

Finland's War Children by Veijo Paine

Who are Finland's War Children? It refers to 70,000 Finnish children who were displaced from their homes during WWII. Over 95% of these children were shipped to Sweden. A few were shipped to Denmark and Norway; but, when Germany occupied those countries, the children were sent back to their home country or they ended up in Sweden.

The evacuation of these children started in December 1939, less than a month after Russia attacked Finland in November. Initially, it was just a couple of thousand a month for the duration of the Winter War. The "Winter War", as the Finns called it, lasted only three and a half months and ended late winter, 1940. For Finland, the second part of WWII started in June, 1941 – Finns called this the "Continuation War" – and the evacuation of the children started again. By spring of 1942 there was a large wave of evacuees. The primary reasons for this evacuation were the bombing of the cities by the Russians and food shortages, particularly in the southern third of Finland. In the spring of 1944, the largest wave of evacuees took place. All in all, 70,000 children aged 1 to 14 ended up in Sweden. The majority of the children came from urban areas rather than from farming areas – in south-eastern and southern Finland.

Why did Finland send such a large group of children to Sweden? Three of the primary causes were: the safety of the children, secondly, single working mothers just could not adequately take care of their children, and thirdly, the food shortages experienced during the war.

Why were there so many single mothers? Since most able-bodied men from age 18 to 50 were called to service in the armed forces, that left the wife/mother as the sole bread winner of the family. The meager soldier's pay was not nearly enough to feed the family. Besides, if you lived in the cities, the government assumed the authority to direct where the women had to report to work, meaning they were required to work – hardly conducive to taking care of the home and children. For example, my mother was trained to be a caretaker in a pre-school nursery. However, she was assigned to work in the warehouses located by the ship-ping docks along the waterfront. The city of Kotka, where we lived before, during and after the war, is one of the largest port cities in Finland. Not five feet tall, she ended up stacking lumber, shoveling coal and doing all kinds of other heavy physical labor.

The families just did not have a choice but to send their children to where they would be safe and have good nutrition. Once the war ended in 1945, most of the children returned to their homes in Finland. A few thousand were permanently adopted by their Swedish families. In many cases there simply was no home to return to. The father was killed in action, and the mother was killed in the bombing raids.

Interestingly, these children became a taboo subject after the war. Nobody wanted to talk about it. The media did not address it. The government remained silent about it. Even the academia avoided it. The children involved were also reluctant to talk about their experiences.

Why this reluctance to face their history? Some time ago, I read an article in which the author suggested the following rationale. To understand this reluctance, you have to understand something about the history and character of Finnish people. For centuries, Finland was a pawn between Sweden and Russia. Regardless of who ruled Finland, we were the serfs who served the lords that ruled us. But throughout the centuries of being dominated by more powerful neighbors, Finnish people struggled to keep their identity, their culture, the customs and their language.

It wasn't until 1918, during the Bolshevik revolution, that Finns saw their chance to become independent. It was this sense of self-reliance and fortitude that led the Finnish mindset to feel ashamed that they could not take care of their own children. It became viewed as a national shame.

The children who lived through this experience also did not want to talk about it. To all of them, it had been a very traumatic experience. It is not easy for a child to be shipped to a strange place where you don't understand the language and the customs.

It wasn't until the late 1980's that former War Children formed networks in both Finland and Sweden. These networks consisted of individual community based associations. The War Children discovered that it was much easier to talk about their childhood experiences with someone who had gone through similar experiences. It was the formation of these associations and networks that finally brought out in the open the true story about the War Children. The formation of these networks also spurred numerous studies, surveys, articles, conferences and even films. Through these activities the rest of the world came to understand the trauma and the long term impact of that trauma as these children grew into adulthood.

Trauma? Of course, the whole experience of being sent to a foreign country for varying periods of time and finally returning back home is a sequence of traumatic experiences. But, most War Children would agree that the initial separation from your family and being inserted into a new environment, new language and new culture (even though this initial experience lasted only a few days or weeks) was the greatest trauma of them all.

An article written by Mona Serenius, titled **The Silent Cry**, was published by the Center of Psychology in Oslo, Norway. An adult woman, who was one of the War Children, had sought therapeutic help to relieve her of the nightmares she was having about her experiences. The therapist had asked her to document her feelings when she was sent to Sweden to serve as the starting point of her therapy. The woman brought a cardboard box. The sides of this box could be folded over, and on the bottom of the box she had painted a picture. The picture was oval shaped, like an egg. Inside the oval she had painted a small red heart. When asked to interpret the box and the painting, this is what she said: *"The terror is paralyzing. I have no eyes – because I cannot understand what I see. I have no ears – because I don't understand what I hear. I have no mouth – because no one can understand what I say. I have no arms – because I have no one to reach out to. I have no feet – because I have no one to run to. This is me in a foreign country. I am in deadly agony. My senses are paralyzed. In order to survive I have shut the doors on myself."* It is the trauma that every child experienced to varying degree.

The studies and surveys about the War Children and their experiences as they grew up after the war were truly revealing. Perhaps it is not surprising that they found the suicide rate and especially the divorce rate were significantly higher than the average population. Researches are concluding that the trauma experienced by these children has been repressed for decades and is finally coming to the surface. This is vividly illustrated by the headline from a Finnish newspaper published September, 1994. The headline states in big bold letters:

"THIS MUST NEVER BE REPEATED"

My story.....

As you probably have assumed I am one of the Children. The city of Kotka, where I was living with my mother, was heavily bombed by the Russians when the "Continuation War" started. The city authorities ordered evacuation of children between ages 1 and 14. I was sent to a rather primitive farm in east-central Finland. I am not sure just how long I lived at this farm, but probably between six and nine months. When my mother came to visit this farm, she made an instant decision to take me back to Kotka. Why did she do this? That's another long story but in any case, my mother managed to smuggle me back into the city despite the evacuation orders.

In Kotka, my mother and I lived in a small two room flat at the back side of an old house. Every morning as my mother had to leave for work, she would lock the outside door so I could not get out. The days sure seemed, and were, long and boring. One day I managed to get the basement door open and proceeded to explore around. I noticed that a small window up close to the ceiling was cracked open. So I gathered a table, some old chairs and boxes and stacked them up under the window. I managed to climb up and open the window enough for me to crawl out. I think that this window, which was at the ground level, was probably the way the heating coal was brought in, for my clothes were a mess, sooty and dusty. I remember thinking how mad my mother would be when she got home.

Since I was now outside, I decided to walk around. I hadn't gone more than a couple of blocks when the air raid sirens went off. I saw people running and yelling to each other. I could hear the bombers approaching. I could hear explosions. I was scared. Not knowing what to do, I just stood there and cried. Suddenly this big man was running towards me. That really scared me. The man scooped me up and tucked me under his arm and kept on running. We got to a doorway where I could see a stairway going down below ground. At the bottom of the stairway I could see a number of people looking up. The man that picked me up yelled something to the people below and grabbed me with both hands. Just at that moment, there was a terrific explosion right behind us. I remember flying through the air towards the people at the bottom of the stairs. I don't know whether the man threw me or was it the blast that pushed me. The people below caught me and I was safe. My right forearm was bleeding from two shrapnel cuts but otherwise I was OK. I never learned who my savior was. I have always wondered what happened to him. He was standing there at the top of the steps with his back to the blast. If I received two minor wounds, how badly did he get hurt?

This incident forced my mother to make a decision to get me out of the city. I was 6 years old when I was sent to Sweden in May 1942.

We were packed into a special train that transported hundreds of children to the southwest corner of Finland. There, we were transferred onto a specially modified cargo ship for an overnight trip to Stockholm. It was specially modified in that the cargo areas below the decks had been converted into huge sleeping areas with hundreds of wooden bunks, three tiers high. Here we had hundreds of children just separated from their families, headed into the unknown, forever. At least, that's how I felt. I had no way of knowing if or when I would see my mother again.

It was no vacation cruise. There was a lot of crying. You cried until you couldn't cry any more. After a while, somebody near you started to cry, so you started again. And so it went, on and on. What made this trip even worse was that during the night the ship started to rock. Apparently, we were experiencing some heavy seas. Many, many of the children got seasick. I didn't get any sleep that night. There was so much crying, the kids were throwing up, the nurses and caretakers were running around with pails and towels. The smell all around from vomiting and messy pants was overpowering. I have often wondered afterwards how difficult and unpleasant it must have been for these nurses and caretakers. Thankfully, the boat trip lasted less than 24 hours.

Once we landed in Stockholm, we were loaded on a train. This train, loaded with only Finnish children and their caretakers, proceeded to head southwest from Stockholm. The train stopped at every station along the way, and at each station a group of children would get off the train. The Swedish organization, Help Committee for Finland's Children, which arranged this evacuation, had received commitments from families in those communities. Thus, they knew exactly how many children to leave off at each station. This same committee also provided instructions to the Swedish families on what to do once they received the child.

As luck would have it, I ended up sitting in this train at least two days, perhaps three. It seemed like a very long time. Finally this train arrived at the small village station near the southwestern coast of Sweden. There, I and perhaps 10-12 other children were taken off the train and led to a small old fashioned railroad station. The station was completely empty. We were seated on the wooden benches lining the inside walls of the station. Once we were all seated, the doors were opened and a throng of people poured in. These people would walk around the station checking us over. I'm not sure, but it was my understanding later on, that the families were able to specify whether they wanted a boy or a girl but that was it. It was quite intimidating to sit there with your name tag hanging from your neck, being examined for selection.

I was selected to live with a reasonably well-to-do farm family in nearby Kalleberg. They had five children of their own, and all five were older than me. Their youngest daughter was 7 years older, so I became the junior of the family. I was very fortunate that I was picked by such a wonderful and caring family. I lived with this family for 11 months.

At the request of my mother, I returned to Finland in April 1943. Interestingly, I have no recollection about the return trip back to Finland. This trip must have been pretty benign.

Why did my mother ask for my return? I'm not entirely sure. I think that my mother felt, at that point in time, the war was going reasonably well for Finland. Probably the main reason was she wanted me to be educated in Finland. My mother's older sister was a grade school teacher in west central Finland, in the farm country. My aunt had offered to have me live with her family and to go to school there. That is where I lived until the spring of 1944.

By the spring of 1944 the outlook of the war had completely turned around. Russians had intensified their bombing of the cities, and the Finnish troops were retreating on the eastern front. My Swedish family wrote to my mother several times, saying that they would more than welcome me back to Sweden. In the

spring of 1944, my mother relented. After the school year ended, she came to pick me up from my aunt's home and took me to a city in south-central Finland. There we intercepted a train full of children headed to Sweden. I was all excited for I knew where I was going. Most of the other children were in the same situation that I had been when I first went there in 1942. I was counseling the other kids what to expect once they got to Sweden.

However, things didn't go quite as planned for me. The second day on the train I started to feel odd, I felt dizzy and I had trouble balancing. By evening I had completely lost my sense of balance. If I tried to open my eyes, everything spun around and I was sick to my stomach. After that, I don't remember anything for a week.

I was to have arrived at my Swedish family's place on the fourth day after I got on the train. When the train arrived, there was no Veijo aboard. My Swedish family sent a telegram to my mother. Mother returned the telegram confirming that she had put me on the train four days earlier. Of course my mother and my Swedish family made urgent inquiries to the organizations arranging the train evacuation and the respective authorities in both countries. It was confirmed that I was brought aboard the train. The Finnish train caregivers even remembered that I had gotten sick the following day. The authorities in both Finland and Sweden contacted local authorities requesting they search both sides of the track. They confessed to my mother that they feared that I had fallen off the train, perhaps, because I was ill and dizzy. I don't need to tell you what my mother and my Swedish family were going through.

As it was determined later, I had contracted a severe inner ear infection in both ears. The infection caused a very high fever. In effect I was delirious for over a week. As it turned out, the train had crossed the border during the middle of the night. As the train crew and all the nurse and caregiver crews were changed, somebody made a decision that I should be hospitalized immediately. So, I was taken off the train and rushed to a hospital just on the Swedish side across the river from Finland. The problem was that in the confusion of changing crews somebody forgot to document the transfer. So far as the rest of the world was concerned, I had disappeared from the face of the earth.

I started to feel better after about a week. One day, a Finnish speaking nurse stopped by my bedside. I was so glad to talk to her since my Swedish was quite poor after not speaking Swedish for over a year. She asked where I was from and about my family. As we talked, I got the idea that I wanted to write to my mother. She volunteered to get an envelope and mail the letter. I didn't have any writing paper, so I grabbed a sheet of toilet paper and I wrote a very short note to my mother. I didn't have the sense to even tell my mother where I was. Luckily the nurse also included a note telling her where I was, what had happened to me and how I was doing. It is hard to imagine how my mother felt when, after two weeks, she found out that I was still alive.

I stayed in Sweden until the end of the war. I returned to Finland in August 1945. To my mother's consternation, after living in Sweden for a year and a half, I had forgotten how to speak Finnish. However, I did know how to read the language although I had only a vague idea what I was reading. My mother had sent a Finnish language reader. I was made to sit down and read aloud once a week. Thus I retained my ability to pronounce the words. I often wonder how many times I read through that

book.

As I reflect back on my experiences during WWII, I feel I was very lucky – truly very fortunate. Yes, there were many traumatic experiences that left me with some sad and hurtful memories. Some of these memories left scars so deep that I still have difficulty allowing myself to think about them. But, on the balance, I feel that I was very fortunate. My stays in Sweden are still the best memories of my youth. After the war, I spent three out of four summers, between 1946 and 1949, in Sweden with my Swedish family. Every spring, my Swedish family would send a ticket for me to travel to my second home country. I would leave Finland with very little except the clothes on my back. Every fall I would return with a suitcase full of clothes.

My mother had an opportunity, for the first time, to meet my Swedish family in the spring of 1950, when we were on our way to America. We stopped and stayed a couple days in Horred, before we boarded *MS Stockholm* in Gothenburg. Leaving my Swedish family, leaving Finland, at age 14, was the toughest thing that I had to do as a teen.

My mother passed away in 1974. As I was sorting through her belongings, I picked up my mother's well worn Bible. In between the pages there were several papers with their corners sticking out. As I pulled out these papers, there was the little letter I had written to her from the hospital. She had saved that letter for all those years.

My Mamma and Papa have long since passed away and so have two of my Swedish sisters. I am still in touch with the remaining two sisters and my Swedish brother as well as with many of their children. After all, I am their Finnish uncle.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to bring you my story of being one of Finland's War Children.