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Frankfurt Book Fair opening

### **Sofi Oksanen: Santa Claus Speaks Finnish**

I was born into an Estonian-Finnish family in 1977, when Finland was in its golden age of Finlandization. This influenced the atmosphere that permeated the country, and decision makers in both political and artistic life, the media and the cultural elite all practiced Finlandization. The life of Soviet critics in academia was not easy, and the same spirit was adhered to in journalism training. In our schools we used maps that did not include my other homeland, Estonia, and its Soviet occupation was spoken of in euphemisms. When a film based on Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was shown on Swedish television, Finnish officials cut off the broadcast lest it be seen inside Finland's borders. A film depicting the Soviet prison camp system was not to be seen by Finns. Perhaps most awkward of all was the self-censorship. Finland was its own best censor. Finlandization meant diminishment of independence, erosion of democracy, and strangling of freedom of speech. It is a model a Finn could not possibly recommend to anyone, although in recent times many foreign experts have thought it appropriate for Ukraine. The public opinions and tastes of that time, however, told of another Finland. The release of an album by the Finnish rock band Sleepy Sleepers took place the year I was born. The original title of the recording was to be *Anarkiaa Karjalassa – Anarchy in Karelia* – but for reasons of foreign policy it was released under the name *Takaisin Karjalaan – Return to Karelia*. Finland had been forced to surrender Karelia to the Soviet Union following the Winter War in 1940 – and again after the Continuation War – and it remained a thorny issue. The album release was seen as injurious to Finnish-Soviet relations, so the record was removed from jukeboxes and cancellation of the band's appearances was demanded. But the band refused to be Finlandized, and they became one of Finland's most popular rock groups. Karelia has always been a significant area in Finnish arts as far back as the birth of Finland's national epic *Kalevala*. Karelian themes have long been well known in music as well as the

visual and literary arts, and after the region was lost, the literature of Karelian evacuees was added to this tradition. Half a million Finnish citizens fled from Karelia into Finland. At the very time that Finlandization was occurring, women writers with evacuee backgrounds were building a strong literary Karelia within the literature of Finland. The critical establishment did not favor such themes during the worst years of Finlandization, but readers loved them. The books of authors such as Laila Hirvisaari, who wrote historical novels about the evacuation, sold more than four million copies in Finland. Our entire population is a little more than five million, which gives you an idea of their popularity. Although public discussion of the issue was difficult, Karelia had become a place in music and literature where Finland's sensitive issues could be dealt with, and it is in just such issues that art is needed. When external reality and the official national posture did not correspond to a person's own experiences or sense of justice, the result is always uncertainty, mistrust of the reality of one's own experience of reality and justice. This weakens self-esteem, weakens the individual, weakens society. A person needs a mirror for their experiences, and for that you need a national literature that you can read in your native language. In Finland this fact has not always been self-evident.

### **The Significance of Women Writers**

Finland became independent in 1917. The desire for independence had been powerfully growing since the end of the 1800s, yet at the time it was still believed that the Finnish language was too coarse for literary purposes. Our written language was young, and there simply were not enough writers who had mastered the art of writing in Finnish. The *Kalevala* was an inspiration to art in all its forms, but it was collected by Elias Lönnrot from artists in the oral tradition. The official language was Swedish, and it retained this status even when control of Finland was transferred to the Russian Tsar. Swedish remained the language of culture, education, and literature. Finnish was for peasants. The Swedish-speaking intelligentsia, however, believed that Finland needed not only its independence but also its own Finnish-language literature, and they fought on behalf of the Finnish

language. Women were active participants in the movement for independence, and were thus also participants in the birth of Finnish literature. Fredrika Wilhelmina Carstens (1808-1888) wrote Finland's first novel in 1848. Another important trailblazer was Fredrika Runeberg (1807-1879), who was the wife of national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg and long remained in his shadow. She wrote our first historical novel, *Rouva Katariina Boije ja hänen tyttärensä* (Mrs. Katariina Boije and Her Daughter), published in 1858. The book dealt with the Isoviha, Greater Wrath, the period of Russian occupation of Finland in the early 1700s. Fredrika Wilhelmina Carstens and Fredrika Runeberg still wrote in Swedish, but women who wrote in Finnish followed close after them, including dramatists. These women dealt with the problems of domestic life and gender roles – questions which had not been a subject of public discussion. Although the response was generally lukewarm, a Finland hungry for independence welcomed stories of women struggling against adversity into its literature. It welcomed fighters and heroines, because they were needed. The need for them in Finnish literature was so great that women writers simply could not ignore it. From its very beginnings, Finnish literature has produced stories of women's identities, written by women, and women characters who defied idealization have always been a part of our literature. Women in Finnish literature were subjects, from the start. These pioneers began a conversation about women's rights, women's identity, the right to one's own body, that continues today, and they were an influence in making Finland a country with a level of equality that is good compared to other - countries, a nation in which about half of all writers are women.

### **Natural Resources Dictate the Fate of the Finno-Ugric Languages**

The birth and the importance of literature in Finnish have been intertwined with the woman question, with national identity, and with national independence. Without independence, the future of our literature could have been just as unfortunate as that of the many other Finno-Ugric cultures, some 23 million people who speak 24 different languages. Only three of these languages are thriving in their own nation state: Finnish in Finland, with over five million speakers, Estonian in Estonia, with

about one million speakers, and Hungarian in Hungary, with about fourteen million speakers. Other Finno-Ugric languages have fared poorly over a broad geographic area, most especially in Russia, and many of these languages, not to mention their literatures, have already died or are threatened thanks to colonization, which has been the fate of so many other indigenous peoples. We Finns can perhaps feel glad that our natural resources have mainly been our rather unsexy forests. The Mari and -Nenets people, on the other hand, are sitting on top of Russia's oil fields.

The natural resources of the lands where the Komi live were appropriated with the help of the Soviet Union's prodigious system of camps, the Gulags, which led the area into Russification and its accompanying shutdown of Komi-language literary culture. Because the Finno-Ugric peoples have always lived in rural areas, Soviet forced collectivization was a particular blow to them, and constituted de facto Russification of the areas where they were living. 40 percent of Russia's reserves of oil and diamonds are located in areas inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples and this is what has dictated the fate of these extremely peaceful cultures.

During Perestroika, however, the atmosphere liberalized and the effects could be seen in the life of the Finno-Ugric peoples as well. There began a discussion previously silenced, about persecution how to -remedy the present situation, and networks with other Finno-Ugric peoples improved. After the fall of the iron curtain activity began in many areas to improve the status of native languages and cultures. That freer time ended, however, with the wars in Chechnya. They led to a tightening of attitudes in Russia, and the Chechen war of independence was followed by a wave of terrorist attacks that fed fears of other minority groups. With Vladimir Putin's reign there emerged a new threat: the growth of centralized power and the harmonization of federation laws. The goal was to change local laws that had granted Finno-Ugric jurisdictions the right to their local resources and natural riches; to return the flow of money back to Moscow. Pressure for change was also directed at language laws, thus weakening the rights of minority peoples. Over the past few years the central government has continued to tighten their grip and extreme Russian nationalism has only intensified. According to Sirkka Saarinen, a

professor of Finno-Ugric languages, the increase in centralized power can also be seen in the fact that no one dares to promote the rights of Finno-Ugric peoples anymore – the discussion has dried up. It has been made clear that everything is fine and the policies of the central government are not to be questioned. So we have returned to the theater of Soviet times, where the friendship of nations is an act, where national costumes are tolerated but discussion is not. Only the facade and not the substance of national cultures is condoned. In 2005 Russia's government-controlled media accused these little groups of conspiracy and claimed that the work of cultural cooperation among Finno-Ugric peoples was bent on creating a Finno-Ugric super state – a claim that would have been laughable if it were not an attempt by a colonial power like Russia to further oppress already downtrodden groups of people. In 2012, the significance of Russia's new direction for the Finno-Ugric people living within its borders became concrete. That was when the sixth Finno-Ugric Congress was held, with the participation of then Russian Culture Minister Vladimir Medinski. Medinski announced that Finno-Ugric collaboration was an “anti-Russian - activity”. As an international collaborative forum, the congress was supposedly created to meddle in Russia's internal affairs and destroy Russian cultural harmony. Having made this announcement, the Culture Minister left the congress and went directly to the founding meeting of an ultra-nationalist conservative patriots' club. The club's stated purpose was to oppose the provocations of democratic movements and promote a new ideology in Russia with the single goal of Russian rebirth. We all know how that project is going. It is quite paradoxical that Russia makes a political tool of its desire to defend the right of ethnic Russians to use their native language while denying the same right to others. But the issue, of course, is not just one of languages, but of natural resources. The melting ice in arctic regions is uncovering more natural resources and those areas also happen to be part of the lands inhabited by Finno-Ugric peoples. A great leap into industrial use of arctic areas is underway, and indigenous people are the last obstacle in the path of exploiting those resources. The crisis of these peoples has not achieved

international awareness as widely as has the environmental destruction that is eating away at indigenous peoples' way of life on other continents. Perhaps that is because journalists would rather travel to warmer regions than the arctic, or perhaps there is simply not as much knowledge about the distress of the Finno-Ugrians. Their literature, if they have it, is not read and a culture that does not play an even marginal part in the world's literature is, in a way, nonexistent to those who have the power of influence in such matters. Literary cultures are always strong cultures, and one of the best aspects of that is the fact that through translation, their literature can also be shared. It can communicate their collective memory and history to later generations and, through translation, to the whole world, but a language can only live if children and young people use it among themselves, if it is alive, a part of everyday life. And it is that environment that gives birth to writers who know how to use their language as a tool. That is why instruction and everyday use are the lifeblood of the literary culture of small languages and that is why language immersion programs in schools and preschools is so terribly dangerous in the opinion of the Russian government. After all, it could soon lead to a situation where, here at the Frankfurt Book Fair, books from scores of indigenous cultures came to be published, stories of the persecutions they have experienced, the exploitation they have endured, the many centuries of Russian colonial politics. Movies might be made about them, like the films about the Maoris of New Zealand or the Native Americans of the United States, for all the world to see. Because such a situation could be problematic for the exploitation of natural resources, it cannot be allowed to happen.

### **Only Free languages Can Fly**

Representatives of large language areas have sometimes asked me why in the world I write in Finnish, when I know how to speak English. I write in Finnish because it is my mother tongue, and thanks to translators, the fact that I come from a small language area and a small indigenous culture has not been any obstacle in achieving a worldwide readership. Finnish language is for an author absolutely unmatched in its alliteration and endless inflectional possibilities.

But if we Finns had left the development of our language and literature at that, you all might not have J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, because Tolkien loved this "droll tongue", which became the basis of his Elvish language. And if there were no books in this language, no one would ever have wondered, for instance, whether personal pronouns need not specify gender. Finnish and Estonian have got along very well without gender-specific pronouns, and that may have had something to do with our egalitarianism, since language creates reality. And perhaps the Finns are known for their punctuality because their present and future take the same verb form. And most of all it is wise to remember that Santa Claus's native language is obviously Finnish, or Sami, which is also a Finno-Ugric language. Santa Claus, you see, lives in our parts, on a high fell located in the borderlands of present day Finland and Russia, but luckily for your children, he is from the Nordic countries, and is thus well-studied in many languages.

In 2014 Finland was ranked number one by free speech and press freedom organizations in terms of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Estonia has managed to climb to number eleven, and the condition of human rights in these two democracies is, by international comparisons, excellent. The change that has occurred in just twenty years is staggering. At the time of Finland's independence in 1917, and Estonia's in 1918, their ability to act as independent nations was considered doubtful – just as it now is in the case of Ukraine. Both Finland and Estonia are examples of the kind of advances that people, language, and art can make in a short period of time if they are given the opportunity. Fredrika Runeberg believed, like John Stuart Mills, that women and slaves only know who they are once they have gained their freedom. This is also true of languages. Only a free language can fly.

Translated from Finnish by Lola Rogers