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JAAKKO'S FINLAND: A VILLAGE BOYHOOD AND BEYOND

On a bright cold May morning, with snow still lying in patches between the pathways, *Road to Emmaus* staff and friends met Jaakko Olkinuora, a young Orthodox man who was finishing his national service at Finland's New Valamo Monastery. As we got to know each other over shared meals in Valamo's pleasant trapeza, it became clear that here was a story worth telling, but time was not on our side. The days ran short and, too soon, the train carried us back to Helsinki.

Six months later, walking through an unfamiliar neighborhood of Thessalonica, I began musing over our trip to Finland and the encounter with Jaakko, mentally scolding myself for having missed such an opportunity. I didn't even know his last name – how would I ever meet him again? Moments later, I was startled back to the Greek present by clamoring church bells, and on impulse turned down a small side street towards the neighborhood church so insistently announcing Vespers. When the service ended, someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned to find Jaakko (presumably dropped from heaven) smiling down at me! I was more than astonished – but needless to say, heaven didn't have to knock again.

RTE: Jaakko, can you start by telling us about your family. Where are you from?

JAAKKO: I grew up in a southern Finnish village where my mother's family has lived for at least 400 years. They could have been in Heinäjoki much longer, even twice as long, but written records only begin in the 17th century. The sons and daughters of the family always married local people, so our heritage on my mother's side is entirely from this small area. My

father is from a Karelian village, where his family had lived for at least 500 years. During the Winter War (1939-40) with the Soviet Union they had to leave and settle in Harviala, Finland, a village quite close to Heinäjoki. Over 400,000 refugees from Karelia, almost the entire population, were settled throughout Finland.

RTE: Do Finnish Karelians and western Finns have distinct cultural differences? They are so close geographically.

JAAKKO: Like two different worlds. At the time of the resettlement, western Finnish people didn't like the Karelians at all, because the state took land from them for the refugees. The Karelians had nothing and needed to start their lives, but, of course, people were angry at this appropriation. Neither my mother's nor my father's parents ever visited one another.

Twenty or thirty years ago the regional differences were quite distinct, now not so much. For example, the food was completely different in different Finnish regions. Now all of these dishes have spread all around the country. My mother said that when she was young they only ate the food of southwestern Finland, never the specialties of northern Finland, like reindeer. Nor did she know anything about eastern food, which has more of a Russian influence, like *blini* and *piroshki*. My Karelian grandmother was a great Karelian cook, and she taught my mother. One of the things she always emphasized was that before you stir the soup with a wooden spoon you have to dip the spoon in cold water. I never understood why, but when you did, the soup always became really tasty.

My father's parents died when I was quite young, about 11 or 12. My grandfather was 94 and my grandmother 85. As my



Above: With friends on the pond, 1993.
Below: Cousins diving off the pier, early 1990s.



grandmother Airi lay dying, she thought that she was back in her village, speaking with her neighbors. We sat beside her listening – her Karelian dialect was so clear. It was only then that I realized that she had had a really hard life. Her family was communist, but my grandfather was a capitalist. He was only 23 years old when he took my grandmother from her home, and she was 13. No one knows why they married so young. Their marriage must have been a scandal for both families because it was just after the Russian civil war.

My grandfather was very popular in their Karelian village, he was the first war hero to return and his brother was the first villager to die fighting in the wars. The family had farms and animals, and my grandfather was also a great gymnast. He fought in three wars: the Finnish civil war, the Winter War and World War II. When my grandparents first came to western Finland as refugees, they settled with people from Russian-speaking villages. These villages were the basis of the Orthodox population in our region of Häme, but the other Russian-speakers were not refugees. They had come to Finland centuries before as slaves from central Russia and had been given land by the Swedes. They don't speak modern Russian, but a much older form, and my father grew up amongst these people. I once traveled to Russia with a group of them, and they told me many stories about their youth in the village and my father's family.

Mother's Family, Marriage and a Recession

My mother's family is also quite remarkable. Ours is a farming village, with no higher education in the area. My grandmother Lahja, however, was intent on sending her daughters to school, and this was considered very strange. My mother, Anita, and her twin sister were the first girls from the village to go to high school. Everyone mocked my grandmother for this, saying that girls need to stay home to cook and take care of the house, but my grandmother replied, "No, they will go to school and I will find the money to send them." My mother was also the first person from our village to go to university. She went to Helsinki, the capital of Finland, and of course, the village was even more scandalized that someone would leave for Helsinki. It's extraordinary that none of the boys in her family went to university, but all of the girls did. My mother has told me crazy stories about Helsinki in the 1960s. She loved parties and Latin dance. She couldn't afford to go home by

tram, so she always waited for the “cleaning tram” (which cleaned the rails for the passenger trams) and would manage to ride for free.

After university she left for Sweden to work at Åhléns, Stockholm’s famous department store, to make sandwiches for a year. When she returned, she became a psychologist and then married my father. My grandmother gave them a piece of her land and my father and grandfather, who were both builders, built a house on it. My older brother was born first, then two sisters, and I am the last. When I was a child, Finland had a serious economic recession, which is always particularly difficult for the building trade, and my father was bankrupt. My mother had to buy the house from the bank in her name, or it would have been taken as well.

My parents decided that the recession was a good time to travel – it was much cheaper to travel then, of course, and we didn’t have money to do anything else – so as a family we traveled all around Europe, and to Africa, Cuba, Egypt, India, Thailand, and Morocco. We traveled quite easily because my mother speaks Finnish, Swedish, German and English and my father speaks Finnish, Swedish and some English. I was very young at the time, and the first places I remember visiting are Egypt and Cuba. Another of my early memories is Gambia. We were in a village school, a small hut in the middle of the forest. I had a sweater with a zipper, and when I pulled the zipper, all of the children came over to watch. They’d never seen one before, and everyone wanted to try it.

Later, when I spoke about our family trips back in our village school, no one believed me, because no one else from the village had ever gone anywhere.

A Natural Childhood

RTE: What an adventure! Did you go to school as you traveled?

JAAKKO: No, I went to our village school in Finland. My first school was very old-fashioned and it has been the center of the village for over a century. Now it seems ancient. I remember as a child when we had the school’s 120th anniversary. My teacher knows all of us well, as she had taught my mother, and as I’m the youngest child, all of my brothers and sisters were also taught by her. She had a very old-fashioned style of teaching. For music lessons we had an

old harmonium, which she played and we sang to. For gymnastics, she had a drum that she would beat while singing, “Go around, go around, go around,” and we would all spin around in circles. She is still living and I met her three or four years ago.

We were about fifty students, a big school for a village – the other villages only had fifteen or twenty students. It was quite close to our home, only two kilometers away, and in winter I skied to school. We start skiing when we are two or three years old in Finland and we carried shoes in our backpacks to change for the skis at school. Skiing is fun, but winter in Finland is difficult because it’s dark in the morning until very late. It was always dark when I left for school and dark when we came home, and I remember that one morning when I was about eight years old, I was very sleepy and I just kept skiing and skiing. I lost track of time, and finally thought, “Where am I?” I’d forgotten the turn and skied ten kilometers past the school. I arrived two hours late. Finnish schools are very strict about being on time, and the teacher was angry. I had to explain that I’d gotten lost.

Ours was a very natural childhood. I remember going with my little friends after school to the forest to bring the cows home. (I had a really big switch and all of the cows were afraid of me.) We had huge fields in front of our house and a sauna, as all Finns do. Children love the sauna and we had a great time once school was out because my father’s sister had married a Swede and our Swedish cousins would come for



Right: Jaakko’s sister on skis, 1986.

Left: Cousins making flower crowns.





Grandfather Väinö and his horse, Nessu, 1987.

the summer – there were about fifteen or twenty of us and we children would run about without any clothes, swimming for five or six hours at a time, and racing all day between the sauna and the lake. In winter, we'd do the same, but after the sauna we'd run and

roll in the snow. I remember once that we had just come from the sauna – my twelve-year-old sister, her friend, and myself who was nine – all running and leaping downhill from the sauna onto the snowy road, when a car suddenly came up the drive. We realized that it was our older cousin who was bringing her new boyfriend for a visit. His first encounter with us was these wild naked children running up the road. We were a bit embarrassed when we had to meet him later and shake hands. He just said, "Oh yes, I saw you near the road."

In the summer and fall, there were lots of mushrooms and berries, and swamps of *Suomurain*, cloudberries, grew near our house. Mother and I always went to gather them together, and even now, I know where to find the best berries. Before my mother studied psychology, she went to home economics school, so she can cook all of the delicious Finnish dishes. She also taught us to cook from a very old Finnish cookbook with traditional recipes. I was very excited, particularly about baking, and every weekend I baked something different. At Christmas we had our own Karelian dishes for Christmas dinner, different from the rest of the village.

We had a television, but we rarely watched it, maybe an hour sometimes in the evenings. My family remembers that once when I was young, a plane flew across the television screen, and I walked around to the other side of the television to see where it had gone. (Our region is known for its slow people.)

My father's parents had a house about ten kilometers from us, and they also had a horse. At that time no one had just one horse, almost everyone had twenty horses, but because my grandfather was a builder, not a farmer, they only had one for the family. The horse's name was Nessu. She wasn't a

riding horse; she pulled a wagon, and all of us children would lay on the hay in the wagon when we rode out to the fields in the summer. (I was allergic to hay, so I sneezed all the time).

I don't remember how old I was when they took her to the slaughterhouse. This was a farming community, and they told us, "Nessu is going to be made into sausage." It was so sad. We cried and missed her terribly, but we had a small wooden horse in the house also called Nessu, and even after we became too big for it, we still rode that wooden horse, thinking of our old Nessu.

It was a wonderful childhood, though, and I think that my generation was the last to experience something of the old Finland in the countryside. Things have changed now.

RTE: Is Finland still predominantly agricultural?

JAAKKO: Since we joined the European Union, everything has changed, and there has been a break in the agricultural life of Finland. Now that Poland has joined the EU, it is difficult for the Finnish farmers to survive, because Polish products are so much cheaper. When I was a child there were many farms in our region, and hundreds of cows. Now, almost nothing. We had a sugar factory in our village where they produced sugar from sugar beets, but it also closed. This was a huge blow because it left hundreds of people out of work. Each time I go back now more and more farms have closed down. There are only one or two working farms left and the village is dying out. People are moving in who don't want to live in Helsinki, but they aren't part of the traditional village families.

Nowadays, Finland has become too rich and too comfortable. People have money for everything, but many of them no longer come together as a family. Today real family life is often found only in the countryside. In the cities, people don't have time to talk things over, to be family, just to eat together – even if you don't talk. And Russian Karelia, my father's homeland, is now full of people who have no roots and no sense of themselves – they were simply moved there from

Playing Swedish game of Kubb with friends, 2001.



central Russia after the Finns evacuated Karelia during the Winter War. We need to realize that just a kilometer east of our border, people are living in real desperation.

RTE: Archimandrite Sergei of Valamo told us about help that has been given to small parishes there, but sadly, this change is something that the entire world seems to be going through. Would you like your own children to grow up as you did?

JAAKKO: Yes, of course, I'd like them to grow up in the village with the same kind of childhood I had. When I think of village life, I often think of my grandmother, my mother's mother, whom I respect because she is a simple, hardworking woman. One story she always tells is, "When I gave birth to your mother, the water broke, but I had to finish



Jaakko's grandmothers, Lahja and Airi.

in the fields before I could go into the house. With your uncle, I was milking the cows when the same thing happened, but I finished the milking first." She also has a story about the "pig's tooth." When she was young, the health care system wasn't as developed as it is today. Once, when she had a terrible toothache, she pulled the tooth out herself, without any pain-killers. She still has the tooth in her cupboard and she shows it to visitors every now and then... Terrible, but on the other hand, who could do the same thing nowadays? These old people are very hardy.

She is 86 years old now and has had fifteen back surgeries, but she is still doing her own gardening. She can't bend now, so she lies down on her side to garden. When she was young she was a wonderful dancer, and used to lead all the village dances. She didn't come home until two in the morning, and then got up at three to take care of the cows. If she has this much energy now, I can imagine what she was like when she was young.

So, our childhood was rather idyllic, until 1996, when we had a great tragedy in the family. My brother, our cousin, and their friend all died in the same car accident on Midsummer's Eve. It was terrible for the family, and

overwhelming to be at a triple funeral. Then both of my father's parents died in 1997. It seemed that everyone was dying, and the family was just meeting at funerals.

RTE: How sad. You must have been about twelve then. Was your family religious?

JAAKKO: We were Lutheran like everyone else in the village, but Häme, our region, was traditionally known for its very strong paganism. Christianity came to the area early, but when the Catholic missionaries began baptizing our people, there was a lake (which still exists) called "Repentance Lake" where there were many animal sacrifices, and the native peoples would go there to *repent* of their baptism, to "wash it off." In fact, our region is still rather pagan. Although everyone is formally Lutheran and socially one has to belong to the church, you can't really be a practicing Christian. If you go to church regularly or are very active in church life, the village will think you are strange.

RTE: How long did paganism survive?

JAAKKO: In Russian Karelia, some beliefs still exist. Orthodoxy wasn't able to reach everywhere before the Russian Revolution, and in some very remote places paganism continued unbroken. In western Finland, the Catholic Church was very strong before the Reformation, as was Lutheranism afterwards. Our region, however, still has its native pagan place names and stories about spirits and demons of the lakes. When I was a child my mother had a book of Finnish stories collected from the old people. They were all pagan: demons of the lake, demons of the forest. My father has two Finnish names, Seppo and Tapio, both names of Finnish gods. No one believes the stories now, but they still come up in conversation.

A Finnish Christmas

RTE: How did you celebrate holidays such as Christmas?

JAAKKO: Christmas is Finland's biggest annual holiday, when everyone spends a few calm days with their families. Every year our Christmas followed, and still follows, the same pattern. On Christmas Eve morning we wake up early to eat a traditional porridge made of rice and milk. Our mother cooks the porridge and hides an almond in it. The person who gets the almond will

have good fortune in the year to come. Then we decorate the Christmas tree that I and my father have brought a few days earlier from the forest. At noon there is a national declaration of “Christmas peace,” a medieval tradition that has been kept alive in Finland until now. Usually my aunt and cousins are with us, and we begin to prepare the Christmas Eve meal. In the afternoon we all visit the graves of our beloved ones, wishing them a joyous Christmas and lighting candles next to the gravestones.

At around five, we have the traditional Christmas sauna, and we then dress in fancy clothes and prepare ourselves for Christmas Eve dinner. The dinner includes lots of traditional Finnish dishes: ham, different dishes of potatoes, carrots, eggs, and raw salted salmon. After the meal we give each other some small presents and sit around the fire, drinking coffee and a traditional hot Christmas drink called *glögi* (a spiced juice, sometimes mixed with wine). Around the midnight we go to church and around two or three in the morning, we come home to bed.

On Christmas Day, our whole family gathers at my grandmother’s house (my mother’s mother), who always prepared a meal for us, and this is where we meet the rest of the family. Unfortunately, my grandmother no longer has the energy to make such a meal, but we still visit her during the Christmas holidays. The days after Christmas are spent exchanging visits with relatives. Most of these customs are Lutheran, and they don’t mingle well with the Orthodox tradition because of the Nativity fast, but I love the Christmas feeling. Easter is magnificent, but the joy of Christmas is another kind of joy, silent and somehow secret.

Sister Anna, Jaakko, and Cousin Vera roasting marshmallows.



Restoring the Hämeenlinna Church

RTE: How did you first meet Orthodoxy?

JAAKKO: Because my father grew up in a Russian-speaking village, he knew about the Orthodox Church and he had Orthodox friends when he was young. Later, he was hired to restore an old Russian church that was in terrible condition in Hämeenlinna, Finland, and my sister and I went with him. I was about fifteen or sixteen and didn’t know anything about Orthodoxy, although I had been to Valamo Monastery and to the Orthodox women’s monastery at Lintula many years before, where I got my first icon. I remember that trip and that as a child I had liked Lintula even more than Valamo.

When my father first began to restore the church, it had been closed for fifty years and was in very bad condition. Drunks had broken in and made fires in the church to keep warm. It was dirty, the windows were broken, but there still remained an old 19th-century iconostasis from a Russian pre-revolutionary warship. One day a woman came in and said, “These are the holy doors of our altar. I’ve passed by here every day, and I always think, ‘Perhaps one day the church will reopen,’ and now it has. I’ve been waiting for this for twenty years!” When the Orthodox consecrated the church, they invited us to the service.

RTE: What do you remember?

JAAKKO: It was Vespers. The church is very small, like a chapel – no electricity, no running water, nothing, just candles. It was dark and raining and the church was shining with candles, and they sang “O Gentle Light” in Finnish. I remember everything about that Vespers; I even remember the clothes I was wearing. When the choir conductor heard that I could sing, she came and said, “You must be in the choir, we don’t have enough people,” so I sang also.

The Wider World

RTE: And what was it that lured you away from this idyllic village life to the wider world?

JAAKKO: When I was seven years old, I found a book on ballet and went to my mother and said, “I want to take ballet lessons.” She said, “Alright.” My sisters were ice-skaters, who also played piano and Finnish baseball. I didn’t

care for that, but I loved ballet. It was so strange for our small village – that this family that had travelled around the world now had this ballet dancer.

In my village it was just amusing, and I often danced for school programs. It was such an innocent time that no one could think anything bad, but once I went to junior high school in another village, there were already problems with alcohol, drugs and broken families, and the students were different.

RTE: Did you stop dancing?

JAAKKO: Of course not. Later, I did African dancing, which was completely new in Finland. Our teacher had studied in Africa, and I was so in love with African dancing – I still am, it's so physical and natural. I also love Irish dancing, Finnish folk, and modern dance. I've tried everything. There is an international dance festival every year in Finland and they have a camp for young male dancers, from seven to twenty years old. The most important thing for all of us was to know that there were other boys who danced; that you had friends.

In junior high school, I was still dancing, and I also started painting, practiced judo, and played football. I was also going to music school at this time, and took cello, piano, and guitar lessons. Now, I don't understand how I had the energy to do it all. I went to my hobbies every day after school, and came home around nine in the evening. People asked me why I did so much, but I couldn't imagine a day that I would leave school and just come home. Then I did the same thing that my mother had done thirty years before; when I was fifteen I went to high school in Helsinki. Perhaps it wasn't as much of a scandal, but it still caused a commotion in the village.

RTE: Why did you choose Helsinki?

JAAKKO: I was accepted into the National Ballet of Finland.

RTE: How wonderful.

JAAKKO: Yes, but I quit after the first week, because I understood that I would never have time for anything else. I didn't want ballet to be my whole life. I stayed in Helsinki for high school.

This was also when I first began studying Orthodoxy. The Finnish school curriculum includes classes for the two state religions: Lutheranism and Orthodoxy, and you go to the class of your own denomination. Almost everyone

is one of the two. But in high school, I asked if I could go to the Orthodox classes, and they said "Yes." Although many Lutheran children knew something about Orthodoxy, none of the Orthodox knew anything about Lutheranism, and I often had to laugh. When our Orthodox class went to visit the Lutheran cathedral and they heard the organ, one girl asked, "Do they always have this music in church?" Then she saw the door into the vestry behind the altar and asked, "What's that?" I said, "Come, and I'll show you." But she was afraid to go up because she thought women weren't allowed..."

At that time I also went to icon painting school, which I liked very much, and I went home and told my mother that I wanted to become Orthodox. She said, "I have nothing against it, but I'd like you to wait until you are eighteen." If you are under eighteen in Finland you have to have your parents' consent to join a church.

RTE: You were interested in so many things, she probably wanted you to be sure.



Jaakko, with friends Mari, Eeva and Ella on youth choir tour, Venice 2002.

JAAKKO: Yes, it was a good answer. In the meantime, I was in church every Sunday, still going to icon-painting lessons, to choir rehearsals, and to Orthodox religion classes at school. Finally, I reached the end of my senior year, when we take our final exams covering all of the high school curriculum in three lengthy parts. One part is an extremely difficult comprehensive exam, where you choose eight questions out of any of the subjects to answer in detail. I was not a bad student and I had been studying chemistry and biology like crazy, because this was known to be the hardest part of the exam, but when I sat for the exam I found that I couldn't answer anything in the chemistry section. After all of my work, the chemical calculations were hopeless, so I thought, "Well, I'll answer some questions on religion." So I went to the portion on Orthodox Christianity and answered all eight of the questions from there – it's rare that someone answers eight questions from one area.

One question was, "What happened to the Theotokos after her death?"

Now, I wasn't raised Orthodox and I thought, "Oh no! They never said anything about this in class." I didn't know what to write, but I had to write something, so I wrote out the, "It is Truly Meet"... "More honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim..." and then I analyzed it, line by line. When the results came I had received full marks. I was the first student in Finland to ever get a perfect score just on religion, on a religion that I wasn't a part of. (*laughter*) Actually, I think the exam was quite easy that year, but in any case it was a big scandal that I'd done so well, not being Orthodox. I even received a large scholarship from the Finnish Orthodox Church, which they give each year to the student who does the best on the Orthodox religion section. When I went to Metropolitan Ambrose to receive the scholarship, he said, "Well, welcome to the Church, if you would like to join." He smiled as if, "What can I say?" I had just turned 18, so two months later I joined the Orthodox Church.

This was my last year of high school, and I was trying to figure out what to do next. In Finland, young men all have to do military service, but I thought, "I'll do it later; first I'll enter university." So, I applied for the Orthodox Church Music Department at the Theological Faculty of the University of Joensuu, for mathematics at the University of Helsinki, for sociology at the Swedish-speaking University in Turku, and to the Music University in Helsinki. I was accepted by all four, and then had to decide which to choose.

My mother said, "Take the Music University because it is the most difficult to get into. If you don't like it, you can quit, but go now because this might be your only chance." So I went to the music school. That same summer we were having an icon painting course, when Metropolitan Ambrose (then the bishop of Helsinki) called me and said, "Our secretary just left. Would you like to come and be our secretary for the summer?" So I went to work

*Jaakko's
Chrismation by
Fr. Markku
Aroma, 2003.*



in the Metropolitan's office. I was just nineteen and knew nothing, but it was really a nice time. Of course, it was difficult – I learned a lot about obedience and patience – but the best thing about the job was that I got to know many people, like the archbishop of France and the head of L'Institut St. Serge in Paris, and all of the parishes and churches of Finland. I also saw the reality of day-to-day life of the Orthodox Church, which was good to meet at the beginning.

RTE: Being so close to the highs and lows of church administration doesn't seem to have dampened your enthusiasm. You must have handled it well.

JAAKKO: The reality didn't shock me at all. In Finland, we have a rather good situation. Since Orthodoxy is a state religion, we avoid some of the problems of other Orthodox countries. For instance, because the state both distributes and strictly controls the finances, there is no possibility of corruption in dealing with money. Also, the Finnish mentality is very obedient and honest. Stealing, even as a possibility, is a terrible thing. It's funny, in Finland we don't even cross the road except in the proper place. Even now, I feel a bit bad if I cross outside the crosswalk, although we do it all the time in Greece.

A Passion for Byzantine Music

After that summer I began my studies at the Music University, and was part of the parish of Helsinki, which is made up of about fifteen churches and includes one-third of the country's Orthodox population. (Our parishes are different from your one church/one parish system.)

Once I moved to Helsinki, a whole new Orthodox world opened up to me because here were young Orthodox people. Our parish at home was mostly older people, still speaking the older Russian dialects that I didn't understand. In Helsinki I lived in the parish house set up for students, and I had many Orthodox friends. It was a great time. We only had services on Saturday evening and Sunday morning in our village parish; here there were services every day, which was a new experience. I also became acquainted with Byzantine music, which has now become my passion. That first autumn at the university, I went to Greece for the first time, to Mt. Athos for ten days, and I was in heaven. I didn't speak Greek, nor did I know anything about Greece – at least nothing practical. Greece was the only European country my family hadn't visited. We had gone everywhere in Europe except Greece.

I didn't understand anything about Greek or Byzantine music, and couldn't speak Greek, but I bought all of the Byzantine music books I could find – the liturgy, matins, vespers... everything. When I returned to Finland, I found an English guide to Byzantine music, but the concepts were very difficult, so I contacted the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Essex, England to ask if I could come for a week. They agreed, and because they do many of their services in Greek with Byzantine chant, I learned a lot just by watching. There are many questions you can't get answers for in books.

I had become acquainted with Father Job, the director of L'Institut St. Serge in Paris, and I also went there for a week. He took me to the south of France, to La Faurie, where they sing so beautifully that I was in heaven, and I thought, "I can stay here, I don't need to go back to Finland." We also visited the Monastery of St. Antoine, a *metochion* of Simonos Petra on Mt. Athos, where for the first time I sang on the cliros with someone who used the actual Byzantine notation.

I went back to the Holy Mountain to study a bit more and the following fall I began at the Classics Department of the University of Finland because I wanted to learn ancient Greek. I had already studied Latin in high school, so it was quite easy to get in because my Latin was good. Then they called me from the Helsinki parish, and told me that the choir director for the young people had quit, and that they needed someone for six months, so I said, "Of course." They have so many parishioners, that they have a special music program just for young people. I worked there forty hours a week, while doing two full-time university courses – music and classics. I was going crazy, but it was such a nice time.

RTE: The young people must have loved you, and you were close to their own age.



Jaakko at Valamo, with pilgrims Iraida and Gaios.

JAAKKO: I learned so much there and I love working with kids myself. When I began the choir for high-school students, there were only four singers, and I thought, "I don't want to go on for six months with just four people," so I called all of the young people I knew from the parish and said, "You have to come to choir. No 'buts.' Rehearsal is next Thursday at six." By the end of the year I had sixteen members.

RTE: Did they do well?

JAAKKO: I was very hard on them. I used all of the Byzantine material because it was what I loved. I did a lot of different arrangements, and finally we did a concert and even traveled to St. Petersburg. We had many music camps with the young people.

After working in the parish for awhile, I thought, "Now, I want to go back to the Holy Mountain and really get to know Greece." So, I took a ticket to Greece for six weeks, alone, with no plans. At first I stayed for ten days at the Monastery of Simonos Petra, where the monks took me into the choir and helped me learn the Byzantine notation. At some point during that six weeks, with long daily services and many hours of singing, something inside me snapped, and I finally understood the Byzantine notation. I stayed on the Holy Mountain for a month. I didn't know any modern Greek, only the ancient Greek I'd learned at the university, which didn't help for daily things at all. I remember being lost one day in the middle of nowhere and meeting an old monk and not even being able to ask where I was. At

Simonos Petra, though, I worked in the trapeza, and the monks taught me quite a few words and phrases of modern Greek.

RTE: Didn't the Greeks understand your attempts with ancient Greek? They study it at school.

JAAKKO: No, because no one really knows how to pronounce ancient Greek, and in northern Europe and Finland we use the Erasmian pronunciation, devised by the philosopher Erasmus. The linguists think that it is a more correct pronunciation than the late Byzantine, but the Greeks don't understand it, so it's no use in daily life.

National Service at Valamo

RTE: What happened after your stay on the Holy Mountain?

JAAKKO: I came home to do my national service. In Finland, you can either do military service or civil service, which is twice as long as military service, and I decided to do civil service at Valamo Monastery. Since the Finnish Orthodox Church is a state church, the monastery, for this purpose, is a state institution, and you can serve there. My job was to be the cantor at services because they didn't have anyone in their small brotherhood who could sing well enough. Parish choirs sometimes came and I would conduct them as well, as they weren't familiar with the monastic services. It was three services a day, seven days a week. I had three weeks on, and one week off. There were other young men there also doing their civil service. Most were Lutheran, but almost all Lutherans convert after doing their civil service at Valamo.



Downtown Helsinki.

JAAKKO: They may not be interested in Orthodoxy at first, but they are interested in Valamo as a monastery, in seeing what life is like there. We had a Finnish Baptist who did his civil service at Valamo, and now he is an Orthodox priest. Another former Lutheran is now a monk on the Holy Mountain.

RTE: Why do they choose Valamo if they aren't Orthodox? Surely they could serve in a Lutheran setting.

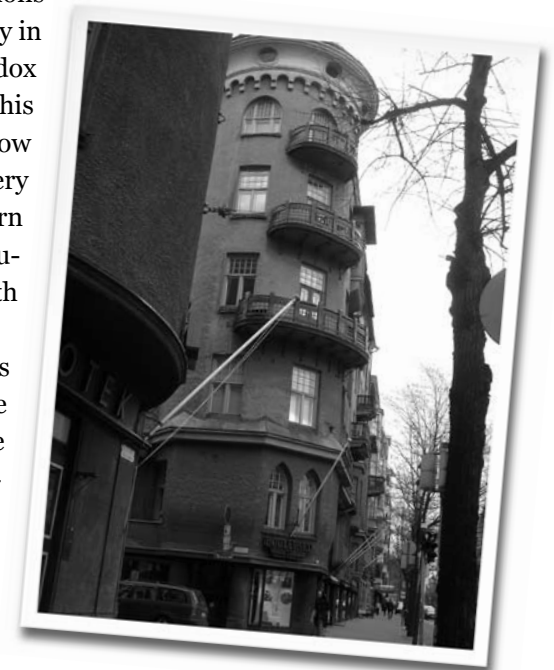
Lutheran Relations and the Herännäisyys

RTE: Speaking of the Lutherans, it seems that the Orthodox-Lutheran relations are rather cordial now within Finland.

JAAKKO: Yes, relations are better now, but when the Orthodox Karelians first came, many had to change their Russian names and convert to Lutheranism before they could get a job to feed their families. Even though Orthodoxy was one of the two state religions and the state had to teach Orthodoxy in the schools, if you were an Orthodox teacher, you couldn't get a job. This was as late as the 1970s, and even now in some areas this attitude is still very strong, particularly on the western border, where there was a huge Lutheran revival in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Finnish Lutheran Church has gone through many changes in the past few decades, and it has become rather divided. Older Finnish Lutherans are still very engaged in repentance, but not necessarily in a healthy way. It's the harsh Protestant attitude of "We are sinners and we have to repent. The human body is bad, we are bad..." On the other hand, younger Lutherans are becoming a little eclectic. They borrow a bit from the Catholics, the Orthodox, a little rock music...trying to make it relevant. My grandmother doesn't go to church anymore because she says it is no longer Lutheran.

There is one very interesting movement, though, inside the Lutheran Church – the *Herännäisyys*, which would be translated as "Awakening." Theologically, this movement is closer to Orthodoxy than most Lutheran doctrines. They don't venerate the saints, but their idea of the Trinity, Christ, and the human person are very close to the Orthodox. Although quite large, the movement



Helsinki.

is very quiet, and hardly known even among Lutherans. The *Herännäisyys* people are very kind and open, but they don't talk much about their services – you just have to find out about them and go. Many Lutherans now are thinking of converting either to Orthodoxy or joining this movement.

They have a very nice tradition of beautiful songs that they sing in church. These are not modern Lutheran hymns and they have no instruments. On Sundays they usually go to a Lutheran church in the morning, and afterwards to people's homes where they sit silently until someone begins singing. These songs are very old – three and four hundred years old, and in old Finnish, not modern Finnish. They sing very slowly and quietly, often with their eyes shut. Then suddenly in the middle of the hymn, without any direction, they will all stop at once. Everyone intuitively knows how long the pause will be, and then they continue. They must have a sort of spiritual unity amongst themselves because there are no rules for the pauses, but they always know exactly where it comes and when to continue. At the Music University they have tried to study this phenomenon because it is so unique, but they've found nothing – no patterns or rules. It's simply an unspoken group understanding.

I believe that their songs come from the Finnish folk music tradition. Also, among the Finnish Orthodox, old folk songs are sung, many with pagan overtones, but you know they are Orthodox. The Karelian tradition of folk-singing was especially strong, and theirs also may have originated centuries ago from pagan folksongs. We don't know how old they are, only that they were written down four hundred years ago.

Choral music first came to Finland from Germany, so these songs may be a mixture of that tradition and early Finnish folk music. The Lutheran "Awakening"



Jaakko, chanter at Valamo for national service.

group also has some very nice Paschal hymns. They aren't like a march; they are serene and calm, and the joy is pure joy, like the joy in Byzantine music, from the heart. This is really the music of the people. Also, the Finnish mind is naturally melancholic. It isn't suited to the triumphal kinds of tones that we have in German Lutheran church music. It's interesting because this ancient Finnish singing sounds a bit like Russian Znameny chant. The lyrics are beautiful, and the melodies so very Finnish, that I believe if we are to develop a Finnish Orthodox musical tradition, this is where we should start from.

Finnish Chant and Missionary Work

RTE: Would it be possible for the Finnish Orthodox Church to develop its own tones – especially since your own traditional folk music is still very alive? The Russian, Arab, and Romanian tones are all based on their own music, and such a development still seems possible in a traditional society made up of a single ethnic group. I've often hoped that our own Alaskan natives might do something similar – they still have a rather homogenous society and a living tradition.

JAAKKO: The Greek Byzantine tradition also came from the folk tradition; they have the same scales in their folk music. But one thing that is very important is that the folk music of all these jurisdictions was raised to a high level by church hymnographers who were saints. This is what is needed to develop it in Finland or in any culture that still has a distinct tradition – it can't just be contemporary musicians setting traditional words to popular tunes.

RTE: The first time I heard Ethiopian monks chanting in the Holy Land, their voices seemed to come from the depths of the earth and before the Flood. It was like listening to music from the beginning of time.

JAAKKO: Do you know how Ethiopian chanters are trained? You have a long, thorough and extremely demanding education, but once you graduate and are ordained, you improvise the melodies and the text, because they believe that once you have gone through the training you are inside the tradition and you will only produce melodies and texts that are traditional. They have some fixed hymns, of course, but there is a good bit of improvisation.

RTE: So you couldn't just sing by rote – your level of attention and your spiritual state would be evident to anyone listening. Speaking of Ethiopia, hasn't

the Finnish Orthodox Church sponsored missionary and social outreach in Africa? Igumeniya Marina, the abbess of Lintula convent, was herself an African missionary.

JAAKKO: The Orthodox Church of Finland has done missionary work in Kenya for many decades, but, of course, the Church's most extensive missionary work is in Finland itself, which is predominantly Protestant. The Orthodox don't aggressively proselytize, but the Orthodox Church is very present in the media and this is important for growth. The old generations are dying out and the converts are the new, dynamic power in the church. There are numerous converts yearly. Especially during Easter, which is not a big feast in the wider Finnish society, Orthodox priests are often featured in magazines and on television, and most Finnish people are very conscious of Orthodox traditions.

RTE: Now that you have finished your civil service, what are your plans, and what do you hope for the future of the Finnish Church?

JAAKKO: When I return from Greece I will finish my music degree, and theology as well. I want to go back to the village to live, as I can work on my Ph.D. anywhere.

For the Church as a whole, I hope that lay people will begin to take a bigger part in parish activities. An average Finn often isn't ready to commit to doing things, but I hope this will become more and more usual. I also would like to see some decisions taken: there are still very open issues concerning translations, liturgical music and other matters. Our future prospects are positive: the Church is becoming larger and more evident in an increasingly secularized society, and I hope that as the Church grows it will respond to the spiritual needs of the people by having more churches doing daily services. Most of our parishes have services only on Saturdays, Sundays, and feastdays, but weekday reader's services can also be conducted by lay people, in which anyone can take part. Worship is the heart of Orthodoxy. ✦

Christmas Eve

On the hillsides foggy weather hangs,
the clouds move heavily,
and a humid gentle wind
breathes through the dimness of the pines.
Yet fond rejoicing smiles in the dimness,
like a wedding feast at dead of night,
for Christmas Eve has come.

From the room a merry whiteness shines towards the passerby,
and the fruits a busy year has borne,
are piled up in a tower on the table's white cloth to offer guests,
and upon the floor the straw reflects the blazing Yule log fire.

At the table, all the household sits within the shining room,
and before each member, limitless are set the gifts of heaven.
All have equally earned, all the guests here,
and as soon as they have had their fill, the Christmas carols ring.

Now a young one sings, an old one sings, a child devoutly hears,
and the hymn in honor of Zion sounds, the greatest wonder tells,
the manger-Hero in Bethlehem town,
and the child who listens has a tear a-shining in its eyes.

When the brightness of the fire grows less, and carols reach a close,
for a long time, all in silence sit, and solemnly reflect
where the fireplace glows and red embers dim,
and to rest they totter off at last, upon a bed of straw.

O Exalted feast, fair Christmas Eve!
Upon the golden straw, in the firelight,
in the joyful flame, in the womb of the foggy night –
Who can forget you? Your carols echo,
and the baby in His mother's lap, homeless at Bethlehem.

FINNISH POET ALEKSIS KIVI (1834-72)
(TRANSLATED BY KEITH BOSLEY)