On Vacation: Finnish Migrants at Home as Tourists

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Structural change has been a marked feature of Finnish history since the Second World War. Not until around 1980 were there more Finns living in towns than in the country. The 1960s have come to be known in research literature as the decade of rural depopulation. The migrants headed mainly for the industrial towns of Southern Finland or for neighbouring Sweden. The flow of migration to Sweden from Salla, on the eastern border of Northern Finland, was so strong in the 1960s and 1970s that the locals joked that Gothenburg, a major industrial city in Southern Sweden, had within a matter of years become Salla’s biggest village. In 1970, for example, more than six per cent of the population of Salla moved to another Nordic country, and the other municipalities of Lapland likewise came high in the migration statistics. Although the figures for the individual municipalities were not large, migration to Sweden meant a considerable population drop in Lapland. The consequences were made all the more dramatic by the fact that the migrants were those of the best working and child-bearing age.

The typical migrant from Finland to Sweden in the 1960s-70s was, in the light of research, a member of one of the large age cohorts from the remote regions of Eastern or Northern Finland, most often a small farm, and had completed an elementary school education. The majority of the Finns who migrated to Sweden after the war settled in the Stockholm region and the Tornio River Valley. In the 1960s they spread over a larger area, heading especially for the industrial strip of Central Sweden between Stockholm and Gothenburg. In 1998, Stockholm had most Finns (22,287 persons), followed by Gothenburg (9,727), representing three and two per cent of their total populations, respectively. There were most Finnish immigrants employed in the 1960s and 1970s in foundries, car factories, shipyards, other metal-working undertakings, and in the rubber, textiles, clothing and paper industries. Jobs were often to be found in Gothenburg at the Volvo car works, the shipyard, or at the ball-bearing maker SKF.

In around 1960, Finns became the biggest immigrant group in Gothenburg. By 1962 there were 3,213 Finnish citizens living there. A major, multicultural city, it had other nationalities as well: 2,854 Norwegians, 2,822 Danes, 1,499 Germans and 912 Hungarians. In 1980 Gothenburg had an estimated 28,000 or so inhabitants of Finnish descent. Of the just under half a million at the beginning of the 1990s, five per cent were Finns. In the absence of source information, it is not possible to say categorically what part of Finland the Gothenburg Finns originally came from. It may be assumed

1 LÖYTÖNEN, M. 1999. 57-60.
3 KORKIASAARI, J. 2000.169.174
4 See ARVASTSON, C. 1967.
5 DE GEER, E. 1980. 3.60
that a considerable proportion of them came from Northern Finland - 40 per cent of the Finns migrating in the late 1960s were, after all, from the provinces of Lapland and Oulu.

My ongoing research is concerned with the experiences of persons who migrated to Gothenburg from Salla and other municipalities in the province of Lapland in the 1960s-70s. I am examining the environment in which they grew up in Finnish Lapland, and the way this background was reflected in their lifestyle in their new homeland. I am further looking into their key experiences of being a Gothenburg Finn. One of these experiences is the topic for this paper: vacations in Finland. The focus is on the thoughts and experiences at individual level, and in my analyses I will be trying to piece together their worldview. The study is based almost exclusively on interview material. I have at my disposal 62 interviews, half of which I made myself. The interviewees had migrated to Sweden at different times. The one who had spent the longest uninterrupted period in Sweden had gone there in 1955 and the most recent in 1979. The majority of the interviewees had migrated to Sweden between 1962 and 1974, and 1967-1970 were peak years. Although I did not know the year of migration when I fixed the interview, the data well represents the peak years in the statistics. The same applies to the age of the interviewees on migration: the youngest woman had migrated to Sweden without her parents when she was 14, and the oldest at the age of 37. The ages of the men on migration varied between 16 and 39. Most of the interviewees had been under the age of 25 when they migrated to Sweden.

In addition to the interviewees, I have used material in the press, oral history collected by The Archives of The Finnish Minority in Sweden in Stockholm, and the diary of and letters received in Sweden by a young girl who migrated from Salla to Gothenburg. My research is part of a project financed by the Academy of Finland entitled "Gothenburg - the largest village in the parish of Salla" of which I am in charge. Also working on the project are Marja Agren, a postgraduate student of ethnology at the University of Gothenburg who is writing her doctoral dissertation on the identity of second-generation Finns in Gothenburg, and Marianne Junila, a historian using archive sources to examine the volume of migration.

The permanence of temporality

All the interviewees with a couple of exceptions stressed that they never intended to stay in Sweden. The idea of temporality is a major element of the migration narrative. "I'll just stop for a while and then go back" is how many described their mood when they first went to Sweden. As a rule, they hoped to earn a lot of money in a short time and then return home. "Migration to Sweden spread like at the flick of a fan" is how Auno recalled her sudden decision to go to Sweden with some of the boys from the village in 1969. They all intended to make only a short stay and then to return home: "We thought we'd just visit, make a packet of money and then come back like everyone else". Employers were used to people going off to Sweden "just for a visit", so they might promise their employees a job to come back to if they did not like it there. "We both had jobs, but we came over sort of just out of curiosity. And at work, back home, the boss said you go over in your summer holiday and then come back," is how Aaro recalled the mood in which he set off.

On departing for Sweden, the majority thought they would be returning before long. But many never did. "It must be years [since I gave up the idea of going back]; the last time must have been when we moved here [their house]". His wife continues: "It's just come about gradually, always just a bit longer. Then when the children start school, then we'll have to go back at the latest, but I don't know what ... why we didn't go back then. And then I had a good job at the glass factory by the time the girls were born". "We've been here ever since. Reckon we no longer have the gumption to go back," adds Auno. Research literature uses the term 'permanence of temporality' for this phenomenon. The idea of returning is typical of first-generation migrants; but with time, temporary nevertheless becomes permanent.

Many stopped dreaming of returning when their parents had either died or moved away from their home region. They ceased being homesick. As their children, or at the latest their grandchildren, were born and grew up, the new country came to be looked upon as home. Even so, many of those interviewed still treasured the annual vacation in Finland. The migrants returning to their former native region for their holidays are an interesting group. In a way they are tourists, but they are tourists at home.

Ulla's diary

Ulla, who kindly lent her diary as material for research, was 15 when she migrated to Southern Sweden from a remote village in Salla. She had finished her compulsory schooling at the end of May and been confirmed at the end of June, 1969. The summer and autumn were spent at home, helping about the house, with the hay-making and as a domestic help. Being a domestic help did not appeal to her, and by September she was noting in her diary that she would have to look for a job. She was already mulling over the idea of migrating in October, as a domestic help at the school: "Oh if only I could get a job somewhere else. It would be fun to go with Tuula." It is evident from the entries for November that the girls used the telephone in the village shop to reply to a job advertisement, but the diary does not say what the job was. On December 20 Ulla writes: "Guess what! I'm off to Sweden with Tuula and my big sister. Just think!"

The story of how Ulla came to migrate at 15 is in many ways typical: she goes with her older sister and her best friend to stay with a cousin's family. The idea was that one of the girls would remain as a domestic help with the cousin's family and the other two would go and work in a factory. The decision to go would appear to have
been made quickly, because according to the diary, Tuula's father did not even know they were going. He may have been away at a logging camp, because their departure came in mid-December, while the cousin and family were on vacation in Finland.

We set off on Monday. Came here with Tauno and Jukka. I cried when we left. Ensio (Tuula's father) didn't know Tuula was going. He's sure to be angry. So the journey over was fun. We laughed and sang a lot. Jukka's really nice. I'm staying at Irma's. The men are out at work.

Life in Sweden was not, however, quite as pleasant as Ulla and her pals had expected. After three days there, Ulla wrote in her diary, "Nothing's been as good yet as the journey over." She was a domestic help in her cousin's family, so she had both a job and a roof over her head. Also living in the same house were two other families. It was the end of December, and Ulla hoped she could "stick it out until the summer". In other words, she had no intention of staying permanently. Even so, she was depressed: "This house is SO cold and such a dump. It's not at all nice here. Posted home a letter and some cards. We've been to the bank and the shops. There are 2 other families living here. - The children are absolutely impossible. Eero wipes his snotty nose on the cushion. Yuck! I'm so glad the girls didn't leave, so I wasn't left here on my own. How am I going to cope with these kids? Goodness knows. - I do hope I can go and live with the girls, and if only the place was WARM.

Ulla spent eighteen months in Sweden, but she never really enjoyed it. The subtenants living in the same house partied until well into the night, and Ulla could not sleep - she was, after all, expected to sleep in the living room, where the party was going on. The girls who came over from Finland with her were in a different town, so Ulla was lonely. She felt she could not handle the work expected of her, and she even went hungry. Meditating on the course her life had taken, she bitterly regretted going to Sweden. She likened herself to the bleak Lapp countryside and said that it was difficult being uprooted:

Time goes on, every day the same! Never a free Saturday or Sunday. Yrjo's now got an accordion and I've had a go on it, too. Oh how lonely I am. I've written home as well. And I've been writing up my old memories of our hut in the forest to pass the time. It makes me feel better at once and long to be in the wilds. Tomorrow I'll be 16. This is the fifth year since I started writing to you. What a lot I've been through, first childhood, school, a few months hanging around at home and now - now I'm testing my wings on the winds of the world - without Mum to support me. And without any friends (for the time being). I don't know whether I'll come back to Sweden if ever (Cod willing) I get home. What a way to leave - suddenly snatched away from home - the homeland. Life completely changed. From my dear, quiet home village to the big wide world. How can anyone turn at once into a hard city creature, self-confident and independent? And try to be grown up as well? It's not easy. It's difficult for youngsters, too; it makes me frightened and weepy. And they can't understand why I don't get to know the girls who call here. I don't see how I can. They've got different interests, and a different outlook on life."

"Must get back to Finland"

Homesickness comes in many guises, one of which is a longing for the native countryside. The interviewees recalled that even after decades away they still longed for the light summer nights in Finland, the snows of early spring, the silence, the autumn colours and the wilds. In other words, they longed for the natural phenomena for which Lapland is specifically famous and which Gothenburg lacks. Even after thirty years, Reino still finds it hard to leave Sodankylä and return to Gothenburg after his summer holiday: "But even so, the longing remains. I don't know really what it is. What is it I miss? Is it, is it my relatives, or is it Lapland itself, the place where I was born?"
must say I sometimes long for a bit of peace and quiet. When I first came here, I really enjoyed it when I got there, right up north. You couldn't hear a single car, and you could go off down to the river and fish. You'd light yourself a fire and brew some coffee there on the river bank. The only sound there was the rippling stream,” said Keijo, who had been living in Sweden for forty years.

It is interesting to note the different way in which Finns who had migrated from Ostrobothnia to South Africa felt for the scenery of their old and new homelands. For those interviewed by Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, the cold Finnish winter was the best remedy for any homesickness suffered in Africa: for them, the South African countryside was paradise. Homesickness meant missing their parents, brothers and sisters. “Nor did all the people I interviewed idolise the Lapp countryside; some also said they were satisfied that the winters in Gothenburg were not cold and that there were no mosquitoes in summer. They did not, however, extol the Gothenburg countryside particularly. Some of the interviewees pointed out that in some winters it was possible to ski in Gothenburg and to go tobogganing with their children - pastimes familiar to them from childhood. Nor was a longing for the Finnish countryside a key experience of migrants from Lapland only, since similar sentiments were expressed by interviewees from Kainuu and North Ostrobothnia, too.

The core feature of the summer vacation narratives is a heroic drive to Lapland without a single stop to rest or eat. The vital thing was to get to Lapland, and fast. You can imagine how we always looked forward to the summer holiday. It was always the .Just as little kids look forward to Christmas, so we always looked forward to the summer holiday, when we could go back. You know, we’d pack the cars up the same night and we’d drive to Sodankylä you know, we wouldn’t eat and we wouldn’t sleep. So we could be there the whole four weeks.

Seeing their parents, brothers and sisters was for many the primary motive for travelling to Finland. They missed their mother and father, and letters and phone calls could not bring them sufficiently close. During the summer holidays, particularly, there might be many visitors at their grandparents’, and this made the stays so memorable. Alma’s family would first visit relatives in Raahe before going on to Rovaniemi and Salla. The return journey would take them via Kuopio and Imatra. Salla was the main destination; there might be more than twenty summer visitors there, all working in Sweden. The cousins born in Gothenburg met one another each summer in Salla. Some would sleep in the house, others in a caravan or tent. According to Alma’s brother, the time in question, the 1970s, was the best time of his life. “I still get wistful when I recall how the summer holiday would come and the whole crowd would come; it was quite a to-do. The whole village had people over”.

The migrants did not, however, return to Finland merely to see friends and relations, but also to do things they could not do in Sweden. Many felt that their childhood environments were the only ones where they could really relax and enjoy the countryside. During their annual vacation they therefore fished and picked arctic cloudberries. A sauna bath beside a lake was the crowning glory. During the summer holiday they wanted to tramp the familiar wilds, the likes of which were, they claimed, not to be found in either Gothenburg or Sweden. During a five-day holiday Akseli once drove all the way from Gothenburg to Salla just to spend the night in the familiar wilds: I set off after work down at Volvo's and drove all the way to Salla without a single shut-eye. What would that be - 1,800 kilometres. I slept the next day after I got here in the morning, early morning, I was here in Salla before noon. Then I got up and when I'd had a bite to eat, had a meal, I threw my rucksack on my back, stowed an axe and some grub in my rucksack and off I went, off up to Vilma Fell. I skied ten kilometres or so into the backwoods, chopped down a dead pine tree and spent the night there. Then the next day I skied back and set off to drive back to Gothenburg. It was that sort of visit. I needed it, being able to spend the night by the glow of the burning pine. I just went and recharged my batteries, as it were.

For Raili’s family, fishing and picking berries were among the highlights of the summer trip. It was also easier to go out dancing than in Gothenburg, because there was someone to look after the children:

We went fishing, and we went berry-picking. It was pretty important for us to go berry-picking, we had to have our berries, arctic cloudberries. And we would go dancing. I always felt the month passed so quickly, we couldn’t be there the whole time, and it went so fast that we hardly had time to do anything. And if it happened to be cloudberry time, then you could spend weeks tramping in the cloudberry forests.

While home on vacation, the migrants would recruit others. Like Ulla, many of the interviewees had literally been fetched from home to work in Sweden. Good workers at the Volvo factory, for example, were even urged to bring over relatives in the days when labour was scarce. The same phenomenon can be observed among the Turkish immigrants in Gothenburg, or the Yugoslav immigrants in Stockholm. Magnus Berg, in his doctoral dissertation about second-generation Turks in Gothenburg, uses the term kamratrekrytering (peer or pal recruiting) in describing how the majority of the first-generation Turkish men found their way to Sweden. Most of the recruiting was done during the vacations. “

The interviewees were young, and they mostly spent their summer holidays with their parents. Many were soon in a position to buy a caravan; this was useful during their vacations, too, when many of their brothers and sisters descended on their parents at the same time. Others bought a summer cottage in their home region, or used their former house in Finland as a summer cottage. There they could live in the way familiar from childhood. A potato patch, for example, and a sauna were key elements of a lifestyle regarded as Finnish.


" BERG, M. 1994. 6., 76.
The home as a stage

One thing I noticed in making the interviews was that almost all the interviewees had a collection of souvenirs of Lapland conspicuously placed in their homes. Typical examples were souvenirs made from reindeer skin or bone, gold pans, Lapp dolls, and woven raanu wall hangings. There might also be such relics of bygone days as a rake reminiscent of a meadow economy or a curdled-milk pan from a former dairy. These items were usually placed in the hall, i.e. the most public part of the house. If the home is regarded as a theatre, then the hall and living room are the stage. The objects are displayed as an entity; they are symbolically placed in a frame.

Ulrika Wolf-Knuts likewise mentions the Finnish ornaments in the homes of Swedish-speaking Finns in South Africa, but she does not specify exactly where they were placed. The fact that similar interior elements occur in the homes of people unknown to one another supports the claim put forward by Marianne Cullestad that home decoration has a grammar of its own that is commonly observed. Päiviik Suojanen speaks of the language of the American-Finn home.

The souvenirs in the homes of the Gothenburg Laplanders indicate the home decorator's rural Lapland background, and probably also childhood memories. Eva Londos, in her studies of Swedish home interiors, has aptly noted that it is possible to read the life story of the owner (or his/her partner) from the walls of the home. The wedding, confirmation and other photos are a visual document of significant people and events. This same narrative is supported by the paintings and objects on display. The fact that the conspicuously placed objects are associated specifically with Lapland (reindeer herding, the Sami ethos, gold panning and other indigenous occupations) tells of a desire to underline their owner's Lapp origins. Strength is drawn from a traditional way of life now past in the society of the present.

On the other hand, the treasures also tell of holiday trips chiefly to the former homeland, in this case Lapland. In the family albums are photos of souvenir stalls along the roads to Lapland. It is in a way paradoxical that the symbols of Lapland for the Finns who migrated young are, in the new homeland, ones that are clichés: tourist souvenirs.

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