emigrating. Conditions in Finland set the stage for migration, while recruiters and letter writers appealed to the potential émigré's hopes for a better life.

Migration and New Beginnings

The transatlantic trip from the port of Hanko to eastern Canada and the United States was an experience shared by tens of thousands of Finns. Finns first appeared in the Canadian census in 1901, with 2502 individuals of Finnish origin counted.¹⁸ Between 1901 and 1931, more than 60 000 Finns came to Canada.¹⁹ The American numbers prove even more impressive: by 1930, close to 500 000 Finns had landed in the United States.²⁰ For many, however, their stay was short, as neither Canada nor the United States proved to be the land of gold that recruiters and immigrant letters promised. The 1931 Statistics Canada census reported that 43 885 people of Finnish origin lived in Canada, including 30 354 who were Finnish born.²¹ By that same year in the United States, Finnish born residents numbered over 100 000.²² Those who had stayed helped lay the groundwork for the vibrant Finnish communities that began to emerge by the 1890s.

Peter Kivisto contextualizes the place of Finns by stating that, while Finns “represent a relatively small immigrant group in the United States, their settlement

¹⁸ Lindström, *The Finns in Canada*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. Statistical break down provided.

²⁰ Hans R. Wasastjerna, *History of the Finns in Minnesota*, trans. Toivo Rosvall (New York Mills, MN: Northwestern Publishing Company, 1957), 54-59. Wasastjerna carefully considers how to make sense of the US census and Finnish emigration numbers. As Wasastjerna points out, the statistics are problematic because multiple trips between Finland and the United States inflated the numbers, returnees are not considered, and descent rather than country of birth is used in calculation.

²¹ Statistics Canada, 1931 Census. See also Varpu Lindström, *The Finns in Canada*, 7, and Tauri Aaltio, “A Survey of Emigration from Finland to the United States and Canada,” in *The Finns in North America: A Social Symposium*, ed. R. Jalkanen (Hancock, MI: Suomi College, 1969), 68.

²² Aaltio, 65.

patterns were such that, as an ethnic group, they had a rather profound impact on certain locales.”²³ While a common argument claims that Finns settled in areas that replicated the familiar landscape and geography of Finland, it seems that economic necessity and some level of coincidence, rather than intentionality, explains the phenomenon. Ontario, especially in the northwest, the Prairies, and British Columbia were the destinations of the majority of Finns in Canada. While the government of Canada officially welcomed Finns to work in agriculture, many instead found employment in lumbering, mining, rail-road construction, and fishing. Finns in the United States pursued similar occupations. Wage work, rather than farming, proved the norm among Finns in North America.²⁴ In the United States, the Great Lakes region attracted the majority of immigrants, but Finnish immigrant communities could be found from Brooklyn, New York to northern California. In both Canada and the United States, Finns typically settled in smaller towns and cities rather than in large urban centres. Finnish women arriving at the turn of the century, however, were an exception to this standard, as they primarily found employment as domestics in cities.²⁵

Documentary evidence, such as the over 10 000 letters written by Finns in North America and now contained in the Satakunta Letter Collection²⁶, reveals Finnish immigrants actively assessing and evaluating their earning potential, whether that meant

²³ Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 71.

²⁴ Lindström, *The Finns in Canada*, 9.

²⁵ Lindström, “I won’t be a slave!: Finnish Domestics in Canada, 1911-30” in *I Won’t be a Slave: Selected Articles on Finnish Canadian Women’s History* (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2010), 35-38.

²⁶ The forty-one reel Satakunta Letter Collection was compiled in 1964 by the University of Turku and is now available on microfilm through the Immigration History Research Centre in Minneapolis and the Migration Institute (Siirtolaisuusinstituutti) at the University of Turku.

frequently or seasonally changing jobs, or moving to where wages were best.²⁷

Adaptation allowed Finnish immigrants to shape their North American experiences to their advantage. This willingness to pursue different occupations, job sites, and locales resulted in a wide array of skills and knowledge that allowed Finnish Canadians and Americans to successfully transfer their know-how to any situation. These broad skills made Finnish North Americans especially appealing for recruitment into the Karelian project.

While securing wages and a roof over one's head were the primary focuses of individual immigrants' lives, settlement in Canada and the United States also meant establishing collective spaces for Finns that would feed mind and soul. The Finnish church, therefore, has played an interesting part in ethnic community formation.

Church

In Finland, resentment of the Finnish State Lutheran Church's power grew in the years coinciding with the rise in emigration. Although largely responsible for the high rates of literacy among the whole of the Finnish population²⁸, the church's hand in so many aspects of people's lives had become burdensome. For those eager to leave Finland, a character reference from the home parish had to accompany their passport

²⁷ For example, M. Larson's letter exemplifies a life driven by work; Larson mentioned having worked on the rail-road, on farms, and in the bush in winter time. He dreamt of moving from Biggar, Saskatchewan, where there were no other Finns, with Michigan and Oregon in mind as possible destinations. Larson's letter, like others, indicates that he was aware of all the work possibilities and knew where the best wages could be found, at least through hearsay. (M Larson, Satakunta Letters, Reel 13: 2 May, year unknown but handwriting and subject matter suggest early 1900s).

²⁸ Less than two percent of Finnish immigrants were illiterate. See Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., "The Work People's College: Immigrant Education for Adjustment and Solidarity" in *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America*, ed. Michael G. Karni, and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., 87-118 (Superior, WI: Työmies Society, 1977).

application. The church, however, actively discouraged migration, blaming it for the spread of immorality.²⁹

Not heeding the warnings of the church, the tens of thousands of emigrants were left with the task of setting up church once in North America. Compared to the highly institutionalized operations of the Finnish state church, North American Finnish religious expression struggled to establish a church core with broad popular support. A lack of funds, strong leadership, and formally educated Finnish clergy resulted in intense competition among a number of congregations in the early phases of settlement.³⁰ By 1890, the main streams of these were the conservative Laestadians (or Apostolic Lutherans) and the Suomi Synod. The Finnish State Church proclaimed its support of the orthodox Suomi Synod, and it did not take long for the Synod to also be accused of devaluing lay people and failing to address the realities of workers' lives.³¹ Immigrants continued to carry their old suspicions and bad feelings about the church, and anticlericalism was widespread among Finns in North America. In the United States it is estimated that no more than twenty-five percent of Finns had joined a church by 1900.³² Even more strikingly, the 1931 Canadian census revealed that only three percent of Finnish immigrants had joined the church.³³ The Finnish Lutheran church espoused that

²⁹ A. William Høglund, "Breaking with Religious Tradition: Finnish Immigrant Workers and the Church, 1890-1915," in *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America*, ed. Michael G. Karni, and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., (Työmies Society: Superior, WI, 1977), 27-29.

³⁰ Due to the State Church's disapproval of emigration, it refused to send trained ministers to North America. See for example, Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 77.

³¹ Høglund, 30-34.

³² Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 79.

³³ Lindström, *Defiant Sisters*, 115.

only in the after-life would the world be improved.³⁴ Faced with poverty and dangerous working conditions, many Finnish immigrants refused to simply sit by, trading the church pew for the workers' rights placard. Many Finnish immigrant ministers in the early twentieth century preached a Christian Socialist outlook that was meant to reflect the newcomers' needs.³⁵ However, for many, traditional church simply seemed "irrelevant" to the everyday realities of their immigrant lives.³⁶

The Temperance Movement

Though generally wary of secular immigrant activities, the Suomi Synod and other Protestant sects did become involved with the temperance movement. The mission of temperance societies spoke to many early Finnish immigrants. When no formal Finnish church had been established, the moral guidance of the temperance pledge was reassuring for those needing religion. In fact, cooperation with friendly temperance societies proved beneficial for fledgling churches. While temperance societies, like the Finnish National Temperance Brotherhood, formed in Michigan in 1888, managed to secure buildings, many congregations were still homeless and held services and meetings in these temperance halls.³⁷ Carl Ross estimates that in the United States, some 200 temperance societies had been formed by 1900.³⁸

³⁴ Sakari Sariola, "Socialism and the Church: An Antinomian Impasse in Finnish-American Immigrant Communities" in *Finns in North America: Proceedings of Finn Forum III*, ed. Michael Karni et al. (Turku: Institute of Migration, 1988), 202 and Gary London, "The Finnish-American Anti-Socialist Movement, 1908-1918," in *Finns in North America: Proceedings of Finn Forum III*, ed. Michael Karni et al. (Turku: Institute of Migration, 1988), 212.

³⁵ Ollila, "The Work People's College," 92.

³⁶ Høglund, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸ Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture, and Society*, Second Edition (New York Mills, MN: Parta Printers, Inc, 1982), 26.

Even for those not necessarily driven by spiritual life, the temperance movement aimed to combat the alcoholism prevalent among new immigrants, and gave direction to those feeling lost and lonely.³⁹ The temperance societies proved to have a far reaching impact on Finnish immigrant life and, in the words of Carl Ross, they “outstripped the church, became the incubator for Finnish immigrant culture, and the umbrella under which its institutions arose.”⁴⁰ Indeed, it did not take long for the religious undercurrents of the temperance movement to be challenged. The church’s idea of a proper Christian temperance movement included a ban on dancing and other forms of lively social interactions, and vice was viewed as the result of individual immorality.⁴¹ For the majority of Finnish immigrant participants, the church’s ideas did not mesh with their understanding of the role of social factors, or with their cultural needs. Both the church’s role and the scope of the temperance movement became too limited to address the issues of work and life so dear to immigrants.

Hall Life

Along with the formation of Finnish temperance societies came the establishment of the Finnish *haali*, or cultural hall. For example, the Finns of Copper Cliff, Ontario built their hall in 1906, the Port Arthur Finns in 1910, and, in Minneapolis, a hall was built in 1913. Edward Laine argues that Finnish halls fostered a highly developed sense

³⁹ Aaltio, 67; Marc Metsaranta, ed., *Project Bay Street: Activities of Finnish-Canadians in Thunder Bay Before 1915* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society, 1989), 57.

⁴⁰ Ross, 23.

⁴¹ Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 80-81.

of collectivization by simultaneously creating the appearance of alienation from the greater Canadian society and building strong community ties.⁴²

In the safety of the Finnish hall, immigrants could come together to speak their language, celebrate their traditions and customs, and partake in the busy social calendar. Hall members frequently staged *iltamat* or evenings of entertainment, that featured a variety of activities ranging from dances, musical acts, and guest speakers, to dramatic performances. Finnish women were instrumental in organizing these popular community events. Additionally, halls were home to a wide array of clubs, groups, and organizations. From childhood to old age, Finnish immigrants could partake in athletics, sewing circles, theatre troupes, or politics, to name just a few options. The vital place of the *haali* in Finnish Canadian and Finnish American lives was to be replicated in Karelia in the Cultural Houses and Houses of Enlightenment, which stood as hubs of cultural life.

The forging of close ethnic communities through halls did much to encourage Finns in Canada to develop their class consciousness. In the words of Edward Laine, halls “provided a refuge or sanctuary for the immigrant community where its members could immerse themselves in the comfort of their commonly-held Finnish cultural heritage and, increasingly, to dream of the coming era of social democracy.”⁴³

Why Socialism?

⁴²Edward Laine, “Finnish Canadian Radicalism and Canadian Politics: The First Forty Years, 1900-1940,” in *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*, ed. Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 96; Joan Sangster also recognized the alienating aspect of the Finnish halls in “Finnish Women in Ontario, 1890-1930,” in *Polyphony: The Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 3, 2 (Fall 1981), 49.

⁴³ E. Laine, 93.

An undeniable characteristic of Finnish organization in Canada and the United States was the prevalence of socialism. In the words of Varpu Lindström, radicalism for Finns “was not a philosophy abstracted from the experience of the ordinary people, but was an integral part of the day-to-day life.”⁴⁴ In fact, in a 1910 survey of Finns in Toronto, 57% self-identified as ‘socialist,’ outnumbering those who identified themselves as Christian by four to one.⁴⁵ The era of mass migration from Finland to North America coincided with the quickly-growing popularity of social democracy in Finland, as is further discussed in the next chapter. Peter Kivisto concludes that Finns “who arrived from 1890 onward, no matter where their point of origin in Finland, had been exposed, in varying degrees, to socialism; socialist ideas, quite simply, were in the air.”⁴⁶ Likewise, according to J. Peter Campbell, “Finnish history, culture, and class structure were the foundation stones, not the direct cause, of the influence of the Industrial Workers of the World.”⁴⁷ The statement rings true for Finnish North American immigrants in the whole range of socialist organizations. Although Finns were certainly aware of the growing labour and social democratic movements in Finland, conditions in the adopted homeland often proved to be a stronger push to the Left.

Many Finns were sorely disappointed when the new lives they sought in Canada proved rife with injustice and oppression. Auvo Kostiainen suggests that large numbers

⁴⁴Varpu Lindström, “The Socialist Party of Canada and the Finnish Connection, 1905-1911” in *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*, ed. Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 119.

⁴⁵Sangster, “Finnish Women in Ontario,” 51; Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 131.

⁴⁶Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 70.

⁴⁷J. Peter Campbell, “The Cult of Spontaneity: Finnish-Canadian Bushworkers and the Industrial Workers of the World in Northern Ontario, 1919-1934,” in *Essays in Northwestern Ontario Working Class History: Thunder Bay and its Environs*, ed. Michel Beaulieu (Thunder Bay: Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies, 2008), 94.

of Finnish immigrants in North America were drawn to socialist organizations because socialism and communism offered Finns an opportunity to fight for improved living and working conditions within the political realm.⁴⁸ It can also be argued that the international focus of revolutionary organizations proved very appealing to many Finnish immigrants in Canada. Fighting for change in their adopted home was only one aspect of socialism; through the movement, Finnish immigrants could toil to change conditions for workers everywhere, including family and friends remaining in Finland. In addition, affiliation with socialist organizations allowed Finns to come together to share cultural traditions and practices. In Finland, socialists emphasized the importance of community and stressed the need for the involvement of all workers.⁴⁹ This cry resonated with Finnish immigrants, as evidenced by the popularity of socialist cultural halls.

With a keen eye on movements in Russia, Finns in both North America and Finland were profoundly affected by the Russian Revolution. Reflecting on the early days of the North American communist movement, Elis Sulkanen, a well known Finnish American organizer, remarked: “With ludicrous devotion did we sit in meetings of the underground branches, where the mentioning of the name of Lenin made the heart throb...In mystic silence almost in religious ecstasy, did we admire everything that came from Russia.”³⁹ For those who had not yet been compelled to draw political lines, Finland’s independence and the bitter Civil War that followed left no Finn politically

⁴⁸Kostiainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 191.

⁴⁹Varpu Lindström, “Finnish Socialist Women in Canada, 1890-1930” in *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics*, ed. Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 199.

³⁹Quoted in Peter Kivisto, “The Decline of the Finnish American Left, 1925-1945”. *International Migration Review*, 17, 1 (Spring 1983), 69.

neutral.⁵⁰ Finland was torn apart by war and, after its official end, the victorious ‘Whites’ (conservatives) systematically terrorized those who had been sympathetic to the ‘Reds’ (socialists or social democrats).⁵¹ Many escaped to North America in search of freedom, bringing their heightened class consciousness with them. The effects were clearly felt in Finnish Canadian and Finnish American communities.

Work in the Left

Whether politicized by traditions and events of the homeland or by immigrant life in Canada or the United States, a significant portion of Finns in North America pledged their allegiance to the workers’ movement. From the turn of the twentieth-century until the move to Karelia and beyond, Finnish leftists worked their way through a number of political movements and parties, making a lasting mark on the broader North American political and social spheres. An overview of the Finns’ establishment of Sointula and Drummond Island, and their involvement in the cooperative movement, Imatra Association, the Socialist Parties of Canada and the United States, the Social Democratic Party of Canada, their own ethno- cultural political organizations, unionism, and, finally, Communism, demonstrates that Finnish immigrants clearly desired a place of their own in the North American Leftist movement but struggled to find the perfect fit because of both internal and external factors. Ultimately, the opportunity to move to Karelia to establish their own utopia seemed the answer for thousands disheartened by the North American socialist movement’s failure to meet Finnish immigrants’ needs.

⁵⁰ Lindström, “Finnish Socialist Women in Canada,” 199.

⁵¹ Anthony F. Upton, *The Finnish Revolution 1917-1918* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 312.

Sointula & Drummond Island

One of the first attempts by Finns to make a political mark on North America can be seen in the example of the Finnish utopian community Sointula on Malcolm Island, British Columbia from 1901 to 1905. The brainchild of Finnish utopian socialists Matti Kurikka⁵² and A.B. Mäkelä, Sointula received a land grant from the Government of British Columbia in 1901. Kurikka's - and, by extension, Sointula's - brand of socialism was not motivated by the works of Marx; instead, they looked to Christian principles of love, equality, and harmony.⁵³ Building a new life based on cooperation appealed to many Finns frustrated by the realities of immigrant life in industrial North America.

By the summer of 1902, Sointula had 127 inhabitants and settlers continued to arrive over the next two years.⁵⁴ The Finnish residents were charged with clearing the forest, setting up housing, establishing industry – primarily lumbering and fishing – and anything else required for a fully functioning 'utopia'. Organized as the Kalevan Kansa Limited, the people of Sointula aimed to produce commodities that could be traded both internally and externally in order to move away from the capitalist cash system.

Perhaps ironically, though, rapidly growing debt plagued the community from its inception and was a significant cause of the commune's demise.⁵⁵ Additionally, a clash of personalities and philosophies, mixed with the difficult demands of building a self-sustaining community out of rugged bush, proved too much. The dream of Sointula, or

⁵² While Mäkelä was also instrumental to the organization of Sointula, Kurikka has historically become the better known figure.

⁵³ J. Donald Wilson, "Matti Kurikka: Finnish-Canadian Intellectual," in *BC Studies* No. 20 (Winter 1973-74), 52.

⁵⁴ John I. Kolhemainen, "Harmony Island: A Finnish Utopian Venture in British Columbia" in *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 2 (April 1941), 115 and 118.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

the Place of Harmony, ended on 27 May 1905 when the Kalevan Kansa dissolved.

Sointula shares fascinating similarities with the experiences of Finnish North Americans in Karelia decades later.

Another example of Finnish North American communal utopianism, though lesser known and not quite as dramatic as the Sointula story, can be found in the history of Drummond Island, Michigan. Finnish immigrant Maggie Walz became a government land claim agent in 1905 so that she could recruit desirable Finnish residents to the Island, who would participate in cooperative, temperate, Christian life.⁵⁶ The several hundred residents proved more aligned with socialist principles than with Walz's ideals, and the socialists took over the colony in 1914.⁵⁷ Finnish socialist activity continued on the island until the late 1930s⁵⁸, but the utopian aim of cooperative living never came to fruition. The Kangas family, whose letters we will become well acquainted with, moved to Karelia from the Finnish community of Drummond Island. Together, the examples of Sointula and Drummond Island demonstrate the Finnish North American tradition of utopianism.

The Cooperative Movement

The Cooperative movement became closely linked with Finns in Canada and especially the United States. In fact, Finnish immigrants had established between sixty

⁵⁶ Timothy Miller, *The Quest for Utopia in Twentieth Century America, Volume I: 1900-1960* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 94-95.

⁵⁷ Gary Kaunonen, *Finns in Michigan* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 74-75.

⁵⁸ Armas K. E. Holmio, *History of the Finns in Michigan*, translated by Ellen M. Ryyanen (Hancock, MI: Great Lakes Books, 2001), 161.

and seventy cooperative stores in the United States by 1919.⁵⁹ The appeal of the cooperative movement was its ability to allow workers to take into their own hands the meeting of material needs, and Finnish immigrants had become familiar with cooperative principles already in the homeland. Perhaps even more important than their role in providing material goods, coops organized social, cultural, and athletic activities for Finnish immigrants.⁶⁰ In the words of Gary Kaunonen, writing about the Finns in Michigan: “To the many families who came to depend on the coop, it became a way of life. Families and individuals shopped, worked, ate, and were entertained at the local coop...”⁶¹

The cooperative movement became closely associated with the Left, especially after the formation of the Communist International in 1919.⁶² By the late 1920s, the cooperative movement was embroiled in controversy as active members struggled to determine whether the communist hard-line or political neutrality would govern the coops. The fight was especially pronounced in the United States. Ultimately, in the spring of 1930 the Communists were ousted and links to the Party were severed, though the Communists would mount take-over efforts in the following years.⁶³ Many Communist coopers turned to the Karelian project. Once the political tensions were diffused, the coops grew quickly and began to lose their Finnish character. Decades of the cooperative movement meeting the material, physical, social, and cultural needs of

⁵⁹ Walfrid Jokinen, “The Finnish Cooperative Movement,” *Publications of the Institute of General History, University of Turku*, 7 (1975), 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Kaunonen, 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

Finnish immigrants drew to a close. Cooperation had not been the ultimate answer to the Finns' quest for a place to call their own.

Imatra

Coinciding with the beginnings of the Finnish immigrant cooperative movement were the origins of their earliest North American mass workers' organization. Finnish workers in the United States had come together to form the *Työväenliitto Imatra*, or Imatra Workers' League, in 1890. This organization operated as an inclusive mutual aid organization that advocated a broad type of socialism to better the lives of workers.⁶⁴ Imatra grew to claim thirty-two locals in the United States and Canada. The Port Arthur branch, for example, was formed in 1903.⁶⁵ Many of these branches traced their roots to temperance societies that had adopted a socialist point of view. Imatra successfully brought Finnish workers together to begin combating the difficulties they collectively shared as immigrants in Canada and the United States. However, it did not take long for rifts to appear.

Imatra's non-doctrinaire approach was criticized by Marxists, who advocated a more militant anti-clerical, anti-bourgeois, revolutionary direction. These staunch socialists succeeded in affiliating some Imatra locals with the American Socialist Party as early as 1904⁶⁶ and Canadian branches quickly followed suit. The era of Imatra had run its course.

The Socialist Parties of Canada and America

⁶⁴ Douglas Ollila, Jr., "The Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism in the Finnish Socialist Movement," *Publications of the Institute of General History, University of Turku*, No.7 (1975), 26.

⁶⁵ Metsaranta, 70.

⁶⁶ Ollila, "Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism," 29.

The Socialist Party of America (SPA) was formed in 1901 and the Socialist Party of Canada (or SPC) in 1903, and it did not take long for Finnish immigrants to join. In the words of Varpu Lindström: “The SPC did not ‘organize’ Finns; rather, it was Finns who ‘organized’ a significant section of the Socialist Party of Canada.”⁶⁷ The statement also applies to Finns in the SPA. In June 1906, the first Finnish language group of the Socialist Party was formed in Canada, joining Local #1 in Toronto.⁶⁸ Other Finnish language SPC branches began to emerge across the country, from Toronto to the West Coast, and the Finnish membership constituted approximately two-thirds of the total party membership.⁶⁹ However, the Finns’ relationship with the Socialist Party at large was strained. Interestingly, Finns in the American party faced different challenges than those in the Canadian party. Socialist Finns in the SPA were not warmly greeted by the Party leadership. Carl Ross outlines the anti-immigrant position of the Socialist Party leadership and their unwillingness to embrace the Finns en masse, despite the Party’s official stance of inclusiveness.⁷⁰ On the other hand, the Canadian Party leadership’s sole focus on the long-range goal of Marxist world revolution did not mesh with Finnish interest in addressing the immediate needs and demands of workers.⁷¹ In both the United States and Canada, Finns failed to find a suitable political platform in the Socialist Parties, but did not leave without a fight. For example, in 1908, Finnish Canadian members staged a coup, armed with a new platform focussed on reforms crucial to

⁶⁷Lindström, “The Socialist Party of Canada and the Finnish Connection,” 113.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁹Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause*, 115; Lindström, “The Socialist Party of Canada and the Finnish Connection,” 113.

⁷⁰ Ross, 68.

⁷¹Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left 1900-1918* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995), 142.

improving workers' lives.⁷² The Finnish bloc was narrowly defeated, resulting in a barrage of expulsions, and ultimately the severing of Finnish ties to the Socialist Party of Canada.⁷³

Industrial Workers of the World

As some Finnish North Americans worked to find a fit within the Socialist Parties, others turned to unionism to advance their objectives. The ideals of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or 'Wobblies'), in particular, resonated with many Finns in Canada and the United States. The focus on direct action to meet immediate needs, with a long-term goal of revolution, appealed to many who had felt hindered by the vagueness of the Socialist Parties.⁷⁴ Founded in Chicago in 1905, the IWW caught the attention of many socialist Finns right away but gained most of its Finnish immigrant support years later.

By 1912, Finnish workers in the Midwest had become disenchanted by the Western Federation of Miners and other smaller unions for their failure to meet the membership's needs and by the unions' move away from direct labour action.⁷⁵ Finns across the United States were equally frustrated with the American Federation of Labor. The failure of the traditional unions and Socialist Parties to reach out to the rank and file opened the doors for widespread IWW support. However, Ollila argues that "actual membership commitment to the IWW itself was most often quite minimal because the

⁷² Lindström, "The Socialist Party of Canada and the Finnish Connection," 117.

⁷³ Only the Vancouver Finnish SPC local remained after 1910. This local, however, soon fell victim to irreconcilable internal differences and fell apart. See Lindström, "The Socialist Party of Canada and the Finnish Connection," 118-119.

⁷⁴ Radforth. "Finnish Radicalism," 301.

⁷⁵ Ollila, "Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism," 50-51.

fires of pure devotion to revolutionary ideals most often burned low, and because membership had its penalties in the form of social ostracism, especially after the purges of 1917 which tempered the radical spirit of the Finns.”⁷⁶ That being said, the arrival of displaced leaders of the Wobbly movement from the United States to Canada – and Northwestern Ontario in particular – had a profound impact on Finnish political activism in the immediate post-WWI period.⁷⁷ Finnish bush and dock workers and grain handlers were especially keen to embrace Wobbly philosophy and actions.

Peter Campbell, in his excellent examination of Finnish Wobblies in Northern Ontario, provides a useful discussion of the IWW’s official platform and whether “spontaneity” truly did rule their approach.⁷⁸ Using the words of Salvatore Salerno, Campbell argues that the IWW “formed an associational context rather than a single ideology, a sensibility based on the emotion of working-class solidarity rather than doctrine, and a concern with agency rather than fixed organizational formation.”⁷⁹ This characterization of the Industrial Workers of the World helps to contextualize why the organization struggled to maintain loyalty when faced with the strengthening of communism. While many Finns continued to support the Wobbly cause into the 1930s and beyond, the rise of the communist movement led to a significant decline.

The Finnish American Socialist Federation

⁷⁶ Ollila, “A Time of Glory: Finnish-American Industrial Unionism, 1914-1917,” *Publications of the Institute of General History, University of Turku*, 9 (1977), 33. Members of the IWW were subject to numerous and violent raids by police in 1917, culminating in the show trial of 101 members, most infamously Bill Haywood, under the new US Espionage Act. The official repression, raids, and subsequent 101 guilty verdicts marked a dark era in the IWW’s history.

⁷⁷ Campbell, 121.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* Campbell quoting Salvatore Salerno, *Red November Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany 1989), 5-6.

As they struggled to claim their space in the North American socialist movement, both American and Canadian Finns began to form their own national organizational body. American Finns had already begun to organize collectively in 1903, when Eero Erkko led a movement to unite all Finnish immigrants in the United States, whether affiliated with the church, the temperance movement, or socialism, under the Finnish National League.⁸⁰ However, Erkko's organization failed to take off because the socialists were gaining popularity and saw only socialist organization as fruitful.

Finnish socialists formally founded the Finnish American Socialist Federation (FASF) at a convention in Hibbing, Minnesota in the summer of 1906, after a lengthy struggle to come together. The Federation proved to be a popular outlet for Finnish immigrant political action and cultural pursuits. The membership quickly grew. In 1912, for example, the FASF boasted having 10 925 members.⁸¹

A fascinating aspect of the Federation's legacy is its role in the establishment of the *Työväen Opisto* or Work People's College in 1908⁸². Although originally founded as the seminary of the Suomi Synod in 1896, which transformed into the People's College or Folk School of the National Church in Duluth, Minnesota in 1904, the institution is best remembered as a unique school for educating socialist leadership. The school was focussed on economics, sociology, and English-language instruction; all courses were committed to being "useful in the revolutionary movement."⁸³ The Work People's College also provided Finnish immigrants with English language skills and provided

⁸⁰ Ollila, "The Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism," 26.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸² For an overview of the origins and operations of the Work People's College, see Ollila, "Work People's College."

⁸³ Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 109.

assistance in filing citizenship applications.⁸⁴ Many eager students of socialism and key Finnish socialist leaders, like Sanna Kannasto, spent time at the school. In fact, as an indication of its reach, the Work People's College had 123 students in 1911.⁸⁵ By the time Finnish North Americans began to move to Karelia, the College was struggling to maintain its IWW identity in the face of growing Finnish Communist encroachment.

Although at its founding the Federation was officially affiliated with the Socialist Party of America and remained a language branch of the party until 1920, the relationship was far from unanimously accepted. Even at the founding convention many members advocated a commitment to radical industrial unionism and the Industrial Workers of the World.⁸⁶ By the end of the 1910s and with the dawn of international communism, the Federation was strained by internal divisions between the Socialists, Communists, and the industrial unionists, with the Communists eventually winning control.

Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada

While American Finns continued their relationship with the Socialist Party through the formation of their own organization, the FASF, Canadian Finns simultaneously looked for a new political party and worked on forming their own association. By 1910, Finns had come to find working within the Socialist Party of Canada nearly impossible.⁸⁷ In 1911, the new Social Democratic Party of Canada (or the

⁸⁴ Ollila, "Work People's College," 105.

⁸⁵ Ollila, "Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism," 41.

⁸⁶ Ollila, "Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism," 30; Ross, 69.

⁸⁷ Arja Pilli, "Finnish Canadian Radicalism and the Government of Canada from the First World War to the Depression," in *Finnish Diaspora I: Canada, South America, Africa, Australia and Sweden*, ed. Michael G. Karni (Toronto: The Multicultural Association of Ontario, 1981), 21.

SDPC) was formed at a convention held in Port Arthur, Ontario, and the newly formed Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada affiliated.⁸⁸

Edward Laine rightly argues that because the establishment of a national Finnish organization coincided with the emergence of the SDPC, the FSOC “was able to maintain and build upon its own autonomous existence right from the beginning.”⁸⁹ It seems the Finns had learned a valuable lesson from their failed relationship with the SPC: by organizing independently, as the FSOC, the Finns assured themselves a place and a voice within the Social Democratic Party. However, the relationship was short-lived. As in the United States, Finnish Canadian socialists struggled to find a party to represent them. Over time, FSOC connected Finns to the ever-changing Canadian socialist organizations of the day, first affiliating with the SDPC, then the Industrial Workers of the World, the One Big Union, and finally the Communist Party of Canada.

While perhaps not satiating the political needs of the Finnish membership, the FSOC undoubtedly made an impact on the Canadian Left. In a 1936 publication commemorating twenty-five years of the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada, founding member and long-time National Executive Chair J.W. Alqvist estimated that the FSOC, in its first ten years, contributed at least \$30,000 to the Canadian socialist movement, with an additional \$10,000 sent to Finnish ‘Reds’ following the Civil War.⁹⁰

The War

⁸⁸ For a comprehensive, insider’s view of the institutional history, see William Eklund, *Builders of Canada: History of the Finnish Organization of Canada, 1911-1971* (Toronto: Finnish Organization of Canada, 1987).

⁸⁹ E. Laine, 97.

⁹⁰ J. W. Alqvist, *Canadian Suomalainen Jarjesto - 25 Vuotta* (Sudbury: Vapaus Publishing Co., 1936), 39 and 42.

The First World War challenged the young FSOC. First, its press was stopped, and then the organization as a whole was banned through provisions of the War Measures Act, both for serving “enemy aliens” and for its alignment with the Left. Membership dropped by as much as half due to the upheaval caused by the organization’s ban and fear of individual persecution.⁹¹ The National Executive played their cards well, quickly complying with new requirements that it conduct its business in English, and transformed itself into a cultural organization. The Finnish Organization dropped the word ‘Socialist’ from its title until the War Measures Act was revoked in 1919.

The Finnish Organization of Canada, however, was not the only victim of wartime anti-immigrant and anti-socialist backlash. In the words of Douglas Ollila: “Anything foreign was automatically suspect, and immense pressure was brought to bear on all immigrants to purchase Liberty Bonds, speak only English, display the flag, and otherwise give unswerving support to Wilson’s Great Crusade.”⁹² Finland’s ties to Germany during the Civil War looked very suspicious to North Americans, and the growing perception that all Finns were Reds helped little. Finnish socialist activity in both Canada and the United States remained fairly quiet for the duration of the war and its immediate aftermath, but rumblings of a new political order were underway.

Communism

If the old socialist parties had neglected the needs of Finnish North American workers and the IWW lacked ideological firmness, the Communist or Workers’ Parties

⁹¹ E. Laine, 99.

⁹² Douglas Ollila, “Defects in the Melting Pot: Finnish-American Response to the Loyalty Issue 1917-1920,” *Siirtolaishistorian Tutkimuskeskus*, XVI (1976), 397.

in Canada and the United States came to more than make up in the political hard-line. With the 1919 establishment of the Communist International in the aftermath of the Russian Revolutions, Finns still searching for their place within the political spectrum turned to Moscow.

While the Finnish American Socialist Federation debated the merits of aligning with the new Communist International⁹³, it did not take long for Communist parties to emerge in the United States. In February of 1919, the new communist-oriented Left wing of the Socialist Party of New York issued its “Left Wing Manifesto,” which was quickly circulated throughout the American Socialist Party and across the border to Canada. According to Auvo Kostiainen, not many Finns were yet willing to turn from principles of social democracy in order to commit themselves to the radicalism proposed by the new faction.⁹⁴ However, the appeal of the Manifesto and the call for the overthrow of capitalism quickly began to find favour, and the Socialist Party became irreconcilably fractured. At the August 1919 Party Convention, two rival communist parties were formed: the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and the Communist Party (CP).⁹⁵ Finns, for the most part, found their place in the CP. Santeri Nuorteva, later a member of the Karelian leadership, acted as an organizer and liaison between the Finnish Communists and the English-speaking Communist Labour Party.⁹⁶ In May 1920, the United Communist Party was established, though it had far from unanimous support, and the

⁹³ For a discussion of the vote on joining the International, see Kostiainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 86-89.

⁹⁴ Kostiainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 70.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹⁶ Nuorteva would go on to become a crucial part of the Red Finns’ fight for Karelian autonomy in the 1920s and 1930s.

Communist International openly approved the merger.⁹⁷ With growing persecution of Reds, especially the immigrant elements, the United Party went underground for much of the next two decades, using the Workers' Party as its front.

In Canada, the emergence of a Communist party proved less dramatic. Before the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) was established in its underground and open forms, as the Workers' Party of Canada (WPC), many Canadian Bolshevik sympathizers had joined informal Canadian branches of the US communist parties, despite the continued ban on revolutionary organizations under the War Measures Act.⁹⁸ According to Ian Angus, an underground organization by the name of the Communist Party of Canada had been in existence since 1919.⁹⁹ However, in May 1921, a secret convention held in Guelph, Ontario established a program for a new party that would serve as the Canadian branch of the Communist International and the framework for the illegal or underground Communist Party of Canada. In addition, plans were made for an open mass party that would carry out the direction of the CPC, as ordered by the Comintern. The Workers' Party of Canada was officially founded in February of 1922. Within the first months of its creation, Canadian communism in the form of the Workers' Party of Canada had managed to draw in many of the country's leading socialist activists and their supporters.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Kostianen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 96.

⁹⁸ Tim Buck, *Thirty Years: The Story of the Communist Movement in Canada 1922-1952* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1952), 21.

⁹⁹ Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal: Vanguard, 1981), 36-42. However, due to a RCMP ban on the supposed documentation supporting Angus's claim, one can only be certain that pamphlets espousing a revolutionary manifesto were spread in the immediate post-WWI period by an unknown organization.

¹⁰⁰ Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners: European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism*

The emergence of Workers' Parties in Canada and the United States coincided with the adoption of a new United Front policy by the Third World Congress of the Communist International. The call could not have come at a better time for Canadian and American communists. For the infant Communist Parties, an opportunity to call to action anyone who had marvelled at the creation of a workers' state in Russia proved very beneficial. With an emphasis on unity, fractures in existing socialist parties and organizations could be used to gently coax new members toward communism. The United Front of the Workers' Parties represented the interests of all shades of socialists, social democrats, labour unionists, and even anarchists, along with a diverse range of cultural and social ideologies. With the Communist International's United Front, the Workers' Parties successfully replicated, in political terms, the diverse nature of the North American experience.

While many Finns had individually been moving towards communism, the Finnish American Socialist Federation became affiliated with the Workers' Party of the United States in late 1921 and the Finnish (Socialist) Organization of Canada joined the Workers' Party of Canada at their conference on 16 February 1922.¹⁰¹ This meant that all FSOC and FASF members also became members of their respective Communist Parties. The automatic membership proved very significant, considering that by 1930, the FSOC boasted over 6000 members.¹⁰² Half of the members of the Communist Party

in Canada, 1896-1932 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1979), 119.

¹⁰¹William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 51; Donald Avery, "Ethnic Loyalties and the Proletarian Revolution: A Case Study of Communist Political Activity in Winnipeg, 1923-1936" in *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*, eds. Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 70.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

of Canada in the 1920s came from the membership of the FSOC.¹⁰³ When other segments of the CPC witnessed stagnation or even a drop in party membership, Finnish membership continued to grow.¹⁰⁴ In the United States, Finns, through the FASF, accounted for some forty percent of the American communist membership.¹⁰⁵

In the Workers' Parties, in addition to a national body, federations based on language accommodated the majority of their supporters, who were affiliated first with their cultural socialist organizations.¹⁰⁶ Because of their strength in numbers and the experience contributed by radical immigrants, such as Finns, Jews, and Ukrainians, language groups were viewed as key pillars to the organization's structure, right from the foundation of the Parties.¹⁰⁷ These ethnic branches were to have their own constitutions and by-laws, and hold their own conferences, with an emphasis on maintaining the official party line at all times.¹⁰⁸ This model suited Finns who had learned to work with other political parties in the past.

The Finns became *the* financial backbone of the Canadian and American Communist Parties. For example, in Canada, with 2028 members out of the reported 4808 in 1923, the Finnish elements contributed a disproportionate two-thirds of the Party's total revenue, through fundraising and dues payments.¹⁰⁹ At times Finns supplemented the Parties even further. In 1922, Finnish Canadian communists donated

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Rodney, 76.

¹⁰⁵Ross, 182.

¹⁰⁶Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), 272.

¹⁰⁷Rodney, 41; Avery, "Ethnic Loyalties and the Proletarian Revolution", 71; Penner, 272.

¹⁰⁸Rodney, 41-42.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 55 and 68.

\$2000 to help launch the English language Party organ, *The Worker*.¹¹⁰ American Finns provided \$25 000 for the establishment of *The Daily Worker*.¹¹¹

However, the Finns' relationship with the Communist Parties quickly turned sour, just as the Workers' Party fronts were being dismantled. In 1924, the Communist International adopted a 'bolshevization' policy which, in part, meant the abolition of all language federations. In the words of Auvo Kostiainen, bolshevization was intended to "destroy the last remnants of socialist and social democratic thought among the world's communists."¹¹² The Comintern viewed the North American communist movement as splintered and failing to follow the official international party line. An emphasis on a 'working-class language' was the solution supported by the Communist International.¹¹³ Unfortunately for the more than eighty percent of non-English speaking members, this unifying language was to be English.¹¹⁴ While communist parties in other countries were largely structured unilingually, both the Canadian and American parties were created by the amalgamation of numerous linguistically and culturally differing organizations, and, thus, breaking the original branches into smaller cells proved almost impossible.¹¹⁵ In the North American context, bolshevization essentially meant the assimilation or

¹¹⁰Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners*, 120.

¹¹¹Ross, 182.

¹¹²Auvo Kostiainen, "The Finns and the Crisis Over 'Bolshevization' in the Workers' Party, 1924-25" in *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives*, Michael Karni et al. (Turku: Institute for Migration, 1975), 172.

¹¹³Avery, "Ethnic Loyalties and the Proletarian Revolution", 78 and Kivisto, "Decline of the Finnish Left," 70.

¹¹⁴Figures vary but typically suggest at least 80%. For example: Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 35 and Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners*, 116.

¹¹⁵Rodney, 85.

‘Americanization’ of immigrant communists.¹¹⁶ In an attempt to counter the very real fear expressed by the non-English branches, the Comintern and, in turn, the North American leadership argued that an inability to effectively communicate in English could be manipulated by the bourgeoisie.¹¹⁷

The bolshevization crisis not only alienated Finns and other language groups from the wider communist movement but also resulted in extreme divisions within the Finnish branches. Hostile in-fighting, neglect of the rank and file, and, ultimately, a rash of expulsions marked the end of moderation in the Communist Parties of Canada and the United States. By 1930, after years of struggling to maintain their original position within the North American communist movement, less than ten percent of the Finns who had aligned themselves with Communism at the beginning of the decade remained members.¹¹⁸

By the 1931 establishment of the Karelian Technical Aid to recruit Finnish Canadians and Americans to Soviet Karelia, the Finns’ relationship with the Communist Parties of North America was complicated, to say the least. Although the Karelian project was officially sanctioned by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Communist International, the Canadian and American Parties, as we will see, were very reluctant to grant remaining Finnish members permission to participate in the immigration scheme. Therefore, the vast majority of the Karelian migrants were not card-carrying communists, but rather those who felt betrayed by the North American

¹¹⁶Kostiainen, “The Finns and the Crisis Over ‘Bolshevization’ ,” 173.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 174.

¹¹⁸Kostiainen, “The Finns and the Crisis Over ‘Bolshevization’ ,” 192; Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 172.

Communist Parties.

Divide Between Leftists

The Finns' bitter experience with communism in the 1920s was not an isolated event of dissatisfaction and dissension, neither between Finnish immigrants and the Leftist political movement in North America, nor among Finnish socialists themselves. As evidenced by the continual shifts in allegiance, members of the Finnish socialist movement could not find a political party or philosophy to unite them as Leftist Finnish immigrants. Though committed to the establishment of new world order through varying forms of socialism, Finnish immigrants were also caught in trying to find their place in Canadian and American society, while holding on to their native Finnish culture. Different geographic and employment realities also separated the needs of Finnish immigrants spread throughout Canada and the United States. The contesting pulls could find no simple compromise and hostilities between socialists of varying shades of red were an ongoing feature of the history of Finnish North Americans up to the Karelian exodus and beyond.

One area of contention surrounded the question of anarchism. This example serves as a useful illustration of the typical schism among the Finnish North American Left. While conservative Finns and other unfriendly forces consistently referred to all Finnish socialists (and all other socialists, for that matter) as "anarchists," the label troubled those with social democratic leanings. Already beginning in the first decade of the 1900s, the Leftist Finnish-language press was filled with heated debates between the "impossibilist" industrial unionists and the "opportunist" socialists, as the two sides

referred to each other.¹¹⁹ The “impossibilists,” geographically primarily Midwesterners, believed that freedom would only be gained through a complete overthrow of the capitalist electoral system, beginning with meeting workers’ immediate needs through widespread general strikes. On the other hand, the “opportunists,” typically from the Eastern United States, wanted to use the existing structure to implement political changes to the advantage of the workers.¹²⁰

These two points of view were further aggravated by a whole range of additional opinions and strategies. Continuous in-fighting and ideological power struggles are a consistent and fascinating feature of the history of Finnish socialism in Canada and the United States. Despite all their differences in philosophy and rhetoric, Finnish Canadian and American Leftists were united in their fight against conservatism and “White” Finns.

Divide Between ‘Whites’ and ‘Reds’

Clashes rooted in the homeland combined with North American economics and labour competition separated ‘Red’ Finns from ‘White’ Finns. The wave of immigration that followed the Finnish Civil War brought with it bitterness that succeeded in dividing Finns so thoroughly that the remnants of that line still remain after almost one hundred years.¹²¹ At this time many former members of the civil war White Guard arrived and were faced with an uncertain economic future and a thriving Finnish socialist

¹¹⁹ Ollila, “Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism,” 36.

¹²⁰ Geography and economic opportunity may explain these differences to an extent. Douglas Ollila argues that differences in working conditions in the Eastern United States, where labour relations were sufficiently peaceful, compared to the Midwest, where significant labour tensions were the norm, help to account for the differences in the two factions’ approaches. See, Ollila, “Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism,” 49-50.

¹²¹ See Auvo Kostiaainen, “The Tragic Crisis: Finnish-American Workers and the Civil War in Finland,” in *For the Common Good*: 217-235.

movement.¹²² However, even former Red Guardsmen were viewed with suspicion by the Finnish North American left wing. In 1921, “The Committees of Examination of Recent Arrivals from Finland” began operations in Canada and the United States, subjecting newcomers to thorough oral questioning and background research before being granted permission to join Finnish North American workers’ organizations.¹²³ These committees, continuing into the late 1920s, wanted to ensure that no “butchers”¹²⁴ infiltrated Red-sympathetic organizations.

The involvement of so many Finns in the frequent labour disputes and disruptions of the early 1900s caused employers to be wary of hiring Finns, believing them all to be radicalized. This meant that even those “church” Finns, vehemently opposed to the activities of the socialists, were often unwelcome at work sites.¹²⁵ Conservative Finns rallied together in Canada and the United States to publically distance themselves from Finnish leftists.¹²⁶ In the United States, non-socialist Finns organized the Lincoln Loyalty League in 1918. Canadian Finns attempted to come together under the Kansallis-Liito (Finnish National Federation) in 1917 and other similar groups over the years, but had lasting success with the Central Organization of Loyal Finns in Canada in 1931. With these organizations, Finnish conservatives promoted their own well-being,

¹²² Saarinen, 116.

¹²³ Kostiaainen, “The Tragic Crisis,” 230-232.

¹²⁴ *Lahtarit*, in Finnish: the Red Finn term for the White Guard.

¹²⁵ Interestingly, though, being wrongly accused of being a socialist was not the only difficulty conservative Finns faced in securing employment. Many “White” Finns accused the “Reds” of using “workplace terrorism” to be sure that only union members were hired. See for example Raili Garth and Kaarina Brooks, *Trailblazers: The Story of Port Arthur Kansallisseura Loyal Finns in Canada* (Toronto: Jack Lake Productions Inc., 2010), 12.

¹²⁶ See, for example, London, “The Finnish-American Anti-Socialist Movement, 1908-1918”; Ollila, “Emergence of Radical Industrial Unionism in the Finnish Socialist Movement,” 30; Garth and Brooks, *Trailblazers*.

asserted their North Americanness, and also informed prospective employers about those with known, or even suspected, ties to socialism or unionism.¹²⁷ The tensions caused by the severe economic downturn in the late 1920s and early 1930s meant that displays of loyalty to Canada and the United States could prove very beneficial to securing employment in a scarce market.

The persecution of socialist sympathizers in North America, often referred to as the 'Red Scare', affected many Finns. Not only were Finnish immigrant socialists attacked by the Canadian and American governments, and nativist groups, but the onset of the Depression led to a no-holds-barred attack by organized conservative Finns. Varpu Lindström's "The Finnish Canadian Communities during the Decade of Depression" successfully points to the rise of conservatism and right-wing movements among North American Finns as contributing to the hardships experienced by Finnish socialists and communists and to the decision to immigrate to Karelia.¹²⁸

Conclusion

By examining the course of Finnish immigrant life in Canada and the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, we gain an appreciation of the socio-political world the Karelian immigrants left behind and the 'cultural baggage' they brought with them. Looking at Finnish immigrants' establishment of Sointula and Drummond Island, and involvements with the cooperative movement, socialism, social democracy, their own political-cultural organizations, the IWW, and communism

¹²⁷Garth and Brooks, 23-24.

¹²⁸Varpu Lindström, "The Finnish Canadian Communities during the Decade of Depression," in *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia During the Depression Era*, ed. Ronald Harpelle et al. (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, Inc., 2004), 23.

demonstrates the ways that Finnish immigrants committed to improving the lives of fellow workers, and even took steps toward building their utopia. When faced with irreconcilable conflicts within the Left, an organizing Right, and an unfriendly North American economic and political state, the call for a Finnish workers' utopia in Karelia came at the perfect time. As news of the creation of a worker's republic was reaching North America, the effects of the Great Depression and the Red Scare were beginning to take their toll. Karelia was presented by Finnish language newspapers and recruiters as a land of opportunity where employment was available for all willing to work. Peter Kivisto believes Karelia offered Canadian and American Finns a chance to escape the alienation they had come to experience.¹²⁹

These willing builders of socialism went to the Karelian wilderness armed with the skills and experiences needed to build community from the ground up. The migrants went on to reproduce familiar forms of Finnish immigrant cultural and social life in the Soviet Union. Leaving the struggles of North American immigrant life behind, the road to utopia was to be harmonious this time around. However, the ideals and realities of Karelia within the Soviet sphere had long been set into action, and, as we will see, the Finnish North Americans arrived at a crucial moment of change that would alter their paths.

¹²⁹Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 173. See also, Anita Middleton, "Karelian Fever: Interviews With Survivors," *Melting into Great Waters, Journal of Finnish Studies*, 1, 3 (1997), 180.

Chapter II

The Question of *Karjala*: The Karelian Background

The Finnish Canadians and Americans who answered the call of Soviet Karelia in the 1930s were no strangers to the ‘Karelian Question.’ Karelia, or *Karjala* in Finnish, has for many generations occupied a central part of the Finnish people’s sense of self, past and future. However, the question of Karelia’s significance and how to best realize its potential has been highly contested. By joining in the recruited immigration of the 1930s, Finnish North Americans became participants in the contentious negotiation of Finnish-Russian relations. This chapter examines the role of Karelia in the rise of Finnish nationalism and Finland’s struggle for independence, Edvard Gylling’s vision of Karelia as a Red Finn homeland and the resolution of peace between Finland and Soviet Russia, ‘Karelianization’ in the era of the NEP and *korenizatsiia* minority accommodation, the tradition of Finnish North American involvement with Karelia, and, finally, the changes in Soviet strategies and their implications for Karelia and Finnish Canadian and American immigrants in the 1930s. Such an investigation highlights some remarkable similarities: firstly, between the pre-independence Finnish and Russian relationship and that of Soviet Karelia and the Bolshevik centre; between ‘White’ Finn and ‘Red’ Finn ideas for Karelia; and between Finnish and Soviet conceptions of Karelia as a wilderness to be colonized. Combining the North American Finnish immigrant context, as outlined in the last chapter, with the Karelian background helps to explain

how 6500 Finnish North Americans settled there and creates a framework for making sense of the experiences that were in store for them. Unbeknownst to the Finnish North American life writers, the conditions for their individual fates in Karelia began to form over a hundred years before they set foot on Soviet ground.

The Rise of Finnish Nationalism

In the fall of 1809, Russia and Sweden signed the Peace of Fredrikshamn, which transferred control of Finland to the Russian Empire. Even before the treaty was concluded, Alexander I had made arrangements with the Finnish Estates-General to recognize Finnish autonomy in order to sway loyalties away from the Swedish.¹ Whether it was due to a feeling of empowerment inspired by the new guarantees of autonomy or because, as Anthony Upton has argued, the Finnish Swedish-speaking² elite could no longer identify with their rulers, as had been possible under the reign of Sweden,³ these Finnish intellectuals regardless embraced the spirit of *Fennophilia*. Stirring mass Finnish nationalism, the elites worked to elevate Finnish language and literature over the Swedish, and actively shaped the Finnish people's history.

Out of this movement came the *Kalevala*. Dr. Elias Lönnrot, like other scholars of the time, travelled through the Finnish language borderlands of Finland and Russia gathering folk poetry. Lönnrot published the first version of the *Kalevala* in 1835 and the second, elaborated and now standard version, in 1849. These *runos* formed the epic of

¹ For an excellent introductory history of emerging Finnish autonomy and the Finnish Grand Duchy under Russian rule, see Jason Lavery, *The History of Finland* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

² Most of the middle classes and intellectuals did not speak Finnish at this time, since Swedish had been the ruling language, and that of education, literature, and state institutions. Finnish, however, was the main language of the majority of agrarian and labouring Finns.

³ Upton, 4.

the Finnish people. However, to complicate the claim on these ancient Finnish roots, the *runos* were primarily preserved among the Finnish speakers of Karelia, securely in the clutches of the Russian Empire. Regardless, for Finns, in David Kirby's words, "Karelia came to assume immense significance as the cultural cradle of Finnishness, where the ancient poems and the traditions of their forefathers had somehow been magically preserved by simple folk."⁴ However, the *Kalevala* stood for more than just a glorified Finnish past. The poems, as Eino Friberg writes, were "not a simple summary of things past, but very emphatically a proof of an ethnic entity previously underestimated, and an argument for its coming to full expression."⁵ Finns believed they had an obligation to 'modernize' the local Finnish, Karelian, Ingrian, and Vepsian populations of Karelia, uplifting them with Lutheranism and Finnish culture.⁶ Though Russians had also made claims on the folklore of the region⁷, in the *Kalevala* and in Karelia, Finnish nationalists had found their origins.⁸

Lönnrot and other Finnish cultural nationalists, like writer Aleksis Kivi, poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg, and political theorist and ardent Fennophile J.V. Snellman, worked to bring the Finnish language and Finnishness to the forefront for much of the following decades. Finland's cultural renaissance and rise of nationalism under the benevolent Russian overlord would become a crucial example to support claims for an

⁴ David Kirby, *A Concise History of Finland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93.

⁵ Eino Friberg, "Translator's Preface: The Significance of the *Kalevala* to the Finns," in *The Kalevala: Epic of the Finnish People* (Keuruu, Finland: Otava Publishing Company, 1988), 12.

⁶ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 18.

⁷ Markku Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune, 1920-1923: Nationalism as the Path to Communism," *The NEP Era: Soviet Russia, 1921-1928*, 1 (2007), 2.

⁸ See Paul Austin, "Soviet Finnish: The End of a Dream," *East European Quarterly* XXI, 2 (June 1987), 184.

autonomous Soviet Karelia in the 1920s. However, by the 1880s, Finland's relaxed relationship with the Russian centre had become strained. Heavy-handed Russification campaigns aimed to undermine autonomy and ever-strengthening Finnish nationalism. The 1898 appointment of Nikolai Bobrikov to Governor General of Finland resulted in a subsequent attack on Finnish law-making, the imposition of Russian language education and officials, and the very unpopular military conscription law of 1901 that would have all Finnish men serve in the Russian military.⁹ In addition to major protests and military boycotts by Finns and Swedish-Finns, emigration to North America reached new heights as people fled the 'Age of Oppression.'

The Russian invasion of Finnish autonomy was met with quickly organized opposition. However, this initial opposition was divided along two main lines. The so-called Old Finns believed that continuing to work and negotiate with the Russian state, as had been the status quo since 1809, would allow Finnish culture to continue to flourish. Conversely, the 'Young Finns' believed that Finnishness could only be protected through a vigilant defence of Finnish autonomy, ultimately leading to the creation of a Finnish nation.¹⁰ Among the political parties that supported the Young Finn constitutionalism was the rising Social Democratic Party. Socialist ideologies were rapidly popularizing in Finland as the nationalist movement grew. The Young Finns participated in civil disobedience and some small groups organized underground militias. On June 16th,

⁹ For a thorough study of Russification in Finland under Bobrikov, see Tuomo Polvinen, *Imperial Borderland: Bobrikov and the Attempted Russification of Finland, 1898-1904* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). On the February Manifesto, see especially 81-102, and on the expansion of Russian education see especially 174-176. Anthony Upton argues that the 1901 conscription law was the issue that stirred up the resentment and activated the general population: Upton, 6.

¹⁰ Lavery, 75.

1904, Eugene Schauman, a Young Finn, shot Bobrikov in the Senate and then turned the gun on himself.¹¹ Bobrikov's murder triggered widespread rebellion against Russian imperialization. Nicholas II returned some of Finland's legislative rights and transformed the Estates-General into a Parliament in 1906, but the Finns' quest for nationhood could not be appeased by the facade of autonomy.¹²

Finns Divided

With expanding industrialization and no relief in the plight of tenant farmers (*torparit*), many embraced the Social Democrats and unionism to combat Russian rule and the poverty and hunger spreading throughout the country. Faced with popular unrest and continuing Russification campaigns, the Finnish middle class strengthened its commitment to nationalism. Anthony Upton outlines the different ways that the working and middle classes viewed Russian rule:

to the bourgeoisie Finn, the danger was the subversion of the constitution, and oppression meant the appointment of a Russian to a Finnish official post; to the worker, the danger was the way in which power of the Russian state sustained Finnish capitalists in their struggle with the proletariat, and oppression was the use of Russian troops or blacklegs in a Finnish industrial dispute.¹³

Upton's statement demonstrates how Finnishness and the quest for sovereignty were understood in highly classed terms. Finland quickly cycled through Parliaments in the decade after the first election¹⁴, speaking to difficulties in satisfying a multitude of interests and approaches that hinged on culture, language, and class, paired with the

¹¹Polvinen, 258-262; Lavery, 76.

¹² The Russian Tsar had ultimate veto power, could re-group the Senate as he wished, and controlled revenues. Upton, 10.

¹³ Upton, 13.

¹⁴ For a description, see Kirby, 150-152.

interference of unwelcome foreign control. The fall of the Russian tsarist government in 1917, though, finally resulted in the formation of what has come to be known as Finland's first official government, a Social Democrat-led coalition. While almost unanimous in their desire for Finnish independence, Finns of different political allegiances were divided on whether there was a continued obligation to work with the Russian Provisional Government, as upheld by groups like the Old Finns, or whether the Tsar's abdication had severed Finland's bondage, as argued by the Social Democrats and the Agrarian League.¹⁵ Further disagreements about whether the Parliament or the Senate would rule, differences between socialist-Bolshevik supporters and non-socialists, and in-fighting between hardliners and reformists within the Socialist and Conservative movements intensified relations in Finland.

In the words of Jason Lavery, “[t]he Russian threat had dissipated in the minds of many voters, while the threat of violent domestic revolution had risen.”¹⁶ The Bolshevik takeover in November 1917 again changed the game in Finland: the non-socialist ‘Whites’ wished to cut ties with Soviet Russia immediately, while the socialist ‘Reds’ wanted to see how the Bolsheviks would act on the question of Finnish autonomy. On December 6th, however, the White led Finnish Senate passed a Declaration of Independence. The new nation had many challenges to resolve, including what its eastern border would look like. Almost immediately following the Declaration of Independence, the Finnish government committed to securing Karelia and the Petsamo

¹⁵ Lavery, 83.

¹⁶ Ibid.

region in the far northwest, and considered turning to the Germans for assistance.¹⁷ By the new year, Finland's independence had been recognized by the Bolsheviks and other foreign powers. Lenin initially agreed to cede Petsamo to the 'Socialist Workers' Republic of Finland,'¹⁸ but the question of Karelia was left unresolved. Too many differences between conservative Finnish nationalists and socialists made further progress on questions of Finland's structure and organization impossible. As the world acknowledged the fledgling nation, Finns, now starkly divided into Red and White factions, began to mobilize their armed guards.¹⁹

The Red Guard, led by the Social Democrats, took control of Southern Finland, including the four largest centres, Helsinki, Viipuri, Tampere, and Turku. The White Government army secured the rest of the country. From February on, Finland's men and women were entangled in a bloody civil war that culminated in April, when the Whites called in German supports and defeated the Reds in a series of raids. The war was officially over on May 5, 1918, but its wounds stayed in the forefront of public memory for generations and even followed Finns across the ocean.²⁰ In total, close to 10 000 Whites died as a result of the conflict, while the Reds' losses have been calculated at around 30 000 casualties.²¹ However, the majority of the Red victims died after the

¹⁷ Osmo Jussila, Seppo Hentilä, and Jukka Nevakivi, *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State: A Political History of Finland since 1809* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 116-118.

¹⁸ However, the transfer of Petsamo did not occur at this time due to the proceeding war and tensions between White Finland and Soviet Russia.

¹⁹ For the most comprehensive English language study of the Finnish Civil War, see Upton, *The Finnish Revolution 1917-1918*.

²⁰ For very insightful analysis of the public memory and commemoration of the Civil War, see Ulla-Maija Peltonen, *Punakapinan Muistot: Tutkimus työväen muistelukerronnan muotoutumisesta vuoden 1918 jälkeen* (Helsinki: SKS, 1996) and Peltonen, *Muistin Paikat: Vuoden 1918 sisällissodan muistamisesta ja unohtamisesta* (Helsinki: SKS, 2003).

²¹ Lavery, 87.

official cease fire. Following the Whites' victory, Reds were hunted, terrorized, and imprisoned. Post-civil war Finland was a hostile environment for anyone with sympathies for the socialist cause or the Bolsheviks. Those who were able fled; many Reds found their way to the Finnish immigrant communities of North America and became key left activists there, and others found exile in places like Sweden and in - now befriended - Soviet Russia.

Having forcefully secured their power in Finland, White Finns turned to Karelia to continue their work. Still set on bringing Karelia into the Finnish nation and holding on to the Fennomania of decades past, the White Finnish government began extensive agitation campaigns among the Finnish and Finno-Ugric speakers of the region in an attempt to turn the people against the Bolsheviks. In August 1918, Finnish border guards pushed into Repola and convinced the people to join Finland.²² Similar expeditions and missionary work continued over the course of the next years, with the aim of converting the impoverished population of the borderlands into Finnish nationalists.²³

Meanwhile, Red Finns in exile began to regroup and re-envision their work among the Finnish people, having been displaced from their homeland. Many in the Red leadership began to look to Soviet Karelia as the hope for a Finnish revolutionary base. In August 1918, the Finnish Communist Party was established in Moscow, positioning Red Finns to work closely with the Soviets. In Sweden, another Finnish exile, newly converted to Communism, began to formulate plans that would result in the creation of the Karelian Workers' Commune.

²² Jussila et al., 122-123.

²³ Kirby, 193; Jussila et al., 138-141; Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 2-3.

Edvard Gylling & the Red Finn Homeland

Edvard Gylling, born to a wealthy middle class family in Kuopio in 1881, began his political life amid the fight for Finnish freedom from Bobrikov's repression. Gylling, who was a scholar and politician, worked with the Social Democrats and Old Finns at the turn of the century.²⁴ Gylling's nationalism, special interest in the living conditions of the rural population, and work with the Helsinki and National Statistical Bureaus made him staunchly opposed to the large scale emigration occurring in Finland in the first years of the 1900s.²⁵ Alexis Pogorelskin's research on Gylling characterizes him as a "conciliator who throughout his political career showed a preference for negotiation over confrontation."²⁶ Therefore, Gylling, as a self-described "right-wing socialist,"²⁷ did not support the revolutionary cause, instead supporting parliamentary reform, and worked to prevent his beloved nation from erupting into Civil War.²⁸ However, when hostilities broke out, Gylling was nonetheless selected to serve as the Red Guard's Chief of Staff in 1918, following his brief stint as Minister of Finance in the revolutionary government. After being charged with treason by the White Finnish Senate at the close of war, Gylling found refuge in Stockholm, where he began to draft his vision for a Red Finn home in the mythical land of Karjala.

²⁴ Alexis Pogorelskin, "Edvard Gylling and the Origins of 'Karelian Fever,'" in *The Dividing Line: Borders and National Peripheries*, edited by Lars-Folke Landgren and Maunu Häyrynen (Helsinki: Renvall Institute Publications, 1997), 262-264.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 264-265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁷ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 20.

²⁸ John H. Hodgson, *Communism in Finland: A History and Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 65 and 147-148.; Pogorelskin, "Edvard Gylling," 265.

Gylling's plan for the Red Finn homeland included Karelia and the Kola Peninsula, Red Finns as leaders, Finnish language and culture as its foundation, and the right to self-govern matters of local policy, education, and finance.²⁹ With the population envisioned to be at least half Finnish and Karelian, the Soviet Karelian commune would serve as the perfect centre for the future 'Soviet Republic of Scandinavia'.³⁰ Though first attempts to realize his plan amounted to little, Gylling was called to meet with Lenin in May 1920. By the May meeting, the Soviet leadership was in the position to reap real advantages from a careful consideration of the Karelian proposal.

Soviet Russia had not signed a peace treaty with Finland since the conclusion of the First World War. The young Soviet government was very much still sorting out its central organization, trying to rally the support of its culturally and geographically diverse population, and asserting its place in international politics. Already consumed with controlling Polish ambitions in the Ukraine, the Finnish pursuit of Karelia and their close relationship with Germany added unwelcome stress to Russian foreign affairs. Karelia had, in fact, gained special importance for the Russians after the loss of Finland and consequent access to the Gulf of Finland, because the Murmansk railway, completed in 1916, was now the Soviets' primary route to the open sea.³¹ Therefore, ensuring access was crucial and making peace with Finland was seen as the key. In addition to making dramatic territorial demands³², one of Finland's additional conditions was self-governance for Karelia. It seemed, then, that Gylling's plan to bring Finnish autonomy to

²⁹ Baron, 21; Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 5.

³⁰ Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 6; Baron, 21.

³¹ Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 2.

³² Jussila et al., 138. Finland demanded all of Karelia from Lake Ladoga to Lake Onega in the South straight through to the entirety of the Kola Peninsula in the north.

Karelia under the Soviet realm could prove to be the solution to winning Finland's favour.

On 7 June 1920, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee issued a decree that established the Karelian Workers' Commune, just days in advance of the opening of a new round of peace negotiations with Finland.³³ The commune was created as a buffer between Finland and the Soviet Union preventing Finnish annexation, to counter White Finn agitation, swaying loyalties to the Soviets via the Red Finns, and to pacify unrest by improving living conditions through development.³⁴ However, the founding of the Karelian Commune did not make Finland automatically agreeable to signing a peace treaty with Russia. Finland wanted more say in the terms and extent of Karelian autonomy. Therefore, the Soviets, desperate for peace, continued to broaden the scope of Karelia's self-governance, conceding to practically all of Gylling's requests, including control over local revenues. As Markku Kangaspuro succinctly concludes,

[w]ithout the threat that Finland posed to the Murmansk railroad, no autonomy of this scale would have been possible. Had not Karelian autonomy had this dimension of international politics, Red Finns would never have gained the central role in Karelia they now were to enjoy.³⁵

Kangaspuro and others have likewise demonstrated how, under the pressure of signing the peace, Gylling's Karelia became the area with the most wide-ranging autonomy in all

³³ Hodgson, 149; Jussila et al., 138; For a concise account of the way the 'Karelian Question' went through the Soviet bureaucracy in the spring of 1920, see Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 6-10.

³⁴ See, for example, Markku Kangaspuro, "Russian Patriots and Red Fennomans," in *Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia*, edited by Antti Laine and Mikko Ylikangas (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2002), 30.

³⁵ Kangaspuro, "Russian Patriots and Red Fennomans," 33.

of the Soviet Union.³⁶ The Tartu/Dorpat Agreement was ultimately signed on October 14th, with Finland gaining Petsamo, but losing Repola and other villages that had been secured through Karelian campaigns.³⁷ For non-socialist Finnish nationalists, the treaty, in the words of David Kirby, “was a ‘shameful peace,’ a betrayal not only of the Karelian people, but also of the full realisation of Finnish national statehood... Karelia, romanticised and lauded as the cradle of Finnish culture, was now inaccessible beyond the frontier, and in the hands of the enemy,” both Red Finn and Soviet.³⁸ Ironically, though, White Finn and Red Finn visions for Karelia differed little.

Korenizatsiia & “Karelianization”

With the green light given to begin building a Red Finn commune in Karelia and the threat of Finnish annexation eased (at least temporarily), the Fall of 1920 also marked the beginning of a Soviet era of minority accommodation, or the strategy of *korenizatsiia*. At the end of the tsarist regime, about fifty percent of Russia’s population was non-Russian and the revolution and Russian civil war had done much to awaken minority nationalisms.³⁹ On October 10th, *Pravda* published an article written by Stalin, in his role as People’s Commissar of Nationalities, that called for an ‘indigenization’ of the borderlands to foster cultural and linguistic development, along with economic and

³⁶ See for example, Kangaspuro, “The Origins of the Karelian Workers’ Commune” in *Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia*, ed. Antti Laine and Mikko Ylikangas, 24-48 (Helsinki: Kikumora, 2002), and Sari Autio, “Soviet Karelian Forests in the Planned Economy of the Soviet Union, 1928-37,” in *Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia*, ed. Antti Laine and Mikko Ylikangas (Helsinki: Kikumora, 2002), 73-74.

³⁷ Jussila et al., 139.

³⁸ Kirby, 193.

³⁹ Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53.

resource development.⁴⁰ By the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, *korenizatsiia* had become official policy. Though vaguely defined, Lenin's Russia was to be a federalist union supported by the restricted autonomy of the vast state's minority nationalities.⁴¹ The Bolsheviks were aware of the 'backwardness' of rural Russia and saw roads, electricity, postal service, and improved hygiene, among other factors, as crucial to achieving modernity.⁴² Autonomy, then, was the key to realizing these beacons of modernization. By installing locals to administrative posts and allowing some level of self-governance on local issues, the Soviets envisioned a cultural uplift among the minority groups, bringing them to the level of the Russian Soviets and ensuring loyalty.⁴³ Soviet *korenizatsiia* perfectly suited the Red Finns' aspirations.

The Karelian leadership team consisted of Red Finns in all top posts, with Edvard Gylling selected as the main man, in the position of Permanent Chairman of the Karelian Council of the People's Commissars and his long-time colleague and other former Finnish Social Democrat, Kustaa Rovio, as First Secretary of the Karelian Communist Party. The Soviets believed that using Finns as the representatives of the state would help border residents, susceptible to White Finnish agitation, better relate to the Soviet cause.⁴⁴ Gylling and the Red Finns were focussed on building a new homeland for Finns and saw themselves as the natural leaders of the people. The leadership was then charged with ingraining Finnishness in the public's lives.

⁴⁰ Baron, 36.

⁴¹ Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union*, 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁴³ Kangaspuro, "Russian Patriots and Red Fennomans," 26-27; Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union*, 57.

⁴⁴ Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 7; Antti Laine, "Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia: Continuity and Change in 20th Century Russia" in *Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia*, ed. Antti Laine and Mikko Ylikangas, 24-48 (Helsinki: Kikimora, 2002) 9.

The question of which language would be the Commune's primary language of administration and education was an important and difficult one. In Karelia, Russian, Finnish, Veps, and three main dialects of Karelian were all represented. Northern Karelian was very similar to Standard Finnish, while the southern dialects were quite distinct.⁴⁵ Karelian speakers far outnumbered Finnish speakers in the region, but the Karelian language had yet to be standardized and had no literary form, so choosing Karelian as an official language would have been a complicated matter.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in the minds of Finnish nationalists, like Gylling, the Karelian language was little more than just another dialect of Finnish.⁴⁷ In Hannu Rautkallio's words: "[i]n Karelia there was a saying that the Karelian language was poor Russian, but even poorer Finnish."⁴⁸ Russian language was well-represented in the region as many Karelians were also fluent, but selecting Russian as the main language in the newly autonomous region would have made the establishment largely redundant in the view of *korenizatsiia* and, in Kustaa Rovio's words, "nonsensical."⁴⁹ Both Russian and Finnish were given official language status, but between 1921 and 1935, Karelia became increasingly Finnicized.⁵⁰

Finnish language newspapers and libraries were established as a passive form of expanding Finnishness in Karelia.⁵¹ On a more official level, from 1922 onward the

⁴⁵ Austin, 187.

⁴⁶ Hodgson, 155; Austin, 187.

⁴⁷ Austin, 187.

⁴⁸ Rautkallio, 38. "Karjalassa oli tapana sanoa, että karjalan kieli oli huonoa venäjää, mutta vielä huononpaa suomea."

⁴⁹ As quoted in Hodgson, 156.

⁵⁰ Rautkallio provides an overview of Karelian Finnicization in *Suuri Viha*, especially 36.

⁵¹ Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 11.

policy of ‘Karelianization’ was actively pursued.⁵² As an indication of what the Karelian Commune’s true objectives were, the policy, in actuality, meant elevating the status of the Finnish language – or ‘Finnish-Karelian’, as it was tokenized - and the assimilation of Karelians and other Finno-Ugrians into Finnish speakers. Out of 420 schools in the region in 1920, not a single one used Finnish as the language of instruction.⁵³ In 1922 Karelia’s educational budget was adjusted to establish a comprehensive Finnish language school system, with funds redirected from Russian language schooling.⁵⁴ By the time Finnish North Americans were arriving in the 1930s, all of Karelia’s schools were Finnish.⁵⁵ Likewise, regional records and most interactions with the administration had become Finnish.⁵⁶

Based on the elevated position of the Red Finns and Finnish language in Karelia, one would expect the region’s population to have been largely ethnically Finnish as well. However, that was not the case. Finns actually accounted for less than one percent of the population.⁵⁷ In addition to ethnic Finns who had roots in Karelia, the region’s Finnish population was comprised of no more than 10 000 Red Finn refugees (including Social Democrats, Communists, and other Leftists) who had fled Finland during and after the Civil War, and a steady flow of illegal border-hoppers (*loikkaarit*), of whom an estimated

⁵² Hodgson, 156-158; Reino Kero, “The Role of Finnish Settlers from North America in the Nationality Question in Soviet Karelia in the 1930’s,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 6, 3 (1981), 230-231.

⁵³ Hodgson, 156.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Ol’ga Iliukha, “Behind the Facade of the Soviet School: Ways and Means of Bringing Up a ‘New Individual’ in the Schools of Karelia in the 1930s,” in *Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia*, ed. Antti Laine and Mikko Ylikangas (Helsinki: Kikumora Publications, 2002), 52; Pogorelskin, “Edvard Gylling,” 267; Hodgson, 158.

⁵⁶ Reino Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 14.

⁵⁷ Hodgson, 153;

3000 to 3500 settled in Karelia.⁵⁸ Interestingly, while Karelia had such strong associations with Finnishness, only approximately ten percent of Finns in Soviet Russia resided in Karelia, with the majority instead located in the Leningrad area.⁵⁹ Ethnic Karelians represented some 40% of the population in the 1920s but Russians were the most numerous in the region.⁶⁰ In population counts taken during the transition from the Commune structure to the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) in 1923, Russians represented 55.7 percent of the total population.⁶¹ In Petrozavodsk (or Petroskoi in Finnish), the Commune's selected capital, Russians accounted for some 90% of its residents in 1926.⁶² The early years of the commune were also characterized by continuing negotiations over Karelian borders. Between the establishment of the Karelian Workers' Commune and the end of 1924, the region's borders had been redrawn at least six times.⁶³ The overall impact of Karelia's spatial redefining was to further dilute of the Finnish and Karelian character of the region, due to the inclusion of additional ethnically Russian areas.⁶⁴

The demographic reality in Karelia suggests that the Soviets were, in fact, simply using Red Finns in Karelia to appease Finland and the discontented borderland residents, rather than displaying any real commitment to the promotion of the region's indigenous

⁵⁸ Kostiainen, "Genocide in Soviet Karelia," 334.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁶⁰ Markku Kangaspuro, "The Soviet Depression and Finnish Immigrants in Soviet Karelia" in *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia during the Depression Era*, ed. Ronald Harpelle et al. (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2004), 132.

⁶¹ Hodgson, footnote 25, 153.

⁶² Hodgson, footnote 14, 150; Baron, 80.

⁶³ Baron, 38.

⁶⁴ Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 19; Russell Bartley and Sylvia Bartley, "Afterword: A Dream Consumed," in *The Nelson Brothers: Finnish-American Radicals from the Mendocino Coast*, by Allen Nelson (Ukiah, California: Mendocino County Historical Society/Immigration History Research Center, 2005), 123.

cultures. In this way, the Finnish project in Karelia shared many commonalities with the development of the Soviet Jewish Homeland in Birobidzhan, in the same years. Though representing a larger proportion than the Finns in Karelia, Jews in Birobidzhan accounted only for approximately sixteen percent by the end of the 1930s, after years of active recruitment.⁶⁵ Robert Weinberg argues that Birobidzhan “was designed to buttress Soviet claims to a territory that might be claimed by China or Japan.”⁶⁶ While the Jewish immigrants had claimed no roots in Birobidzhan, Finns in Karelia turned to ancestral bonds with the territory.

The Finnish intelligentsia eagerly took on the task of ‘civilizing’ the region’s people. The Red Finn leadership proved much more interested in advancing their own form of Finnish nationalism than in developing a truly inclusive Karelian socialist workers’ commune. The Red Finns had to proceed with both caution and confidence, as ethnic Karelian and Russian protest against Finnicization were constant.⁶⁷ Therefore, as Antti Laine writes:

The Finnish population had to create a common national identity for the republic and its nationals in order to legitimate its own position and the autonomy of the republic in a situation where the Russians formed a clear majority of the population. The Finnish-Karelian identity became one of the central questions in legitimizing Karelia’s autonomy.⁶⁸

Labour recruitment

⁶⁵ Robert Weinberg, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland. An Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 69.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 and 21.

⁶⁷ Baron, 36 and 96.

⁶⁸ A. Laine, “Rise and Fall of Soviet Karelia,” 11.

One way for the Red Finns to bolster their position was through the recruitment of Finnish workers – and workers were always in short order in Karelia. Under the Soviet Union’s liberal New Economic Policy of the early 1920s, Karelia was poised to become a leader in the lumber industry, thanks to its significant and accessible forest reserves. In addition to aspiring to be a major lumber exporter, for which it had been granted the right to keep 25 percent of profits, the Karelian leadership had high hopes of developing a lumber processing industry.⁶⁹ The Karelian plan included a dynamic and multi-faceted economy emerging from the establishment of a successful forest sector.⁷⁰ However, revenue from exports in the 1920s could not fund wood processing facilities and the local labour force was too small and inexperienced to increase production. Though, overall, Soviet Russia experienced unemployment in the 1920s, Karelia’s sparse and inexperienced population could not meet the region’s demand. In 1920, the Karelian population was approximately 210 000, with the majority employed in small-scale agriculture and only two percent in industrial work.⁷¹ In that year, Edvard Gylling resolved to relocate 80 000 Finnish workers from Finland and North America by 1923.⁷² Gylling believed the call of Karelia could bring back the masses of Finnish immigrants whose loss he had mourned in the early 1900s in Finland.⁷³ Gylling’s plan, however, was a complete failure. His recruitment made the Soviet centre uneasy⁷⁴ and, arguably, caused closer attention to be paid to activities in Karelia. Regardless, very few foreigners

⁶⁹ Baron, 44; Autio, “Soviet Karelian Forests,” 75.

⁷⁰ Baron, 61, outlines the Karelian “General Plan” as envisioned in 1926, including a food production and processing industry, hydro, transportation sector, and so on.

⁷¹ Baron, 74.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Pogorelskin, “Edvard Gylling,” 267.

⁷⁴ Baron, 74.

accepted Gylling's invitation. In fact, by 1923, Karelia's population had experienced a net loss, due to war and starvation in the Finnish borderlands.⁷⁵ Further attempts to populate the region in the second half of the decade were more successful. However, the newcomers did not suit Gylling's vision of a Red Finn homeland. The majority of the arrivals came from other parts of the Soviet Union, and were recruited to work along the Murmansk Railway by the central government, who only wanted to populate and were not looking to fulfill a specific demographic vision.⁷⁶ Another sore point for the Red leadership was the ever-growing presence of over 10 000 prisoner labourers in Karelia by 1926.⁷⁷ Despite setbacks in achieving growth in the Finnish population of Karelia, Gylling's silver lining was the arrival of a few hundred Finnish North Americans and the support of thousands of others in the early 1920s.

Early Finnish North Americans in Karelia

Finnish Canadians and Americans were never far behind the news from Soviet Russia and always proved quick to help, as demonstrated in Auvo Kostiainen's *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*.⁷⁸ Therefore, it is no surprise that, by 1921, Finnish North Americans had already re-organized their 'Society for the Technical Aid of Soviet Russia,' active since 1919, into the 'Society for the Technical Aid of Soviet

⁷⁵ White Finns, allied with White Russians, used the 1921 food shortages as an opportunity to again encourage the borderland's peasants to revolt against the Soviets. The Red Army, however, violently quelled the uprising that year and again in the following year when the Finns, again, encouraged the locals to take action against Russia. See Jussila et al, 139-140, Baron, 55, and Kangaspuro, "The Origins of the Karelian Workers' Commune," 15.

⁷⁶ Baron, 75-79.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁸ See especially, the section "Links to Finland and Soviet Russia," 158-168.

Karelia,' also known as the 'Soviet Karelian Aid Committee'.⁷⁹ In conjunction with this fundraising limb, Finnish Canadians and Americans formed the Karelian Workers' Cooperative that sold bonds to immigrant communists and used the profits to further aid the Karelian project.⁸⁰ The Karelian Workers' Cooperative managed the monies raised, and handled the transfer of goods to the Soviet Union. By the beginning of 1922, the Finnish Socialist Federation reported that the Karelian Aid program had raised \$4696.27 in cash and countless - and, in fact, uncounted - more in material goods.⁸¹

In addition to fundraising, Finnish North Americans also established Karelian labour cooperatives. After 1921, as a part of the NEP, the Comintern encouraged international communists to form cooperatives and to apply for licences to work in Russia. While many Finnish North Americans founded such companies, they did not meet the requirement of having five members, so the Karelian Aid office had to reform the cooperatives into larger units.⁸² Ultimately, about six Finnish North American cooperatives, or communes, became active in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.⁸³ What is fascinating, though, is that while Gylling certainly hoped for Finnish immigrants to come to Karelia and the Comintern encouraged the formation of cooperatives, according to the research of Reino Kero, there were no formally organized Soviet recruitment efforts

⁷⁹ Kostianen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 164; Irina Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 106.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ As provided in Kostianen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 164. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this amount includes the fundraising efforts of Canadian Finns.

⁸² Mikko Ylikangas, "The Seattle Commune: An American-Finnish agricultural utopia in Soviet Union in 1920s," in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, ed. Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, *Journal of Finnish Studies*, Special Edition, 15, 1-2 (November 2011), 54.

⁸³ Kostianen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 165.

made among Finnish North Americans.⁸⁴ Perhaps the North American establishment and design of the cooperatives, then, explains why, despite the Karelian leadership's focus on the lumber industry, the 1920s arrivals from Canada and the United States did not work in the forests. Instead, most participated in agricultural work and others in fishing.

In a January 22, 1921 letter from Arvid Nelson to his brother Enoch, Arvid reported that the *Työmies* newspaper's building in Superior, Wisconsin was being used for a Karelian Committee headquarters.⁸⁵ Arvid's letter reveals that in addition to raising funds, the Superior office was also looking for Finnish Americans to go to Karelia, and he sent his brother an application for the "bona fide red Finnish republic," adding that he would gladly send additional applications for any of Enoch's interested friends.⁸⁶ Enoch Nelson did fill out the application Arvid had sent and, in May 1921, he became one of the early Finnish Americans to head off to build socialism in Soviet Karelia. Enoch's letters to Arvid, while also offering much insight on the daily life of a foreigner in 1920s Soviet Russia, show him moving between jobs and travelling remarkable distances. At first working in the Lake Onega area of Karelia, Enoch moved far north to Knäsö on the Kola Peninsula in April 1923.⁸⁷ There, Enoch joined with the Karelian Fish Trust, established by a small group of fisherman from Astoria, Oregon. Differing from the other farming collectives, the Trust aimed to become a major fish cannery station, but their limited catch did not allow them to recoup the expense of the canning machinery. Further, as

⁸⁴ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa* Rakentamassa, 138.

⁸⁵ Arvid Nelson letter, 22 January 1921. The Nelson, Arvid Papers, Finnish American Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Series 2, Subseries 1, Box 2, Folder 11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ For a synopsis of Enoch Nelson's time in the Soviet Union, see Allen Nelson, *The Nelson Brother*, Chapters 8-14.

Enoch Nelson alleged, the machinery was ill-suited to the processing of herring, the main species present in their region of the White Sea.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, not much is known about the Karelian Fish Trust at this point, but less than a year after Enoch's arrival in Knäsö, the Trust had gone bankrupt and most members had returned to the United States.⁸⁹

In May 1924, Enoch settled 3000 kilometres south of Knäsö, at the Finnish North American collective farm "Kylväjä", in the District of Rostov, between the Azov and Caspian seas. Fortunately, more is known about the Finnish Americans of Kylväjä. Mikko Ylikangas's recent work on Kylväjä, or the so-called Seattle Commune, has made a significant contribution to current knowledge about early Finnish North Americans' building socialism in the Soviet Union.⁹⁰ The Seattle commune was founded by six Finnish American farmers in Washington in 1921 but within a few months, dozens more had joined the cooperative. In addition to giving their labour to the Soviet Union, members each paid \$500 toward the machinery fund, \$100 for necessities for the first year, and each had to pay their own travel expenses.⁹¹ Agreeing to take a loss on their investment if they decided to leave the commune, the members made a real commitment to Kylväjä. Considering the amounts required to participate in the cooperative project, it would seem the members were fairly well-off, and propelled to move to the Soviet Union by idealism, rather than economic necessity, differing from many in the 1930s cohort of

⁸⁸ Nelson, 82.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁰ Ylikangas, "The Seattle Commune: An American-Finnish agricultural utopia in Soviet Union in 1920s." Ylikangas builds on the foundation laid by the work of Ritva-Liisa Hovi in "Amerikansuomalaisten maanviljelyskommuuni Etelä-Venäjällä" in *Turun historiallinen arkisto XXV* (1971).

⁹¹ Ylikangas, "The Seattle Commune," 57.

Finnish North American migrants. The first group of seventy-two communards left for Russia in August 1922 and by the end of 1924, the commune had approximately 150 members, many having already come and gone.⁹² Enoch Nelson stayed only until early 1926.⁹³ Overcoming initial problems with the land, housing, health, neighbours, and machinery, the Commune managed to become a model in collective farming.⁹⁴ However, as Kylväjä began to flourish, the Finnish and Finnish North American character of the farm came under attack. Many Finns chose to move north to Karelia, perceived as a Finnish region, to try their hand at further collective farming.

Among the Finnish North American cooperatives from the 1920s, the name of Säde Commune is most often mentioned, and Enoch Nelson likely knew much about the Finns' work there. Säde was established in 1922 by Finnish Canadian socialists in Cobalt, Ontario and the first nine families arrived in Karelia in 1925.⁹⁵ Säde earned a reputation as an excellent collective and the Finnish Canadians were featured in agricultural manuals, newspaper features, and even a dedicated book written by a leading Soviet agronomist.⁹⁶ Unlike other communes of the 1920s, Säde remained an active farm and model for collectivization into the 1930s.

Through the success of Säde and Kylväjä in the 1920s, Finnish North Americans made a mark on Karelian and Soviet development and proved their capabilities as builders of socialism. By actively raising money for Soviet Karelia through the early

⁹² Ibid., 67.

⁹³ Nelson, 103.

⁹⁴ Ylikangas, "The Seattle Commune," 72.

⁹⁵ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 138. Kero mentions how sources differ on the beginnings of Säde.

⁹⁶ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 141.

Karelian Aid campaign and the Worker's Cooperative Bonds, Finnish Canadians and Americans took a stake in the Karelian project. With a flourishing Finnish language North American leftist press and with the reports and letters of those who went to Karelia, Finns in Canada and the United States were well aware of the Red Finns' work in Karjala and eagerly looked for news from the Soviet Union. Though the Säde Commune continued into the 1930s, the trickle of Finnish North American migration in the 1920s came to a halt by mid-decade. Finns in Canada and the United States were embroiled in conflicts over Bolshevization and the crisis of the cooperative movement's political direction. In Soviet Russia, the state began to reformulate its approach to building their socialist union and an interest in foreign workers was put on the backburner.

Reformulating the Soviet Economy

By the late 1920s, the New Economic Policy had enabled the reconstruction of the post-war Soviet economy. The NEP had served its purpose but had also compromised the ideological position of the Bolsheviks. With Stalin now in charge and the Party and central government having become largely synonymous, the Bolsheviks began to tighten control over their vast territory and worked at centralizing all elements of Soviet life and economy. In addition to the expulsion of 'kulaks' and forced agricultural collectivization in the name of unity⁹⁷, the Soviet government refocused its limited resources and efforts into priority industrial development. "Class A" production of raw goods, like coal, iron,

⁹⁷ Kangaspuro, "Russian Patriots and Red Fennomans," 39.

and timber were increased at the expense of consumer goods.⁹⁸ The switch to the economic strategy of the coming First Five Year Plan had significant repercussions on Karelian development and autonomy.

In *Soviet Karelia: Politics, Planning, and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1920-1939*, Nick Baron successfully demonstrates just how precarious Karelian autonomy truly was. As long as the Bolsheviks were focussed on the spread of socialism, Karelia would be safe, but as soon as the state's focus began to shift, Karelia's future was insecure. Not having Karelia's privileges secured by a constitution meant that "they could be revoked by the centre as swiftly as they had been granted."⁹⁹ Baron convincingly argues that Stalin's growing interest in centrality was fundamentally at odds with Karelia's ambitions, due to its irreversible role as a hinterland or periphery.¹⁰⁰ Karelia's vision of its own development, as highlighted in its 1926 General Plan, included the construction of municipal amenities, housing, transportation, hydro power, food production and processing, and diversified industry.¹⁰¹ However, at the same time, the Soviet centre began to take away Karelia's ability to control its budget and industry. The Soviet Union's main objective by 1929 was the accumulation of hard currency from export. Instead of building up wood processing, or much of anything else, for that matter, the centre focussed on selling raw timber at the lowest prices on the market.¹⁰² To ensure expediency in meeting the goals of the 'optimum variant' of the first Five Year Plan, the Soviet government nationalized forest administration, taking away Karelia's main

⁹⁸ Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union*, 91.

⁹⁹ Baron, 51.

¹⁰⁰ See especially Baron, 62.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰² Autio, "Soviet Karelian Forests," 77-78.

sources of revenue through the Karelles Timber Trust and the Kondapoga Paper Mill.¹⁰³ Finally, the centre repealed Karelia's economic autonomy over its budget in early 1931. The envisioned role of Karelia had transformed from a future showcase of socialist development to little more than virgin forests ready for reaping. However, the overarching goal of rapid industrialization gave the Red Finns' vision of Karelia a final chance of coming to fruition.

A final push for Red Finn Karelia

The Soviet Union overall began to suffer from a labour shortage by 1930. Backwoods Karelia had always had a difficult time attracting and keeping workers, and with the Five Year Plan in action, the shortage was felt even more acutely. The Karelian timber industry was largely dependent on expensive seasonal labourers and forced labourers, who by 1930 numbered 65 000 in the region.¹⁰⁴ Though even less worried about the region's ethnic composition than before, the central government had to concede that Karelia's labour needs were not being met adequately or efficiently. Karelia lacked both modern timbering specialists and equipment.¹⁰⁵ After continually rejecting Gylling's requests to recruit Finnish workers, the 1930 Party Congress agreed to invite foreign experts to fill their labour needs.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Gylling had the opportunity to present his proposal of bringing Finnish North American expertise directly to Stalin and Molotov, which led to the passing of resolutions on immigration.¹⁰⁷ Likewise in 1930, the Communist International summoned American Finnish communists John Wiita and

¹⁰³ Ibid., 77; Baron, 105.

¹⁰⁴ Baron, 82 and 86.

¹⁰⁵ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 14-15.

¹⁰⁶ Takala, "From the Frying Pan in to the Fire," 107.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Matti Tenhunen to Moscow to provide information about the rampant in-fighting among the Finnish North American left. During this time, the two were also sent to meet the Karelian leadership, where it was agreed that the transfer of immigrant Finnish communists could be beneficial to both Soviet Karelia and the depression-struck North Americans.¹⁰⁸ From the negotiations with the Karelian leadership, it was clear that the North American workers needed to be experienced and bring all the tools of the trade, and it was imperative that they be Finnish.¹⁰⁹ Though the Red Finns maintained their commitment to make Karelia Finnish, the Soviet centre saw the recruitment of foreign workers in purely economic terms and demonstrated increasing hostility toward the non-Russian population and their culture.

The Culture of Stalinism

As the Soviet state restructured centre-periphery relations and its economic priorities, it also re-envisioned what it meant to be Soviet. The arrival of Finnish North Americans in Karelia coincided with a transition from revolutionary values and practices to the emerging culture of Stalinism. Just as Stalin's regime insisted on stringent control of all levels of governance, economy, and industry, the newly espoused Soviet culture had little tolerance for contesting cultural values. As it turned out, in the words of Markku Kangaspuro,

[t]he policies of korenizatsiia had not glued the Soviet peoples together but given birth to a great number of peoples, each with its own identity. The original aim had been to favour the establishment of ethnic identities within the framework of a multi-national Soviet Union, not to create

¹⁰⁸ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 16-17. However, Wiita did not approve of the idea of a mass migration. The idea of recruiting Finnish workers from Finland was quickly dismissed, as demonstrated by Kangaspuro, *Neuvosto-Karjalan taistelu itsehallinnosta*, 243.

¹⁰⁹ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 17-18.

ethnic nationalism. However, the founding of national republics and regions, when combined with the centre-periphery conflict, led to this unwanted outcome. A higher form of identity, that of the Soviet Union, does not seem to have developed at all.¹¹⁰

Therefore, the task of Soviet centralization extended to the moulding of a new united Soviet identity, based on Russianness.¹¹¹ As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Stalinism as a culture entailed elaborately constructed social hierarchies, a renewed focus on traditional family and gender roles, the promotion of luxury and merriment with little regard for the reality of daily life experienced by the majority of Soviet citizens, and the use of terror and repression against the population. The cultural shift occurred unevenly and haphazardly, especially in hinterland regions, like Karelia. Finnish North Americans arrived with the cultural baggage of their North American immigrant political and cultural experiences and found themselves negotiating their way through differing notions of what building socialism entailed and the role of Karelia in that project.

Conclusion

Finnish Canadians and Americans who moved to Soviet Karelia in the 1930s participated in the evolving politics of the 'Karelian Question' and continued in the tradition of North American engagement with Soviet Karelia. Karelia played an integral role in assertions of both Finnish autonomy and Soviet protectionism. Through struggles that led to the creation of the independent Finnish state, the policy of *korenizatsiia*, and the emergence of a new Stalinist culture, Finnishness was continually at the core of what Karelia meant. The region saw contests, both armed and rhetorical, over who had the

¹¹⁰ Kangaspuro, "Russian Patriots and Red Fennomans," 38; Takala, "From the Frying Pan in to the Fire," 106.

¹¹¹ Kangaspuro, "Russian Patriots and Red Fennomans," 107.

right to govern, and the people of Karelia were caught in a struggle over who would be their 'civilizer.' By 1931, Finnish North Americans had been framed as the region's saviours - saviours of the Finnish ideal for Gylling, and saviours of the Soviet centre's floundering economic machinery. However, the tide had already begun to turn against Karelian autonomy, the Finnish presence, and foreigners in the Soviet Union, more broadly, just as the doors of the new Soviet Karelian Technical Aid office in New York opened on 1 May 1931. Thousands of eager Finnish North Americans proved ready to join the cause of building socialism in the land of the *Kalevala*. It is to their recruitment, motivations, and arrivals that we now turn.

CHAPTER III

“Our comrades are leaving again”: Moving to Soviet Karelia

“Far away to Asian expanses / Our comrades are leaving again, / Knowing so well they stand no chances / Of winning without taking pains,” begins a poem written in honour of the Finnish North Americans who set off for Karelia in the 1930s.¹ While the required “pains” referred to in the poem most directly address the challenges inherent in the building of socialism, the stanza also connotes the difficulty of immigrant life in Depression-ridden North America and the effort and feelings involved in the decision to emigrate. This chapter builds on the Finnish North American and Karelian backgrounds developed in the previous chapters, turning to what it meant for Finnish Canadians and Americans to engage in the Karelian project. Synthesizing past studies on the motivations for emigration and the mechanisms of recruitment provides a holistic overview of the many factors that propelled the Finnish North American migration to Karelia in its scope and intensity. First considering who answered the Karelian call and why the migration happened, then allows the Karelian life writers to offer their insights on the personal decisions to move, the preparations for departure, the voyage, and first impressions of life in the workers’ state. It is worth noting that, with regard to motivations and travel, the memoirists have produced fuller accounts of their experiences

¹ Poem by “a now-forgotten person of the time,” as recited by Mayme Sevander. *They Took My Father*, 23.

than letter-writers. Given how the processes involved in ultimately becoming an immigrant in Karelia played out in the North American home community, these considerations precede the establishment of the available letter correspondences. Memoir writers reflect on the entirety of their migration experience, in light of subsequent events. When letter writers do directly address the themes surrounding the migration, their comments complement the insights gleaned from the retrospective sources.

Motivations and Recruitment

A recent collection of research about Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia, *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, approaches the topic by acknowledging that the motivations for the emigration “were much more diverse than has been previously understood.”² The migration of over six thousand Finnish North Americans to Karelia was the result of several factors: the general economic and political climate of the first years of the 1930s; an active recruitment campaign by the North American Karelian Technical Aid and Finnish communist press, in collaboration with the Soviet Karelian leadership; and an assortment of personal motivations. While it is not the purpose of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of motivations and the processes of recruitment³, an overview of the main factors allows for a better understanding of the dynamics of the mass Karelian migration.

Since the late 1970s, when the earliest studies of Finnish North Americans in Karelia appeared, there has been a great interest in understanding what compelled

² Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, “Introduction” in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, 6.

³ For the most thorough consideration of motivations and recruitment, see Reino Kero’s *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*.

thousands of people to move to Karelia in such a short span of time. Much of the debate has focussed specifically on whether politics or economics motivated ‘Karelian Fever.’ With the rich history of Finnish immigrants’ involvement in Left politics in early-twentieth-century North America, many have looked to political ideology to explain the feverish pace and scope of the migration. The trajectory of North American Finnish radical communities in the decades leading up to the 1930s set the stage for a mass migration to Soviet Karelia in many ways, as detailed in Chapter One. The Finnish North American Left expressed a widespread admiration for the development of the Soviet Union and looked for ways to participate in it. Mayme Sevander’s work, which combines a community study with autobiography, best exemplifies the adamant insistence that the migration was ideologically motivated and that individuals’ political conviction led them to the decision to move to Karelia. For Sevander, the migration exemplified a “commitment to the Cause, the sincere desire to render practical and material assistance to young Soviet Russia. The exodus can be considered a mass manifestation of idealism!”⁴ For Sevander’s family and others, the migration “took on the aura of a religious crusade.”⁵ The money Finnish North Americans committed to the Karelian project suggests that more than dire economic conditions propelled the movement. Reino Kero argues that those who left were not from the poorest ranks, nor were many totally unemployed at the time of departure.⁶ Recruits were expected to pay their own fare, an ‘entrance fee’ of several hundred dollars, provide tools and household

⁴ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 48.

⁵ Kivisto, *Immigrant Socialists*, 172.

⁶Kero, “Emigration of North Americans to Soviet Karelia in the Early 1930s,” 219.

goods, and make significant monetary contributions to the Machine Fund. In fact, questions on the application for emigration focussed on determining how much money an applicant could offer to the cause.⁷

However, there is no denying that the height of the exodus coincided with the depths of the economic Depression and immigrant workers, already typically living with negligible means, were among the first to feel the burden of lay-offs and work reductions.⁸ Michael Gelb recognized that while politics played a role, the Finnish American movement to Karelia also consisted of many “economic refugees.”⁹ Some have downplayed and even downright denied the political motivations for migration, asserting that economic factors entirely accounted for the scale of the migration. Miriam “Margaret” Rikkinen, who moved to Karelia at the age of nine, insisted in an interview in 2000 that “there was no question of the Left or Reds... Unemployment caused it, the whole thing.”¹⁰ Many of those who returned from Karelia to North America, at a time of increasing animosity toward “communists” and misgivings about the Soviet Union, strove to distance their families from the “Red” label. Interestingly, Sevander and Rikkinen illustrate how the staunchest positions have been typically upheld by those who experienced the migration first hand.

⁷Irina Takala, “From the Frying Pan into the Fire: North American Finns in Soviet Karelia,” 109.

⁸ See, for example, Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

⁹ Gelb, 1092. Barry Broadfoot has argued that the Depression years were the most “traumatic” and also “the most debilitating, the most devastating, the most horrendous.” Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years, 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1973), iv.

¹⁰ Miriam Rikkinen interview with Raija Warkentin, May 8, 2000. “...eikä siinä ollu mistään punikesita kysymys eikä punaisista... Työttömyys sen aiheutti, koko sen jutun.” Raija Warkentin research materials, “Finnish-Canadian-American-Russians”, Lakehead University.

With regard to both politics and economics, the Finnish-language Leftist press, publications like *Työmies* and *Vapaus*, in particular, played a significant role in building the ‘Karelian Fever’. The press juxtaposed reports of a thriving Soviet Union alongside devastating depictions of how the Depression was ruining the lives of workers in Canada and the United States. Newspapers successfully built up a sense of panic. The press seems to have exaggerated the impact of the financial collapse and readers were made to believe that if they had not yet felt the Depression’s blow, it was fast approaching, and that workers were specifically targeted by the capitalist crisis.¹¹ Karelia, on the other hand, was presented as a place where there was “work, bread, there the ill and elderly were taken care of, there was a good educational system, there the voices of workers and peasants were heard.”¹²

Working with the press and bringing the Karelian project to Finnish communities across Canada and the United States were the recruiters of the Karelian Technical Aid Committee, who formally carried out the recruitment objectives of the Soviet and Karelian leadership.¹³ The KTA was headed by Matti Tenhunen, a long time leader in Finnish American leftist circles, who had recently been ousted from the Co-operative Exchange Board in their mass expulsion of Communists. Tenhunen knew Finnish North America well, and had proven his commitment to the Soviet Union during his many travels to Moscow and Karelia. Tenhunen began his work in January 1931, as the

¹¹ Reino Kero, “The Canadian Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s,” 203 and Kero, “Emigration of North Americans to Soviet Karelia in the Early 1930s,” 216.

¹² Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 78.

¹³ A similar body, the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union (ICOR), worked in North American to fundraise and recruit for the Jewish settlement project in Birodizhan. See, for example, Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, ed. Laurie Bernstein (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 9.

coordinator of committee activities and was in charge of the foreign section of the Karelian Resettlement Agency, a Soviet entity.¹⁴ The New York City office, located in Harlem, officially opened its doors on May Day of that year. Kalle Aronen worked as the Chair of the KTA in the United States until 1932. Oscar Corgan replaced Aronen and ran the office until 1934, when it was closed. In Canada, John (Jussi) Latva represented the Karelian Technical Aid, and an office in Toronto operated from 1931 into 1935. Tenhunen, Aronen, and Corgan ultimately brought their families to Karelia, while Latva remained in Canada. In addition to these formal paid positions, the Technical Aid found volunteer recruiters in the larger Finnish enclaves, to keep community enthusiasm alive.¹⁵ The KTA's responsibilities included recruiting suitable migrants, working with Soviet authorities and North American Finnish workers' federations to select successful candidates, organizing the appropriate paper work, acting as liaison with the shipping companies, and raising funds and equipment for Karelia and the Soviet Union through the Machine Fund. Tenhunen, Aronen, Latva, and Corgan were employees of the Resettlement Agency, and, therefore, reported to the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Their wages and the operations of the committee were funded by voluntary donations from Finnish North Americans and by commissions from the shipping companies, mainly the Swedish-American Steamship Company.¹⁷ With their wages on the line and the men's abilities to rouse interest in the Karelian project, the KTA proved successful at securing income.

During its three years of operation, the New York office reportedly secured \$162 146 in

¹⁴ Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 107.

¹⁵For example, Kaarlo Tuomi's stepfather, Robert Saastamoinen was the volunteer agent in Rock, Michigan. See Tuomi, 64.

¹⁶ Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 107.

¹⁷ Ibid., 107-108.

donations, in addition to \$11.50 per adult and \$5.75 per child commissions on every sea fare purchased.¹⁸

Recruiters criss-crossed Canada and the United States, speaking at Finnish halls and regularly contributing to Finnish newspapers to spread the word about Karelia. In order to meet their quotas and to earn their commissions, recruiters used multiple messages to broaden the appeal of the Karelian project. Some of the main themes included selling Karelia as: a place for all workers, regardless of specific political orientation; Karelia as a Finnish homeland; and Karelia as a place of work and free education and health care for all.¹⁹ The recruitment messages also spoke to people's sense of pride: Finnish workers were the ones needed! A significant proportion of Finnish Canadian and American cultural organizations and individuals had made the ideological move toward Communism, yet the increasing hostility of the Canadian and US Party leadership toward ethnic language groups began to alienate much of the rank and file.²⁰ Karelia's focus on the recruitment of specifically Finnish language workers supportive of the Communist project provided a new, tangible way for Finnish immigrants to work for the cause, while maintaining their Finnishness. Varpu Lindström and Borje Vähämäki argue that North American Finns were drawn to Karelia because the Soviet Union and the recruiters promised a "more cooperative and freer intellectual

¹⁸ Ibid., 108 and Alexis E. Pogorelskin, "Communism and the Co-ops: Recruiting and Financing the Finnish-American Migration to Karelia" in *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia During the Depression Era*, ed. Ronald Harpelle et al. (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, Inc., 2004), 37.

¹⁹ Pogorelskin, "Communism and the Co-ops," 37. The research of Anita Middleton and memoirs of Sylvia Hokkanen reveal that the opportunity for free schooling was especially alluring for women. See Middleton, 179-180 and Hokkanen, 30-35.

²⁰ Samira Saramo, "Finns in Canada, Communism, and Bolshevization" (paper presented at New Voices in Labour Studies, Brock University, March 2009).

climate” than what was available for socialists in interwar North America.²¹ The recruiters knew first-hand that the persecution of socialist sympathizers in North America, often referred to as the ‘Red Scare’, affected many Finns, and that the rise of conservatism and right-wing movements among North American Finns contributed to the hardships. Depictions of a Finnish workers’ state, full of like-minded individuals, appealed to many frustrated Finnish North American Leftists. While right-wing Finns used nationalism to justify their attack on socialists in both North America and Finland, the recruiters and press manipulated the Left’s own nationalist sentiments to encourage migration to Karelia, long considered a vital part of the Finnish homeland and the cradle of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*.

The perceived accuracy of the recruiters’ promises divided those who left Karelia. Mayme Sevander later recalled meeting disgruntled American returnees in Sweden, where both parties awaited the next step of their voyage. An angry man yelled at her father, KTA recruiter Oscar Corgan, “Some paradise! Some utopia! Everything you told us was a pack of lies!”²² Another man came to Corgan’s defense: “He didn’t lie to us. If we had listened to the words of Oscar Corgan, we would never have gone. He told us it wouldn’t be easy. Don’t you remember when he said it would be just like being pioneers again? He promised no paradise. We just didn’t listen.”²³ Given the reality of the harsh living and working conditions in Karelia, did the recruiters adequately forewarn interested emigrants? Was Karelia depicted in accurate terms? Did the lucrative

²¹ Lindström and Vähämäki, 14.

²² Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 40.

²³ *Ibid.*

shipping commissions motivate recruiters to downplay the negatives in favour of attracting more emigrants? Unfortunately, no recruitment speeches have been found to detail exactly what attentive crowds in Finnish halls were told about Karelia. However, there is evidence from other sources to say that recruiters did make efforts to inform interested people about the nature of the project, who its ideal candidates were, and the reality of the early phases of life in Karelia. In his frequent correspondence with the Finnish Left press, Matti Tenhunen aimed to clarify misconceptions and romantic notions of Karelia induced by the 'Fever' and to temper the press's tendency to depict the USSR in glowing terms. In May 1931, Tenhunen explained that "the emigration to Karelia should not be an emotional movement."²⁴ Furthermore, emigration was not to be viewed as a cure-all for economic woes. Tenhunen believed that the ideal candidate had to have something to offer Karelia and "the idea that a strong desire for emigration should be enough... is completely incorrect."²⁵ Looking back, Sevander interpreted Tenhunen's message as: "The wrong notion: I've got to get going because there's no way to get along here any more [sic]. The right notion: I've got to get going to help train the local labor force; I can't be a burden to Karelia; the most important professions are: loggers, farmers, steel workers, printers, quarry specialists. I've got to pay my own passage to Leningrad, a little help may be found, but not to turn to the KTA."²⁶

²⁴ *Työmies*, 27 June 1931. Reprinted in Peter Kivisto and Mika Roinila, "Reaction to Departure: The Finnish American Community Responds to 'Karelian Fever'" in *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s*, ed. Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University, 2008), 30-31.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁶ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 5.

In sum, Auvo Kostiainen has accurately summarized the essence of why so many Finnish North Americans were compelled to join in the Karelian project. The migration “must be viewed as manifestations of the close identification of the Finnish-American communists with internationalism, and as a vigorous expression of the dissatisfaction with conditions in the New World.”²⁷ Compounding the multifaceted political and economic factors impacting the scale of migration, each individual and family weighed their own circumstances and perspectives in determining what emigration would offer them. The more we learn about the life writers studied here, the more we can see how their unique personalities and histories led them to Karelia and inflected their subsequent memories.

Communists among the migrants

Official Communist Party members were only ever intended to make up a small percentage of the total number of Karelian recruits. The Communist Parties of Canada and the United States knew that their success depended on holding on to their existing membership. The Finns, though continuously embroiled in contestations over the rights of ethnic language branches, still represented a significant portion of the Party’s overall support. William Pratt’s examination of the CPUSA’s reaction to the recruitment of Finnish communists succinctly demonstrates the ambivalence surrounding ‘Karelian Fever’. On one hand, the CPUSA, much like the CPC, opposed the project outright. Just before the official launch of the Karelian Technical Aid, the US Politburo reacted to the announcement that an initial effort to recruit 800 Finns was under way. A December

²⁷ Kostiainen, *The Forging of Finnish-American Communism*, 192.

1930 motion proclaimed: “such a mass immigration of the Finns who are close to the Party will seriously cripple our mass work among the Finnish population in the United States, and in our opinion the comrades in Karelia should recruit a smaller number.”²⁸ As Karelia’s desired number of immigrants grew into the thousands by the spring of 1931, the Canadian and American Parties’ relationship with the KTA grew tense. Pratt concludes that the District was right to worry; though the recruits were intended to include only a maximum of ten percent Party members, his findings suggest that up to twenty percent of the Great Lakes region’s District 9 members joined the migration.²⁹ By early 1932, the District sounded the alarm: “The Karelian migration from this district threatens to develop to serious proportions, liquidating our mass organizations and withdrawing financial support from the co-operatives: the district and center must act on this quickly.”³⁰

However, the Party’s opposition was necessarily tempered by its commitment to international Communism and the direction of the Comintern. The District’s motion continued by stating “we realize that the decision will have to take into consideration other things besides our own interests, and the question should be taken up with Moscow... with the understanding that whatever decision is made will be carried out unquestionably.”³¹ Recruiters for the Karelian Technical Aid could act confidently, knowing their work had the backing of the Soviet Union, to whom the Parties had to

²⁸ From William C. Pratt, “Background on ‘Karelian Fever,’ as Viewed from Communist Party USA Records” in *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s*, ed. Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University, 2008), 40-41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

defer.³² Correspondence between KTA head Matti Tenhunen and CPC leader Tim Buck reveals Tenhunen's advantage. In May 1931, Tenhunen coolly reminded Buck that "I think it is error from part of [Party] comrades if they think that this matter of bringing over about 3000 workers from US and Canada before the end of the year is for discussion."³³

Of the letter writers and life writers studied here, two families stand out as having made the decision to emigrate based largely on political conviction. The Pitkänen's family history reveals an iron dedication to the revolutionary movement. Radical newspapers, philosophies, organizations, labour actions, Leftist symbols, and a profound stake in the development of a workers' state in Russia permeated the Pitkänen family's rural Ontario life.³⁴ Taimi Pitkänen (later Davis), daughter of Antti and older sister of Aate, was the first of the family to go to the Soviet Union. Recognized as an up-and-coming labour leader and political student, Taimi, at the age of nineteen, was sent to the USSR in a group of bright Young Communist League delegates in 1930. Taimi, now with the alias Liz Alton, set off in the fall on the secret mission with four other Finnish immigrant teenagers.³⁵ She spent about a year in the Soviet Union, studying at the Young Communist League School in Moscow and travelling throughout the country, as far north as Archangel, doing practical work, and seeing the Soviet model in action. Aate

³² For example Matti Tenhunen letter to Tim Buck, Superior, Wisconsin, 17 May 1931. LAC MG 10 K 3 K-282 Reel 14 (1931) File 128.

³³ Quoted in Evgeny Efremkin, "'Karelian Project' or 'Karelian Fever'? Orders from Above, Reaction from Below: Conflicting Interests in Kremlin, Karelia, and Canada" in *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s*, ed. Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University, 2008), 65.

³⁴ See Saramo, "Committed to the Cause."

³⁵ Lindström, "The Radicalization of Finnish Farm Women," 86.

Pitkänen was not far behind. Following in his parents' footsteps, Aate had further strengthened his commitment to the work he had begun as a Pioneer and YCL participant by becoming a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Canada at the age of seventeen.³⁶ In 1931, when the first group of young Finns from Kivikoski left for Karelia, Aate Pitkänen was among them. With the one bringing back to Canada knowledge of the Soviet system and the other contributing Canadian work experience to the Karelian hinterland, the Pitkänen siblings met one final time at the Moscow train station.³⁷ Aate was joined in Karelia by his father Antti Pitkänen in the fall of 1934. However, Antti left Karelia in 1935, frustrated by being denied a transfer of his Communist Party of Canada membership to the CPSU, and by the distance between himself and his wife and daughter in Ontario.

Similar to the Pitkänen family, the Corgan family, too, exemplified a life dedicated to the workers' struggle, as Mayme Sevander, nee Corgan, has shown. In addition to serving as the last director of the Karelian Technical Aid in the United States, Corgan had devoted his career and personal life to the Finnish Leftist press (as long-term editor of *Työmies*), the Finnish socialist cooperative movement, and, later, the Communist Party. Much like Aate and Taimi Pitkänen, the Corgan children, Mayme, Paul, and Aino, were raised to be 'Little Reds'. According to Mayme Sevander's memory, when the family began their journey to Karelia in April 1934, Oscar Corgan explained that the move was "in keeping with his principles."³⁸ Confirming the political conviction motivating the

³⁶ Gordijenko, 125.

³⁷ According to *Letters from Karelia*.

³⁸ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 8.

Corgan family's emigration, Sevander further explains that American Communist leaders, like her father, were "under the influence of standards of the communist doctrine which had the force of a fundamental religion. Such an inflated and glorified image of Communism and Soviet Russia ...left no room for doubt or analysis."³⁹ Sevander, likewise, recalled her own childhood excitement about going to "live these [Soviet/Communist] ideals ourselves" in Karelia.⁴⁰

Raised in the revolutionary spirit

While the examples of the Pitkänen and Corgan families demonstrates that certainly some of the Karelian immigrants were primarily motivated by a profound commitment to Communism and the building of the Soviet Union, most of the migrants left with a more subtle connection to the radical movement. In the debates about political or economic motivations, an important socio-cultural element of the migrants' background has remained inadequately expressed. Though many of the migrants would not have characterized themselves as fundamental Communists, their family and personal histories reveal a life and upbringing deeply rooted in the support of the workers' cause. Even if labelled as "hall socialists," or those who turned to the socialist halls and organizations to fill social and cultural needs more than political ones, these Finnish North Americans nonetheless spent their time attending the events of Leftist organizations, reading the Left press, and donating their money and time to socialist causes. Regardless of whether the migrants were card-carrying members of the Communist Party or were active in agitation work, the vast majority of the Finnish North

³⁹ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 10.

⁴⁰ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 32.

American emigrants were raised and cultured in the revolutionary spirit. These immigrants embraced the Karelian migration with an understanding of the workers' struggle and sympathy for the Russian revolutionary state. By recognizing the prevalence and importance of Left-ally upbringing and culturing, it becomes clear that discussions about migration motivations need not be fixated on questions of absolute commitment to Communist ideology or on arguing away the importance of politics.

The Hokkanens' memoir depicts the multifaceted factors leading to their decision to move to Karelia, but also helps us to better understand the overall nature of the Finnish North American emigrants. Sylvi and Lauri, like many others in the Karelian migration, were young, newlywed, and had not yet settled into their adult married lives. Sylvi explains that they were "getting along all right," since "those living in the country had not been hit as hard by the Depression as city dwellers."⁴¹ However, she explains that "the future did not look promising in the United States at that time."⁴² They believed that, in Karelia, "there would be an opportunity to work for a better life with a good chance of success."⁴³ Sylvi Hokkanen's explanation of their financial position at the time of emigrating confirms that while the couple had not faced abject poverty, nor had they felt the most severe repercussions of the economic depression, they, like many other youths in Canada and the United States lived with the reality of curtailed opportunities.⁴⁴ Sylvi Hokkanen characterized herself and Lauri as "more or less apolitical" and believed this factor, along with their lumber and teaching backgrounds, qualified them for Karelian

⁴¹ Hokkanen, 9.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 9.

immigration.⁴⁵ However, both Sylvi's and Lauri's parents had joined the Finnish American socialist movement at a young age, turning to Communism after the Russian Revolution.⁴⁶ Both had grown up with the workers' slogans and anthems, but, in Sylvi's words, "[w]e hadn't, as yet, fully understood what they were striving for, or what the true meaning of communism was."⁴⁷ While Sylvi and Lauri never characterize themselves as active or ideologically convinced Communists, their family and social backgrounds substantiate that they, like the significant majority of emigrants, lived in the revolutionary spirit. Like so many others, this Leftist culturing combined with the economic uncertainty of the future and their youthful adventurousness propelled the Hokkanens to join in the Karelian project.

Who went?

Between 1930 and 1934, some 6500 Finnish North Americans moved to Soviet Karelia, joining the smaller and less organized migration of hundreds in the 1920s. Finns from the United States formed about sixty percent of this migration, but given Canada's smaller population overall, and its smaller number of Finnish immigrants, Canadian Finnish communities made a significant contribution to the migration. Only preliminary statistical analysis about the migrants has been conducted, but even this demographic information enhances our understanding of who moved to Soviet Karelia. Using Eila Lahti-Argutina's registry of approximately 4000 Finnish North Americans in Karelia, Evgeny Efremkin has examined the age, marital status, and occupational category of over

⁴⁵ Hokkanen, 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 6-7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

half of the total number of the 1930s immigrants.⁴⁸ The Soviet government directed the Karelian Resettlement Agency and the Karelian Technical Aid to find young, single, ‘politically reliable’ tradesmen, who could also financially contribute to Karelian development. It is clear, though, that the composition of migrants was much more diverse than the ideal candidates sought out by recruiters. They did succeed in finding young emigrants. The age of the migrants from both Canada and the United States proves striking: eighty-five percent of Canadians and fifty-eight percent of Americans went to Karelia before their thirtieth birthday.⁴⁹ Many of these youths, however, were younger than working age. According to Efremkin, almost seventy-five percent moved to Karelia with their immediate family, and every sixth immigrant was under the age of twelve.⁵⁰ Many single men also came to Karelia, having endured the poverty and hardship of Depression conditions first-hand. Out of recorded male migrant workers, twenty percent of Americans and forty percent of Canadians were single.⁵¹ Even those registered as single, however, primarily migrated as a part of a kinship chain. That is, they followed or travelled with aunts, uncles, siblings, and extended family.⁵² Much less is known about the demographic profile of women. Only the very rare single woman appears in the available documentation, and little detail is given about women generally, since often only the husband’s or father’s information was recorded. In fact, Terttu Kangas reported to her family that single women were not granted permission to go to

⁴⁸ Evgeny Efremkin, “Recruitment in North America: An Analysis of Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1931-1934” in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, ed. Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, *Journal of Finnish Studies*, Special Edition, 15, 1-2 (November 2011).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* and Efremkin, “‘Karelian Project’,” 73.

⁵¹ Efremkin, “Recruitment in North America, 115.

⁵² Efremkin, “‘Karelian Project’,” 71-72.

Karelia, unless they went with their father.⁵³ The recruiters successfully found men eager to work in the lumber industry, but, as we will see, they did not necessarily bring the expected expertise or commit themselves to employment in one sector. Overall, however, the migrants typically met the basic requirements of having “reasonably good health, two strong hands, the skills and enthusiasm for building a new society, willingness to endure some hardships until the paradise was built, the reference of an American Communist affiliated organization, a supply of tools and winter clothing and enough money to make it to the border.”⁵⁴

Deciding to go

Going to Karelia was not always as simple as just deciding to move. In a top-down chain of command from the Kremlin to the Karelian leadership to the KTA, and then the Finnish branches of the North American Communist Parties, interested Finns often faced long delays or even outright rejection. Through Karelian Technical Aid, interested persons had to apply for permission to move. Mayme Sevander has outlined the application process:

First the applicants filled in forms, attached three passport photos and a doctor’s certificate to it.

Second, these papers went to a general meeting of a local Finnish Federation. Here a decision was passed on the applicant’s political and trade abilities. If satisfactory, they were signed and sealed by the presiding officers and sent on to the KTA offices.

Third, a committee of three, two from the Finnish bureau and one from the KTA, after a final examination and approval of the papers, forwarded them to Narkomtrud (Labor Commissariat)

⁵³ Terttu Kanagas, letter to father and siblings, Lohijärvi, 27 November 1933.

⁵⁴ Tuomi, 62.

in Petrozavodsk. This was the final stage of the visa application.⁵⁵ Candidates had to strike a perfect balance between a commitment to the class struggle without threatening the work and strength of the North American communist movement, and offering sufficient funds and skills to contribute to developing socialism in Karelia without bordering on being 'bourgeois'. William Pratt has argued that non-Party members "had fewer hurdles" to overcome, while Communist Party members had to prove that they had already secured employment in Karelia, and Party and co-operative leaders were typically rejected.⁵⁶

Upon acceptance into the 'Karelian Project', the applicant then confronted the challenge of sorting out their lives and relationships and preparing for such a significant move. While the available sources do not typically offer any sense of how the decisions and permissions to move were reached, a letter written on Christmas Day 1933 by Antti Pitkänen provides a rare opportunity to learn about the process of application and acceptance, and the personal side of making the decision to move. Writing to Taimi in Sudbury, Antti informed her of the news:

I have received word from Comrade Latva [responsible for Canadian recruitment] that I could not even in my dreams await anymore and now there is negotiation or rather, yesterday I informed your mother what I did almost three years ago without her permission. She has not yet been too judgemental, only asked that it not happen before summer. Permission is not yet final only it said that a month before spring work begins we must have arrived if any other comrades can be found to come along and he expects that in the west there are two families that can go, and if so then we are to be ready to go in February. The place where we are supposed to go is a new settlement 20 kilometres from Petroskoi. I do not know why that application has been buried there for so long and

⁵⁵ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 8.

⁵⁶ Pratt, 42 and 45-46.

now if there is an opportunity and it is put off, well it may be put off for the last time. And even if not, if I am to go at some point, putting it off won't fix it... That brings me to ask what you say to these news...⁵⁷

Antti's letter clearly demonstrates the long wait – three years in this case – after filling an application, and how official word from Latvia in Canada or one of the KTA directors in the United States meant a sudden jump to departure.⁵⁸ In Antti's statements about whether he should delay departure, he demonstrates the decision-making processes that likely played out in the minds and homes of all Finnish North American could-be migrants. Likewise, reading into how Antti had applied to move without his wife's permission or perhaps even knowledge, and how he sought Taimi's opinion and probably approval, offers a subtle glimpse of the family operations and negotiations that surrounded 'Karelian Fever'. Ultimately, Antti Pitkänen left Kivikoski in August 1934, but the available letters do not show how it was that he came to leave much later than the originally planned February departure date or whether he received the blessing of his daughter or wife, who herself refused to go.

The decision to move to Karelia could reveal the power structure of a family.

When resistance to migration arose, many families were not comfortable with the idea of

⁵⁷ Antti Pitkänen letter, December 25, 1933. "Olen saannut Tov Latvalta tiedon jota en enää unissanikaan osanut odottaa ja nyt siitä neuvoteltu tai ilmoitin eilen sen äidillesi jonka olen kolmatta vuotta sitten ilman hänen lupaansa tehnyt. Ei hän ainakaan vielä oikein tuomitseva ole vaan pyytää että ei se tapahtusi ennen kesää. Lupakaan ei ollut lopullinen vaan siinä sanottiin kuukausi ennen kevättöiden alkamista pitäis olla perillä jos ketään toisia tovereita saadaan matkaan ja hän arveli olevan lännellä kaksi perhettä jotka voi lähteä, ja jos niin silloin olisi oltava valmis lähtemään Helmikuussa. Tuopaikka johon pitäisi mennä on uudis talous 20 kilometriä Petroskoista. En tiedä kuin tuota hakemusta on niinkin kauan siellä haudottu ja nyt jos on tilaisuus ja sen sivuttaa niin sekiin voi olla sivuudettu viimeisen kerran. Ja vaikka ei niinkään niin jos meinaan joskuskaan mennä eihään se pitkittäin korjaannu... Tuleehan tässä kysymään mitä sinä siihen uutiseen sanot."

⁵⁸ Comparing Antti Pitkänen's experience to Matti Tenhunen's correspondence in 1931 shows a significant difference in processing times. In June 1931, Tenhunen noted how it could take up to six months from the time that individuals signed up for the Karelian project. Matti Tenhunen letter to KTA, 22 June 1931. LAC MG 10 K 3 K-282 Reel 14 (1931) File 128.

separating, even temporarily, in order to take advantage of the Karelian opportunity. However, the move was often made without full family consensus. For example, Klaus Maunu's family had already lived in the Soviet Union on the "Työ" Commune in the 1920s, but his mother had not been happy there.⁵⁹ In order to return to North America, Maunu's parents reportedly agreed to return to the Soviet Union a few years later, when further development had taken place. Three and a half years later, in 1932, Maunu's father began to make arrangements for their move to Karelia without his wife's endorsement and without discussing the plans with their child.⁶⁰ With men as the primary breadwinner in most Finnish immigrant homes and the Left movement primarily targeting men⁶¹, the male head of the household often overruled women's thoughts and feelings about moving. Likewise, when the Depression challenged men's positions as breadwinner and women provided the family's steady income⁶², some, like Kaarlo Tuomi's step-father⁶³, battled their egos and looked to Karelia as a chance to restore their masculine role. Tuomi recalled that "[m]y mother was not eager to leave the United States, but, as a faithful wife, she went along with his travel plans."⁶⁴ Family power dynamics held much sway in the decision to move to Karelia. Tuomi sums up the point,

⁵⁹ Maunu, 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁶¹ For more about this, see Samira Saramo, "A socialist movement which does not attract the women cannot live': Finnish Socialist Women in Port Arthur, 1903-1933," in *Labouring Finns: Transnational Politics in Finland, Canada, and the United States*, ed. Michel Beaulieu et al., 145-166 (Turku: Institute of Migration, 2011).

⁶² Lindström has examined the gender role disruption caused by the North American labour market and economy. See *Defiant Sisters*, 85-88.

⁶³ Tuomi, 65.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 66.

with regard to his own feelings about the move: “[m]y stepfather wore the pants and his mind had to be the family mind.”⁶⁵

Preparing to move

Once the decision had been made to move to Karelia, the emigrants had to prepare. One of the first considerations was what to do with property and belongings. Many did not have the hard dollars needed to pay for the sea voyage and other moving expenses, which could easily amount to over \$400, so liquidating possessions was necessary.⁶⁶ Allan Sihvola’s family sold most of their belongings in an auction.⁶⁷ Given the economic conditions of the time, Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States struggled to sell their goods, and especially to secure a fair price. The Finnish press and Communist movement negatively portrayed those who wanted to hold on to their North American assets, either to wait until the market had improved or in case they wanted to return, as uncommitted to the cause.⁶⁸ Letters from Karelia, however, reveal that many immigrants did leave behind unsorted matters regarding property and other assets.⁶⁹

One could not expect to arrive in Karelia empty-handed. The immigrants seem to have been generally aware that they were to pack enough provisions to see them through the first years of Karelian life. Some brought whatever they could, like Paavo Alatalo’s family who took along “many trunks and large boxes” and everything from furniture to a

⁶⁵ Tuomi, 66.

⁶⁶ Mayme Sevander reported that each family paid the KTA a \$400 fee (*They Took My Father*, 23), which presumably included the sail fare. Reino Kero found that the sail ticket by itself cost over \$110 in 1931 (*Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 80). The costs of getting to New York or Halifax, temporary accommodation en route in North America, and money spent on needed supplies must be added to these amounts.

⁶⁷ Sihvola, 17.

⁶⁸ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 80.

⁶⁹ For example, Terttu Kangas’s letter to her father and siblings, 27 November 1933, makes references to a tenant living in their home and asks whether anyone has inquired about purchasing it.

gold coffee service set “because we were instructed to provide everything for 3-5 years...”⁷⁰ Others, especially unsettled youth and newlyweds, had little to bring. Sylvi and Lauri Hokkanen had no savings to spend on buying new goods for Karelia and packed what little they had: some clothing, tools, and a hideaway bed.⁷¹

When belongings had been sorted into what was to be sold, given away, and taken along, the Finnish North American migrants had to say goodbye to their communities. Remembrances of farewell parties appear in most of the memoirs. Some describe casual and very personal events, where friends and family sent off emigrants with their warmest wishes. For example, Sylvi and Lauri Hokkanen were given a “going-away party. It was held at the Hall. We danced and enjoyed the usual cakes and coffee. A collection had been taken earlier, and at the party we were presented with a ‘going- away’ gift: a genuine Hudson’s Bay blanket.”⁷² Other farewells were much more political, with Party speeches and inspirational workers’ songs. Allan Sihvola remembers that he and the other youth left the New York Labor Temple “farewell meeting” early, suggesting the event was more a political meeting than a party.⁷³ Owing to the stature of Oscar Corgan in the Finnish Left movement, Mayme Sevander remembers their farewell event as

the biggest party I had ever seen. The Finn Hall was all lit up, and the tables in the auditorium were spread with white cloths and covered with pots of coffee, platters of cookies, and little bowls of candy. ... More than four hundred people packed the hall to say goodbye to my father, and we listened to speech after speech until we [the family children] were yawning so hard we thought our faces would split.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Alatalo, 21. ”Matkatavaraa oli aika paljon: monta arkku aja suuria laatikoita aina leveistä vuoteista ja sohvista kahvi-kultaan asti, sillä oli määrä varata kaikkea 3-5ksi vuodeksi...”

⁷¹ Hokkanen, 10.

⁷² Ibid., 10-11.

⁷³ Sihvola, 21.

⁷⁴ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 32-33.

Public farewells helped migrants reaffirm their decision to move to Karelia and made them feel as if they were in fact contributing to the greater good. Saying goodbye to family and close friends just before departing, though, undoubtedly raised many emotions.

Making the Move

Memoir descriptions and the rare letters sent during travel or upon first landing in Karelia allow readers today to gain an appreciation of the journey to Karelia. For many, the trip began with a train ride to either New York City or Halifax,⁷⁵ where the overseas voyage began. For some, hard hit by economic conditions, the cost of the train ticket was prohibitive. To make do, while his wife Aino and other women in their group enjoyed the comforts of the coach interior, Eino Streng and the men rode the rails in cargo cars, hoping not to get caught.⁷⁶ Reino Hämäläinen's letter to his friend Benny in his hometown of Waukegan, Illinois depicts his journey to New York City, his awe of the Appalachian Mountains – “my neck was sore for I was looking at the scenery all through the mountains” – and his boyish cavorting around the big city.⁷⁷ Some drove their cars to the port cities, planning to sell them to help cover the expenses of the trip, donate them to the KTA, or to bring them to Karelia.⁷⁸ Others, like the Hokkanens, rode the bus.⁷⁹ For American Finns, especially, it was not uncommon to wait in New York City for several weeks or even several months for the finalization of travel documents and arrangements.

⁷⁵ While all of the reviewed memoir, interview and letter sources list Halifax as the Canadian port of departure, Kero's *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa* names Montreal as the Canadian launching point.

⁷⁶ Bucht, 45.

⁷⁷ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, New York, 20 February 1932.

⁷⁸ For example Paavo Alatalo's family drove their Ford to New York, where they sold it for a mere \$25. Alatalo, 21.

⁷⁹ Hokkanen, 11.

Allan Sihvola's family left Warren, Ohio in the fall of 1931, believing that their travel arrangements would be sorted by the time they got to New York.⁸⁰ However, upon arrival, they were told that they would not set sail until the spring, and were left to figure out how to get by until then.

Reino Mäkelä's family left New York City on September 16, 1931 at four o'clock, with a three hour docking in Halifax, where an additional ninety-four Karelia-bound passengers embarked.⁸¹ The nine-day voyage to Gothenborg, Sweden was activity packed, as described by Mäkelä: "We had dance and music by a Canadian. We saw three shows. We had a pioneer and YCL meeting every other day in the public room. The older folks held a meeting and a program every day."⁸² Reino Mäkelä's experience had much in common with descriptions offered by others who travelled the same route, like Paavo Alatalo in May 1931, Viola Ranta in 1932, and Mayme Sevander, whose family departed in April 1934. Sevander explained how the Karelian emigrants, once on board, elected committees to oversee social, political, and cultural needs over the course of the voyage.⁸³ The posts were split equally between US and Canadian Finns, and the executive consisted of a Chair, Secretary, and a ten-person board. Additional committees included correspondence to communicate with the Finnish language press in North America and Karelia, a cultural committee, an organizational committee that included programming, and a children's committee. Sylvi Hokkanen also explained the organization of life on ship at the peak of 'Karelian Fever': "These earlier groups were

⁸⁰ Sihvola, 17-18.

⁸¹ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, 19 October 1931, Petrozavodsk.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 17-18.

well organized with elected officials, entertainment committees, and rules of conduct. They held meetings and social events, and in this way kept up their spirits and their sense of camaraderie.”⁸⁴ By Sylvi and Lauri Hokkanen’s departure in late May 1934, the voyage had a different feeling than for earlier migrants. Sylvi noted that “[t]here were only about ten people in our group, and we held no political meetings, no programs, no flag waving or hurrahs as the earlier, larger groups had been in the habit of doing.”⁸⁵ Regardless, Sylvi believed that “[a]lthough we did none of these things, we were also a dedicated group and on the way to help as best we could in building a workers’ land.”⁸⁶

In Sweden, where most Karelian migrants first landed, Finnish North Americans were greeted by the celebratory spirit of international communism. Local Communist groups, especially children’s and youth’s branches, put on programming for the visitors.⁸⁷ From the port of Gothenborg, the Karelian migrants would head to Stockholm by train, to await the next leg of the trip: a two day sailing to Leningrad. Another train trip brought Finnish North Americans four hundred kilometres north to Petrozavodsk, where the regional Resettlement Agency would send newcomers to their new homes and work sites across Karelia, sometimes several hundred kilometres further.

Landing: First Impressions

Having himself already been in the Soviet Union since 1921, Enoch Nelson commented on the North American immigrants arriving in late 1930: “The people coming over here now have it much easier than what it was when I came over but even

⁸⁴ Hokkanen, 12.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁷ For example, Mäkelä letter to Benny, 19 October 1931, Petrozavodsk.

then it takes them a few days to get used to things because we have so many things different from what it is there.”⁸⁸ For many newcomers, though, it likely felt like more than a few days were needed to adjust. How the migrants expressed their feelings about initial impressions varied.

The study of life writing provides an opportunity to analyse both the literal, experiential level of what is told and, also, the ways that the form of writing can be employed to further what the writer hoped to accomplish by setting pen to paper. Early letters from Karelia often served to reassure family and friends that the migrant had arrived safely and was contented with their new situation. Reino Mäkelä normalizes his impressions of Karelia by focussing on relaying encounters with old friends who had migrated before him and emphasizing the Americanness of the movies and youth culture.⁸⁹ In Terttu Kangas’s first letter to her family, she twice mentions that people at home ought not to await their return any time soon, confirming that the move had been a good idea and that she and her husband were satisfied.⁹⁰ These positive exclamations may have hidden feelings of uncertainty and discomfort experienced by many immigrants, given the depictions presented by memoirs and what is known about the challenges of daily life in Karelia (as explored in the next Chapter).

Unlike the reported first impressions found in letters, those in memoirs serve a different purpose. Without denying the validity of the migrants’ early impressions, many of the memoir sources seem to utilize common literary conventions to structure the

⁸⁸ Enoch Nelson letter to Arvid Nelson, Petrozavodsk, 28 December 1930.

⁸⁹ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 19 October 1932.

⁹⁰ Terttu Kangas letter to father and siblings, Lohijärvi, 27 November 1933.

overall arc of their narrative, expressing their feelings about the move in general and linking the beginning of life in the USSR with the ultimate outcome of their experiences in the later 1930s and 1940s. In Paavo Alatalo's memory, the travellers' spirits were high during the entire voyage. However, the narrative switches in tone with their "cool" reception in Leningrad.⁹¹ After arriving in Karelia, "the mood was depressing," with lice and cockroaches depicted as the newcomers' welcoming committee.⁹² Viola Ranta's life writing oozes with disdain for having been forced to move by her parents and her abhorrence for life in Karelia. Fittingly, Ranta's description of arrival in Uhta in August 1932 uses pathetic fallacy to emphasize her misery. After a short two days of good weather, Ranta claims "then it started to rain and that water came every day until it turned into snow."⁹³ Allan Sihvola remembered the surprise of seeing several funeral processions in Leningrad during the day or two they spent there en route to Karelia; he was left wondering why so many people had died.⁹⁴ For sixteen-year-old Kaarlo Tuomi, the early images of the Soviet Union were burned into his memory. For eight hundred kilometres, from Leningrad to Kem in northern Karelia, desperate exiled peasants, accused of being *kulaks*, filled the train. These "broken people," as Tuomi remembers, "were literally dying of starvation before our eyes."⁹⁵ These displaced peasants, while undoubtedly making a significant impression on him, also seem to serve Tuomi's life writing by foreshadowing the coming fate of Finnish communities. Lauri Hokkanen's first impressions also foreshadow the Soviet corruption, labour inefficiencies, and food

⁹¹ Alatalo, 21.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ranta, 2.

⁹⁴ Sihvola, 24.

⁹⁵ Tuomi, 67.

shortages that would soon become familiar.⁹⁶ Allan Sihvola noted that already at the Petrozavodsk train station some decided to return to North America, “but for the majority, enthusiasm closed their eyes to the first shortcomings.”⁹⁷

The memoir sources not only build their narrative arcs around their first impressions, but also offer vivid descriptions of where they settled. These early depictions, not found in the available personal letters, allow readers to build mental maps of what Karelian towns and villages looked like in the early 1930s. Sevander described Petrozavodsk, Karelia’s capital and largest center: “It looked somehow medieval. The main streets were cobblestone, but the rest of the roads were dirt, with car tracks and the clear prints of horses’ hooves in the dust. There were no sidewalks. Most of the buildings were small, unpainted log homes with shingled roofs and dirty windows. Smoke from a thousand chimneys rose straight up...”⁹⁸ Sihvola’s family was brought to the lumber camp Rutanen, some twenty kilometres west of Petrozavodsk, in a forest network of small lumber camps. Much like the other lumber camps, Rutanen, as described by Sihvola, consisted of “two living quarters, of which one was made of boards and the other logs. Additionally, there was a dining hall with kitchen, a laundry hut, a clothes drying room for the bush workers, a horse stall, sauna, a pig stall and blacksmith’s shop – all log buildings.”⁹⁹ Uhtua, the commercial center for northern interior Karelia, approximately 100 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle, was on the northern shore of Lake Kuytto. Many North Americans were sent to the Uhtua area’s

⁹⁶ Hokkanen, 15.

⁹⁷ Sihvola, 24.

⁹⁸ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 44.

⁹⁹ Sihvola, 25.

lumber camps. Lauri Hokkanen described arriving in the town, after travelling almost two hundred kilometres west from Kem, on the White Sea, in the open box of a truck: “There was no railroad, only a poor gravel road from the Kemi station. The town did have a clinic and a hospital, grocery store, schools and the usual government offices. A liquor store was a recent addition... There were also docks along the shore for... small ships and tugs...”¹⁰⁰ These portrayals of select Karelian towns and lumber camps help to build a sense of North American Finnish everyday life, contextualizing the detailed descriptions of living conditions, working conditions, and leisure found in personal letters.

Conclusion

Finnish North American halls were abuzz with stories, debates, and rumours of Karelia in the first years of the 1930s. The development of the Soviet economy and society contrasted with the anxiety and gloom of North American economic depression and political hostility. With the establishment of the Karelian Technical Aid and the support of the Finnish language Leftist press, recruitment for the Karelian project reached feverish proportions. A study of Karelian memoirs and personal letters provides new insights into the decisions, preparations, and travel that led so many to move to Karelia. The migrants’ first impressions allow for an analysis of the narrative structure of life writing and also refocus attention on the experiences of the individuals that collectively make up the Finnish North American movement. Arrival on Soviet soil intensified the diverse and complex decisions and emotions that led to Karelia. As the poem for

¹⁰⁰ Hokkanen, 16.

emigrants recognized: “Our comrades are leaving again,/ Knowing so well they stand no chances / Of winning without taking pains.” A spirit of optimism drove many of the migrants to look beyond the hardships they saw, believing, as the final stanza of the poem reminded, “Many an obstacle you may not know / This faraway journey will bring. / But once overcome, the day will glow / With created light and workers will sing!”¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Recited in Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 23.

CHAPTER IV
“... of course not like there”:
Karelian Living Conditions as Experienced by Finnish North Americans

“ [S]till last fall when we came the stores were pretty much empty...,” wrote Antti Kangas. “[B]ut now,” he continued, “the situation is entirely another[.] [G]oods there are starting to be all kinds, of course not like there.”¹ This letter, composed in October 1934, the only available one written by Antti Kangas, was addressed to the “Comrades” of Drummond Island, Michigan, from where he and his family had left a year earlier. Kangas’s statement demonstrates how Finnish North Americans walked a fine line in their correspondence. Most writers made an effort to emphasize the positive in their new Karelian lives, like the apparent increase in available consumer goods. Some aimed to assure their friends and family that they were healthy, happy, and had made a good choice in emigrating. Others, like Kangas, hoped to further the Karelian project by convincing others that they, too, should be good comrades and move or send money and needed goods. A close reading of Finnish Canadian and American letters and memoirs, though, also reveal the migrants coping with how things were “of course not like there,” in the North American communities left behind. Nowhere are Finnish North Americans’

¹Antti Kangas, Lososiina, 12 October 1934 to “Kunnon toverit”: “vielä viime syksynä kun me tultiin niin kaupat oli melko lailla tyhjiä (nimittain vapaa kaupat) van nyt tilanne on kokonaan toinen tavaraa alkaa olla jo melko lailla, ei tietenkään niin kun siellä.”

efforts to assess the positives and negatives of Karelia clearer than in their discussions of housing, food, clothing, everyday items, and health and hygiene.

Moving to Soviet Karelia involved the re-establishment of daily life and this chapter considers how Finnish North American narratives addressed new living conditions. Situating the letter and memoir content within the context of the writers' North American immigrant backgrounds and the ideals and daily realities of Soviet life illustrates some of the challenges and strategies the migrants employed in making do in Karelia. While food and housing are important for all people, access to these were, in Yasuhiro Matsui's words, "crucial factors for people living under the Stalinist regime."² The arrival of Finnish North Americans coincided with the Soviet Union's entry into rapid, at-all-costs industrialization. During this time, people in the Soviet Union experienced major shortages and a drop in their overall standard of living,³ alleviated only by minor improvements in the availability of certain consumer goods. An examination of housing, food, clothing, and consumer goods also highlights the shift in Soviet culture and social politics in the first years of the 1930s. It is these early years of Finnish North American life in Karelia that provide the focus of the current chapter. Analysing both the 1930s letters and retrospective memoirs illustrates the symbolic and collective significance of home life and, especially, food. While men and women alike were concerned with finding an adequate place to call home and securing required nutrition, the attention given to the topics of housing and food, and the ways that they are

² Yasuhiro Matsui, "Stalinist Public or Communitarian Project? Housing Organisations and Self-Managed Canteens in Moscow's Frunze Raion," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60, 7 (September 2008), 1223.

³ Hoffman, 123.

discussed, reveal a gendered social order and narrative structure. Access to housing, food, and goods, and the overall health of Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia clearly demonstrate the disparity in standards of living between these invited foreign workers, and the local residents and Finnish border hoppers. Finnish North American narratives shed light on some of the ways that these migrants viewed others in the region and point to inter-ethnic tensions.

Soviet Housing Overview

Housing in the Soviet Union has been of interest to scholars exploring both the lives of ordinary citizens and the intersections of ideals and practices.⁴ The topic provides a useful lens for seeing how the Communist project extended into personal spaces and the accompanying contestations over how this reach would be shaped. By briefly turning to broader Soviet ideals and realities regarding housing practices, the Karelian context becomes better situated.

In revolutionary Russia, all aspects of life were to be rid of bourgeois values and ways in favour of new selfless and ascetic styles and methods. Home life was a primary target for this Bolshevik reformation and living spaces and the functions of the family were accordingly reimaged. Women's break with the domestic life, a focus on communality over the traditional family unit, and self-disciplined functionality of spaces and objects were cornerstones of the revolutionary vision.⁵ Throughout the Soviet

⁴ For example, recently, Lynne Attwood's thorough study of housing in Soviet Russia through the lens of gender has provided a useful overview of the themes, trends, and transitions of housing policy throughout the whole of the communist era. Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*.

⁵ Cynthia Hooper, "Terror of Intimacy: Family Politics in the 1930s Soviet Union" in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, ed. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 64.

Union, people were to be revolutionized by separating daily activities from the home, with each task given its own appropriate communal space. Paid work was to occur outside of one's living space. Cooking and eating were to take place at workplace cafeterias and canteens or shared cooking facilities in the communal apartment building or barracks. Special club rooms and Red Corners served as formal political study and participation sites. Children were to be sent to day nurseries and schools. Family members were often assigned different shift schedules. With the day's routine divided into specialized sites, the Bolshevik project specifically targeted family cohesion.

For the few activities deemed suitable for the home, Soviet citizens were faced with new conceptions of what that personal space would look like. The move away from single family homes to communal housing, throughout the Soviet era, was ideally a "revolutionary experiment in living" and in reality, largely a response to a severe housing shortage.⁶ An inherited housing shortage from the tsarist regime was exasperated by the Civil War, rapid industrialization, and the uprooting of millions of rural peasant households due to forced collectivization. These factors further strained urban housing capacities and changed the nature of city society. Collective housing aimed to make room for the newcomers and also to ease the counter-revolutionary 'ruralization' of urban centres. Lenin's housing plan, dating back to 1917, appropriated the homes of the bourgeois for communal dwellings, leaving people with an allotted eight to nine square metres of personal space.⁷ However, by 1930, it was not uncommon for people to have

⁶ Boym, 124.

⁷ Boym, 124 and Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*, 32.

far less than five square metres of space in actuality.⁸ Living space was conceived of mathematically, or by square metre, rather than in terms of rooms or actual spaces. “As a result,” according to Svetlana Boym, “most of the apartments in the major cities were partitioned in an incredible and often unfunctional manner, creating strange spaces, long corridors, and so-called black entrances through labyrinthine inner courtyards.”⁹ In addition to taking charge of physical living spaces, Bolshevik leaders and designers worked on creating furniture that suited the new efficiency and represented the revolutionary ideal. With small living spaces, “furniture was supposed to change form as it changed function and was to be constructed in such a way that it could be folded to redefine interior space.”¹⁰ The functional and disciplined aesthetic had no place for home decoration.¹¹ Middle-class frills were to be cast off in favour of sparse, clean and hygienic spaces. Even the bed was laden with socio-cultural significance. The double bed, as analysed by Olga Matich, symbolized a bourgeois and family-centric life, while the foldaway single cot represented a life committed to the communist struggle.¹²

Despite attempts to alter the form and spaces of daily life, the Soviet Party began to turn its back on efforts to revolutionize the home and family life during the First Five Year Plan. A plummeting birth rate and the exorbitant costs of establishing communal

⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 46. In Magnitogorsk, the available living space in January 1932 amounted to only 1.8 square meters per resident. While conditions improved in the years ahead, Kotkin found that “[a]t no time in the 1930s did the average amount of living space per person in Magnitogorsk exceed 4.0 square meters.” Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 161.

⁹ Boym, 125.

¹⁰ Olga Matich, “Remaking the Bed: Utopia in Everyday Life” in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experimentation*, ed. John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 68. See also, Alexander Lavrentiev, “Experimental Furniture Design in the 1920s,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 11, Russian/Soviet Theme Issue 2 (Winter 1989), especially 145-146.

¹¹ Hoffman, 122.

¹² Matich, 61 and Hooper, 64.

life pushed the Soviet official line to reinstate the family unit's central role, the woman's primary role in domestic and family labour (while maintaining full-time paid work), and the value of single-family apartments. The 1930s signified a shift from the ideals of the revolutionary era to the purported "ever more cosy and comfortable" Stalinist culture.¹³ People's living spaces were still to represent how Soviets were to live and behave, but now focussed on exemplifying the abundance and quality of Communist life.

Just as the ideals of revolutionary communal life could not be achieved universally, ordinary Soviet families were also unable to obtain the Stalinist ideal of single-family housing, due to the continuing housing shortage.¹⁴ Soviet images and writing began to place emphasis on making homes comfortable. In the 1930s, a focus on the Soviet 'cultured life' brought domestic niceties back into fashion.¹⁵ By the mid-1930s, homes were to be not just clean, but also decorated "to make [them] more advanced and cultured."¹⁶ North American department store wares began to provide the Soviet government with images of appropriate domesticity.¹⁷ According to David Hoffman, acquiring "expensive furniture of Karelian birch" had become an aspiration of many Soviet Stakhanovites and elites by the late 1930s.¹⁸ These Karelia Ski Factory luxury goods¹⁹, though, were not common in the living spaces of those in the region.

¹³ See for example, Karen Kettering, "'Ever More Cosy and Comfortable': Stalinism and the Soviet Domestic Interior, 1928-1939," *Journal of Design History*, 10, 2 (1997): 119-135.

¹⁴ Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*, 107.

¹⁵ Hooper, 64-65.

¹⁶ Hoffman, 22.

¹⁷ For example, Gronow, 77-78.

¹⁸ Hoffman, 144.

¹⁹ In addition to skis and sleds, the Ski Factory produced different types of furniture.

Throughout the Soviet territory, ordinary people could not typically acquire the latest multi-purpose furniture pieces or Soviet interior fashions, due to prohibitive cost or lack of regional availability; they made do with whatever was available to fit their needs. As Olga Matich observed, “makeshift furniture in general must have been one of the real-life prototypes of multifunctional furniture.”²⁰ With changing notions of living spaces and domestic life, families, typically sharing single rooms or sections of rooms, had to employ a great deal of creativity. Women were primarily responsible for ordering home space and creating an atmosphere of comfort. In Attwood’s words, “[w]hile the home was now presented as a place of comfort and support, women were its providers rather than recipients.”²¹

An overview of changing Soviet conceptions of appropriate housing and home life highlights some important points for better understanding the experiences of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia. The reality of housing shortages challenged the Soviet regime’s ability to successfully implement their ideals. With a stark contrast between the revolutionary vision of Communist life and the evolving official view of what it meant to live in Stalin’s Russia, the typical home was caught somewhere in-between. Additionally, the uneven distribution of material goods and housing funds meant that each region, especially those farther from the centre, like Karelia, created its own version of Soviet housing policy. Balancing what types of housing and furniture were available regionally with the needs of an individual family typically meant straying from the official Moscow line on living spaces. As we will see, however, women’s

²⁰ Matich, 72.

²¹ Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*, 116.

domestic labour in Karelia provided a clear link between life in the hinterland and formal Soviet expectations of family life in the 1930s.

Karelian Housing

Housing arrangements impacted the lives and letters of Finnish North Americans in Karelia. Overall, living conditions were markedly different than in Canada and the United States, even considering the Depression era standard of living. Though working-class and with few extras in the North American sense, many of these Finnish immigrants had enjoyed indoor plumbing and electricity²², relatively spacious homes (rented or owned), and a wide array of consumer goods. In Karelia, Canadian and American Finns, according to Irina Takala,

were not used to living in barracks in groups of 5 to 6 people per room without any conveniences (one washstand for 3 barracks). Some organizations had 2-3 families accommodated in one room. In the rooms unsuited for the Karelian winter, there were no lights, there was no furniture, and they were swarming with insects. The accommodation situation was best in Petrozavodsk and in the villages where foreigners built housing themselves but here was a permanent shortage of materials, transport, money and so on.²³

Takala's description speaks to the extreme of what Finnish North Americans encountered in Karelia. Regardless, the themes of unfamiliar conditions and shortage emphasized by the passage resonate clearly with the migrants' overall experience in Karelia.

Housing shortages had become apparent at the outset of Karelia's optimistic resettlement program. By 1926, it was obvious that even while actually recruiting only a fraction of the desired number of newcomers, Karelia's towns and villages, especially

²² Kyvig, 67-69. It must be noted, as Kyvig reminds readers, that rural households typically did not have electricity at this time, unlike those in towns and cities.

²³ Irina Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 113.

Kem and Petrozavodsk, could not meet their housing needs.²⁴ By the early 1930s, as Nick Baron summarizes, “Karelia’s resettlement and recruitment initiatives suffered not only because of the better opportunities that industrialization offered workers elsewhere, and the resistance of local authorities in recruitment areas, but because living conditions and food supplies in the autonomous republic were miserable.”²⁵ Therefore, officials in Karelia took special measures to assure that Finnish North Americans, especially, would be met with better than average living conditions.²⁶ Finnish North Americans in Karelia made their homes in apartment buildings and logging barracks, many of which were built with scarce materials and tools, by the immigrants themselves. Families shared single rooms in Karelia’s towns and villages, and open sections of large, primitive camp dwellings, familiar to Finnish immigrant men who had worked in North America’s lumber and mining industries.²⁷ Outcast families of arrested ‘enemies of the people’ found shelter outside of the towns and villages in abandoned barns, saunas, or huts. The immigrants did their best to make do with the situation at hand. Living in such close quarters, however, could place people in unpleasant positions. As an example, for the non-smoking Ranta family, sharing a single room with heavy smokers proved very difficult and awkward.²⁸ Karelian living conditions, however, posed many additional challenges.

²⁴ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 79-80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁶ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 105.

²⁷ See for example, Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), Chapter Five, “In the Camps.”

²⁸ Elis Ranta letter to “Hyvä Veli,” Petrozavodsk, 1 April 1934.

The Second Five Year Plan for Karelia aimed at the wide scale electrification of the region, with a focus on industry.²⁹ While electrified homes were not the norm in the early 1930s, Finnish North American narratives show that some places did have power. For example, the ski factory barracks had electric lighting, but residents, as Sylvi Hokkanen explained, were prohibited from using electricity for other purposes, such as heating electric hot plates.³⁰ In Komulainen's autobiographical novel *A Grave in Karelia*, "bright electric lights illuminated" Nikolai's logging camp barrack.³¹

Even if fortunate enough to have electric lighting, Finnish North Americans, especially those who had lived in Canadian and American towns and cities, had much to learn in Karelia. Many Finns in North America had become accustomed to indoor plumbing and now had to haul in water, share privies, and keep their rooms heated. In Petrozavodsk, some had their water delivered to the barracks daily, free of charge, while others drew water from shared wells in the yard, which froze in the cold months.³² A bucket full of clean water had to be carried indoors, and a slop bucket of dirty water out to the yard. Heating one's space proved difficult too, with no central heating and very little available to burn. Though working to keep the fire going throughout the day and night, Mayme Sevander remembered that they "could sometimes feel the wind howling through the thin walls"³³ Great care had to be taken to prevent fires. Reino Mäkelä wrote about the fire that started in their room; the log walls began to burn from the

²⁹ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 140.

³⁰ Hokkanen, 55.

³¹ Ernesti J. (Ernest Laine) Komulainen, *A Grave in Karelia*, trans. Ritva Koivu (Ann Arbor: Braun-Brumfield, 1995), 23.

³² For example, Hokkanen, 49 and Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 46.

³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

constant heat of the room's stove, which was set right against the wall.³⁴ Remembering her family's time in exile in a large sixty family barrack in Latushka³⁵, Sevander's recollections show how communality was natural when battling the cold Karelian winter:

The wooden building was uninsulated and had only drafty, single-pane windows...We banded together and did what we could to weatherproof the barracks. We stockpiled logs for fuel and assigned families with the smallest children to the warmest part of the room.³⁶

In Latushka, women whose husbands and fathers had been taken came together to make their primitive space liveable. Even in the more hospitable environs of Petrozavodsk and other villages, the responsibility of creating a semblance of domestic comfort belonged to Finnish North American women. Women used their Finnish and North American backgrounds and know-how to create a homey atmosphere out of next to nothing.

In the opening of her final work, *Of Soviet Bondage*, Mayme Sevander offers a take on the Finnish character and reveals something of her own mother's feelings about having moved to Karelia:

Judging by history, Finns have moving in their blood! And when there are no major moves to be made, they begin changing the furniture around. At least that's what happened to Mother when we came to Petrozavodsk. Every other Saturday on coming home from school we saw that Mother had been 'moving' again!³⁷

³⁴ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, undated [circa 1932].

³⁵ Emma Mason, in her study of women in the GULAG, has found similarities in the daily experiences of arrested, exiled, and free Soviet society. See Mason, "Women in the Gulag in the 1930s" in *Women in the Stalin Era*, edited by Melanie Ilič (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 144.

³⁶ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 111.

³⁷ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 1.

Reino Kero's study of Karelian correspondence with Canadian and American Finnish-language newspapers found that the housing situation proved to be the major "stumbling block" for many women and resulted in return migration.³⁸ Perhaps turning their attention to "moving" and beautifying their living spaces provided Finnish North American women with a sense of control over the Karelian conditions and their new lot in life. Finnish North American letters and memoirs provide examples of women engaged in this domestic work.

Eventually granted a private room, Sylvi Hokkanen remembered that, there, she "even enjoyed keeping house."³⁹ Terttu Kangas told her sister about their acquaintance, Tilda Korpi, who had made her family's small room "really pretty" by painting it herself.⁴⁰ Sylvi decorated their room in the ski factory barracks in Petrozavodsk with her favourite colour green, pictures and photographs, and hung cheesecloth curtains that she had made.⁴¹ Space could be created in crammed shared rooms by building racks to stack beds on top of each other.⁴² Mayme Sevander remembered her family's arrival in Petrozavodsk:

My mother did her best to make the place homey. She strung up a curtain to divide the room in two. In one half was the day bed, where Aino and I slept, and a big steamer trunk that Paul curled up on at night. My mother hung their wedding picture and a photo of my [deceased] brother Leo on the bare wall, unpacked the dishes

³⁸ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 101. "Stumbling block" (*kompastuskivi*) used by Nick Alden in a letter published in *Vapaus* on March 4, 1933.

³⁹ Hokkanen, 49.

⁴⁰ October 28, 1934 from Terttu to Toini: "Korvella [Titla Korvi?] on oikeen nätti huone vaikka se on pieni mutta Korpi on sen itse maalanut oikeen sieväksi."

⁴¹ Hokkanen, 50.

⁴² Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, undated [circa 1932].

and kitchen utensils, and that was our home.⁴³

Like Mayme's mother, women in Karelia and across the Soviet Union used partitions, curtains and screens to create the illusion of space and privacy in their small rooms.⁴⁴

Vadim Volkov has shown how curtains in communal living arrangements, marked the "creation – both real and symbolic – of a private space through limitation of its observability."⁴⁵ The value of curtains, lampshades, tablecloths, flowers, and carpets exceeded their practical utility by also functioning as key symbols of 1930s Soviet 'cultured life'.⁴⁶

While Moscow urbanites may have seen depictions of cultured domestic comforts in model store window displays or culture exhibits, and workers may have aspired to the material comforts that accompanied Stakhanovite status, it is unclear how and whether such messages and standards translated into the Karelian context. According to Irina Takala, "[t]he fact, that even in the unbearable conditions of life in the barracks Finns wanted to create something like cosiness and cleanliness, was seen by their neighbours as bourgeois and lower-middle class characteristics."⁴⁷ Takala's findings reveal both the cultural differences among the Karelian population and the extent of official Soviet cultural education in the region. Karelia's rural population, apparently, did not have the same inclination to exert energies on domestic prettying and differing home interiors came to mark very different social and cultural realities between Karelia's ethnic

⁴³ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 46.

⁴⁴ Boym, 146.

⁴⁵ Vadim Volkov, "The Concept of Kul'turnost': Notes on the Stalinist civilizing process" in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 221.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Takala, "North American Finns as Viewed," 206.

populations. Takala's focus on the 1930s show how, though official Soviet rhetoric espoused the merits of cultured life and Communist consumerism, the practices had not impacted the lives of the Karelian people. The realities of poverty, shortages, and never ending hard work precluded widespread participation in Soviet proscribed culturing.

Gendered Narratives

The Karelian life writing demonstrates gendered narrative conventions worthy of further exploration. Women's letters and memoirs provide insights on domestic interiors, conspicuously missing from men's writing. For example, in their shared memoir, Sylvi's voice depicts the home much more clearly than Lauri's. Mayme Sevander offers descriptions of her home and mother's work, whereas the unpublished memoirs of Allan Sihvola and Paavo Alatalo do not provide the reader with any sense of what their home was like. Elis Ranta did tell his brother in Finland that in the United States his family of three had been accustomed to three or four rooms, plus a separate washroom, but in Petrozavodsk they shared a single room with another family.⁴⁸ Otherwise, Ranta does not elaborate on how they organized their space in order to manage two families in such close quarters. When men do discuss living areas, their narratives focus on the structure of the building and what it was made of, much more than what was inside of it. The memoir of Klaus Maunu serves as a prime example, offering great detail about the construction of his family's detached home, but saying nothing about the home interior, or even how many rooms it had. The mentions that can be found focus on the lumber camp barracks, which were often a male space. This gendered division in the narratives

⁴⁸ Elis Ranta to "Veli hyvä ja perheesi" September 26, 1933 from Petroskoi.

reflects the more obvious gendered division in home responsibilities. An examination of food in the Karelian narratives provides further insights on daily life and social roles.

Food

“[B]y virtue of its sheer necessity, food tends to *define* the everyday,” writes Ian Mosby in his study of food in World War II Canada.⁴⁹ And certainly, in the letters and memoirs of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia, food played a vital role and came to define the positives and negatives of life there. Though securing adequate nourishment became a preoccupation of most Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia, at least at some point in their time there, food serves a further purpose in these migrants’ narratives. The Karelian letters and memoirs successfully demonstrate how “food carries fundamental symbolic and ritual meanings that go well beyond its importance for survival.”⁵⁰ The following analysis explores the practical questions of what people were eating and where they ate it. These questions are paired with a close reading of Finnish North American narratives that considers how they felt about that food and the powerful symbolic functions that different foods began to take on, building a mythology of Finnish North American life in Karelia. In approaching the daily realities of food and eating and its psychological role, attention must be given to who prepared food and who wrote about food, and whether men and women approached the topic differently.

The Soviet Union has the dubious reputation of having been, in Jukka Gronow’s words, “the only modern state, which has adopted bread cards during peace time,” in

⁴⁹ Ian Mosby, “‘Food Will Win the War’: The Politics and Culture of Food and Nutrition During the Second World War” (PhD Dissertation, York University, 2011), 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

addition to wartime.⁵¹ The Soviet Union enforced rationing in the periods of 1917-1924, 1928-1935, and 1939-1947. While rationing assured that most Soviet citizens would have access to at least some food, the program's structuring entrenched a hostile social hierarchy. "The conditions of differential accessibility of food has to do with the power relationships between social strata in a country," Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott, and Anneke H. van Otterloo have remarked.⁵² In the Soviet case, Julie Hessler has identified a "geographic hierarchy of supplies and the social hierarchy of access."⁵³ Food and other material goods were not evenly available throughout the Soviet Union, with the cities typically having greater access. As an example, according to Jukka Gronow's research, Moscow, with three to four percent of the Soviet Union's population, received half of the country's available meat and margarine in 1935.⁵⁴ Moscow was also the centre of the Soviet administration, with a significant number of Party elites living and working there. Their status granted them access to foodstuffs and quantities largely unheard of beyond the capital and the privileged inner circle. Beyond geographic disparity, the Soviet social

⁵¹ Gronow, 98.

⁵² Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott, and Anneke H. van Otterloo, *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet, and Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 66. See also Amartya Sen's "Food Entitlement and Economic Chains" in *Hunger in History: Food Shortage, Poverty, and Deprivation*, edited by Lucile F. Newman, 374-386 (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁵³ Julie Hessler, "Cultured Trade: The Stalinist turn towards consumerism" in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 184.

⁵⁴ Gronow, 125. Robert Allen similarly argues that Soviet per capita consumption actually increased between 1928 and 1937 but this growth was "confined to urban residents" and that other improvements in the standard of living were "confined to only a fraction of the population." Robert C. Allen, "The Standard of Living in the Soviet Union, 1928-1940," *The Journal of Economic History*, 58, 4 (December 1998) 1065 and 1084.

hierarchy and system of rations meant that occupational group, political history, and, often, ethnic background determined what and how much one was entitled to.⁵⁵

Antti Kangas reported to his comrades in Drummond Island about the conditions he saw in Karelia. He noted: “here there’s one good thing that if something is lacking then it is lacking for everyone because here there are none of those better and worse People...”⁵⁶ Perhaps the equality that Kangas admired could be seen among Finnish North Americans, but the statement downplayed some major social inequities. While not the life of caviar and champagne⁵⁷ enjoyed by Moscow Party officials, Finnish North Americans had privileged access to food and goods in Karelia in the first years of the 1930s. Motivated to attract and retain North American lumber and mechanical expertise, the Karelian leadership and Soviet centre redirected limited food resources toward Finish Canadians and Americans. These “foreigner’s rations” were much better than those given to the local population and immigrants from Finland.⁵⁸ According to Aino and Eino Streng, a full-time working North American was allotted 800 grams of bread per day, and monthly rations that amounted to: a kilo of butter, two kilos of sugar, 3 kilos of oats or macaroni, three kilos of meat, two kilos of *silli* (pickled herring), and one to two kilos of caramels.⁵⁹ However, a real discrepancy exists between what was technically

⁵⁵ William Crossgrove et al. discuss the ideas and practices of “food as a weapon,” and use the example of the Soviet Union. See “Colonialism, International Trade, and the Nation-state” in *Hunger in History: Food Shortage, Poverty, and Deprivation*, edited by Lucile F. Newman (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 223.

⁵⁶ Antti Kangas, 12 October 1934 to ”Kunnon toverit”: “...sehän täällä on yks hyvä puoli että jos jotain puuttuu niin se puuttuu kaikilta täällä kun ei ole niita parempia ja huompia [huonompia] Ihmisia...”

⁵⁷ The symbols of Soviet Russian abundance and prosperity and the focus of Soviet luxury production. See Gronow’s *Caviar with Champagne*.

⁵⁸ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 106.

⁵⁹ Bucht, 76.

allotted, what was actually available, and how migrants remembered available foods.

Viola Ranta's recollections suggest a less than adequate diet and emphasize the difference between Finnish North Americans' and Karelians' diets:

We had the foreigner's rations, which included salted meat, rancid butter, sugar, tea, caramels, hulled grain, flour. Other folk got just black bread, salt and tea for rations. Was it a wonder then, that we were insulted by all kinds of names when they saw hunger and we had these kinds of rations. If only they had even been decent foods.⁶⁰

Ranta's "Life Story" is characterized by a deep bitterness about her life in Karelia and she is especially negative about her experiences with food. Though recognizing the unfair rationing system, Ranta still dismissed the extras her family and Finnish North Americans were afforded.

None of the Finnish North American memoirs acknowledge the Soviet famine of 1932-1933. Given what is known now about the horrendous starvation and death in vast regions of the Soviet Union, especially the Ukraine, at the exact time that the migrants were receiving "caramels" and other extras, it can be difficult to accept the migrants' complaints.⁶¹ Of course, at the time, people removed from the famine did not know or understand what was happening. From the perspective of Karelians and Russians, the Finnish North Americans had more than adequate rations.⁶² As Jukka Gronow confirms,

⁶⁰ Ranta, 2. "Meillä oli ulkomaalaisten normit, johon kuului suolattua lihaa, härskiintynyttä voita, sokeria, teetä, karamellejä, ryynejä, jauhoja. Muu kansa sai normikseen vain mustaa leipää, suolaa ja teetä. Oliko se sitten ihme, että meitä haukuttiin jos milläkin nimellä kun he näkivät nälkää ja meillä oli kuitenkin tällaiset normit. Olisivatpa olleet edes kunnan syötäviä."

⁶¹ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 221. Collingham has shown how forced collectivization worked to "relocate hunger" from the towns and cities to the agricultural villages. Given that the Soviet media did not report on the famines, as the peasants starved, food seemed more readily available from the perspective of towns and cities.

⁶² Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 104.

“[a]lmost anything – other than very basic goods, such as plain bread, cabbage, potatoes, or vodka – was a luxury in the eyes of Soviet citizens and the authorities.”⁶³ According to Irina Takala, unhappy locals rallied around the phrase “Americans came here to eat our bread!”⁶⁴ Reino Kero’s analysis helps to better understand the subjectivity of what was judged as sufficient in terms of housing and food. Kero argues that from the perspective of the high North American standard of living, even the above-average provisions were shocking and disappointing.⁶⁵ With reference to the United States, by 1930, people, despite obvious variation, had become overall accustomed to “much more fruit, particularly citrus, many more vegetables, especially green ones, significantly more milk and cheese, less flour and cornmeal, fewer potatoes, and less red meat.”⁶⁶ The Karelian diet was a significant change. Furthermore, though the North Americans were technically afforded superior rations, at times the promised goods proved to be just a “set of aspirations.”⁶⁷

Like many regions of the Soviet Union, Karelia was very dependent on food import and could not meet its own need.⁶⁸ Karelia faced shortages of meat, butter, vegetables, and even canteens to feed the Soviet masses.⁶⁹ Many North American families rarely had fruit and fresh vegetables in the midst of Depression conditions.⁷⁰

However, their near total absence from the Soviet diet was noteworthy and especially had

⁶³ Gronow, 33.

⁶⁴ Takala, “North American Finns as Viewed by the Population of Soviet Karelia,” 203.

⁶⁵ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 104.

⁶⁶ Kyvig, 118.

⁶⁷ Collingham, 328, speaking generally about Soviet rations.

⁶⁸ Baron, 54.

⁶⁹ Takala, “From the Frying Pan into the Fire,” 113.

⁷⁰ See for example the recollections of interviewees in Laura Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario’s Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 29 and 31.

an impact on the memories of child migrants. Mayme Sevander's childhood recollections revealed that "in Karelia, there were no oranges or bananas. In Karelia, there was no fresh fruit at all."⁷¹ Mary Leder remembered the role of food in social conversations with other foreign émigrés in Moscow:

Food was, indeed, a constant topic of conversation... we fantasized about eating, especially about the foods of our childhoods and younger years, which many of us had spent in distant countries. We did this in fun, not in self-pity. Afterall, we were not starving. Our stomachs were seldom full, but we had enough nourishment to keep our bodies and souls together.⁷²

As foreign workers, Leder and her Moscow friends, like Finnish North Americans in Karelia, enjoyed privileged access to foods, but familiar foods and diets still retained a special place in their minds.

Karl Berg diplomatically summed up food in a 1932 letter: "Food you do get here even though it is not so varied but, yes, with it you get by."⁷³ Descriptions of food found in letters written in the 1930s successfully show, from the Finnish North American perspective, what foods could be found in Karelia, the value of particular foods, and how the letter-writers shaped their narratives to convey health and success to their correspondents. In her first letter from Lohijärvi, some eighteen kilometres from Petrozavodsk, Terttu Kangas assured her father and siblings that "Yes you manage here[.] foods here are almost the same kinds as there on the island except eggs and milk you

⁷¹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 41. Likewise, Suzanne Rosenberg remembered really missing fruit as a child immigrant in Moscow. Suzanne Rosenberg, *A Soviet Odyssey* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35.

⁷² Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, ed. Laurie Bernstein (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 229.

⁷³ Karl Berg Letter to Bertha and Reino, 17 October 1932. "Ruokaa täällä kyllä saa vaikka ei se ole niin monipuolista vaan kyllä sillä pärjää"

can't really get lots yet. We have a baker [who] came from America [who is] really good. Even though here the bread isn't from bare rye, it has 30 percent white flour."⁷⁴ Terttu used food to assure her family of her health. Interestingly, it seems that Terttu utilized the baker's Americanness to contribute to her assurance of health and normalcy. Terttu did not hide the shortages. On one hand she claims food is the same as at home, but without eggs and milk, which have been staples of the Finnish immigrant diet. Likewise, Terttu has clearly noticed differences in the available bread, even with the skills of an American baker, but tries to emphasize its purity, mentioning the thirty percent white flour.

Decades ago, Roland Barthes examined the communicative role of food.⁷⁵ His findings are useful in understanding how Finnish North American narratives use food to express Karelian shortage and plenty. Terttu's comments about the available bread fit into the émigrés' broader folklore symbolism surrounding bread. Farb and Armelagos point out that "[t]he important metaphorical associations a society has are usually with the staples."⁷⁶ Certainly bread served as a primary staple in Karelia and throughout the Soviet Union. By 1933, Soviets were eating only one-fifth of the amount of meat and fish they would have eaten in 1900.⁷⁷ Bread and other coarse grains attempted to fill the

⁷⁴ Terttu Kangas to Father and siblings, Lohijärvi, November 27, 1933: "Kyllä täällä pärjää ruokaa täällä on kyllä melkein samanlaista kun siela saarela paitsi munia ja matoa [maitoa] ei vielä oikeen paljon saa. Meilla on leipoja Amerikasta tullut oikeen hyvä. vaikka ei täällä se leipä aivan paljasta ruuista ole, siina on 30 prosenttiä valkosia jauhoja."

⁷⁵ Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997) [originally published in 1961], 21-22.

⁷⁶ Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 108.

⁷⁷ Collingham, 325.

void. Bread would be made from whatever was available, often making it difficult to digest, poor tasting, and unrecognizable.⁷⁸ Soft, white bread communicates a life far different than that of the rough, sour, and dark bread.

Marlene Epp's study, "The Semiotics of Zwieback: Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women," skilfully explores the varying meanings given to staple foods in the life stories of Mennonite women from the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ Regarding bread, Epp noted that "white bread, a symbol of prestige and plenty, marked a departure from hardships, when any morsel of dark, rough bread was devoured eagerly."⁸⁰ When Mayme's brother Paul Corgan got his first pay check, which was to support the family, he bought a loaf of white bread and a "whole" jar of jam. Sevander remembered: "We celebrated that night. It was the first white bread any of us had had in months; we always ate the Russian brown bread because it was cheaper and more filling."⁸¹ Sevander's statement reveals that, while it may have also tasted delicious, the white bread had more celebratory symbolic value than nutritional sense. According to Farb and Armelagos, "[o]nce a particular food has been elevated to symbolic status its nutritional use may become secondary."⁸²

Likewise, in a letter written to her sister Toini, Terttu Kangas, like Finnish letter-writers in North America generations earlier, used the image of sweets and baking to

⁷⁸ For example, Suzanne Rosenberg recalled the prevalence of bread made with flour and sawdust in her Soviet experience. Rosenberg, 86.

⁷⁹ Marlene Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback: Feast and Famine in the Narratives of Mennonite Refugee Women" in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, ed. Marlene Epp et al., 314-340 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

⁸⁰ Ibid, 328.

⁸¹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 107.

⁸² Farb and Armelagos, 98.

represent an improved standard of living.⁸³ Instead of directly addressing whether they had steady access to protein or vegetables, or other pillars of sound nutrition, Kangas emphasized the availability of “*pulla* [coffee bread] and *keekiä* [Finnish ‘cakes’] and all kinds of baking but coffee [we] still can’t get except with foreign money.”⁸⁴ As Epp has shown, sugar acts as a symbol of abundance and metaphor for better times.⁸⁵ Terttu Kangas’s cakes allowed her to assure her family that she was fine and stood in for her sweet life, so to speak. Sweets were also sent from North America to Karelia. Care packages from relatives and friends often contained treats like cookies, candies, chewing gum, and especially coffee. These specialty foods provided a taste of home and the nostalgic sweetness of distant homes and communities.⁸⁶

Coffee holds an incomparable place in the narratives of Finnish North Americans in Karelia. Like sweets, the absence or availability of coffee act as symbols of shortage and plenty, of hardship and prosperity. In 1961, Roland Barthes argued that “coffee is felt to be not so much a substance as a circumstance.”⁸⁷ Indeed, coffee serves a vital social role in Finnish culture⁸⁸ and is the beloved national beverage, enjoyed several times a day. In Karelia, however, coffee was a very rare treat and Russian *chai* or tea

⁸³ For a discussion of the use of food in Finnish immigrant letters, see Samira Saramo, “Terveisiä: A Century of Finnish Immigrant Letters from Canada,” in *The Finnish Immigrant Experience in Canada*, edited by Michel Beaulieu et al. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, Forthcoming), 11-13.

⁸⁴ Terttu Kangas to Toini, Lohijärvi, March 1935: “Täällä saa jo valkosta leipää ja minkä laista ei siitä ole puuteta kahvi pullaa ja keekiä ja vaikka minkä laisia leivoksia mutta kahvia ei vielä saa muutakin ulkomaalaista rahalla. Mutta pian sittäkin pitäis tulla.”

⁸⁵ Epp “The Semiotics of Zwieback,” 329.

⁸⁶ Aate Pitkänen letters to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 29 March 1933, to “Lakeridge Residents,” 20 June 1933, and to Parents, 9 November 1933.

⁸⁷ Barthes, 26.

⁸⁸ Anthropologist Frederic M. Roberts outlined the ritual elements of the Finnish coffee ‘ceremony’ in an interesting outsider analysis. See Roberts, “The Finnish Coffee Ceremony and Notions of Self” in *Arctic Anthropology* 26, 1 (1989): 20-33.

was the standard local beverage. Whether simply indicative of a love of coffee or suggesting that recruiters warned candidates about the lack of coffee, among the few items brought to Karelia by Lauri and Sylvi Hokkanen was a pound of their favourite coffee.⁸⁹ It seems Elis Ranta's family also brought coffee from the United States. Ranta casually asked his brother in Finland to send him some: "Apparently you can send duty-free a kilo of coffee, so I was thinking that maybe you brothers there could try to send us a coffee package. We have scrimped American coffee so far, but now it's starting to run out and it might be sad to be without coffee when you are used to it."⁹⁰ Ranta specified that wrapping it in cloth, rather than paper, would assure its safe arrival. Sylvi Hokkanen remembered that "we felt the lack of [coffee] deeply but also found it a great pleasure when we did have some."⁹¹ The narratives do suggest that the absence of coffee was a "sad" state, but, conversely, memories of the availability of coffee have taken on the significant symbolic representation of fortune and prosperity in the mythology of Finnish North American Karelia.

It seems the smell of coffee and a warm cup in hand could melt the hardships of Karelian life and inspire a camaraderie fit for a worker's paradise. Lauri Hokkanen remembered the woman who cooked for the workers at the Vonganperä lumber camp:

One evening she dipped into her personal supply of coffee and made a pot for all of us. It was a real treat. We had all been sitting there quietly around the fire but when the coffee came, everyone began to talk. What a difference coffee can

⁸⁹ Hokkanen, 10.

⁹⁰ Elis Ranta to "Veli hyvä ja perheesi," Petrozavodsk, September 26, 1933. "Tänne kuulemma saa lähettää tulli vapaasti, kilon kahvia, niin minä ajattelin, että jos te veljet siellä koittaisitte lähettää meillen kahvi paketin. Meillä on piisannut tähän asti Ameriikakalaisia kahvia, mutta nyt ne alkaa loppumaan ja taitaa tulla ikävä ilman kahvia, kun on siihen tottunut."

⁹¹ Hokkanen, 55.

make, especially to people who haven't had any for a long time.⁹²

The rare cup of North American coffee could flood the drinker with nostalgic emotion. Even in 1989, Harold Hietala explained how the first cup from a package from Canada made him and his wife “imagine being again on the other side of the ocean.”⁹³ Barthes identified coffee as symbolizing “neighbourliness” to North Americans, and the same can be said for Finns.⁹⁴ Reino Hämäläinen noted that “this place is darn good any place you go the people allways [sic] want to feed you with something. Coffee and coffee is what they usually serve out here.”⁹⁵ Certainly the rare scent of coffee infiltrating the communal apartment corridors or barracks brought eager visitors. Sylvi Hokkanen recalled: “whenever anyone was lucky enough to have coffee to make she would soon find unexpected company at her door.”⁹⁶ Hokkanen’s statement further depicts coffee brewing as a woman’s task.

Though women brewed coffee and served small meals at home, Finnish North Americans’ daily meals were to be offered at state-run cafeterias or canteens. Eating communally was a part of the Soviet welfare vision and a sign of communist life, and, by 1935, sixty percent of families in the Soviet Union ate at their workplace canteens.⁹⁷ Workers received vouchers for food, which were traded for meals at the dining halls.

⁹² Hokkanen, 19.

⁹³ Harold Hietala letter to Varpu Lindström, Tshalna, February 1989. “Leini keitti heti kunnan kahvit ja kuvittelimme olevamme jälkeen siellä meren takana.”

⁹⁴ Farb and Armelagos, 175-76.

⁹⁵ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

⁹⁶ Hokkanen, 55-56.

⁹⁷ Gronow, 124.

Finnish North Americans were to be fed in special foreigner canteens. Aate Pitkänen detailed his cafeteria's offerings for his sister and brother-in-law in 1934:

I still have an Insab book, that is I get my stuff from the foreigners supply store. I give my food coupons to the 'Ruokala' [cafeteria]. Boy! And I eat plenty. This restaurant of ours happens to be a good one, well managed. We have 3 meals a day. Breakfast is tea with sugar, porridge, 3 slices of white bread with a hunk of butter, porridge you can eat all you want. Dinner is soup, velli [porridge] or something else and few slices of white bread and all you want of brown, and tea with sugar. Supper is the best meal and you can get second and even 3rd helpings of soup or spuds and gravy, but the best and richest grub in by the norm and as is desert [sic]. I always eat 2 and 3 helpings unless I'm sick very bad. I tell the women that 'pitää kokkien mieliksi syötä' [have to eat for the cook's sake]. Then we make tea at home once in a while and buy some biscuits or cakes. Some of the restaurants serve tea in the evenings.⁹⁸

Based on his depiction, Aate seems to have been very well-fed and satisfied with his lot in Karelia. Upon close reading, Aate's emphasis on "sugar," "white bread," "deserts," "cakes," and "biscuits" reveals rather little about the nutritional content of his meals, or whether the meals contained any meat or vegetables beyond starchy potatoes. Instead, they show the use of symbols of prosperity and happiness. More striking, perhaps, is how Aate's description is worlds apart from most other Finnish North Americans' experiences with food in the Soviet Union and with the research findings of Alexey Golubev and Irina Takala.

Viola Ranta remembered: "We ate at the cafeteria, but I wasn't able to eat anything for 2 weeks. The potatoes were frozen, sweet, and bad tasting, porridge ingredients were all mouldy, disgusting porridge. Rye porridge then became the food that I could eat. The black bread was so sour and raw that with it you could glue

⁹⁸ Aate Pitkänen to Taimi and Jim, Petrozavodsk, November 21, 1934.

whatever.”⁹⁹ The ski factory had two dining areas, separated according to Soviet worker hierarchy; one fed the technical staff and the other the ordinary workers. Lauri Hokkanen had never eaten in the elite dining room, but “was told by some that they had better food.”¹⁰⁰ Hokkanen had grown accustomed to the daily offering of sour bread and cabbage soup. Such plain and repetitive food was the standard. Having done some repair work at a collective farm, he recalled their normal meal: “The first course consisted of water that fish had been boiled in. Next we had the boiled fish with sour bread and tea.”¹⁰¹ Golubev and Takala examined canteen investigation reports and found a scene much different than the one presented by Pitkänen. In early 1932, a Petrozavodsk canteen, designed to cater to a maximum of two hundred people, found itself serving eight hundred people each day.¹⁰² The canteen could not meet the need, and people waited for hours to get what little they could. Golubev and Takala have also pointed to the North Americans’ horror to find that “[h]uge accommodations in which hundreds of people dined had no separate facilities for cooking, dishwashing, or food storage. In addition, the facilities were infested with rats and cockroaches.”¹⁰³

Why, then, did Pitkänen paint such a rosy picture of the Karelian food offerings? Perhaps he was truly impressed by the food or perhaps it stood in contrast to what had been available at home in Kivikoski, Ontario during hard times. However, in letters

⁹⁹ Ranta, 2. “Söimme ruokalassa, mutta minä en voinnut 2 viikoon syödä mitään. Perunat olivat jäätyneet, makeita ja pahanmakuisia, puuroaineet kaikki homeisia, inhottavaa puuroa. Ruispuurosta siiten tuli se ruoka, jota voin syödä. Musta leipä oli niin hapanta ja raakaa että sillä voi liimata vaikka mitä.”

¹⁰⁰ Hokkanen, 41.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Alexey Golubev and Irina Takala, “The Harsh reality of Fine Words: The Daily Implementation of Immigration Policy in Soviet Karelia,” in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, ed. Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, *Journal of Finnish Studies*, Special Issue, 15, 1-2 (November 2011), 132.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

written by his parents, Antti and Kirsti, in Ontario, the various local bounties were described, suggesting he had been used to a sufficient diet.¹⁰⁴ Maybe Aate was trying to emphasize the positive against the common negative attitudes to Karelia displayed by returnees and the anti-Karelian segment of Finnish North America. Finally, perhaps Aate was simply trying to reassure his big sister and family that he and his father, who had only recently arrived in Karelia, were being well cared for and healthy. Regardless of the ‘truth’ behind Aate’s portrayal of Karelian food, his description shows the basic structure of vouchers, foreigner advantages, and the cafeteria meal structure, even if only in the ideal. Such a narrative also shows the need to approach personal letters with a sharp analytical eye.

Many people were frustrated by the inefficiencies, high costs, and poor quality of canteen dining. Others, still, lacked access to canteens, either because of their rations category or because they lived in an area where a dining hall had not yet been established. For example, after being sent to work in a remote area on the western shore of Lake Segozero (Seesjärvi, in Finnish), the Maunu family had to make a treacherous fifty kilometre voyage by land and waterway to get their monthly food rations from a Finnish Canadian lumber camp (Tumba).¹⁰⁵

Other letters and memoirs do not address the communal dining halls, and instead comment on preparing food in their small and ill-suited living spaces. “So you asked where I prepare food,” Tertti Kangas wrote to her sister in April 1934 from Lohijärvi, “I

¹⁰⁴ See for example, Antti Pitkänen letter, Lakeridge, April 2, 1933 and Kirsti Pitkänen letter, Lakeridge, April 10, circa 1935-1936.

¹⁰⁵ Maunu, 14-15.

have in this same room a stove made of tile and it has an iron lid with holes just like in American stoves[.] yes with it I can cook and it is also a heating oven much better than *paksi stouvi* [‘Finnglish’ for ‘box stove’][.] our room has been so warm that the windows weren’t frozen all winter.”¹⁰⁶ Although the communal cafeteria and communal kitchen were symbols of revolutionary *byt*, they were neither the reality nor preference of many women across the Soviet Union. In fact, none of the available letters or memoirs mention a communal kitchen in an apartment building at all. Terttu also told her sister that a “restaurant,” meaning cafeteria, had not yet been built in the new village of Lohijärvi. It is unclear where lumber workers in the community ate during their shifts or where the food was prepared, but Terttu’s explanation shows that many women were cooking for their families in their rooms on the stoves intended for heating. In an April 1934 letter, Elis Ranta explained to his brother that his wife, Alli, did not work outside of the home in Petrozavodsk, but “just prepares food for us, because the communal cafeterias are not yet in the condition that you can go there to eat.”¹⁰⁷ Knowing that there were, in fact, cafeterias operating in Petrozavodsk at this time, it seems the Ranta’s felt they could better feed themselves at home. Ranta’s and Kangas’s letters confirm Lynne Attwood’s finding that many women in Soviet Russia were disinterested in communal cooking and preferred to take care of their own families.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 9 April 1932. “niin sinä kysyit missä mina laitan ruan[.] minulla on tässä samassa huonessa hella joka on tiilestä muuratu ja siinä on rauta kansi jossa on reiät niin kun Ameriikalaisessa stouvissa kyllä sillä voin keitelee ja se on myös hyvä lämitys uuni paljon parempi kun paksi stouvi meidän huone on ollut koko talven niin lämmin että ei ole ollut yhtään jäässä akunat koko talvena.”

¹⁰⁷ Elis Ranta letter to “Hyvä Veli”, Petroskoi, 1 April 1934.

¹⁰⁸ Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*, 64.

Rural upbringing, experience with poverty, and North American Depression conditions prior to migration helped Finnish women make the best out of what foods were available to them in Karelia.¹⁰⁹ Regarding the Depression specifically, Cynthia Comacchio recognized that “previous experiences of unemployment and constrained family budgets prepared many working-class families to meet Depression scarcity with well-honed resourcefulness.”¹¹⁰ Comacchio also notes that “[m]ending, sewing, backyard vegetable gardening, berry-picking, baking and canning returned to many homes.”¹¹¹ Donna Gabaccia draws attention to how immigrant women have been seen as especially adept at economizing and making do.¹¹² These insights can all be extended to the experiences and practices of many Finnish North Americans who moved to Karelia. Finnish women from agricultural or working-class backgrounds, both in Finland and after emigration to Canada and the United States, had grown up with subsistence garden plots, foraging, and the skills of home preserving. Despite the growing modernization of the food processing industry in North America and the increasing availability of canned foods, the 1930s economic downturn meant a return to old-fashioned approaches to food. As an example, the sale of canned goods fell significantly during the Depression, while the sale of canning jars and, likely, other home-preserving tools reached record highs.¹¹³ These changes helped prepare Finnish North American women for life in Karelia.

¹⁰⁹ Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 85. Gabaccia notes Finnish American women’s work in family subsistence food acquirement and production.

¹¹⁰ Comacchio, *The Infinite Bonds of Family*, 126.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 138 and 145.

¹¹³ Laura Hollingsworth and Vappu Tyyska, “The Hidden Producers: Women’s Household Production During the Great Depression,” *Critical Sociology* 15, 3 (October 1988), 15.

Though Karelia's small villages and countryside lacked the amenities available in Petrozavodsk, the possibility of growing one's own vegetables and being able to hunt and fish held significant appeal for many Finnish North Americans eager to supplement their diets.¹¹⁴ For Finns, annual berry and mushroom harvests have been important traditions and could provide diets with vital vitamins and fibre.¹¹⁵ From available letters, we know that, in Karelia, Finnish North Americans joined the ranks of those who scoured the forests and clearings for seasonal berries. In fact, revealing the importance of the summer berry harvest, in August, 1934, Lisi Hirvonen told her sister that employers provided workers with transportation to go berry-picking on their days off.¹¹⁶ Terttu Kangas told her sister:

There has been lots of all kinds of berries. I also bottled a whole lot of blueberries and raspberries and a whole lot of lingon-berries are in a tub and *krämperiä* ['Finnlish' for cranberry] [we] have a big package so yes here berries you can get *avian kyliksi* [essentially, 'until you're fed up] But here you can't get at all that kind of berry jar as there [and we] didn't get to buying any there But yes here they have their own ways that berries are canned[.] here they are put in a vodka bottle with tar on top.¹¹⁷

Terttu's description shows a familiarity with berry varieties and canning processes. The reference to American canning jars suggests that Terttu had preserved berries before

¹¹⁴ For example, Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 60.

¹¹⁵ Throughout the vast Soviet land, hungry people foraged for food, like Mennonite communities turning to foods, like mushrooms, not typical in their diets, to make do during times of hardship. For example, Collingham, 225 and Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback," 320.

¹¹⁶ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 6 August 1934. It is unclear which employers, but seems like the Ski Factory (her employer), and whether the practice was common beyond Petrozavodsk.

¹¹⁷ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 28 October 1934: "Kaikkia marjoja on olut kovasti. Minäkin pulotin koko paljon mustikaita ja vaaraimia [?? Raspberries??] ja puolukoitakin on koko paljon saavissa [tub] ja krämperiä on iso pakoilinen että kyllä täällä marjoja saa avian kyliksi. Mutta ei täältä saa olenkaan selaisia marja purkia kun siellä oli kun ei tullut niitä sieltä ostetua Mutta kyllä täällä on omat konstit miten marjoja kanutetaan täällä ne panaan votka pulloon ja pihkaa päälle."

migrating to Karelia. Her statement, likewise, illustrates the array of items missed by North American Finns in Karelia, the shortage of consumer goods in the region, and the common repurposing of available items (vodka bottles in this case). Learning the local way of preservation shows the adaptation of Finnish North American women to Karelian life. Lisi Hirvonen's late autumn letter from 1932 reports an abundance of berries but "blueberries we didn't get for the winter because had no containers."¹¹⁸ Fortunately, as Hirvonen describes, she was able to preserve lingonberries in wooden vats. While Sylvi Hokkanen seemed to otherwise hold responsibility for housekeeping and food preparation, her husband Lauri "took care of" the autumn lingonberry pick.¹¹⁹ In the winter, Sylvi would make a *marjapuuro* (berry porridge) from the frozen lingonberries, using a homemade whisk made of twigs.¹²⁰

Among the Finnish Canadian and American families, like Karelian, Finnish, and Russian families also, women used their ingenuity and know-how to create filling meals out of what little was available. In many cultures, women have been responsible for providing their family with a 'proper meal,' that is typically warm and has many courses.¹²¹ Mayme Sevander proudly recalled her mother's domestic work: "[m]y mother was a creative cook; she could concoct a wonderful, nourishing soup out of a handful of potatoes and very little else."¹²² Sylvi and Lauri Hokkanen did not have

¹¹⁸ Lisi Hirvonen to Anna, Wonganperä, 13 October 1932. "mustikoita emme saaneet talveksi kun ei ollu astioita"

¹¹⁹ Hokkanen, 57.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Mennell et al., 107.

¹²² Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 50.

children and enjoyed a good standard of living, especially since Lauri was a prized Stakhanovite worker. Lauri recalled:

I could just imagine how difficult it was for a family with a few kids to get along. I remember a time when the lady who did our wash came over for coffee. We had cookies, and when we put butter on them, she was horrified at our extravagance. She was a good worker and so was her husband, but they had four or five children, and it was tough going.¹²³

The woman Lauri referred to was a local, and would not have had the extensive rations that the Hokkanen's had grown accustomed to in Karelia. It is no wonder that the woman was outraged by what she witnessed: spreading butter, if there even was any to be had, on special cookies would have been unheard of. The seeming abundance and "extravagance" of North American Finns would have left a lasting impression on the area's local residents. With a large family and meagre rations, all food had to be scrimped and used with great care. Failure to use foods accordingly could have significant consequences on a family. In the face of shortages and even severe hunger, women encountered a difficult challenge. Marlene Epp has shown how women confronted profound emotional and psychological distress when unable to feed their families. Epp argues that since women are typically in control of providing their family with sustenance, "when that domain is threatened by food shortage..., women are accordingly disempowered by the loss of that domain."¹²⁴

As we will see, with the end of Finnish North American special rations and the beginning of purges and then war, everything changed. After 1936, the values placed on

¹²³ Hokkanen, 47.

¹²⁴ Epp, "The Semiotics of Zwieback," 315.

foods took on new meanings. Food, though, already served an important role in Finnish North American narratives about the early 1930s. Food, like housing, served as a material signifier of the Karelian life and its contrasts with North American living and, perhaps more dishearteningly, with the collective image of the Soviet Union as a place where workers' needs were satisfied. However, as demonstrated by Sheila Fitzpatrick, "[c]lothing, shoes, and all kinds of consumer goods were in even shorter supply than basic foodstuffs, often being completely unobtainable."¹²⁵ Therefore, they, too, played a part in Finnish North Americans' coming to terms with their new life.

Clothing

Suzanne Rosenberg succinctly summarized Soviet style: "'Fashion' was dictated by the scarcity of manufactured cloth."¹²⁶ The end of the First Five Year Plan, in its cultural shift, marked the end of military, ascetic fashion in favour of "smart clothes, clean shaving for men and the use of perfumes and makeup for women."¹²⁷ However, again, the ideal and the reality were at odds. The Soviet Union proved unable to meet the nation's clothing needs, especially the continuous demand for women's clothing and woollen garments.¹²⁸ Even amid his usual Soviet boosterism, Enoch Nelson conceded that people in Karelia and the USSR were "not rich in clothing."¹²⁹ Not understanding the poverty of the local population, seventeen-year-old Reino Hämäläinen was first struck by what he saw: "They[sic] sure are a lot of dirty people here[.] they seem not to care

¹²⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 44.

¹²⁶ Rosenberg, 38.

¹²⁷ Volkov, 217.

¹²⁸ Gronow, 91.

¹²⁹ Enoch Nelson letter to Brother Arvid, Petrozavodsk, 10 January 1933.

how they dress. They all ware[sic] boots and torn coats...”¹³⁰ In many villages, an insufficient supply of clothing could impact productivity. For example, Lewis Siegelbaum identified a rural cooperative in 1935 that had one pair of shoes for eight workers.¹³¹ In Karelia, foreign workers had been encouraged to bring plenty of work clothes, but replacements were continually needed. With harsh winters and heavy labour, adequate clothing was vital. Even though North Americans typically earned double the monthly wages of locals, a work shirt or pair of shoes could each absorb about twenty percent of a person’s earnings.¹³² Even if one had the rubles to buy these poor-quality items, stores rarely had clothing in stock. Laundering in Karelia could also take its toll on clothes. Mayme Sevander remembered: “In New York we had had a separate laundry room, equipped with a wringer washer and plenty of soap, hot water and galvanized laundry tubs. But here, of course, we didn’t have those things, and we had to learn to wash our clothes the Russian way.”¹³³ For Hämäläinen, unfamiliar to the “Russian way,” the sight “makes one laugh right in front of the one washing.”¹³⁴ But for women, who were responsible for this work, the difficult task meant dragging clothes to the river and beating them, even in the bitter cold. One had to be careful with clothes in the river for, as Sevander reminded, “[i]t wouldn’t do to lose anything, because clothes and fabric were so hard to come by.”¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

¹³¹ Lewis Siegelbaum, “‘Dear Comrade, you ask what we need’: socialist paternalism and Soviet rural ‘notables’ in the mid-1930s” in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Routledge, 2000), 240.

¹³² Bucht, 77.

¹³³ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 51.

¹³⁴ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

¹³⁵ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 52.

When manufactured clothing or fabric were not available, North American friends and family were relied on to send clothing; both new and used were appreciated. Western clothes were also made of better fabrics and proved warmer and more durable.¹³⁶ The letter writers asked for and received clothing like sweaters, underwear, socks, woollen long underwear, and especially shoes.¹³⁷ Enoch Nelson explained to his brother that “[t]he hardest we are up for yet is footwear as the demand for it is so great that our factories are not able to supply the demands.”¹³⁸ Adding some official rhetoric, Nelson continued: “In 1932 we made nine times as many shoes and boots as the Tsars Government made in its best year but this is not enough for the present day demand.”¹³⁹ In the same letter, Nelson acknowledged – though notably did not offer thanks – the arrival of a “dress and kimono as well as the overcoat.”¹⁴⁰ Clothes were made and re-made to meet changing needs and to make the most out of available cloth. Many women still hoped to keep up with American fashions. Terttu Kangas asked her sister to send recent dress patterns and catalogues.¹⁴¹ Keeping hair stylish was just as important. Kangas told her sister that, in Karelia, you could now get “*permanenti weivi* [permanent wave] as good as there but it still had a bit expensive price.”¹⁴² Bobby pins, however, were not available at all. Terttu asked Toini to send some twice in the available correspondence, and it seems her sister complied. Kangas explained that “[h]ere there is

¹³⁶ See for example, Komulainen, 16, about the values placed on American, Finnish, and Russian clothes.

¹³⁷ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 9 November 1933 and, Buzuluk, 1 January 1939; Alice Heino letter [to Martha], [Kontupohja], circa. 1938 (AH3) and Justiina Heino letter to Waino, Kontupohja, 25 January 1933 (JH2).

¹³⁸ Enoch Nelson letter to Brother Arvid, Petrozavodsk, 10 January 1933.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 6 January 1937.

¹⁴² Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, March 1935: ”Täällä jo saa permanenti weiviäkin yhtä hyviä kun sielä mutta on vielä vähä kalis hinta. Mutta kyllä se siitä pian halpenee.”

already starting to be almost everything, except those little things there still are not everything.”¹⁴³

Consumer Goods

Terttu Kangas’s explanation was quite accurate. In the Soviet Union’s rapid industrial development, few resources were left for the production of consumer goods. To attract foreign currency and to provide the symbols of the Stalinist ‘good life’, Soviet production focussed on luxury production in the 1930s. Jukka Gronow’s insightful study of Soviet luxury production and mass consumerism highlights the resultant scarcity of ordinary items, like buttons and nail scissors, to name only two examples.¹⁴⁴ Even in 1991, Jack Forsell pinpointed the USSR’s continual shortage of household goods: “We do know how to make artillery, planes, bombs, rockets & etc, but we don’t know how to make nails, pails, pierollers & other items which we need in our household.”¹⁴⁵ Mary Leder recalled the difficulty of getting “good quality merchandise” so that “‘what to buy and where’ was a constant topic of conversation.”¹⁴⁶ Finnish Canadians and Americans had access to the special store for foreigners, *Insnab*. Reino Kero found evidence of *Insnab* stores operating in Petrozavodsk, Matroosa, and Soloman, and concluded that they were “noticeably better stocked than Soviet stores generally.”¹⁴⁷ These stores were, in Irina Takala’s words, “the object of envy for local people.”¹⁴⁸ Even with access to

¹⁴³Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 6 January 1937. ”Täällä jo alkoa olla melkein kaikkia paitsi selaista pikku tavaraa ei vielä ole kaikkia.”

¹⁴⁴ Gronow, 68-69.

¹⁴⁵ Jack Forsell letter to Janet, Tshalna, 12 December 1991.

¹⁴⁶ Leder, 170.

¹⁴⁷ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 105.

¹⁴⁸ Takala, “From the Frying Pan into the Fire,” 113.

Insnab, though, it was not necessarily possible to get what was needed, let alone one's allotted rations.¹⁴⁹

When needed items were not available, Finnish North Americans again turned to the transnational flow of material goods made possible by friends and family in Canada and the United States. Items like darning needles, razors, aspirin, iodine, and alarm clocks were much appreciated by their recipients.¹⁵⁰ Fulfilling both practical and emotional needs, North American calendars had special significance for those in Karelia.¹⁵¹ Calendars were hard to come by in Karelia and usually did not have pictures. Soviet calendars were typically laid-out in a six day week, though Finnish North American lumber workers continued to work in a seven day cycle.¹⁵² Jack Forsell remembered making calendars with scrounged pencil stubs and cardboard.¹⁵³ When calendars were sent from abroad, the familiar scenery on the pages gave a glimpse of home and the North American calendar lay-out kept the migrants connected to the temporal reality of their far away friends and family.¹⁵⁴ After receiving a particular calendar, Aate Pitkänen told his parents: "That one calendar was so fine quality that people line up here so they can come and admire it."¹⁵⁵ While obviously exaggerating to express his gratitude, the calendar was nonetheless a prized gift.

¹⁴⁹ Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 113.

¹⁵⁰ Aate Pitkänen letters to "Lakeridge Residents," 20 June 1933; to Parents 9 November 1933, and to Parents 1 January 1939.

¹⁵¹ Aate Pitkänen letters to "Lakeridge Residents," Petrozavodsk, 8 April 1933 and to Parents, 20 March 1937; Jack Forsell letter to Janet, Tshalna, 29 November 1983.

¹⁵² For example, Terttu Kangasletter to Toini, Lohijärvi, January 6, 1937.

¹⁵³ Jack Forsell letter to Janet, 8 April 1978.

¹⁵⁴ For more about the social significance of time and calendars, see Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁵⁵ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 20 March 1937.

The range of practical household goods requested and received, like clothing and needles, for example, offers a sense of everyday material needs not met in the hinterlands of Karelia. With special rations, access to the *Insnab* store, higher wages, and North American clothes and goods, Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia, like ‘foreign specialists’ throughout the Soviet Union, were significantly better off than the region’s locals. However, perhaps due to their community’s insular nature or perhaps because comparisons may have roused censors’ suspicions, available Finnish North American letters did not acknowledge their privileged position. Rather the writers acknowledged a change in their own standard of living; North American products were seen by the life writers as crucial contributions to their Karelian lives.

Health and Hygiene

Terttu Kangas reported to her sister that all of their acquaintances had grown plumper and healthier in Karelia.¹⁵⁶ When considered along with other Finnish North American narratives, however, it seems that Kangas was perhaps exaggerating to assure Toini that she was doing well, just as she had assured her father that she had plenty of food to eat. More typical was Lisi Hirvonen’s statement. Just a few months after moving to Karelia, Hirvonen light-heartedly reported to her sister: “we have both lost weight but what do you do with excess flesh anyway[?]”¹⁵⁷ Like Kangas, it appears Hirvonen wanted to present herself as healthy and well, though willing to admit that her body was undergoing changes. Difficult work and living conditions with limited food quickly

¹⁵⁶ For example, Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 9 April 1932 and March 1935.

¹⁵⁷ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Wonganperä, 5 February 1933. “me olemme laihtunu molemmat mutta mitäkä sillä liijalla lihalla tekee”

affected people's weight and bodies.¹⁵⁸ Mayme Sevander's memories of her mother's hands exemplify the physical transformations that occurred. Sevander stated: "Her hands, once slender, beautiful and capable, were now red and cracked, the knuckles painfully swollen from arthritis. It hurt me to even look at them."¹⁵⁹ Marina Malysheva and Daniel Bertaux likewise found that the life story of Marina Zolotareva, a Soviet "countrywoman," was narrated as the "life story of her body."¹⁶⁰ The very different living conditions, foods, and environment in Karelia impacted the health of most Finnish North Americans; many noted changes almost immediately. Gastric illnesses were the most typical. Both adults and children experienced the ailments that accompanied new foods, a change in caloric intake, new water sources, and other factors. Allan Sihvola remembered that "for medicine there was only dried blueberries and blueberry soup."¹⁶¹ Suzanne Rosenberg, likewise, remembered the "skin rashes, boils, and other minor troubles" she experienced shortly after emigrating from Canada to Moscow as a child.¹⁶² Others felt the effects of change more drastically.

The Heino family experienced the devastation of losing two young children to illness in their first years in Karelia. Fourteen year old Urho and twelve year old Arte died within three months of each other, both seemingly from pneumonia.¹⁶³ The boys were both fortunate to receive medical care and hospitalization, but they could not be

¹⁵⁸ Collingham, 9. Collingham makes the point, though with specific reference to wartime conditions, that difficult and impoverished living equates into more physical exertion, and, thereby, a greatly heightened caloric need.

¹⁵⁹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 113.

¹⁶⁰ Marina Malysheva and Daniel Bertaux, "The Social Experiences of a Countrywoman in Soviet Russia" in *Gender and Memory*, ed. Selma Leydesdorff et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41.

¹⁶¹ Sihvola, 27.

¹⁶² Rosenberg, 35.

¹⁶³ Justiina Heino letter to Laura, Kondapoga, 14 October 1932 (JH1) and Justiina Heino to Waino, Kondapoga, 25 January 1933 (JH2).

saved. Likewise, Klaus Maunu's newborn baby brother contracted pneumonia at the Petrozavodsk birthing hospital where he was born, and died there after only a few short weeks.¹⁶⁴ Maunu's mother blamed the hospital's poor heating for the death. Though free health care had been a major lure for Finnish North American migrants, gaining access to doctors could be difficult. Irina Takala explains: "Proper medical aid was not always rendered in time and was not accessible everywhere. The lines to doctors were even longer than the lines to the canteens. In some locations there were no doctors whatsoever but just a nurse with a scanty set of medicines who did not understand the patients' language."¹⁶⁵ Encountering diseases almost entirely eradicated in the United States by 1930, such as typhoid and smallpox, and tuberculosis, which had seen a significant decrease¹⁶⁶, came as a horrific shock to the immigrants. In lumber camps and away from the towns, illness could run rampant. In Latushka, a typhoid outbreak made thirty-three people sick and claimed the lives of fifteen. Sevander remembered:

The smell of illness was everywhere. The typhoid was caused by our inhumane living arrangement. Cleanliness was impossible in a place with no running water, a place where so many people lived and cooked and slept in such close quarters. Many people also suffered from lice, and some of the lice carried disease.¹⁶⁷

The Soviet authorities were well aware of the disease outbreaks and unhygienic living conditions prevalent across the nation. However, the Communist regime treated outbreaks of infectious diseases as classified matters.¹⁶⁸ Hygiene became an important concern for the burgeoning communist state, immediately following the revolution.

¹⁶⁴ Maunu, 13.

¹⁶⁵ Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 113.

¹⁶⁶ Kyvig, 139.

¹⁶⁷ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 114.

¹⁶⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 23.

Stalinist *kul'turnost'* encouraged properly cultured Soviet citizens to practice impeccable personal hygiene. For example, Vadim Volkov has shown how Soviet discourse of the mid-1930s promoted cleanliness, discipline, and efficiency, which could be achieved, at least in part, through the use of individual showers over communal bathhouses, and clean bed linens.¹⁶⁹ As with the ideals of housing and rationing, as we have seen, the daily reality of Soviet life, again, often fell short of the ideals of hygiene. As with all aspects of Soviet intentions, the foremost commitment to rapid industrialization meant that little energy or reserves could flow elsewhere. According to David Hoffman, despite major formal hygiene campaigns and the work of the *obshchestvennitsa* ('housewife activists') movement, hygiene standards actually fell because resources were entirely directed at industrialization and overlooked the housing improvements and needs caused by the subsequent urbanization.¹⁷⁰

Without proper funding and re-structuring, barracks living, as characterized by Mayme Sevander, left hygienic aspirations as just that:

My family staked out a place in the barracks for ourselves and strung up blankets for privacy. But there was no way to shut out the sounds of the other people, talking, coughing, snoring, belching. Or the smells – the smells of unwashed clothes and unwashed bodies, the cooking smells of cabbage and potatoes.”¹⁷¹

Sevander's descriptions of the sounds and smells of barracks living resonate with what Svetlana Boym has referred to as the “communal trash” of common spaces.¹⁷² Sharing

¹⁶⁹ Volkov, 218.

¹⁷⁰ Hoffman, 25. For more on the *Obshchestvennitsa*, see Mary Buckley, “The Untold Story of the *Obshchestvennitsa* in the 1930s” in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 151-172 and Rebecca Balmas Neary, “Mothering Socialist Society: The Wife-Activists' Movement and the Soviet Culture of Daily Life, 1934-41,” *Russian Review*, 58, 3 (July 1999): 396-412.

¹⁷¹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 111.

crowded spaces and responsibility for upkeep could strain relationships and emphasize cultural differences. The hygienic standards of Russians often dismayed the North Americans. Allan Sihvola explained that, at the Rutanen lumber camp, the outhouse was clean “because the people were all Finnish.”¹⁷³ Lauri Hokkanen took it upon himself to teach a Russian family in their barracks how to use the shared outhouse, without standing on the seat. According to Hokkanen, “the Russian family caught on right away and there was no more crap on the seat and they took their turn washing and cleaning.”¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, “[a] few months later, another Russian family moved in and the same thing happened, but this time the first Russian came to me cussing the ‘dirty Russians’ who soiled our toilet.”¹⁷⁵ Hokkanen’s description of these interactions echoes the ideas of Finnish North Americans as Karelian civilizer and of long-standing prejudices and stereotypes about local peoples. Ernesti Komulainen’s *Grave in Karelia* further demonstrates these themes. When protagonist Nikolai arrives at the lumber camp, he must find the barrack with the Finns. One bunk is ruled out because a boy is urinating on the steps, but at the last one “he studied the steps and the area near the walls. The snow there was clean, and he turned in without any hesitation. It was the right place.”¹⁷⁶ Finns have a deep-rooted cultural pride in their cleanliness. In the wilds of Karelia, urinating near one’s living space delineated ‘civilized’ Finns from ‘others’. Komulainen further qualifies the Finns’ space as “bright,” “clean,” “cheerful,” and “cozy,” in stark contrast to

¹⁷² Boym, 140.

¹⁷³ Sihvola, 25.

¹⁷⁴ Hokkanen, 51.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Komulainen, 22.

the gloom of foreign Karelia, as presented in the novel.¹⁷⁷ Many Finnish women, like Terttu Kangas,¹⁷⁸ who had worked in North America, became housewives in Karelia, and took pride in their cared for homes. However, women from different backgrounds judged each other by their differing cultural values. As Irina Takala explains, “Soviet women, who toiled as hard as men, didn’t understand how Finnish women could stay at home with children and called them ‘vagabonds’ and ‘idlers’ who are used to ‘living at the expense of others’ in their bourgeois countries. Finnish women despised Soviet women for their constantly muddy floors and untended children and household.”¹⁷⁹

Finns, however, were not the only North Americans to find hygiene distressing in the Soviet Union. Mary Leder was struck by the difference in attitudes toward washing and the care of bedbug and cockroach infestations between herself and her room-mates at a Moscow Komsomol Commune.¹⁸⁰ North Americans in the Soviet Union were, indeed, certainly confronted with cockroaches, bed bugs, lice, and other insects in numbers that few had known before their migration. The 1930s letters do not address the constant struggle to keep the parasites at a distance, but they are discussed in all of the memoirs. Letter-writers likely wanted to keep up appearances of well-being in their writing. Also, given the hygienic values of North Americans overall and Finns in particular, the letter writers may also have struggled with a sense of embarrassment about the infestations. For the memoirists, the infestations act as a symbol of primitive living conditions and

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷⁸ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, January 30, 1939.

¹⁷⁹ Takala, “North American Finns as Viewed by the Population of Soviet Karelia,” 206. See also Lynne Attwood, “Rationality versus Romanticism: Representations of Women in the Stalinist Press” in *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Linda Edmondson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 165.

¹⁸⁰ Leder, 47.

perhaps, on a deeper level, even signal the way that Soviet life ate away at them, mentally and physically. Some insects, and lice especially, as we have seen, posed a very real health hazard, as disease carriers. Memoir descriptions teach us about how they were dealt with.

Kaarlo Tuomi remembered his early encounters with cockroaches: “[m]illions of them nested in the cracks [of apartments and barracks] and the only way to exterminate them was for the people to vacate the houses for a couple of weeks in the winter and freeze them.”¹⁸¹ Of course, with such limited housing and the intensity of the winter cold, in reality, the suggested extermination method most likely meant simply enduring the presence of the cockroaches. Lauri and Sylvi Hokkanen had been warned about Karelian bed bugs before their departure and found that they were, indeed, “a constant problem all the time we were in Karelia.”¹⁸² The Hokkanens brought Borax to try to keep them away, but when it “didn’t help at all,” they tried different techniques, like setting the legs of their bed in pails of water.¹⁸³ Americans and Canadians elsewhere in the Soviet Union also engaged in a battle with bugs. Suzanne Rosenberg fought bedbugs with kerosene and boiled her clothes and cut her hair to combat lice.¹⁸⁴ Mary Leder battled the lice that plagued her and her infant daughter during their wartime evacuation with boiling water, kerosene, and pyrethrum, in an attempt to keep typhus at bay.¹⁸⁵

While the letter-writers do not address the insect problem, given the physical discomfort

¹⁸¹ Tuomi, 68.

¹⁸² Hokkanen, 17.

¹⁸³ Ibid. See also, Arvo Tuominen, *The Bells of the Kremlin: An Experience in Communism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983), 107.

¹⁸⁴ Rosenberg, 57 and 86.

¹⁸⁵ Leder, 219.

of bug bites and the mental anguish and lost sleep caused by their presence, bed bugs, lice, and cockroaches played an undeniable and unwelcome role in the everyday lives of Finnish North Americans in Karelia.

Conclusion

An examination of Karelian living conditions as experienced by Finnish North Americans proves useful on many levels. Firstly, looking at housing, eating, consumer goods, and health provides a more vivid image of what life was like for the thousands who moved there from Canada and the United States. The letters reveal how their writers worked to communicate a particular - and typically positive - image of their lives in Karelia. In certain cases, the use of cultural symbols, especially foods, helped to convey the writers' message. A study of living conditions also offers an excellent platform for assessing the gendered order of Finnish North American culture in Karelia, and emphasizes the expectation that women establish a sense of home and comfort for their families. With regard to gender and, more broadly, the ways living conditions are addressed in the studied narratives further highlight the contrasts between Finnish North American experiences and expectations and both Karelian reality and Soviet ideals. An examination of housing, food, access to material goods, and hygiene unveil inter-ethnic tensions and misunderstandings occurring in Karelia. According to Irina Takala, "the privileged position American Finns found themselves in evoked a natural reaction among the half-starved inhabitants of the republic – they envied the foreigners, they did not understand and did not like them..."¹⁸⁶ But foreigners, likewise, did not understand the

¹⁸⁶ Takala, "From the Frying Pan into the Fire," 114.

people living around them. Mary Leder's memoir provides a poignant observation. Thinking about her Moscow circle of friends - all foreigners - Leder realized that they "had a much easier life than the ordinary people of Moscow. They lived in a world of their own inside and outside the office, and they knew very little about that other life."¹⁸⁷ Demonstrating either his ignorance or his unwillingness to admit Soviet inequality, Antti Kangas told his comrades that the only reason someone in Karelia would be left wanting was out of "laziness."¹⁸⁸ In the Soviet Union, in Jukka Gronow's words, "[u]tmost poverty could exist side by side with signs of abundance and luxury" and the two sides could certainly be seen in Karelia.¹⁸⁹

Touching on the topics and themes addressed in this chapter, Mayme Sevander thought back on the 1930s in Karelia:

With our American clothes, American luxuries and ration cards, we must have evoked some envy in the Russian people. Life in Karelia was rough and difficult for us, but we still had privileges and possessions that most of the natives could only dream about. I didn't really notice such subtle tensions; I was only a child. I don't even know if my parents were aware of them...¹⁹⁰

Though they were visibly different and seemingly privileged to those who had been in the region before them, the living conditions Finnish Americans and Canadians faced were "rough and difficult" for them, based on their own past experiences. While many struggled to make peace with their advantages, it was difficult to acknowledge living a privileged life when, no matter what, daily life was "not like there," in North America.

¹⁸⁷ Leder, 96.

¹⁸⁸ Antti Kangas to "Kunnon toverit," 12 October 1934.

¹⁸⁹ Gronow, 141.

¹⁹⁰ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 49.

CHAPTER V:
'The Golden Fund of Karelia': Childhood in Finnish North American Karelia

It is said that Yrjö Sirola, a prominent Finnish communist in North America, Finland, and the Soviet Union, called the children of Finnish North Americans “the golden fund of Karelia.”¹ Indeed, the hopes and dreams of a thriving communist society rested on the shoulders of these children. In Canada and the United States, they were raised in the revolutionary spirit by their parents and, in Karelia, the developing Soviet state saw children as both the symbol of and the means to a new social order. However, very little is known about these smallest builders of socialism.

“Special stress should be laid on the fact that the children and young people, who went over with their families, can in no way be left out,” Mayme Sevander declared in 1993.² Sevander was speaking specifically about the ways that Finnish North American emigrants to Karelia have been enumerated and the tendency to lose children in counts based on passenger lists or official Party records. Evgeny Efremkin’s recent statistical analysis of over 3000 Finnish Canadians and Americans who immigrated to Karelia suggests that close to thirty percent of the total number were under the age of sixteen.³ If Sevander was right in her assessment of the limitations of statistics compiled from passenger lists, then the number of children is likely even greater. Regardless, this

¹ Discussed by Sevander in *Red Exodus*, 212.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

³ Evgeny Efremkin, “North American Finnish Migration to Soviet Karelia, 1930-1933: Statistical Analysis,” unpublished Missing in Karelia Research Project report, 2010, Graphs 5.1 and 5.2, 18.

significant proportion of the exodus has been almost wholly ignored in studies of Finnish North American Karelia, except occasional personal mentions in memoirs. Being one of these children herself, Sevander's statement seemed to extend beyond statistical practices, addressing the need to research the experiences of Finnish North American children in Soviet Karelia. Historians of childhood have long since lamented the scarcity of source material produced by children and how their experiences often remain obscured by adult-written and adult-minded sources. Yet, as Canadian historian of childhood Neil Sutherland has said, "childhood is at least as complex a stage in any life history as is adulthood. Children experience the full range of physical and emotional circumstances that characterize adult lives."⁴ Today, few scholars need convincing of the value of better understanding the ways that children experienced, comprehended, and were shaped by the historical moments that they participated in, yet much work remains to be done.

Therefore, this chapter takes on the challenge of giving a voice to the many Canadian and American born children in Karelia. Admittedly, next to no information about the lives of infants and toddlers is offered here. Obviously finding first-hand material from preliterate or preverbal children is a nearly impossible task. Likewise, available Karelian sources say very little about the lives of babies and toddlers. Existing photographs, like one of twenty tots with six female caretakers from the Finnish commune Hillisuo's daycare, remind us of this important area waiting for further research. The present work, however, focuses on primarily school-aged children up to approximately sixteen years. By sixteen, many youth in the Soviet Union had completed

⁴ Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), ix.

schooling and were legally eligible to work adult hours. Likewise, this age marked the transition from membership in the Communist Pioneers to the Komsomol or Communist youth organization, which was a mark of political and social maturity.

Beginning with Finnish North American socialist children's upbringing and education places the identities and world views of those who went to Karelia in a new context. For those who emigrated as children, understanding their cultural and political point of departure makes it possible to analyse their encounters with Soviet education and children's programming. For those who went to Karelia as youth, their North American socialist upbringing sheds light on the ways they understood the values and realities they confronted in the Soviet Union. A brief discussion about the trajectory of Soviet conceptions of childhood and education reveals that North American children arrived in Karelia at a unique historical moment, caught between revolutionary ideals and the developing mechanisms of Stalinism. Looking at children's feelings around the decision to emigrate and initial confrontations with language barriers, and, then, daily experiences with school, the Pioneers, at work, and at play reveals aspects of North American Karelian life previously unaddressed. Analysing Finnish North American childhood also provides an opportunity to contrast their lives with those of the local Karelians and Russians, and, thereby, Soviet childhood in the 1930s more broadly. Finally, situating children's everyday lives in the context of adult-driven ideas about childhood and education reveals the symbolic and contested value placed on children. These vantages show how Finnish North American children's multinational identity provided protection but also made them susceptible to repression.

Regrettably, few letters written by children in Karelia are currently available. Therefore, letters have been paired with available memoirs and interviews that reflect on childhood. The personal sources are joined with literature on socialist childhood and education in both North America and the Soviet Union. Many of the available scholarly sources provide a great deal of valuable information, but keep children largely hidden. Discussing shortcomings in histories of Soviet education, Catriona Kelly acknowledges the “engrained custom of neglecting day-to-day life in the school in favour of top-down educational policy and of the ideological content of the syllabus.”⁵ Such tendencies are also evident in the North American historiography. For example, in the very informative *Raising Reds: Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* historian Paul Mishler writes:

I am not... concerned with the success or failure of [Communists'] efforts in transmitting their values and beliefs to their children, or with the effect of these programs on the political, personal, or psychological development of the children. This is not because the children's perspective – or rather, adult memory of childhood experiences filtered through time – is unimportant. Rather, I want to look at these activities for what they illustrate about the culture of the adults who created them.⁶

Mishler's statement exemplifies the field's seeming unwillingness to accept children's own experiences and interpretations as valid entry points for study of political culture. Likewise, though employing oral history interviews, Mishler demonstrates unease with the use of “adult memory of childhood experiences filtered through time.” As with the study of letters and memoirs more generally, careful analysis makes such sources as

⁵ Catriona Kelly, “Shaping the ‘Future Race’: Regulating the Daily Life of Children in Early Soviet Russia” in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, eds. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 263.

⁶ Mishler, 2.

relevant and useful as any other. Though Mishler does give attention to the significant role of immigrants in US Communist culture, his almost sole reliance on English-language sources leaves the picture incomplete.⁷ Therefore, this examination of Finnish North American children in Karelia builds on studies of Leftist immigrant children, most notably Rhonda Hinthel's⁸, broadening the scope and bringing children to the forefront. With careful prodding, the experiences of children are found within the lesson plans and rhetoric around upbringing, thoroughly researched and successfully presented by scholars like Paul Mishler.

The North American Context:

By the 'Karelian Fever,' Finnish socialists and communists in Canada and the United States had a long established tradition of raising their children in the revolutionary spirit. The children of Finnish North American leftists were no strangers to the ideals of communism or the vision of the workers' society they were to build. An examination of the main forms of children's political upbringing provides a sense of families' and children's political and social outlooks upon arrival in Karelia. Likewise, looking at the proclaimed purposes and methods of North American socialist education contextualizes how Finnish children and their families may have understood the ambivalent and transforming attitudes toward childhood and education, which they encountered in the Soviet Union.

Finnish parents, like most immigrant parents, worried about the assimilation of their children and the loss of mother tongue and cultural traditions. By the late 1920s, the

⁷ See also Teitelbaum, *Schooling for "Good Rebels"*.

⁸ Hinthel, "Raised in the Spirit of the Class Struggle," 43-76.

Communist movement in Canada and the United States actively resisted ‘foreign language elements’ in the Party, and left immigrant families to negotiate their way through an increasingly English language oriented political culture that sought to shape their children into Anglo-North American revolutionaries. Varpu Lindström’s work on the radical women of Kivikoski, Ontario demonstrates how the younger generation’s ability to communicate and work with the English language youth socialist movement broadened the reach of the Finnish immigrant community beyond what was possible for the non-English speaking adult socialists.⁹ However, the push to anglicize the Communist movement was highly contested. As Rhonda Hinthier has convincingly demonstrated, using the example of the Ukrainian Canadian workers’ cause, “[y]oungsters’ activities are an important lens through which to understand the significant role of cultural-political activism and the movement’s overall efforts to challenge and resist [Communist] Party efforts to control and dictate the shape of the ULFTA.”¹⁰ Hinthier’s argument can easily be applied to the case of Finnish groups, like the Finnish Organization of Canada. Examining Finnish socialist children’s education and upbringing shows a commitment to instilling both identification with the class struggle and a sense of Finnish identity.

Not only were Finnish adults on the Left expected to actively engage in Party and committee work, activism, and agitation, children were to be moulded into politically and socially conscious people from a young age. As Suzanne Rosenberg recalled,

⁹ Lindström, “The Radicalization of Finnish Farm Women,” 77, for example.

¹⁰Hinthier, “Raised in the Spirit of the Class Struggle,” 48.

“Communism was in the air I breathed from my very early childhood.”¹¹ Many Finnish children on the Left would certainly have felt the same way. Indeed, most children of Finnish socialists and communists began their relationship with the movement as infants and toddlers, brought to the Halls for meetings, speeches, and entertainments. Allan Sihvola remembered his early days at the Warren, Ohio Finnish Workers’ Society Hall: “When we went to the Hall I was always brought along, whether there was a play, an evening program, a dance, or a meeting. [When I was] smaller during meetings I would always be found in some corner sleeping.”¹² Antti and Kirsti Pitkänen, determined to set an example of activism for their children Aate, Taimi, and Taru, always brought them along to events at the Finnish socialist halls. According to interviews in her later life with Varpu Lindström and in her autobiographical writings¹³, Taimi remembered her parents’ stern expectation that she and Aate be active in the workers’ movement and train for leadership. Simply attending meetings was not enough, let alone sleeping in the corner; the Pitkänen children had to always be prepared to perform.¹⁴ Children were also made aware of current events and struggles of the working class through early exposure to the Finnish language leftist press. Taimi Pitkänen remembered her family’s subscriptions to *Toveritar*, a Finnish socialist newspaper from Oregon aimed at women, and *Vapaus* based out of Sudbury, Ontario.¹⁵ North American children continued to

¹¹ Rosenberg, 11.

¹² Sihvola, ”Kun mentiin haalille niin olin aina mukana, oli siellä sitten näytelmä, ohjelmailtamatat, tanssit tai kokous. Pienempänä kokouksien aikana löydyin aina jostakin nurkasta nukkumasta.”

¹³ See for example, Taimi Davis, “The Pitkanens of Kapalamaki: A history of the family and Kivikoski school,” unpublished, date unknown. York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fond, 2009-025/034.

¹⁴ Lindström, “The Radicalization of Finnish Farm Women,” 81.

¹⁵ Lindström, “The Radicalization of Finnish Farm Women,” 72 and 76.

engage with the Canadian and American Finnish communist press in Karelia, through subscriptions to papers, like *Työmies*.¹⁶

At times, Finnish families on the Left organized ad hoc campaigns to circumvent their children's encounters with capitalist and religious values in public schools and in broader North American society. For example, the 7 May 1930 minutes of the Communist Women's Bureau in the Finnish rural community of Tarmola, Ontario show the women resolving to fight religious indoctrination in public school.¹⁷ As an example of other types of campaigns organized by Finnish socialist families, in 1927 the Pitkänen children were part of a successful strike by the students of the Kivikoski School to fight for the removal of an unsatisfactory teacher.¹⁸ Ties to the communist movement left lasting impressions on children. Though insistent that she was *not* a Communist when she moved to Karelia, Sylvi Hokkanen's childhood upbringing in the socialist tradition had stayed with her. Talking about the *Internationale*, the workers' anthem, Hokkanen wrote: "I'd heard it many times as a child. ... But the feeling of solemnity as well as exaltation associated with the 'Internationale' had stayed with me, and I always had to stand whenever I heard it played. Childhood memories and feelings die hard."¹⁹

Home and community based socialist teaching was complemented by formalized education methods and programs. At the turn of the twentieth century, North American socialists had begun organizing Socialist Sunday Schools for their children. The programs proved popular, and, as Kenneth Teitelbaum has identified, at least one

¹⁶ Alice Heino mentions their *Työmies* subscription in her March 18th [early 1937] letter to "Rakas Veljeni."

¹⁷ LAC, MG 28 V 47, Vol. 191, File 5. Minutes of the Tarmola Women's Branch, 7 May 1930.

¹⁸ Davis, "The Pitkanens of Kapalamaki," 2.

¹⁹ Hokkanen, 83.

hundred English-language Socialist Sunday Schools operated in the United States during the first two decades of the 1900s.²⁰ Though thorough study of the non-English-language children's socialist programming has not been completed, the inclusion of such Sunday Schools would certainly raise the number significantly. Using the example of Minnesota, Teitelbaum recognized the "particularly active" role of Finns in children's socialist education.²¹ The goal of these early Sunday Schools, in Teitelbaum's words, was "to instil a sense of continuity between the generations of workers and a feeling of being part of the larger socialist community."²² However, the schools served a further purpose for newcomers. In the case of immigrant socialists, as Donald Wilson has argued,

Socialist indoctrination by itself was not sufficient, or else they would have sent their children to the [English-language schools]. Finnish-language education and acquiring knowledge about Finland, both unavailable in the public system, led Finnish socialists (and by the same token other foreign-language socialists) to found their own Sunday schools...²³

By 1930, the Finnish socialist children's Sunday Schools had largely been replaced by branches of the Communist Young Pioneers. Many child emigrants, like Mayme Sevander, fondly remembered their days in the North American Pioneer movement.²⁴ Like the Sunday Schools, the Pioneers targeted children from the ages of approximately five to fifteen. Also, like the Sunday Schools and more informal family-based Leftist upbringing, Pioneer leaders aimed to

²⁰ Teitelbaum, *Schooling for "Good Rebels"*, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²² Kenneth Teitelbaum, "'Critical Lessons' from Our Past: Curricula of Socialist Sunday Schools in the United States," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 20, 4 (Winter 1990), 418.

²³ Donald J. Wilson, "Little Comrades: Socialist Sunday Schools as an Alternative to Public Schools," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 21, 2 (Summer 1991), 218.

²⁴ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 15.

instill a working-class education and consciousness which should combat the training and education received from the bourgeois organizations, from the schools, movies, Sunday school, boy scouts and girl guides, etc. all year round.²⁵

The Sunday schools and Pioneers sought to teach children to question the norms of the capitalist system. "Let us open the eyes of the children. Let us get them to asking WHY," proclaimed Kendrick Shedd, a leading curriculum designer in the early American Socialist Sunday School movement, in 1913.²⁶ Early Communists also encouraged critical thinking in their child comrades. The cover of the Communist *Fairy Tales for Workers Children*, published in English translation by the Communist Party of the United States in 1925, illustrates the point well.²⁷ The image shows three children gathered around a book with the floating caption "WHY?" repeated nine times. While Socialist educational programming made children sympathetic to the workers' plight and critical of the capitalist status quo, the Pioneers, arguably, took a more aggressive approach to engaging children and youth in political activism.²⁸

Like the "bourgeois" Scouting and Guide movement, the Pioneers held weekly meetings and summer camps, giving children frequent access to their alternative values. Ester Reiter's take on the nature of Jewish Communist children's education at Camp Naivelt resonates with the experiences of Finnish children in the Pioneers: "The politics and the serious intentions of the adults to raise children who would understand class

²⁵ National Children's Council, "Camps and Summer Work for Workers, Children, Groups," May 1931, 1. Nordström Collection, Lakehead University Archives, MG 2.

²⁶ From *Lesson Topics for September-October 1913*, quoted in Teitelbaum, "Critical Lessons," 421. Teitelbaum's *Schooling for 'Good Rebels'* provides a thorough overview of Shedd's hugely influential yet little known role in the Socialist Sunday School Movement.

²⁷ Hermynia Zur Muhlen, *Fairy Tales For Workers' Children*, translated by Ida Dailes (Chicago: Daily Worker Pub. Co., 1925). <http://www.archive.org/details/FairyTalesForWorkersChildren>

²⁸ See for example Mishler, 41.

struggle were woven into the play of children just being children. Sometimes the political was the play and the play was political.”²⁹ Available curriculum and programming guides give a sense of what a child’s experience in the Pioneers would have been like. The 1931 booklet “Games for the Pioneer Leader” provides useful insights into the messages that children were being taught and the means used to convey revolutionary values.³⁰ Although the booklet is in English, the fact that it was “issued by the Young Pioneers of Canada District No. 6[,] 316 Bay St. Port Arthur Ont.” reveals that its games were in fact aimed at Finnish children. 316 Bay Street in Port Arthur, Ontario was the address of the so-called “Little Finn Hall” or the Communist Hall, next door to the – at the time - IWW affiliated “Big Finn Hall, or Finnish Labour Temple. District Number 6 was the designation of the Port Arthur Finnish Organization of Canada. The use of the English language is indicative of the lost battle of non-Anglo communists over the right to formal Communist correspondence in ‘ethnic’ languages, and, also, of the changing nature of Finnish youth, who were becoming more fully immersed in English-speaking society.

The booklet begins with a section on the “Significance of Games,” which are said to be “the training school for serious militant work.”³¹ Furthermore, Pioneer Leaders were instructed to “[a]llow the comrades to participate wherever possible in formulating necessary rules, And than [sic] absolutely see to it that they are enforced by the comrades

²⁹ Ester Reiter, “Camp Naivelt and the Daughters of the Jewish Left,” in *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History*, eds. Marlene Epp et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 371.

³⁰ Young Pioneers of Canada, “Games for the Pioneer Leader,” July 1931. Nordstrom Collection, Lakehead University Archives, MG2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

themselves.”³² The names and directions for the games reveal their work as ‘training schools.’ Names like “Sock the Scab” and “Competition or Co-operation” successfully convey their political orientation, and “The White Terror,” with its reference to the Finnish Civil War, specifically speaks to the Finnishness of the game’s participants.³³ In “Catching the Shop Nucleus Organizer” Pioneers were to disguise themselves in order to trick the “boss” from discovering the identity of the factory organizer.³⁴ The aim of “Employment Agency” was for the “unemployed workers” to remain composed and not “loose [sic] their grip” when poked and prodded by the “capitalist.”³⁵ Games like “Win a Tractor for the Soviet Union” would certainly have resonated for Finnish children living amidst the escalating ‘Karelian Fever’ and the campaigning of the Karelian Technical Aid.³⁶

Indeed, Karelia and Soviet Russia held a special place in the hearts of children brought up on the class struggle. “Hammer, Sickle, Soviet Star, I love Soviet Russia with all my heart,” sang Pioneers.³⁷ Children’s affection for the Soviet Union mirrored adults’ interest in the world’s first workers’ state. North Americans of varying political persuasions kept a close watch on developments in burgeoning Soviet Russia. As Julia Mickenberg has observed about the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, “interest in the Soviets’ social engineering of children matched interest in their industrial progress.”³⁸

³² “Games for the Pioneer Leader,” 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3 and 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ Julia L. Mickenberg, “The New Generation and the New Russia: Modern Childhood as Collective Fantasy,” *American Quarterly*, 62, 1 (March 2010), 107.

Naturally, for those sympathetic to the revolutionary movement, the Soviet Union provided inspiration and guidance for children's education and the movement more broadly. Regarding the significance of the Bolshevik state, Paul Mishler states: "U.S. Communists identified strongly with the Soviet Union, and their idea of what the Soviet Union was like influenced their political perspective and the political culture that developed among them."³⁹ Therefore, immigrants to Karelia, whether formally identifying themselves as Communists or not, brought with them their revolutionary upbringing, a deeply entrenched attachment to the plight of workers, a critical eye for identifying injustice, and a sincere fondness for the Soviet Union.

Soviet Conceptions of Childhood and Education

Following the Revolution, the Russian intelligentsia and Bolshevik activists turned to children to bring about a new society, freed from the old ways. Lisa Kirschenbaum's valuable study on kindergarten and preschool aged children in post-revolution Russia up to Stalinization thoroughly outlines the primary, and often competing, pedagogical ideals of the time and the push for universalized education. *Small Comrades* presents the ideas and practices of child-led "Free Upbringing" popularly espoused by revolutionary thinkers up to the mid-1920s. Proponents of Free Upbringing, in Kirschenbaum's words, "insisted that the immediate interests of children be the primary determinant of the curriculum."⁴⁰ A similar approach was advocated in the North American Socialist Sunday School pedagogical literature, which encouraged children to explore socialist-minded topics through varied creative and experiential

³⁹ Mishler, 3.

⁴⁰ Kirschenbaum, 20.

methods.⁴¹ By Lenin's death in 1924, Free Upbringing had fallen out of favour in Soviet Russia, as attention shifted from unshackling individuals from the bondage of bourgeois tradition, to the needs of broader Soviet society.

The new educational program, in Kirschenbaum's summation, "valued not rebelliousness, liberation, or self-expression but stability, enlightenment, and state-building."⁴² Allen Kassof's 1965 study of Soviet youth highlighted the regime's psychological view of people as malleable and most affected by environmental conditioning, differing from the Western emphasis on the power of individual personality or biology.⁴³ The bond between parent and child was thought to hinder the emergence of the new Soviet social order, by teaching passé ritual and tradition. The state and teachers were to play the key role in children's new socialist upbringing.⁴⁴ Thomas Ewing effectively summarizes official Soviet notions of proper upbringing. *Vospitanie*

referred to the character training, political education, and moral guidance that accompanied and informed academic instruction (*obuchenie*). The definition of *vospitanie* in official educational discourse included the maturation of the child, the formation of a worldview, the development of character, socialization into customs and habits of the established order, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills.⁴⁵

⁴¹ See for example, Teitelbaum, *Schooling for 'Good Rebels'*, Chapter Six "Socialist Sunday School Curriculum," 137-176.

⁴² Kirschenbaum, 106.

⁴³ Allen Kassof, *The Soviet Youth Program: Regimentation and Rebellion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 32.

⁴⁴ See for example, E. Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 217. Teachers were expected to extend their control beyond the classroom, through home visits and supervision of pupils outside of school hours.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 192. See also, Mollie Schwartz Rosenhan, "Images of Male and Female in Children's Readers," in *Women in Russia*, eds. Dorothy Atkinson et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 294. Schwartz Rosenhan identified that "...there has been a continuous desire to blur the boundaries between home and school, to unify learning and labor, and to join formal knowledge with experience."

“Political education” and “socialization into customs and habits of the established order,” though, seem to have become the main components of Soviet upbringing from the 1930s on. By the beginning of the decade, children had little to say about the form or content of their education. Kirschenbaum has characterized the Stalinist revolution in education, from 1928 to 1932, as having “generally favoured the formulaic over the experiential, the state-directed over the spontaneous.”⁴⁶ While curriculum undeniably became more rigid and focussed on indoctrinating a very specific political culture, it must be noted that Thomas Ewing, in his excellent study of Soviet teachers in the 1930s, has convincingly argued that “[t]he variety of strategies advocated and enacted by teachers and contrasting evaluations of such methods by inspectors and officials testify to a more complex set of political relations in Stalinist schools.”⁴⁷ The educational directives from above were applied unevenly and differently by individual teachers in varied parts of the Soviet Union.

The large scale arrival of Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia coincided with a unique period in the Soviet approach to education and childhood. Mandatory primary education was instated in 1930, resulting in an explosion in the number of schools, teachers, and students. For the first years of the decade, the Soviet state was still determining the nature of its educational method and Soviet schools were at varied points in their transition to the new Stalinist curriculum.⁴⁸ School-aged Finnish North American children experienced the short-lived Finnish-language school system and, at its

⁴⁶ Kirschenbaum, 133.

⁴⁷ Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism*, 210.

⁴⁸ For a good demonstration of the debates about curriculum and the difficulties in putting plans into action, see Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), especially discussion about 1930 curriculum, 123-140.

cancellation, the following challenges of being thrust into an unknown language in Russian schools. The tools of critical analysis instilled in Finnish children in North America through formal and informal socialist education and upbringing also came under attack in the schools and children's programming of the Soviet Union. It is to these experiences in Karelia that we now turn, beginning with North American children's feelings about moving to Karelia and the language barriers they encountered there.

Feelings about moving

Displaying her usual flair for words, Mayme Sevander described the moment she learned her family would move to Karelia:

My eyes grew wide with excitement. Karelia! We were actually moving to the Soviet Union! Over the years I had attended so many Pioneer camps, so many Communist rallies, and always, the goals of the Soviet Union and its first leader, V.I. Lenin, had been held out as almost unattainable. And now we were going – we would live those ideals ourselves. I was sure I couldn't wait until April 4.⁴⁹

Sevander's enthusiasm suited her exceptional upbringing as the daughter of a leading Finnish American Communist and recruiter for the Karelian Technical Aid. Her carefully crafted retrospective statement highlights the success of Communist children's upbringing; she was an example of a child committed to the cause and ready to serve the Soviet Union. Other Finnish Canadian and American children, though, did not share Sevander's fervent enthusiasm for leaving behind their familiar lives to build socialism. For some, the weight of the move was obscured by a sense of adventure. When asked what he had thought about his family's decision to move to Karelia, Erwin Niva

⁴⁹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 32.

answered: “it was interesting to get to leave, and a child, of course, doesn’t think where they’re going as long as they’re going somewhere, that is the main thing.”⁵⁰ Allan Sihvola remembered, “When we left Warren, I didn’t know to yearn for my friends staying behind, and now, leaving the state of Mass, it was again the same. I was still so young, a 12 year old kid, that everything just felt like an adventure.”⁵¹ For others, departure was excruciating. In her memoir, Viola Ranta wrote, “[I] begged and cried that let’s not go there, but in vain.”⁵² “[I] asked my parents even in Leningrad that we turn back on the same ship,” remembered Ranta, “I so missed my own homeland that all I could do was cry all the days. How were there enough tears!”⁵³ Leaving behind everything familiar was very difficult for fourteen year old Viola. Even her father’s two available letters to his brother in Finland both mention Viola’s desire to leave Karelia.⁵⁴ Though all of the above examples are based on adult reminiscences, the varied responses to migration highlight the diverse and complex feelings children had about Karelia and their homeland and further illustrate the need to turn to children to better understand the entirety of Finnish North American life in Karelia.

Language barriers

⁵⁰Erwin Niva interview with Varpu Lindström, August 1988, Karelia. “...se oli oikein mielenkiintosta että pääsi lähtemään, ja lapsi tietenkää ei ajatetele, mihinkä menään kuhan ollaan vain menossa johonki, se oli pääasia.”

⁵¹ Sihvola, 21. “Kun lähdimme Warrenista, en osannut kaivata jälkeen jääviä ystäviäni, ja nyt lähtö Massan valtiosta oli taas samanlainen. Olin vielä siksi nuori, 12-vuotias poikanen, että kaikki tuntui vain seikkailulta.”

⁵² Ranta, 1. “Pyysin ja itkin että ei lahdetä sinne, mutta turhaan.”

⁵³ Ranta, 2. “Pyysin vanhempiani vielä Leningradissa, että kääntyisimme takaisin samalla laivalla. Minun oli niin ikävä omaa synnyinmaatani että en voinut muuta kuin itkeä kaikiet päivät. Mistä niitä kyyneleitä riitikin!”

⁵⁴ Elis Ranta letters to brother, 26 September 1933 and 1 April 1934.

The appeal of an emerging Finnish-language worker's society proved very enticing for many Finns in Canada and the United States who struggled to make their way with limited English language skills and who had been alienated by the revolutionary movement through increasing Canadianization/Americanization and the Bolshevization of the Communist Parties. However, for many of the children of these Finnish speakers, the reality of life in a linguistically Finnish, Karelian, and Russian community proved difficult. "[I] pretty much learned the Finnish language here," Erwin Niva told interviewer Varpu Lindström.⁵⁵ "Of course we spoke some [Finnish]," Niva explained, "but the English language among the children was the main language and here with each other we children always spoke English in the beginning..."⁵⁶ Mayme Sevander remembered: "We were dismayed to find that our Finglish [sic] was worthless here, and we would have to learn Finnish practically all over again."⁵⁷

For school-aged children, the learning was expected to be rapid. With the nationalities policy of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet government instituted schooling in minority languages and more than seventy instructional languages were in use in the USSR in the 1930s.⁵⁸ By 1931, all of Karelia's 275 schools were operating in the Finnish language.⁵⁹ Commenting on her son's progress in school, Terttu Kangas told her sister that Olavi was getting by in everything "but the Finnish reading is very slow for

⁵⁵ Niva Interview. "Suomen kielen melkein täällä oppinu."

⁵⁶ Ibid., "tietenkin suomea puhuttii jonku verran mutta ni englannin kieltä lapsien keskuudessa oli pääkieli ja täällä keskenäänki me lapset puhuttii aina englanninkieltä alusta..."

⁵⁷ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 47.

⁵⁸ E. Thomas Ewing, "Ethnicity at School: 'Non-Russian' Education in the Soviet Union during the 1930s," *History of Education*, 35, 4-5 (2006), 511.

⁵⁹ Austin, "Soviet Finnish," 189.

him.”⁶⁰ Even North Americans training to become teachers in Karelia encountered difficulties with Finnish. Sylvi Hokkanen, who studied at the Karelian Pedagogical Institute recalled,

I knew nothing of Finnish grammar. I had grown up speaking the dialect of Varsinais-Suomi region... Like most dialects it was far from book language. During the course of my studies I was often amazed to learn how the correct way to speak or write Finnish differed from what I had known at home.⁶¹

As Sylvi Hokkanen points out, it was one thing to speak Finnglish or an old dialect of Finnish in the home setting and another to be expected to complete classes and homework in formal, literary Finnish. Paavo Alatalo, who began school in Petrozavodsk in 1933, echoed Hokkanen’s point: “I didn’t know anything at all about Finnish language, especially grammar, well, [I knew] the spoken language.”⁶² However, he continued by saying, “Of course we spoke Finnish at home. We didn’t even know anything else.”⁶³ Alatalo’s comments point to the precarious linguistic balance that many immigrants sustained. Alatalo, for example, had completed five years of English-language schooling in the United States, yet maintained that he “didn’t even know anything” other than Finnish. While obviously not speaking literally, Alatalo’s choice of words addresses difficulty with not feeling in full command of either language used in daily life, and the competing pulls of assimilation and tradition that weigh on immigrant

⁶⁰ Terttu Kanagas letter to sister Toini, Lohijärvi, 28 October 1934, 5. “Olavi on nyt toisessa luokkossa. Kyllä ne kaikkiissa muissa parjää hyvin mutta se suomen lukeminen on sille hyvin kankiaa.”

⁶¹ Hokkanen, 30.

⁶² Paavo Alatalo Interview with Raija Warkentin, January 2002, Jokela, Finland. “Enhän mina suomen kielestä varsinkaan kieliopista tiennyt yhtään mitaan, no puhekielen.”

⁶³ Ibid., “Tietenkin kotona puhuttiin suomea. Ei muuta osattukaan.”

children. In Karelia, the primary position of the Finnish language was further disrupted by the realization that it was not up to the standards of formal schooling.

For children who had already attended English schools in Canada and the United States, being sent to Finnish language school in the midst of so many other changes to their lives could lead to stress and dissatisfaction. North American children in Karelia were often placed in grades that they had already completed before emigration. Leini Hietala felt her two completed grades “counted for nothing” in Karelia and she was put back into the second grade.⁶⁴ Mayme Sevander was placed in fourth grade in Karelia, though she had been in grade five at the time of her family’s departure from New York.⁶⁵ For North American children, being placed in grades below their age group and perceived competence was a source of embarrassment. Academic demotion was worsened by the resultant physical demarcation of those who did not look to fit into their newly assigned grade. According to Mayme Sevander, her brother Paul “was placed in second grade, which he hated; he’d been in fourth grade in New York, and he was head and shoulders taller than the other students.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Paavo Alatalo found himself thirteen years old in the fourth grade, where most students were between nine and ten years of age. In his memoir, Alatalo wrote: “Bitterly I did my best with [Finnish] grammar. For I had to (!) advance to the fifth grade... I felt myself to be over-aged.”⁶⁷ Inserting the parenthesized exclamation point in his life writing sixty-nine years after beginning school

⁶⁴ Leini Hietala Interview with Varpu Lindström, August 1988, Karelia. “ei vastannut sitä mit[ään] täällä...”

⁶⁵ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 47.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Alatalo, 6. “Katkerana tein parhaani kieliopin parissa. Sillä minun täytyi (!) siirtyä 5-nnelle loukalle... tunsin itseni yli-ikäiseksi.”

in Karelia points to the anxiety that Alatalo must have felt about his position in Karelian school and, indirectly, about his ethno-linguistic identity. Neil Sutherland has found that, in childhood recollections, the “factual core” of what happened tends to be “encapsulated in the feelings that it aroused.”⁶⁸ Alatalo’s long-held exclamation of being held back in school succinctly demonstrates Sutherland’s observation. For Allan Sihvola, the – also exclamation point worthy – shock of being placed in the fifth grade for his “imperfect” Finnish, after having completed seven grades in the US, was eased by placement in a class composed of others his age and primarily foreigners.⁶⁹

School

Like for most children, school occupied a central place in the thoughts of Alice Heino. In a March 1938 letter, Alice told her brother “I go to school every day except on the rest day,” immediately following the compulsory greetings and weather talk.⁷⁰ Spending six days a week there, the Soviet school was a main force in the acculturation of North American children. However, in many cases, the schools were ill prepared to welcome these new students.

The steady arrival of Finnish North Americans coincided, at least in the official view, with the return to “class-room based instruction with a standardized curriculum, stable textbooks, regular examinations, and competitive grading.”⁷¹ However, schools in the early 1930s lacked sufficient books, materials, and space – students often attended

⁶⁸ Sutherland, 14.

⁶⁹ Sihvola, 27-28. Sihvola, like Alatalo, punctuated his discussion of being placed in a lower grade with an exclamation point. From Sihvola’s discussion of the school he attended, it seems by “foreigners” (“ulkomailta tulleista”) he meant other North Americans.

⁷⁰ Alice Heino letter to “Rakas Veljeni,” Kontupohja, 18 March [early 1937] (AH2).

⁷¹ Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism*, 7-8.

school in shifts – and suffered from a scarcity of trained teachers. Between 1930 and 1933, the teaching profession grew by almost sixty percent in the Soviet Union.⁷² Ewing’s research reveals that in late 1930, Soviet educational planners knew that, due to the massive increase in the demands for education propelled by mandatory schooling, less than one third of new teachers would receive any pedagogical training.⁷³ In 1932, thirty-five percent of Soviet teachers had less than secondary education.⁷⁴ For students in remote or rural areas, and especially in minority language school systems, the situation was even bleaker. Ewing argues that the policy of *korenizatsiia* resulted in the hiring and promotion of unqualified teachers and officials who met the requirements of being a local.⁷⁵ Though intended to support local culture, Ol’ga Iliukha has shown that school materials sent to the Finnish ‘minority’ schools were simply Moscow works, translated into Finnish and “poorly applicable to the local conditions.”⁷⁶ Inadequate facilities and instructors and unevenly applied curriculum undoubtedly proved to be to children’s detriment.

To continue studies beyond basic primary, children who lived in small rural communities or communes - like Leini Hietala, Mayme Sevander, Allan Sihvola, and Paavo Alatalo - went to a boarding school for foreigners, the Internaat, in Petrozavodsk. When asked if she enjoyed living and studying at the Internaat, Leini Hietala replied:

⁷² Ibid., 67.

⁷³ Ibid., 68.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 160. The rate had grown considerably from 18% in 1930, before the decree on mandatory primary education.

⁷⁵ Ewing, “Ethnicity at School,” 506-507.

⁷⁶ Iliukha, 52.

“Well I guess it was [nice/comfortable] there. After school we could run around there.”⁷⁷

Allan Sihvola’s memoir includes a vivid description of the school’s accommodations, food, teaching, and camaraderie.⁷⁸ Sihvola described his forty pupil class studying subjects like music, English, wood shop, Russian, physics, and physical education, taught by Finnish North Americans, Karelians, and Finns.⁷⁹ Interestingly, Sihvola does not mention political study explicitly.

In the classroom, North American students often encountered a teaching style much different from what they had been accustomed. Viola Ranta explained: “I tried to go to school, but nothing came of it. It was such different kind of school-going from what I was used to, that I said to my parents that I will not go there for even a day.”⁸⁰ Mayme Sevander’s work, both her own recollections of childhood in Karelia and her research on the North American immigrants, and Ol’ga Iliukh’s study of Karelian schools in the 1930s identify rigid textbook learning and the presence of fear as key characteristics of the Karelian Soviet school. Sevander observed:

In American schools there is a complete absence of inhibition on the part of the child. He feels free to approach the teacher at any time and with any question or request. ... This method of learning in the eyes of some Karelian teachers in the Finnish schools of the 1930s turned out to be a detriment. One could hear them complain: ‘Oh, those American kids! They behave at school as if they were at home.’ Rigid discipline in the schools mirrored the administrative-command system which permeated every field of Soviet life. Such teacher-pupil relations instilled fear

⁷⁷ Leini Hietala interview. “No kyllähän se mukavaa oli. Koulun jälkeen sai jouksennella siellä.”

⁷⁸ Sihvola, especially 28-30.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁰ Ranta, 3. “Minä yritin käydä koulua, mutta siitä ei tullut mitään. Se oli niin toisenlaista koulunkäyntiä kuin mihin olin tottunut, että sanoin vanhemmilleni, että en käy päivääkään siellä.”

and excluded any initiative on behalf of the student.⁸¹

Likewise, Iliukha argues: “The pupils’ independent judicious reasoning came to be more and more regularly replaced by formal rote-learning of the fundamentals given in textbooks and the main theses of Stalin’s works and by citations from them.”⁸²

Furthermore, Iliukha contends, “all literature recommended for reading invoked in children, in one way or another, a sense of danger, anxiety, fragility of the surrounding world, instilled hatred for the hostile encirclement around the country.”⁸³

In 1937, the Finnish language was banned in schools and local administration. Life in Russian language school made Finnish North American children’s previous struggles with the Finnish language pale in comparison. Tight-lipped Leini Hietala summed up her experience moving to a Russian-language school by saying “it was difficult.”⁸⁴ When asked if she had known any Russian, Hietala answered: “I did know some, but not as much as [I] should have.”⁸⁵ Paavo Alatalo actually began his schooling in the Soviet Union at a Russian school, but felt he lost time in his studies because of his inability to comprehend Russian.⁸⁶ Sylvi Hokkanen, who had just begun teaching in a Finnish secondary school, was sent to teach at an all-Russian school in 1937. She did not yet really know Russian, and her students could not understand English or Finnish. “My discipline was terrible,” Hokkanen remembered,

I had several young lads in the class who continually disrupted the whole class. I repeatedly asked the principal to come and

⁸¹ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 14.

⁸² Iliukha, 60-61.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁴ Hietala interview. “Se oli vaikeaa.”

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* “Osasin mina jonku verra, mut ei niin paljon ku olis pitäny.”

⁸⁶ Paavo Alatalo interview.

oversee my lessons and to help me with discipline, but he never would enter my classroom. I thought it was probably his first job as principal, and he was just afraid of the kids as I was. On the other hand, perhaps he did not want me teaching there since I was a foreigner.⁸⁷

Hokkanen's description highlights the linguistic difficulties of both students and teachers, the prevalence of improperly trained teachers (imagine how the Russian students would have felt about their Finnish American teacher) and principals, and growing inter-ethnic tensions.

Pioneers and community work

The Soviet educational structure closely bound in-school curriculum with extracurricular involvement in children's programming. For children who had participated in the Pioneers in Canada and the United States, continued involvement with the program in Karelia offered the relief of familiarity. For those new to the movement, the Pioneers presented children an opportunity to become involved in a wide array of educational and fun activities. Alice Heino told her brother

I go to lots of places to practice pieces. We have lots of that kind of groups here that I go to. They teach songs, pieces, and poems. Then when there is some evening program we have to perform. I have already performed many times... I am in the [P]ioneer organization and I have been given tasks.⁸⁸

Alice's tone suggests pride and enjoyment in her involvement in the Pioneers.

Commitment to Pioneer work could lead to community recognition. On July 23rd, 1936,

Punainen Karjala featured a photo and blurb about young Karelian Pioneer Lilja

⁸⁷ Hokkanen, 86.

⁸⁸ Alice Heino letter to "Rakas Veljeni," Kontupohja, 18 March [early 1937] (AH 2). "Minä käyn monessa paikassa kappaleita harjoitelemassa. Meillä on paljon sellaisia piireja joissa minä käyn. Niissä opetetaan lauluja, kappaleita ja runoja. Sitten kun tulee jotku iltamat niin pitää esittää. Minä olen jo monta kertaa esittänyt... Minä olen pioneeri järjestössä ja minulle on annettu tehtäviä."

Sorokina for her “diligence and work ethic.”⁸⁹ Such acknowledgments in official newspapers encouraged children to aspire to do their best and perpetuated the manufactured image of happy, thriving youth in Soviet Karelia. On a practical level, the Pioneers could offer children security and well-being. For example, acceptance to a Pioneer summer camp could provide a child with a “carefree life” and “three square meals a day,” as Mayme Sevander described it⁹⁰; both very appealing to families experiencing increasingly difficult times as the 1930s progressed.

Working Children

While some children experienced the highs and lows of Soviet schooling and children’s programming, others left behind childhood quite abruptly. Though it is common to think about the twentieth-century as a decisive transition from child labour to prolonged schooling, many young people continued to contribute to their family income. Joy Parr, a leading expert on Canadian childhood history, reminds readers that even as late as 1931, children made “substantial contributions” to working-class family wages.⁹¹ Children certainly contributed to family labour in the Soviet Union. Lenin’s widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, wrote about working children on collectivized farms in 1932, reminding the reader that “[t]here are no officials whose job is to protect child labor, and it is exploited inordinately.”⁹² Though, according to Krupskaya, *kolkhoz* children were expected to engage in heavy, full-time agricultural work from the age of twelve, Finnish

⁸⁹ *Punainen Karjala*, 23 July 1936, No. 168.

⁹⁰ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 107.

⁹¹ Joy Parr, “Introduction,” in *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd, 1982), 14-15.

⁹² Krupskaya letter to P.P. Postyshev, 1932, reproduced in *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 360-361.

North American children joined the work force in different occupations and at different ages. Viola Ranta, who struggled with Karelian school, joined the labour force at the age of fourteen as a typist.⁹³ Erwin Niva, also at the age of fourteen, lost a semester of school due to illness, never returned, and instead became a tractor operator.⁹⁴ For families who lost a parent in the political turmoil, children's labour proved invaluable. At the age of thirteen, after the arrest of his father, Paul Corgan, Mayme's younger brother, supported his family by driving horses at a lumber camp.⁹⁵ According to Mayme, "Paul knew he was the man of the family now, and he didn't complain."⁹⁶ After the arrest of Frank Heino, Alice, at fifteen, tried to find work to help her family's subsistence, but, as she explained to her brother Viljam, "I'm always told I am too young for heavy work and there isn't any light work."⁹⁷ It seems, when considering the work done by boys, like Niva and Corgan, that gendered notions of appropriate work were also involved in Heino's inability to find work. Some balanced school and work, like Mayme Sevander, who wrote: "Not a day of study occurred after grade school without a full-time job. I worked my way through high school, university and M.A. exams and I'm not an exception."⁹⁸

Children's daily freedoms

Viewed in one light, children's lives in Karelia were quite difficult. North American-raised immigrant children struggled with the demands of Finnish education

⁹³ Ranta, 3.

⁹⁴ Erwin Niva interview.

⁹⁵ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 107.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹⁷ Alice Heino letter [to William Heino], Kontupohja, date unknown [circa 1938] (AH4).

⁹⁸ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 18.

and the unfamiliarity of the Russian language. The critical analysis that had been instilled through their socialist upbringing was unwelcome in the Soviet system, and as time passed, so was their suspicious multiethnic identity. Some toiled through school to become the required New Soviet Citizen, while others gave their physical labour to build industrialized socialism in the Karelian woods. However, it is possible to also find examples of Finnish North American children at play, enjoying the freedom of youth.

In January 1933, twelve year old Art Heino died from pneumonia. Looking through the tragedy of a lost son, Justiina's letter to son Waino (Väinö) in the United States on January 25th, 1933, depicts the active life of children in Karelia. Justiina wrote:

The children got a day off school on the first of January and then for two days they had a ski competition. On the final day he came home in the evening with a real chill so he went with father to warm up [presumably in a communal sauna]. He had gotten sweaty and then didn't come home but went to the cafeteria from there and still to a friend's place from there. Only around 9 in the evening did he return home...⁹⁹

Justiina's description of Art's final day of play succeeds in painting a clear image of a day in the life of a child and Karelian life more generally. Contrasting with the rigid inculcation of schedule, regiment, and punctuality undertaken in Soviet school and Pioneers¹⁰⁰, the statement speaks to the relative freedom children enjoyed. Art seems to have spent the day in the company of friends, engaged in school and, likely, Pioneer sanctioned athletics, briefly returning home and going to the sauna with his father, before heading out again for leisure activities. Art's mobility was common to other Finnish North American children as well. In one short letter, Alice Heino told her brother about

⁹⁹ Justiina Heino letter to Waino Lane, Kontupohja, 25 January [1933] (JH2).

¹⁰⁰ See Kelly, "Shaping the 'Future Race'," especially 261.

her involvement in various community activities, her visits to see the “kino” or movie shows, skating, and skiing.¹⁰¹ In another, she told of hanging around the house with nightly youth visitors, listening to their phonograph, and about attending programs and dances at the Cultural Hall.¹⁰² Mayme Sevander recalled that at the age of thirteen, “I was old enough to go out alone now...” to participate with friends in various social and cultural events.¹⁰³ In Mayme and Alice’s case, it is worth pointing out that they were permitted to go off alone, without gendered limitations on what girls could do. Older children were enabled to move through their towns without adult supervision, gaining a first-hand understanding of the social and cultural cooperation and clashes occurring across the region.

Encounters with other children

In the streets, at school, and at community groups, Finnish North American children came into contact with local Karelian and Russian children, and the children of Red Finn émigrés. In *A Grave in Karelia*, Ernesti Komulainen provides a colourful description of children at play in Kontupohja:

Kids were sledding... Nikolai observed the colourful group as he sat on his trunk. Some of them were American or Canadian Finns; he could pick them out easily from the others by their good clothes and loud voices and the English language that they used in their play. He could also tell which children had come from Finland because their clothes were of Finnish make, and their spoken Finnish was clearer than that of the American children. They, like the Russian and Karelian children, looked cold and malnourished. The Russian and Karelian kids were wearing padded jackets. All of them were trying

¹⁰¹ Alice Heino letter to “Rakas Veljeni,” Kontupohja, 18 March [early 1937] (AH2).

¹⁰² Alice Heino letter [to Martha], [Kondopoga], circa. 1938 (AH 3).

¹⁰³ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 61.

to be cheerful and to enjoy the sledding, each clamouring in his or her language, although some of them were shivering and runny-nosed.¹⁰⁴

Komulainen's portrayal raises some important considerations. While the children were all playing on the same hill, they were separate and divided by language and appearance. Komulainen, like Erwin Niva testified, showed North American children playing in English, with their Finnish language less "clear" than that of the Finns. Unlike the Finns, Russians, and Karelians, who looked "cold and malnourished," the North American children had "good clothes" and exhibited health in their "loud voices." The notion of "all of them trying to be cheerful" is striking; what was it in these children's lives that made cheer take effort?

Perhaps tensions between children of different backgrounds made sharing play space difficult. Red Finn child Kyllikki Joganson remembered that between Finnish speaking children (Red Finns, North Americans, and Karelians) and Russian children, "dealings with them almost never happened..."¹⁰⁵ Irina Takala, whose work has provided some excellent findings on the inter-ethnic relations of adults, has acknowledged that "relationships among children were also not very simple."¹⁰⁶ In the school yard, Russian children taunted Finns with "finka-blinka" and Finnish children retaliated with "ruskii pusskii."¹⁰⁷ Other encounters had darker undertones. Takala's interviews with Paul Corgan revealed fear and bullying based on ethno-linguistic differences.¹⁰⁸ In some

¹⁰⁴ Komulainen, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Helena Miettinen and Kyllikki Joganson, *Pettyjen Toiveiden Maa* (Saarijärvi, Finland: Arator, 2001), 21. "Kanssa-käymistä heidän kansaan ei juurikaan ollut..."

¹⁰⁶ Takala, "North American Finns as Viewed by the Population of Soviet Karelia in the 1930s," 206.

¹⁰⁷ Miettinen and Joganson, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Takala, "North American Finns as Viewed by the Population of Soviet Karelia in the 1930s," 206.

cases, though, children interacted together productively. Paavo Alatalo learned to speak Russian through mixed ski competitions and Pioneer events.¹⁰⁹ Whether children approached each other positively or with disdain, a clear line separated Finnish North American children from the others.

Children as Symbols

As Komulainen's description of children sledding illustrated, Finnish North American children stood out among others for their higher quality clothes and, as we have seen in the last chapter, overall better well-being thanks to their privileged access to special foods and supplies. Local children often stood out in sharp contrast. Lauri Hokkanen proves to have been very moved by the health and lives of Karelian and Russian children. In describing a visit to a Karelian single-mother's home and the health of her children, Hokkanen stated, "They just got to me. I will never forget them."¹¹⁰ Though Finnish North American adults recognized the plight of local children, materials from the 1930s, and, perhaps more surprisingly, retrospective sources do not connect what they see with the wider context of Soviet conditions. Lauri Hokkanen, in a brief mention of the apprentices at the ski factory, explained: "At first I thought they were only about twelve or thirteen years old, but I was told that none of them were under sixteen. They were small because they had been born during really hard times and hadn't gotten enough food for growth."¹¹¹

"Really hard times" seems to do little justice to the facts, considering, just for example, that in the famine year of 1921, when these apprentices would have been about

¹⁰⁹ Alatalo interview.

¹¹⁰ Hokkanen, 108.

¹¹¹ Hokkanen, 42.

two years old, ninety to ninety-five percent of children under the age of three died.¹¹²

Likewise, the mass arrival of the Finnish North Americans also coincided with a surge in the number of homeless children in the USSR. Following the Civil War, Soviet Russia was left with millions of homeless children,¹¹³ but the period of 1932-1934 saw another increase caused by forced collectivization, dekulakization, and the famine of 1932-33.¹¹⁴ The known horrendous living conditions of these devastated children, as evidenced in official inspections of 'Children's Homes' shows a significant disparity in the lives and health of Home inhabitants and Finnish North American children.¹¹⁵ Hokkanen does not demonstrate an awareness of the broader Soviet children's experience.

Regardless, for Finnish North American men, like Lauri Hokkanen, who otherwise demonstrated very little interest in domestic issues or family life, the attention paid to other people's children is striking. It seems local children took on symbolic significance for Hokkanen. His description of an "expeditor from the lumber camp" serves as a poignant example:

we found him sitting at the table chewing away on a chicken with several children watching. I could see the kids were hungry and undernourished, but the fat slob ignored them and continued to crunch away, grease dripping down his chin. It was a depressing sight and we were glad to get out of there.¹¹⁶

Although it is difficult to ascertain to what extent Hokkanen would have been influenced by Soviet characterizations of the bourgeois enemy and his own North American socialist

¹¹² Kirschenbaum, 34.

¹¹³ For an overview of children's homelessness, see Kelly, *Children's World*, Part II: Children on Their Own.

¹¹⁴ Siegelbaum and Sokolov, 390.

¹¹⁵ As an example, see the report on the inspection of the 'Children's Commune, Barybino, June 1936, reproduced in Siegelbaum and Sokolov, 394-396.

¹¹⁶ Hokkanen, 47.

upbringing in the class struggle, his vivid imagery can be analysed in the wider context of 1930s Soviet discourse. The “fat slob” represents the class enemy, while the children can be seen as portrayals of the tragedy of Russian backwardness and the inspiration for the construction of a new Soviet social order. The image evoked by Hokkanen highlights the distance between the reality of life for many of ‘Stalin’s children’ and the ideal of the proud, committed, and healthy Pioneer. In Lisa Kirschenbaum’s words, “[t]he clearest symbol of the Stalinst Revolution’s success became the beaming faces of Soviet youngsters. The policy of making childhood (appear) happy had at least as much to do with the state’s need for disciplined and devoted communists as with the best interests of children.”¹¹⁷

Conclusion

When asked if her childhood in Karelia was pleasant, Leini Hietala replied, “Well, I don’t know, you had to get used to it whether it was pleasant or not...”¹¹⁸ Hietala’s response suggests that life for “Karelia’s Golden Fund” was a marked change from earlier days in Canada and the United States, and reveals a mix of ambivalent emotions about immigration, schooling, Communist training, work, play, and their privileged place in the region’s ethnic contestations. American socialist pedagogue Jeanette D. Pearl wrote in 1911: “make no mistake, children of 10 and over know much of the sadness and sorrow of life which this system of capitalist exploitation inflicts upon them. Our children are the workers' children; and they have imbibed the suffering and

¹¹⁷ Kirschenbaum, 134.

¹¹⁸ Leini Hietala interview. “No en tiedä, oli totuttava siihen oliko se hauska tai ei...”

privation of the working class with their mothers' milk."¹¹⁹ In North America and in Karelia, these children symbolized the new social order. Yet, in their upbringing and experiences in Karelia they carried the burden of an adult movement's clash between ideals and practice. Beginning the work of uncovering the experiences of Finnish North American children in Karelia contributes to a greater understanding of the joys and struggles, and broader social, cultural and political workings of Autonomous Finnish Karelia in the Soviet project.

¹¹⁹Jeanette D. Pearl in *New York Call*, October 29, 1911, quoted in Teitelbaum, "Critical Lessons' from Our Past," 419.

CHAPTER VI
“Isn’t it a different land this sickle and hammer land?”:
Working in Soviet Karelia

Karl Berg enthusiastically described to his daughter how good life was in Karelia in October 1932, emphasizing the availability of work and the rights of workers. Berg concluded by rhetorically asking, “[i]sn’t it a different land this sickle and hammer land?”¹ With regard to working experiences, most Finnish North American immigrants in Karelia would likely have agreed that the USSR was indeed a “different land.” Having come to *work* to *build* a workers’ state, the hours committed to formal state labour were integral to forming the migrants’ sense of place, purpose, and perceptions of life in Karelia. This chapter examines the role of work in the life-writing studied.

Examining the theme of work through letter and memoir narratives results in an analysis far different than what has been seen in other studies of the region. Past research has turned to the specifics of the local industry, work projects, and top-down analysis of the struggles between regional autonomy and state control. Such studies, most notably those by Reino Kero, Sari Autio-Sarasmo, Markku Kangaspuro, and Nick Baron, lay the foundation for an examination of experiences, perception, and memory, as narrated by workers and their families.² The letters and memoirs reveal the importance of

¹ Karl Berg letter to Bertha, 17 October 1932.

² Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*; Sari Autio-Sarasmo, *Suunnitelmatalous Neuvosto-Karjalassa 1928-1941. Paikallistason rooli Neuvostoliiton teollistamisessa [Planned economy in Karelian ASSR. The role of local level in the industrialisation of the Soviet Union]* (SKS: Helsinki, 2002); Markku Kangaspuro,

emphasizing the positive qualities of working life in the USSR. The writers' descriptions of their work provide valuable glimpses of their daily lives and how they felt about their assignments. Looking at how some migrants became a part of the Soviet worker hero movement furthers the consideration of Finnish North American privilege. Narratives surrounding work shed light on social relations between the North American immigrant workers and other peoples in the region. Descriptions of work and social interactions in the work place also allow for an analysis of gender, and the mechanisms for the formation and maintenance of Finnish North American normative masculinity. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of how Russification and changes in labour laws impacted narratives about work, and the writers' lives. This personal dimension enriches our understanding of what it was like to be engaged with the great socialist project in Karelia. First, however, the brief outlining of Finnish immigrants' labour experience in North America and the main sites and types of work the immigrants encountered in Karelia contextualizes the ways that work has been written about in life.

Finnish immigrants at work in Canada and the United States

Most Finnish immigrants in North America came from an agricultural background. Many continued to pursue farming – or at least dreamed of one day owning their own farm³ – but wage work became the standard occupational category for Finns

Neuvosto-Karjalan taistelu itsehallinnosta. Nationalismi ja suomalaiset punaiset Neuvostoliiton vallankäytössä vuosina 1920-1939 [Soviet Karelia's Struggle for Autonomy: Nationalism and Finnish Reds' Use of Power in Soviet Union in the Years 1920-1939] (SKS: Helsinki, 2000), especially 180-209; Nick Baron, *Soviet Karela: Politics, Planning, and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1920-1939* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³ Reino Kero, *Suureen Länteen*, 156; Ian Radforth, "Finnish Radicalism and Labour Activism in the Northern Ontario Woods" in *Nation of Immigrants*, 294; Keijo Virtanen, "Work as a Factor of Adaptation for Finnish Immigrants in the Great Lakes Region," 122.

and Finnish descendants in early-twentieth-century Canada and the United States. The paid labour of Finnish immigrants, like so many others, can be summarized as insecure, seasonal, piece rate, and strenuous. Finnish men found employment primarily in lumbering, mining, freight handling, and factory production.⁴ The families whose experiences are represented in the Karelian life writing demonstrate the typical challenges that faced Finnish immigrant families, including the ongoing search for secure employment. Oscar Corgan's work in a coal mine and on the railroad ignited his passion for workers' rights, which eventually led him to leadership roles in the Finnish immigrant press, cooperatives, and Karelian Technical Aid.⁵ Klaus Maunu's father worked in logging and cleared land at Pike Lake, Ontario for a family farm.⁶ Paavo Alatalo's father tried his hand at farming on the outskirts of Warren, Ohio, but the family ultimately moved to town, where his father worked at an iron mill, and also took on other short-term wage work in the Cleveland area.⁷ Allan Sihvola's father also worked at the Trumbull Steel Factory in Warren, Ohio, which significantly reduced wages in 1929.⁸ In 1932, the company was forced to shut down half of its operations. Sihvola remembered that the company's management was so "forward thinking" that, instead of completely eliminating workers, they doubled up positions and split the wage in half.⁹ The union protested the drop in wages and staged an unsuccessful strike, teenaged Sihvola among

⁴ For the Finnish role in these industries see Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses*; Jean Morrison, *Labour Pains: Thunder Bay's Working Class in Canada's Wheat Boom* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2009); Donald Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigners'*; Reino Kero, *Suureen Länteen*, especially 143-191.

⁵ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 5 and 12.

⁶ Maunu,

⁷ Alatalo, 20.

⁸ Sihvola, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

the picketers, which left the strikers unemployed. Before moving to Karelia, Elis Ranta worked at a Pennsylvania iron mill for ten years, where the hard, hot work had begun to take a toll on his health.¹⁰ With the economic depression, his hours were reduced to only two to three days per week, and the family struggled to make ends meet. Without a secure job in sight, young Lauri Hokkanen had worked on lake freighters, at lumber camps, and sawmills in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, developing his mechanical skills.¹¹ Finnish women typically found secure employment - though poorly compensated and little less strenuous - more easily than men, as domestic servants, in the service industry, or as cooks and laundresses at work camps.¹² Paavo Alatalo's mother, for example, worked as a domestic servant for three dollars a day.¹³ Many other women stayed at home to care for their families, leaving the few available jobs open for men and single individuals.¹⁴ Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States gained experience in many different industries through their ongoing search for secure employment and fair wages and treatment. Such labour experience, paired with their experience in workers' movements, attracted Karelian planners in the Soviet Union.

North American Skills and Karelian Projects

Finnish North Americans found work at many sites in the vast Karelian territory, which spanned over 800 kilometres from the Finnish agricultural commune Säde near

¹⁰ Viola Ranta, 1.

¹¹ Hokkanen, 7.

¹² See Lindström, *Defiant Sisters*, especially 84-114, and "I Won't be a Slave"; Keijo Virtanen, "Work as a Factor of Adaptation for Finnish Immigrants in the Great Lakes Region," 120-121; Marsha Pentti, "Piikajutut: Stories Finnish Maids Told" in *Women Who Dared*.

¹³ Alatalo, 20.

¹⁴ Sylvi Hokkanen wrote about having to leave her job as a teacher because "people looked askance at married women who held jobs that could have gone to single people." Hokkanen, 8.

Lake Ladoga in the south to work settlements above the Arctic Circle, near Kandalksha Gulf on the White Sea. The Murmansk Railway and the White Sea Canal, both within Karelian borders, provide two examples of significant labour projects that brought thousands into the area, garnered national and international attention, and also resulted in appalling numbers of fatalities. Finnish North Americans' contribution to Karelia's economic development, however, was made primarily in the lumber industry, construction, agriculture, and general mechanics.

Finnish North Americans were invited to Karelia foremost to harvest the region's "green gold." Timber was viewed as Karelia's way forward, from backwoods periphery to a modern, industrial economy.¹⁵ The northwestern region of the Soviet Union, which included Karelia and the Leningrad district, accounted for half of the nation's forests and the reserves had been largely unexploited.¹⁶ However, the shortage of workers, especially in the north, had been the primary impediment to developing the regional timber industry. Finnish North Americans were recruited to fell forests, transport logs, float them in the spring, and work in sawmill operations. Indeed, over sixty percent of the immigrants worked in Karelia's lumber industry.¹⁷ The Petrozavodsk area had many successful lumber camps that employed Finns almost exclusively, including Matroosa, Vilga, and Lososiina.¹⁸ The Kangas family was based at the Lohijärvi camp, near the village of Lososiina, where Antti and his sons worked in the lumber industry, which

¹⁵ Sari Autio-Saraso, "The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia During the Process of Soviet Industrialization" in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, Special Double Issue of *Journal of Finnish Studies* (15, ½, November 2011), eds. M. Kangaspuro and S. Saraso, 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Takala and Golubev, "The Harsh Reality of Fine Words," 133.

¹⁸ Using greetings published in Finnish North American newspapers, Reino Kero outlines the numbers of North Americans at specific camps in *Neuvosto Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 95-98.

included building ice roads for lumber transportation.¹⁹ Fifty-five kilometres further north, along the shore of Lake Onega, the town of Kondopoga served as a hub for surrounding lumber camps, with its paper mill and hydroelectric plant. Small lumber camps were also scattered throughout the Karelian territory, along its many lakes and rivers. Uhtua and Kem were two additional centres supporting Finnish North Americans working in the north. The Hokkanens and Hirvonens first worked at Vonganperä camp, outside of Uhtua.

Finnish North Americans were encouraged to bring tools with them and to donate money to the Machine Fund. In Karelia, the immigrants' tools, like "Finnish axes" and "Swedish saws,"²⁰ were renamed and rebranded in the socialist fashion.²¹ For example, the Caterpillar bulldozer used for hauling logs was renamed "Stalinets." Foreign tools offered the possibility of significant production increases.²² Autio-Sarasmo argues that "[o]ne Canadian lumberjack cut down a tree in just half the time required by two local lumberjacks. The Canadian lumberjack used a frame saw and a Canadian axe whereas the local workers used Russian saws and axes."²³ Takala and Golubev have also found impressive results: a Canadian lumberjack could cut an average of 12 cubic feet of harvested wood per day compared to the meagre 3 cubic feet cut by lumberjacks from

¹⁹ Finnish North Americans were instrumental in establishing the use ice roads to ease lumber transportation. See, for example, Kero, *Neuvosto Karjalaa rakentamassa*, 117.

²⁰ So-named in North America, for their use by Scandinavian immigrants.

²¹ Autio-Sarasmo, "Economic Modernization," 93.

²² Kero outlines the various technique and technological contributions of Finnish North Americans in *Neuvosto Karjalaa rakentamassa*, 109-121.

²³ Autio-Sarasmo, "Economic Modernization," 94.

other regions in the Soviet Union.²⁴ The immigrants also donated trucks and tractors which were used to facilitate the transportation of lumber. These technologies and techniques were disseminated by touring experts who visited lumber camps and through the establishment of model camps, like “Internationale” in Matroosa. Interestingly, while contemporary literature tended to refer to all Finnish North Americans as “Finnish Americans”, lumber expertise and technology was typically labelled “Canadian.”

In addition to lumber exports, Karelia used some of its timber for manufacturing and processing. In the first half of the 1930s, employees of the Kondopoga Pulp and Paper Factory were primarily Finns. Frank Heino was among the Finnish North Americans working there. In Petrozavodsk, the Ski Factory was another largely Finnish operation, with Finns representing sixty percent of the 500 employees.²⁵ The Ski Factory had the reputation of being the most productive ski manufacturer in all of the Soviet Union.²⁶ In the mid-1930s, the factory began to also manufacture furniture. Among the studied life writers, Lisi Hirvonen, Lauri Hokkanen, and Elis Ranta were employed by the Ski Factory. Both the paper mill and the ski factory were touted as “a forge for the ethnic Karelian and Finnish proletariat.”²⁷ In addition to the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory, the capital was home to the large Onega Metallurgic Factory. Finnish North Americans

²⁴ Takala and Golubev, “The Harsh Reality of Fine Words,” 134. Local Karelian lumberjacks averaged 4.3 cubic feet per day, and the overall North American average was 8.5 cubic feet.

²⁵ Approximately 150 Finnish North Americans worked at the Ski Factory. Takala and Golubev, “The Harsh Reality of Fine Words,” 136.

²⁶ Autio-Sarasma, “Economic Modernization,” 93.

²⁷ Takala and Golubev, “The Harsh Reality of Fine Words,” 135-136.

not only worked at the factories, but they had played a significant role in building the operations, going back to the late 1920s.²⁸

Finnish North Americans established agricultural communes, most famously Säde, Hiilisuo, and Vonganperä, which were to produce feed for the 10 500 horses used in the lumber industry and to help alleviate reliance on food imports to the region.²⁹ Hiilisuo, just outside of Petrozavodsk, became an experimental and educational farm in 1933.³⁰ In 1933-1934, Finnish North Americans were also recruited to contribute to the Karelian fishery on the White Sea and the region's large lakes.³¹ To accompany the front line extraction and production of the lumber camps, factories, and farms, approximately thirty percent of Finnish North Americans worked in the construction industry.³² Many also worked building roads and other infrastructure, and on electricity and telephone lines. The available letters and memoirs, as we will see, collectively highlight work in several of these fields.

Working in a Workers' State

Describing just how different life was in the USSR, Karl Berg wrote: "Work is free[.] There is no *Paasia* [boss][.] Workers choose always from amongst themselves a capable leader only they work just the same as others and if we notice some defects then they are always discussed[.]"³³ Berg exemplifies how letter writers were eager to point

²⁸ Takala and Golubev, "The Harsh Reality of Fine Words," 135-136.

²⁹ Kero, *Neuvosto Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 116; Ylikangas, *The Sower Commune*, 79.

³⁰ Ylikangas, *The Sower Commune*, 80.

³¹ Kero, *Neuvosto Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 98.

³² Takala and Golubev, "The Harsh Reality of Fine Words," 135.

³³ Karl Berg letter to Bertha, 17 October 1932. "Työ on vapata Ei ole mitään Paasia [boss] Työläiset valitsee aina keskuristansa jonkun kykenevä johtajan vaan se tekee töitä aivan samaten kuin toisetkin ja jos huomataan jotain epä kohtia niin niistä aina keskustellaan."

to the positive qualities of working for a Communist state, and to draw a contrast between labour in the Soviet Union and labour in Depression-stricken, capitalist North America. The writers emphasized the availability of work, the equality of workers, and access to paid sick leave and vacation. These issues were well-familiar to the Finnish North American labour and leftist movement and many of the migrants had fought for those very rights in the United States and Canada. Unemployment, paltry wages, and poor working conditions were a significant concern in Finnish socialist circles and media. Enoch Nelson explained to his brother Arvid that “I have learned a new way of living out here that is different from the way we used to live in [A]merica and that is that what I earn I spend because I have no reason to save up for hard times or sickness in the family as they are all free of charge in all cases.”³⁴ He elaborated, stating, “Everybody who has money, and every one that works has money, and everyone has a chance to work, has learned the same form of living as I have that it is useless to save money and they spend it as they get it.”³⁵

The letter writers often referred to the availability of work. For example, Aate Pitkänen wrote to his parents in late 1933: “Yes work there is enough, don’t have to worry at least about unemployment.”³⁶ Likewise, Karl Berg explained to his daughter that you did not have to “fear that the work will end.”³⁷ The letter writers wrote even more often about workers’ benefits in the Soviet Union. If a worker fell ill, they had

³⁴ Enoch Nelson letter to Brother Arvid, Petrozavodsk, 10 January 1933.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, 12 November 1933. “Kyllä töitä riittää, ei tarvii pelätä ainaskaan työttömyyttä.”

³⁷ Karl Berg letter to Bertha and Reino, 17 October 1932. “eikä tarvis pelätä että työ loppu niin kauvan kuin sitä van tehdän.”

access to free health care and paid sick leave. Lisi Hirvonen explained to her sister that “here are free doctors and hospitals and you get wages during your sick leave.”³⁸ Some workers even got sent to health sanatoriums, without expense. Enoch Nelson boasted that the sanatorium that he had stayed at “has been equipped with a lot of the latest form of electrical and other medical apparatus [sic] and can take care of a thousand workers at a time. There are a dozen doctors with there [sic] staff of nurses and other personnel [sic] on the place to take care of the people that come there and all the care is given free of charge to the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union.”³⁹ Kalle Korhonen summed up the importance of paid sick leave in 1937, stating that with it sickness doesn’t “feel so heavy.”⁴⁰ To provide sufficient rest for workers, paid vacations were also provided. In an earlier letter, from 1935, Korhonen exclaimed, with his typical communist zeal, that “In capitalist countries workers do not get a month vacation with full pay but for us IN THE SOVIET UNION IT IS SECURED FOR EVERY WORKER.”⁴¹ Terttu Kangas explained in 1934 that vacation pay was calculated by what one had earned in the three months prior.⁴² Therefore, she told her sister that her husband, Antti, had been on a month long vacation and “so yes it suited him to be on vacation when every day came over 22 rubles ... of pay.”⁴³

³⁸ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 20 April 1933.

³⁹ Enoch Nelson letter to Brother Arvid, Petrozavodsk, 10 January 1933.

⁴⁰ Kalle Korhonen letter to Aune, Judith, and Trenton, Petrozavodsk, 30 January 1937. “joten se [ei] tunnu niin raskaalta sairaus.”

⁴¹ Kalle Korhonen letter to Aune, Petrozavodsk, 23 August 1935. “Kapitalistimaissa eivät työläiset ja toimitsijat saa kuukausien lomaa täydellä palkalla mutta meillä NEUVOSTOLIITTOSSA SE ON TURVATTU JOKAISALLE TYÖNTEKIJALLE.” Emphasis in original.

⁴² Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 28 October 1934.

⁴³ Ibid. “Niin kyllä siltä kelpas olla lomala kun joka päivä tuli yli 22 ruplaa päivässä palkaa.”

These references to the availability of work, the equality of labour, and state-covered health care, sick leave, and vacation served two main functions: one personal and one social. To the family and friends on the receiving end of the letter, such mentions acted as assurances that the emigrant was personally secure in employment and well supported in their new home. These descriptions further reflect the critical role of procuring stable work in immigrant and working-class life. The emphasis on the positive qualities of work in the USSR also served as social reinforcements of the success of the Karelian project specifically and the Communist project overall. Guarantees of employment, healthcare, and vacation strengthened networks of chain migration to Karelia. These assurances signalled that the North American recruiters had told the truth, and that Finnish Canadians and Americans were better off in Karelia.

Employment and benefits for all also symbolized the success of the revolution. Enoch Nelson's letters characterize the commitment to collective endeavour and show how he took his role in the completion of the Five Year Plan to heart. Believing that the Five Year Plan would be achieved ahead of schedule, Enoch noted that "[e]verybody talks only about getting the plan fulfilled and after this plan has been made there is a noticeable increase in the amount of work that a person does."⁴⁴ The Finnish North American letter writers echoed the official vision of work in the USSR. "Work under Soviet conditions," as summarized by Sheila Fitzpatrick, "was regarded as a transformative experience because it was collective and imbued with a sense of purpose. Under the old regime, work had been an exhausting, soul-destroying chore; under

⁴⁴ Enoch Nelson letter to Sister Ida, Kem, 2 May 1930.

socialism, it was the thing that filled life with meaning.”⁴⁵ The old regime, as described above, also easily represents labour as it had been known in North America. The attainment of worker equality and universal healthcare, and the elimination of unemployment in the Soviet Union, as depicted in the Karelian letters, encouraged their recipients – and, thereby, the Finnish North American Left - to keep up their struggle for workers’ rights. Though emphasizing the positives of work in the Soviet Union for the benefit of their correspondents and to further justify their commitment to the building of socialism, the letters and memoirs also reveal that working life was fraught with continuous negotiations and fluctuations.

“Change Refreshes”: Changing Jobs

When Finnish Americans and Canadians landed in the Soviet Union, they were quickly “commanded” to a work site by the Karelian Resettlement Agency. There was plenty of work to be done to build the necessary infrastructure to develop the region, and to meet the centre’s productivity requirements. Enoch Nelson, writing from Petrozavodsk, told his brother in July 1930 that “I have been changing jobs so often this year that I have also had several places of residence.”⁴⁶ While some people stayed at the same job for extended periods of time, one is struck by how often a change of work is noted in the Karelian narratives. The early phase of immigration was especially characterized by a succession of jobs, often accompanied by a change in residence. Some of these transfers were ordered by the administration, others were self-propelled in hopes

⁴⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russian in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 75.

⁴⁶ Enoch Nelson letter to Arvid Nelson, Petrozavodsk, 28 July 1930. Two months earlier, Enoch had reported to his sister Ida that he had left Uhtua and was now working in Kem. See Enoch Nelson letter to Sister Ida, Kem, 2 May 1930.

of finding more satisfactory work and living conditions, and others, particularly after 1937, were forced by repression, fear, and, then, war.

Lisi Hirvonen's letters to her sister Anna demonstrate the impact of each of these factors. Upon arrival, in 1932, Lisi Hirvonen and her partner Eino Hirvonen were sent on assignment to the Vonganperä camp. While Eino worked in the forest, Lisi reported, "I have been busy doing many different duties picking berries cleaning fish gathering mosses digging up potatoes and many other little jobs"⁴⁷ Four months later, Lisi Hirvonen reported that she was "still" working in the laundry.⁴⁸ These jobs in Vonganperä were likely all officially delegated. However, self-interest was culminating in yet another change. In the same February 1933 letter, Lisi told her sister that "Eino and I have been here thinking of putting in an application for a town in the spring this place is a bit too far from the railway and too cold in winter I don't know if it will happen."⁴⁹ Lisi's next letter, dated April 20th, came from Petrozavodsk, showing that their move had been accepted and happened quickly.⁵⁰ In Petrozavodsk, Lisi had happily secured work at the Ski Factory, remarking "I have always wanted [to work in] a factory."⁵¹ Eino, at first, worked at a construction site but changed work again in September 1933, this time finding employment with the touring Finnish National Theatre.⁵² Based on the available letters, Lisi Hirvonen stayed on at the Ski Factory until at least February 1938, when she reported that "I'm still in the same job as before and

⁴⁷ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Vonganperä, 13 October 1932.

⁴⁸ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Vonganperä, 5 February 1933.

⁴⁹ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Vonganperä, 5 February 1933.

⁵⁰ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 20 April 1933.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, December 1933.

living in the same place” – albeit on her own, having separated from Eino Hirvonen around 1935.⁵³ However, by September 1938, with the region in upheaval due to repression, and for reasons unknown, Lisi had left the capital area and was unemployed.⁵⁴ In the fall of 1938, she returned to a lumber camp for forestry work for some months.⁵⁵ Lisi Hirvonen’s final available letter, dated July 19, 1939, revealed that she was again back in Petrozavodsk, working at the Ski Factory.⁵⁶ Following Lisi Hirvonen’s employment throughout her time in Karelia illustrates frequent changes of work, typical of the Finnish North American experience in Karelia. Whether compelled by personal reasons or state directed transfers, Lisi twice explained the recurrent moves with humour, simply stating, “change refreshes.”⁵⁷

The Hokkanen’s work history likewise exemplifies the whirlwind of formal work assignments that immigrants could face. During their first two months in Karelia, in the summer of 1934, Lauri Hokkanen was moved to six different jobs, which can be traced through his memoir.⁵⁸ Lauri and Sylvi were first sent to the Vonganperä Lumber Camp, where Lauri was charged with trimming tree tops at ten kopeks per top, leaving his “hands full of blisters.” Next, he was sent to Kannussuo Lumber Camp, some ten kilometers away, to make shingles. A few weeks later, Lauri made hay in a five man team. From there, he was sent to Sakura Järvi Camp to drag and float logs. Soon, he was making bricks, back in Kannussuo. Finally, he ended the summer by dismantling a saw

⁵³ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 2 February 1938.

⁵⁴ Lisi Mattason letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 10 September 1938.

⁵⁵ Lisi Mattason letter to Anna, U.S.S.R. Karjala, 17 January 1939.

⁵⁶ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 19 July 1939.

⁵⁷ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, USSR Karjala, 17 January 1939 and letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 19 July 1939.

⁵⁸ Hokkanen, 17-22.

mill in Uhtua, then transporting and rebuilding it in Kannussuo. Sylvi Hokkanen also experienced many different odd jobs in their first months in Karelia. Sylvi realized: “Having never done anything but attend school and then teach, I was ill-prepared for any of the work that needed doing at the lumber camps.”⁵⁹ In Vonganperä, Sylvi was at first without work and left alone when Lauri was sent for shingle and hay work. Sylvi secured a position at Sakura Järvi with Lauri, where she worked as camp cook.⁶⁰ Sylvi again followed Lauri to Kannussuo, where first she picked moss for caulking, and then joined in the brick-making operation.⁶¹ Her assignment was riding a horse around in circles, hour after hour, to mix the clay. Thinking back on her work, Sylvi remembered: “None of these jobs made me feel very important, but at least I was doing something.”⁶² Throughout the quick succession of assigned jobs, the Hokkanens tried to arrange a move to Petrozavodsk.⁶³ In the fall, Sylvi enrolled in the Karelian Pedagogical Institute, and Lauri was re-assigned to the Ski Factory shortly after.

It must be noted that the history of Finns in North America in the twentieth-century, too, offers abundant examples of chasing work, better wages, and more hospitable working and living conditions.⁶⁴ However, moving in the Soviet Union was not meant to be so free. The Soviet government enacted state-wide passportization in 1932, binding individuals to a particular village or town and workplace, and determining

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Hokkanen, 27.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Hokkanen, 22.

⁶⁴ See for example, Samira Saramo, “Terveisiä: A Century of Finnish Immigrant Letters from Canada,” 4-5.

access to goods.⁶⁵ The internal passport was intended to keep people in place, taking pressure off housing demand and ensuring labourers for each project. Takala and Golubev have discussed how North American immigrants had the formal right to change jobs, but that it was very difficult to do so.⁶⁶ However, the available letters and memoirs paint a different picture. The narratives suggest that changing locales and work places required official permission and that these Finnish North Americans had little trouble obtaining a desired command. The main insight into how this process may have worked comes from Lauri Hokkanen's memoir. The Hokkanens wanted to move into the city so that Sylvi could attend teachers' college and so Lauri could focus on "mechanical and metal work."⁶⁷ Their strategy was to send Sylvi ahead to register for school, which was a formally acceptable move, and to use a friend at the Ski Factory to sell the Director on Lauri's auto mechanics and sawmill expertise. Apparently, though, it was Lauri's trumpet - rather than mechanical - skills that ultimately helped him obtain a transfer. "I learned later," Lauri recalled,

that Laine, the fellow from the ski factory band, had approached Kustaa Rovio, secretary of the Karelian Communist Party, and asked to have me transferred to the ski factory. Hearing that I had already been sent up north to the lumber camps, Rovio had first said it was too late and why hadn't I been sent to Petrozavodsk in the first place. But later he relented and went along with the plan.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ David Shearer, "Elements Near and Alien: Passportization, Policing, and Identity in the Stalinist State, 1932–1952" in *The Journal of Modern History*, 76, 4 (December 2004), 838.

⁶⁶ Alexey Golubev and Irina Takala, "The Harsh reality of Fine Words: The Daily Implementation of Immigration Policy in Soviet Karelia," in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, special double issue of *Journal of Finnish Studies*, 15, 1/2, eds. M. Kangaspuro and S. Saramo, 138.

⁶⁷ Hokkanen, 22.

⁶⁸ Hokkanen, 24.

If Lauri's explanation of how the transfer came to be can be taken at face value, it implies that, in the close-knit Finnish North American community, personal connections could be used to influence the system. Regardless of whether one had the connections or not, Karelia had a severe labour shortage and Finnish North Americans were viewed as the most desirable workers, classified as "foreign experts," whether their experience actually merited such a title or not. As we have seen, Finnish North Americans were in a privileged social category in the region in the first half of the 1930s, which seems to have also manifested in the freedom in movement not necessarily afforded to others.⁶⁹ The Finnish Karelian leadership was desperate to retain its foreign work force and likely "went along with the plan" on more than one occasion. Finally, throughout the Soviet Union, the passport and registration system was "notoriously inefficient" and knowledge of how to manoeuvre around formalities was a part of Soviet life.⁷⁰

Implementing Know-how

Adaptation to Soviet conditions is also evident in descriptions of everyday work experiences. An excellent example comes from the letters of Aate Pitkänen. For much of his time in Karelia, Aate worked as a telephone cable linesman. In late 1934, he detailed the kinds of work he engaged in on a daily basis. Working with one other "kid" in Petrozavodsk, Aate explained:

We're supposed to be the cable splicers but when there is no splicing, that is, when there is no breaks or new cables to be put in we do almost anything; clean manholes, install phones, tear others down, pull lines, somethings [sic] we're carpenters and blacksmith. If there is cable work we dig our own canals, set our

⁶⁹ Takala and Golubev have referred to the North Americans' right to change jobs, unlike illegal Finnish immigrants. "The Harsh Reality of Fine Words," 138.

⁷⁰ Shearer, 845.

own poles, ring, splice and wipe the joints, and of course we get hell for everything too. While in other places there is different gangs for all the different jobs. We have no truck to take our tools around. Last year we had a two wheeled wheel barrow we were hauling poles with it one day and it fell apart. It could have been fixed but it didn't happen to be ours and the owner took it away. So now when we start on a job in the morning we have everything on our backs all the way from pliers, torches and magnets to shovels, saws, crow bars and cable rolls.⁷¹

Aate's description successfully illustrates just what his job entailed and reveals a great deal about Karelian conditions. For example, Aate explains how he was responsible for the whole of cable work, whereas "in other places there is different gangs for all the different jobs." This point addresses the serious labour shortage in Karelia, overall, and the difficulty in finding qualified workers for technological jobs. Aate offered a listing of the tools he used at work, giving a sense of what was available locally. Finally, that Aate and his co-worker had to carry their tools on their backs, without even the use of a borrowed wheel barrow, points to the make-shift nature of Karelian life and work. Not only was his job all-encompassing and haphazard, Aate, in another letter, complained that he was very cold during the winter, when working down in manholes or up on poles.⁷² Knowing the scarcity of clothing and the extreme Karelian temperatures, one can imagine how outdoor work must have felt.

The letter writers and memoirists show us how the immigrant work experience in Karelia was characterized by both entry into previously unknown fields and make-shift tools and practices, and by the application of past experience and Western technology. For example, in May 1930, Enoch Nelson was building a highway to connect the towns

⁷¹ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi, Petrozavodsk, 21 November 1934.

⁷² Aate Pitkänen letter to friends, Petrozavodsk, 8 April 1933.

of Uhtua and Kem, improving the transportation of lumber to the White Sea. He told his sister Ida that “[w]e have been given...order to fulfill to have this highway open for automobile traffic at the end of the summer. This is the first time in my life that I have been working on roadwork but my duties here are to keep the machinery going.”⁷³ Enoch, in this case, applied his previous mechanical skills to a new field of work. Aate, as described above, made the best of what was available to him to perform his job. North American know-how was a vital element of Karelian development. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet Union was very interested in adopting western technology and labour practices. Foreign workers were essential to transfer this knowledge.⁷⁴ In Karelia, many jobs involved using innovation and knowledge gained from North American work experience. Reino Kero’s foundational work, fittingly subtitled *North American Finns as Bringers of Technology in 1930s Soviet Karelia*, details how North American saws, axes, and trucks, especially, were viewed as the key to modernizing and rationalizing the Karelian lumber industry.⁷⁵ The Finnish North American lumber camp Internationale, arranged in the Canadian way, became a Soviet model work site of national importance.⁷⁶ In other fields, North Americans also provided new technologies and methods. For example, Aate described visiting his father’s work camp, where the men had made their own shingle mill using a “new technique.”⁷⁷ Finnish North Americans could ask friends

⁷³ Enoch Nelson letter to Sister Ida, Kem, 2 May 1930.

⁷⁴ Andrea Graziosi, “Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920-40: Their Experience and Their Legacy” in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 33 (Spring 1988): 38-59. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 42-49.

⁷⁵ Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 109-121.

⁷⁶ Autio-Sarasmo, “The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia,” 94.

⁷⁷ Aate Pitkänen letter, November 21, 1934.

and relatives to send manuals and information from Canada or the United States, like Aate did at the end of 1934, requesting books on telephone cable work.⁷⁸ This transnational flow of information furthered technological development in Karelia. For their part in developing Karelian industry and infrastructure, Finnish North Americans were often rewarded.

Worker Heroes

In the Soviet Union's all-out drive for industrialization and modernization, production quotas were continually raised. Workers were expected to take responsibility for their share in the building of socialism.⁷⁹ Those who proved able to consistently meet and exceed labour requirements and embodied the Soviet work ethos were praised and rewarded as heroes. Conversely, those who did not meet goals were shamed and their rations were downgraded.⁸⁰ To meet the ambitious objectives of the First Five Year Plan, which included astronomical increases in iron, steel, coal, and power production, along with the collectivization of agriculture, and the construction of both industrial and residential infrastructure, "Shock Work" became the preferred method. Kotkin explains: "Predicated on the belief that vastly higher productivity could be achieved through a combination of labor exploits and better work organization, shock work was facilitated by the generally low level of mechanization and carried out in gangs or brigades."⁸¹ The most successful and accomplished workers were endowed with the title of "Shock

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Stephen Kotkin, "Coercion and Identity: Workers' Lives in Stalin's Showcase City" in eds. Lewis Seigelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 279.

⁸⁰ See for example, V. Suomela, *Kuusi kuukautta Karjalassa*, 12.

⁸¹ Kotkin, "Coercion and Identity," 282.

Worker” (*Udarniki* in Russian, *Iskuri* in Finnish) and represented the idealized labourer. Central administration and localized managers used the honour to fuel “socialist competition,” or challenges between work brigades to see who could achieve the highest productivity. In the summer of 1935, miner Alexei Stakhanov’s record breaking labour output propelled him to celebrity status and changed the nature – and name – of hero workers in the Soviet Union. The resulting Stakhanovite Movement publicized exemplary workers and used them to further propagate the image of Soviet culture and advancement.⁸² Shock workers and Stakhanovites came to represent a privileged class in the Soviet social system.

North American Finns, as a result of their ‘foreigner expert’ status, were already at the top of the Karelian social hierarchy. Their special social position paired with past work experience and culturally-scripted devotion to hard work further elevated many of the immigrants to the top ranks of the labour force. In the early 1930s, Finnish North Americans, to the disapproval of many in the local population, served as foremen and managers on several of the job sites in the region. Additionally, Canadians and Americans were frequently honoured with Shock Worker or Stakhanovite status. It is known that four of the studied life writers were granted these work titles and awards. Aate Pitkänen mentions the “Iskuri” prize of fifty rubles he was awarded at the Revolution celebration in November 1933.⁸³ Antti Kangas’s work brigade in the

⁸² For a thorough analysis that pairs the economic and labour aspects of Stakhanovism with sociological and cultural considerations, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For a case study of Stakhanovism at Magnitogorsk, see Kotkin, 207-215.

⁸³ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, 12 November 1933.

Lossosina Lumber Camp won a Shock Worker prize in 1934.⁸⁴ Lisi Hirvonen's hard work at the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory earned her an all expenses paid (plus wages) women Shock Worker's trip to Leningrad in March 1935.⁸⁵ Hirvonen was a part of a forty person regional delegation of prized workers who enjoyed their time away from work, visiting palaces, factories, churches, the circus, and an art museum. The perks of her status continued in Karelia. During the revolutionary celebrations of 1935, in the midst of Stakhanovite excitement in the Soviet Union, Hirvonen refers to a "great party for us shock workers at the ski factory" and another occasion when the "shock workers" were treated to an all-night cultural event, which included a play, concert, and dance."⁸⁶ In the same year, 1935, Lauri Hokkanen was also honoured as a Stakhanovist for his work at the Ski Factory, for which he received monetary bonuses, praise, and his photo in the newspaper.⁸⁷ Although their social status was elevated with the title of shock worker or Stakhanovite, none of these Finnish North Americans emphasized their difference. This is fitting with the broader Soviet trend, as identified by Sheila Fitzpatrick: "Nobody who had privilege in the Soviet Union in the 1930s seems to have thought of himself as a member of a privileged upper class."⁸⁸ The position of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, however, did not go unnoticed by others in the region.

Working with 'Others'

Irina Takala's research demonstrates the "big difference in cultural priorities and value orientation between urbanized North Americans and the people of poor rustic

⁸⁴ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 9 April 1934.

⁸⁵ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 18 March 1935.

⁸⁶ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Petrozavodsk, 12 November 1935.

⁸⁷ Hokkanen, 66 and 83.

⁸⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 103.

Karelia.”⁸⁹ This gulf can be clearly seen with regard to work place interactions and perceived differences in work ethics. In the early 1930s, the Soviet Union pronounced its “civilizing mission” to bring the vast nation “Out of Backwardness.”⁹⁰ The Red Finn leadership and many in the Finnish North American migration also believed their task to be the culturing and modernizing of Karelia. Bringing new tools and methods, the Finnish Canadians and Americans saw their part in Karelia as crucially important, as exemplified by Mayme Sevander: “The Finns had brought more than machinery and equipment with them; they had also brought knowledge and culture.”⁹¹ Sevander noted that Finns in 1930s Petrozavodsk “didn’t mix much with the Russian-speaking natives, other than to help them in their work.”⁹² In Sevander’s portrayal of inter-ethnic relations, then, it is possible to see how Finnish North Americans perceived their role in Karelia as educators of the local population. When working on highway construction inland from Kem, Enoch Nelson noted the problems caused by novice “tractorists”: “My job would not be very hard if we had some American tractorists on the job but we have to use men who have never seen a tractor as tractorist. This makes the job important.”⁹³ Though not explicitly belittling the skills of the non-American workers, Nelson’s statement emphasizes the commonly held belief of North American immigrants that their know-how was superior and essential, and that their work with others in the region was inherently “important.” In his scathing criticism of life in Karelia, V. Suomela

⁸⁹ Irina Takala, “North American Finns as Viewed by the population of Soviet Karelia in the 1930s,” in *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s*, eds. I. Takala and Ilya Solomeshch (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2008), 202.

⁹⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 9-10.

⁹¹ Mayme Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 55.

⁹² Mayme Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 47.

⁹³ Enoch Nelson letter to Sister Ida, Kem, 2 May 1930.

perpetuated attitudes about the differences between Russian and Finnish work ethics. Complaining about the labour laws, he noted that, while they were unnecessary and demeaning for foreign workers, “maybe those kinds of laws are needed for Russians, who are not willing to do work.”⁹⁴ Finnish North Americans shared with other foreign workers in the Soviet Union, the rewarding feeling of being needed and of being glorified as skilled workers.⁹⁵ Lauri Hokkanen, working primarily with other Finns, remembered that “[a]nything you did was noticed and appreciated, and we were all proud of what we had been able to accomplish.”⁹⁶ North American Finns had passionately upheld workers’ rights in Finland, Canada, and the United States and took pride in their self-ascribed dedication to hard work. By accepting the perks that accompanied their self-proclaimed status as exemplary workers, however, the foreigners created a division between them and other local workers. Sevander explained that “[t]hough the Finns tried to teach the Russians their skills and shared their tools, the two cultures didn’t mix well. The Russians weren’t always receptive to having immigrants tell them how to improve their country, and most of the Finns didn’t make an effort to assimilate.”⁹⁷

Aggravating relations was the fact that Finnish North Americans earned much higher wages than local Karelians and Russians. For example, Sylvi Hokkanen, as a teacher, earned four times the average local wages, and Lauri, as a Ski Factory foreman, earned double average wages.⁹⁸ Though the Hokkanens were both employed in skilled

⁹⁴ Suomela, 12. “Saatta olla, että tuollaiset lait ovat tarpeen venäläiselle, joka ei ole halukas tekemään työtä...”

⁹⁵ Graziosi, 43.

⁹⁶ Hokkanen, 19.

⁹⁷ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 49.

⁹⁸ Hokkanen, 74.

work, even North Americans without qualifications automatically received higher pay.⁹⁹ Such inequalities lead to the resentment of the foreigners and indifference to work quality and output.¹⁰⁰ As a further consequence, local workers were often unwilling to take direction from North Americans or to adopt new work methods or technologies.¹⁰¹ In a vicious cycle, such resentment, in turn, made many North Americans view local Russian and Karelians as poor workers and ‘backwards’.¹⁰² As a result, Karelia was ethnically stratified, with Finnish North Americans forming an insular community. Inter-ethnic interaction was largely limited to the workplace.

One group of labourers in Karelia is noticeably absent in the Finnish North American narratives. At the beginning of 1931, Karelia had over 70 000 forced or prisoner labourers, who accounted for a significant percentage of the region’s productivity, especially the building of the Murmansk railway, the Baltic-White Sea Canal, and in lumbering.¹⁰³ In 1934, Suomela wrote about the prisoners in Karelia, noting that they were transported in Petrozavodsk “like animals” but “with the difference that beasts’ mouths cannot be shut like these misers. Quietly, depressed, half-naked, wrapped in sacks and rags, men, women, old grey-haired, [and] young, school-aged.”¹⁰⁴ Suomela further described what he had learned about prisoners in Karelia for his North

⁹⁹ Takala, “North American Finns as Viewed by Soviet Karelians,” 203.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Autio-Sarasmo, “The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia,” 95-96. Such clashes have been noted elsewhere in the Soviet Union, where foreign expertise was recruited. See for example Deborah Fitzgerald, “Blinded by Technology: American Agriculture in the Soviet Union, 1928-1932” in *Agricultural History*, 70, 3 (Summer 1996), 476-478.

¹⁰² See also Kero, *Neuvosto Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 122-125, for an example of a conflict in Matroosa.

¹⁰³ Baron, 123.

¹⁰⁴ Suomela, 28 and 29. “Aivan niinkuin elukoita kuljetettiin niitä katuja pitkin sillä eroituksella, että elukoiden suita ei voi tukkia niinkuin näiden onnettomien. Hiljaisina, masennettuina, puolialastomina säkkiin ja aasyihin käärittynä, miehiä, naisia, vanhoja harmaanhapsisia, nuoria, kouluikäisiä.”

American audience. Nick Baron has researched the gruesome life of prisoner labourers in Karelia and also found evidence of the fear that such a large prisoner population supposedly caused the rest of the area's inhabitants. An August 1930 report from the Medvezh'ia Gora District, 200 kilometers north of Petrozavodsk, "stated that camp inmates were roaming freely throughout the district, wreaking havoc and terrifying the local population to such an extent that citizens were too frightened even to collect berries and mushrooms in the forest."¹⁰⁵ The only mention of these labourers in the studied letters and memoirs comes from Karl Berg. In his glowing endorsement of life in Karelia, Karl states, "No here there is no *vanki* [prisoner] labour except in the case that you do something bad and end up in jail but that is your own fault."¹⁰⁶ The use of the Finnish word "vanki" is ambiguous. While it literally translates as 'prisoner', in Berg's context it also suggests the socialist rhetoric of 'slave labour'. Regardless, he acknowledged that there was prisoner labour "in the case that you do something bad." Concluding that "it is your own fault" if you were such a prisoner labourer echoes formal Soviet attitudes towards the numerous *kulaks*, and even "saboteur" engineers and specialists¹⁰⁷, who were sentenced to work in the region's prison camps, including Medvezh'ia Gora and Belomorsk. Only a few years after Karl Berg wrote about the prisoners, many Finnish North Americans themselves became well acquainted with work in the prison camps.

Gender at Work

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Berg letter to Bertha, 17 October 1932. "Ei täällä ole mitään vanki työtä paitsi siinä tapauksessa jos teet jonkun pahan ja joutut vankilaan vaan se on oma syys"

¹⁰⁷ Baron, 134-135.

Inter-ethnic interactions and attitudes in the work place reflected the Soviet social hierarchy. An analysis of gender and work in the Karelian life writing further exemplifies cultural categorizations. The gendered division of labour is commonplace across times and societies, but in a socialist world, it took on ambivalent forms and meanings. The equality of men and women in work, wages, and political rights was espoused in Soviet rhetoric, but, as we have seen, women still retained primary responsibility for the home sphere. Finnish North American letters and memoirs reveal further social constructions of what work was appropriate for men and women. Enoch Nelson wrote to his brother in 1933 that “I and the family are getting along as well as can be expected but as the plans of the Soviet Union are short of laborers the wife is also working and of course earning money.”¹⁰⁸ Nelson’s phrasing suggests that despite the Soviet push to move women into the workforce, his wife’s employment was either not the norm or not the ideal. Others, too, preferred their wives to stay at home, despite what a woman herself may have desired. Justiina Heino, concerned about the family economy, wrote to her daughter: “I’ve been thinking that I’ve got to go find some type of work. We really should get clothes but father is against it saying to try to patch them one more time and make cheap food.”¹⁰⁹ In an interview in 2002, Paavo Alatalo explained that his mother did not work in Karelia during their first several years there: “Mother was just at home. She did want to work... Father wanted her to be at home and taking care of the

¹⁰⁸ Enoch Nelson letter to Brother Arvid, Petrozavodsk, 10 January 1933.

¹⁰⁹ Justiina Heino letter [to Martha], [Kondopoga], circa. late 1936 (JH 3).

home and mother just wanted to work somewhere, so she, too, could get those work years.”¹¹⁰

When women did work, there was the question of what work was appropriate for them. In her first letter from Karelia to her sister, Terttu Kangas wrote, “I haven’t been at work here yet except two days sawing firewood [...] here there doesn’t seem to be any women’s work but here women do not have to work like some there seem to think[.]”¹¹¹ Kangas took for granted that her sister would understand what she meant by “women’s work.” Her statement also addressed the North American communities’ prevalent perceptions of Karelia. A few months later, Kangas further explained her experiences with work and offers more insights on women’s work:

I haven’t been really in a permanent [full-time] job this winter I have knitted a lot for people and day care children clothing now I am again in the forest with other women sawing firewood[...] yes it’s fun being at work when you have a big bunch of *akoja* [hags] it’s not so hard the work as there in America people think[...] yes a woman does it just like a man too[...] Yes I could have gotten [work] as a daycare worker if I had wanted but with spring here I don’t have the mind for indoor work when you can be outdoors[.]¹¹²

Knitting, daycare work, and sawing firewood in a gang of women were all women’s work, based on Terttu Kangas’s description. Again, she referenced the North American notions of what women were doing in Karelia. In both cases, Kangas assured her sister

¹¹⁰ Paavo Alatalo interview with Raija Warkentin, Jokela, Finland, 15 January 2002.

¹¹¹ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 27 November 1933. “En mina ole ollut vielä täällä työssä kun kaksi päivää polto puita sahaamassa ei täällä tahto oikeen olla naisten töitä mutta ei täällä naisten ole pakko työtä tehta niin kun siellä on joilakin käsitys.”

¹¹² Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 9 April 1934. “Minä en ole ollut oikein vakituisesti työssä tänä talvena olen mina koko paljon neulonut ihmisille ja Seimen lapsille vaateita nyt mina olen taas metsässä toisten naisten kanssa polto puita sahaamassa kyllä siellä on hauska olla työssä kun on suuri puntsi akoja ei se niin kovaa se työ ole kun siltä siellä Ameriikassa luullaan kyllä siltä nainen tekee niin kun mieskin[...] Kyllä mina olisin pääsyt Seimeen hoitajaksi jos olisin halunut mutta näin kevään tulen ei tee mieli mennä sisä töihin kun ulkonakin saa olla.”

that Karelia was not so different than the United States; women did not have to work and that the work was not so hard.

If North Americans both there and in Karelia had concerns about appropriate women's work, they were quite taken by the work of local Karelian women. Lisi Hirvonen wrote to her sister about two women who worked directly in lumbering. That Hirvonen only knew of two women in the industry shows that it was considered a male occupation. She explained that one of the women, whose ethnicity was not mentioned, worked as an *ylösottaja*, or a log measurer and labeller, and "the other one does everything that the men do she is one of these Karelians she married a Canadian."¹¹³ Hirvonen was not the only one struck by how Karelian women did what was seen by Finnish North Americans as men's work. In Lauri Hokkanen's memoir, local women workers were referred to as "big... like a prize fighter," "powerful-looking," "Katinka," and "built like a wrestler, a powerful Katrinka," developing an image much different than how North American Finnish women were depicted.¹¹⁴ Both Lauri and Sylvi Hokkanen recounted their surprise to learn that Karelian women typically rowed boats. When a young Karelian woman was among Finnish North Americans, however, according to Sylvi, "[o]ur men told her to sit in the bow while they did the rowing."¹¹⁵ Sylvi believed that such differences reflected broader cultural distinctions: "She was accustomed to doing men's work as is generally true in societies not as far developed as ours."¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna, Vonganperä, 5 February 1933.

¹¹⁴ Hokkanen, 22, 23, and 72.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26. See also 20.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

Karelian lumber camps, as in North America, were a predominantly male space where rough masculinity was on display.¹¹⁷ For the women and children who were there, the environment could feel inhospitable. Sylvi Hokkanen, for example, remembered her discomfort of being around the “lumberjack humour” the men enjoyed “as men are apt to do.”¹¹⁸ For men, however, the lumber camps served as a place where masculinity was formed.

At the age of seventeen, Kaarlo Tuomi and three other “older” Finnish North American “boys” were chosen to go to Matroosa to study the “fundamentals of lumbering,” which included “cutting logs and pulpwood, sharpening saws, hauling logs and grading them according to quality.”¹¹⁹ Tuomi’s 1980 memoir essay highlights this training or apprenticeship system in Karelia, and also reveals something about the ideals of gender and the coming of age for young workers. Tuomi remembered: “The instructors were old lumberjacks from the States and they sweated us as we learned the trade. After four months we were able to fulfill the quotas with our own tools and equipment which we had to build from scratch. Now we were considered men.”¹²⁰ Training to become “foremen or scalers,” as portrayed by Tuomi, entailed the hierarchical “sweating” by senior workers, and masculinity was achieved through the fulfilment of quotas and using the products of one’s own labour – note the lack of manufactured tools.

¹¹⁷ For example, in Komulainen’s description of the barracks dwellers, only men were present. *A Grave in Karelia*, 28-36.

¹¹⁸ Hokkanen, 27.

¹¹⁹ Kaarlo Tuomi, “The Karelian ‘Fever’ of the Early 1930’s” in *Finnish Americana*, 3 (1980), 69.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

In addition to a commitment to hard work, Finnish North American masculinity was also characterized by the solidarity of the work gang. Finnish North Americans wanted to uphold the labour practices and policies they had fought for with unions and socialist organizations before moving to Karelia.¹²¹ During the Second Five Year Plan, the Soviet Union turned away from equal payment but this “went against the grain” with North Americans.¹²² The new form of worker “differentiation” served as a valuable tool in upholding and expanding the Soviet hierarchy by clearly distinguishing worker heroes from “slackers.”¹²³ After being told they were to rank the productivity of each member of their lumber gang to determine wages, Lauri Hokkanen explained “[w]e had been taught that even though some people weren’t physically able to do as much as the others, they deserved full pay if they were doing their best. I believe all of us – Americans and Canadians felt this way.”¹²⁴ Despite official policy, the Finnish North American lumber workers at the Sakura Järvi camp decided on equal pay, confirming the masculinity of each “one hundred percent productive” member.¹²⁵ Ian Radforth has argued that Finnish immigrants working in northern Ontario bush camps actually preferred to be paid by individual piece rate, because their logging experience ensured that they typically earned higher wages this way.¹²⁶ The preference for equalization in Karelia, then, suggests that the Finnish North Americans’ adherence to a masculinity based on group identity and collective hard work was also specifically socialist.

¹²¹ See for example, Takala, “North American Finns as Viewed by Soviet Karelians,” 203-204.

¹²² Hokkanen, 21.

¹²³ Kotkin, “Coercion and Identity,” 283-284.

¹²⁴ Hokkanen, 21.

¹²⁵ Hokkanen, 21. Due to widespread labour scarcity, managers may have been willing to work around official policy in order to retain their employees. See Kotkin, 283.

¹²⁶ Radforth, “Finnish Radicalism in Northern Ontario,” 295.

Changes

Reading the letters and memoirs for the gendered organization of work and the perceived role and status of the immigrants vis-a-vis the local worker population show a group negotiating its place in Karelia. The process, however, was interrupted by external forces imposing their will.

While Finnish North Americans were at the top of the social hierarchy in the early 1930s, after the fall of 1935, being Finnish in Karelia took on new meanings. The immigrants became faced with forceful Russification and outright hostility to Finnishness, which will be further explored in Chapter VIII. The studied life writing offers limited glimpses of how these changes began to impact work experiences. These later experiences draw a sharp contrast to the positive depictions of working life found in so many of the Karelian letters. Sylvi Hokkanen's memoir recounts the devastating impact that the abolishment of Finnish education had on her career. After having been able to teach only one year of Finnish school after her graduation from the Pedagogical Institute, Sylvi was assigned to a Russian school, with limited Russian language skills.¹²⁷ There, she "could not make a go of it."¹²⁸ Sylvi remembered the experience of a friend, another Finn, and herself at this time: "She soon lost her job because she was a 'foreigner' and 'foreigners' were not allowed to teach in Russian schools at this time. In my case, the situation became so difficult that I finally just stayed home, and no one ever came around to ask why I didn't come back."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Hokkanen, 83-84.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Due to the restrictive atmosphere in Karelia in the late 1930s, it is unsurprising that little direct mention of the Finnish repression can be found in the available letters from the period. However, the Heino letters serve as a poignant example of the changing position of Finns and North Americans in Karelia and the difficulty of getting by after a family member's arrest. In an undated letter, likely from late 1937 or early 1938, Justiina explains how "here [presumably in Kondopoga] they are taking Finns out of lots of management tasks and replacing with Russians... The whole factory is Russians and wages are heavily dropping."¹³⁰ Making do was a "struggle" for the Heino family at this time due to diminishing wages, price increases, and food shortages.¹³¹ However, after Frank Heino's arrest, sometime in 1938, life became even more difficult. A partial letter from Justiina shows increasing Russification and the need for more income:

"...should know Russian to get [a job at] a cafeteria, a children's nursery or to bake but everything is in the Russian language – you should know how to speak Russian – but for an old woman it's hard to learn. Bush work was promised but I'm not used to bush work so I'm a little scared but that won't help because I've got to get something [some work]. Walte's wages aren't enough now that father isn't earning. Alice is still too young. She's asked for some but can't get any... you can only get it when you turn 16 years old."¹³²

Alice Heino's letter from the same period confirms that Justiina had taken up forest work, despite her concerns.¹³³

¹³⁰ Justiina Heino letter [to Martha], [Kondopoga], circa late 1936 (JH3). "Täällä nyt panaan paljo Suomalaisia pois johto tehtävistä ja venäläiset tilalle...koko tehtaalla on venäläisiä ja palkat laskee kovasti."

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Justiina Heino letter, unknown details [1938] (JH4).

¹³³ Alice Heino letter [to William], [Kondopoga], circa 1938 (AH 4).

In 1938 and again in 1940, the Soviet Union introduced new labour laws, which further impacted work experiences. The new laws - “a losing proposition for all workers,” in Lauri Hokkanen’s words¹³⁴ - imposed harsh penalties and fines for tardiness and absenteeism, and made leaving a job more difficult.¹³⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued that the impact of the new labour legislation for the average worker “was probably much stronger than that of the Great Purges.”¹³⁶ In an area as small as Karelia that faced such an enormous extent of repression, the argument does not stand up, but the new rigid rules certainly made their mark. Interestingly, Lauri Hokkanen’s narrative eases in a more difficult discussion of the Karelian purges with his memories of the 1938 labour laws.¹³⁷ Both newly tightened labour discipline and Russification changed the nature of work for Finnish Americans and Canadians in Karelia.

Conclusion

The Finnish North American letters and memoirs allow for an analysis of aspects of working life not necessarily seen through the use of other source types. The life-writers offer their own takes on what work was like and what their role was in the building of socialism in Karelia. By writing about work, and more specifically its positive aspects, the immigrants participated in advancing the Karelian project and the North American Finnish commitment to workers’ rights, overall. Life writing reveals the Soviet social hierarchy in motion on the micro-level of the region and helps us to better understand the perception of Finnish North Americans as Karelian civilizers. The

¹³⁴ Hokkanen, 89.

¹³⁵ Lewis Siegelbaum, “1939: Labor Discipline,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History* website. <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1939discipline&Year=1939>

¹³⁶ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 8.

¹³⁷ Hokkanen, 89.

narratives highlight a gendered order of work, and how masculinity could be secured.

Looking at work contributes another dimension to the investigation of North American privilege in Karelia and begins to build the contrast of how their position was suddenly revoked by a change in Soviet nationalities policy. In the “sickle and hammer land”, the work place was a central component of a person’s life, being closely linked with one’s place of residence and rations.

CHAPTER VII
“All kinds of hustle and bustle”:
Social Life, Community Involvement, and Leisure

Soviet Karelia may not have lived up to expectations when it came to living and working conditions, but Finnish North Americans’ social lives were rich with opportunities for community involvement, leisure, and entertainment. A November 1933 letter from Aate Pitkänen to his parents describes “all kinds of hustle and bustle” in Petrozavodsk, including athletics, community evening programs, official Soviet celebrations, and youth organizations.¹ The vivid portrayals of social and community life found in personal letters and memoirs enrich historical understanding of the society Finnish North Americans strived to establish in Soviet Karelia.

Much of the focus on the history of Finnish Canadians and Americans in Soviet Karelia has, understandably, been on the tragic fate of the community, ravaged by murderous purges and war. The approach of searching for signs of coming repression, though important, has often left neglected the study of community building and everyday social life, in which the immigrants actively participated during the early years of Finnish North American settlement in Karelia. The study of daily life prior to the years of repression makes an important contribution to understanding the enthusiasm,

¹ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 12 November 1933. “Kaikenlaista touhuaa ja hyörimää.”

commitment, and idealism that these immigrants applied to their collective work of building socialism.

An analysis of Finnish North American community life in Karelia provides an opportunity to look closely at the lives and impact of the youth population. Alongside the serious business of building communism through large-scale work projects and formal political education, Finnish North American youth in Karelia were coming of age. Commenting on the youth culture he found upon arrival in Karelia, Reino Hämäläinen wrote that “[t]hese people wouldn’t go back to the states for no money and neighter [sic] would I. They seem to like it so darn well and seem to have a lot of fun here. They know the place and got places to go.”² The Finnish Canadian and American youth represent a fascinating subsection of radicalism; raised in the revolutionary spirit by their parents, these young people brought their utopian idealism and their particular understandings of migration and the Soviet project to Karelia. As we have seen, parents, committed to improving workers’ lives, introduced their children to the community congregated around the Finnish Canadian and American socialist halls, where they attended lectures, events, special children’s programming, and many were active members of the Communist Young Pioneers or, as teenagers, the Young Communist League. Little attention has been paid to the impact of North American youth on the cultural and social development of “Red Finn Karelia,” yet 85 per cent of Canadians and 58 per cent of Americans came to Karelia before their thirtieth birthday.³ Out of the Canadian migrants, 43 per cent were

² Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

³ Based on the statistical analysis of 4,000 Finnish North American immigrants. See Evgeny Efremkin, “Recruitment in North America,” 115.

between the ages of 13 and 30. A close look at community and cultural life in Karelia reveals the indelible mark of Finnish North American youth.

The social and cultural world of Finnish North Americans in Karelia is best understood when situated in the contexts of the broader cultural program of the Soviet Union in the 1930s and the Finnish North American tradition of working-class community life. The 1930s witnessed a cultural revolution in the Soviet Union. As we have seen with regard to values surrounding home life and family, Stalin's Russia turned away from the ideals of militant, ascetic revolutionary communality in favour of illusionary portrayals and rhetoric espousing a life of happiness and plenty. In Robert Edelman's words, "'serious fun' has been the historic task of mass culture in the USSR."⁴ State-prescribed popular culture, celebrations, and leisure time were to instill principles of productivity, hierarchy, and unswerving commitment to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Although the CPSU provided its citizens with carefully planned pastimes, festivals, and venues to promote the 'culturing' and political education required of 'advanced' socialists, ordinary people shaped popular culture and exercised power by selecting which activities they would participate in, by approaching leisure and entertainment as personal social outlets, and by determining for themselves to what extent they would engage with the Party's political messaging. Robert Edelman has convincingly argued that through "choices about which entertainments they accepted and

⁴ Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), x. Attwood has also noted how leisure played an important role in the Soviet Union's formal "new image, but it had to be spent in an 'intelligent' way." Lynne Attwood, "Women Workers at Play: The Portrayal of Leisure in the Magazine *Rabotnitsa* in the First Two Decades of Soviet Power," in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 43.

which they rejected,” Soviet citizens “could, in limited but important ways, impose their own meanings and derive their own lessons.”⁵

Empowered by official recognition of Finnish as the region’s main non-Russian culture and language, Finns framed their community and artistic contributions as invaluable to the culturing of the region. Their cultural work, though, further demarcated the insular spaces of the Finnish community in Karelia. The immigrants replicated familiar proletarian entertainments and pastimes, providing them with a sense of community continuity.⁶ Just as Finnish North Americans had spent many evenings at their local socialist halls, attending meetings, lectures, dances, athletic events, and evenings of entertainment, the Karelian letters and memoirs depict an active social and community life in the first half of the 1930s. The challenges of North American immigrant life had prepared the migrants for the social and cultural work that lay ahead for them in Karelia. Just as life in Canada and the United States had motivated Finns to collectively create the kind of society they wanted to belong to, Karelia was truly viewed as a world to be built by and for workers. Mayme Sevander has argued that the Finnish North American community in Karelia was united by one feature: “enthusiasm. The immigrants truly believed in the significance of each person’s unstinted efforts and concrete contribution...”⁷ Sevander also characterized the migrants as “radicals of the best sort: people who were out to change the existing social order when capitalist exploitation was at its highest peak.”⁸ While the difficulties of Karelian life could be

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ To extend David Gerber’s useful concept of “personal continuity” in *Authors of Their Lives*, 4.

⁷ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 98.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

eased by the availability of social, leisure, and cultural outlets, their establishment had more to do with the belief that these were an integral part of socialist life in its glory.

This chapter begins with a look at how the Karelian life-writers understood and responded to the significant numbers of Finnish North Americans leaving Karelia in the first half of the 1930s. Reading their take on return migration reveals that the writers saw community involvement as the antidote to the phenomenon. From there, we turn to an examination of what opportunities for community work existed, considering serious political involvements and socialist leisure, including evening entertainment programs, music and dancing, theatre, cinema, and the official celebrations. A look at dating, marriage, and divorce, and also alcohol and masculinity ties together threads that run through each of the above topics. The study of leisure sporting shows how Finnish North Americans brought their athletic experience into the Soviet world of physical culture. Hobby sporting in Karelia leads to an analysis of competitive sport in the USSR and to the remarkable story of Finnish Canadian Aate Pitkänen, whose experiences offer glimpses of living the ‘Soviet Dream’. The 1930s letters and the later memoirs successfully bring to life a vibrant social world, where the work of building socialism happened with joy and comradely spirit.

Responding to Return Migration

For many Finnish North Americans, living conditions in Karelia were simply too much to bear. Having left North America for a better life in the Soviet Union, the realities of housing, food, and consumer good shortages, difficult working conditions, and, often, feelings of homesickness made past experiences in Canada and the United

States seem much rosier than the building of socialism. Many, then, chose to leave. By the careful calculations of Golubev and Takala, between 1300 and 1500 Finnish North Americans left Karelia between 1931 and 1935.⁹ After 1936, as we will see in the next chapter, it became very difficult to leave the USSR, though a few did manage to cross the border into Finland and even fewer returned to North America. Those who left before 1936 were often very vocal about what they had experienced in Karelia, causing controversy and uncertainty in the Finnish communist communities in the United States and Canada. The Finnish North American left-wing press that opposed the Karelian migration, like the IWW's *Industrialisti* and the Canadian Social Democratic paper *Vapaa Sana*, published negative reports about Karelian life.¹⁰ Such accounts left Communist organizations, such as the Finnish Organization of Canada, and papers, like *Työmies* and *Vapaus* on the defensive. The negative depictions and rumours circulating in Finnish American and Canadian communities compelled some letter writers in Karelia to address the situation first-hand.

“Boy there’s a lot of people going back. There’s a real migration,” Aate Pitkänen wrote to his sister, Taimi, in March 1933.¹¹ In fact, 1933 and 1934 saw the most Finnish North Americans leaving Karelia.¹² With return migration clearly on his mind, a few

⁹ Golubev and Takala, 139. This number includes those who returned to North America, to Finland, and other regions of the USSR.

¹⁰ See Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 202-204, and Varpu Lindström’s analysis of V. Suomela’s scathing expose, *Kuusi kuukautta Karjalassa*, in “Heaven or Hell on Earth?: Soviet Karelia’s Propaganda War of 1943-35 in the Finnish Canadian Press” in *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s*, ed. Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch, 83-103 (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 29 March 1933.

¹² Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa*, 200, and Golubev and Takala, 139.

days later, Pitkänen explained to friends how he understood the return of so many to Canada and the United States:

There is some truth to the fact that some at times experience difficulties and setbacks. Then when that first *trupelli* [trouble] begins to brew in the mind, it brews and brews, expands and takes root, and every little *trupelli* is put to brew, so in the end nothing seems good, and there is no consolation except one and only saviour, and that is to get back to *kultala* [land of gold].¹³

Later that year, Aate, again, shared his views on people's decisions to leave Karelia:

In the first place some people come here for mere adventure, to see the place. They come here, see all kinds of short comings [sic] and the good points just seem to fade away in the bad ones. Day in and day out they roll these thoughts in their brains & think of good old American times.¹⁴

It is interesting to note how North America had, again, become a *kultala* in the minds of the Finnish migrants. After all, the bitter disappointment with life in Canada and the United States had been a main catalyst for the 'Karelian Fever'. "With young people," though, explained Aate, "it's a little different."¹⁵ He continued:

A lot of them come here alone, their parents staying in America ... They get homesick, and in many cases their folks from back there coax them to come back. They don't think any further and can't resist it. Some of them are here with their folks and when the folks go back they say "I wanna stick by my Pa and my Ma." In general they haven't got a backbone. All they think of is fun.¹⁶

Those brewing on their misery, as depicted by Aate, were accused of failing to work for improvements. "They don't stop to think of the achievements or the other side of things, or how to better things," wrote Aate, "They don't bother with meetings, educational classes, etc. They run up against some short coming, can't get over it, pack

¹³ Aate Pitkänen letter to "Aatut, Mikkolat, Haarat ja ketä vielä", Petrozavodsk, 8 April 1933.

¹⁴ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, November 1933.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

up their trunks and there they go.”¹⁷ Writing about family friends that left, to the disapproval of the Pitkänen¹⁸, Aate said that they did not “fight against the difficulties and I can say that they did not even want to, for Aho, at least, did not make any effort to get involved with any organization or education, etc. any more than Martta did, and there they could have brought the negatives to light and worked collectively to improve them.”¹⁹ Similarly, Terttu Kangas explained to her sister that one Selma Mäki, who had left Karelia, had not worked hard enough “to build a socialist society.”²⁰ Antti Kangas, Terttu’s husband, wanted to set the record straight about return migration and conditions in Karelia in a group letter to the “Comrades” of Drummond Island. He accused returnees of spreading false rumours about Karelian life and how others there were making out.²¹ The “truth,” as Kangas saw it, was that “a person who just wants to live off their own work, then, yes, their place is here.”²² Despite what he depicted as small shortcomings, Kangas believed that “we here are with sure steps moving toward improved economic and cultural life.”²³ The authorities and other immigrants also recognized the failure to fully engage in community building. “The Y.C.L. & Party have been taking big steps to avoid this migration,” Aate wrote to Taimi, “This Anglo

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Antti Pitkänen joked to Taimi that Aho had “gone crazy” trying to get back to “kultala,” based on the letters Aho had sent Antti. Antti Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Lakeridge, ON, April 2, 1933.

¹⁹ Aate Pitkänen letter to “Aatut, Mikkolat, Haarat ja ketä vielä,” Petrozavodsk, 8 April 1933. Underlining in original. “eivät jaksaneet taistella näitä vastakohtia ja voin sanoa että ei ollut haluakaan sillä Aho ainakaan ei ottanut yhtään osaa mihinkään toimintaan, opiseluun, y.m. sen enmmän kun Marttakaan joissa tilaisuuksissa olisivat saaneet tuota julki huonot puolet ja joukolla koittaa poistaa niitä.”

²⁰ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, March 1935.

²¹ Antti Kangas letter to “Kunon Toverit,” Lososiina, 12 October 1934.

²² Ibid. “ihminen joka vaan halua elää oman työnsä kustan nuksella, niin kyllä Sen paikka täällä on.”

²³ Ibid. “me täällä ollaan varman askelin kulkemassa Parempaan taloutelliseen Sekä kulttuuriseen elämään.”

American Youth Club is one of them and a good one.”²⁴ For these letter writers, the antidote to Karelian hardships was getting involved and staying active in community life. Mayme Sevander, writing some sixty years after Aate Pitkänen and Terttu Kangas, understood return migration in similar terms. Sevander explained that, many left Karelia,

But thousands stayed. We stayed. ... But when people are honest and hard-working they don't let the circumstances get the better of them. They look forward to a happier future. Many built families, had children, worked for the common good and are rightfully proud of their contribution to that multi-suffering land called Russia.”²⁵

If one chose to engage, opportunities for building community and improving local life were abundant, as illustrated by the Karelian letter writers and memoirists.

Political Volunteerism

Building socialism involved developing one's own socialist consciousness. Soviet Karelia provided the immigrants with many opportunities to engage in their personal socialist education and to work for the common good. Some, like Kalle Korhonen, immersed themselves in formal political study. Korhonen explained to his estranged daughter in 1935 that he had spent the previous three years completing “Communist University” through correspondence.²⁶ Korhonen's writing consistently utilized official Party language and themes, showing that, if he had not yet become a member of the CPSU, he was at least working toward that goal. Even if one had been an formal member of the Communist Party of Canada or of the United States, admission into the increasingly withdrawing Communist Party of the Soviet Union was far from certain.

²⁴ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, November 1933.

²⁵ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 29.

²⁶ Kalle Korhonen to Aune Batson, “Tunkuan Piiri,” 23 August 1935.

Antti Pitkänen, Aate's father, had been an active and loyal CPC member since 1925, and applied for Soviet Party membership once in Karelia. His application, however, was denied, which may have precipitated his hasty return to Ontario.²⁷ His letters and the research conducted by Anatoli Gordijenko demonstrate that Aate Pitkänen remained an active YCL member into the 1940s, despite nearing the age of thirty, but never seemed to have become an official Party member.²⁸ Mayme Sevander joined the Communist Party only in 1960.²⁹ Based on the Hokkanen's discussions about politics, it seems unlikely that either Lauri or Sylvi would have been members. Sylvi Hokkanen recalled: "We knew only a few party members, and a few more who were candidates, but it was something that was not much discussed. Political matters in general were not discussed as freely over there as in the United States."³⁰ With no mention found in their narratives and with limited biographical information, the Party statuses of the other life writers are unknown. Even without formal Party responsibilities, Finnish North Americans in Karelia participated in many forms of political activity.

The letter writers described their community political work in terms that likely resonated with their correspondents, who were familiar, if not active, with the Finnish North American Left. Building socialism in Karelia also meant actually building the worksites, villages, and towns where the migrants settled. Much like common work bees, Finnish North Americans, like Mayme Sevander's father, Oscar Corgan, joined "*subbotniks* – a volunteer labor force that met on Saturdays to build necessities for the

²⁷ Gordijenko, 118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 180.

³⁰ Hokkanen, 29.

city, such as housing, plumbing and sidewalks.”³¹ Lisi and Eino Hirvonen quickly joined in community work with other Finns in Wonganperä, with Eino serving as a voluntary inspector of schools and Red Corners, and Lisi participating in women’s fundraising efforts.³² After moving to Petrozavodsk, Lisi Hirvonen wrote to her sister that “we have joined the *Mobriin Oso* [International Red Aid/MOPR] and the labour union’s athletic club[.] there sure is bustle here. Two nights a week there is the political circle meetings.”³³ Viola Ranta remembered that her mother, Alli, was “enthusiastic about building that bright future and joined the Red Cross and women came to our home to have all kinds of meetings and singing practices.”³⁴ Aate Pitkänen wrote home about the kinds of activities that he had been involved in with other Finnish North American youth. “Even tonight,” wrote Pitkänen,

we went to the Radio studio to perform a group poem. We often go there. We are in our workplace youth league’s *agit brigaadissa* [agitation brigade] and we help with the radio program. Here also slowly organized an English Language Youth Club. We present English language programs, (this is not workplace, but General City Club) a wall paper, lessons of different kinds, technical, political, dramatic, Russian language, etc. I am the organizer of political education.

Alice Heino proudly described the *tehtävät* (tasks) assigned to her by the Young Pioneer group.³⁵ She told her brother that she had joined many groups, or *piirit*, where she learned songs and poems that they frequently performed for community evenings of

³¹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 48.

³² Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Wonganperä, 5 February 1933.

³³ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 20 April 1933. “Me olemme yhtyneet täällä Mobriin osoon. Ja ammattiliittoon voimisteluseuraan kyllä täällä touhua on. Kahtena iltana viikosta on politpprin kokous.”

³⁴ Ranta, 2. “Äiti oli innostunut rakentamaan sitä valoisa tulevaisuutta ja yhtyi Punaiseen Ristiin ja naiset kAvivät meillä pitämässä kaikenlaisia kokouksia ja lauluharjoituksia.”

³⁵ Alice Heino letter to “Rakas Veljeni,” Kondopoga, 18 March [1937] (AH 2).

entertainment (*iltamat*).³⁶ Involvement in Young Pioneers, Youth Leagues, unions, and study groups, among other politically motivated activities, provided Finnish North American immigrants with continuity. These activities were well known among the communities that formed around American and Canadian Finnish halls. Throwing themselves into community life undoubtedly eased transition into Karelian life and provided space for social interaction with other immigrants. Writing home about participation in such activities served to illustrate the flourishing culture of the Soviet Union and Karelia, and reassured correspondents that the immigrant, too, was doing well.

Others depicted their participation in political organization with little enthusiasm. Teenaged Reino Hämäläinen explained to a friend: “Out here we have to join mostly all kinds of clubs and have to go out and practice our military on free days. You have to join the Y.C.L. and a lot of other clubs in the same line.”³⁷ Hämäläinen’s three uses of “have to” suggest how strongly “volunteering” was encouraged and serve as a reminder of teenagers’ dislike of being told what to do. Similarly, Sylvi Hokkanen wrote, thinking back on her years in Karelia:

I, for one, was concerned only with school and the social life connected with it. But in Karelia, each school, each factory, every workplace had its political organizer or teacher. They held meetings regularly at which the workers and students were taught the tenets of communism. They would also hold meetings at the various barracks, and although attendance was not required, it was what we called ‘voluntary compulsion’ – it was best to go.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

³⁸ Hokkanen, 34.

Though the Communist Party viewed the role of political organizations and spaces as key sites for developing socialist consciousness in the masses, these sites served as much more for citizens throughout the Soviet Union. The Karelian letters and memoirs primarily describe the writers' involvement in the political sphere in terms of the opportunities for socialization that they provided. Take for example a description offered by Terttu Kangas, writing to her sister: "We have a radio right here in our downstairs. There, there is also a Red Corner so we don't have to go far. There we always spend our evenings and have fun."³⁹ The radio and Red Corner, held as key tools of politicalization by the Soviet leadership⁴⁰, were, instead, for Kangas, an object and space of leisure and entertainment. Lewis Siegelbaum, using the example of Soviet workers' clubs, succinctly summarizes the primary value of political spaces, arguing that they "functioned as sites for friendship-making and bonding, courtship, informal exchanges of information, sheer entertainment or fun, and a host of other purposes not officially acknowledged or sanctioned."⁴¹ While the Soviet centre expected that all free time and leisure be devoted to the serious work of socialist enlightenment, Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia, like people throughout the Soviet Union, created their own meanings and met their personal needs through their pastimes.

Iltamat

³⁹ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, March 1935. "Meillä on radio aivan tässä meidän alla kerassa. Siinä on myös punanurka että ei sitä kauvas tarvitse mennä. Siellä me aina viettäme iltamme ja pitämme hauskaa."

⁴⁰ Stephen Kotikin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 180-182.

⁴¹ Lewis Siegelbaum, "The Shaping of Soviet Workers' Leisure: Workers' Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 56 (Fall 1999), 85.

Iltamat, or evening entertainment programs, were a staple of Finnish North American hall life. An *iltama* program could consist of a variety of activities, ranging from dances, auctions, musical performances, guest speakers, to theatrical performances.⁴² Personal letters reveal that the tradition of the *iltama* was just as ubiquitous in Karelia. On many evenings of the week, Finns in the region's larger centres, like Petrozavodsk and Kontupohja, could rush to the *Kulttuuritalo* (House of Culture) to take part in whatever event was scheduled.⁴³ In 1935, construction was completed on the *Kansantaiteentalo*, or the House of (Finnish) National Arts. Klaus Maunu remembered the centre's large auditorium, multiple meeting rooms, and gymnasium.⁴⁴ In Mayme Sevander's view, the Kondopoga House of Culture, completed in the same year, "truly was a place connected with culture and entertainment."⁴⁵ Writing a retrospective piece on the cultural work of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, "They Built Culture," émigré Impi Vuohkanen noted: "It felt then, like everyone took part in something. The Clubs were in diligent use. The American workers' Uritski Street... Club was the youth's almost nightly gathering place. There, all kinds of activities were organized, [such as] dance, dramatic, [and] athletic program evenings, for example."⁴⁶ Lumber camps, like Vonganperä, also organized evening entertainments, as described by Lisi Hirvonen in early 1933: "from other villages people come to have *iltamat* and perform[.] [A]t Christmas time, here, came two school groups to perform

⁴² Saramo, "A socialist movement which does not attract women cannot live," 151.

⁴³ See for example, Alice Heino to "Rakas Veljeni," Kontupohja, 18 March [1937] (AH 2).

⁴⁴ Maunu, 19.

⁴⁵ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 71.

⁴⁶ Impi Vauhkonen, "He Rakensivat Kultuuria," *Carelia*, 3 (1993), 78.

programs[.] was fun to see and hear.”⁴⁷ Allan Sihvola remembered the Club building in Vilga, where dances, *iltamat*, and touring theatre productions were hosted.⁴⁸ The Kontupohja Paper Mill Club was also a popular leisure space.⁴⁹ Shortly after moving to Petrozavodsk, Hirvonen wrote about the *iltamat* they had already participated in, including a dramatic performance and films.⁵⁰ When Eino Hirvonen began to work for the Finnish National Theatre, the couple were given lodging by the theatre’s outdoor stage, in Petrozavodsk’s Summer Park. The Summer Park was a main site for cultured socialization, which led Hirvonen to note: “only during the summer this place is a bit restless because there are entertainments every evening almost [but] I guess we’ll manage.”⁵¹

In addition to organized evening programs, the Karelian life writers show that visiting friends and spending time with neighbours were popular ways to pass the time. The letters, especially, frequently mention the back and forth visiting with acquaintances from Canada and the United States. Lisi Hirvonen wrote to her sister that her day’s plans had gone awry because “we were out visiting people so late last night that I was very sleepy this morning.”⁵² Alice Heino wrote to her sister: “Visitors are coming again. We

⁴⁷ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Wonganperä, 5 February 1933. “tulevat aina muilta kylistä pitämään iltamia ja näyttelevät Joulun aikana täällä kävi kahret koululaiset esitämäs ohjelmaa oli hauska nährä ja kuulla.”

⁴⁸ Sihvola, 27.

⁴⁹ Vuohkonen, 79.

⁵⁰ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 20 April 1933.

⁵¹ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, December 1933. “wain kesällä tämä on vähän rauhatoin paikka kun täällä on huveja joka ilta melkein mutta ehkä sitä pärjää.” See also, Impi Vauhkonen, “He rakensivat kulttuuria” [“They Built Culture”], *Carelia*, 3 (1993), 76.

⁵² Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 6 August 1934. “olimme illalla niin myöhälle kyläs että nukutti niin aamulla...”

have them every night.”⁵³ Heino explained that during week nights, when not going to the *kulttuuritalo*, “the youth gather at our place and we play [the phonograph].”⁵⁴ Reino Hämäläinen explained to Benny: “Out here we go from place to place visiting and talk about all thing[s] and so on. We all get together and start singing some of the popular songs. Meaning once [were] popular.”⁵⁵ *Iltamat* and evenings spent with friends worked to build a strong sense of community among the Finnish North Americans. Turning to an examination of specific cultural and social activities demonstrates the ways that Soviet cultural politics, North American immigrant’s backgrounds, and Karelian conditions collectively shaped the ways that the life writers experienced leisure.

Music and Dancing

In the 1930s, Karelia could boast a rich music scene. Not only did youth gather to listen to recorded music and join together to sing favourite American songs, Karelia had several active musical groups, performed by and performing for Finnish North Americans. A symphony orchestra, radio orchestra, dance orchestra, brass band, *kantele* orchestra, children’s orchestra, two choirs, and smaller Workers’ Club bands are all mentioned in Vuohkonen’s short overview of Finnish North American music in 1930s Karelia. Allan Sihvola’s memoir portrays the numerous performance opportunities he had as a young, ambitious musician. Reino Hämäläinen wrote to Benny about how much

⁵³ Alice Heino letter [to Martta], [Kontupohja], circa 1938 (AH 3). “Tulee vieraita taas. Niitä on meillä joka ilta.

⁵⁴ Alice Heino partial letter to [Martta], [Kontupohja], [1938] (AH 3). “nuorisoa kokoontuu meille ja meillä soiteltiin.”

⁵⁵ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

he enjoyed music in Petrozavodsk “because these bozos can play and sure got good places to play.”⁵⁶

The “Radio Calendar” published in the Finnish newspaper *Punainen Karjala* shows “[m]usic performed by the radio orchestra, directed by K. Rautio” on most days, as a break in educational programming, such as “Karelian History,” “Forest workers’ Study,” “Building Technique Lecture,” and children’s and youth’s programs.⁵⁷ Elis Ranta moved his family from Uhtua to Petrozavodsk in the spring of 1933, having been given the opportunity to work as a full-time musician.⁵⁸ He was the horn player for the Petrozavodsk Radio Orchestra. Ranta wrote to his brother about the Radio Orchestra: “This orchestra is very good. I have never played in such a good gang, as this our orchestra. We have 32 players and two directors. One of the directors is Russian, [and] has at some time been an American symphony orchestra’s director... We don’t play every night, just about twelve times a month. Then the musicians perform solos on the other evenings...”⁵⁹ Reino Hämäläinen offered his opinion on the group, writing to Benny that “The Radio orchestra is another good thing to listen to because they play some American pieces ones in while.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

⁵⁷ For example, *Punainen Karjala*, No. 17, 20 January 1932.

⁵⁸ Viola Ranta, 3 and Elis Ranta letter to “Hyvä Veli,” Petrozavodsk, 26 September 1933.

⁵⁹ Elis Ranta letter to ”Hyvä Veli,” Petrozavodsk, 1 April 1934. “Tämä orkesteri on koko hyvä. En ole koskaan soittanut näin hyvässä sakissa, mitä on meidän orkesteri. Meitä on 32 soittajia ja kaksi johtajia. Toinen johtajista on Venäläinen, on ollut joskus Ameriikassakin Sinffonia orkesterin johtajana. ... Ei me soiteta joka ilta, kun noin kaksitoista kertaa kuukaudessa. Sitten soittajat esittää yksityis suuleja muina iltoina kukin vuoron perään.”

⁶⁰ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

Elis Ranta was also the conductor of the Ski Factory's Brass Band. Lauri Hokkanen played in the Brass Band and his memoir looks back on his time with the group. Hokkanen explains how the band operated:

I started out playing the trumpet and later switched to baritone... There were about twenty-five of us in the band, and we practiced every week. Occasionally we even played in a combined group of bands from all over the territory with about a hundred and fifty musicians... Elis Ranta was the leader of our ski factory band. We were called upon to play at dances, parades, an occasional concert, and various affairs at the ski factory club. We received no pay for this; it was a civic duty, and one we enjoyed. But we did get paid for playing at funerals. ... Often we were asked to play at doings some distance from town.⁶¹

By playing at different events, Hokkanen was able to experience many sides of Karelian cultural life. Lauri Hokkanen's narrative suggests that involvement with the Brass Band was a highlight of his time in Karelia.

Listening to Karelia's orchestras also brought great joy to Finnish North Americans. Mayme Sevander wrote about her mother's relationship with music in Karelia:

My mother, who loved music, often said that the Karelian Radio Symphony Orchestra in Petrozavodsk was one of the finest orchestras she had ever heard. I think she was proud of the fact that most of the musicians were American Finns... Mother seldom had time to attend [concerts], but she would put on the radio in the evenings and listen to the concerts while she did the mending. She always said that listening to the cheerful folk music and beautiful classical pieces made it easy to forget for a few minutes that our walls were thin, our food poor and our feet cold.⁶²

⁶¹ Hokkanen, 45.

⁶² Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 56.

Sevander's description of her mother finding her moments of leisure at home, while performing domestic tasks, rather than out at public cultural events is fitting with what is known about North American and Soviet women's lesser participation in leisure due to greater family care burdens.⁶³ Though women in 1930s Soviet Union were continuously told that their maternal and home duties should not interfere with their cultural and socialist development⁶⁴, the reality of women's lives and lack of support structures impeded their full engagement. Sevander, herself, still with the freedom of youth, formed happy memories and a love of music by attending many symphony concerts at the Philharmonic building, which was destroyed by the Soviets as the Finnish army approached during the war.⁶⁵

With so many orchestras in the region to entertain, Finnish North Americans had ample opportunities to dance. Dancing was certainly a favorite pastime, especially of the youth, as it had been in Canada and the United States.⁶⁶ For youth, music and dances could offer opportunities to "raise hell" and have a good time with friends.⁶⁷ The dance floor had less to offer others. Lisi Hirvonen, writing at the age of forty, complained: "we went to the summer park yesterday evening but we got so cold that we had to go home[.] there aren't any amusements for someone this old, though you do hear beautiful music

⁶³ See for example Sarah Davies, "'A Mother's Causes': Women Workers and Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia, 1934-1941" in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 93; Saramo, "A socialist movement which does not attract women cannot live," 153.

⁶⁴ Choi Chatterjee, "Soviet Heroines and the Language of Modernity, 1930-1939" in *Women in the Stalin Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 59.

⁶⁵ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 93-94.

⁶⁶ Kyvig, 209; Comacchio, "Dancing to Perdition: Adolescence and Leisure in Interwar English Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, 32, 3 (Fall 1997), 9.

⁶⁷ Tauno Salo letter to Carl Heino, Petrozavodsk, 23 November 1935.

there.”⁶⁸ Though the value of dancing – especially Western dances – was contested in the revolutionary period, by the Second Five Year Plan, dancing had come to be seen as “almost a duty” for good Soviet citizens.⁶⁹ Alice Heino wrote about how she had learned to dance so well in Karelia that she could teach anyone, adding that many boys had asked her to dance but she had yet to promise anyone a “lesson.”⁷⁰ Reino Mäkelä also reported having learned to dance in Karelia.⁷¹ Aate Pitkänen, however, wrote to Taimi that “[w]e have quite a few programs and dances. I don’t dance very much, once in a while.”⁷² Elmer Nousiainen, former saxophonist for a popular Finnish North American dance band in 1930s Petrozavodsk, remembered that “[w]e played Russian, Finnish and American dance music, and, of course, jazz.”⁷³ Dancing was as prevalent in the lumber camps and remote areas, but sometimes required a bit more creativity. Youth from Rutanen camp, like Allan Sihvola, would go to neighbouring Isku lumber camp for dances.⁷⁴ “Often though,” Sihvola remembered, “we carried in the evening Leipälä’s cabinet gramophone into the cafeteria, gathered tables and chairs and the dance started.”⁷⁵ Finnish Canadians and Americans embraced music and dancing, participating as musicians and audiences. Likewise, the immigrants turned to local theatre, as both entertainment and as a continuation of their socialist development.

⁶⁸ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 19 July 1939. “eilen illalla olimme kesä puistossa mutta meille tuli kylmä piti lähteä kotia eihän siellä näin wanhoille ole enään mitään huvia. Kuulehan siellä kaunista musiikkia.”

⁶⁹ Hoffman, 32-33 and 129; Gronow, 39; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 93.

⁷⁰ Alice Heino letter [to Martha], [Kontupohja], circa 1938 (AH 3).

⁷¹ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 24 January 1932.

⁷² Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi and Jim Davis, Petrozavodsk, 21 November 1934.

⁷³ Voukonen, 79.

⁷⁴ Sihvola, 27.

⁷⁵ Ibid. “Useimmin kuitenkin konnoimme illalla Leipälän kabinettigramofonin ruokalaan, keräsimme pöydät sekä tuolit syrjään ja tanssit alkoivat.”

Theatre

“They put on some good plays here,” Aate Pitkänen wrote to his sister and brother-in-law in late 1934.⁷⁶ Finnish immigrants brought popular amateur and working-class theatre with them to Canada and the United States. In North America, stage productions were a mainstay of Finnish Hall activities, beginning with the earliest temperance organizations.⁷⁷ With reference specifically to the community of Sudbury, Ontario, but easily extending to the immigrant group, overall, Oiva Saarinen argues that through theatre “the Finnish community found its fullest expression.”⁷⁸ The Finnish immigrant workers’ movement used theatrical performances to rally support for the cause and to fundraise.⁷⁹ “Socialist theatre did not always attain the highest theatrical standards,” noted Carl Ross, “but, even in its more banal moments of stage propaganda, it reflected popular Finnish [American] culture and theatre tradition.”⁸⁰ In Karelia, Finnish theatre also thrived. Soviet policies of minority accommodation placed great importance on building cultural institutions that ‘civilized’ the population in its official minority language.⁸¹ Therefore, the Karelian Finnish National Theatre was established to offer audiences professional, Communistic plays year round, and *iltamat* around the region presented amateur productions by workers, youth, and children.

⁷⁶ Aate Pitkänen letter to Jim and Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 21 November 1934.

⁷⁷ Ross, *The Finn Factor*, 25.

⁷⁸ Saarinen, 235.

⁷⁹ See Timo Riippa, “The Finnish American Radical Theater of the 1930s,” *Finnish Americana*, 9 (1992): 28-35 and James A. Roe, “Virginia, Minnesota’s Socialist Opera: Showplace of Iron Range Radicalism,” *Finnish Americana*, 9 (1992): 36-43.

⁸⁰ Ross, *The Finn Factor*, 70.

⁸¹ See for example, Yuri Slezkine, “The Soviet Union as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism.” *Slavic Review*, 53, 2 (Summer 1994), 423.

Finnish North Americans, already used to the stage, made a mark on theatre in Karelia, and a lasting impression on those who watched them perform. Mayme Sevander remembered: “I loved to sit in my wooden seat at the theater and smell the musty curtain and see everyone around me, dressed up and expectant as the lights fell low.”⁸² Klaus Maunu remembered a delightful performance by a Finnish Canadian and Sevander reminisced about the roles played by many immigrants from the United States and Canada.⁸³ Eino Hirvonen began work with the National Theatre in September 1933. Through Lisi Hirvonen’s letters, we learn about the busy touring schedule of the company. For example, in August 1934, Hirvonen wrote to her sister that “Eino has been on tour all over Karelia and now he has been given summer vacation for one and a half months and right after summer vacation they will again leave on tour to Leningrad and Ingria.”⁸⁴ The troupe brought performances to lumber camps, agricultural collectives, and other remote regions, where audiences could escape their difficult lives for a few moments.

Beyond entertainment, the theatre was to culture and educate audiences in socialist living. Mayme Sevander provides a noteworthy description of the accomplishments of the professional Finnish theatre:

The Karelian Finnish Theatre may rightfully be called a great enlightener. There was neither a small village nor a logging camp in the Republic where actors and singers wouldn’t have delighted eager audiences with their performances. Among the most memorable events in the history of the theatre was the

⁸² Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 57.

⁸³ Maunu, 18; Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 88-92.

⁸⁴ Lisi Hirvonen letter Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 6 August 1934. “Eino on ollut kierteellä ympäri Karjalaa nyt hän sai puolentoista kuukauden kesäloman ja heti kesäloman jälkeen taas lähteivät kierteelle Leningraadiin ja inkerinmaalle.”

month-long, 1200-kilometer skiing expedition that eight company members undertook in 1936... On their backs, they carried sets and costumes. They staged plays in several god-forsaken places. Probably the greatest impact of this heroic venture was that the company often interested illiterate people in learning to read and write. Often, they were the ones to give the first lessons.⁸⁵

Sevander's depiction of the Theatre Company casts it as "a great enlightener" on a "heroic venture," bringing culture and literacy to the "god-forsaken" and 'backwards' Soviet periphery. Though not explicitly communicated, Sevander's description implies that those receiving the "lessons" were not Finnish North Americans – since their literacy has been a significant point of pride in their collective history – but the "others" of the region, likely poor Russian, Karelian, Ingrian, and Veps peasants. Sevander's characterizations echo formal Communist enlightenment rhetoric and reveal how Finnish North Americans internalized scripts that supported their elite status in Karelia. Finnish Canadians and Americans participated in cultural work through their involvement with theatre. By attending the cinema, they had the opportunity to receive cultural messages directly from the Soviet centre.

Cinema

By the late 1920s, Finnish immigrants in Canada and the United States were among the masses that flocked to movie theatres to see the latest Hollywood offerings. Even with families facing economic hardships during the Depression, people continued to see movies regularly, with youth reportedly still attending at least once a month.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 92.

⁸⁶ Comacchio, "Dancing to Perdition," 12. Rates continued to climb. By 1936, a Halifax survey found that 96 out of a hundred respondents went to the cinema more than twice a month. See, Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth*, 167. See also, James R. McGovern, *And a Time for Hope: Americans in the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 172.

Movie-going was an important part of Soviet people's lives in the 1930s, as it was in many other places, world-wide. In Karelia, Finnish North Americans continued to have frequent access to movies or *kinos*, as they were known locally, using the Russian word. Movies could be viewed almost daily in the capital in theatres such as the "Triumpf," "*Kino-Teatteri Puna-Tähti*" ("Movie Theatre Red Star") or the Karelian National Dramatic Theatre's "Little Hall" ("*Pieni Sali*") cinema⁸⁷, but even in Karelia's remote lumber camps, like Vonganperä, film projectors were brought in regularly.⁸⁸ Writing in spring of 1933 from the outskirts of Petrozavodsk, Lisi Hirvonen reported that there "films are shown on two or three evenings each week."⁸⁹ A look at what Soviet audiences were watching in the 1930s demonstrates how popular culture was being re-shaped at this time.

Aate Pitkänen complained to his sister and brother-in-law that the films presented in Karelia "aren't so hot," and that he preferred the odd occasions when foreign films were screened.⁹⁰ While old foreign films were still screened at the "Triumpf" theatre, as remembered by Klaus Maunu, they had, indeed, become rare.⁹¹ Soviet movie-goers had come to love Hollywood comedies and romances, but, in the 1930s, the government almost wholly ended the importation of foreign films, despite their profitability.⁹² As an example, no foreign films were brought into the Soviet Union in 1932 and only three

⁸⁷ As advertised in *Punainen Karjala*, January 1932-December 1936.

⁸⁸ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Vonganperä, 5 February 1933.

⁸⁹ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 20 April 1933.

⁹⁰ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 21 November 1934.

⁹¹ Maunu, 19.

⁹² Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001), 120. Lewis Siegelbaum, "The Shaping of Soviet Workers' Leisure," 86.

films made abroad entered the country in 1936.⁹³ It was believed by the leadership that, since films were to serve solely as a political tool, only films made in the Soviet Union could project the correct political message.⁹⁴ This reasoning provided the justification needed to direct scarce resources to the film industry.⁹⁵ The Soviet film industry was never able to meet its ambitious production goals, but while the number of films made decreased, the number of copies per film increased significantly.⁹⁶ This assured that Soviet films would be widely viewed. Through movie attendance, Finnish North Americans in Karelia, like audiences throughout the Soviet Union, had an opportunity to directly view the world as their leader wanted it portrayed. Stalin, as characterized by Peter Kenez, was preoccupied with the national film industry and “personally saw and approved every single film exhibited in the Soviet Union.”⁹⁷ The approach taken by the Soviet leadership was to use films “not to portray reality but to help deny it.”⁹⁸ Richard Stites has characterized Soviet popular culture, including films, as a “web of fantasy and a giant political cover up.”⁹⁹ If ordinary people, in their daily lives, were not experiencing the ‘joyous life’ Comrade Stalin had exhorted, then Soviet films would allow them to participate in it, even if only for the duration of the screening.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Furthermore, movie theatres could act as a political site by serving as a venue for significant political meetings. See the use of the Karelian Triumph theatre in Kangaspuro, *Neuvosto-Karjalan taisetlu itsehallinosta*, 244.

⁹⁵ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 2.

⁹⁶ Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture*, 85.

⁹⁷ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 131.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹⁹ Stites, *Soviet Popular Culture*, 95.

The Soviet film-industry, under the strict micromanagement of the top Party officials, paid special attention to stirring children and youth through film.¹⁰⁰ A letter from Alice Heino shows how effective Soviet film propaganda could be at times. Heino, writing in her early teen years, conveyed how impressed she had been by the movies she had watched in Karelia and wrote eagerly to her brother about one that had an especially strong impact on her: a film about the school years of a poet who defied the Tsar by aligning with the Bolshevik cause.¹⁰¹ “Young Pushkin,” the film Heino likely referred to, was a part of the profusion of Pushkin material created as a part of the 1937 Pushkin Centennial.¹⁰² While Soviet films could successfully indoctrinate key political messages, movie-going was still, for the ordinary person, a leisure activity, and became an increasingly important form of escapism.¹⁰³

For youth, who made up a majority of the audience,¹⁰⁴ the cinema provided a space away from the adult gaze. The movie theatre was a primary site for youth sociability and courtship in Karelia, as it had been in North America. In a letter written just days after arriving in Petrozavodsk, Reino Mäkelä explained to a friend, “This towns [sic] got movies like America and American shows translated to Russian. As I was writing this Benny is sitting beside me wanted to go already.”¹⁰⁵ Mäkelä had already become familiar with the cinema offerings and attended a showing with at least one other

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 146.

¹⁰¹ Alice Heino to “Rakas Veljeni” [Wiljam or Waino], Kontupohja, 18 March [1937].

¹⁰² For more about the production and celebration of the Pushkin Centennial, see Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, Chapter 5, “A Double-Edged Discourse on Freedom: The Pushkin Centennial of 1937,” 113-148.

¹⁰³ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 115.

¹⁰⁴ In Canada, for example, boys and girls under eighteen years of age comprised over sixty percent of cinema audiences. Comacchio, *Infinite Bonds of Family*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 19 October 1931.

Finnish North American youth. It is worth noting that, in late 1931, Mäkelä knew of American films that had been shown in Karelia. Mayme Sevander also remembered frequently attending movies with friends from the age of twelve, without adult supervision.¹⁰⁶ Kenez has proposed that “People, especially the young, went to the cinema not so much to see a particular film but because there was literally nothing else to do.”¹⁰⁷ This argument does not hold true for Karelia. While the cinema may have offered respite from a bitterly cold day, the letters and memoirs of Finnish North Americans in Karelia show an array of available leisure outlets.

Celebrations

For a few days out of the year, the Soviet Union could take a break from its fast-paced industrialization drive to celebrate what it had already accomplished. The main holidays in the Soviet calendar were May Day (May 1st), the Anniversary of the Revolution (November 7th), and, after 1935, New Years Day (January 1st). These celebration days would transform cities and villages across the nation, and “[e]ven the smallest bakery in a quiet back street would remove the plaster loaves from behind its windows for the festival and spread out a red cloth on which to place portraits and busts of the leaders, or at the very least would hang colourful posters.”¹⁰⁸ Celebrations, as depicted in the Karelian life writing, incorporated, on a grander scale, many of the leisure activities and entertainments that Finnish North Americans participated in regularly. Karen Petrone has analyzed celebrations during Stalin’s rule showing “how Soviet

¹⁰⁶ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 119.

¹⁰⁸ Iurii Gerchuk, “Festival Decoration of the City: The Materialization of the Communist Myth in the 1930s,” *Journal of Design History*, 13, 2 (2000), 124.

officials tried to create legitimacy through emotional appeals and mobilize citizens through apolitical gaiety.”¹⁰⁹ That is, the “purpose of the celebration was to get citizens to identify voluntarily with the state.”¹¹⁰ The Karelian descriptions touch on key components of Soviet-constructed festivities, and share what the writers took from the events.

Just days before Stalin proclaimed that “Life has become better, life has become more joyous, comrades,” a letter by Lisi Hirvonen shows that the Soviet turn to gaiety had already made its mark.¹¹¹ Hirvonen described her participation in the October Revolution celebrations in Petrozavodsk:

now again our celebration is over[.] even I was allowed to be free from work for four days[.] it was lots of fun[.] we had a fun shock worker party at the ski factory[.] we ate and drank[.] there was entertainment and at the end we danced[.] everything was free for the shock workers[.] and one evening I was at the national enlightenment house[.] 8 o'clock began a theatre piece and 12 began a concert. And at 2 o'clock began a dance[,] lasted to 5 in the morning and the third evening I was at *kinos* meaning moving pictures. And I was in a parade...¹¹²

Hirvonen's description features many of the primary elements of Soviet celebration in the 1930s. The Ski Factory celebration, like those across the Soviet Union, singled out the heroes of production, and offered them food, drink, and entertainment to reinforce social hierarchy and to show those who were not included what to strive for. Hirvonen's

¹⁰⁹ Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹¹ Stalin's speech at the Conference of Stakhanovites, 17 November 1935.

¹¹² Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 12 November 1935. “Nythän ne on taas meidän juhlatkin ohitse minäkin sail olla työstä wapaana neljä päivää oli paljon hauskaa meillä oli hauskat iskuri juhlat suksitehtaalla syötiin ja juotiin ohjelmaa oli ja lopuksi tanssitiin kaikki oli wapaasti iskureille ja yhtenä iltana olin kansalisella walitus talolla kello 8 alkas näytös kappale ja 12 alkoi konsertti ja kello 2 alkoi tansit kesti 5teen aamulla ja kolmentana iltana minä olin kinossa eli elävässä kuvissa ja paraadissa olin.”

participation in the parade would have been obligatory, as all workers were expected to participate, but she, as a Shock-worker, may have marched closer to the front of the procession, which replicated Soviet hierarchy.¹¹³ Ironically, parading workers for their production accomplishments and taking people away from work, for four days in Hirvonen's case, resulted in decreased production that then would lead to higher output requirements in the following days.¹¹⁴ While Hirvonen's narrative does not reveal what types of food and drink were on offer, they were a crucial part of all Soviet celebration. Karen Petrone has demonstrated how "Soviet officials created a rhetoric of mythic plenty that was supposed to exist year-round and then used holidays to back up this myth."¹¹⁵ At times, the regime would even go so far as to remove food from stores in the days leading up to a holiday in order to create the illusion of plenty when it was re-released for the celebration.¹¹⁶ Despite what may have been happening beneath the surface of the October Revolution celebration, Hirvonen projected Soviet 'joy' to her sister in writing "it was lots of fun."

Celebrations were also held in honour of local accomplishments. Terttu Kangas detailed the events at the opening of the Lososiina House of Enlightenment in October 1934:

Here there was a really big celebration, a real two-dayer. They were Lososiina's new enlightenment house's opening, because there they built a really grand enlightenment house. Even almost all of us from here in Lohijärvi were there. Yes, there you got to hear valuable programming[.] From the city had come a 30 person singing choir and 20 person *päntti* [band] so yes it felt festive that

¹¹³ Gerchuk, 125; Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 23-29.

¹¹⁴ For example, Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 31.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 16.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

fine playing and singing[.] then there was still lots of other valuable programming[.] there was Marti Henrikson, too, quivering his mouth[.] the next evening there was a big theatre production and a dance at the end of both nights[.] I think the events will be written about in *Työmies*.¹¹⁷

Kangas's description of the Lososiina celebration follows the Soviet recipe for mass events, featuring political speeches – Henrikson's quivering mouth – and entertainment.¹¹⁸ However, if the Soviet system was, as Richard Stites has stated, “a dual system of politics and fun,” then Kangas's description suggests that she internalized the fun of the occasion.¹¹⁹ Perhaps exercising “a mild form of resistance” against the continuous bombardment of political messaging, Kangas, like others in the Soviet Union, took from the celebration what she wanted, and not necessarily what the officials had intended.¹²⁰ Stites has identified the ways that celebration organizers “attempted to saturate their audience” through “days of pre-festival press coverage, speechifying on the main day, and then the post-mortem congratulatory rhetoric when it was over.”¹²¹ Interestingly, none of this messaging transferred over into the letter writers' narratives. It seems that if the letter's recipients wanted to know about the political content of the events, they could turn to North American Finnish newspapers, like *Työmes*, for coverage.

¹¹⁷ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 28 October 1934. “Täällä oli oikeen suuret juhlat oiheen kaksi päiväset. Ne oli Lososiinan uuden valistus talon. Mekin oltiin täältä Lohijärveltä. Sielä melkein Kaikki kyllä sielä sai kuula arvokasta ohjelmaa. Kaupunkista oli tullut 30 henkinen laulu kuoro ja 20 henkinen pänti että lylläse tuntui juhhaliselta. Se komea soito ja laulut sitten oli vielä paljon muuta arvokasta ohjelmaa. Oli sielä Morti Henriksonikin suutansa varistamass. Toisena iltana sielä oli iso näytös kapale ja tansia oli lopuksi. Kumpankin iltana luulen että siitä tilaisuuteste on Työmiessäkin kirjutus.”

¹¹⁸ Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 15.

¹¹⁹ Richard Stites, “Festivals of Collusion? Provincial Days in the 1930s.” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 1, 3 (Summer 2000), 476.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 478.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 477.

Christmas was not celebrated in the USSR for its ties to religion and Santa Claus's questionable *kulak* background, and, in 1928, the festive fir tree was also banned, for its religious symbolism and the perceived "economic evil" associated with cutting down young trees.¹²² In 1934, Lisi Hirvonen noted "it will be Christmas soon as well although it does not feel like Christmas here," ending by wishing her sister a happy New Year, instead.¹²³ Though New Years had been quietly acknowledged throughout the early Soviet years, in December 1935, it became an "official Soviet holiday that emphasized entertainment, merry-making, and the creation of a joyous atmosphere of prosperity."¹²⁴ Along with public celebrations and the reinvention of the New Year's Tree, 1935 marked a reversal of the ban of private, home-based celebrations.¹²⁵ Sylvi Hokkanen wrote about the small New Year's party that she and Lauri hosted in their room in 1937: "We planned a midnight supper with as much on the table as our purse could stand. The big thing was the tree with homemade decorations – that was great fun."¹²⁶

Private parties were also held on other holidays after 1935. Mayme Sevander vividly described a 1938 May Day party at the Finnish North American "Valiparakit" barracks in Petrozavodsk. The Mäkelä brothers, Kalervo (Cowboy), Rudy, and Reino, one of the studied life writers, hosted the festivities. Sevander wrote:

They talked it up with the neighbors and we were given a free hand up to 12 [am]: use the kitchen, dance in the corridor, smoking

¹²² Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 86.

¹²³ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 19 December 1934. "joulukin on lähellä vaikka ei se täällä tunnu joululta."

¹²⁴ Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 85.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹²⁶ Hokkanen, 87.

on the stairwell only! Have a good but orderly time! One room was the “Jokes only.” That’s where Reino Mäkelä, Ansa Sword, and Ensio Haapanen reigned. It was non-stop joking: one got through, laughter hadn’t yet subsided when the next one took over. A second room was for games. A third – for hors d’oeuvres and beer (naturally some guys had pocket flasks too. You couldn’t exactly picture Russia without them!) The fourth was for coffee, tea and goodies made by the girls. And in the corridor – dancing to gramophone music...¹²⁷

Descriptions of private celebrations and public festivals, like those depicted by Hirvonen and Kanagas, bring to life the social world of Finnish North American Karelia. While the Soviet leadership viewed celebrations as a crucial tool for political indoctrination, ordinary people revelled in their delights and the escape they provided from the drearier aspects of Soviet life. For youth, celebrations and leisure were closely linked to courtship.

Dating, Marriage, and Divorce

Mayme Sevander’s description of the May Day party further provides great insight on the drama of youth courtship:

It happened that somebody would accidentally stumble on a couple kissing and hugging in the kitchen, or on the stairs that led to the attic or in a neglected corner. A girlish tear was shed here and there. You know how it is: A is in love with B, while B is in love with C etc. That was happening all along... the party began breaking up and the boys went to see off the girls.¹²⁸

For older teenagers and young adults, Karelia provided ample opportunities to date. Aate Pitkänen clearly made the point when he wrote to friends in Lakeridge, Ontario that dating was “like a disease” and that bachelors changed dates as often as “gypsies change

¹²⁷ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 53.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

horses.”¹²⁹ Aate and other Finnish North American youths in Karelia were participating in a dating culture that they had known already in the United States and Canada. In the inter-war period, “dating served as general recreation and social self-affirmation, not necessarily courtship of a potential life companion.”¹³⁰ More bluntly, “dating was not about marriage. Dating was about competition.”¹³¹ The goal, at least in its popular and public portrayals, was to collect as many dates as possible.¹³² In April 1933, Pitkänen confided to his sister:

You asked me about Irma. Oh yes she was one of these summery flares. There’s been quit[e] a few of these flares, summery, autumn, wintery and springy and over night flares, I haven’t had a steady one for a long time, since last year. Boy she was something you don’t get everyday. She was an American. So new years came along and I made a resolution and told her where to get off at. I spose summer will bring some flare again.”¹³³

Describing the romantic pursuits of a young man who lived in the same communal tent as her and Eino, Lisi Hirvonen noted, “yes those young men get around.”¹³⁴ Aate Pitkänen wrote home that “mother wanted to know if I have an *akka* [hag/old woman/wife] yet. Yes, I am ashamed to admit that not a serious one yet.”¹³⁵ Perhaps playing up the ‘shame’ of not being in a committed relationship for his mother’s sake, Pitkänen’s narrative suggests that he had, in fact, been dating, though casually. Reino Mäkelä

¹²⁹ Aate Pitkänen letter to “Lakeridge Residents,” Petrozavodsk, 20 June 1933. “ottaa uusia niinkuin mustalaiset hevosia.”

¹³⁰ Kyvig, 133.

¹³¹ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 25.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 25-31.

¹³³ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 3 April 1933.

¹³⁴ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 20 April 1933. “kyllä ne nuoret miehet kerkivät.”

¹³⁵ Aate Pitkänen letter to “Lakeridge Residents,” June 20, 1933. “äiti haluasi tietää jos minulla on vielä akka: häpiä kyllä tunnustaa mutta ei ole vielä vakituista” In the first instance of “vielä”, the term could refer to “yet” or “still.”

explained that “I’ve learn a lots of Russian when you go with Russian girls [sic].”¹³⁶

Though describing diverse dating and an array of appealing women, Reino Mäkelä boasted to Benny: “We have a lot of blondes here and I got one myself – a ‘hellu’ [steady].”¹³⁷

Many young men, like Mäkelä and the man who lived with the Hirvonens, dated local Karelian and Russian women. Mäkelä explained that “[t]hese Russian girls then you sure have fun with them. If you want to go some place there [sic] the ones to pay your way.”¹³⁸ Mäkelä’s description of Russian “girls” covering the expenses of dates requires further consideration. Beth L. Bailey has successfully demonstrated how, in the United States, the switch from home courting to public dating created an “economy of dating” that, through the use of men’s money, resulted in unequal power relations.¹³⁹ The very fact that Mäkelä felt that women footing the bill for a date merited remark suggests that he had encountered new customs through dating Russian women in Karelia. Mäkelä seems to have viewed these differences positively. Sylvi Hokkanen’s memoir, however, demonstrates that the economy of dating was at play in some cases in Karelia. Hokkanen remembered that “Many American and Canadian men married Karelian girls; the girls obtained better food norms as wives of recruited workers, and the men were proud of their young wives.”¹⁴⁰ The prevalence of marrying Karelian and Russian women also related to the Karelian immigration policy, which excluded single women.

Terttu Kangas addressed the issue in late 1933, in order to provide clarification for those

¹³⁶ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 24 January 1932.

¹³⁷ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 24 January 1932.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Bailey, 13-14 and 21-22.

¹⁴⁰ Hokkanen, 53.

in Drummond Island.¹⁴¹ As Kangas understood it, single women were only able to immigrate if accompanying their father, adding “I don’t know why [they] can’t come here[.] yes, there are men here so that here too you can get married.”¹⁴² Terttu Kangas presented the issue of marriage from the woman’s perspective, not touching on how the large numbers of single Finnish North American men had limited opportunities for forming endogamous relationships.¹⁴³

In 1937 Pitkanen started to date Maria “Maikki” Smolenikova, a Russian, and told his sister that people were very happy for them, except for some bachelors who had their eye on the “sweetest and cutest girl on this side of the north pole.”¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, in Pitkänen’s letter, Maikki’s positive qualities are framed through her community involvement. “She’s always active & has responsible jobs at sport meets,” Aate proudly wrote, “Now during the celebrations she’s been performing at the house of culture every night.”¹⁴⁵ The two appear to have married quickly but the relationship proved short-lived, ending a year later.¹⁴⁶ Ultimately, Pitkänen met and married Lilia, a Russian woman from Buzuluk. Youth at times married without the approval of their parents. A 1939 letter written by Alice Heino explains to her sister Martha, how their brother Walter had married against their mother’s wishes.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, with an underlying tone of disapproval, Terttu Kangas wrote to her sister in 1937: “So room we have again, because

¹⁴¹ Terttu Kangas letter to “Rakas Isä ja siskot ja veljet”, Lohijärvi, 27 November 1933.

¹⁴² Ibid. “en tiedä miksi ei tänne pääse kyllä täällä miehiä on että täälläkin naimisiin pääsee.”

¹⁴³ Varpu Lindström has shown Finnish Canadian men’s historical and statistical preference for marrying Finnish women. See, for example, *Defiant Sisters*, 64.

¹⁴⁴ Aate Pitkanen letter to Jim, Taimi, and Joan, Petrozavodsk, 2 May 1937.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Gordijenko, 121.

¹⁴⁷ Alice Heino letter to Martha, Kontupohja, 3 September 1939 (AH 5).

we aren't now but a three person family. Martha she went and got married this summer August 3rd day to one Olavi Niemi named man. ... This Olavi has come from somewhere in Minnesota to here with his parents to Lososiina. He has been the whole time a car driver there. He is 24 years old.”¹⁴⁸ When couples did marry, parenthood quickly followed. Tauno Salo referred to the speed at which newlyweds had babies as a “socialist competition.”¹⁴⁹

In addition to forming marriages and families, the Karelian narratives reveal many relationships ending in divorce. In a 1988 interview with Varpu Lindström, Leini Hietala spoke about her parents' 1933 divorce in Karelia. Hietala noted: “Well, it was at that time just some kind of fever that you left your own wife and got married with another.”¹⁵⁰ Hietala gave the example of a man who left his wife for another woman, who had also left her husband, only to have the abandoned individuals marry each other.¹⁵¹ Hietala, herself a child when her mother left her father for another man, judged that in all of the divorces and “exchanges,” “children had to suffer... children had to see it all.”¹⁵² The letters of Lisi Hirvonen reveal the breakdown of her marriage, though in limited detail. After beginning to work and tour with the Karelian National Dramatic Theatre in the fall of 1933, mentions of Eino Hirvonen transformed from comments on how he was often away to Lisi offering no word on her husband's whereabouts or

¹⁴⁸ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 6 January 1937. “Että tilaa meillä tässä on, kun ei meidä enään ole kun kolme henkeä perhessä. Martha se otti ja menni naimisiin kesällä Elokuun 3 päivä yhten Olavi Niemi nimisen (?) miehen kans. ... Tämä Olavi Niemi on jostakin Minnesotasta tullut tänne vanhempiensa kans Lososiinaan. Se on ollut siellä koko ajan auton ajurina. Se on 24 vuotta vanha.”

¹⁴⁹ Tauno Salo letter to Carl Heino, Petrozavodsk, 23 November 1935.

¹⁵⁰ Leini Hietala interview with Varpu Lindström, Petrozavodsk, August 1988. “No se oli siihen aikaan justiin semmonen niinkö kuume, että jätivät omat vaimot ja menivät toisen kans naimisii”

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid. “vaihtokauppa” “Lapset siinä joutu kärsimään. ... Lapset siinä joutu näkemään kaikki.”

happenings.¹⁵³ Then, in August 1936, Hirvonen finally wrote that Eino was in Uhtua and “there’s no need to write much about it[.] let it be as if it had only been a dream.”¹⁵⁴ A year and a half later, Lisi Hirvonen explained that “here in Petroskoi Hirvonen lives with his wife[.] I rarely come across them[.] it does not feel like anything anymore[.] we say *haloo* that’s all[.] one gets used to everything.”¹⁵⁵

Both marrying and divorcing were simple matters in the USSR until 1936. “In fact,” wrote Enoch Nelson to his sister,

Now it is not even necessary to get the marriage license if you do not want to. If you want to be legal, the young couple go to the nearest elected official (it makes no difference hardly who he is) and state that you wish to live together as man and wife. He writes a certificate and it is ready. If you want a divorce, go to some official and state the case. If a man wants a divorce he can get it without the consent of the woman and if a woman wants it she can get it without the consent of the husband. In the case of children the man must pay the mother for the support of the children.¹⁵⁶

Recognized common-law relationships and legal marriages without a role for the church had been recognized by a 1917 decree in Revolutionary Russia, and echoed the political beliefs and practices of many in the Finnish Left.¹⁵⁷ Acquiring a divorce in Canada and the United States, while on the rise, continued to be difficult well into the 1930s and beyond.¹⁵⁸ In the Soviet Union, not only would non-mutual divorces be granted, one could even request a “post card divorce,” where the registry office would inform the

¹⁵³ For example, Lisi Hirvonen letters to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 6 August 1934 and 19 December 1934 to 30 January 1935 and 18 March 1935.

¹⁵⁴ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 15 August 1936. “ei siitä kannata paljon kirjoitella olkoon se niinkun unta vaan.”

¹⁵⁵ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 2 February 1938. “täällä asuu Petroskoissa Hirvonen vaimoineen mina hyvin harvoin niitä tapaan eipä se enää tee mitään vaikutusta haloota sanotaa[.] Siinä kaikki[.] kaikkeen tottuu.”

¹⁵⁶ Enoch Nelson letter to Ida Perkut, Uhtua, 30 December 1926. Nelson, *Nelson Brothers*, 106.

¹⁵⁷ Hoffman, 90; Lindström, *Defiant Sisters*, 72-77.

¹⁵⁸ Strong-Boag, 16; Kyvig, 135..

spouse on your behalf.¹⁵⁹ Personal freedoms in marrying and divorcing were also complemented with legalization of abortion in 1920. However, with a very low birth rate and increasingly pronatalist rhetoric emitting from the Soviet centre, a controversial 1936 decree banned abortion, complicated divorce proceedings, and established a strict formula for child support, while continuing to espouse conservative family values in the name of building socialism.¹⁶⁰

In the Soviet Union, every aspect of life held political significance and was arranged in a way that would best support the socialist society that had been crafted. While the State succeeded in establishing a hierarchy that created the appearance of omnipresence, people adapted, reworked the system, and did what they needed to do.¹⁶¹ Lending itself easily to the Karelian context, Mary Leder has astutely characterized her time with Moscow youth in the 1930s: “In spite of all the politics, young people did what young people do all over the world – meet, mingle, make friends, start romances, have fun.”¹⁶²

Alcohol & Masculinity

Fun could be found at a public celebration, at the cinema, or with drinks shared among friends. “Theres a lot of vodka to drink out here any way [sic],” Reino Hämäläinen noted.¹⁶³ An analysis of stories of drunkenness suggests that such antics were the domain of men, and women were viewed as the moral regulators. Terttu

¹⁵⁹ Hoffman, 97.

¹⁶⁰ Hoffman, 101; Bernstein, 191; Kent H. Geiger, *The Family in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 95-96.

¹⁶¹ Johnston, in *Being Soviet*, offers an insightful and highly useful framework for considering the middle ground between strict adherence to formal ideology and behaviours and outright resistance.

¹⁶² Leder, 117.

¹⁶³ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

Kangas reported to her sister Toini in April 1934 about attitudes toward drunkenness in Lohijärvi: “Yes, those temperance heroes should come here because that liquor you can buy here from every grocery store as much as you want even though very little is still drunk because drunkenness here is held as a very shameful thing[.] if you appear in drunken scenes then soon you find your name in the wall paper.”¹⁶⁴ Kangas’s explanation was well in keeping within official attitudes toward drinking. Just as the Left in Canada and the United States had admonished drunkenness and smoking, the official Soviet policy was to attack the morality and political weakness of workers who were susceptible to drink.¹⁶⁵

However, public opinions of drunkenness must not have been too severe, since descriptions of excesses are easy to find. For example, in the Streng’s story, men spent many hours drinking at the hotel bar, while waiting for their departure from Halifax, and at a Karelian party, the men went to a neighbour’s home to “add to their life’s joy.”¹⁶⁶ Lauri Hokkanen remembered a careless evening when he sampled a Karelian friend’s home-made beer or “*braug*.”¹⁶⁷ The “powerful stuff” was “made from sugar, grain and raisins and fermented under pressure.” The two drank a few glasses before heading off to the Ski Factory Club, but could not properly drive the *potku kelkka* (Ski Factory made

¹⁶⁴ Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 09 April 1934. “kyllä niiten raituis sankareiten pitas tulla tänne kun sittä viinaa täällä saa ostaa joka ruoka tavara kaupasta niin paljon kun halua vaikka hyvin vähä täällä sittä silti juuaan sillä sittä juopouta täällä pitetään hyvin häpeälisenä asiana, jos täällä esiinty juovukuvsissa niin pian löytää nimensä seinä lehtesta.”

¹⁶⁵ The North American Finnish Left movement largely grew out of the temperance movement. See the discussion in Chapter 1, and also, Ross, *The Finn Factor*, 71, Hoffman, 76.

¹⁶⁶ Bucht, 55 and 91. “miehet ovat käyneet elämäniloan lisäämässä.”

¹⁶⁷ Hokkanen, 66.

kick sled) and got banged up along the way.¹⁶⁸ Reino Mäkelä wrote to Benny about the previous evening's escapades. Mäkelä and a friend "go[t] some 'vodka' and got stewed to the gills. I got kick[ed] out of the dance and the girls are sure sore."¹⁶⁹ Allan Sihvola wrote about how the lumber camp bachelors would drive into Petrozavodsk on Sundays for "amusements at the restaurants and to taste on the park lawn the liquor store's offerings."¹⁷⁰ At the lumber camp, however, Sihvola remembered "rarely seeing drunks, but in the barracks attic we boys once found a big suitcase full of empty bottles, which we brought to Petroskoi and gave them to the store to get some pocket money."¹⁷¹ At the Mäkelä's May Day party, as portrayed by Mayme Sevander, "some guys" brought pocket flasks with spirits, while "the girls" provided the snacks.¹⁷²

These descriptions of alcoholic consumption each portray the act in terms of male sociability. Women, as depicted by Hokkanen and Mäkelä, were cast in the role of judge, rather than fellow drinker. After he got drunk, injured, and missed his award presentation at the Ski Factory Club, Lauri Hokkanen looked to his wife's reaction, remembering that "Sylvi wasn't too harsh on me."¹⁷³ Likewise, when Mäkelä was so intoxicated that he was expelled from the dance, "the girls sure [were] sore." In Christer Bucht's telling of the Strengs' Karelian story, narrated in Aino's voice, she states: "at our house vodka

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 24 January 1932.

¹⁷⁰ Sihvola, 26. "...huvittelemaan ravintoloihin ja maistelemaan puiston nurmikolla viinakauppojen antimia."

¹⁷¹ Ibid. "Kämpällä näki harvoin humalaisia, mutta parakkien vintiltä me pojat löysimme kerran ison matkalaukullisen tyhjiä pulloja, jotka veimme Petroskoihin ja luovutimme kauppaan saaden niistä taskurahaa."

¹⁷² Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 53.

¹⁷³ Hokkanen, 66.

is not served, at least during my time.”¹⁷⁴ Sylvi Hokkanen thought back on a particularly “spic and span” American woman who also lived in the Ski Factory complex.¹⁷⁵ In addition to her meticulous cleanliness, Hokkanen remembered the woman for something she had said: “If a man drinks, it is because of the woman’s laxity.”¹⁷⁶ Hokkanen reflected on the meaning of this saying, writing, “[s]ince drinking was common among us at that time, it put the burden of the problem on the women.”¹⁷⁷ The gendering of social acts, like alcoholic indulgence, and the gendering of moral regulation, here in the form of women’s chastising, are both visible through an analysis of drinking in the Karelia life writing. It is unclear whether Terttu Kangas’ Michigan “temperance heroes” were men or women, but they would have at least been satisfied by the commitment to physical culture readily apparent in Finnish North American life in Karelia.

Athletics

Sports were a primary pastime in Karelia in the 1930s. The Finnish North American letters and memoirs provide ample evidence of involvement in numerous physical activities, ranging from casual leisure to serious competition. For the everyday participant, sport provided an outlet for leisure and socialization. However, by committing to athletic pursuits, Finnish North Americans engaged in the socialist building of individuals and society, espoused by the North American Left and the Soviet centre. For the Soviet leadership and intelligentsia, sport “was to be a means for achieving: better health and physical fitness; character-formation, as part of general

¹⁷⁴ Bucht, 91. “meidän kodissa ei tarjota vodka ainakaan minun aikana.”

¹⁷⁵ Hokkanen, 55.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

education in producing a harmonious personality; military training; the identification of individuals with groups (Party, Soviet, trade union) and their encouragement to be active socially and politically.”¹⁷⁸ Such formal objectives were familiar to Finns who had taken part in Left-organized sports in Canada and the United States.

Bruce Kidd argues that “[t]he Finnish Canadians were the best organized and most athletically gifted of the worker sports participants in Canada,” with both men and women actively participating in numerous sports.¹⁷⁹ In the United States and Canada, many Finnish athletic organizations vied for participants with each group’s membership representing a different religious, temperance, or political stripe.¹⁸⁰ In the United States, the Finnish Left remained active in several sports societies, both socialist and Communist, and in the national socialist Labor Sports Union, which federated in 1927.¹⁸¹ The Finnish-Canadian Amateur Sports Federation was the main athletic organization of the Finnish Canadian Left for over half a century, beginning in 1906. From 1925 onward, the Federation linked the local sports clubs of the Communist-affiliated Finnish Organization of Canada.¹⁸² Much like the objective of the other Finnish North American Leftist sports associations, the constitutional purpose of the Finnish Canadian Workers Sports Federation, as it was initially named, was to “raise the physical, intellectual and

¹⁷⁸ James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 106.

¹⁷⁹ Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 160 and 161. For a recent overview of the extensive Finnish immigrant involvement in sports in the Thunder Bay area, see Diane Imrie, David Nicholson, and Laura Nigro, eds., *A Century of Sport in the Finnish Community of Thunder Bay* (Thunder Bay, ON: Northwestern Ontario Sports Hall of Fame and the Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society, 2013).

¹⁸⁰ Reino Kero, “Finnish Immigrant Culture in America,” in *Old Friends – Strong Ties*, ed. Vilho Niitemaa et al. (Turku: Institute for Migration, 1976), 123.

¹⁸¹ Kaunonen, 89.

¹⁸² Jim Tester, ed., *Sports Pioneers: A History of the Finnish-Canadian Amateur Sports Federation, 1906-1986* (Sudbury, ON: Alerts AC Historical Committee, 1986), 7.

cultural level of workers by promoting an interest in physical activity, and to further the country's militant labour movement."¹⁸³ Through these clubs, Finnish North Americans participated in gymnastics, wrestling, skiing, skating, baseball, and basketball, among other fields.

In the 1980s, the Finnish-Canadian Amateur Sports Federation compiled its organizational history by calling for separate, local sports group histories, and the memories of key members and top athletes.¹⁸⁴ The resulting 1986 publication provides fascinating vignettes of Finnish immigrant life across Canada throughout much of the twentieth-century, and allows for analysis of what individual contributors, writing on behalf of their home club, believed to merit mention. Not only does the history of the Sports Federation reveal what types of athletic activities Finns may have been involved with before emigration, but the publication also makes clear the Karelian migration's impact on the Finnish North American sports movement. The histories of several of the Federation clubs specifically mention the loss of top athletes to Karelia and the significant decline in overall membership and activity caused by 'Karelian Fever'.¹⁸⁵ The accounts depict the migration of medal-winning wrestlers, skiers, and track and field athletes, among others. Further contextualizing the Karelian experience, *Sports Pioneers* clearly illustrates how Finnish immigrants' participation in sports, the arts, politics, and entertainment comprehensively integrated into a whole. Members of the Federation, and thereby of the Finnish Organization of Canada, were most often active in the full range of

¹⁸³ Quoted in Jim Tester, ed., *Sports Pioneers: A History of the Finnish-Canadian Amateur Sports Federation, 1906-1986* (Sudbury, ON: Alerts AC Historical Committee, 1986), 7.

¹⁸⁴ Tester, *Sports Pioneers*

¹⁸⁵ For example, Tester, 31, 37, 41, 59, and 61.

community activities, rather than just one area. Such holistic involvement, including physical and intellectual pursuits, was in line with the focus on socialist enlightenment, espoused by both the North American Left and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Broad community involvement was, likewise, a visible characteristic of the Finnish North American diaspora in Karelia.

While Finnish North American athletic organizations struggled in the immediate aftermath of the mass migration, Karelia gained many skilled athletes and experienced a boost in regional sporting and competition. The Karelian letters and memoirs paint an image of an immigrant community passionate about sports. Given the dearth of sporting venues and equipment in the Soviet Union, simple sports were the most popular.¹⁸⁶ The Finnish North American-organized baseball league, along with wrestling and soccer, were popular with both participants and observers.¹⁸⁷ Track and field events were common pastimes and Allan Sihvola remembered the long jump pit and high jump apparatus constructed by Finns at the Rutanen lumber camp.¹⁸⁸ Given Karelia's many rivers and lakes, swimming was another favorite summer amusement.¹⁸⁹ In the lumber camps, horseshoes were among the favorite games.¹⁹⁰ During the summer, nearby lumber camps would get together for sporting competitions and community fun.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ Riordan, 135.

¹⁸⁷ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 168; Maunu, 17; Edelman, 73; Aate Pitkänen letters to "Lakeridge Residents," 8 April 1933, and to Parents, 20 March 1937 and 12 March 1939.

¹⁸⁸ Sihvola, 26.

¹⁸⁹ See for example, Sihvola, 26; Maunu, 17; Terttu Kanagas letter to Father and Siblings, Lohijärvi, 27 November 1933.

¹⁹⁰ Sihvola, 27.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*.

Tauno Salo wrote about how pool rooms were very much “in style” in 1935.¹⁹² Youths could spend their time playing billiards for six rubles per hour.¹⁹³ Skiing was definitely the top winter sport in Karelia, for all ethnicities, as it was elsewhere in the Soviet Union.¹⁹⁴ Reino Hämäläinen reported to Benny that “[t]hey do a lot of skiing and boy do they know how to ski out here.”¹⁹⁵ During the long winter, in addition to being an avid cross-country and downhill skier, Aate Pitkänen also played on a hockey team and enjoyed keeping track of the local basketball teams.¹⁹⁶ Skating was another favourite pastime and there were skating rinks in most towns across Karelia.¹⁹⁷ Reino Mäkelä’s letters demonstrate how rinks were an important site for youth sociability. Mäkelä explained how “[w]e go skatting [sic] with girls here like there too,” and that “[w]e go skatting [sic] here every night at the stadium where they have a band playing.”¹⁹⁸ Skates and skis were among the most widely owned goods in 1930s Soviet Union, and quality skis were made right in Petrozavodsk by Finnish North Americans employed at the Ski Factory.¹⁹⁹ It is unclear how easily obtainable skates and skis were in actuality, since Aate Pitkänen wrote about spending days mending and maintaining his skates and skis in November 1933.²⁰⁰ A look at the everyday role of sports, as highlighted in personal letters and memoirs, demonstrates how grassroots community formed around physical

¹⁹² Tauno Salo letter to Carl Heino, Petrozavodsk, 23 November 1935.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Riordan, 138.

¹⁹⁵ Reino Hämäläinen letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 5 April 1932.

¹⁹⁶ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 6 April 1933.

¹⁹⁷ For example, Alice Heino letter “Rakas Veljeni” [Wiljam or Waino], Kotupohja, 18 March [1937], and Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, Petrozavodsk, undated [circa Winter 1932].

¹⁹⁸ Reino Mäkelä letters to Benny, Petrozavodsk, 24 January 1932 and undated [circa Winter 1932].

¹⁹⁹ Gronow, 60.

²⁰⁰ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 12 November 1933.

culture. In some cases, however, athletic ability could pull an individual out of leisure sporting, into the Soviet world of competitive sport.

Competitive Sport, Aate Pitkänen & Embodying the Soviet Dream

For keen athletes hobbies could transform to become a ticket for travel, Soviet praise, and safety from violent repression. Aate Pitkänen's letters and remarkable life story show a progression from leisure sporting to a full-time occupation. Pitkänen's love of sport had begun in Kivikoski, Ontario but in Karelia he excelled. In the earliest available letters, from March and April of 1933, he wrote about his participation in biathlon events and ski meets in the Petrozavodsk area.²⁰¹ After a break in available letters that spans over two years, Aate wrote to his parents "about what I have been up to, that is, of course, about sport."²⁰² This March 1937 letter demonstrates that Pitkänen had begun to transition into a full-time athlete and trainer. In February, 1937, he placed second in the Soviet Union for slalom, but also participated at the national level in ski-jumping. "Based on this," Pitkänen explained to his parents, "our trade union [athletic organization] left me in Moscow for a few days to train some more and then sent me to Svedlovski with my original instructor, to a league-wide camp and to an all trade union wide competition," where he placed second again.²⁰³ At this time, he also competed and dominated in various cross-country skiing events. Pitkänen estimated that during the winter of 1937, sports competitions and training had taken him 17 500 kilometres.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Aate Pitkänen letters to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 29 March 1933, 3 April 1933, and 6 April 1933.

²⁰² Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 20 March 1937.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Aate Pitkänen letter, Petrozavodsk, 12 April 1937.

Two years later, Aate Pitkänen wrote again to his parents to fill them in on what had happened since the winter of 1937. He had been moved approximately 2000 kilometers south-east to the city of Buzuluk to train athletes and to compete. “I will write more about sports, as they have become such a part of daily life,” Pitkänen stated.²⁰⁵ Aate recounted that, in Petrozavodsk, he had worked as a coach and trainer, though still technically working as a linesman. He had broken Karelian cycling records in the fall of 1937, a fact which is also mentioned in the memoir of Klaus Maunu, who had lived close by the Pitkänen family in the rural Thunder Bay area.²⁰⁶ Pitkänen also reported having broken ski records, competing in downhill, slalom, ski jumping, and even one-footed ski jumping, in 1938.²⁰⁷ These successes secured Pitkänen a place on a national ski team, sending him to Leningrad and Sverdlovski to train and compete.²⁰⁸ In 1940, Pitkänen developed a close relationship with future Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, who came to Karelia in 1940 to head the Youth League, which may explain Pitkänen’s continuing work with the YCL.²⁰⁹ Andropov was especially interested in bolstering the sports prowess of Karelian and Soviet youth, and supported Pitkänen’s continuing athletic development, leading to another record year in 1941.²¹⁰ In an article on “Aate Pitkänen’s Life and Death,” journalist Anatoli Gordijenko interviewed one of Pitkänen’s teammates,

²⁰⁵ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Buzuluk, 1 January 1939. “Kirjoitan enemman urheilusta sillä se on tullut minulle niin päivä järjestöön.”

²⁰⁶ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Buzuluk, 1 January 1939; Maunu, 17.

²⁰⁷ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Buzuluk, 1 January 1939.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Gordijenko, 125-126.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

Tenho Nygard, also a North American Finn. Nygard portrayed his former colleague as a celebrity, stating that “the name of skier Aate Pitkänen was on everyone’s lips.”²¹¹

While Aate Pitkänen’s transition from a skilled sports hobbyist to an international competitor may seem fairly straight-forward, Soviet policy regarding athletics complicated the situation. Pitkänen’s letters illustrate, in action, the Soviet centre’s dichotomy between shaping world-class athletes and officially denouncing athletic professionalism.²¹² No one in the Soviet Union was officially permitted to work as a full-time athlete, and no one was to earn a salary from sport, so loop holes emerged in the system. In Pitkänen’s case, training and trial races took him away from work, but “[a]ll the travel costs [were] paid for by the trade union and in addition we get an allowance. In the resort where we were training we had free food and we were still getting full salary (same in all the later competitions).”²¹³ When Pitkänen was made a voluntary ski trainer – “during [his] free time” – the position quickly became priority. Pitkänen confessed that “not much came of my other work [as a telephone linesman] as even my days were spent in organizing sports.”²¹⁴ He found time to work a day here and there, between travel for races and training. Pitkänen’s experience resonates with Robert Edelman’s explanation of top athletes having to “pretend” to work in another field.²¹⁵ Pitkänen wrote to his parents about how he had been rewarded with a gramophone and a radio in two separate races.²¹⁶ However, there may well have been other prizes that were left unmentioned.

²¹¹ Ibid., 120.

²¹² For a discussion of this dichotomy, see Riordan, 125-135.

²¹³ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 20 March 1937.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Edelman, 68.

²¹⁶ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Buzuluk, 1 January 1939.

James Riordan has identified the “general process of elite-creation” that rewarded top athletes: “Even more than their counter-parts in industry, the sports stars began to receive large sums of money, priorities in respect to flats and scarce commodities for establishing records and winning championships.”²¹⁷

Aate Pitkänen’s story is remarkable and serves as an excellent example of what could be called the Soviet Dream. As we have seen, Pitkänen’s family history prepared him for a life of socialist commitment. In Karelia, Pitkänen began to embody the Soviet ideals. A common workshop poster in the Soviet Union proclaimed: “Every Sportsman should be a Shock Worker; Every Shock Worker, a Sportsman.” Aate Pitkänen epitomized the slogan. He was a competitive athlete at the national level, and he was a rewarded Shock-worker and Stakhanovite in Karelia, going back to 1933. Pitkänen took seriously his commitment to socialist development, both personal and societal. Pitkänen’s responses to return migration, as discussed above, suggest that he, personally, believed in the value of full engagement with the socialist project. In addition to all the ground he covered as an athlete in 1937, Pitkänen characterized his additional involvements as: “lots of work, and then I had to train the parachutists, and then I still attended Russian language courses in the evenings, and add still to that meetings (as they still put me in the Youth League’s committee) and then I still did my training at the Aero Club.”²¹⁸ Furthermore, Pitkänen reported to his parents that “I have always filled my norm 100%. During the winter I still continued my physical culture work in the evenings

²¹⁷ Riordan, 134.

²¹⁸ Aate Pitkänen letter to Parents, Petrozavodsk, 20 March 1937.

and during my days off.”²¹⁹ As we will see in the next chapter, between 1937 and 1939, most Finns in Karelia were leading a life very different from that described in the letters of Aate Pitkänen. Severe Stalinist purges were striking the region. For Pitkänen, however, involvement in political study and activism through the Young Communist League, military preparedness work in the form of Oso (Special Operations) manoeuvre practices²²⁰, parachuting, and Aero Club, Russian language study to counter any ‘bourgeois nationalist’ tendencies, Stakhanovite-level productivity, and top ski rankings constructed a safety net that elevated his social standing and protected him from the fate of many with whom he had made the journey to Karelia. Individuals like Aate Pitkänen served as personifications of the ideal Soviet traits and ‘good life’ that the centre adamantly promoted. His community in Karelia, though ultimately condemned as ‘bourgeois nationalist’, had also mirrored the Soviet ideal in the cultural life they communally built.

Conclusion

Most Finnish North Americans wholeheartedly threw themselves into Karelian community building. They believed that they had been brought to Karelia to educate the region in labour productivity and to bring culture to the wilderness. Through their involvement in political organizations, and leisure and entertainments, such as *iltamat*, music, and theatre, Finnish Americans and Canadians developed strong bonds with their fellow migrants. However, in the process, they exacerbated a pre-existing gulf between them and other residents of the region. Irina Takala explains the non-Finnish perspective:

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Aate Pitkänen letter to Taimi Davis, Petrozavodsk, 29 March 1933.

The energy of Finns, the fact that they were engaged in theatrical activities, singing, that they created their own orchestra, provoked open misunderstanding of the local population. The people couldn't believe how anybody could be engaged in a voluntary activity in such a difficult time, not having any means of subsistence. The people had suspicions that the Americans, in addition to the preferential rations for foreigners got some additional payment from Finnish authorities, because they couldn't understand how Finns could sing, play, and go in for sports while others were starving.²²¹

For the North Americans, however, community involvement did not occur in spite of hardships, it flourished *because* of hardships. Based on the Karelian letters and memoirs, it seems that those who chose to stay in Karelia truly believed that they were building a flourishing economy and cultural life in "sure steps," as Antti Kangas wrote in 1934.²²² By working together, the immigrants could see beyond what they believed to be temporary set-backs, and made the best of their time and talents together. In Canada and the United States, Finnish immigrants had stuck together and built a rich community life that integrated politics, the arts, athletics, and socialization; it would be no different in Karelia.

Considering life writing portrayals of community life and leisure within the contexts of transforming Soviet attitudes and policies provides an opportunity to look at the ways Finnish North Americans chose to engage with the State and socialist building, and the ways they used formal venues to suit their individual needs for entertainment and social life. Youth, such a large contingent of the North American diaspora, carried on with the work of coming of age. They remoulded their immigrant backgrounds, socialist

²²¹ Takala, "North American Finns as Viewed by Soviet Karelians," 206-207.

²²² Antti Kangas letter to "Kunnon Toverit," Lososiina, 12 October 1934.

upbringing, and the avenues that the Soviet state opened to them, like movie theatres, official holidays, and political organizations, to befit courtship, sociability, and fun. Sylvi Hokkanen recalled: “being young and imbued with the idea of building a workers’ paradise, as it was called, we took all the difficulties in stride... And we had fun, real fun.”²²³

What Karelia may have lacked in material comforts, it made up for in a vibrant community, cultural life. Examining these leisure pursuits reveals a new side of the Karelian experience that is often overshadowed by a focus on the devastating fate of the community. The next chapter closely examines the ways that the Great Terror has been written about in Finnish North American letters, both from the 1930s and from the post-Stalin era, and memoirs. This analysis shows how the happy days of dances, dating, and sports stand as a foil for their tragedy, but also how those times of optimism somehow lessen the pain in the collective memory formed over time. Illustrating the magical idealism that has stayed with the memory of Karelian community life and leisure, Mayme Sevander wrote:

The skating, skiing, and music and theatre were wonderful ways to make the long, dark winter days speed by. But there was something else, too, that made our early life in Soviet Karelian as special: a spirit that I had never felt before or since, a spirit of cooperation and humanity... It was the spirit of socialism, though the streets were muddy and the stores often bare.²²⁴

²²³ Hokkanen, 59.

²²⁴ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 57-58.

CHAPTER VIII
**“Karelia is soaked in the blood of innocent people”:
Writing about the Great Terror**

The fate of the Finnish North Americans’ utopia in Soviet Karelia can, in part, be found in the pine forests of the region. At the northernmost tip of Lake Onega, where the roads of Medvezhegorsk and Povenets meet, some 160 kilometers north of Petrozavodsk, lies a horrific site of the Stalinist Great Terror. Up to 9000 people were shot and buried in the forest of the small village Sandarmokh between 1937 and 1938.¹ The July 1997 excavation of the site found remains that showed that the victims “had been stripped to their underwear, lined up next to a trench with hands and feet tied, and shot in the back of the head with a pistol.”² The victims were “men and women of sixty ethnicities and nine religions,” many of whom had been brought there from hundreds of kilometers away.³ Many were transported from Karelia’s infamous Solovets prison, often referred to as Stalin’s first concentration camp.⁴ At Sandarmokh, one man, Mikhail Matveev, a

¹ Researchers link differing numbers with the Sandarmokh grave. John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr note “more than nine thousand bodies” in *In Denial*, 117. Alexander Etkind describes the discovery of 9000 corpses in “Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror,” *Constellations* 16, 1 (2009), 182; Nick Baron refers to 5000-6000 deceased in *Soviet Karelia*, 220; Catherine Merridale lists just 1100 in *Night of Stone*, 3. However, despite stating, “[u]nusually, the site would not be used for killing again,” Merridale’s low estimate is in line with the initial mass murder that occurred at the site in less than a week in late October-early November 1937. See, for Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 220.

² Haynes and Klehr, 117.

³ Alexander Etkind, “Post-Soviet Hauntology,” 182.

⁴ See for example the region’s tourist map, “Karelia for travellers,” APIS, 1999.

Leningrad NKVD administrative officer, personally killed 200 to 250 people every day over a five day period in late October-early November 1937.⁵ Matveev's own interrogation record from 1939, when he was arrested and tried for "excess of zeal," ultimately led to the discovery of the site and the names of many of its victims.⁶ Iurii Dmitriev from Petrozavodsk was among the small group of independent researchers who found the Sandarmokh graves. Among those executed there, 268 Finnish North Americans have so far been identified.⁷ Included in the list, we find individuals directly linked to this study: Oscar Corgan (Mayme Sevander's father), Frank Heino (husband of Justiina and father of Alice), Enoch Nelson, and Karelian Technical Aid director Matti Tenhunen.

Just twenty kilometres from Petrozavodsk, in a quiet spot on the side of the road lies another site of injustice, death, and unburied memories. In 1997 in Krasny Bor, the bodies of 1193 people were found in mass, open pit graves, identified by the depressions in the ground, characteristic of such sites. In the pit, excavators, again led by Dmitriev, found bullet holes in the back of skulls, shards of glass, and pieces of tin. The glass pieces were the remnants of vodka bottles, offered to give courage to the executioners; the tin was from meat cans, given as a reward for a job well done.⁸ A large stone monument resembling teeth welcomes visitors and reminds them of the people eaten up

⁵ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 220.

⁶ Etkind, "Post-Soviet Hauntology," 183; Merridale, 4.

⁷ Haynes and Klehr, 117 and 235.

⁸ Kaa Eneberg, in conversation with Samira Saramo, Petrozavodsk, May 2008. Eneberg is a Swedish journalist and researcher whose work has uncovered the history of Swedes and Swedish Finns in Soviet Karelia. See for example Eneberg's, "Recruitment of Swedish Immigrants to Soviet Karelia," in *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia during the Depression Era*, ed. Ronald Harpelle et al., 189-200 (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2004).

by the Stalinist regime. The government would not provide funds for the creation of a monument at Krasny Bor, so Dmitriev himself made and erected the sculpture.⁹ Visiting the site, one is struck by the individual grave markers scattered in the forest, which give a name and face to some of the victims. In addition to Krasny Bor's 1200 souls, over 2500 more bodies are said to have been hidden in the Petrozavodsk vicinity.¹⁰ Many Finnish Canadians and Americans are among them.

The people of Karelia, like those throughout the Soviet Union, fell victim to the Stalinist regime's cruel and murderous programme of accusation, arrest, exile, and execution, which peaked in 1937-1938. An analysis of how the Great Terror has been narrated, interpreted, and remembered by Finnish North American life-writers contributes to humanizing the impact of this violent repression. Such work deepens understandings of the ways that the Terror impacted everyday lives, not only at the time, but also for decades later. An overview of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union and, specifically, in Karelia contextualizes how these experiences have been written about. Finnish North American letters from the mid-1930s to the first years of the 1940s provide an opportunity to read for glimpses of the Terror in action. What is written and, just as importantly, what is not, informs us of writers' strategies, and state- and self-censorship. The letters reveal emotions and negotiations of self and place wrapped up in the fear and uncertainty of turbulent times, and the settling in of silences that would enshroud the history of Finnish North Americans in Karelia for decades. Then, memoirs and retrospective letter collections written after Stalin's death make it possible to assess the

⁹ Etkind, "Post-Soviet Hauntology," 183.

¹⁰ "Krasny Bor 1937 – 1938," <http://heninen.net/punakangas/english.htm> Accessed 20 November 2013.

multiple layers of silence in Finnish North American narratives, the scars of trauma, the writers' search for "truth," and how the sources, taken together, promote a collective memory of Finnish North American life in Karelia and their community's loss. We begin, however, with a few words about the researcher's role in undertaking such fragmentary, subjective, and emotional work.

Affect and Representation

In *The Great Terror*, Robert Conquest stated: "It is very hard for the Western reader to envision the sufferings of the Soviet people as a whole during the 1930s. And in considering the Terror, it is precisely this moral and intellectual effort which must be made."¹¹ Engaging in the study of the everyday experiences of Finnish North Americans in Karelia during the years of the Great Terror, one is faced with obstacles that require consideration and acknowledgement. Firstly, the sheer magnitude of the Stalinist Terror in 1937-1938 - let alone during the whole of his rule - impersonalizes encounters with this brutality. Eila Lahti-Argutina has noted that "[t]he numbers may seem abstract if we do not stop to contemplate that each number stands for a human being, an individual."¹² When we commit ourselves to representing the experiences of individuals, re-humanizing the Terror, the historian confronts emotions that challenge the disciplinary norm.

¹¹ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1990), 250.

¹² Eila Lahti-Argutina, "The Fate of Finnish Canadians in Soviet Karelia" in *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia during the Depression Era*, ed. Ronald Harpelle et al., 118-131 (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, 2004), 121.

Paul John Eakin has argued that the analysis of life writing is not done by “disinterested witnesses,” but rather “we are ourselves part of the game.”¹³ Those who managed to get their letters out of the Soviet Union to North America during the Purges and war, either numbed their emotional display out of fear or trauma, or wrote heart-wrenching laments on the life and family they lost through migration. Memoirists and retrospective letter writers addressed the ‘dark years’ with a mix of traumatic uncertainty, anger, shame, and profound grief and loss. Researchers uneasily join in mourning their subjects’ losses, not knowing how to use the tools of ‘objectivity’ to measure and define what such emotions mean. However, the emotions of both subject and researcher play a role in the work and must be acknowledged.¹⁴ Addressing her own struggles with how to present her research on death and mourning in Russia, Catherine Merridale explains that “there were times when the sadness was the only vivid thing I could convey.”¹⁵ Complicating the researcher’s process further, as Alexander Etkind aptly notes, “[u]ncomfortably for the historian, postcatastrophic memory often entails allegories rather than facts and imaginative fiction rather than archival documentation.”¹⁶ Grappling with the relationship between academic scholarship and subject emotion, Dominick La Capra contends: “[w]ithout diminishing the importance of research, contextualization, and objective reconstruction of the past, experience as it bears on

¹³ Paul John Eakin, “Introduction: Mapping the Ethics of Life Writing” in *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 14.

¹⁴ Dominick La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 40. La Capra has warned against historians “numbing” or splitting off from the emotion that faces them in studies where trauma has occurred.

¹⁵ Merridale, 325.

¹⁶ Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 244.

understanding involves affect both in the observed and in the observer.”¹⁷ The approach, as advanced by La Capra, needs to be the search for knowledge, rather than the writing of history. Knowledge, standing apart from history, “involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value.”¹⁸ By embracing “empathic unsettlement” the researcher acknowledges and responds to the subject’s emotions and trauma, without appropriating that emotion and pain as their own.¹⁹

This chapter considers trauma, silences, and representations of ‘truths’ with recognition of the complicated and personal processes and displays of affect, and takes the maintenance of the subjects’ integrity as a crucial task. The analysis of letters and memoirs requires many levels of conscientiousness on the part of the researcher. Claudia Mills notes: “Storytelling must be done with sensitivity and concern both for the stories themselves and even more for the persons, for the human beings, whose stories they are.”²⁰ Conquest has rightly pointed out that “[w]hat is so hard to convey about the feeling of Soviet citizens in 1936-1938 is the... long-drawn-out sweat of fear, night after night, that the moment of arrest might arrive before the next dawn.”²¹ For historians, who have not endured the fear and losses of those years, writing about the Terror always falls flat. The entirety of a survivor’s experience can never be known, but armed with historical context and openness to their emotions, interpretations, and narrations, we may

¹⁷ La Capra, 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁹ La Capra, 41. See also Victoria Stewart’s discussion of the ways scholars have considered the role of “witness” in the study of traumatic narratives. *Women’s Autobiography*, 16-18.

²⁰ Mills, 114.

²¹ Conquest, 261.

let their writing guide us to an – even partial - understanding of what the Terror has meant for Finnish North Americans in Karelia.

The Great Terror

Violence and fear had been tools of the Soviet order since the Revolution, from the brutal containment of enemies during the Civil War to the repressions that accompanied Stalin's consolidation of power. In its furious march toward Communism, the Soviet regime unleashed several rounds of "small-p" purges²² to remove opposition in society, including 'Nepmen', 'kulaks', dissenting voices in the Party, and industrial 'wreckers', among many other largely fictive categories. However, the scope and magnitude of violence and repression, as primary tactics of control, reached unparalleled heights in 1937-1938. During this time, known as the Great Terror, the Soviet government switched its focus from the hunt for "class enemies" to the uncovering of "enemies of the people." As Sheila Fitzpatrick argues, this change in rhetoric marked the transition from targeted repression to random, all-out attacks.²³ Similarly, Conquest has stated, "while officialdom, the intelligentsia, and the officer corps were prime victims, by mid-1937 practically the entire population was potential Purge fodder."²⁴ Catherine Merridale argues that this "arbitrariness was integral to the system."²⁵ Though compiled numbers are incomplete and debated, Conquest has estimated that in 1937-1938, eight million people were arrested in the Soviet Union or, in other words,

[n]ot less than 5 percent of the population had been arrested by the time of Yezhov's fall [head of NKVD, stripped of all posts in early

²² Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 192.

²³ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 191-192.

²⁴ Conquest, 258.

²⁵ Merridale, 201.

1939] – that is, already at least one in twenty. One can virtually say that every other family in the country on average must have had one of its members in jail. The proportions were far higher among the educated classes.²⁶

The gulags, in those years, held about seven million people, with a survival rate as low as ten percent.²⁷ At least one million were executed and an additional million people had died in prison by late 1938.²⁸

Across the Soviet Union, the formula of the Terror was largely the same. First, the night time arrest:

Two or three NKVD men, sometimes brutal, sometimes formally correct, would knock and enter. A search was made which might be brief but could take hours, especially when books and documents had to be examined. The victim, and his wife if he had one, sat under guard meanwhile, until finally he was taken off. A quick-witted wife might in the long run save his life by getting him some warm clothes. By dawn, he would usually have been through the formalities and be in his cell.²⁹

Then, at the prison, the arrested individual would undergo several rounds of interrogation³⁰, with the aim of obtaining a confession. Since the arrested were almost all entirely innocent and the NKVD did not reveal what the alleged charges were, the prisoner would be left struggling until they invented their own crime to confess.³¹ Once

²⁶ Conquest, 290.

²⁷ Conquest, 485 and 309. Etkind has characterized Soviet camps as “torture camps, not extermination camps” and that the number of deaths “was the result of negligence rather than purposeful intent.” *Warped Mourning*, 27.

²⁸ Conquest, 485-486. Conquest notes that these numbers may well be underestimations. Formally, death sentences were only 10% of sentences, but he believes there were many more in actuality. Additionally, “the sentence of ‘ten years without the right of correspondence’ in fact mean[t] execution.” Conquest, 287.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

³⁰ As the Terror intensified, and the NKVD became increasingly overwhelmed by the number of ‘enemies’ to process, interrogations changed from the lengthy “conveyer” method of wearing the prisoner down to so-called “simplified interrogation procedures,” which quickly produced confessions through severe beatings and torture. Conquest, 279.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 277.

the arrested had confessed and provided further names to the NKVD, they were sentenced to prison, the gulag, or execution, often without trial. Researchers have detailed the horrendous conditions in Soviet jails, the inhumane transportation of prisoners, and the abuses rampant at the labour camps that led to millions of deaths.³² Those who were executed were shot with a Soviet TT-33 pistol, which often required several bullets or the ultimate use of blunt force.³³ Those who were spared from personal arrest were little better off. The families of “enemies of the people” were evicted, removed from their jobs, and “shunned as plague-bearers.”³⁴ Everyone feared their uncertain futures, not knowing if their relatives and friends would return, and whether their own turn was soon approaching. As Conquest notes, “[f]ear by night, and a feverish effort by day to pretend enthusiasm for a system of lies, was the permanent condition of the Soviet citizen.”³⁵

The Terror in Karelia

Though defying any moral, logical explanation, the government’s war on its own people found reason, in part, through the “inextricably intertwined” relationship of ideology and security.³⁶ In David Hoffman’s words, “Soviet leaders could achieve communism only if they defended the Soviet motherland from the attack of capitalist countries. And from their point of view, they could defend the country only... by eliminating all dissent to the socialist order.”³⁷ Dissent was defined broadly and

³² For example, Conquest, 267-268, 311, 315, 338; Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 27, 44.

³³ Conquest, 287; Merridale, 200..

³⁴ Fitzpatrick, 213 and Conquest, 264.

³⁵ Conquest, 252.

³⁶ Hoffman, 176.

³⁷ Ibid.

arbitrarily. However, those with foreign contacts and the intelligentsia of minority nationalities were categorized, with certainty, as dangerous and needing to be repressed.³⁸ Proximity to the Finnish border, alleged 'bourgeois nationalism,' and perceived foreignness proved to be the undoing of Red Finn Karelia, and the justification for the wide-scale repression of Finns in the region.

Life in Karelia changed very quickly for Finnish North Americans. Sergei Kirov's murder on 1 December 1934 has often been pinpointed as the turning point for the fate of Finns in Karelia. As First Secretary of the Leningrad Regional Party Committee, to whom the Karelian party was subordinate, Kirov had provided the Karelian Red Finn leadership with much support and had advocated on their behalf. His successor, Andrei Zhdanov, however:

took up his new post determined to enhance the defensive capability and security of the northwest border, and to assert communist authority, party democracy, and political orthodoxy among subordinate regional structures, including the Karelian party organisation, dominated by Red Finns who persisted in proclaiming, only slightly less vociferously than earlier, their internationalist aspirations, transborder perspectives and dual-peripheral orientation.³⁹

The early manifestations of Zhdanov's control included a renewed attack on the Finnish, Karelian, and Ingrian families living in the Karelian border districts, forcefully relocating thousands of individuals.⁴⁰ In conjunction with clearing the border, 400-500 regional political and industrial leaders, primarily Red Finns, were purged at this time.⁴¹ To thwart Finnish nationalism and to transfer local power to the Soviet centre, the Finns'

³⁸ Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End*, 109.

³⁹ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

much-respected First Secretary of the Karelian Party, Kustaa Rovio, was stripped of his post in August 1935 and sent to Moscow. Four months later, in late November, Edvard Gylling, too, was removed as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, and followed Rovio to Moscow. Both men, first re-assigned to insignificant Central Committee work, were arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938. Russians from the Leningrad Party replaced Rovio and Gylling, and took over many of the other Karelian posts taken from Finns. Nick Baron argues: “[f]rom this time on, it is difficult to distinguish an independent Karelian position in any sphere of policy.”⁴²

By the autumn of 1935, Finnish North Americans, largely spared from the purges up to that point, could not deny that the tide had turned in Karelia. Finnish North Americans working and living in the agricultural communes Säde and Hiilisuo felt the weight of the repressions first, when their immigrant leaders were arrested, exiled, and eventually executed for ‘bourgeois nationalism’ and ‘wrecking.’⁴³ It seems 1936 was the calm before the storm, though people were arrested and taken under no known formal policy or explanation. Early 1937 witnessed the continued removal of Finns in leadership positions. The Terror against the whole population was officially launched in Karelia and across the Soviet Union in July 1937, with Yezhov’s signing of Operative Order 00447, the repression of “kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements,” followed in August by Order 00486, “The operation for the repression of wives of traitors of the Motherland” (also extended to children), and Orders 00439, 00485, and 00593, which specifically

⁴² Baron, 171.

⁴³ Takala, “The Great Purge” in *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, ed. Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, *Journal of Finnish Studies*, Special Issue, 15, 1-2 (November 2011). 146; Ylikangas, “The Sower Commune,” 80.

outlined the repression of national groups in the Soviet Union. While these national orders did not mention Finns by name, they became the basis of the region's large-scale repression.⁴⁴ A further October Order, number 00693, "Operation for the repression of illegal crossers of the border of the USSR,"⁴⁵ had especially devastating effects on the Finnish *loikkarit* (borderhoppers). At the same time as issuing Order 0047, the Soviet government and NKVD established the use of *troikas*, which empowered local groups of three people – though often operating as a *dvoika*, or twosome – to impose the death penalty.⁴⁶ In Karelia, the regional First secretary, head of the local NKVD, and the Party Prosecutor served as arrestor, prosecutor, judge, and jury.⁴⁷

Under the all-encompassing Order 00447, Karelia's first target, to be fulfilled between 5 August 1937 and 20 November 1937, demanded the purge of 1000 people, 300 of whom were to be executed.⁴⁸ Heeding Yezhov's warning that "better too far than not enough," local police and the new Party leadership were, in Baron's words, "inclined to interpret their quotas not as limits but as starting-points."⁴⁹ By the November deadline, the *troika* had, in fact, convicted more than double its target and sentenced 1690 people to death.⁵⁰ The arrests and death sentences continued at such exorbitant rates.

Approximately 10 000 people were arrested in Karelia between July 1937 and August

⁴⁴ Takala, "The Great Purge," 149.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁶ Conquest, 286.

⁴⁷ As the Purge was quick to turn on its own, over the course of the Karelian Terror campaign, the region went through four First secretaries, after Rovio, and two heads of the NKVD. See, for example, Takala, "The Great Purge," 149.

⁴⁸ Takala, "The Great Purge," 148.

⁴⁹ Baron, *Soviet Karelia*, 211.

⁵⁰ Takala, "The Great Purge," 151.

1938, of whom up to 83% were condemned to death.⁵¹ These verdicts were called the “five kopek sentence,” by Finnish North Americans in Karelia, referring to the cost of a bullet.⁵² Although Finns represented no more than three percent of the Karelian population, more than forty percent of the region’s purge victims were ethnically Finnish.⁵³ Irina Takala traces the arrests of 418 Finnish Americans and 323 Canadian Finns (741 total), concluding that Finnish North Americans accounted for fifteen percent of the region’s total purges.⁵⁴ Finnish North Americans in Karelia in 1938 numbered some 4750, out of the approximate total free population of 447 000, or, in other words, no more than one percent of the region’s population.⁵⁵ Therefore, Finnish North Americans, like Finns overall, comprised a disproportionately high percentage of those repressed in Karelia. Out of the North American Finns arrested, Takala has found that 84 percent of the Canadians and 71 percent of the Americans were executed.⁵⁶ The scale of death sentences imposed on Finns in Karelia has led Auvo Kostiainen to label the Terror as “genocide.”⁵⁷

⁵¹ The Karelian numbers, as everywhere in the Soviet Union, are incomplete and debated. However, Baron and Takala’s numbers prove quite reliable and come relatively close to each other. Baron reports that 9250 individuals were arrested during the July 1937-August 1938 time period (*Soviet Karelia*, 211), while Takala posits that by 1 January 1938, 5340 people had been arrested and with 5164 further arrests taking place between January and August 1938, totalling 10 504 (“The Great Purge,” 155).

⁵² Hokkanen, 96.

⁵³ Takala, “The Great Purge,” 147-148. 27% of the purge victims were ethnic Karelians and 25% were Russian. Baron contends that Finns represented 2.5% of the population and represented 1/3 of the purge victims. See *Soviet Karelia*, 211.

⁵⁴ Takala, “The Great Purge,” 159.

⁵⁵ Number of Finnish North Americans in the region based on Takala (“The Great Purge,” 155) and 1938 regional population calculated on average yearly growth between 1933-1939, as outlined by Baron (Table 5.9, 181). Baron’s population sources excluded the region’s prisoner labourers.

⁵⁶ Takala, “The Great Purge,” 156.

⁵⁷ Auvo Kostiainen, “Genocide in Soviet Karelia: Stalin’s Terror and the Finns of Soviet Karelia.”

The numbers of arrested and executed do not begin to address the true scope of the Great Terror in Karelia. Families and friends, themselves repressed and shunned, traumatized and filled with fear, stand obscured behind the numbers that represent each individual taken by the NKVD. Finnish North American memoirs and oral histories abound with stories of the wives and children of arrested men being sent to places like the dreaded “Lime Island,” on Lake Onega, where back-breaking forced labour and inadequate provisions claimed the lives, health, and spirit of many.⁵⁸ Fear was ever present. During the sweeping arrests, Klaus Maunu’s father built a large wooden chest, knowing that if he were arrested, his family would be evicted.⁵⁹ In that case, they could quickly pack their essentials into the chest to bring with them. The chest stood as a constant reminder of what might lurk ahead.

In such a closely knit community, it is reasonable to say that the Terror reached into the lives of every Finnish North American in Soviet Karelia. This runs contrary to Sheila Fitzpatrick’s argument that “the terror was not a terror for everyone” and that the Great Purges likely had less of an impact on the daily lives of ordinary people than disciplinary labour practices.⁶⁰ Fitzpatrick’s argument rests on the fact that, overall, the Soviet Terror targeted officials and the intelligentsia above all others. However, in Karelia, the Finnish North Americans’ privileged position, their very obvious ‘foreignness,’ their imported North American outspokenness, and the region’s precarious border position in the geopolitical tensions between Finland and the Soviet Union made

⁵⁸ See for example, Maunu, 21; Alatalo, 26; Hokkanen, 95; Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 110.

⁵⁹ Maunu, 21.

⁶⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 202. Merridale puts forward a similar argument. Merridale, 198.

the immigrants obvious targets. Anti-Finnish measures severely restricted the freedoms of the region's Finnish border hoppers, Red Finns, and Finnish North Americans alike. The Finnish language was eliminated in schools and administration, Finnish newspapers were discontinued, and cultural activities had to be conducted in Russian.⁶¹ As early as 1935, many once-desired Finnish teachers were dismissed for 'nationalism.'⁶² Sylvi Hokkanen was among those whose teaching careers came to an abrupt end, ousted for being 'foreigners' and insufficient in Russian.⁶³ Finnish children's education suffered greatly. Whole libraries of Finnish language books were destroyed, although some, like young Klaus Maunu, hid away their cherished volumes.⁶⁴ The change in language policy proved very difficult for many immigrants, who struggled to maintain jobs and go about their normal lives, as bravely noted in the letters of Justiina Heino and Lisi Hirvonen.⁶⁵ "[W]e were not even supposed to speak Finnish in public," Sylvi Hokkanen remembered, and Allan Sihvola noted that "on the streets you would not dare speak Finnish aloud, as the Finnish language was an 'enemy of the state' language and taboo."⁶⁶ Mayme Sevander wrote: "People dared speak Finnish only in whispers, in their own rooms, behind closed doors and around only the most trusted of friends. The rest of the time

⁶¹ Baron, 223. Baron argues: "The end of the use of Finnish in Soviet Karelia was designed finally to extinguish the territory's dual periphery status and transborder perspectives of spatial development."

⁶² Alatalo, 25.

⁶³ Hokkanen, 85-86.

⁶⁴ Maunu, 22.

⁶⁵ Justiina Heino partial letter to unknown recipient [one of her sons], unknown date, circa. 1938 (JH4); Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, "U.S.S.R. Karjala," 17 January 1939.

⁶⁶ Hokkanen, 85; Sihvola, 41. "Kadulla ei tahtonut uskaltaa ääneen puhua suomea, sillä suomenkieli oli 'kansanvihollisten' kieli ja tabu."

people like my mother, who knew no other language, stayed silent, worried that the wrong words would slip out and then they, too, would be taken away.”⁶⁷

Indeed, the fear of saying the wrong thing began to tear apart friendships. In his memoir, Paavo Alatalo relays his interrogation with the NKVD in early 1938.⁶⁸ He had been asked about what his family discussed, to which he replied that he was too busy participating in numerous Soviet approved activities to take note and that no one visited his home. In a January 2002 interview, Alatalo further elaborated that people did not visit with each other “because everyone feared each other. You didn’t dare go, really, anywhere.”⁶⁹ Mayme Sevander recalled: “We didn’t know who was friend or who was foe... Finns were no longer sticking together; no one was sticking together. We all looked out for ourselves and our own families; it was suicide to trust further than that.”⁷⁰ There was reason to be suspicious and fearful. Denunciations were an unsavoury yet ever-present feature of Soviet life, and the case was no different in Karelia.⁷¹ Regardless, it was impossible to keep everything inside. Though writing about people’s hesitance to speak, Sevander also remembered: “The arrests were all we talked about, but in whispers, always in whispers, and then we felt a knot in our stomachs, a fear that someone would hear us, that a hand would fall on our shoulder and voice would say,

⁶⁷ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 100-101.

⁶⁸ Alatalo, 27.

⁶⁹ Paavo Alatalo interview with Raija Warkentin, Jokela, Finland, 15 January 2002. “Sen takia, että jokainen pelkäsi toisiaan. Ei sitä uskallettu käydä oikein missään.”

⁷⁰ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 99.

⁷¹ Siegelbaum and Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life*, 181-182; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 116; Kotkin, 174; Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 124. Sevander commented: “It would make me happy to say that there were no turncoats among the Finnish community. Alas, my correspondents and interviewees hold to another opinion.”

“Come with me,” and that would be the end of us. But we couldn’t help ourselves; we had to talk; stories went around despite the risk.”⁷²

Writing at the Time of Terror

In a world of “whisperers,” the letter could also speak too loudly.⁷³ It was widely known in the Soviet Union, and in Karelia, that the post was intercepted and that foreign contacts placed a person in danger.⁷⁴ Whether letters were stopped by censors before leaving the country or whether writers chose to cut off their foreign correspondences when the purges began,⁷⁵ few letters are now available from the peak of the Terror. Though not referring to political censorship or the Soviet Union, Sheila McIntyre accurately characterized the peril of letters that would have faced Finnish North Americans in Karelia: “where conversation is fleeting, a letter is a written record of feelings, events, and opinions that is dangerously open to interpretation and misinterpretation – both intended and unintended – by readers.”⁷⁶ Letter writers utilized several strategies to deal with their correspondence during the Terror. Before delving into the covert and muted letter writing practices, however, we first turn to a remarkable letter that depicts the life of terror with startling clarity.

⁷² Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 101. Allan Sihvola also noted that news of the arrests immediately circulated through the community, 42.

⁷³ See Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), xxxii. In this controversial work, Figes identified the fitting term from the two uses of the Russian *shepchushchii*, referring both to people whispering not to be overheard and to those who whisper about others.

⁷⁴ Glenna Roberts and Serge Cipko, *One-Way Ticket: The Soviet Return-to-the-Homeland Campaign, 1955-1960* (Manitock, ON: Penumbra Press, 2008), 40-41; Conquest, 271.

⁷⁵ See Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 124 and 126.

⁷⁶ Sheila McIntyre, “‘From a Fine Pen Much Art and Fancy Flows’: Letter Writing and Gentility in Early New England” in *More Than Words: Readings in Transport, Communication and the History of Postal Communication*, ed. John Willis (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, 2007), 183.

Aino and Aatu Pitkänen escaped Karelia sometime between March and early June 1938. The couple travelled over 500 kilometres, surviving the month-long trek to the border and the subsequent eight days of quarantine in a Finnish prison, finally landing in their family village of Urimolahti. From there, Aino Pitkänen wrote a chilling letter to her husband's brother's family (Aate Pitkänen's mother and father) in Ontario, which detailed the dire situation so vividly and accurately that it merits quotation at length.

Pitkänen wrote:

Thank you for your letter that I received in March. I was very happy to receive it. Except there isn't really a place where I could read it because nowadays it's a bad person in the Soviet Union who receives letters from outside. ... we poor people have not been feeling well for the entire past winter. This is because Russia is undergoing a big cleansing. The whole winter we were afraid whose turn is it to leave tonight. Soldiers came with their bayonets to get [people][.] after that nothing more was known [of them]. From the whole river they took Finns so thoroughly that only four men were left when we escaped[.] they have [since] taken the rest of them as well. You cannot believe what life in the Soviet Union was like last winter. People have not done anything bad, only hard work, and this is the way they are treated, some are imprisoned, others sent away. ... All last winter we did not dare sleep[.] always had to watch the door because the soldiers always came at night. This imprisonment of people is because of saboteurs [and] innocent people have to suffer, especially Finns. All the Finnish books had to be burned, Finnish newspapers were discontinued. Karelian and Russian languages came into use [and] we forcibly became illiterate. They did organize night circles for Karelian and Russian language... This was a good thing, in the country, [use] the country's language. All the women whose husbands had been imprisoned were treated badly by the local leadership. Those women who were working less strenuous tasks, for example in the cafeteria, were taken out of work and sent to the forest, even if they had small children[.] In the forest a woman alone can't keep many children alive. It also happened that they were evicted and told to go where they please. ... There were eight widows living together in one small room with three children. But because they were wives and children of the imprisoned they are left [like that]. You may think that I am slandering the welfare of the workers in the Soviet Union. I am not, but writing as things are. It is not the wish of the Party or the Government, but when saboteurs

have infiltrated such places where they can do damage, then an honest worker becomes their victim. That is what happened to us. ... Injustice wins no matter how good the person is. Because today in Russian prisons there sit hundreds of innocents. At least our conscience does not bother us that we would have done anything wrong against the Soviet Union. ...⁷⁷

The letter further outlined the names of arrested friends, who the Pitkänen family knew from Canada.

Pitkänen displayed a striking understanding of hostility towards foreign contacts, the nature of the arrests, the attack on the Finnish language, the state of Soviet prisons and justice, and the fate of wives of ‘enemies of the people’. Pitkänen’s narrative clearly demonstrates that while the men were taken (and the horrors they endured were not witnessed by those who remained), women and their children were disempowered and displaced. The suffering of women and children served as a symbol of inhumanity.

Margaret Kelleher has analysed the image of women and children in Irish Famine

⁷⁷ Aino Pitkänen letter to Antti and Kirsti Pitkänen, Urimolahti, Finland, 25 July 1938. ”Kiitos kirjeestäni jonka sain maaliskuulla. Tykkäsin kovasti saada sen kirjeen. Vaan ei meinaa olla semmoista paikkaa että missä sen sain lukea. Sillä nykyisin on se paha ihminen Neuvostoliitossa, joka saa ulkoa kirjeen. ... me raukat ei ola voitu hyvin koko viime talven. Sillä Venäjällä on käynnissä suuri puhdistus. Koko talven oli se pelko, että kenen on vuoro lähteä tänä yönä. Solitaat tuli pistimien kansa hakemaan sen jälkeen ei teitona mitään. Siellä kok järvellä otettiin niin tarkaan suomalaisia että ei jään[y], kuin 4 miestä silloin kun meidät karkotettiin. On ne viety loputkin. ... Te ette voi uskoa minkälaista on elämä Neuvostoliitossa viime talven. Ihmiset ei ole tehny mitään paahaa, kun kovasti työtä, niin näin kohdellaan toiset vangitaan toiset laitetaan pois. ... Koko viime talven ei uskaltan[u] nukkua aina piti vahtata oveen koska solitaat tulee aina ne tuli yöllä. Tämä ihmisten vangitseminen johtuu tuholaisen takia siitä saa kärsiä syyttömät, erittäin suomalaiset. Kaikki suomalaiset kirjat piti poltaa, suomalaiset sanoma-lehdet lakkautettiin. Karjalan ja Venäjän kieli tuli kätäntöön pakosti tuli lukutaitottomaksi. Järjesti ne illaksi Venäjän ja Karjalan kielen piiriä... tämä oli hyvä asia maassa maan kieltä. Kaikkia niitä naisia kohtaan joilla miehet vangittiin niin paikallinen johto kohdeli niitä huonosti. Ne naiset jos oli kevyemässä työssä erim ruokalassa, niin pantiin pois työstä ja määrättiin metsään, vaikka oli pienet lapset... Metsässä ei voi elättää nainen yksin monta lasta. Sattui niinkin että käskettiin pois huoneesta että mene minne tykkäät. ... Niitä leskiä asu kahdeksan yhdessä pienessä huoneessa ja siihen 3 lasta. Mutta kun ne oli vangittujen naisia ja lapsia niin ne saa olla. Te voite ajatella että minä parjaan Neuvostoliiton työläisten hyvin vointia. En vaan kirjoitan niin kun asia on. Se ei ole puolueen ja halituksen tahto vaan, kun on pääsy tuholaiset semoisiin paikoin missä ne voi tehdä sitä paha, niin siinä joutuu rehellinen työläinen sen uhriksi, niin se on käyny meille. ... Vääräys voittoa vaikka ihminen olisi kuinka hyvä. Sillä nykyisin istuu Venäjän vankiloissa satoja syyttömiä. Ei meidän ainakaan vaivaa omaa tuntoa että olisime tehny pahaa Neuvostoliittoa vastaan.”

narratives and has similarly found that such figures represented the “unspeakable.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, Kelleher argues that the inability of mothers to care for or feed their children symbolized a “collapse in the natural order,” but also served to draw attention away from the political causes for the famine.⁷⁹ In the case of Pitkänen’s narrative, the attention to women’s hardships addressed the experiences of her personal friends and her own very likely fate had she and Aatu not escaped from Karelia. Though Pitkänen was able to convey the “collapse in the natural order” through these examples familiar to her, she did not shy away from addressing the political issues at play.

It is not known how Antti and Kirsti Pitkänen reacted to such shocking news. Antti had been in Karelia and learned first-hand that Soviet Communism was not what he and other Finnish North Americans had imagined before. However, Antti Pitkänen left before the Purges in Karelia began. Their son, Aate, as we have seen, sent positive messages of Karelia’s development. Furthermore, Antti and Kirsti were staunch Communists, who upheld the Party line. Yet, here was a letter, from Antti’s sister-in-law and brother that told of unbelievable horrors. Aino Pitkänen placed the blame on “saboteurs,” explicitly stating that the chaos was “not the wish of the Party or the Government.” Pitkänen portrayed herself as a loyal communist, and distanced herself from “slandering,” which so many who had left Karelia had been accused of. Though out of the Soviet Union, Aino Pitkänen demonstrated remarkable bravery in “writing as things are,” choosing to get the news out, despite the risks of Soviet retribution and North

⁷⁸ Margaret Kelleher, “Woman as Famine Victim: The Figure of Woman in Irish Famine Narratives” in *Gender and Catastrophe*, ed Ronit Lentin (London: Zed Books, 1997), 249.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

American Communist – even family – ostracization. Pitkänen’s letter remains as a significant contribution to rare contemporary first-hand accounts of the Terror in Karelia.

Other Finnish North Americans, still in Karelia, were more restrained. Some chose to simply discontinue writing letters until life seemed more settled. This seems to have been Aate Pitkänen’s strategy, whose available letters contain a gap between early 1937 and 1 January 1939. Aino Pitkänen, however, wrote about Aate to his parents:

“[w]ell then greetings from Aate. He does not dare write to you or to us. He was very emotional when we left. Aate can’t be any surer of when the retrievers attack him.”⁸⁰

Other immigrants nevertheless strove to maintain their correspondence, despite difficulties and never knowing for sure whether the letters would arrive at either end. Writers devised strategies and codes to pass their letters through the system. A Russian joke about two brothers, one in the USSR and the other outside, demonstrates the scale of evasion in Soviet personal letters. They had decided that the brother remaining in the Soviet Union would use red ink when not telling the truth and black ink for the truth: “[t]he first letter arrived written all in black describing the success of the harvest, his new housing, the shelves crowded with consumer goods. Only one item was missing in this utopia, the brother wrote – red ink!”⁸¹ Using family history and multiple correspondences stemming from two sisters, Ann Goldberg was able to unveil an elaborate though improvised code used in letters to bypass both Stalin’s and Hitler’s

⁸⁰ Aino Pitkänen letter to Antti and Kirsti Pitkänen, Urimolahti, Finland, 25 July 1938. “No sitten terveisiä Aateelta hän ei uskalla teille kirjoittaa eikä meille. Hän oli kovasti liikutettu, kun me lähdimme. Ei Aate voi olla sen varmenpi että koska on hakumiehet kimpussa.”

⁸¹ Roberts and Cipko, 43.

censors.⁸² Even without the advantage of extensive biographical information or the two sides of correspondence, it is still possible to identify some of the ways in which Finnish North Americans addressed politically sensitive topics. Instead of writing directly, correspondents often slipped mention of forbidden topics amid typical content.⁸³ For example, after Frank Heino was arrested, Alice simply asked her brother, “Have you gotten a letter from Pop?” and otherwise left him unmentioned in the letter.⁸⁴ However, without knowledge of what was happening inside the Soviet Union, many North American recipients, like Mary Leder’s parents, did not understand the “hints.”⁸⁵

Sometimes frustration and distress led writers to throw subtlety out the window. In a letter written close to the same time as Alice’s letter mentioned above, Justiina Heino overtly stated: “I got [a letter] from Martta now and she didn’t know that father’s been arrested even though I wrote her in as political way as I knew how but I still saw from the letter that she hadn’t received my letter.”⁸⁶ Perhaps exemplifying glitches in the Soviet mail interception system, Justiina’s letter that explicitly addressed arrest, the act of masking writing, and state censorship reached its destination.

⁸² Ann Goldberg, “Reading and Writing Across the Borders of Dictatorship: Self-Censorship and Emigrant Experience in Nazi and Stalinist Europe” in *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, ed. Bruce S. Elliott et al., 158-172 (Ottawa: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

⁸³ For an analysis of discrete letter writing practices in a different context, see Anu Lahtinen, “There’s No Friend like a Sister: Sisterly Relations and the Rhetoric of Sisterhood in the Correspondence of the Aristocratic Stenbock Sisters” in *The Trouble with Ribs: Women, Men and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anu Korhonen and Kate Lowe (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2007), 195-196.

⁸⁴ Alice Heino letter to Wiljam, Kontupohja, unknown date, circa 1938 (AH4). Goldberg similarly found that one of her studied correspondents signalled the arrest of her husband by simply not mentioning him, until he was released from prison. See “Reading and Writing Across the Borders of Dictatorship,” 163.

⁸⁵ Leder, 297.

⁸⁶ Justiina Heino partial letter to unknown recipient [one of her sons], date unknown, circa early 1938 (JH4). “Marthalta sain nyt [kirjeen] ja hän ei tiedä että isä on pidätetty vaikka kirjoitin hänelle niin poliittises muodos kuin suingi osasin mutta silti näin kirjeestä että hän ei ollu saanu minun kirjettä.”

Others remained silent about what was happening around them, but have left clues for the knowing reader. No letters written by Lisi Hirvonen in 1937 have been found. There is no way to know whether she wrote during that year, but, in February 1938, Hirvonen wrote that she had received her sister's letter "ages ago." According to Hirvonen, it had been left unanswered "because there isn't any news really."⁸⁷ Given Aino Pitkänen's description of the same awful winter in Karelia, one can deduce that Hirvonen had chosen silence. David Gerber argues that it is the historian's task to "explain how it is that intentional, strategic silence, where we might be fortunate enough to find traces of it, may have been integrated into the negotiations that comprise epistolarity."⁸⁸ Worries about censorship and the consequences of writing outright added another actor to the epistolary negotiation. In addition to protecting her sister from the truth of what was happening in Karelia, by avoiding the topic and adding assurances that she was "OK," Lisi Hirvonen had to construct her letters in a way that protected her from a third party overseeing the correspondence. Perhaps Hirvonen's silence also indicated her personal process of trying to understand what was happening around her. Although they had already separated, Eino Hirvonen was arrested in 1938 and it is believed that Lisi had also, at least, been interrogated by police.⁸⁹ Writing on 10 September 1938, she acknowledged her silence, reporting that she had "so much to say but can't, maybe

⁸⁷ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 2 February 1938.

⁸⁸ David A. Gerber, "Epistolary Masquerades: Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters" in *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, ed. Bruce S. Elliott et al. (Ottawa: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 151.

⁸⁹ Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 189; Anatoli Shishkin correspondence with Nancy Mattson, 06 December 2009. Eino Hirvonen spent ten years in prison.

sometime in the future....”⁹⁰ She would never reveal all she had hoped to share with her sister. Nothing is known about Lisi Hirvonen after a letter from Petrozavodsk dated 19 July 1939.

Goldberg notes that “because authentic feelings and thoughts mostly could not be communicated, that form had become hollowed out and transformed. Letter-writing thus became a kind of mimicry of authenticity and privacy, a performance in which real communication of real thoughts occurred only in oblique, coded, and disguised form.”⁹¹ The letters of Terttu Kangas reveal the strategy of moving attention away from one’s self in order to avoid difficult topics. Kangas apologized to her sister for not having written between January 1937 and January 1939, by explaining that the “[b]iggest reason of course has been just laziness.”⁹² Kangas’s letters typically offered elaborate, if not mundane, descriptions of her daily life. However, other than a few, very brief lines about her family’s work, questions to her sister almost entirely made up the January 1939 letter. Kangas told nothing about what had happened in her life over the last two years. She wanted to reconnect with her sister, but could not write about her life honestly and openly. By posing question after question to her sister, she was able to re-establish their correspondence, while safely maintaining the silence surrounding the two missing years. Like Lisi Hirvonen, the fate of Terttu Kangas and her family is unknown beyond the 30 January 1939 letter.

⁹⁰ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 10 September 1938.

⁹¹ Goldberg, 167.

⁹² Terttu Kangas letter to Toini, Lohijärvi, 30 January 1939. “Suurin syy on tietenkin ollut vain laiskuus.”

The long gaps and stoppages in correspondence, and the uncertainty of whether one's mail would even arrive profoundly affected the relationship of correspondents and the emotional condition of the Karelian writers. David Fitzpatrick has aptly noted that "[t]he arrival of a letter was itself a token of solidarity, while the absence of an expected letter was an endemic source of anxiety, even a harbinger of death."⁹³ When one's sense of self could be partially wrapped up in regular connections with the life left behind, being without letters caused a disruption of "personal continuity."⁹⁴ Failure to hear from loved ones could lead to a severe sense of loneliness and depression. After losing two young sons in Karelia and not knowing what had happened to her husband after his arrest in 1938, Justiina Heino expressed in her letters a desperate plea for ties to her family and old community. Heino wrote that she had been wondering about all kinds of old friends and looking at the few photographs she had, but confessed she knew nothing of their lives, having been without correspondence for so long.⁹⁵ Photographs and letters received, looked at over and over again, made poor substitutes for missed people, but provided a tangible link. While asking her sister questions moved attention away from her own life, Terttu Kanags's January 1939 letter can also be viewed as an attempt to re-entrench herself in social world of the community she had left behind and now longed for. With uncertainty clouding daily life, nostalgic memories of friends, family, and the places left behind solidified the desire to maintain the security of belonging in the home community.

⁹³ David Fitzpatrick, "Irish Emigration and the Art of Letter-Writing," in *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, ed. Bruce S. Elliott et al. (Ottawa: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 97.

⁹⁴ Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 4.

⁹⁵ Justiina Heino letter to Wiljam, Salmi, 16 June 1941.

Zophia Rosinska notes how “[i]nability to return home...intensifies the desire to return and the sense of longing for home.”⁹⁶ It became increasingly difficult for Finnish North Americans to stay optimistic about past decisions to move to Karelia. In Lisi Hirvonen’s final available letter, from July 1939, she reflected on her life’s choices:

Yes, many times I sadly remember you all because I am so alone here but that is my fate. I have thought that I should have stayed there in Canada and not gone anywhere like a hobo[.] I have come to the view that the person is the most happy and contented who is in one place their whole life even though too late I came to understand. Well, what about it[,] you can’t get it back anymore.⁹⁷

Hirvonen, like many of the letter writers, had expressed her belief that life in Karelia would only improve, but the passing of time and the hostile environment challenged her hopefulness.⁹⁸ With the possibility of leaving the Soviet Union practically eliminated by 1936, many Finnish North Americans, like Hirvonen, were saddened yet resigned to their “fate” of life in Karelia.

The extraordinary life of Aate Pitkänen took a dramatic twist during the Finnish Continuation War. Through research of official Soviet documents, Anatoli Gordijenko discovered that Aate Pitkänen had become a Soviet spy, leading intelligence gathering missions into Finnish territory in 1941 and 1942.⁹⁹ Pitkänen was captured and imprisoned by the Finns on 5 May 1942. In June 1942, just days before his execution by

⁹⁶Zofia Rosinska, “Emigratory Expience: The Melancholy of No Return” in *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, ed. Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 34.

⁹⁷ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 19 July 1939. “Kyllä monta kertaa ikävällä muistelen teitä kaikkia kun minä olen niin yksin täällä mutta se on minun kohtaloni. Olen ajatellut että olis pitany jäädä sinne canaadaan eikä minnekään lähteä hopoilemaan olen tullu siihen käsitykseen että semonen ihminen on kaikkein onnellisempi ja tyytyväisempi joka on yhes paikas koko elämänsä waikka liijan myöhään minäkin sen tuln ymärtämään. Niin mitäpä siitä sitä ei enää saa takaisin.”

⁹⁸ Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, Wonganperä, 5 February 1933.

⁹⁹ Gordijenko, 125-127.

the Finns for wartime espionage, Pitkänen set his final thoughts and wishes on paper from his cell in occupied Petrozavodsk (Äänislinna). He expressed remorse for not having been there for his parents, stating: “I am sorry that I have not been able to help you at all in your old age, but as you know yourselves, it has not been possible.”¹⁰⁰

Pitkänen continued: “You did right, Father, when you returned to Canada in time, and didn’t have to suffer these wars and become separated from home and family like me.”

In his final letter, from 12 June 1942, Pitkänen confessed: “It was always my wish to see you again one day, and particularly now that I have started a family of my own.”¹⁰¹

Though the reality of impending death would understandably inspire retrospection, Pitkänen’s writing echoes the sentiments expressed in Justiina Heino’s and Lisi Hirvonen’s letters. Even many years after they had separated from their past and established new lives, thoughts of family and the familiar continued to hold a special place.

Others, still, would not accept their place in Karelia and became increasingly desperate to leave.¹⁰² The letters of Kalle Korhonen to his estranged daughter, Aune, inflict readers with the uneasy emotions of strained relationships, regrets, and losses. The very intimate details of this letter exchange could only truly be understood by the correspondents, and since Aune’s voice is missing, the analysis of this collection proves challenging. However, being mindful of the ways that letter writers shape their narratives to best convey their needs and to suit their audience, it is possible to read the strain

¹⁰⁰ Aate Pitkänen letter to parents, Petrozavodsk/Äänislinna, 10 June 1942.

¹⁰¹ Aate Pitkänen letter to parents, Petrozavodsk/Äänislinna, 12 June 1942.

¹⁰² For example, the Heino letter collection is accompanied by a 1 August 1938 letter from Minnesota Congressman Harold Knutson to Bill Heino that reveals that the Heino family, in both the United States and in Karelia, were working to get Justiina, Alice, and Walter out of the Soviet Union.

caused by political upheaval in Karelia across the strain of the relationship depicted in Korhonen's letters. The span of the correspondence reveals Korhonen's ever-growing desire to leave Karelia and the strategies he employed to discuss his return with his daughter, in light of both the nature of their relationship and the turmoil in Karelia.

Korhonen extended his first letter to Aune in August 1935, noting three years of silence between them.¹⁰³ He portrayed the positive sides of Soviet life and leaned heavily on ideological language. Such rhetoric extended to the congratulations he offered for Aune's newborn child, whom he wrongly believed to be a son. Korhonen wished that the "boy child" would grow to be "HEALTHY, SWIFT, BRAVE AND (apologies) THE NEW SOCIALIST WORLD'S UNFALTERING SUPPORTER."¹⁰⁴ This letter depicts a man contented with his life in Karelia, and who believed that his daughter, now an adult, would understand his past choices and actions. By late October 1936, Korhonen admitted that he and his wife had begun to think about returning to North America.¹⁰⁵ He wrote about some of the considerations involved, including his preference for the United States rather than Canada, but noted that getting into the US would be more difficult. Korhonen warned his daughter not to tell anyone about his plans. In the next letter, written 30 January 1937, Korhonen again notes: "I have begun to grow the idea of moving still to

¹⁰³ Kalle Korhonen letter to Aune Batson, Tunkua District, Soviet Karelia, 23 August 1935.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Capitalized in original. "TERVE, REIPAS, ROHKEA JA (anteeksi) UUDEN, SOSIALISTEISEN MAAILMAN HUORJUMATOIN KANNATTAJA."

¹⁰⁵ Kalle Korhonen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 25 October 1936.

the U.S.A. but it is now a bit difficult. Requires organization and [you] can't travel whenever you want."¹⁰⁶ Korhonen's writing signals the growing tensions in Karelia.

In May 1937, Korhonen did not write directly about returning, but expressed his desire to be with his daughter in emotional terms. He wrote: "Only now I too feel, with a serious mind, that I wish to be near you, I wish to see you often – your child, your husband I wish to see often ... but especially you ... Before I didn't feel this matter, did not comprehend with love. Now I feel it."¹⁰⁷ Korhonen's letters in January and May 1937 did not speak directly to the increasing arrests and unease gripping the Finnish community. However, the emotion Korhonen expresses may very well hint at the fear and uncertainty he and others were becoming acquainted with.

Korhonen's letter dated 30 November 1937 is a rare one both because it was written during the peak of the Terror and because of the insights it reveals about letter writing strategy. This letter is devoid of the emotion seen in the previous one. Given how frankly Korhonen had written about his desire to return to North America less than a year ago and the horrors we know were occurring in Karelia at the time of writing, this letter suggests active self-censorship. Korhonen wrote: "I, because I am ill so much, think sometimes that [I'll] move there again, for health's sake, but from the other side rises counter-points against. I know that my health is [best] in that climate but the

¹⁰⁶ Kalle Korhonen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 30 January 1937. "minulla on alkanut kasvaa ajatus, siirtyä vielä U.S.A mutta se on nyt vähän vaikea. Vaatii järjestelyä eikä voi matkustaa milloin vain haluaa."

¹⁰⁷ Kalle Korhonen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 5 May 1937. "Vasta nyt tunnen minäkin, vakavimmassa mielessä, että tahtoisin olla lähelläsi, tahtoisin nähdä sinut usein --- lapseni, miehesi tahtoisin nähdä usein. ... mutta tietysti sinua ensiksi... Aikaisemmin en tätä seikkaa tuntenut, käsittänyt rakkaudella. Nyt sen tunnen ---" It is interesting to note how the Finnish word "tunne," meaning emotion, can also mean familiar or known, as in when Korhonen writes that he had not felt or known that longing before.

socialist system has already strongly taken hold. It says: here is your home! For health reasons only, if at all, otherwise no.”¹⁰⁸ Korholen masked his desire to leave in the safety of a discussion of his health. Korholen framed this letter narrative as a debate with himself, but one can question who exactly raised the counterpoints. Reading between the lines, the socialist state had, indeed, taken hold and told Finnish North Americans, Korholen among them, that Karelia and the Soviet Union was their home which they could not leave.

No letter from the following year has been found, and it is unknown if Korholen wrote during that time. On 30 November 1938, exactly one year after the last letter and as the Terror subsided, Korholen again wrote directly about his plan to leave Karelia. He listed his work experience and capabilities, and directed Aune to go to the local immigration authorities.¹⁰⁹ In February 1939, Korholen wrote again, revealing that he had not heard back from Aune, but continued to formulate his plan for leaving the Soviet Union. This time, he explicitly referred to “my aspiration to return again to the United States,” to obtaining travel permits, and asked Aune to seek the advice of both a lawyer and the Finnish Consulate to see whether he could return directly or whether he should go through Finland.¹¹⁰ Not having heard from his daughter, Korholen could only “assume that you have tried to accomplish something” regarding his return plans.¹¹¹ A letter from George Halonen, from Superior, Wisconsin, to “Mrs. Batson,” dated 5 April 1939

¹⁰⁸ Kalle Korholen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 30 November 1937. “Minäkin, kun sairastelen näin paljon, ajattelen joskus että siirtyä sinne jälleen terveyhden tahden, mutta toiselta puolen nousee vastakohdat vastaan. Tiedän, että terveyteni on siinä ilmastossa mutta sosialistinen systeemi on jo istunut lujasti kiini. Se sanoo: täällä on kotisi! Terveys-syistä vain, jos ollenkaan, muuten ei.”

¹⁰⁹ Kalle Korholen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 30 November 1938.

¹¹⁰ Kalle Korholen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 22 February 1939.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

accompanies Korholen's letter collection. Halonen wrote: "I received a confidential letter from your father stating that he would like to come back to America. He also informed me that he has written you about the same question. Consulting our attorneys here I found that you as his daughter have the only possibility to apply for his re-entrance."¹¹² Halonen made suggestions about how Aune should best proceed. By 30 October 1939, Korholen had still not heard from Aune. In his last available letter, he scolds his daughter for not writing and pleads for her help to get back to the United States.¹¹³

Kalle Korholen never made it back. Allegedly, he died alone in Petrozavodsk from long-plaguing tuberculosis, just half a year after writing the final available letter.¹¹⁴ Though denying his existence to her own daughter and husband, Korholen's daughter saved her father's letters.¹¹⁵ It seems as though Aune Batson could not forgive her father for abandoning her as a child and could not overcome the difficult past they had shared. Batson could not have known what her father was experiencing in Karelia when he wrote her about wanting to return. Employing different strategies and approaches to get his message past the censors to his daughter, Korholen's letters likely read, to Aune, as too cryptic and confused, and too self-serving. Kalle Korholen's letters depict a time when little was heard from Finnish North Americans in Karelia, show the increasingly desperate desire by some to escape, and shed light on some of the ways that the

¹¹² George Halonen letter to Mrs. T. W. Batson, Superior, Wis., 5 April 1939.

¹¹³ Kalle Korholen letter to Aune Batson, Petrozavodsk, 30 October 1939.

¹¹⁴ Judith Batson, "On Being Half-Finnished," unpublished personal essay accompanying Korholen letter donation.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

immigrant letter writers shaped their letters to get their message out, without saying too much.

When situated within the context of the Terror in Karelia, letters from the late 1930s, though rarely making direct reference to the difficulties their writers were enduring, reveal some of the strategies employed in order to carry on correspondence. Even long after the death of Stalin, narrating experiences of the Terror proved difficult. In their memoirs and retrospective letters, Finnish North Americans continued to formulate and utilize various approaches to convey their experiences in 1930s Soviet Karelia in a way that offered them protection from the past.

Life Writing and Returning to the Terror

“Now I will continue these lines in this tranquil quietness with just the clock on my desk ticking away the time of eternity and let my thoughts roam to the far off years of strife and struggle,” wrote Jack Forsell to his niece in February 1979.¹¹⁶ He continued:

So unreal it seems now that if I wrote to you about those years you wouldn't believe me, for even to me they seem so unbelievable. It's a miracle that I happened to survive those years when thousands and millions succumbed who were in the same conditions as I was. All of this was no earning or heroism of mine, just pure luck and chance [in] which I believe, but not in hero[e]s.¹¹⁷

In this remarkable statement, Forsell addressed the processes of thinking and writing about his experiences with Stalinist repressions and war, making sense of what had happened, making peace with why he had survived, and the problems of conveying an extremely difficult past, of which little was known or understood, especially by outsiders.

¹¹⁶ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, “Karelia,” 6 February 1979.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Examining the ways that Forsell and other Finnish North American life writers narrated their experiences of the Great Terror demonstrates the role of silences, the scars of trauma, the quest for ‘truth’, and the collective aspects of grief and memory.

Silence

“Silence is a *collective* endeavour,” and, indeed, multiple layers of silence shrouded the history of Finnish North Americans in Karelia.¹¹⁸ Eviatar Zerubavel argues that “the larger the number of participants in the conspiracy [of silence], the more prohibitive the silence.”¹¹⁹ Finnish North Americans had many factors to overcome to bring their past to light. In North America, both the Finnish immigrant Left and Right silenced returnees. Finns loyal to Communism and the Soviet project could not believe the stories told by those who managed to escape. As the Cold War intensified, those who had been to Karelia were forced to hide their pasts for fear of anti-communist retribution. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union continued to repress resistance to the regime and maintained its secrecy and silence. As silence is promulgated by both perpetrators and victims, many Finnish North American survivors kept their stories to themselves.¹²⁰

Robert Conquest argues that “[t]he population had become habituated to silence and obedience, to fear and submission.”¹²¹ As we have seen, many Finnish North Americans chose to remain silent about what was happening around them, and fear was a part of daily life in Karelia during and after the Terror. It is useful, however, to view

¹¹⁸ Eviatar Zerubavel, “The Social Sound of Silence: Toward a Sociology of Denial” in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze’ev et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 36. Italics in original.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹²⁰ See Zerubavel, “The Social Sound of Silence,” 37.

¹²¹ Conquest, 447.

silence as an active process, rather than as simply “submission.”¹²² Jay Winter characterizes silence as a “social construction” and that idea works successfully in this analysis.¹²³ Examining Soviet memory, Geoffrey Hosking notes: “A split opened up inside each individual between what one knew and what one was allowed to say – a split made more complicated by the powerful effects of self-deception.”¹²⁴ However, the individual participated in the active work of determining what could not be said. While fear of the state’s known actions – arrest – presumably dictated “what one was allowed to say,” it was, in fact, individuals who had to determine for themselves what they would not say. Determining the unspoken could extend beyond what protected one from the Soviet regime; many things could not be said because they were too difficult emotionally for the individual. Hosking’s use of “self-deception,” again suggests the power of official messages, but also the framing of one’s personal narrative to make it more coherent and bearable.

Stalin’s regime actively concealed the nature of its reign from the West, and found protection in Communist parties outside of the Soviet Union.¹²⁵ The migrants who managed to return to North America did not find a receptive audience in the very communities that had stood by them in the fight for workers’ rights and had seen them off to Karelia.¹²⁶ While the significant and well-documented Finnish immigrant involvement

¹²² For a discussion about silence as active, see Zerubavel, 33.

¹²³ See for example, Jay Winter, “Thinking About Silence,” in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze’ev et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

¹²⁴ Geoffrey A. Hosking, “Memory in a Totalitarian Society: The Case of the Soviet Union” in *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 122.

¹²⁵ Conquest, 308 and 467.

¹²⁶ See for example, Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 8-10.

in Left politics in Canada and the United States was in decline by the late 1930s, many still strongly believed into the 1950s and well beyond that the Soviet Union was a workers' paradise and that Stalin was the true leader of working people. It was difficult to believe that paradise had become hell on earth and that the Father of the Soviet Union could harm his own people. Mayme Sevander blamed North American communists for silencing those who had lived through the purges, using "misrepresentations" to protect the movement.¹²⁷ John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr directly call to question American scholarly tradition of 'normalizing' Soviet atrocities in their 2003 work, *In Denial: Historians, Communism & Espionage*. Furthermore, Haynes and Klehr identify the "egregious and shocking silence" that forms "the cover-up of the murder of hundreds of Finnish American radicals by the Soviet Union."¹²⁸ Lauri Hokkanen remembered an incident at their welcoming party, when they returned to the United States in 1941:

But there was one sour note to that afternoon. A fellow from the Soo made a welcoming speech. He said very little about us but got into politics, bragging about the Soviet Union. Among other things, he said that no innocent people had been arrested there. I was about to object but could not get a word in at that point, and so I let it go. I have regretted ever since that I did not speak up, but because I knew how my mother felt, I remained silent.¹²⁹

Even Hokkanen's mother, a committed Communist, would not believe what her son and daughter-in-law recounted.¹³⁰ Furthermore, in the eyes of the rising Finnish Right wing in North America, people "foolish" enough to have turned their backs on capitalism and religion, or even worse, on their Canadian or American citizenship, seemed to deserve

¹²⁷ Ibid., 8.

¹²⁸ Haynes and Klehr, 115.

¹²⁹ Hokkanen, 125.

¹³⁰ Hokkanen, 1-3.

what they experienced.¹³¹ Many returnees moved away from their old home communities to be freed from the stigma of their Soviet experiences. Finnish immigrant communities were not safe places for survivors to speak. Lauri Hokkanen wrote: “I really wouldn’t have minded telling them about it, but that subject always stirred up strong feelings.”¹³²

While Finnish American and Canadian returnees had a difficult time sharing their Karelian experiences in North America, those immigrants who remained in Karelia internalized the Soviet culture of silence. During Stalin’s reign, the phrase “we do not arrest innocent people” was repeated ad nauseam, though people in the Soviet Union knew otherwise.¹³³ Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” in 1956 at long last began to tell the story of what had happened in the late 1930s. He exposed the Stalinist regime’s crimes, and explained them with the concepts of “cult of personality” and “unjustified repression.” The “Thaw” that accompanied these revelations began to open discussion about the past. However, many questions remained and many people’s mourning went unacknowledged. Khrushchev placed the blame on Stalin, protecting the ruling Communist Party.¹³⁴ The Thaw placed its focus on the unjust arrests and executions of Party members and the political elite, saying little about the crimes against ordinary people. Families began to seek answers from the government, but received falsified death certificates that cited natural causes and, most often, dating the deaths to the time of

¹³¹ Lindström and Vähämäki, 15.

¹³² Hokkanen, 126.

¹³³ For example, Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 102 and Hokkanen, 92.

¹³⁴ See for example, Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 35; Haynes and Klehr, 15.

the war.¹³⁵ Though the public work of mourning could begin, there were still many things that could not be said, by the state and its citizens. Soviet openness proved relatively short-lived, as the Brezhnev “Stagnation,” beginning in 1964, has been referred to as the “repression of repressions.”¹³⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev’s *glasnost* of the 1980s again reintroduced the hope of uncovering and redressing the horrors that the population had endured in the first half of the twentieth century. The era of *glasnost* saw the successful work of many Memorial Societies, such as the discovery and memorialisation of the Krasny Bor and Sandarmokh sites in Karelia. It seems that the current political situation in Russia has again drawn a curtain over the past.

The Soviet Union (and now Russian Federation) has concealed and revealed parts of its dark history in waves that have hindered both society’s and individuals’ processes of coming to terms with their past.¹³⁷ The result of decades of silence, with uncertain periods of openness, has been the “inadequate” building of collective memory¹³⁸ and personal stories have been left unshared. Mayme Sevander wrote about getting a friend to open up about his arrest years later, when he left Karelia for Finland: “[o]f course, I had to give a vow of silence, but I dare break it now as he is gone, almost 50 years have passed since then and the truth is coming out.”¹³⁹ Following an oral history interview

¹³⁵ For example, the Corgan family received a death certificate that claimed Oscar Corgan had died of cancer in 1940, rather than execution in 1938. Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 175. Lahti-Argutina has explained the falsification of dates: “The thinking was that it was easier for people to accept the death of a loved one if they thought the person died in the war.” In “The Fate of Finnish Canadians in Soviet Karelia,” 123.

¹³⁶ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 38.

¹³⁷ Alexander Etkind refers to this issue as “Post-Soviet Hauntology” and offers excellent insights on the matter. See Etkind’s “Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror,” and his recent monograph, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*.

¹³⁸ Etkind, “Post-Soviet Hauntology,” 182.

¹³⁹ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 48.

about his life in Karelia, Harold Hietala wrote a series of letters to Varpu Lindström that touched on his feelings about having become a historical subject. In one letter, Hietala apologized for the “tight-worded” replies he had given in the interview.¹⁴⁰ He explained that he did “not yet believe that [in Russia] you can speak about things as they in reality are for many have totally without guilt been made to spend years in prison camps and those who have been there don’t have the mind to go there again.”¹⁴¹ His memories of imprisonment stayed with him, as had the Soviet culture of silence. Interestingly, Hietala felt comfortable enough to write about his hesitancy to speak.

“If all my letters to Canada were gathered into one pile it would be quite a package,” Jack Forsell wrote, “but in these letters I have never written about our ‘political life’ here. This part of our life has been a ‘closed book’ to you people there in Canada. Why? Simply because if I wrote about it you people there wouldn’t understand anything about it or even believe it!”¹⁴² The Karelian survivors had difficulty seeing how others could relate to their experiences and were rarely willing to break the silence that could lead to mutual understanding. Like Aino Pitkänen, who twice wrote that the recipients of letters would be unable to understand what had happened,¹⁴³ fifty years later Jack Forsell still believed that a definite line existed between the Finnish North Americans in Karelia and “you people there.” Some years later, Forsell warned his niece that “the actual

¹⁴⁰Harold Hietala letter to Varpu Lindström, Tshalna, 1 February 1989. “...en vielä usko että täällä saa puhua asioista niinkuin ne todellisuudessa ovat sillä moni on joutunut aivan syytömänä viettämään vuosia vankileireillä ja joka sielä on ollut ei tee mielli toista kertaa joutua sinne.”

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴²Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 4 December 1988

¹⁴³ Aino Pitkänen letter to Kirsti Pitkänen, , Urimolahti, Finland, 25 July 1938.

tragedies would be too hard for you to digest.”¹⁴⁴ Sylvi Hokkanen reflected: “[a]side from [two returnee friends from Karelia] we had no one with whom we could talk freely of our common experience. It was a relief to discuss these events, and I found it sad that we could not talk about them with others because they wouldn’t have or couldn’t have understood.”¹⁴⁵ Indeed, an experiential gulf existed between those who had lived through the Terror and those, on the outside, who had not and did not know what had occurred in the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁶ However, very few Finnish North American survivors have been willing to draw attention to the period of the purges in their life writing.¹⁴⁷

The Hokkanens’ memoir begins and ends with emotional, indirect references to what they experienced in Karelia, and how they were silenced in North America, because of the unwillingness of others to engage in open discussion about their past. However, the body of the memoir says very little about specific encounters with the Terror and state repression.¹⁴⁸ Smith and Watson note that “since a narrative cannot recount all time of experience, its gaps as well as its articulated time produce meaning.”¹⁴⁹ In a 1972 letter, Forsell set out to “write at least a few sentences of our life here in the past and present.”¹⁵⁰ That life story jumps from the birth of his son in 1931 to the death of his daughter in the fall of 1939, with no discussion of anything between. With so many

¹⁴⁴ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 14 January 1993.

¹⁴⁵ Hokkanen, 128.

¹⁴⁶ Conquest argues that “an almost instinctive feeling that this did not accord with common sense, with normal experience” struck outsiders, even “people of good will,” when they were faced with facts about the Terror and the Soviet labour camp system. *The Great Terror*, 309.

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, the analysis of Eila Lahti-Argutina, “The Fate of Finnish Canadians in Soviet Karelia” in Harpelle *et al.*, eds., *Karelian Exodus*, 122.

¹⁴⁸ The main discussion of the Purges is found in the chapter, “How can they all be guilty?,” Hokkanen, 89-96.

¹⁴⁹ Smith and Watson, 93.

¹⁵⁰ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 20 February 1972.

layers of silence surrounding their pasts, the Karelian life writers undoubtedly questioned how much they could say and how their stories would be received. In addition to considerations of audience and reception, the Finnish North American writers were confronted with the emotional discovery inherent in the life writing process.¹⁵¹ Sarah Dyck argues: “[t]here is therapeutic value in telling and re-telling, a catharsis in reliving the gruesome agony.”¹⁵² However, many burdened by the weight of the past choose silence. Discussing her research, Mayme Sevander noted that “[n]ot every Finnish-American responded to my articles and questionnaires. Many of those in the Soviet Union who had gone through the drastic experiences of the thirties were reluctant to let their memories go back to the days when they had lost their loved ones.”¹⁵³ Though willing to tell her own story of struggle and loss, Sevander acknowledged that “recalling the horrendous past is torture.”¹⁵⁴ Extending oral testimony to life writing, perhaps some, as Jay Winters suggests, “remain silent, since the speech act may be performative; that is, the pain described is inflicted once again through testimony.”¹⁵⁵

TRAUMA

Robert Conquest wrote that “[i]t is easy to speak of the constant fear of the 4:00 a.m. knock on the door, of the hunger, fatigue, and hopelessness of the great labor camps.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2007), 27.

¹⁵² Sarah Dyck, editor and translator, “Introduction,” in *The Silence Echoes: Memoirs of Trauma and Tears* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), 12. Jonathan H. Slavin also shows how “narrative memory” must be “linguistically encoded” in order for one to maintain their “sense of self” and how this work is so important in cases of trauma, where one’s agency and “sense of self” are disrupted. See, Slavin, “Personal Agency and the Possession of Memory” in *On Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Doron Mendels (New York: Peter Lang AG, 2007), especially 303-309.

¹⁵³ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 4. See also, Miettinen, 315.

¹⁵⁴ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 110.

¹⁵⁵ Winter, “Thinking about Silence,” 14.

But to feel how this was worse than a particularly frightful war is not so simple.”¹⁵⁶ A corresponding challenge of the researcher is to understand how these feelings continued to hold sway over the Terror’s survivors and to make sense of how their understandings of what they endured are expressed. While the Finnish North American life writers never employed words like trauma, it is useful to look at their silence through the lens of traumatic memory. Catherine Merridale’s study of death and memory in Russia demonstrates how questions of mental health are “taboo” and the label of “trauma” “is something that most Russians reject.”¹⁵⁷ The hesitancy to acknowledge the wide impact of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, as Merridale argues, can partially be explained by the ways starvation, illness, and other physical needs overshadowed concerns about mental health.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, the collective mourning of the nation’s devastating losses and experiences moves the focus away from such individualized consequences as personal trauma. While the terminology may be controversial or even rejected, trauma studies nevertheless offers valuable tools and insights for understanding the narratives of Finnish North American survivors of the Great Terror. Antze and Lambek recognize that instances of individuals’ unwillingness to discuss or remember traumatic events “are less refusals to continue telling stories than to continue interpreting them.”¹⁵⁹ Interpretation proves painfully difficult, as “[t]rauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence.”¹⁶⁰ Jay Winter has also observed among veterans that when “the images and feelings [of war] did not fit [into

¹⁵⁶ Conquest, 251.

¹⁵⁷ Merridale, 16.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 119 and 239.

¹⁵⁹ Antze and Lambek, “Introduction,” xix.

¹⁶⁰ La Capra, 41.

one's life story], when they continued to have no location in a soldier's sense of who he was and where he was, then a kind of disorientation, lasting for varying periods of time, was inevitable."¹⁶¹ Victims often become caught up in "acting out" their traumatic memory, and struggle with the "working through" and "making sense" of what their lives have come to mean.¹⁶² Dominick La Capra poignantly notes that when affected by trauma: "one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel."¹⁶³

The extensive letter collections of Jack Forsell and Reino Mäkelä demonstrate how the Terror of 1937-1938 and the war years continued to occupy their thoughts and writing, even after many years. An analysis of these collections reveals some of the strategies the writers used to represent their difficult pasts. Jack Forsell used the narrative device of "disowning" the voice or self that has experienced trauma to be able to confront it.¹⁶⁴ Forsell began "disowning" years earlier, during his childhood in rural northwestern Ontario.¹⁶⁵ As remembered in letters to his niece, nature had served as the line between the hardships of routine life and a severe father-son relationship and his dreams of a brighter future. Jack remembered: "The biggest joy and peace I felt when I

¹⁶¹ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 61.

¹⁶² La Capra, 22; Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 87. Etkind has proposed the addition of "making sense" to the traumatic stages put forward by La Capra. La Capra's "acting out" is bound in the Freudian "repetition compulsion."

¹⁶³ La Capra, 42.

¹⁶⁴ For a discussion of this distancing, based on the Holocaust testimonials gathered by L. Langer, see Laurence J. Kirmayer, "Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (New York: Routledge, 1996), 189.

¹⁶⁵ See Samira Saramo, "The Letters, Memories, and "Truths" of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, XLVI, 92 (November 2013), 487-488.

rambled in the bush listening to the sounds of nature.”¹⁶⁶ His letters repeatedly return to the same wording and imagery to emphasize the serenity he found in the forest; time spent there represented Jack’s “other life.”¹⁶⁷ By creating a distinction between his “real,” troubled life and his “other life,” Jack utilized the same narrative technique of creating multiple selves to explain existence between hardship and coping that he used to make sense of what he had experienced during the purges and war. Although Forsell wrote about the purges and war in several letters over the 25-year span of his correspondence, he never once described his personal experiences directly. In 1979, he wrote about a chance meeting with a woman he had originally met during the war.¹⁶⁸ While Jack shared the experience, he narrated the circumstances of their initial meeting in the voice of the woman.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, when Jack wanted to broach the topic of the Terror with his niece in Canada, rather than using his own experiences and knowledge, he sent a newspaper article on the subject.¹⁷⁰ Again, Forsell used someone else’s voice to tell his lived experiences.

Reino Mäkelä’s letters reveal similar strategies. Over the twenty-one years of correspondence, Mäkelä wrote mostly about family and work, and, as Mayme Sevander remarked, “[h]e had his own troubles, but up to his dying day he preserved a positive outlook on life.”¹⁷¹ Though he may have been generally happy in his life, when

¹⁶⁶ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, “Karelia,” 28 December 1993.

¹⁶⁷ See for example, Jack Forsell letters to Janet Lehto, 28 December 1993, [6?] January 1995, and 10 December 1995.

¹⁶⁸ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, “Karelia,” 6 February 1979.

¹⁶⁹ Marlene Epp has found a similar tendency among Mennonite women’s narratives about rape during WWII. See, “The Memory of Violence,” 65.

¹⁷⁰ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 4 December 1988.

¹⁷¹ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 70.

Mäkelä's letters are read closely, they reveal that memories of the Terror and the war were never far from his mind. However, Mäkelä stopped himself from elaborating on those experiences. The Terror explicitly enters Mäkelä's correspondence on two occasions, when he addressed the arrest and death of his brother. In August 1967, Mäkelä wrote: "Kalervo was never married. He was 19 years old when they took him and he died there in 1946."¹⁷² Mäkelä wrote nothing about who "they" were, why Kalervo was taken, or where "there" was. Eleven years later, in the midst of writing about family (likely responding to questions from his correspondent), Mäkelä wrote:

Kalervo wasn't married. He was young when he was arrested. We had a bad time in 1938 when a lot of Finn were arrested for nothing. Kalervo was in prison for 8 years and died in prison in 1946.¹⁷³ When he died we got papers that he was innocent like a lot of people arrested at that time were and [never] came home again. It was the enemies of this country that got into our higher organization. They were all arrested in 1939. Annikki's father was arrested too and he died in prison too. Innocent. Get the papers after they died. Enough of this.¹⁷⁴

Mäkelä wrote in a very matter of fact way, presenting facts as he understood them, and avoiding overtly emotion language. It is worth noting that while he got caught up in memories of the Terror, no "I" appears in the description. Though discussing the fates of people closely connected to him, Mäkelä is himself not present. He abruptly ends the discussion; the space between the description and "[e]nough of this" stands as a physical, tangible separation between "this" past and what Mäkelä wanted to write about in his letter. The strategies employed by Forsell and Mäkelä – while likely subconscious –

¹⁷² Reino Mäkelä letter to Eva, Säpsä, 20 August 1967.

¹⁷³ Sevander lists Kalervo Mäkelä's death as 1938. *Vaeltajat*, 206. Like in so many cases, the family's rehabilitation notice may have given an incorrect date of death.

¹⁷⁴ Reino Mäkelä letter to Eva, Säpsä, 16 October 1978.

exemplify the distancing, deference, and disowning of the victim-self that is common to narratives of trauma.

In an insightful analysis of the differing memory outcomes of child abuse survivors and Holocaust survivors, Laurence Kirmayer concludes that dissociative amnesia, “forgetting,” and an unwillingness to confront the past can be linked to abuse victims’ lack of a “social landscape,” within their families or in society, where they can narrate their experiences. Conversely, the readily available audience for Holocaust narratives integrates “remembering” and the sharing of individual experiences into collective history.¹⁷⁵ Kirmayer argues that, as with the collective memory of the Holocaust, “if a community agrees that traumatic events occurred and weaves this fact into its identity, then collective memory survives and individual memory can find a place (albeit transformed) within that landscape.” If, however, the community does not believe in the occurrence of trauma, “the possibility for individual memory is severely strained.”¹⁷⁶ Finnish North American purge survivors can be seen as fitting into both categories. Those individuals who wrote during the purges (through heavily censored mail) and immediately following their return to North America, when many Finnish North American Leftist communities continued to support the Soviet regime, did not have the opportunity to remember and share their experiences with fear, violence, and loss on the communal or social level. On the other hand, like those living through the Holocaust, Finnish North Americans experienced the purges collectively and talked, though in hushed voices, about events as they unfolded. “This narrative process,”

¹⁷⁵ Kirmayer, 188-190.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

according to Kirmayer, “served to maintain memory,” and, likewise, collectively experienced trauma created the space for “retelling.”¹⁷⁷ Alexander Etkind, in his recent study of collective mourning in contemporary Russia, notes that the “low consensus [about the facts surrounding traumatic events] suppresses public memory, but can intensify its manifestations in the remembering minority.”¹⁷⁸ Among the Finnish North American survivors, the breaking of silence has resulted in a strong urgency to depict what they believed to be the truth of the Great Terror and life under Stalin.

TRUTH

In 1996, at the age of 91, Jack Forsell looked back on 66 years of life in Karelia and wrote: “I do hope that all the ‘enlightened’ people of the world will someday know the truth of life & death in the USSR.”¹⁷⁹ While struggling to find a way to tell their stories, Forsell and other Karelian life writers believed that their narratives had to contribute to getting the “truth” into the open. By bringing their stories out, the life writers engaged in “coming to voice, claiming social space, and insisting on the authority of [their] previously unacknowledged experiential history.”¹⁸⁰ In this way, the Finnish North American memoirs and retrospective letters belong, in part, to the genre of testimonial narrative. In this type of writing, “the emphasis is on the I as an *eye*, a witness, of some injustice that the narrative seeks to put on record, if not redress.”¹⁸¹ However, the life writers were faced with a daunting task. Smith and Watson note how “coming to voice” could “put the narrator in jeopardy because what is told is in some

¹⁷⁷ Kirmayer, 189.

¹⁷⁸ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 177.

¹⁷⁹ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, “Karelia,” 23 December 1996.

¹⁸⁰ Smith and Watson, 85.

¹⁸¹ Couser, 41.

sense publically ‘unspeakable’ in its political context.”¹⁸² If determined to get at the “truth,” survivors and the mourning Russian public confronted an immense chore. Etkind captures its nature:

the only certainty about the Soviet catastrophe, apart from its massive scale, is its very uncertainty. We do not have anything like a full list of victims; we do not have anything like a full list of executioners; and we do not have adequate memorials, museums, and monuments, which could stabilize the understanding of these events for generations to come.¹⁸³

Writers had to come to terms with what happened, applying order to the uncertainty, mourning the failure of the socialist project, and finding a voice for their emotional truths.

Life writing scholars give significant attention to the weight and form of “truth” in memoirs and letters. For example, Larson contends that the “memoir emphasizes the emotional truth of the author.”¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Karen Armstrong’s analysis of Karelian women found that, in their narratives, they “aim at an emotional truth rather than the truly true.”¹⁸⁵ The emotional truth allows life writers to get at the essence of their personal experience, and brings what was important to them to the surface. Furthermore, David Gerber argues that “narrative truth, which assists in establishing continuity and stability amidst the inconsistencies and the frequent contradictions of life, is more important for individuals than literal truth when it comes to the ongoing work of constructing personal identities.”¹⁸⁶ Given the chaos and anachronism that trauma inflicts on its sufferer, the “continuity and stability” afforded by “narrative truth” provides life writers with an

¹⁸² Smith and Watson, 85.

¹⁸³ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 10.

¹⁸⁴ Larson, *The Memoir and the memoirist*, 104.

¹⁸⁵ Karen Armstrong, *Remembering Karelia*, 112.

¹⁸⁶ Gerber, “Epistolary Masquerades,” 147.

opportunity to tell their story, and contributes to the work of “making sense.” La Capra goes so far as to suggest that the “literal truth” of victim narratives may be irrelevant to the value they offer.¹⁸⁷ It seems, though, that for the Karelian life writers themselves, and perhaps for others who lived through Stalin’s reign, the quest for truth gets caught somewhere at the intersections of “emotional truth,” “narrative truth,” and “literal truth.” Having endured immense hardships and witnessed “untold” horrors, those who looked back and felt secure enough to voice their stories had begun to insist on telling and being told the “literal truth” of what had happened in decades past. At the same time, though, these survivors came to formulate their own “narrative truths” to explain what happened and why they made it through alive. Catherine Merridale reflected on the uniqueness of Russian elders’ memorized “monologues,” concluding that

It makes a difference if you spent the best part of your life without the luxury of comparison or collective context, relating the story only to your closest friends, and sometimes even not to them, without re-focusing the images. It also makes a difference if you never had the chance to acquire the knack, the discipline, of listening.¹⁸⁸

A part of finding one’s “truth” was the process of “making sense.” Klaus Maunu’s memoir demonstrates attempts to bring order to what he experienced during the Great Terror and war. Maunu’s memoir searches for explanations in the past. He remembered the fortune cake a family friend in Pike Lake, Ontario, had made. Each slice contained a small item that was to provide a glimpse into the future. When, Maunu’s revealed a piece of chain, he recalled, they all joked that perhaps he would end up in jail some day. Some seventy years later, after surviving his time in a Ukrainian

¹⁸⁷ La Capra, 88-89.

¹⁸⁸ Merridale, 190.

labour camp, Maunu wrote: “[w]asn’t that a true prediction.”¹⁸⁹ He pinpoints the murder of Kirov as “some kind of turning point in my life.”¹⁹⁰ Yet, the role of this event in the narrative suggests that its impact became apparent after the fact, rather than at the time. He conceded that the talk about the murder quickly died down, but believed that it made a “lasting impression” on people.¹⁹¹ The “turning point” of the narrative occurs in Maunu’s telling of 1936. The narrative transitions immediately from a description of what he called his “most pleasant times” to “the ‘grey’ times.”¹⁹² His narrative marks a clear delineation between carefree, youthful life, and the onset of confusion and fear caused, first, in Maunu’s chronology, by the arrest of Finnish writers accused of nationalism. By looking to the past to find foreshadowing of what was to come, Klaus Maunu pieced together a tenuous logical chain of events that could offer some coherence in the disrupted timeline of traumatic events.

Committed to the process of recording their life stories, the memoirists studied here each shaped their narrative in a chronological sequence that moved from North America, to the early days of Karelian life, to the Terror, and through wartime. This ordering allowed the writers to present a coherent portrayal of their life. However, in the case of Jack Forsell and Reino Mäkelä, who set out to write their life stories through letter correspondence over the span of many decades, the formulation of such order and progression was not possible. It is clear in both letter collections that the act of writing to their old home communities had the effect of transporting their memories to the past.

¹⁸⁹ Maunu, 7. “Olikohan se tosi ennustus.”

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Maunu, 19.

For Forsell and Mäkelä, the past in North America, the present-day at the time of writing, and their Karelian past became entangled. The narratives of both men conflate the hardships of the Terror and war years. Perhaps because the form of letter writing hindered the establishment of a narrative chronology and a sense of order for their life stories, these two life writers proved least able to approach their experiences with Terror head-on in writing.

Along with making sense of one's life trajectory and how the Terror had come to be, a part of the survivors' work was coming to terms with the truth of what had become of the socialist project. Etkind notes that "mourning for the human victims of the Soviet experiment coexists with mourning for the ideas and ideals that were also buried by this experiment."¹⁹³ Jack Forsell wrote about his disenchantment with the Soviet political system on several occasions and lamented the loss of both the idea of socialism and the lives sacrificed. Forsell claimed: "[t]he very first winter here I realized that this isn't the Socialism which I had dreamed about & I doubt if there has ever been any Socialism in the U.S.S.R."¹⁹⁴ He blamed all that had happened on Lenin, writing: "Lenin was the greatest despot of the 20th century. It was he that founded the U.S.S.R. with its terrorist & totalitarian methods of rule. The blood of millions upon millions of people are on the conscience of the party he created."¹⁹⁵ Analysing descriptions of bodily pain in soldiers' memoirs, Joanna Bourke notes that "it mattered whether a serviceman believed in 'the cause' or not."¹⁹⁶ When one believed the cause was just, pain was perceived and narrated

¹⁹³ Etkind, *Warped Mourning*, 12 and also 134.

¹⁹⁴ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, "Karelia," 12 December 1991. Underlining in original.

¹⁹⁵ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, "Karelia," 4 December 1990.

¹⁹⁶ Joanna Bourke, "Bodily Pain, Combat, and the Politics of Memoirs: Between the American

as less. However, when one did not believe in the cause, suffering was described.

Bourke's finding can be applied to the emotional pain of Finnish North Americans in Karelia. Believing that socialism had failed in the Soviet Union made the pain of all that had happened that much more difficult to bear. Sylvi Hokkanen recalled a night in July 1938 when the Finnish North American barracks were assaulted with arrests on a vast and brutal scale. Hokkanen remembered hearing her beloved anthem "Internationale" playing from the outdoor speakers, as the NKVD raided. She wrote: "Until then, the 'Internationale' to us had been an expression of hope for a better world in the future, for freedom from fear. But now, hearing its stirring notes and, at the same time, being witness to a mass arrest of friends and fellow workers horrified us."¹⁹⁷

The failure of the socialist project weighed heavily on Mayme Sevander, who continually identified as the devoted daughter of executed KTA Director Oscar Corgan and a life-time believer in the cause of the working people. It is clear from her writing that Sevander devoted herself to disseminating the history and "truth" of what had happened to Finnish North American immigrants in Karelia, or "My People," as she preferred to call them.¹⁹⁸ Taking responsibility for the fates of Finnish North Americans, Sevander expressed her need to:

apologize for my father and his comrades who, due to their firm convictions, due to their zeal in furthering the Cause, found hundreds of followers among Finnish-Americans willing to be among the foreign pioneers, to help the newborn State which was to become a haven for workers and peasants. Remembering my father's profound honesty and dedication, I'm sure he'd approve of the work I undertook and these

Civil War and the War in Vietnam," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 46, 91 (May 2013), 59.

¹⁹⁷ Hokkanen, 94.

¹⁹⁸ Sevander uses this term throughout *Red Exodus* and *Of Soviet Bondage*.

logical conclusions. I'm not denouncing these idealists. I'm bowing my head in reverence to those committed Finnish men and women whose moral obligations were so high, that they completely disregarded their own interests.¹⁹⁹

In addition to making peace with her father's role in the Karelian project and bringing attention to the plight of Finnish North Americans, Sevander emphasized the lessons that the Karelian tragedy offered the present day. She concludes *Red Exodus* by stating:

I'm convinced that a profound knowledge of the crimes and blunders of the so-called socialist epoch is imperative to avoid repetition of the past. ... I wanted to let the world know about a very unusual, outmoded set of believers, to prevent those honest people from falling into oblivion, and to rehabilitate true democratic socialism, which many have lost their faith in, and its supporters.²⁰⁰

Contemporary life in the Soviet Union (later Russian Federation) provided both Sevander and Jack Forsell with continuous parallels. In *Of Soviet Bondage*, Mayme Sevander argued: "You may agree with me or you may not. But with criminality running riot in Russia today I find a direct connection between the crimes of the past and those of today."²⁰¹ The widespread hunger and economic crisis of the 1990s brought Forsell back to memories of secretly helping families of 'enemies of the people' and to the "hungry years" of the war.²⁰² By drawing connections between events of the past and those of the present day, life writers also connect understandings of their past self with their present self.²⁰³

As researchers and life writers began to publicize the history of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, those who lived through the Terror judged how well their

¹⁹⁹ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 188-189.

²⁰⁰ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 190.

²⁰¹ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 61.

²⁰² Jack Forsell letters to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 4 December 1990 and 14 January 1993.

²⁰³ Larson, 24.

experiences were represented. Jack Forsell's letters reveal his opinions on three historical accounts. He criticized Mayme Sevander's *They Took My Father* for covering "all this awful bloodshed in a couple of paragraphs."²⁰⁴ For Forsell, the "truth [was] much more tragic [*sic*]."²⁰⁵ However, he concluded that "[a]ll in all I hope many people will read this book. It's better than nothing."²⁰⁶ When Forsell's own life story was featured in a 1993 edition of the journal *Carelia*,²⁰⁷ which focussed on the experiences of the 1930s Finnish North American immigrants in Karelia, he felt the article was "not a very good one at that!"²⁰⁸ It offers a basic biographical overview of Jack and Elvie Forsell's lives and immigration, and briefly shares some of the couple's memories of the Great Terror. It is unclear what the article should have covered that would have made Jack Forsell more satisfied. Another piece about the Karelian migration by researcher Irina Takala appears in the same edition of *Carelia*.²⁰⁹ Takala details the recruitment of Finnish Americans and Canadians, their living conditions in Karelia, the region's changing politics, and the launch of the Terror. In Forsell's opinion, Takala's article was "the most truthful history of these Finns that I have ever read."²¹⁰ It is worth noting that Takala's article does not include immigrants' first-hand experiences, but rather provides an overview of what archival documents had revealed about the migration to date. Takala's work moved the discussion about Finnish North Americans in Karelia from the

²⁰⁴ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 14 January 1993.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Paula Autio, "Haaveet jäivät haaveiksi," *Carelia* 3, 93: 37-43.

²⁰⁸ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, "Karelia," 28 December 1993.

²⁰⁹ Irina Takala, "Eldoraadoa Etsimässä," *Carelia* 3, 93: 4-25.

²¹⁰ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, "Karelia," 28 December 1993.

realm of speculation and individual “truth” constructions to the “objective” analysis of official documents.

Although Forsell was happy that journalists and other researchers were beginning to reveal the story of the Finnish North Americans in Karelia, he was critical of the trends he saw: “now the ‘fad’ of the times is that writers & journalists write about the crimes of that time & of people who fell victims to this crime, but they are silent about the criminals that convicted & shot these innocent people!”²¹¹ The “truth” for Jack Forsell had to look beyond the role of Stalin as the sole perpetrator of the horrific crimes he had lived through.²¹² Perhaps his intimate knowledge of the victims and the crimes against them made Forsell want to turn the focus away from his community’s suffering to the deeds of those who had betrayed them. Harold Hietala expressed more satisfaction with the work of researchers: “I am thankful that I have been able to live so long that I have seen the day that the truth has after all become apparent.”²¹³ He went on to thank Lindström and Vähämäki for bringing “to the whole world this truth.”²¹⁴

Finnish North American life writers worked through their pasts in order to formulate and share their multifaceted “truths” – emotional, narrative, and literal. While these truths fostered a sense of self, they also served to reinforce identification with the Finnish North American collective.

Collective Grief

²¹¹ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, [day unknown] October 1994.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Harold Hietala letter to Varpu Lindström, Tsalna, 26 August 1989.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

The Finnish North American narratives reveal the “mov[e] toward a transpersonal identification with those who suffered.”²¹⁵ Writers who openly discussed the effects of arrests and dislocation downplayed their own losses and pain to lament the overall consequences of the Terror on Finns. While Justiina Heino was not sure whether her husband was alive or dead, she deflected her own very evident mourning by saying that he was only one of thousands missing.²¹⁶ Just as Aino Pitkänen described the Karelia Terror through the community’s suffering, rather than her own, Aate Pitkänen’s final letter to his parents followed the pattern of transferring personal loss to the community’s grief. Pitkänen stated: “I was hoping that when the war is over we would all somehow get together and that we could help you when you need help, but one cannot change fate. And so many boys, and much better ones than me, have died after all.”²¹⁷ Following this tendency, Jack Forsell was frustrated by Mayme Sevander’s memoir, *They Took My Father*, because he felt that the book focused too much on the struggles of one family rather than the community.²¹⁸ Likely unbeknownst to Forsell, however, Sevander herself struggled to put forward her personal story. While she had been contracted to publish her family memoir by supporters and friends in the United States, she, instead, pursued a project on the experiences and fates of the broader Finnish North American community in Karelia. Sevander believed the collective story to be more important.²¹⁹ While she

²¹⁵ Smith and Watson, 28. In an analysis of life history interviews with Karelia survivors, Helena Miettinen found that narratives of trauma most often told the stories of friends, colleagues, and neighbours. *Menetetyt kodit, elämät, unelmat*, 315.

²¹⁶ Justiina Heino letter to Wiljam, Salmi, 16 June 1941.

²¹⁷ Aate Pitkänen letter to parents, Äänislinna, 12 June 1942.

²¹⁸ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, “Karelia,” [day unknown] October 1992.

²¹⁹ Author’s personal email correspondence with Laurie Hertzell, co-writer of *They Took My Father*, November-December 2013.

was obligated to complete her personal memoir, she told the story she wanted to tell – the collective story - in her subsequent works, *Red Exodus*, *Of Soviet Bondage*, and *Vaeltajat*. Kaarlo Tuomi’s memoir essay concludes with a commitment and dedication “to those thousands of our countrymen who lost their lives in such a senseless way. It is in tribute to those thousands who had the foresight to turn back in time. And finally it is in tribute to those few who are still living in the Soviet Union.”²²⁰

In *The Politics of Storytelling*, Michael Jackson argues: “the need for stories is linked to the human need to be a part of some kindred community, [but] this need is most deeply felt when the bonds of such belonging are violently sundered.”²²¹ Finnish North American life writers demonstrated how they had come to form a sense of self that placed them within a new community, based on language, ethnicity, and geographic proximity and solidified by collectively experienced terror. La Capra notes the ability of traumatic events to create group identities, terming the phenomenon “founding trauma.”²²² In such cases there may be a subconscious “fidelity to trauma:” “[o]ne’s bond with the dead, especially dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound.”²²³ Focussing on collective experience and remembrance, Finnish North Americans’ life writing served as “a monument to those who perished.”²²⁴ In this way, the Karelian memoirs and retrospective letters can be viewed as belonging, in part, to the

²²⁰ Tuomi, 75.

²²¹ Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2002), 33-34.

²²² La Capra, 161-162.

²²³ Ibid., 22.

²²⁴ Dyck, 12.

genre of *testimonio*. Testimonio, defined by Thomas Couser, is “understood to *issue from* an individual, who testifies to its truthfulness, but also to *speak for* a larger community to which its author belongs.”²²⁵ In this way, when Finnish North Americans, like other Soviet life writers, portray, for example, the *troika* arriving in the night, the description extends beyond personal experience to the collective one.²²⁶ Another example of the testimonio function of Finnish North American life writing and the building of collective memory can be seen in the story of Katri Lammi’s arrest.

Katri Lammi and Collective Memory

Katri Lammi’s name was well-known among the Finnish population of Karelia. Lammi and her husband, Jukka Ahti, were both professional singers, who entertained the community regularly through regional Finnish language radio programming and in performances at Petrozavodsk’s Finnish National Theatre. However, more than her talent, the story of her exile has made a mark on the memories of Finnish North Americans. An examination of four different retellings of Lammi’s story provides insights into the making of collective memory. Together, the versions exemplify how, as Paul Connerton has emphasized, the act of remembering is closely bound to representations of the body.²²⁷ Only one of the versions, written by Impi Vauhkonen, claims to tell the story from first-hand experience. The recollections of Mayme Sevander, Lauri Hokkanen, and Mirjam “Margaret” Rikkinen convey Lammi’s arrest

²²⁵ Couser, 86. Italics in original.

²²⁶ For example, Ranta, 3; Hokkanen, 94. Fitzpatrick notes the prevalence of such descriptions in Soviet memoirs. *Everyday Stalinism*, 209.

²²⁷ See for example Connerton’s groundbreaking 1989 work, *How Societies Remember*, and his recent *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

through what they had been told, confirming the important role of gossip in forming communal history.²²⁸

Katri Lammi's arrest features in Impi Vauhkonen's recollective article about Finnish North American cultural life in 1930s Karelia.²²⁹ She explains that Lammi had been arrested, released, and re-arrested in Petrozavodsk to be taken to Lime Island.

Vauhkonen wrote:

Katri was Katri, could not be humbled. I remember her departure. When her things had been lifted on to the back of the [truck] and She was helped into the mix, she wrapped an old quilt around her shoulders, straightened up and sang out with her strong voice: *Laaja on mun kotimaani kallis* [wide is my homeland dear]... Maybe somebody else who lived at *väliparakeilla* [Finnish North American barracks in Petrozavodsk] then remembers it.²³⁰

Mayme Sevander's version of the story shares much in common with Vauhkonen's:

A friend wrote me in Latushka, telling me the story of Katri Lammi, a Petrozavodsk opera singer. 'The truck came to take her away to Lime Island,' my friend wrote. 'She stood on the back, holding onto its sides and surrounded by pots and pans and a few broken chairs, singing the national anthem. It made quite a picture, this old green military truck driving off down the road in a cloud of dust, and Katri Lammi standing in the back, singing at the top of her lungs: Boundless is my Motherland beloved. / Thousands are the rivers, lakes and woods. / There's no other land you'd ever covet. / Here you breathe as freely as you should. It gave the song a whole new meaning, let me tell you.'²³¹

²²⁸ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 17.

²²⁹ Vauhkonen, 77.

²³⁰ Vauhkonen, "He Rakensivat Kulttuuria," 77. "Katri oli Katri, nöyrytmätön. Muistan hänen lähtönsä. Kun hänen kampeensa oli nostettu auton koriin ja hänet autettu niiden sekaan, hän kietaisi vanhan täkin harteileen, suoristautui ja kajautti voimakkaalla äänellään: *Laaja on mun kotimaani kallis...* Ehkä joku muukin silloin väliparakeilla asunut muistaa sen. Katri palasi myöhemmin Petroskoihin, mutta tahto taisi olla jo tipotiessään..."

²³¹ Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 118.

Both versions feature Lammi on the back of the truck taking her away, and report her singing the anthemic “Song of the Motherland,” first performed in the enormously successful 1936 Soviet film *Circus*, then expanded in 1937. It has gone on to be one of the most beloved Russian patriotic songs.²³² *Circus* tells the story of a woman who flees America and becomes enamoured by and devoted to Soviet society. The lyrics include:

At our table,
no one is excluded,
Each is awarded on merit,
In golden letters we write
The people's Stalinist law.
These words of greatness and glory
Cannot be taken back through the years:
A person always has the right
To exercise, rest, and work.²³³

The song exemplifies the reinforcement of the Stalinist myth of plenty and draws on the facade of rights written into the 1936 Stalin Constitution. Sheila Fitzpatrick has drawn on the lyrics “Broad is my native land” to refer to the practice of exiling and re-locating undesirable elements from Soviet society, pushing problems to the edges, made possible by the Soviet Union’s vast geographic scope.²³⁴ Katri Lammi’s song choice, whether actual or a created element in the collective re-telling of the story, serves to reinforce the tragedy and irony of the Finnish North Americans’ fate in Karelia.

Lauri Hokkanen’s version of the story contributes additional elements:

One of the ladies taken to the island [Lime Island] was Katri Lammi, an actress and singer who worked at the Finnish Dramatic Theatre in Petrozavodsk. Katri was married to a well-known singer, Jukka

²³² Thanks to researcher Alexey Golubev for helping to track down this song.

²³³ Translated lyrics from “Wide is My Motherland.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wide_Is_My_Motherland Accessed 12 December 2013. The quoted verse was removed from the song at some point during de-Stalinization campaigns.

²³⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 217.

Ahti, who had been arrested some time earlier. They used to sing together a lot, which is what they had done while the police were searching their apartment before they arrested Jukka. Those who saw Katri leave for Lime Island said she put on quite a performance, having the police pack and carry her things onto the scow. Richly dressed in furs and laces from the theatre, she paraded along the dock, singing parts from operas. Once on the island, Katri got the job of driving a horse hauling stone to the dock. People said she was a real sight, dressed in the most ridiculous way – furs, lace, muffs – and acting the part of some character. I wished I had seen it.²³⁵

Hokkanen's story dresses Lammi in "furs and laces" and follows her "performance" all the way to Lime Island, where she continued to play her role. Conversely, Margaret Rikkinen explained in a 2000 interview that Lammi "knew that they were coming to take her so she stripped everything off and put just a blanket around when they were taking her away."²³⁶ Her interviewer asked why and Rikkinen answered simply: "to damn them."

Though allegedly continuing her performance on Lime Island by taking on a "character," the system of repression may have ultimately broken Lammi. In *Red Exodus*, Sevander explains:

For many years there was no news of Katri Lammi. When she appeared on the Petrozavodsk scene after a long absence, she had aged beyond recognition; her spirit was broken. She found refuge at the old folks' home on the beautiful island of Valaam where she breathed her last. Upon hearing this sad news, I wondered whether, when they were lowering her into her grave, the beautiful melodies of Lehar, Strauss and Imre Calman she had so exquisitely sung, rung in anyone's ears. She and her husband had sacrificed comfort, popularity and finally life itself for the socialist ideal!²³⁷

²³⁵ Hokkanen, 95.

²³⁶ Margaret Rikkinen interview with Raija Warkentin, 8 May 2000. "MR: ...ja hän tiesi että häntä tullaan hakee niin se oli riisunut kaikki päältänsä pois ja pani blanketin vaan ympärilleen kun ne lähti viemään sitä. RW: Minkä takia? M: Piruutain"

²³⁷ Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 111.

Vauhkonen noted that when Lammi returned, “her will seemed to have already gone.”²³⁸ Jukka Aho, Lammi’s husband, had been killed in 1938.²³⁹ Despite the tragic outcome, Lammi’s story symbolizes strength. Rikkinen understood the collective significance of Katri Lammi’s story: she challenged her captors “to damn them.” Regardless of what Lammi actually did - whether she was naked or dressed in finery and whether she put on a performance or not - her behaviour has come to represent the resistance and perseverance of the Finnish North American community in Karelia. Alessandro Portelli argues that such enduring yet discrepant tales are “generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general.”²⁴⁰

In each of the four versions, Katri Lammi’s body and physical comportment play vital roles. In both Vauhkonen and Sevander’s stories, Lammi is initially objectified, placed among “pots and pans and a few broken chairs,” but from there, she “straightened up and sang out with her strong voice.” The images of Lammi standing upright, shoulders back with a quilt worn like a cape, and parading around represent the bodily projections of power, analyzed by Paul Connerton.²⁴¹ Furthermore, the Finnish North American community’s strength is embodied as a woman. If the mistreatment and suffering of women and children, as exemplified in Aino Pitkänen’s letter, stand for the “unspeakable,” then this portrayal of a woman’s proud resistance can be proclaimed for all to see.

²³⁸ Vauhkanen, “He Rakensivat Kulttuuria,” 77.

²³⁹ Sevander, *Vaeltajat*, 182.

²⁴⁰ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 26.

²⁴¹ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 73-74.

While only one of the four narrators claimed to have witnessed the event, all four took ownership of the story, drawing on its collective claim and value. Stories of the extraordinary make it into collective history.²⁴² Katri Lammi's fame among Finnish North Americans in the 1930s and the performance of her capture certainly resulted in an extraordinary episode that has had the lasting impact of forming a community narrative representing shared struggle and resistance.

Conclusion

The Great Terror in Karelia solidified the group identity of Finnish North Americans there. As seen in both the late 1930s-early 1940s letters and in the retrospective life writing, their persecution and their survival bound them to a shared history. The analysis of letters and memoirs provides new insights into how the Terror was experienced and understood by those who fell into its destructive path. Letters from the 1930s reveal the strategies of writers, who sought to maintain their connections with North American correspondents without compromising their safety. The study of the use of indirect references and silences in Karelian letters contributes to a broader understanding of peoples' every day strategies in the Soviet Union. The experiences and fates of the community were silenced by the Soviet regime, Finnish immigrant communities in North America, and by the victims themselves. The memoir and retrospective letter narratives reveal the scars of trauma and the quest for "truth", to make sense of all that had happened. An analysis of these Terror narratives brings the history of Finnish North Americans in Karelia to the point of the community's tragic decline.

²⁴² Karen Armstrong, *Remembering Karelia*, 88.

The dream of Soviet Karelia as a homeland for Finnish workers came to an end with the Great Terror. The tribulations of those who remained in the region after the Terror subsided were far from over. The region was quickly thrown into the panic and preparation of war.²⁴³ Karelia became the front for the Wars with Finland, and in 1941, with the Continuation War, Petrozavodsk and its vicinity were bombed and burned. The war years were a time of further displacement and family separation. Able men and women were called to serve, while mothers, children, the ill, and the elderly were evacuated to the far north and to the Caspian Sea under extremely dangerous conditions.²⁴⁴ Many perished along the way, and survivors had to overcome extreme hunger and hardships through the war years. The war experiences and narratives, and later lives of the Finnish North Americans who remained in the Soviet Union deserve further research and analysis. Though many returned to Karelia after the war, the vibrant Finnish North American community of the 1930s was never revived. Too many had gone and those who remained carried the great burden of all they had endured.²⁴⁵ With bodies scattered throughout its forests and “soaked in the blood of innocent people,” Karelia holds many stories yet to be told of idealism, hope, and despair.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ See Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 125.

²⁴⁴ Ranta, 5.

²⁴⁵ See for example, Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 157.

²⁴⁶ Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 82.

CONCLUSION

Jack Forsell reflected on his life in Karelia and wrote: “My coming to this country was like a drowning man grabbing at a straw. I did not wish for anything, just threw my future to destiny. Well, eventually and ultimately this ‘straw’ was a sturdy log that drifted to the harbour of my existence. What this existence has been is another story. A long, long story of which we didn’t talk about with our relatives.”¹ The statement poignantly speaks to the broader Finnish North American experience in Karelia. In Canada and the United States, many Finnish immigrants lived a hard life. Language difficulties and their working-class immigrant status had long made obtaining a fair and fulfilling standard of living nearly impossible, but the Depression stripped people of hope. Finnish immigrants on the political Left were finding themselves increasingly under attack by their governments, the growing right-wing Finnish North American community, and the deepening rifts among the Finnish immigrant Left. Young Soviet Russia and the messages of the Karelian Technical Aid’s recruiters ignited a new spark of optimism. The possibility of an escape from the capitalist world to pursue meaningful work proved widely appealing. “Destiny” threw many challenges at the immigrants in Karelia, such as difficult living conditions, inter-ethnic tensions, and ultimately, the violent repression of Finns. With little control over their fates – though with many

¹ Jack Forsell letter to Janet Lehto, Tsalna, 2 December 1984.

“tactics”² – Finnish North American immigrants drifted with the changing tide of Soviet ideology. Those who survived the Great Terror and the war years could begin to see their “straw” as a “sturdy log,” though left with the work of making sense of what their “existence ha[d] been.”

An attempt to make sense of what their lives have been and have meant is apparent in the retrospective letter collections, including Forsell’s, Mäkelä’s, and Hietala’s, and in the memoirs of Ranta, Sihvola, Alatalo, Maunu, Tuomi, Sevander, and the Hokkanens. For the Hokkanens, their years in Karelia became something that they “would do well to forget,” but, as Sylvi remarked, “of course, we couldn’t forget.”³ They could not forget their friends and those who were taken in the purges. For the rest of their lives, the couple was “left with a deep feeling of sorrow and disappointment that the dream we’d had – the dream we’d worked hard to fulfill – had collapsed around us.”⁴ Lauri Hokkanen remembered the significant changes and modernization he saw upon returning to the United States after seven years in the Soviet Union, which led him to think: “Somehow it felt as if the revolution had happened here in the United States!”⁵ The Hokkanens’ memoir concludes with a clear statement of their politics. Sylvi wrote: “Although when we left for Karelia, we had no clear concept of what either ‘democracy’ or ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ meant, by degrees we found out. Having become

² Kotkin successfully demonstrated the “little tactics of the habitat” that people employed to live within the Soviet system in *Magnetic Mountain*. Johnston has recently categorized further strategies to complement Kotkin’s approach. *Being Soviet*, xxxi-xxxii.

³ Hokkanen, 126.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

thoroughly disillusioned by the latter, we feel that democracy is the way to go.”⁶ While they may have believed in the opportunities and freedoms that democracy afforded, such a statement also served to distance the Hokkanens from the uncomfortable communist label that followed them through their lives.

The relationship with Karelia and the Great Socialist Project was more complicated for those who stayed in the region beyond the Stalinist years, and built lives and families there. It was not possible to draw clear lines, such as those between Soviet Karelia and capitalist North America. Instead, these life writers had to form understandings of their past and present by weighing their experiences against the long trajectory of Soviet politics and life. As we have seen, Jack Forsell doubted whether socialism had ever existed in the Soviet Union, but he also viewed the collapse of communism with suspicion and saw “no Reason” for the shortages and poverty that accompanied the transition.⁷ While others did not write as explicitly about how they came to regard communism, it is telling that out of all the retrospective life writers considered in this study, only Jack Forsell and Reino Mäkelä ultimately stayed in Karelia and the former Soviet Union.

Each of the memoirists and retrospective letter writers conveyed their consternation at the injustices they had lived through. No one among the life writers studied here denied the Great Terror and the Stalinist crimes or apologized for the Soviet regime’s wrongdoings. A sense of betrayal runs through the collective narratives. Even Mayme Sevander, whose ideological commitment to what she termed “socialist

⁶ Ibid., 130.

⁷ Jack Forsell letter to Janet, Tshalna, 4 December 1990.

democracy” was made evident throughout her life writing, had to reconcile the betrayal of “My People.”

We do not know what happened to so many of the 1930s letter writers, including the Kangas family, Lisi Hirvonen, and Justiina and Alice Heino. We cannot know with certainty how they understood the changes and violence that surrounded them. In their last letters, they did not have the freedom to write openly, and it is unlikely that they could have suspected that Stalin and his inner circle were behind the repression.

However, an analysis of the letter collections illuminates a clear change in the letter narratives. The optimism and proud descriptions of the work being accomplished, characteristic of the early letters, were replaced by reflections on the significance of family, laments about distance and migration, and, most often, silences.

Aino Pitkänen’s brave description of Karelia in the throes of the Great Terror suggest she was not alone in believing that people who had “not done anything bad” were being victimized.⁸ Pitkänen portrayed the repression as the fault of “saboteurs,” which, for the researcher, raises questions about how people living through the Terror could understand who was responsible for the attacks. Narratives, such as Pitkänen’s, allow us to consider the internalization of state media and messaging, challenges to one’s own commitment to communism, how one conveyed these atrocities to communist-sympathizers in North America, and the caution one had to exercise when speaking critically of life in the Soviet Union.

⁸ Aino Pitkänen letter to Kirsti and Antti Pitkänen, Urimolahti, Finland, 25 July 1938.

Forsell's observation about his existence and how his life was "[a] long, long story of which we didn't talk about with our relatives" proves to be especially striking when considered in the context of a larger examination of Finnish North Americans' Karelian life writing narratives. Engaging in the life writing process began to break down the silences and distances that existed between the immigrants' experiences and those of their relatives remaining in North America. In the Finnish North American communities, where historic political differences and hard feelings are often still harboured, focussing on the experiences of the American and Canadian Finns who participated in the Karelian project helps to free these ostracized individuals from the community shadows.⁹ This project serves as a part of the communal healing process and helps to continue opening communication and breaking down myths about who went to Karelia, why, and what happened to them there.

Life writing narratives teach us that those who participated in the Karelian migration need not be characterized as, solely, economically or politically motivated, at the expense of the other. The writers illuminate a community, raised in the revolutionary spirit, who believed in the ideals of the workers' movement, without necessarily engaging in the formal ideological contestations of the Communist Parties, or even paying membership dues. The economic depression made the inequalities of the capitalist world plainly clear, providing an important additional impetus. The significance of both of these factors is readily apparent in the immigrants' own telling of their life stories.

⁹ Haynes and Klehr have further critiqued the American intellectual Left's failure to acknowledge the experiences of Americans who participated in the Soviet building of socialism, exclaiming: "Perhaps some day, when the poisonous politicized atmosphere of today's academic world dissipates, American historians will take on the task of a full-scale scholarly study of the American radicals who immigrated to the Soviet Union to build socialism, only to meet the Gulag and Stalin's executioners." Haynes and Klehr, 121.

The history of the Karelian migration is very much a part of Finnish North American history. The 'Karelian Fever' marked a turning point for the Finnish North American Left, and the character of Finnish immigrant communities in Canada and the United States, overall. Karelia called away so many of the immigrant youth, raised in the revolutionary spirit. Their absence created a void in Finnish North American political and community life. When people returned from Karelia with strange tales of poverty and, even worse, repression, the communities in Canada and the United States were fractured. When letter exchanges came to a sudden end and friends and family in Karelia simply seemed to disappear, the losses weighed on Finnish immigrant communities. The enthusiastic participation in the Karelian project, manifested through fundraising and migration, can be viewed as the final mass display of Finnish Left activism in North America.

Grounding the life writing narratives in Canadian and American social history studies, it is possible to see the ways the writers used their North American and Finnish backgrounds to make familiar what they encountered in Karelia. Additionally, by examining this immigrant community in the Soviet Union, we simultaneously learn about what it meant to be a Finnish North American. As we have seen, when met with formal Finnish language and a significant population of Finns from Finland, Finnish immigrants from Canada and the United States came to see themselves - and be seen - increasingly as North Americans. The letters and memoirs both demonstrate the ways writers made distinctions between groups in the region, even among Finns.

Life writing offers future opportunities to analyse the immigrants' relational identities and how they viewed their own national and ethnic identities, given the complexity of negotiating Finnish and North American backgrounds, with newly adopted Soviet citizenship, and the internationalist and anti-nationalist worldview of their socialism. Further research may also be directed by an examination of the language hybridization and multilingual character of many of the narratives. For example, many letters written in Finnish begin and end with English salutations, include 'Finnglish' (Finnish-English hybrid) words to describe goods or activities, and utilize Russian terms for work, politics, and organizational life. A linguistic consideration rooted in historical and narrative studies may teach us more about the transnational lives and identities of the immigrants.

Through Finnish Canadians' and Americans' life writing about Karelia, we gain an understanding of the world they lived in, in a way that does not come to the surface through the study of newspapers, organizational records, or government documents, alone. The immigrants detail their travel and first impressions, the housing, food, and consumer goods they confronted, as well as their attitudes toward other peoples of the region, their working lives, how they participated in social and cultural life, and their understandings of community. Through these sources, "we see and feel, and occasionally hear, taste, and smell, their experiences."¹⁰ While all immigrants naturally had their own personal paths and perspectives, the life writing reveals the significant extent of collectively shared experiences. Both the vivid detailing and quick comments offered by

¹⁰ Attebery, 166.

the writers bring to life a Finnish North Americans' ordinary day in Karelia. These narratives lend themselves to gender analysis. Considering the ways that home life, working life, and social life are written about by men and women highlights the ideals and practices of masculinities and femininities within this community. In addition to exploring intersections of men's and women's experiences, looking at Karelian life through the eyes of children and youth reminds us of the varying roles and encounters the building of socialism entailed. As Barbara Walker has reminded us, we "cannot afford to ignore these lively and intriguing sources for understanding the human experience in twentieth century Russia."¹¹

Approaching the Finnish North American settlement in Karelia through the lens of everyday life serves to bridge Karelian experiences with the history of Soviet life, overall. When considering the whole body of Karelian literature, one may come away with the impression that the Finnish North American settlement existed in a bubble. While there were certainly unique features of Finnish North American immigrant life in Karelia, it is more useful to view 'Karelian Fever' as one part of a larger project of Karelian autonomy, and to situate the daily realities and contestations in the context of Soviet life. Viewing the migration to Karelia in light of a period of transition in Soviet conceptions of housing, consumer goods, families, gender, and sociability, life writing offers unique vantage points for understanding how such formal ideological shifts manifested themselves in the Karelian hinterland and among the immigrant population.

¹¹ Barbara Walker, "On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the 'Contemporaries' Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture from the 1790s to the 1970s," *Russian Review*, 59, 3 (July 2000), 328-329.

In the massive and diverse Soviet Union, ethnicity and background were significant factors for how people were positioned in the social hierarchy and how they encountered the state. To best understand how ordinary people experienced the Soviet system, it is essential to consider a wide spectrum of the population, from all parts of the nation. The study of Finnish North Americans in Karelia joins other community micro-histories to further elucidate daily life under Stalin, showing the ways that people not only built socialism, but lived it.¹² Together, these studies develop the framework of “Stalinism as an analytical category.”¹³

Letters written inside Stalin’s Soviet Union and sent to North America are a rare source, which allow for the consideration of many issues. The Karelian letter writers demonstrate the ways that personal correspondence supported the transnational flow of information and material goods, and also created a bridge for immigrants to stay connected and engaged with their North American home community, with their forming Karelian community, and with the in-between space where individuals maintain and develop a sense of self which combines the two. The letters show immigrants creating shared frames of reference, which made mutual understanding and connection possible. A close reading of letters also reveals the strategies their writers employed to provide both assurances of health and well-being, as well as the coded and muted writing that signalled distress. The extended letter relay of Lisi Hirvonen, Aate Pitkänen, Terttu Kangas, Justiina and Alice Heino, Kalle Korhonen, Karl Berg, and Enoch Nelson tells us

¹² Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 154.

¹³ Siegelbaum and Sokolov, 3.

that as much as their letters represented their own lived experience, their thoughts were with their correspondent.

The analytical opportunities offered by the Karelian life writing have not been exhausted. The letters, specifically, can be further examined for what they reveal about the negotiation of relationships.¹⁴ Through the common practice of listing who they had exchanged letters with and who they had gotten greetings from, correspondents affirmed their social roles and connections.¹⁵ Unfortunately, many edited letter collections have omitted listings and greetings “for the sake of readability.”¹⁶ However, historians have much to gain by paying attention to these seemingly mundane references. Listings and questions were embedded with meaning and purpose and can be seen as attempts to stay actively connected to the fluid social dynamics of the home community. Names and information flowed in both directions across the Atlantic; those in Karelia asked about friends and family, but also reported on all the others from their hometowns living in Karelia. In David Fitzpatrick’s words, “The recitation of familiar names, to the impatient historian a mere catalogue, evoked an irrecoverable aura of recognition for the intimate reader.”¹⁷ One can imagine the visions of places and people evoked in the minds of letter writers as they reconstructed their social worlds through their lists, providing them with the comfort of “personal continuity.” However, the Karelian letters also reveal that keeping up correspondences and waiting for letters could cause anxiety for the

¹⁴ Gerber’s work demonstrates how letters served to not only maintain bonds, but also to grow them. For example, Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, 4.

¹⁵ See for example, Alice Heino letter to “Rakas Veljeni,” Kontupohja, 18 March 1938 and Lisi Hirvonen letters to Anna Mattson, Petrozavodsk, 6 August 1934 and 30 January 1935.

¹⁶ For example, Kamphoefner et al., 46-47 and Erickson, 9.

¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, 550.

immigrants. Further analysis of these instances would surely lead to a deeper appreciation of just how significant letter exchanges truly were.

Janet Gurkin Altman contends that: “[t]o write a letter is to map one’s coordinates – temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual – in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has travelled since the last writing.”¹⁸ This mapping of the self serves to reinforce the “shared world” of the correspondents¹⁹, but, arguably, also allows the writers – of either letters or memoir – to take stock of where they have been, are in the present, and what the future may look like. For the researcher, these coordinates provide access into the writers’ everyday lives and their ongoing personal development. Continuing to probe the ways that Finnish North American immigrants in Karelia constructed and fostered networks of communication, connection, and understanding will enrich our understanding of Finnish immigrant life on both continents and also of the immigrant experience more broadly.

The retrospective letter collections and memoirs represent and narrate the life writers’ personal truths, but also illuminate their uncertainties, avoidances, and traumas. Thoughts and memories of community and lost friends and family are often found at the heart of these sources. Serving as testimonial narrative and *testimonio*, as we have seen, life writers wanted to set the record straight. They wanted to reconcile their life with what had happened to the community. Writers could reclaim their agency, assaulted by repression and violence, by participating in life writing. Personal narratives and memory hold ongoing importance for the people of the former USSR and those who have lived

¹⁸ Altman, 119.

¹⁹ Ibid.

through repression, terror, and war. Alexander Etkind argues that the Russian state has not adequately met citizens' needs for making sense of their collective past of violence. He notes: "While the state is led by former KGB officers who avoid giving public apologies, building monuments, or opening archives, the struggling civil society and the intrepid reading public are possessed by the unquiet ghosts of the Soviet era."²⁰ Personal stories and the examination of life under Stalin contribute to the communal task of unearthing the past. The letters and memoirs of Finnish North Americans in Karelia add new voices from the edge of the Soviet Union to this important work. Given the current political climate of Russia, in which individual narratives that do not fit the national meta-narrative are suppressed, allowing the past to speak has timely importance.

Personal narratives enrich our understanding of the immigrants' lives and minds, but the contribution made by an analysis of these sources extends beyond its importance for understanding a particular community and its individual members. There is an ever-growing interest in examining the ways that life writing serves our understanding of the past, and the aim of this current study has been to add further perspectives. By utilizing letters and memoirs to build a community social history, while simultaneously exploring what each narrative teaches us about its writer, a broad range of methodological and historical questions have been considered. An interdisciplinary investigation of narrative structures and conventions, modes of self-representation and self-understanding, and the active social and personal constructions of memory add fruitful tools of research, analysis, and thought to historical practice. Bridging the analysis of personal letters and

²⁰ Etkind, "Post-Soviet Hauntology," 182.

memoirs in one study under the umbrella of life writing addresses the common divide in autobiographical narrative research. Working with the two source types demonstrates that, while letters and memoirs have unique particularities and pose their own challenges, the two share much in common. The framing of time, self, and experience are at the core of both of these sources. Both source types also inform us of the communities the writer identified with.

While the individual stories of remaining Finnish North Americans in Karelia continue beyond the Terror years, concluding the study before the outbreak of war seems fitting. For the life writers, the war years of evacuation, displacement, army conscription, and labour camps mark the beginning of a new chapter – literally, in some memoirs. When Finnish North Americans returned to Karelia in 1946 and later, it was no longer the Karelia they had come to build. The buildings had been destroyed, as had any remnants of the community the Red Finn leadership had strived to create. With new marriages and new births, the identities of the migrants and their children continued to evolve. Many began to develop a sense of self that included identification with the Russian language and with being a Soviet citizen. The post-Terror through post-Soviet intergenerational experiences and identities of Finnish North American-Karelians offer many possibilities for further examination. The study of the migration from the Karelian Fever in North America to the years of the Great Terror establishes the framework that makes such future analysis possible.

Finnish Canadians and Americans did not find their socialist society in Karelia. Those who survived the Great Terror and the War, heard Krushchev's Secret Speech, and

lived through the disintegration of Communism were left wondering if there ever had been socialism in the Soviet Union. While the Karelian project ultimately failed and so many lost their lives, the life writers reveal that their hope for the future gave the migration meaning. Finnish North American Leftists had a tradition of utopianism and of grass-roots idealism that played a role in fuelling the Karelian Fever. Forsell claimed he “did not wish for anything” when he left Canada, but the letters and memoirs taken as a whole suggest, instead, that the revolutionary spirit and the spirit of idealism were palpable features of community life. While the outcome proved tragic, positive lessons for today can also be gleaned from pre-Purge life in Karelia. Today’s economic and environmental position and the growing gap dividing the world’s rich from the poor have fostered new sociopolitical movements, including Occupy and Idle No More. The history of the Finnish North American migration provides a reminder of past commitments to cooperative living, and an example of people unsettling themselves in order to contribute to building the society they wished to be a part of.

Life in Karelia moved forward at a pace that left many struggling to keep up, just as Karl Berg wrote to his daughter in early 1934. Caught in the midst of rapid-fire regional economic modernization, the growth of the non-Finnish population, and the termination of Red Finn control, Finnish North American immigrants looked to secure their place in the tenuous Karelian project. Quickly jolted from the position of privileged “foreign specialists” to the lowly ranks of distrusted “bourgeois nationalists” and alleged spies, the short span of time that has come to mark the height of the Finnish North American community in Soviet Karelia had many highs and lows. The optimism and

despair both made their mark on the daily lives of the immigrants. In the 1930s and after Stalin's death, Finnish Americans and Canadians set their experiences to paper, leaving us with a view of their everyday, their joys, and their heartaches.

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