

The Immigration Story of the Olkinuora Family: "This Isn't Helsinki!"

Think of it – in 1928, leaving home, family & friends – sailing across the sea to a strange country called Canada & arriving there unable to speak the language – the three Olkinuoras, Maria (my mother) who was pregnant, Sirkka (my sister) age 4 & Armas (my father) with no job prospects. No government welfare, job training, housing, welfare or unemployment systems existed at that time.

My mother & father were country people from Karelia in north east Finland. I have heard conflicting stories of Father's reasons for immigrating. One story involved Father & his brother dabbling in Shady land deals in Karelia. Father initially planned to come to Canada alone & later (presumably) send for his wife, Maria & daughter, Sirkka. This, in fact, was a common practice for immigrants from many countries. The man of the family came to Canada alone planning to find a job, work, save & then send for his family. Frequently, however, the man grew lonely & found available female companionship irresistible. Thus new family groupings frequently formed in common law relationships & the original families in far away countries were left behind permanently.

My grandmother, however, told her son, Armas, that he could not immigrate without his wife & daughter. Grandmother's edict ruled & in the autumn of 1928 Father, Mother & Sirkka left Karelia. They sailed to Denmark from Helsinki. Sirkka at 76, remembers Father carrying her down the gangplank in Copenhagen. The family shopped & Sirkka was exceedingly proud of her newly purchased brown boots & plaid dress. In Copenhagen they boarded the S.S. *Polonia* & sailed towards Halifax & a new life.

According to records the Olkinuoras travelled third class & Father had the princely sum of \$50.00 in his pocket. Sirkka remembers Mother saying the *Polonia* was so old she thought it

would fall apart at sea. She also recalls seeing her total body reflected in a full length mirror for the first time on board ship. Sirkka danced in front of it singing, "Mina on tyttö-poika" – "I am a girl-boy" – but she does not understand why she had this thought. Mother was pregnant & seasick, unable to eat. Sirkka's most vivid memory of the *Polonia* was being up on deck with Father as huge waves splashed over the top. She panicked & vomitted – a combination of fear & seasickness.

The family arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax, intact, & in fact, on Mother & Father's wedding anniversary, November 24, 1928. On leaving the *Polonia* & seeing Pier 21, Sirkka began crying & sobbing, "Ei tama olle Helsinki." – "This is not Helsinki." – For Sirkka had thought that after Copenhagen the family was returning home in Karelia via Helsinki.

From Pier 21 the Olkinuora family travelled by train to Schumacher in northern Ontario, near Timmins. At their destination, on the station platform the family stood in the dark unsure of what to do & where to go. A kindly man approached & spoke to them in English. In reply, Mother used the only English word she knew: "Finn" & their good samaritan took them to the home of a Finnish family – friends from their own village in Karelia!

Mother always said my sister, Hilka, hitchhiked across the ocean. She was born April 4, 1929. Just prior to the stock market crash & big depression, October 29, 1929. Our family endured many hardships. At one point the family of 4 lived in a one room tarpaper shack in the woods which Mother referred to as their "kesa huvila" – "summer cottage." Father worked as a lumber-jack & Mother cooked for the workers.

When I was born in 1934 we were then living in a small community called Nemegos, near