
Martta Laitinen's Story

Her Work for Socialism in Finland, Canada and Soviet Karelia

BY VARPU LINDSTRÖM

At the age of 94, Martta Laitinen is still optimistic, trusting that Gorbachev will bring about improvements to Soviet Karelia if only "the people would unite and work hard again." Her tiny apartment in Petrozavodsk, about four hundred kilometres north-east of Leningrad, bore mementoes of her long life, filled with tragedy, idealism, and arduous work. She is one of the rare survivors of the thousands of Finnish North Americans (estimates vary from 6,000 to 16,000) who decided to emigrate during the great depression and to make their contribution to the growth of socialism and the building of Soviet Karelia. Driven by idealism and hope, they crossed the Atlantic twice in search of a better life. Most of them were ultimately crushed by economic downturns and political disasters in Finland, Canada, and the Soviet Union.

The story of this remarkable woman who endured childhood poverty and a revolution in Finland, who helped organize a Women's Labour League Finnish local in Blairmore, Alberta, Canada and who survived Stalinist purges and exile in the war-torn Soviet Union, is based on an interview in August 1988 and additional information in subsequent letters. Encouraged by the new spirit of openness, Martta Laitinen tells us her life's story with painstaking candor.

Finland 1895-1923

Martta Laitinen was born into a poor working class family on the 27th of May, 1895 in Helsinki, Finland. Throughout Martta's childhood the country was in the midst of fervent national awakening; Finns were battling against repressive Russian legislation designed to curb previously enjoyed freedoms of the autonomous Grand Duchy. At the same time socialism was capturing the imagination of the country's working class.

Martta does not have any happy memories of her early years:

My childhood was truly miserable and I can't even talk about it without crying. My father was an alcoholic and it was the drink that killed him, leaving mother alone with three children... My older brother was nine at the time and my younger brother three. I was six.

For the next few years, the family lived hand-to-mouth, moving frequently while searching for shelter. Martta's mother worked long hours in a cigarette factory and her meagre income was

augmented by some poor relief and help from charitable institutions. Despite the hunger and hardships, all three children completed six years of public school.

Martta was always very small in size, but tenacious in spirit. By the time she was eleven she was making a significant financial contribution to her family by selling newspapers. At the age of 15 she followed her mother to the cigarette factory.

As youths, Martta and her brothers joined the Young Pioneers (*Ihanneliitto*) and were aroused by eloquent speakers and inspired by the vision of socialism. To eradicate poverty, to build an egalitarian society and to work hard became her life's mission. At the age of 19 she married one of the young pioneers, Pekka Lehto, who was a coppersmith in the shipyards.

On December 6, 1917, while Russia was torn apart by a revolution, Finland declared its independence. Less than two months later Finland too was in the midst of a Civil War. Now Martta, her husband and her brothers had an opportunity to put their words into action and fight for a socialist Finland. For four months the Red and the White Guard were engaged in bitter battle. Martta's husband and both of her brothers were ultimately captured by the victorious White Army. They languished in prison camps, expecting to die by execution, starvation or disease. Miraculously, all three eventually returned home alive, unlike so many of their comrades from the Young Pioneers.

But their life in independent, white Finland proved frustrating. The former "reds" found it impossible to get work. Both Martta and her husband lost their jobs and faced an uncertain future. In addition, the bitter memories of the atrocities during the Civil War made it difficult for them to live in Finland.

In 1923, the Lehtos decided to move to Canada, a country that promised vast opportunities for those who were not afraid to work hard. Pekka left in July, and Martta followed in November. That year over 6,000 other disgruntled Finns caught the "Canada fever," marking the years 1923 and 1924 as the greatest years of Finnish immigration to Canada.

Canada 1923-1931

In Canada Martta's life looked promising as she was able to contract herself as a dishwasher to a distant lumbercamp near Sioux Lookout in Northern Ontario. The owners and the camp's 25 men were all Finnish immigrants. She recalls:

The work started at four in the morning and it was rush, rush till late at night. I had no helpers, and during the day I cleaned the bunkhouse and the rest of the time I washed dishes. The men were nice and they would cut firewood, bring water and dry dishes for me. The money was good. I made \$45 a month and had free room and board. When I finally left to join my husband in Vancouver, I had over \$100 in my pocket.

Pekka too had found work in a lumbercamp in British Columbia, but he was restless and had heard that the Alberta miners were "raking in the dollars." He moved to Blairmore, Alberta in 1925 and Martta followed a few months later. Since Blairmore was a mining town and there simply was no work for women, Martta was unemployed for the next six years.

These years gave Martta an opportunity for great personal growth and self-education. She became a political activist and joined the Finnish Organization of Canada (FOC), a left wing political and cultural group. She participated in plays, helped organize miners' unions, marched in rallies, and collected funds for labour causes.

By July 20, 1926, the Finnish women of Blairmore, Alberta, were sufficiently organized to found a Finnish local of the Women's Labour League (WLL). Martta was elected its first chairperson and later served as its secretary, as a correspondent to the radical Finnish American women's newspaper, the *Toveritar*, and as leader for the Young Pioneers. The culmination of her literary efforts occurred when she received \$18 for a short story based on the Civil War in Finland which was published in two consecutive issues of the *Toveritar*.

All other work she did as an activist and an organizer was entirely voluntary. Her best friend, Anna Apponen, gave Martta and other socialist women activists valuable English lessons, trained them in public speaking and in conducting meetings. Ill health often forced Anna to give her lessons from her sickbed. Martta also recalls, with great respect, the efforts of Mary North, an untiring organizer. Together the women published a hand-written newspaper *Koli-Nyrkki* (a Fist of Coal) and did their best to spread other Canadian radical newspapers.

In March 1928, the WLL reported that its ninth district (Alberta and B.C.) had 10

Finnish language locals with 170 members. In addition to Blairmore, the WLL had Finnish locals in Canmore, Red Deer, and Trochu, Alberta. In February 1928, the secretary of WLL in Blairmore wrote to *Toveritar* to express her enthusiasm for women's efforts:

When we examine the women or listen to their discussions in reading circles, in rehearsals, etc. a spark of hope is ignited in the heart. The work to enlighten women has not been wasted... As the executive (of WLL) was being elected, no one refused, as the idea is already deeply rooted that everyone must fulfill their responsibilities when their turn comes.

Five Finns went even further in their radical activities and officially formed a local of the Communist Party of Canada. They were Pekka and Martta Lehto, Arthur and Anna Apponen and Mary North.

By the late twenties, the work at the mines was cut to three days a week and then even further. By 1930 Blairmore was feeling the economic consequences of the depression and the earlier enthusiasm and hope of the workers waned and people started to drift away. Once again the future looked quite bleak.

But then came some inspiring news. The Soviet Union was looking for good workers to help fulfill the goals of Stalin's five-year plan. The Finnish Canadians

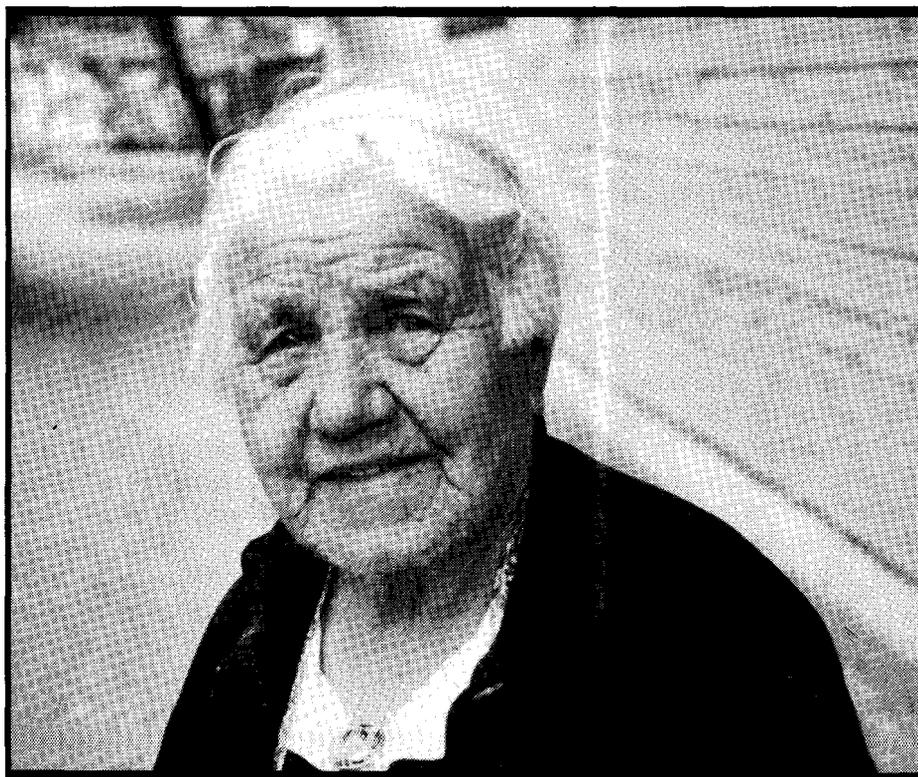
were especially welcomed to Soviet Karelia. The people were encouraged to bring their belongings, tools, farming machinery and money. The FOC organized the recruitment effort, took care of the travel arrangements and helped to spread the news of this opportunity to build a vital socialist Finnish-speaking Karelia.

Martta and Pekka Lehto and their friends Arthur and Anna Apponen decided to uproot once again. In Karelia, Anna was sure to get good food and free medical help. They were joined by yet another family from Kimberley, B.C., Lempi and Santeri (Santtu) Nylander and their two sons.

They packed their cars and drove to Toronto where another hundred Finnish Canadians were ready to move to Soviet Karelia. Pekka and Martta Lehto took only clothing and bedding with them, but others transported cars, furniture, heavy machinery, even pianos.

We were told that for two years the conditions will be really poor, and that then times will improve, but they haven't improved yet...

Off they sailed to Leningrad singing revolutionary songs, waving red flags, and trusting that in the workers' state they could finally settle and find a happy home.



Karelia 1931 to Present

The first few years in Petrozavodsk were years of building and hard work. The Finnish North Americans sent their children to Finnish schools, enjoyed picnics by the picturesque Lososina River, built communes and living barracks, and were proud of their many achievements.

But then slowly the mood changed. Stalin turned his back on the foreigners, ordered the Finnish schools closed and finally, by 1937, Finnish men began to disappear.

We noticed that men, prisoners, were gathered across the street, the enemies of the people were being arrested. But we wondered why so many good men and good workers had all of a sudden turned into enemies. They always came at night and took all good men...

The nightmares of Stalinist purges had begun and before they waned most of the Finnish American men had "disappeared," starved, been worked to death, or shot into mass graves.

Martta's husband survived the first round of imprisonment because he happened to be away the night the police came to fetch him. Both Martta and Pekka went into hiding and when they returned there were no more arrests. Arthur Apponen and Santeri Nylander were not so lucky — they were both arrested and never heard from again. Anna Apponen, unable to get any medical care, and without a husband, withered away and died on Martta's lap.

Martta and Pekka were hauled to face the Communist Party officials. They were stripped of their party membership on the grounds that they had associated with the enemies of the people and a spy. The unanimous decision was announced in the newspapers. After this Martta and Pekka were shunned. Says Martta: "Friends didn't even dare greet us on the street."

In 1939 Martta and Pekka Lehto were reinstated into the CP and Pekka was conscripted into the Russian army, and sent to fight at the Russian Finnish front. Once again, however, Stalin had a change of heart: he decided to remove any foreign elements from his army. The Finns, he reasoned, could not be trusted. Pekka was sent to Siberia where he soon starved to

death. The last Martta heard from him was in a small note where he told her he was gravely ill, bloated because of miserable food, and asked for bread.

Martta was sent into exile, east of the war zone. She was given no time to prepare, only hastily packed a few of her belongings. She was not alone; she was accompanied by many widowed women and their starving children, who were now "enemy aliens" in their chosen land. Unlike so many others Martta survived the horrors of hunger and disease while in exile and, after the war, was able to return to her apartment in Petrozavodsk only to find that all her furniture and other belongings were gone. She decided to marry Jussi Laitinen, a Finnish American from Detroit who had suggested that the two of them "pool their ration cards." Jussi Laitinen had miraculously survived nine months in a Petrozavodsk prison while, in the meantime, his wife had died.

From then on Martta's life has been constant hard work. (Her husband died in 1979 at the age of 84). Until a few months ago she lived alone in a two-storey wooden building erected by Finnish North Americans in 1932. She hauled in her own firewood and kept her tiny apartment spotless. Her modest apartment was adorned with a beautifully carved chest of drawers brought to Karelia from Canada by her second husband. In the drawers Martta hides an impressive collection of medals given to her in recognition of her years of hard work. Martta dismissed the medals and sums up her life in Karelia:

We left from there [Canada] thinking that we are going to build socialism and to work wherever our work is needed. We were ready to do anything. I know I was, but so were all the others too... I have never refused any work, I have always been a "prostoi" worker, always done all the work given to me.

Despite all the hardships and broken dreams in three different countries, Martta has not lost her vision of socialism nor her trust in the common workers. On her walls are pictures of Lenin, a man Martta respects. She is, however, disillusioned and bitterly disappointed in Stalin. She recalls:

We all trusted Stalin. Now I read the papers and think: How could he have

been so cruel? How many Finnish Canadians were murdered by him or by his orders?

Martta returns in her memories to some of the major decisions in her life:

If someone had told us in Canada that life was like this here, we would have been angry; we wouldn't have believed it. We thought Stalin was holy, everyone thought so... I remember when we had a memorial for Josef Stalin in 1953. Not only the women cried, but also the men cried wondering how we were going to live now. Everyone was worried because he had given such good leadership that how would it be possible to live without him?

Martta believes that the workers' state can still be built:

if only all the people would pool together now and work hard so that we could rise again. This Gorbachev, he is trying but how difficult it is for him when things have been allowed to deteriorate so badly.

Martta has moved to an old age home where she recently celebrated her 94th birthday. Her health is weakening, but she still takes pleasure in her daily walks.

Although so many of Martta's dreams have been broken, she is not defeated. The happiest memories of her life are from her relentless work for socialism in Finland, Canada and Soviet Karelia, and of times spent with those who shared her vision.

In her last letter dated August 11, 1989 she writes:

I have my own room and a beautiful view. I have such wonderful memories of the nearby Lososina River where we used to go on Sundays before the war and have picnics. There is a beautiful pine forest and the nature is full of memories.

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