

# "We Serve Too:" Finnish-Canadian Women in International Service Organization

by Robert Alexander

For two Finnish-Canadian women, the fight to establish themselves within the largest service club organization in the world has been marked by three facts: hard work, achievement and, until recently, a considerable lack of political power within the organization itself.

The International Association of Lions Clubs is a humanitarian organization with chapters in over 150 countries. Founded as a men's club in Dallas, Texas in 1917, the Lions' proclaimed purpose is to create and foster a spirit of "generous consideration" among the peoples of the world. Their generosity has manifested itself in many ways, much of their efforts being devoted to working with the blind.

Nonetheless, within the organization itself there has been a certain lack of vision in the freedoms allowed those women

wishing to take part in the club's philanthropy.

In the 1920s, membership rules more liberal than those of other service clubs ensured the Lions' growth. However, these rules were not so lenient as to allow women to become members. That did not come about until 1987.

Until then the women's status was marked by a painstaking reluctance on the part of the men governing the organization to grant them any significant power or autonomy. In the early days, there was no provision for women at all. They were permitted only to accompany the men to those functions to which the wives were invited.

It was not until later that women actually began to take an active part in the Lions' work, but even in this they were

little more than adjuncts to the men. Granted the unofficial title "Lionettes," the women were allowed to help the Lions with their fund-raising activities. However, a woman could only become a Lionette if her husband was a Lion. Furthermore, the Lionettes were accountable to the man named by the Lions to be responsible for them and had no say in the administration of the larger organization itself.

Nonetheless, the Lionettes proved themselves capable in this supporting role and indicated to the Lions they were prepared to do far more. In 1975, their hard work was finally recognized, although the actual improvements produced by that recognition were perhaps more apparent than real. Lions International granted them a charter, a constitution and gave them a



Raija Rosenthal (left) and Pirkko Shaldon fill shelves of the library built by the Toronto-Suomi Lioness Club in the Suomi-Koti, T.O.

Photo: R. Alexander

new name: "the Lionesses." Their motto, in response to the Lions' proud roar, "We serve," was the subtle reminder, "We serve too."

Despite this recognition, the Lionesses still had no say in the decision making processes of their parent organization. Furthermore, although a woman was now free to join a Lioness club regardless of whether her husband was a Lion or not, a Lioness club could only come into existence if sponsored by a Lions Club. Theoretically, sponsorship could be withdrawn at any time and, if the sponsoring Lions club folded, the Lioness club would go down with it, regardless of its state of health. A Lioness Club's success was also to a large part determined by the rapport its members developed with their sponsoring Lions club. Conflict could make survival difficult.

Although Lionesses could hold their own elections, they had no voice in the selection of the person who would represent them before the club's governing body, the cabinet. That individual, (the Lioness Liaison Chair), always a man, in turn appointed an Associate Lioness Liaison, a woman from the Lioness Club who was to report to him.

It was against this backdrop that the Toronto-Suomi Lioness Club was born in 1977. Not only was it the first ethnic Lioness Club in Canada it was also among the first Lioness Clubs in the country.

One of the women instrumental in its formation was Finnish-born Raija Rosenthal, an administrative assistant for the North York Board of Education. Rosenthal says she joined the Lionettes in 1972 because she "wanted to serve." But, at that time, that wasn't enough. In order for her to become a Lionette, her husband first had to join the Lions.

Rosenthal was a Lionette for five years, during the last two of which she began to form a Lioness club. Despite the political restrictions which existed for Lionesses she said their creation represented a step forward. Because the Lionesses were formally recognized by the Lions, Rosenthal says being a member gave women a sense of identity they had lacked as Lionettes. Furthermore, although the Lionesses had little say in the decisions of the association itself, they could exercise a measure of control over their own functions.

"I thought it was a wonderful idea be-

cause we had to be responsible for ourselves," says Rosenthal. "The women wanted more of a challenge than just being an auxiliary."

At the time, she says, it was seen as a bold step for a group of ethnic women to form such a club. Pirkko Shalden, a member of the Toronto-Suomi Lioness Club for six years and a fund-raising director for the Finnish Senior Citizens Home Suomi-Koti in Toronto, attributes the fact that it was Finnish women who first made this move to a combination of the historical factors particular to them along with the general toughening effects of the immigrant experience.

"Finnish women have always been very independent. Finland has such cold winters and with the men always at war the women have had to look after themselves. Also, if you are an immigrant you have to have the strength to break the tie with your country and it makes you stronger," says Shalden who immigrated to Canada when she was 28.

However, immigration can also lead to isolation, especially for women and particularly for those women who remain in the home.

Half of the members of the Toronto-Suomi Lioness Club were born in Finland and a good number of these are homemakers. To ease the isolation and offer the women a more comfortable foothold in Canadian society, the Toronto-Suomi Lioness Club decided five years ago to conduct all their meetings in English. The men in the Toronto-Suomi Lions Club still use only Finnish in their meetings.

"We have members who are homemakers and never had a chance to use English so it was good for them to hear it," says Rosenthal. She has since helped several Toronto ethnic Lioness clubs get started, and to each she gives the same advice: conduct your meetings in English.

Over the years, both Rosenthal and Shalden have accomplished much and have been recognized for their dedication, however the recognition did not preclude running into certain old barriers in the male-dominated association. They were the first Canadian women to be appointed to cabinet positions in the organization: Rosenthal was named Lioness Liaison Chair, Shalden Youth Exchange Chair, both positions held previously only by men. However, because they were Lionesses and not Lions, they could not vote

with the rest of the cabinet-members.

Even without the vote, the naming of women to these positions was not popular with all of the men, something which was pointed out bluntly to Rosenthal when she attended a meeting and found her name omitted from a directory listing of the Lions' chairs. Pirkko Shalden also noted a certain reluctance on the part of some Lions to see her signature on out-going correspondence.

Despite this, both women have been recognized by the association for their hard work. Both this year and last they were the recipients of Lions' special achievements awards.

They'll probably win more. Their work is marked by that perseverance and a toughness of spirit which the Finns call "sisu." Their latest accomplishment, the construction of a library in the Suomi-Koti, a Finnish Senior Citizens home in Toronto, is evidence of that. The project represents three years' work in which the Toronto-Suomi Lioness Club collected more than \$5,000 and 3,000 volumes to create what they say is the largest collection of Finnish books in Southern Ontario. The library, which also contains Swedish, Estonian and English books, opened in June 1988.

As with all their projects, the Lionesses felt, because they were women, the final product of their work had to be impeccable: "I always feel my work has to be A-1 because there are still those Lions who question the woman's role," says Rosenthal. "I don't want them to have to question the work I've done."

However, all such questioning may be on its way to becoming a thing of the past. At their annual International Convention last year in Taiwan, Lions International deleted the word "male" from their constitution, erasing with it all the rules which had restrained women politically throughout the club's 70-year history.

Finally, they could become Lions if they wished and in 1987, Pirkko Shalden and Raija Rosenthal got the vote.

Both are anxious to use it.

"I want to become a Lion," says Shalden. "I don't see why I shouldn't get the same accreditations as the men when I do the same work."

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