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Finns Abroad

A short history of Finnish emigration

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Finns Abroad

"Throughout history the Finns have been migratory people. They were among the first Europeans to cross the seven seas."

1. Finns to North America

There may have been some Finns from Northern Scandinavia sailing with Leif Ericson or with other Norwegian Vikings who explored the New World a thousand years ago. But the documented Finnish presence in America starts with the "New Sweden" colony at the mouth of the Delaware River, in March 1638. The first four European nationalities to settle permanently in the present United States were the English, the Dutch, the Swedes and the Finns. Major contributions made by the early Finnish settlers in America were burn-beating, a new way to build log-cabins, and the art of living at peace with Indians. A descendant of these early Finns was John Morton who signed the USA Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Finnish seamen were the pioneers of Finnish emigrants all over the world. Sailors sometimes decided to stay ashore in New York and other American ports. In 1855, during the Crimean War, a number of Finnish ships sought refuge in American ports. The Californian gold rush was still going on in those days, calling to adventure out in West. A few hundred Finns joined the gold rush starting the Finnish settlements on the Pacific Coast. Since 1790 some Finns had settled in Alaska working for the Russian Government. On two occasions a man of Finnish origin was appointed Governor of Alaska. The most successful seal-skin trader was Captain Gustave Niebaum, who later settled in California and founded a winery, Inglenook, in the Napa Valley. It is related that Niebaum – later Russian Consul in California – contributed drawing up the purchasing contract of 1867 through which the USA bought Alaska from Russia.

Finnish immigration to North America did not get started in earnest until around 1864. The Finnish settlers of the Arctic Norwegian province of Finnmark were the first to respond to the temptation of the Michigan copper mines and to the promise of free land proffered by the Homestead Act signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. From Norway the tide of emigration spread down south. In the 1870s the "America Fever" took hold in Southern Ostrobothnia, becoming a mass movement in the following decade. The crest of the wave was reached in 1902 when more than 23,000 Finns applied passports to emigrate. Emigration continued on a large scale till the outbreak of World War I. When the U.S. Government began to restrict the admission of immigrants in the 1920s, Finnish emigration now shifted to Canada and Australia. Between 1864–1914 well over 300,000 Finns made their homes in the USA and another 20,000 across the border in Canada.

The Finnish emigrants to America originated mainly from western Finland. Nearly half came from the province of Vaasa. The reasons leaving Ostrobothnia were mainly economic and social. Distilling tar had, along with agriculture, been the mainstay of the economy in the Bothnian regions. When the era of sailing ships began to dwindle after

the mid-1800s, the demand for tar declined. Another reason was the rapid increase of population. The farms were small and nearly every household was bursting at the seams with children. The Finns going to America were at the prime, around 20 years of age. Over 60 per cent were men, the majority unmarried. A reason for emigration was the desire to earn money enough to redeem the family farm or to buy a house and a piece of land. A reason was the conscription of young men into the Russian Army. And a clergyman wrote that a member of his congregation took a boat to America to escape his nagging wife.

But the main attraction was the high wage level in the USA; in certain occupations five times higher than in Finland. Work was available for men in mines, lumber camps, factories and railroad construction. Employers regarded Finns as good and reliable workers. The homes of wealthy Americans offered employment to women, and Finnish servant girls were in considerable demand.

The Finnish settlements concentrated in Massachusetts, Michigan and Minnesota. The wish of many Finns to own a Farm created the Finnish farming communities, especially in the Mid West. In Canada, about 60 per cent of the Finnish population lived in Ontario, especially in Toronto, Sudbury and present Thunder Bay. Many Finns settled also on the West Coast, but relatively few in prairie territories or the French-speaking areas.

The Finns in North America had active religious, social and cultural life. In 1876 the first Finnish clergyman arrived in Hancock, Michigan, and at the turn of the century there were some 100 Finnish congregations in the United States and a few in Canada. Temperance societies were started since the 1880s, obviously to respond to the need. The labour movement began to spread in the 1890s, and by 1913 the Finnish Socialist Party could boast 260 local branches before the split. In the U.S. Communist Party Finns have been a major element. The leader of the party, Mr. Gus Hall, is of Finnish origin. Also in the cooperative activities the Finns were trailblazers throughout North America.

Of the many activities of the Finnish communities sport, drama, music, including bands, should be mentioned. The first Finnish newspaper was published in Hancock in 1876, and at the turn of the century there were more Finnish language newspapers in America than in Finland. Many were short-lived, but they played an important role giving information about the old and new homelands.

Although the Finns formed less than one percent of European immigration to North America their concentration e.g. in Michigan and in Thunder Bay in Canada had a considerable impact on the local population. In mining in upper Michigan the Finns were quite visible, especially in the industrial strikes. A study made at Northern Michigan University drew the conclusion that the American Finns had influenced the English spoken in northern Michigan.

Since the Second World War Finnish immigration to North America has been quite insignificant; 15,000 to the United States and 27,000 to Canada. In North America there are about 45,000 first generation and 180,000 second generation Finns. Including later generations there are over a million people of Finnish extraction – a substantial contribution to the ethnic and cultural mosaic of the United States and Canada.

2. Australia and New Zealand

In 1769–70 Captain James Cook sailing the "Endeavour" claimed New Zealand and the eastern parts of Australia to the British Crown. He was accompanied by H.D. Spöring, a draughtsman and naturalist belonging to Joseph Banks' retinue. A street in Canberra and a memorial in Turku, Finland, keeps his name alive.

It is assumed that the first Finns to settle permanently in the Pacific were seamen. In Tahiti the first white European settler was a Finnish seaman, Peter Hägerstein, from Helsinki, living in Tahiti in 1793–1811. Finnish seamen were in whaling and sealing vessels of many nationalities sailing in the Pacific since 1788. During the Australian gold rush in the 1850s and 1860s a few hundred individual Finns, usually seamen, settled permanently in the continent. The first Finnish group migration to Australia took place in 1899–1900 when for a while the Queensland government offered also to Finns a free passage from London to the Colony. This group included the supporters of Matti Kurikka who came to build their utopian socialist community in Queensland. When the United States began to limit immigration in the 1920s, Australia together with Canada, became the major -destination of Finnish emigrants.

Altogether there were some 5,000 Finns to Australia before the Second World War. Between 1957–73 about 20,000 Finns emigrated to Australia due to bad unemployment in Finland and Australian Government assisted passages. The postwar Finns to Australia were generally skilled craftsmen and construction work was the most common trade. The Finns settled mainly in Sydney, Melbourne and other capital cities, but also the remote mining town of Mt. Isa in Queensland was a stronghold of Finnish settlement. Considering the small numbers, the Finns in Australia had quite an active social and cultural life since the turn of the century. Today in Australia there are about 9,000 persons born in Finland and 17,000 including the second generation. Altogether some 30,000 Australians has Finnish blood in their veins. Since the mid 19th century a couple of thousand Finns has emigrated to New Zealand. After seamen and farmers a number of Finnish paper mill workers were recruited to Tokoroa and Kawerau in the 1950s and 1960s. Finns have been the pioneers of New Zealand pulp and paper industry. In the 1970s and 1980s Finns to New Zealand have been usually well educated and often married to a New Zealander. The major settlement of Finns is in Auckland with an active Finnish society.

3. Latin America

Finnish emigration to Latin America is an exotic episode, a small and insignificant trickle – only a couple of thousand persons. The first Finnish colony in Latin America was "Colonia Finlandesa" in Argentina. The colony was founded in 1906 by Arthur Thesleff, a Finnish nobleman and an eccentric student of gypsy life. The colony situated in the subtropical northeastern region called Misiones bordering both Paraguay and Brazil. Today there are descendants of these early settlers, mainly Swedish-speaking Finns, living in this first Finnish settlement in South America at about the same time as "Colonia Finlandesa" was established, a group of Finns settled down in Cuba founding a Finnish colony called "Ponnistus (Effort)".

In 1909 some Finns started to colonize southern Brazil. These Finns came mainly from northern Sweden and Finland together with Swedish emigrants. From Brazil many of them moved over the river to Argentina. In the early 1920s a small group of Finns emigrated to southern Brazil. But the most important Finnish settlement in Brazil was Penedo, founded in 1929 by a Finnish landscape architect Toivo Uusikallio. Penedo, which in the beginning had many utopian elements, has been most significant and vigorous of the Finnish colonies in Latin America up till present days.

In the late 1920s a Finnish settlement was founded in Paraguay. This Finnish village, known as "Villa Alborada" situated near "Colonia Finlandesa" across the river Parana.

In 1929 a Finnish missionary Oskari Jalkio established a Finnish colony "Viljavakka (Bread Basket)" in the Dominican Republic, but this colony never really got off the ground.

The peculiar background of each colonial enterprise makes the Finnish emigration to Latin America unique and interesting. Every enterprise had its own uniting idealistic goals, which placed these colonies apart from the general and spontaneous mass emigration to North America.

4. Finns to Africa

The first Finns found their way to European colonies in Africa already in the 18th century. Henric Jacob Wikar was born in Kruunupyy in 1752 and after studying in the Academy of Turku he travelled to Holland. In 1773 he was employed by the Dutch East India Company in Cape Town as a clerk in a hospital. Being a gambler he left the job after two years and went to unknown regions north of the Colony. Wikar was one of the first Europeans to explore the River Orange and the first European to see the Falls of Au-grabies. His diary has been a valuable source in research of the early history of South Africa and the culture of the natives Wikar was living with. Another early Finn to Africa was August Nordenskiöld who in 1792 joined an expedition to Free Town in Sierra Leone to found a colony called "New Jerusalem". This utopian enterprise never materialized and Nordenskiöld died soon of exhaustion caused by diseases and maltreatment by the natives.

The mining industry in the 1860s and 1870s caused an economic upheaval in South Africa. By the close of the century deep-shaft mining in Transvaal started to attract also Finnish immigrants. In the 1890s emigration to South Africa, and especially to the golden city of Johannesburg, reached proportions of epidemic in Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia. At the turn of century many Finns participated the Boer War on both sides. Altogether some 1,500 Finns emigrated to South Africa before the First World War. Also Belgian Congo attracted a number of Finns who usually worked as engineers or mates in the steamboats on the Congo River. Finnish adventurers could be found in many European colonies since the end of the 19th century. The most famous of these was Carl Theodor Eriksson who, after participating the Boer war in British Rhodesian troops, found important mining areas in Katanga, Belgian Congo, to be exploited later. Finnish missionary work was started in Amboland, present Namibia, in 1870. Many of the missionaries stayed permanently in Africa. Since the last century a few hundred Finnish ad-

venturers and seamen served in French and Spanish Foreign Legions in North Africa. Today there are a couple of thousand Finns living in Africa. Many of them are in missionary work or employed by Finnish and international companies.

5. Finns in Sweden

As long ago as in the 14th century some people from present Finland went to Sweden in search of better livelihood. In the 16th century Duke Charles invited Finns to settle unhabited areas of Sweden. But the main reasons were wars with Russia and crop failures and famines in Finland. Some of these "Forest Finns" of Sweden continued their journey to the colony of "New Sweden" in Delaware since 1638. During the Sweden's period as a major European power in the 17th century, Finns belonging to all classes and estates moved to the "mother country". Most of them were labourers, sailors, fisherfolk and, last but not least, cannon fodder, but the occasional Finn made it into high office as well and many are recorded in the history books as distinguished military men, artists, explorers, scientists and men of letters.

When in 1809 Finland was wrested loose from Sweden to become a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire, the flow of emigrants to Sweden was not staunch. Especially in the latter half of the 19th century, the timber industry and sawmills along the Swedish coast of the Gulf of Bothnia strongly attracted Finnish labour.

The creation of a free Nordic labour market in 1954 and powerful economic growth in Sweden opened the door for a massive westward exodus of Finnish workers. The flow reached the peak in 1970 when more than 41,000 Finns went to Sweden to work. However, the main reasons for mass emigration are found in Finland. A rapid transformation from agriculture to manufacturing industry made a large number of rural workers redundant. At the same time, the children born in post-war "baby boom" years of 1945–49 began entering the labour market. Finally a hefty devaluation of the Finnish mark in 1967 boosted Swedish nominal wages 31 per cent. This financial illusion prompted many Finns to go west in the hope of fatter wage packets.

Since 1533, when the Finnish congregation was founded in Stockholm, Finnish settlers have had active religious, social and cultural life. The first Finnish society started in 1830 and after the postwar mass migration the Federation of Finnish Associations in Sweden was established in 1957. In 1987 the federation had 168 local societies with 46,000 members. The Swedish-speaking Finns have similar organizations in Sweden.

Altogether 550,000 Finns emigrated to Sweden after the Second World War. Half of them have later returned to Finland, especially in the 1980s, or moved to a third country. Today there are over 200,000 first generation Finns living in Sweden and nearly 100,000 of the second generation. Nearly half of the Finns abroad are living in Sweden. The Finns in Sweden have been able to find their own identity, especially as the Swedish Government has recently acknowledged that the Finns in Sweden are a permanent minority which has lived in Sweden for ages.

Since the Second World War about 15,000 Finns has emigrated to Norway. Permanent Finnish settlements began to develop in Finnmark, Norway's northernmost province, since the 18th century, much due to the fainines in Finland. Many of the Finns continued their journey to America. Since the last war thousands of Finns have found work in fish industry of northern Norway and later in the rapidly developed Norwegian oil industry. Today there are 5,000 Finns living in Norway, the majority male industrial workers.

Some 13,000 Finns emigrated to Denmark after the War and a couple of hundred to Iceland as a bi-flow of the Finnish exodus to Sweden. Most of these, however, have later returned to Finland. Today there are only a couple of thousand Finns living permanently in Denmark.

6. Finns to Russia

Already in the middle age slow but steady Finnish emigration began to the Baltic and especially after Estonia since 1561 started to fell under the control of Sweden. After the treaty of Stolbova in 1617 Finns also began migrating to the former Russia. They settled especially around the mouth of the River Neva in the area known as Ingria where St. Petersburg was founded nearly a century later. The numer of these Ingrians was highest in 1917 totalling some 120,000 persons. Since Finland was joined to Russia in 1809 Finns began to emigrate to Russia and especially to St. Petersburg. But Finnish settlements were found in many parts of Russia including the Far East. In the 19th century 3,300 Finnish criminals were transported to Siberia, but there was also voluntary emigration over the Ural mountains.

Because of the lack of statistics it is difficult to estimate the numbers of Finns to Russia. A careful estimation is 50,000 persons since 1809. According to the 1889 Census Finns in the Soviet Union numbered over 67,000. Of these 70 per cent lived in Russia, 25 per cent in Estonia, and the rest in Ukraine and Kazakstan and in the other parts of the country. Within Russia 36 per cent lived in Eastern Karelia and 31 per cent in the Leningrad area. In the Soviet Union censuses many Finns did not wish to be registered ethnic Finns and their number was higher than the official figures.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 about 20,000 persons of Finnish origin (Ingrians) from Russia and Estonia have arrived in Finland. Estimated 60,000–70,000 Finns are still living in Russia.

7. New emigration to Europe

Since the 1960s Finns have started to settle in Central and Western Europe. In Germany there are over 15,000 Finns, 70 percent women often married to a German. Because of the present unemployment in Finland the number of Finns in Germany is growing by 1,000 a year. In Great Britain there are about 6,000 Finns living permanently, and in Switzerland 4,000. In Spain there are estimated to live more than 10,000 Finns, many of

them, retired people who come to Finland during the summer. But generally the "new emigrants" to Europe from Finland are young and well educated people. This can also be called short-term migration as many of these are employees in projects of Finnish or international enterprises. Since Finland joined the European Union in 1995 emigration has not increased much, with the exception of construction workers and nurses to Germany.

8. Conclusion

During the past 150 years 1,2 million persons have emigrated from Finland to foreign countries. Most of them moved to the United States and Sweden. Estimating that every third has later returned, a loss of 800,000 souls has been a heavy loss on such a small country. If they had not left the population of Finland today would be 7 millions instead of 5,1. Over 600,000 first and second generation Finns abroad, and the descendants of Finnish emigrants, are an asset for Finland not yet used much e.g. in the foreign trade or in Finnish cultural export.

In the 1990s Finland, a country of emigration, has become a country of immigration with over 85,000 foreign citizens (1998) representing 150 different nationalities. Although this is only 1,6 per cent of the Finnish population, Finland is slowly becoming a multicultural society following the pattern of other countries in the European Union.