REPORT FROM SCANDINAVIA – NO. 13

Ishpeming Student Records Impressions
Of Finland's History, Geography, Culture

(This is another in a series of articles on European countries prepared especially for The
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BY VINCENT H. MALMSTROM

OSLO, March 22 - Continuing southward from Kemi by rail, the first city of any
importance that you reach is Oulu, or Swedish Uleåborg. That this city should have both
a Finnish and Swedish name tells you at once that you have come into the Swedish
cultural area of Finland -- a region that extends southward and eastward along the coasts
of the Gulfs of Bothnia and Finland respectively.

From the time that the Swedes Christianized the country in the 12th century until
the termination of their dominance in 1809, it was the coastal regions of Finland which
felt their strongest influence, with the interior and northern districts remaining virtually
unaffected. Though the initial Swedish settlements spread along the coast, from Oulu in
the north to Viipuri (Viborg) in the east, they gradually came to be consolidated in two
main concentrations -- one around the west coast city of Vaasa and the other along the
south coast around Helsinki.

Swedish Speaking Population

Though the Swedish speaking population of Finland now numbers less than ten
per cent of the total, in the Vaasa area the percentage is as high as 20 and around Helsinki
it is between 25 and 30. In the Åland islands, off the southwest coast, the Swedish
speaking population makes up 96 per cent of the total and they are so conscious of their
cultural unity that they have been granted large measures of self-government by the
Finnish parliament. Elsewhere in the coastal districts, the Finns and Swedes have lived
side by side for over six centuries, each tenaciously clinging to his own cultural heritage
as long as possible. This long and continuing cultural interplay has had many interesting
and important results.

When the Swedes came to Finland in the 12th century, the Finns had not yet
evolved a unified political structure of their own, and thus were largely at the mercy of
their stronger neighbors. The Swedish conquest of Finland forestalled a similar threat
from the east, for most of the battles over Finland were fought between Swedes and
Russians as their respective spheres of influence expanded and contracted over the
helpless Finns caught in the middle. The net effect of the Swedish victory was that
Finland became Roman Catholic in the first instant (later Lutheran, of course) rather than
Greek Orthodox. Moreover, the Swedes introduced the Latin alphabet, giving birth to the Finnish written language and firmly tying the country into the western cultural sphere. A Russian victory of course would have meant the introduction of the Russian alphabet (Cyrillic) and Finland's consequent orientation toward the east.

**Not An Unmixed Blessing**

Though the Finns maintained their own language, they borrowed profusely from the Swedes, especially the names of technical or foreign items unknown to them. It was likewise the Swedes who began the urban development of Finland, the oldest city being Turku (Swedish Åbo) founded in 1229. It is an interesting fact that even today the Finns show a certain reluctance to live in cities, for whereas 40 per cent of the Swedish speaking population of Finland lives in cities, only 20 per cent of the Finnish-speaking group does.

The Swedish domination of Finland was hardly an unmixed blessing, however, for whenever one people thrusts itself upon another there are bound to be economic and political upheavals. When the Swedes moved in to settle the coastal districts of the country, they occupied the best farms lands, for it is precisely in these coastal areas that the richest, clay covered plains are found. In true medieval style, grants of land were made to Swedish noblemen who then subdivided them for their many tenant farmers -- both Swedes and Finns. Thus the Finns who had not been expelled into the interior were largely reduced to the status of tenants on land that originally had been theirs. Such a state of affairs could hardly make for the most cordial of relations.

**Subconscious Resentment**

Moreover, when your political destiny was determined by people speaking another language and owing their allegiance to a king across the sea, you could not help feeling a subconscious resentment of their presence. Yet when the Russians finally broke the Swedish yoke in 1809, Finns and Swedes alike realized that they had much more in common with one another after their six long centuries of association than they did with the Cossack soldiers that came to be stationed in their villages. Ever since Finland declared its independence in 1917, she has continually sought to strengthen her ties with Sweden and for the last three decades these two countries have lived in the closest of harmony and cooperation.

In Finland itself the cultural conflict between Finns and Swedes goes on apace, and all shades of opinion find expression. There are those who believe that the Swedes should learn Finnish because it is the language of the majority, At the other extreme there are those who believe that the Swedes have a right to maintain their own language because it not only is spoken by more people in the world but it also facilitates communication with the other Indo-European languages; to learn Finnish exclusively is tantamount to isolating yourself completely from the rest of Europe. Instead they advocate that the Finns learn Swedish and thereby come in closer contact with the remainder of their Scandinavian brothers in Northern Europe.
Strong Esperanto Movement

Though the Finns are very proud of their cultural distinctiveness, they are likewise painfully aware of their cultural isolation. Perhaps this is one reason why the Esperanto (universal language) movement is so strong in Finland. Through such a medium the Finns could draw themselves more closely to the other cultural groups of the world without sacrificing their pride or learning a language to which unpleasant political associations may be attached. Whatever the final solution may be, it is a ticklish problem and one that only time and patience can work out.

Southward from Oulu our train rolls through the ever-present Finnish forests, but the farther south we go the more prevalent the clearings of pasture and cultivated land become. The coastal plain of Finland is for the most part very flat and level, broken occasionally by a crystalline outcrop that has been left in woods. Drainage is difficult and across all of the fields one can see the intersecting networks of shallow ditches carrying off excess water into a nearby stream. A characteristic of the agricultural landscape that is distinctive to Finland (among the northern European countries) is the great profusion of little log hay barns which dot the fields, arranged in neat rows and often straddling the narrow drainage ditches. Even the smallest pasture seems to have at least two or three hay barns and some of the larger fields have tens and hundreds.

Richest Farming Area

To study this section of Finland, the so-called East Bothnia region, I spent a number of days in the vicinity of Vaasa, the capital of the district. This region is not only Finland's richest agricultural area but also one of the most fascinating from the historical-geological point of view.

The coastline in the vicinity of Vaasa is rising at the rate of about yard every 100 years. This is the result of the heavy pressures exerted on this area during glacial times, when a great ice mass many thousands of feet thick accumulated here. Its great weight depressed the earth's surface as it built up, but as it gradually melted away and finally disappeared altogether, the earth's began "bouncing back," so to speak. During historic times it has continued rising at the rate of about a third of an inch every year with the result that the Gulf of Bothnian shore is moving farther and farther outward all the time.

Nature's Compensation?

When the Swedes settled the area in the 12th century, it was largely composed of isolated islands, on one of which the city of Old Vaasa was founded. The coast kept rising so much however, that Old Vaasa ceased being a seaport and a canal had to be dug into the town so that at least small boats could come up to it. This turned out to be only a temporary expedient and when the town was largely destroyed by fire in the 17th century, a new site was selected on the coastline then existing. Though the modern city occupies
this same location, its own harbor has become so shallow in the course of time that most of the heavier ships must unload at the outer port of Vasklot.

This phenomenon was brought home to me in another, more personal way. When my grand-mother lived in this region some 60 years ago, her village was a little fishing settlement located on the coast. Today it is about two miles from the coast and the chief occupation is agriculture instead of fishing. Areas that she may once have sailed or rowed across are now level fields of oats or barley. One area in the vicinity, called on old maps the Southern Bay, was just that in my grandmother's day -- an arm of the Gulf. Thirty years ago it was a vast tidal-marsh and today it is a broad, fertile pastureland. In this one "bay" alone Finland has acquired 30 square miles of virgin farm-land and today its surface is dotted by some 2,000 little hay barns. What the Dutch have been heroically wresting from the sea, the Finns have been receiving from the sea. Is this Nature's way of compensating the Finns in the west for the lands they have lost in the east?

Ancient Road Patterns

Before leaving this region and journeying inland, I made two final notes. One was the seemingly needless intricacy of the road pattern and the other was the location of the farm buildings. When you see a road curving aimlessly across a broad flat piece of land you begin to wonder if sobriety was one of the virtues of the surveyor who laid it out. Of course the answer lies in the rising coastline also, for when these farm tracks were established in the 14th century they were laid out to avoid the swamps and marshy areas which had not yet dried out. Though today the land as a whole has been drained, the old road pattern, once established, has still persisted. So modern motorbuses must still follow the ancient corkscrews of the medieval horse track in some of these country districts.

The location of farm buildings has likewise been influenced by the emerging coast, for they all stand on higher, rockier patches of ground which once stood as islands in the sea.

Distinctive Landscape

On the advice of an acquaintance, I took the bus inland from Vaasa to Jyväskylä rather than the train. He correctly advised me that if you wish to "see" Finland, you must go by road and not rail, for otherwise you'll spend most of your time gazing, or dozing,, through the endless forests of spruce and pine. Whereas the roads have been built to join the towns of the country, the railroads seem to wander aimlessly from junction to junction.

On this leg of my trip between Vaasa and Jyväskylä, I crossed into the third major natural region of the country -- the so-called Lake Plateau. This is the most distinctive landscape of Finland and the one of which everyone thinks when the country's name is mentioned. Thousands of lakes are strewn through a setting of forest-covered rock knobs and gravel ridges. Water and woods greet your eye wherever you turn. The greatest disappointment is not being able to encompass as much of this beauty as possible, for
central Finland has few "lookout" spots which afford you a broad view. You are limited to two or three lakes in each panorama -- which of course is more than enough for most people. But with the insatiable craving of a geographer who knew he was missing one of the most awe-inspiring vistas in Europe, I wished that I could see this part of Finland from the air -- for only then can one grasp the vastness and intricacy of this hodgepodge of sunny blue lakes and forest-green ridges.

On this same bus ride I had another occasion to find out how small this old globe of ours has become. Sitting beside me for part of the way were two Finnish - Americans from -- you guessed it -- the Upper Peninsula. From Paynesville to the center of Finland it is not much more than good hop, skip and a jump in these days of air travel, so if Finland has been on Russia's doorstep in the past, she is likewise on ours today.

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