

## A Trip Back in Time

Herbert Wirlöf (Jokiaho), a member of the “The Tornedalians in the World” visited a cousin in Soviet-Karelia in 1995 with two of his sisters, Signe and Nanny. Six months before they did not even know that they had relatives there. Their cousin and her husband emigrated to the Soviet- Union from Canada in the 1930’s. They were tempted to move from Canada to build up the “real” Socialism in Soviet-Karelia. Herbert has interviewed them and we will let him tell the story.

Finnair’s Saab plane bounces on the bumpy landing strip of the military airfield in the town of Petrozavodsk. We have arrived by way of Arlanda in Sweden, Helsinki in Finland, and a domestic flight to the Finnish town of Joensuu. From there, we took the same plane to Petrozavodsk. Now we have to wait a little longer. We hear that the plane had transported a lot of cash and the armoured car is not here yet; so we wait. The money must be unloaded first.

We are lead to an old military camp used as a temporary air terminal.



The Temporary Air Terminal at Petrozavodsk

Our 83 year old, cousin Elvi Forsell-Mattson-Linna, is meeting us. Her neighbour’s son is giving her a lift in his car. When she has seen that we have arrived but don’t come out of the terminal, she loses her patience and, against the rules, she comes inside. She told us later that she requested the custom officers, (there were many of them), to free us immediately; she thought we had been arrested. They could not stop her and when we put our bags on the table and the search was about to start, Elvi came in and we left our bags and hurried to hug her. The officers looked surprised and closed our bags. They winked at us to take them because we had caused a queue. So, thanks to Elvi’s entrance, we took enough food for a week into Russia.

### How Could Elvi Find Us?

Well, the township Varpaisjärvi, in Finland and the village Chalna in Soviet-Karelia were sister communities, and Elvi lived in Chalna. Matti Oravainen from Varpaisjärvi, with roots in Vojakkala in the Torne River Valley, (on the Finnish side), had visited Chalna many times, and made a video-tape in which

he had interviewed Elvi and her husband. Elvi had mentioned that her father was born in Haparanda, Sweden. She had a photo of her aunt, our mother at 18 years of age, which had been enclosed in a letter to her brother in Canada, telling him that she would like to emigrate too. Hjalmar, Elvi's father died in 1937 and her mother died in Siberia in 1944. After her death, some of her belongings were sent to Elvi and this photo was among the family-photos.

Hjalmar Linna had emigrated to Canada from Päckilä on the Swedish side of the Torne River in 1907. Elvi's husband, Jaako Forsell, now 87 years old, was born in Ilmajoki in Finland. He is welcoming us from the porch step of their little red timber house. The beds had been ready for us for the last two weeks. They got our letter with the definite date for our arrival just a day before we arrived.



Arriving

We come into the house. Elvi and Jaako have no running water or septic system. They get water in big pails once a day. (Although they can request more.)

A dry privy is next to the outhouse where the sauna is.

A wood stove and the tile stove are the only sources of heat. Of course there is a wood stove in the sauna and a big boiler to hold warm water for bathing and washing. They also stored up rain water.

We had brought with us coffee and coffee-bread, (pulla). Sharing our food made all of us feel like relatives.

In spite of all the hardships and sorrows they had gone through, both Jaako and Elvi were able to retain a sense of humour and often smiled. They laughed gently at our Tornedalian Finnish language, which they found amusing.

“We have gone through many shocks of sorrow, so to meet you is like a shock of joy,” says Jaako and Elvi agrees. In the yard on both sides of the house, the potatoes are blooming. The black currants are ripening. Carrots, redbeets and cabbages are for the winter time-- a must because the prices have gone up.

“Freedom had its price, says Jaako, especially for us old people.”

Both their children are dead. Their daughter Viola died in 1940 at the age two. Their son, Vilho, died at age 52 in 1985. They had led a strenuous life and had a lot of memories they wanted to share with us and we talked from morning to evening.

Now that we can talk freely, we have no friends to talk with. A solace is that one's enemies also die, says Jaako.

We have to encourage them to rest after dinner, but Jaako continues telling his stories for a while.

"I was 23 years old when I left Canada and followed our neighbour family Mattson. In my family I was the "black sheep". Elvi was 20 when she came with her parents and brother. Elvi and I were the first couple married in the village of Matroza, in the presence of the new community. We lived there eight years and both our children were born there in 1933, and 1938."

While Jaako and Elvi took an after-dinner-nap, we took a walk in the village. It was very quiet and peaceful. We felt as if we had gone back in time to 1938. It was as if time had stood still for 60 years. The cows were eating grass in the ditch along the road.

Some of the streets were covered with asphalt, but heavy traffic had made big holes and the cars had to avoid them. Wooden ramps were placed over the ditches from the road to the houses. The houses were surrounded by wooden fences. We saw no bandidos, but wild dogs were running free and we were frightened of them. We saw one dog attack a car, a Lada. He attacked the car-door at the driver's side with a bang and limped away dejected.

Returning from the walk we found our hosts up from their after-dinner-nap. Elvi had bought two fishes from a neighbour who was a member of a fishing team. She wondered if we liked fish.

"Y-e-s-s, dear Elvi, we will prepare the dinner, please do rest."

My sisters prepared the pike-perches in the wood stove with Elvi instructing how the stove worked and all its idiosyncrasies. She did it well, because the result proved delicious. We will never forget that dinner in Soviet-Karelia.

"Elvi, what was your father like?" I started the conversation.

"My father was an affectionate communist. He said he became one because of the poverty in the Torne River Valley. When the securers came and talked about the unique possibility to build a socialistic society, he just had to take it. I would have preferred to stay in Canada but my mother said "No." We took with us as many clothes as we could, and my father had some money saved. We knew, that we moved to a place which was poverty stricken, but we heard that good workers could make a good living after a while. I thought that if I didn't do well, I could return to Canada."

"I took some rusty nails with me," Jaako says, with a smile,--joking of course.

"We should never have left Canada, Elvi, we were English speaking and had adapted to Canada. We are not bitter, but we have been tired about everything, so many times. In spite of all efforts and Mr. Yeltsin, we cannot trust those in power, because they are the same communists, who have pained us for decades."

Jaako continues,

"both of us have heart trouble, I have a gastric ulcer and problems with asthma, and Elvi's legs are weak."

"My legs were really strong when we were evacuated, and I had to walk to Archangelsk with our 7 year old son. Of course there were horses and carriages, but they were used for the kids and our provisions," says Elvi.

Jaako continues,

“We have sold a bit of our yard and the buyer has promised to help us cut wood for our stoves; help us with our kitchen garden, and do other work we cannot do ourselves any more. We get other help from a teacher in the village but not very often.”

We end this evening looking at their old photos and listening to Jaako who really has a talent for telling stories. My sisters have to share a bed, which they had not done since they were kids in Vitsaniemi village. My bed is in Vilho’s old room. At bedtime everything seems like a fantasy; am I really in the Soviet Union?

Now I understand the reaction of one of my sisters, when she compared Elvi with our mother. Elvi had searched for us at the airport and probably thought that the Russians had arrested us. The airplane had landed an hour before and she could not find her cousins. I can also understand Elvi’s reaction.

My sister gasped,

“She looks like mother.” We hid her between us, because the customs officers got too interested in her.

Next morning Elvi was up early; we heard the doors been closed with care, first the door into the porch and then the door out from the porch.

When we got up, we saw her coming using her walking-stick in one hand and a milk-pail in the other. She looked like our mother coming from our neighbour bringing milk after our own cows had been sold. Our minds flashed back 40 year ago.

Elvi had purchased the milk from a farmer in the village.

“The milk from the food shop is not drinkable, she said, can I invite you to a breakfast of porridge?

“Yes of course, dear Elvi,” we answered her.

The bowls of porridge are soon on the table and jam is brought up from the cellar through a little flap in the floor.

“You are a very good cook, Elvi,” I said.

“You have a good sense of humour Bertti,” says Jaako.

“My name is Herbertti, I answer him; if you call me Bertti I will call you Jatko.”

After that he called me Herrabertti.

We were often caught in a skein of lanuages. He told that the Russians were taking timber to Finland and returning with “Lador.” “Lador” in Swedish means hay barns. He could see by my expression that I didn’t understand. Why should they import hay barns to Russia? So he adjusted the sentence saying, I mean cars-- you know the car brand “Lada”.

My Tornedalian Finnish was not good enough to talk, so I got knots in my tongue.

Jaako and Elvi returned to their stories about the evil-doer Stalin and his regime in 1937-1938.

Jaako continues,

“There were rumours that the people who were arrested were killed, but no one believed that, because they knew that they were not guilty of anything; but they did not come back. We lived in the village of Matroza where 200 persons out of 500 were deported. Three times I lost friends that I worked with. The victims were Finns. Elvi remembers that Saturday evenings were the worst. People were arrested for being enemies of the state, if they found anything foreign in their houses. It was horrible but it was no longer possible to leave the stronghold of socialism.

You would not believe it if you hadn’t experienced it yourself.”

Jaako continues,

“They blamed the people who disappeared as enemies of the state, but no one believed that. We were isolated and had no radio and we got no information from Red Karelia. We worked in the forests, one man drove the horse and two cut the trees. Elvi told me that she wondered every evening if I would come back home. I was not afraid--maybe because I was so young.”

Jaako returns to the war.

“During the winter-war I was in the Soviet Army under the regime of Kuusinen. The thought was that after the Red Army had broken through the Finnish Mannerheim line, we Finns from Soviet-Karelia, would be placed in the front, hoping that the Finns would join us. The plan didn't work and my time in that army was very short---just enough time to change uniforms. The first uniforms were stolen in Poland, then they were changed to Red Army uniforms; it was so important for me to be there that my application for permission to attend my daughters funeral was denied. She was 2 years old when she died.”

After a short pause Jaako says thoughtfully,

“Sometimes I think that life has been in vain. They could have built up Socialism without us. We shouldn't have moved here from a good life in Canada.”

I can see the sorrow in his eyes-- why not joke a bit-- sorrow and happiness walk together, so let us give a little happiness to them for three days.

Jaako seem to read my thoughts saying,

“We have been helping people who need help, even though it was forbidden, and now you have come, in turn, to help us.”

“Jaako, would you like Bertti to tell a short story?”

“Oh yes, please do; I hope I will understand it. It's not easy when you imitate Finnish.”

“Two Tornedalian woodworkers were walking to the woods one morning. One of them slipped on an ice-spot and said, it is slippery today! He doesn't get any answer. Next morning the second woodworker slipped and said, Yes it is. He didn't get any answer.”

I don't know if Jaako got it, but he said,

“The Russians say, don't tell a story to a Finn on Friday, because on Sunday, in church, he will get it and start laughing.”

“Aah, that's why you did not smile at my story!” I said.

Elvi wants to show the food-shop, Jaako stays home to take a nap.

You can see the store from their house so we take a short cut through the fields. A homeless cat is sitting on the outhouse roof licking its paw and we are glad not to meet any dogs without masters.

It's empty outside the shop; the shelves inside are filled only to 50% and the contents are mostly canned food.



We are leave the shop without buying anything.



We see a Russian cow and Jaako's and Elvi's house in the background.

Elvi's pension is 125 000 rubels, Jaako's 175 000, a total of 300 000 rubels a year.

A half litre mjölk, (milk)? costs 1000 rubels. Half a litre a day would cost 365 000 rubels a year. You can see that Hjalmar Linna's dreams did not come true.

We understand that their son's death 10 years ago was a great shock for them. As we enter the house, Elvi says something to Jaako that we don't understand.

"Do you speak Russian to each other?" I ask.

“No-o-o, Jaako doesn’t want to speak Russian, Elvi answers.

“What?”

“No, I have never learned to read or write Russian at any school,” he smiles.

“It’s enough to talk with neighbours. Of course I have done myself a bad turn; I have always felt like an emigrant and I still do. Some people call themselves internationalists but I call myself an emigrant and have always been taken for a second class citizen. Maybe that’s why I’m still alive. What use did they have for an emigrant?”

I understand that Jaako wants to continue but also that my sisters want to talk privately with Elvi. Jaako tends to dominate the conversation. They take Elvi to the kitchen.

“After the time in the Red Army, we moved to a place next to Sortavala village,” Jaako continues. “I was employed as a wood worker and Elvi as a milkmaid. When the “Big-War” started, they didn’t want me in the army any longer. I was sent to Archangelsk to unload ships coming with support from America and Canada. Elvi had made the long march to Archangelsk with our son. After the war Elvi was sent to a place called Hysylä at Suojärvi and I moved there also. I worked as a construction-worker and Elvi as a cleaning-woman. We then moved to Suojärvi where we lived until we got our pensions, in 1967.

We purchased this house from a man from Belorussia whose longing for home was too strong and he moved back to his home district. We liked the house for its beautifully carved woodwork. What you think, Bertti?”, he ended with a Canadian smile.



Their Timber House

The second day in Chalna is soon over, dinner is waiting; we get potatoes from their kitchen garden and herring from Sweden-Island. Before dinner they tried on clothes and shoes, late Christmas gifts which got through the customs without any inspection.

Some were too small but most of them fitted well.

This evening will be long. Elvi is taking a walk with her new Tornedalians cousins.

I want to hear the tragic history of their son and Jaako takes the chance to tell me when Elvi is out. She has taken it very hard and doesn’t want to be reminded of the sorrow.

Jaako says,

“Vilho was admitted as a student teacher at the university in Petrozavodsk, 30 km from here; a town at the lake Onega with 250 000 inhabitants. He wanted to be a teacher of Finnish. When Nikita Khrushchev dissociated from the Stalin period in 1956, students in Soviet-Karelia became enthusiastic and started to sing Finnish songs again. They could talk politics even if they knew that the KGB could listen through their contacts. Vilho was graduated as a teacher in 1957. But already in 1958, the Finnish schools and universities were closed. All Finnish books for teaching were put aside. Vilho had also been secured into KGB, because he could speak Russian, Finnish, Swedish, English and German. He regret it, because he had just heard about Stalin’s terror in 1937-1938. They had threatened him, saying, we are coming back.”

Soon after, he lost his work at the building department. The head of the department had been sorry and said it was an order given by the KGB.

When he understood that the KGB was going to make his life troublesome he decided to escape to Finland with an old school friend. They escape in 1959 and applied for asylum in Finland or at least the possibility of continuing to another western country. The answer was “no.” and they were transported to Helsinki for further interrogation.

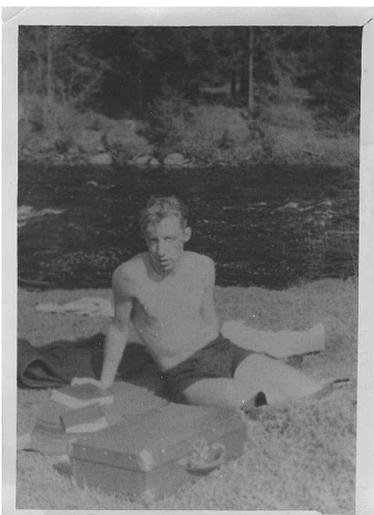
Once they were left alone in a cinema, but they didn’t understand that the Finns were trying to give them a chance to leave.”

Jaako a pauses .....then

“The Finns should have transported them to the ferry, now they did not do anything because they were afraid of being watched and absconding would have made their situation worse. They could have made it anyway, but a Finnish customs officer had exposed their identity to a colleague on the Russian side of the border and this led to the Russians requesting that the boys should be extradited to Soviet-Karelia. That happened the same year, 1959.

Both of them got 10 years in prison; 3 years for passing the border plus 7 years for spreading anti-Soviet propaganda.

The time in prison brok Vilho’s health. During his imprisonment he learned one more language, Hungarian, from a Hungarian fellow-prisoner. After he was set free he worked as a translator of technical literature in the paper mill in Petrozavodsk until he died 1985; he was 52 years old.



Vilho



At the tile stove

We had arrived on Friday. Saturday evening Jaako winked at us in the kitchen asking if we had any requests before we left for home.

“Yes I have--- I would like to wet my foot in lake Onega and also see the town.”

At breakfast the day after, Elvi tells us that the trip to Petrozavodsk has been arranged. The son of their neighbour, Sergei, would take us in his car, (a Lada), to the capital of the Soviet-Karelia. Jaako had ordered him to buy a bottle Russian Champagne.

The journey was memorable because the bumpy roads.

The statues competed for attention; Lenin, Peter the Great, the Soviet-Karelian leader, Kuusinen and Lenin.



Peter the Great



The Soviet-Karelian leader, Kuusinen.



Lenin



I got to put my foot in lake Onega.



It's not every day Elvi gets help doing dishes by a Tornedalian cousin Nanny born in Vitsaniemi in Sweden.



A Photo of the four cousins was taken by Sergei, who selected the background. It was not Lenin, Peter the Great, or Kuusinen. It was the tomb of the Unknown Warrior.

We are leaving Chalna.

“Bless me,” says Jaako with tears in his eyes.

“God bless you, Jaako and thanks.”

Elvi follows us to the air terminal.



Nanny is happy to see the Finn Air plane and soon our trip “back in time” is over, and we return to 1995.