

## **Recalling the Salvation Army's Outreach Amongst Finnish-Canadians**

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The work of the Salvation Army around the world is well known. From its birth in England in 1885 where William Booth began this quasi-military outreach of the gospel message, the work of the Army has spread worldwide to make its presence felt in over 135 countries. During the early-1900s, much outreach amongst ethnic minorities occurred, particularly in the United States. With the great waves of immigration following the turn of the century, groups such as the Germans, Russians, and Scandinavians opened Salvation Army corps (churches) throughout the United States.

The beginnings of Finnish Army work is directly tied to the emerging Scandinavian population of the late 1800s. Begun in New York City amongst the Swedes in 1887, the Scandinavian work expanded over the years to include all the settled areas where any Scandinavian was found.<sup>1</sup> While available literature focuses on the Swedish outreach, some Norwegian and Danish corps also emerged. These three Scandinavian nations share similar languages, and it was not uncommon for all three ethnic groups to work alongside each other. The Finnish work, however, was different. Very little is noted in literature, except for a few sentences.<sup>2</sup> From ongoing research into the Finnish work, it has been discovered that the work of the Finnish Salvation Army in America reached its height in 1920-1923 when a total of six active corps were in operation across the Eastern Scandinavian Province of the Salvation Army. These active locations included Ashtabula, OH (1918-1935); Gardiner (1916-1926) and Worcester, MA (1920-1938); Jersey City, NJ (1920-1923); New York

(1918-1925); and Brooklyn, NY (1913-1955). Material uncovered from the Salvation Army's Disposition of Forces records at the National Archives in Arlington, VA also show other locations such as Quincy, MA (1906-1908); Calumet, MI (1908-1909); Hibbing, MN (1909); along with Fitchburg, MA (1916-1918). The best remembered work occurred at the Brooklyn Corps, which remained viable until the mid-1950s. Since then, there has been no Finnish outreach in the United States.

The Finnish work of the Salvation Army in Canada is obviously much smaller compared to the Finnish work that occurred in the United States. However, there was a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, during which time the Salvation Army was trying to reach Finns as well.

Of the few Finnish officers that have lived and worked in North America, perhaps the best known is Jarl Wahlstrom of Finland, who was appointed the Chief Secretary of Canada and Bermuda in 1972. According to sources, Wahlstrom made a number of visits to local Finnish congregations as well as summer camps, such as Hannajärvi Lutheran Camp near Toronto, Ontario. Once he was invited to speak at a Clan Festival for the Savolaiset at the Agricola Church in Toronto, where he stated "When our forefathers came across the Karelian isthmus to Finland, they came upon a sign along the road that said 'Savo,' and all the literate people headed in that direction."<sup>3</sup> Wahlstrom attended major Salvation Army events that were part of this position, such as the opening of corps buildings.<sup>4</sup> In 1976, Wahlstrom moved back to Finland having been appointed commissioner for the country. Finally, in 1981 he became the General of the International Salvation Army. It must have been interesting for the General to hear shouts of "*Hyvää Päivää, Herra Kenraali*" from the Roinila family as we marched past the grandstand during the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations of the Salvation Army in Canada held in Winnipeg in 1982. In 1985, I had the opportunity to thank the General during the International Youth Congress held in Macomb, Illinois--in Finnish--for awarding me the gold medal for my role with the Canadian soccer team that had defeated the South Americans in the final game. Wahlstrom remained in charge of the Salvation Army until his retirement in 1986.

While Wahlstrom was a bona fide officer in the Salvation Army and highly ranked, he failed to organize any major attempt to reach the Finnish-Canadians. However, in 1979 a Finnish family began attending the Salvation Army Port Arthur Corps, and after a short while, both Olavi and Orvokki Roinila undertook senior soldiership classes, and were accepted as soldiers by signing the Articles of War on 22 April 1979. A Finnish

Salvation Army missionary from Singapore, Major Kyllikki Vataja, officiated this special meeting, which was attended by a full congregation of more than 150 corps members, friends and interested people. Convinced of the needs amongst the many Finnish people of the city, Olavi Roinila began to organize weekly meetings at the Port Arthur corps location. Visits were made to the local resthomes and boarding homes where the Finnish *War Cry* (*Sotahuuto*) was handed out, along with donuts for the needy. This simple social and spiritual outreach is a trait well-known within the Salvation Army. The meetings in Port Arthur continued briefly until the spring of 1980 when the Roinila family moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Here again, Olavi Roinila was able to organize meetings within the Winnipeg Citadel location, which attracted local Winnipeg area Finns. Through misunderstandings and poor communications, this work amongst the needy--especially in Thunder Bay--eventually failed and the vision for this work faded. During this period of activity, contacts were established with the Salvation Army in Finland, along with the newly appointed General Jarl Wahlstrom, but support from these sources was minimal at best, composed of the *Sotahuuto* magazines along with a single Finnish Army songbook.

The following document better describes the attempt at Salvation Army outreach among the Finns of Thunder Bay. It is a translation of an unpublished Finnish manuscript written by Olavi Roinila, compiled as the family memoir in *Roinilat--Meikäläiset Maailmalla*, which provides details of the brief history of the Finnish Salvation Army in Canada, and how this outreach met its untimely end.

Obviously we were wrong in many things, but that was to be expected. We had never been involved in the work of the Salvation Army. Where would we have ever learned about it? Should these English-speakers not have understood our situation so as to try to help us through our short-comings? But no, we were not helped or taught much! By myself I made a mistake in operating the photocopy machine, and the Lieutenant was quick to admonish and complain to a higher ranked Major, as to say "See what he is now doing." In response, the Major only murmured to himself, and must have thought that it was none of his concern.

The biggest blunder, really, that made us think that perhaps we were not welcome into the Salvation Army's sphere, occurred, when the Thunder Bay cable television invited all the Finnish congregations to attend a panel discussion. The Finnish Army also received an

invitation, and the invitation was obviously sent to the corps address. There, our friendly Lieutenant took the letter and with another officer went to attend the meeting, which was held in the Finnish language. The panel discussion dealt with assigning broadcasting possibilities for the different congregations throughout the year, but the officers who attended didn't understand a word! One of the attending pastors wondered "Where are the Roinila's, they were the ones who were invited!" But our valued officer didn't even notify us about this event! We only heard about the meeting through contacts after-the-fact. When we thus saw that the situation began to border on the ridiculous, we saw no possibilities for successful work with the Finns. We had no money to rent facilities, musical instruments, we had nothing. That was the sole reason why we tried to associate with the local corps and work alongside with them. They had everything. I sent letters to Finland and to the newly appointed General with information on our developments and first-hand accounts of what was happening, to no avail. We received vague responses, in which it was hoped that "things will work out." Our Lieutenant then took matters into his own hands by informing the Divisional Commander, that we were somehow "difficult." Even though we had collected over \$600 into their offering plates. One older woman, for example, donated \$100 in support of our work, which still ended up going to the English-language work. We never saw any of the money, and nobody ever spoke of this either.

So this is how things began to change. A letter was received from the Divisional Commander, encouraging us to discontinue our work among the Finns of Thunder Bay. It was suggested that we should receive more training, since reports were that we were not completely familiar with it. This was an official letter, with its official seals and formal politeness. For when the Salvation Army begins to be official and formal, it is literally so. From what I have seen of the Canadian Salvation Army as an observer from the side, I can honestly say, that a piece of paper is more important in its hierarchy than a living person. It is sad to write this, but I have personally experienced and lived through this, seen how things and events are handled, how some thing that are wanted are not allowed to go through, so that "well has the founder William Booth taken his lessons from the military, as the only difference is that some preach, others kill"--but sometimes words can kill as well! It is of no consolation to know that a year following these events, the Lieutenant of the Corps was ordered to another position in another city, where he resigned from his work with the

Salvation Army. We later heard that the Lieutenant had become “tired” of the work.

By this time I had slowly begun to give up my choirs. You see, I thought it would look better for a “believer,” that I didn’t get involved in secular interests. I ended women’s choir “Oras” and the children’s choir “Peipposet,” simply explaining that I was too busy, tired, my life view had changed, now that I was saved and so on. I thus ended my beloved hobbies, that I had in all my moves tried to lead and organize.<sup>5</sup> And then the Finnish Army work ended, and what did I have to show for it? Absolutely nothing, only a cross, bitter, and bad feeling. Fortunately, the family remained together and did not fall apart at the seams. We love each other, try to blow into the “same coal,” but I must admit that there have been times when my wife did not always want to understand me. These were trying times, especially under the guidance of the Army, when my wife would become irritable and I would become agitated. Otherwise we have been a happy couple, and the family has been together. For that I thank God.

Then, one of my friends in Thunder Bay said to me: “Well, don’t you now believe, what the congregations are all about? Do you still feel like beginning again? Why don’t you just take a spoon into your right hand and begin feeding yourself properly. You don’t need a congregation, you can be in touch with God without a congregation. Isn’t a direct contact always much better?” he asked. “Contact with your God is important to you, not just others. Why do you then look for others who become the middlemen between you and God. You have a Bible, read, and learn from it what God is saying to you. And if you can’t read, learn, it is high time for you to learn the ABC’s of life, and not just keep hitting your head against the wall.” This is how he “preached” to me. I listened and listened. He was correct in some ways, and incorrect in others. Take from that what is good, discard the rest, and find the golden path in the middle. I have looked, tried, experienced, and found many wrong roads, while many teachings and beliefs have been found to be long lasting and true. This brought to mind an appropriate saying that goes like this: “If you want to live life sad--look at people, if disappointed--look at other believers, if a winner--look only at Jesus!?”

In thinking about the past, the attitudes and feelings, I now have a melancholy feeling. I feel that the kind of work the Salvation Army does, was definitely needed amongst the Finnish people. Hopefully someone else will have that same vision, and a desire to do some Christian social work, have foresight and faith, to be able to work

within the many difficulties that such work entails, but still continues on. I have often thought about the Finnish General, who served for four years in Canada as Chief Secretary, and after his return to Finland, and why he did not begin to lead and order something to be done towards the Finnish needs among Finnish immigrants? Did he encourage any Finnish officer to take up work among the Finns, especially since he had seen the need among the Finns. Didn't anyone in Finland, once they read about the start of this work in the Finnish *War Cry*, make any contact with me? Did anyone see it as a calling to come to Canada and work with the Finns? No, not one. This is what I have often thought about. And I have begun to understand. Perhaps they know how difficult it is to work 'under the wings' of someone? The English-speakers own their own meeting halls and control all that happen within them, and this is understandable. But if there is the will and foresight within the Salvation Army of Finland, they could build their own hall, and easily send their own worker, or workers, to manage it.

From the bottom of my heart, I wish that the leaders in the Salvation Army of Finland understand the importance of this work, the usefulness, the need, the blessings of this work, work that would not be fruitless. This work would yield blessings to the worker, but more importantly, it would help the many local Finns that others very seldom help. I believe that God would bless such work thousand-fold. Even though God apparently did not bless our attempts at starting such an outreach among the Finns, perhaps the situation would be different with others. I would not be bitter, hurt, or jealous, if I heard that someone had begun work among the Finns. Rather, I would thank God for his blessings.<sup>6</sup>

The Roinila family relocated to Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1983, where Mr. and Mrs. Roinila became the eventual custodians of the well-renowned Winnipeg Citadel Corps, located in downtown Winnipeg. Once again, a vision for reaching people and an opportunity to present the gospel message to the local Finns was brought forward by Mr. Roinila. Having received permission from the Corps Officer as well as the Divisional Commander for the Manitoba and NW Ontario Division, the Roinila family once again established Sunday afternoon meetings for the Finnish community. The participation was less numerous, and after several months, the desire and support from the administrative elements of the Salvation Army led to dissolution of the vision. By 1984, personal difficulties and misunderstandings led to the closing of this chapter of any

attempts by the Salvation Army to extend outreach towards the Finnish population of Canada. In 1986, Mr. and Mrs. Roinila returned to Finland, where after attempts of working as an envoy at a Finnish Corps on the Arctic Circle, and working a few years as a case worker with the Salvation Army Rehabilitation Center, Mr. Roinila was forced to retire due to failing health. Earlier heart attacks, high blood pressure and stress led to an early retirement. Today, Mr. and Mrs. Roinila reside in Tampere, Finland.

The above is a personal biography of an outreach that was attempted among Finnish-Canadians by a well-read, untrained layman, who saw a need and had a desire to meet that need. In recalling the occurrences, with and without its short-comings, the account is a valuable addition to our understanding of religious work among ethnic minorities. My work on the Finnish Salvation Army outreach within the United States received its impetus from my own experiences in Canada and my help with my parent's outreach, and it is my wish that future documentation of the Finnish Salvation Army outreach will recognize this small input among the Finnish work that existed elsewhere in the United States in the early 1900s.

### ***Endnotes***

1. William A. Johnson, *O Boundless Salvation: The Story of the Scandinavian Salvation Army in the United States* (New York: The Salvation Army Literary Department, 1988).
2. K.A. Walden, *Återblick Over Frälsningsarmens Skandinaviska Arbete I Amerika, 1887-1933* (Chicago, 1933); Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr. *Soldiers Without Swords: A History of the Salvation Army in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1956); and Johnson, *O Boundless Salvation*.
3. Kyllikki Korhonen, 17 September 2001, Correspondence from Summerland, BC.
4. *Mississauga Temple, The Salvation Army, official opening and dedication by Colonel Jarl Wahlstrom* (8 October 1974).
5. The Roinila family has lived in Australia (1967-1970), Sweden (1970), as well as Finland and Canada. Olavi Roinila received his education from Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, and his love for music led to his founding of numerous choirs among the Finnish ethnic communities abroad. He has played violin in symphony orchestras and most recently has organized choral and orchestral concert tours from Finland to the United States.

6. Mika Roinila, ed., *Roinilat – Meikäläiset Maailmalla* (Portland: Muse Press, 1990).