REPORT FROM SCANDINAVIA, NO. 12:

Vivid 1st Impressions Attend Malmström's Trip Through Finland

(This is another in a series of articles on Scandinavia by Vincent H. Malmstrom of Ishpeming who is continuing studies in Norway as a fellow of the Social Science Research Council. -Ed.)

BY VINCENT H. MALMSTRÖM

OSLO, Dec. 29 -Few first time visitors to Finland go in through the "back door," yet that is precisely what I did during the past summer.

From Kirkenes in North Norway I motored west to the little town of Lakselv, and there turned south across the vast Finnmark Plateau to Karasjok and the boundary of Finnish Lappland. Indeed, all of the region of northernmost Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia is known as Lappland, and it is here that the nomadic Lapps tend their reindeer herds during the winter. In summer, however, they drive their herds over the plateau to the coast where the animals can pasture on the fresh green grasses to be found there. Accordingly, if the traveler goes into Lappland in the summer expecting to find many Lapps or reindeer, he is likely to be disappointed, but for the tourist who has seen neither one, there will usually be enough of both left to satisfy his curiosity at least.

Lapps In Slacks

While many of the Lapps still wear their traditional black and red costumes and live in tents, the visitor to Karasjok, one of the chief Lapp centers of Norway, is surely in for a shock. There he'll find them wearing slacks and nylons and living in apartment houses!

Though my tour through the Finnmark region of Norway was made during late June, the snow was still lying deep on the plateau and the lakes were frozen solid. In the Ifjord mountains the snow was higher than our bus in a number of places and the road looked more like a canyon than a highway. Where the ground was bare, one could make out the tremendous ridges, heaps and mounds of loose rock left by the great ice-sheets which once covered this area – deposits so vast in extent that they made a mere man feel as though he were lost in the gravel-pile of the gods. Farther inland, the plateau was covered by hardy little dwarf birches and by the time we neared the Finnish border, we were already in a region of good pine growth.

Tremendous Inflation
My entrance into Finland, even at this most remote of border stations, was attended by a number of vivid first impressions which the remainder of my Finnish tour only served to confirm and emphasize in detail. The first thing that strikes the visitor to Finland is the gulf created between the Finns and all other peoples of Europe owing to the uniqueness of the Finnish language. It is a gulf that can and is being bridged in a number of ways --yet is still tends to isolate the Finns from the rest of their brothers in the Northern European community.

A second fact of which the visitor is early made aware is the tremendous inflation of the Finnish economy as compared to that of most of the rest of Northern Europe. Judged by Scandinavian standards, it expensive to travel in Finland and very expensive to live there.

**Women’s Social Position**

A further item of interest that impresses the traveler to Finland is the relatively subservient position of women in Finnish social life, at least in the rural area. It is largely women who plow, harvest, and tend the animals on the farms, and even in industry over 40 per cent of all employees are women! – a situation unique in Northern Europe, if not on the continent as a whole.

The first, last and most enduring impression of Finland, however, comes from the country’s almost interminable forests. With over 71 per cent of its land area in forest, Finland has more productive wood-land per capita then any other nation in Europe -- almost 11 acres for every man, woman and child!

From the little border station of Karigasniemi our bus left at five in the morning. It was a old rainy day as we sped through the forests and marshes of Finnish Lappland. Our first destination was Ivalo, on Lake Inari, Finland’s largest lake. If I had been able to make the trip from Kirkenes, Norway to Ivalo, Finland before the boundary changed in this region, it would have a simple matter of 116 miles and about six hours. Since the Russians annexed the Petsamo area and cut off the road connections, however, one must drive a round-about route of some 330 miles between these towns and use some two and a half days to do it.

**Wreckage, Litter Of War**

Finnish Lappland, like the Finnmark region of Norway, was almost thoroughly devastated by the retreating Nazis in 1944 and few Americans realize that during the last months of World War II the Finns were fighting against the Germans instead of with them. Every snow fence and telephone pole was either chopped or burnt down and the litter of war is strewn all through the region -- empty petrol cans, demolished vehicles, here and there a German helmet gauntly propped up on a pole.

While such scenes are common in both North Norway and Finnish Lappland today, the Finns have made much faster progress in reconstruction than have the
Norwegians. Part of the reason for this I mentioned in an earlier article -- the fact that Norway has been hampered by a tremendous transportation problem. Unlike Norwegian towns of Hammerfest and Honningsvåg, such Finnish towns as Sodankylä and Rovaniemi scarcely hint that seven short years ago they lay completely in ashes and ruins. Today they are modern, attractive cities with large concrete apartment houses and hotels. Indeed, when the job of reconstruction is complete in north Norway and Finnish Lapland it will be a paradox that the most remote regions of these two countries will be the most completely up to date.

**Finnish Punctuality**

At Sodankylä, where we stopped for lunch, we were forcefully impressed by another Finnish characteristic -- punctuality. The buses and trains in Finland definitely run on time, and woe unto the traveler who fails to grasp this from the outset. While such efficiency will surely appeal to most Americans at least, there is one factor that may not. Few stops are long enough to catch even a bite to eat and since most of the railway trains do not have diners, traveling in Finland is almost a choice between starving to death or suffering from indigestion as you dash for a train or bus already in motion. Most Finns have recognized this drawback and many pack their own lunches when traveling, but for the uninitiated tourist it may prove somewhat of a challenge at first.

At Rovaniemi, just south of the Arctic Circle, our bus made connections with the train to the south of Finland. Here, I might mention two additional points with reference to the Finnish railways. Since most of them were built during the period when Finland was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, all of them are of the broad Russian gauge and not the standard gauge like most of the rest of Europe and the United States. This means that Finland has direct rail connections with only one other country in Europe -- the Soviet Union – a situation that has been exploited to the full by the Russians.

**Timber Chief Resource**

The second point of interest is that most Finnish locomotives are wood burning and only the express trains on the main lines burn imported coal. Therefore, it is not uncommon to see vast acres of wood piled in the vicinity of the railroad yards. Some of the locomotives on the branch lines look like those used in the western United States about the 1860's but they perform the worthwhile function of keeping the goods and passengers of Finland rolling along, slowly but surely, to their destinations.

From Rovaniemi I continued southward along the Kemi River to the city of Kemi near its mouth. The Kemi River is the principal outlet for the drainage of most of Finnish Lappland south of the height of land that separates the Arctic drainage from the rivers which flow into the Gulf of Bothnia. As such, it is the funnel through which the greater part of the wood products of this region pass on their way to the sawmills and pulp factories near its mouth. Where the railroad bridge crossed the Kemi, the river is nearly three-quarters of a mile wide, and here, extending for five or six miles upstream, I saw one of the largest log jams I have ever seen -- nothing but a sea of logs as far as the eye
could reach. Timber is Finland's chief, and virtually only, natural resource and wood products normally make up between 80 and 90 per cent of the country's exports by value. This six-mile long raft of logs was just a sample of Finland’s wealth – the green gold of her forests.

**Lodging For The Night**

In Kemi, owing to an industrial fair which was taking place at the time, every hotel room had long since been reserved and my traveling companion and I were confronted with the prospect of spending the night on a park bench or seeking refuge in the local jail. Neither of these prospects was particularly thrilling and since misery likes company, we were soon joined by two German tourists who found themselves in a similar predicament. With the assistance of a Swedish-speaking desk clerk at the hotel, we finally managed to seek out the local Salvation Army and asked for lodging there for the night.

At considerable effort, and perhaps inconvenience to themselves, the local Salvation Army workers helped us to make makeshift beds on the floor of their little chapel and there we finally bedded down for the night -- two Germans and two Americans in a Finnish church. With a Christian understanding far exceeding national boundaries we had been welcomed into this chapel without question -- and there we slept, formerly enemies but now friends, under one roof. Germans or Americans, Nazis or democrats, fascists or capitalists, we were all reduced to human beings in need that night and we were abundantly cared for by the Finns.

I couldn't help but think what a different world this might be if the same Christian love that was shown to all of us on that chilly sub-Arctic night were only practiced to a fuller degree in Man's relations with his fellow beings. To my limited, but steadily, expanding Finnish vocabulary, I added two new expressions that night which I shall never forget – “Salvation Army” and “Thank you”.

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