

The Letters, Memories, and “Truths” of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia

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The letters of seven Finnish North American immigrants in Soviet Karelia, written between 1931 and 1942, and those of two correspondents writing retrospectively about their experiences between 1972 and 1997 introduce readers to unique voices from inside Stalin’s Russia. The letters speak to both collective experiences and personal negotiations of place and self. They shed light on two aspects often overlooked by other sources: youth culture and the transnational flow of everyday items. The Finnish Canadian and American letter writers also offer historians an opportunity to explore individual responses to migration, political repression, and difficult pasts. Looking at the ways in which the writers invoked memories of North America, their experiences of the Great Terror and Finnish Continuation War, and freshly recollected memories of daily life provides glimpses of their fluid sense of self. Reading the letters in light of the silences – what is not said – begins to unravel the writers’ understanding of their “truths.”

Les lettres qu’ont écrites entre 1931 et 1942 sept immigrants nord-américains d’origine finlandaise en Carélie soviétique et celles qu’on rédigées entre 1972 et 1997 deux correspondants se remémorant leurs expériences respectives proposent aux lecteurs un regard unique sur la vie en Russie stalinienne. Les lettres témoignent de vécus à la fois collectifs et personnels du lieu et du soi. Elles mettent en lumière deux aspects souvent négligés par d’autres sources : la culture des jeunes et le flux transnational d’articles de tous les jours. Les auteurs canado et américano-finnois de ces lettres offrent aussi aux historiens l’occasion d’observer les réactions individuelles à la migration, à la répression politique et à de difficiles passés. L’évocation des souvenirs de leur vie en Amérique du Nord, de leur vécu des Grandes Purges et de la guerre de Continuation menée par la Finlande ainsi que de souvenirs encore tout frais de leur quotidien donne un aperçu de la fluidité de leur sentiment d’identité. Lire les lettres à la lumière de leurs silences – de ce qu’on n’y dit pas – offre un début d’éclairage sur la compréhension qu’ont leurs auteurs de ce que sont leurs « vérités ».

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IN 1997, AT the age of 91, “Jack” looked back on 66 years of life in Karelia and wrote: “I do hope that all the ‘enlightened’ people of the world will someday know the truth of life & death in the USSR.”¹ Jack was but one of thousands of Finnish immigrants and descendants from North America who moved to Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s to build a workers’ utopia. Their history and personal “truths” were long kept in the dark, silenced by Soviet and self-censorship, closed archives, the disbelief and scorn of Finnish communities in North America, and the fear and scars of trauma that haunted the memories of the migrants. The personal letters of Finnish North Americans, written in Karelia in the 1930s and 1940s and retrospectively from the 1970s onward, serve to bring forward pieces of their individual and communal histories.

Such letters are valuable in revealing new aspects of both community social history and the personal workings of the migration experience. Providing new information about Finnish North American youth culture in Karelia, the letters offer researchers insights not readily available from other sources. Likewise, an examination of the transnational flow of ordinary practical goods gives a new view of both the Karelian standard of living and the important role of care packages in the Karelian migration. Though specifically addressing the experiences of Finnish North Americans in Karelia, the letters contribute to the study of political and economic immigrants in the Soviet Union, North American emigrations to the land of revolution, and, more broadly, the diversity of everyday lives in the turbulent building of socialism. These two features of communal experiences, as revealed through the letters, are complemented with an exploration of the ways in which migrants worked to maintain relationships with people at home and how their sense of self was tied to the practice of letter writing and letter reading. By further analysing the writers’ lists of material goods and their networks of correspondence, we can see that such seemingly mundane listing is embedded with meaning and purpose for transnational relationships.

Letters show the writers working through the “memory world”² of their past, both the pleasant and the difficult. Analysing the narrative conventions these writers employed when broaching emotionally difficult memories of life in North America sheds light on the similar methods they used to address hardships in Karelia. The narratives and silences surrounding political repression and war provide an opportunity for us to look at the strategies they employed and also at how Finnish North Americans formed a sense of self that bound them to the Karelian community, without compromising their commitment to their home communities in Canada and the United States. Their narratives and an examination of the long-held silence lend themselves to an analysis of traumatic memory among the letter writers. Though they were grounded in their Finnish North Americanness, the narrative devices and content in their letters raise opportunities for scholarly analysis of universal issues. Personal letter collections allow historians to explore

1 York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/035, 13, “Jack” letter to JL, December 25, 1997.

2 On “memory worlds,” see Karen Armstrong, *Remembering Karelia: A Family’s Story of Displacement During and After the Finnish Wars* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

the negotiation of transnational identities, the social and personal workings of memory, and the ways in which writers shape their narratives to best convey their “truths.”

Finnish Migration from North America to Karelia

As self-identified Communists or individuals raised in the spirit of the class struggle, Finnish immigrants on the political Left in Canada and the United States had long-held utopian dreams of a workers’ society.³ Faced with the realities of life in a depressed economy, increasing alienation from the North American Leftist movement, and a widening rift between socialist-minded and conservative Finnish immigrants, those on the Left found the promise of a Finnish-language community in the home of the workers’ revolution, with employment for all and free education and health care, very enticing. Between 1931 and 1934, approximately 6,500 Finns from Canada and the United States and thousands from Finland joined the movement to establish national Communist homelands within the Soviet Union.⁴ It was thought that the successful creation of a Finnish workers’ republic in Karelia would naturally transport communism across the border into Finland. Many were unprepared for the hard work and very different standard of living that welcomed them, and the image of a vast Karelian wilderness waiting to be harnessed and civilized by Finns proved to be a myth. In 1931, Karelia’s population was approximately 300,000,⁵ and Finns only accounted for some 2 to 5 per cent.⁶ However, holding on to the socialist ideal, the remnants of *korenizatsiia* (the abandoned Soviet policy of minority accommodation), and their privileged position as “foreign specialists,” Finnish Canadians and Americans committed to building the “Red Finn haven” worked to develop public infrastructure, industry, and even entertainments. A vibrant Finnish community began to take form.

By 1935 dreams had begun to unravel. Stalin removed the local leadership and original visionaries of the Karelian project, Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio, and replaced them with Russians. The Finnish language was banned in schools, in public administration, and largely in public, and the special privileges of Finnish North Americans were eliminated over time. Uncertainty and suspicion cast a dark shadow over Karelia. The perceived “foreignness” and “bourgeois nationalism” of Finns and their proximity to the unstable Finnish border culminated in widespread attacks on Red Finn émigrés⁷ and North American Finns. As throughout the Soviet

3 For an overview of North American Finnish involvement in radical and Left organizing and the factors culminating in the “Karelian Fever,” see Samira Saramo, “Road to Utopia: Finnish Communities in Canada and the United States up to ‘Karelian Fever’” in Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo, eds., *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, special double edition of *Journal of Finnish Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1-2 (November 2011), pp. 19-39.

4 Another well-known example is the Soviet Jewish homeland built in Birobidzhan in the same period. See Robert Weinberg’s history of Birobidzhan, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland. An Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

5 Nick Baron, *Soviet Karelia: Politics, Planning and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1920-1939* (New York: Routledge, 2007), Table 5.9, p. 181.

6 Markku Kangaspuro, “Finnish Project: Karelian Workers’ Commune” in Kangaspuro and Saramo, eds., *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, p. 40.

7 That is, emigrants from Finland.

Union, men and women were taken from their homes at night, accused of being “enemies of the people,” rarely to be seen again. Although hundreds managed to escape Karelia for Finland or North America, it has been estimated that some 80 per cent of ethnic Finns in Karelia had become victims of Stalinist purges by late 1938.⁸ Recent research concludes that, though Finns comprised less than 5 per cent of the population, they made up more than 40 per cent of the region’s purge victims, with North American Finns accounting for 15 per cent of that total.⁹ The families of the arrested experienced significant hardships, and many were forcefully relocated. Among those who survived the Great Terror, many were then sent to war, fighting their ancestral land, Finland. Death and fear continued to haunt Karelia as war ravished the region, destroying towns and villages and displacing the population. Among the ruins lay the community and the stories of the Finnish North Americans who had come to build paradise.

Finding Finnish North Americans in Karelia

In the era of Stalinist Terror and World War II, Finnish North Americans still in Karelia and those evacuated to Siberia had been left largely without links to their North American home communities. In the mid-1950s, between the Soviet Union’s repatriation efforts and offers of amnesty and Khrushchev’s exposure of the brutal cruelty of Stalin’s regime, Soviet citizens were encouraged to reach out to foreign relatives and connections.¹⁰ Finnish North American immigrants and their descendents remaining in the Soviet Union resumed sending letters abroad.¹¹ While the Soviet Union moved between hard-line and reform-minded leaders into the 1980s, revealing and concealing its past to outsiders and citizens alike, descendents and historians began to unearth the history of the Finnish North Americans in Karelia and the fate of the “disappeared.” The publication of scholarly research about the Finnish North American migration began in 1983 with Reino Kero’s work, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa Rakentamassa* (Building Soviet Karelia).¹² Kero’s socio-economic history relied on newspapers, official government publications pertaining to Karelia such as forestry and agricultural manuals, and any relevant materials in the extensive Finnish Organization of Canada collection at the Library and Archives of Canada (then the National

8 See, for example, Auvo Kostiaainen, “Genocide in Soviet Karelia: Stalin’s Terror and the Finns of Soviet Karelia,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1996), p. 7; Michael Gelb, “‘Karelian Fever’: The Finnish Immigrant Community during Stalin’s Purges,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6 (1993), p. 1102. Leading up to the Purges, a significant number of Finnish North Americans returned to Canada and the United States, so determining numbers of Finns in the region by the onset of the arrests and executions is difficult.

9 Irina Takala, “The Great Purges” in Kangaspuro and Saramo, eds., *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, pp. 147 and 156.

10 For the role of letters in the repatriation campaign, see Glenn Roberts and Serge Cipko, *One-Way Ticket: The Soviet Return-to-the-Homeland Campaign, 1955-1960* (Manotick, ON: Penumbra Press, 2008).

11 Lawrence and Sylvia Hokkanen with Anita Middleton, *Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin’s Russia, 1934-1941* (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 1991), p. 133.

12 Reino Kero, *Neuvosto Karjalaa Rakentamassa: Pohjois-Amerikan suomalaiset tekniikan tuojina 1930-luvun Neovosta-Karjalassa* (Helsinki: SHS, 1983). It is also worth noting travel writer Christer Boucht’s *Karjala Kutsu* (Helsinki: Kirjayhtymä, 1973), which detailed the Karelian experiences of Canadian Finns Aino and Eino Streng in a popularized account.

Archives). This research laid the foundation for understanding the North American Finns as “bringers of technology.” North American interest in the topic surfaced at the same time.¹³ Adding a personalized dimension to the field, Varpu Lindström and Börje Vähämäki collected the oral histories of some of the Finnish North Americans remaining in Karelia in 1988.¹⁴ In 1991, Lawrence and Sylvia Hokkanen published their memoir, *Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin's Russia, 1931-1941*, followed in 1992 by Mayme Sevander's autobiographical *They Took My Father: Finnish Americans in Stalin's Russia*.¹⁵ These early autobiographical works and their subsequent press coverage found an attentive audience in families still waiting for or finally receiving Soviet death certificates and “rehabilitation” notices for those arrested and killed decades earlier.

More recent works have elaborated on political, economic, industrial, and socio-cultural themes raised by the foundational studies and first-hand reminiscences, from the differing vantage points of North America, Finland, and Russia.¹⁶ Studies of Soviet Karelia have contributed to knowledge about Finnish North Americans, though they have often appeared in the background, rather than as the primary focus of research. The story of Finnish North Americans in Karelia was popularized in 2004 by the National Film Board of Canada's documentary *Letters From Karelia*, which featured the story of one of the letter writers examined here (Aate Pitkänen). Beginning in 2005, the “Missing in Karelia Research Project,” headed by Varpu Lindström and Markku Kangaspuro, brought together researchers from Canada, Finland, and the Republic of Karelia to share knowledge and comb archival sources in all three countries.¹⁷ Recently, the “Missing in Karelia” team published a collection of articles, *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*.¹⁸ Taken together, the collection provides a view of the Finnish North American migration to Karelia, from North American push factors and immigrant statistical analysis to Soviet

13 See, for example, David Ahola, “The Karelian Fever Episode of the 1930s,” *Finnish Americana*, vol. 5 (1982-1983), pp. 4-7.

14 See the resulting article, Varpu Lindström and Börje Vähämäki, “Ethnicity Twice Removed: North American Finns in Soviet Karelia,” *Finnish Americana*, vol. 9 (1992), pp. 14-20.

15 Mayme Sevander with Lauri Hertzell, *They Took My Father: Finnish Americans in Stalin's Russia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), originally published in 1992 by Pfeifer-Hamilton.

16 Among the most notable are, in chronological order: Markku Kangaspuro, *Neuvosto-Karajan taistelu itsehallinnost: Nationalismi ja suomalaiset punaiset Neuvostoliiton vallankäytössä 1920-1939* (Helsinki: SKS, 2000); Eila Lahti-Argutina, *Olimme joukko vieras vaan. Venäjänsuomalaiset vainonuhrit Neuvostoliitossa 1930-luvun alusta 1950-luvun alkuun* (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2001); Sari Autio-Sarasma, *Suunnitelmaton Neuvosto-Karjalassa 1928-1941. Paikallistason rooli Neuvostoliiton teollistamisessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 2002); the collected articles in Ronald Harpelle, Varpu Lindström, and Alexis E. Pogorelskin, eds., *Karelian Exodus: Finnish Communities in North America and Soviet Karelia During the Depression Era* (Beaverton, ON: Aspasia Books, Inc., 2004); Baron, *Soviet Karelia*; and the articles collected in Irina Takala and Ilya Solomeshch, eds., *North American Finns in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s* (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2008).

17 Much of the Project's materials, in addition to a comprehensive collection of historic and secondary-source documents and literature on the topic, are now housed in the Varpu Lindström Collection at the York University Archives. In response to the efforts of Karelian migrants' descendants to find information about their long-missing relatives, the “Missing in Karelia” project has created an internet database of the emigrants and any available biographical information (<http://www.missinginkarelia.com>). The community response to the website has been overwhelming, and many families have donated letters and other personal documents to the project.

18 Kangaspuro and Saramo, eds., *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*.

nationalities policy, industrial development, standards of living, and experiences of repression and war.

Letters from Karelia and Epistolary Studies

Building on past research approaches, an analysis of personal letters successfully contributes a new and unique vantage point to understanding the Finnish North American diaspora in Karelia. This article examines the letters of nine Finnish North Americans who migrated to Karelia.¹⁹ The 78 letters that they wrote collectively represent the voices of men and women, from youth to old age.²⁰ The dates they were written span the 1930s and 1940s through the Brezhnev era and to the 1990s. Between approximately 1937 and 1941, Justiina Heino and her daughter Alice wrote ten letters that have survived, along with one written by their family friend Tauno Salo to son Carl Heino. Justiina and Frank Heino immigrated to Karelia from Menasha, Minnesota, in October 1930, with seven of their ten children. Fourteen letters written by Aate Pitkänen to his parents, sister Taimi and brother-in-law Jim, and friends between March 29, 1933 and June 12, 1942 have survived. They are accompanied by one very emotionally charged letter written by Aino Pitkänen, Aate's aunt, dated July 25, 1938. Aate and Aino Pitkänen immigrated to the Karelian capital, Petrozavodsk, from Kivikoski, just outside present-day Thunder Bay, Ontario. Fourteen letters exist from the sixth correspondent, Lisi Hirvonen, all written to her sister in Saskatchewan between December 1934 and July 1939. Michigan-born Reino Mäkelä's six letters to "Benny" begin with one written when Mäkelä was sixteen in New York in February 1931, while awaiting travel to Karelia. The letters cover Mäkelä's early months in Karelia, up to April, 1932.²¹

These 1930s narratives are rounded out by retrospective letter collections. While all letters in this analysis are authorized for open use, the real names and precise home communities of the two retrospective letter writers have not been used. They are identified here as "Jack" and "Harold." The privacy of the writers and their families has been maintained due to the personal nature of the letters and analysis, as well as continuing contention about the topic among some Finnish communities in Canada and the United States. The 28 letters and several Christmas cards from Jack span the period from February 20, 1972 to June 23, 1997 and were all written to his niece. Jack moved to Karelia in 1931 from rural Ontario, near Thunder Bay. The letters slip between talk of daily life in a transforming USSR to memories of 1930s Karelia, war, and boyhood memories from the 1910s and 1920s. Finally, four letters from Harold, who also emigrated from Northwestern

19 These letters represent a small introductory sample of over 220 letters by 26 different letter writers compiled for my in-progress doctoral dissertation, "Life Moving Forward: Soviet Karelia in Finnish North American Letters and Memoirs" (working title), supervised by Roberto Perin, Jane Couchman, Marcel Martel, and formerly Varpu Lindström (York University, Graduate Program in History).

20 All of the letters used here are from the Missing in Karelia Research Project collection, except those written by Reino Mäkelä, whose papers (IHRC1431) are held at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota.

21 Mäkelä's collection also contains many letters written from the 1950s to 1970s, but these have not been included in this article's analysis.

Ontario, offer yet another fascinating view of life in Karelia. These letters were written after Harold and his wife had participated in oral history interviews in 1988.

The letters used in this study have not been polished, and only minor, clearly indicated edits have been made where necessary for comprehension. Many of the letters are in the Finnish language. The provided excerpts have been carefully translated to maintain the structure, form, and intention of the writer. Following the anthropological adage that “language is culture,” uses of metaphor have been translated to best express the meaning and imagery of the Finnish, rather than the sometimes differing English equivalents. The voices of the letter writers and their self-shaped narratives guide us through their own experiences and projections of self. This approach takes seriously David Gerber’s critique of the tendency of published collections to edit immigrant letters. As he explains: “The more we consider the language, form, and content ... as problems we must correct, rather than an opportunity to extend and deepen our understanding, the further we may drift from being able to have the letter instruct us on the mental worlds, experiences, and purposes of the letter-writers.”²²

Letters are an especially fruitful source for historians of migration, who are interested in the workings of kinship across distances.²³ Letters link physically separated family and friends through the shared touch of the paper, through the visible offerings of each other’s handwriting, and mentally and emotionally through salutations, shared news, and reminiscences, making their impact multi-sensory. Letters serve as a bridge in the process of migration, addressing the points of origin and arrival and also the space in between. The concept of transnationalism offers ways to see how people existed in more than one place at a time. Personal correspondence provides historians with first-hand accounts of the ways in which immigrants’ thoughts and identity flowed between the community left behind and their solidifying place in their adopted home. Letters such as those written by North Americans in Karelia demonstrate the transnational flow of goods, money, and ideas and reveal how many migrants continued to maintain a material presence in the home place, through, for example, the ownership of property. Letters also help determine how migrants negotiated identities that co-existed in the home community, in the adopted community, and in the middle ground of migration. Memories conveyed through personal letters played a significant role in this identity work. The Karelia letters show memories working on three levels: memories of the home community in Canada or the United States, memories (though fresh recollections) of daily events in Karelia deemed appropriate to write about, and, in the retrospective letters, memories of the Karelian past, during the

22 David A. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp. 54-55.

23 For just a few recent examples, see the collected articles in Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (Ottawa: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); and in Yves Frenette, Marcel Martel, and John Willis, eds., *Envoyer et recevoir: Lettres et correspondances dans le diasporas francophones* (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2006). A notable older example is David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

Great Terror and World War II. Through letter writing and the negotiation of memory, individuals could formulate the “truth” of their experiences and sense of self.

This paper joins the work of others, like David Gerber and, more recently, Sonia Cancian, that challenges historians to look more critically at personal letters as a source type.²⁴ An interdisciplinary exploration of narrative structures and conventions, modes of self-representation and self-understanding, and the active social and personal constructions of memory and nostalgia adds fruitful tools of research, analysis, and thought to historical practice, enriching our understanding of the past.

Letters, as a source type, raise many challenges for the historian. Some of the obvious difficulties come from missing and torn pages, unpunctuated, ungrammatical, and unconventional writing styles, potentially limited biographical information, and the frequent availability of only one side of the correspondence (as is the case with these letters). Furthermore, personal letters often flaunt the “flaws” of memory and detail. Searching for the fine line between events as they “actually” happened and how an individual may interpret and then present them can be frustrating. As Kerby A. Miller and his colleagues have pointed out, letters are “inevitably colored by [the writer’s] own expectations, emotions, and prejudices. In the process they are also creating images and constructing ‘selves’ for the edification of their correspondents or their posterity.”²⁵ Without knowing much about the addressee of the letter or, importantly, how the recipient was perceived by the letter writer, the researcher is left with many ways of interpreting each line. As David Fitzpatrick states: “One is uncomfortably aware that a further discovery might invalidate a vital interpretation, and that the laborious accumulation of personal background may raise more questions than it resolves.”²⁶ However, by combining a close reading of the letters with careful study of the broader contexts in which they were written and to which they refer, the historian can confidently piece together new and exciting ways of seeing everyday life, community, and human subjectivity. The Karelian letters offer ample opportunities to explore relationships at work across distances, but they also illuminate little-known details about the Finnish North American community there, including its vibrant youth culture.

Rare Glimpses of Karelian Youth Culture

Alongside the serious business of building communism through large-scale work projects and the activism of the Soviet labour unions, Finnish North American youth in Karelia were coming of age. The personal letters of youth offer glimpses of socialization and courtship difficult to discern in newspaper accounts, government documents, or organizational records. The Finnish Canadian and American youth

24 Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*; Sonia Cancian, *Families, Lovers, and Their Letters: Italian Postwar Migration to Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

25 Kerby A. Miller, Arnold Schrier, Bruce D. Boling, and David Noel Doyle, eds., *Irish Immigrants in the Land of Canaan: Letters and Memoirs from Colonial and Revolutionary America, 1675-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 9.

26 Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, p. 27.

also represent a fascinating subsection of radicalism; raised in the revolutionary spirit by their parents, these young people took their utopian idealism and their particular understandings of migration and the Soviet project to Karelia. Parents, committed to improving workers’ lives, introduced their children to the community congregated around the Finnish socialist halls, where they attended lectures and events and special children’s programming.²⁷ From the 1920s on, many Finnish school-aged children were committed members of the Communist Young Pioneers, and teenagers were often involved with the Young Communist League.²⁸ Little attention has been paid to the impact of North American youth on the cultural and social development of “Red Finn Karelia,” yet 85 per cent of Canadians and 58 per cent of Americans came to Karelia before their thirtieth birthday.²⁹ Among the Canadian emigrants, 43 per cent were between the ages of 13 and 30. The letters of Aate Pitkänen, Alice Heino, Tauno Salo, and Reino Mäkelä suggest that building a socialist utopia could also mean re-scripting cultural norms of sociability, courtship, and sexuality. Using the letters to look at youth culture, opportunities for entertainment and sociability, and understandings of dating and sexuality brings to light an aspect of everyday life largely overlooked by official sources and memoirs.

Youth used both formal and informal avenues to shape their community and sense of self and place in Karelia. The Soviet regime’s focus on the officially sanctioned cultural upbringing, or *vospitanie*, of young people has been well documented.³⁰ Finnish North American youth came into close contact with organizations like the Young Pioneers and Komsomol, as well as Soviet schooling that intended to shape Soviet citizens and educate youth in communist ideology and culture. Descriptions of formal involvement in Party-sponsored organizations give a taste of everyday life, but also reveal the socially constructed ideals of behaviour that naturally flowed into the ways the young letter writers constructed their narratives. Alice Heino proudly described the *tehtävät* (tasks) assigned to her by the Young Pioneer group.³¹ Many youths took part in musical groups like choirs and bands, organized through their schools, employers, unions, and youth groups. Heino told her brother that she had joined many groups, or *piirit*, where

27 Samira Saramo, “‘The Golden Fund of Karelia’: Childhood in Finnish North American Karelia” (unpublished paper, 2011). Rhonda Hinthorpe has characterized similar upbringing among Ukrainian Leftist children. See her “Raised in the Spirit of the Class Struggle: Children, Youth, and the Interwar Ukrainian Left in Canada,” *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 60 (Fall 2007), pp. 43-76.

28 For a thorough (though adult-centred) study of Communist children’s and youths’ programming in the United States, see Paul C. Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

29 Based on the statistical analysis of 4,000 Finnish North American immigrants. See Evgeny Efremin, “Recruitment in North America: An Analysis of Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1931-1934” in Kangaspuuro and Saramo, eds., *Victims and Survivors of Karelia*, p. 115.

30 See, for example, Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001); Allen Kassof, *The Soviet Youth Program: Regimentation and Rebellion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); E. Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002).

31 York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/034, 9, Alice Heino letter to brother, March 18, [1938].

she learned songs and poems that they frequently performed for community evenings of entertainment (*iltamat*).³² Aate Pitkänen wrote of taking part in group recitals at the radio station as a part of his commitment to his workplace Youth League.³³ Descriptions of formal programming can also be read as assurances – whether conscious or subconscious – that the Soviet Union was flourishing and that those who had emigrated were doing well.

Others shared less glowing accounts. Seventeen-year-old Reino Mäkelä explained to a friend: “Out here we have to join mostly all kinds of clubs and have to go out and practice our military on free days. You have to join the Y.C.L. and a lot of other clubs in the same line.”³⁴ Mäkelä’s three uses of “have to” suggest how strongly “volunteering” was encouraged and serve as a reminder of teenagers’ dislike of being told what to do. While these organizations certainly worked to train future Communist Party members, the letters hint more at the opportunities for socialization that accompanied educational activities. Whether out of personal interest or a sense of obligation, continuing involvement with the Pioneers or Youth League and participation in activities similar to those taking place in North American Finnish Communist halls undoubtedly eased young people’s transition into Karelian life and provided space for social interaction with other Finnish North American youth.

Athletics, both formally organized and recreational, were an important aspect of youth culture in Karelia. Wrestling, soccer, *pesäpallo* (a Finnish game similar to baseball), and track and field were popular with both participants and observers.³⁵ During the long winter, Aate Pitkänen played on a hockey team and enjoyed keeping track of the local basketball teams.³⁶ Skating and cross-country and downhill skiing were favourite popular activities across the Soviet Union and, likewise, for Karelians of all ethnicities.³⁷ There were skating rinks in most towns across Karelia.³⁸ For keen athletes like Aate Pitkänen, hobbies could become a ticket for travel, Soviet praise, and safety from violent repression. Pitkänen was chosen for the Soviet Union’s ski team and in late 1938 had been moved out of Karelia to head a sports department, some 2,000 kilometres southeast of Petrozavodsk.³⁹ It is well known that athletics were an important tool for moulding Soviet citizens. Moving away from an analysis of official policy and practice in favour of a look at the everyday role of sports, as highlighted in personal letters, demonstrates how grassroots community formed around physical culture.

32 *Ibid.*

33 York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/034, 6, Aate Pitkänen letter to parents, November 9, 1933.

34 University of Minnesota, Immigration History Research Center, Reino Mäkelä Papers, Finnish American Collection (IHRC 1431), Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, April 5, 1932.

35 Pitkänen letters to “Lakeridge Residents,” April 8, 1933, and to parents, March 20, 1937 and March 12, 1939.

36 Pitkänen letter to Davis, April 6, 1933.

37 Skates and skis were among the most widely owned goods in 1930s Soviet Union. See Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Berg, 2003), p. 60.

38 A. Heino letter, March 18, 1938; Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, date unknown, circa 1932.

39 Pitkänen letters to parents, January 1, 1939.

In her memoir *My Life in Stalinist Russia*, American Mary Leder recalled her time with Moscow youth: “In spite of all the politics, young people did what young people do all over the world – meet, mingle, make friends, start romances, have fun.”⁴⁰ While Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia were often struggling with inadequate housing and food and increasing political tension, the letter collections demonstrate that youth found ways to make the best of life. Explaining that he was sure to get along well in Petrozavodsk and commenting on young people who had been in Karelia longer than he had, Reino Mäkelä wrote that they “seem to have a lot of fun here. They know the place and got places to go.”⁴¹ Though busy with the demands of school or work and formal youth groups, Finnish North American youth found time for socializing and entertainment. When the school or work week was finished, young people would rush to the *kulttuuritalo* (cultural hall) to take part in whatever event was scheduled.⁴² Mäkelä was pleased with the local music scene and reported: “The bands out here are good to listen to because these bozos can play and sure got good places to play.”⁴³ Finnish youth had frequent access to movies, or *kinos*, in Karelia, and their letters speak to the impact of Soviet film propaganda. Alice Heino, at 15 years old, was impressed by the movies she had watched. She wrote eagerly to her brother about one that had an especially strong impact on her: a film about a poet who defied the Tsar by aligning with the Bolshevik cause.⁴⁴ Aate Pitkänen, in his early twenties and perhaps less impressionable, however, told his sister and brother-in-law that the available films “aren’t so hot,” preferring the rare occasions when foreign films were screened.⁴⁵ However, Finnish Karelian theatre, according to Pitkänen, could always be counted on, for “they put on some good plays.”⁴⁶ Billiards was also readily available. Tauno Salo wrote about how pool rooms were very much “in style” in 1935.⁴⁷ Youths could spend their time shooting pool for six rubles per hour.⁴⁸

The billiard halls, Saturday night dances, and other socials provided Karelia’s Finnish youth with opportunities for “evenings out” to “raise hell.”⁴⁹ Readily available vodka could amplify an evening, but, as Reino Mäkelä found out, getting “stewed to the gills” could get you kicked out of a dance.⁵⁰ Though the value of dancing – especially Western dances – was contested in the revolutionary period, by the Second Five Year Plan, dancing had come to be seen as “almost a duty” for good Soviet youth.⁵¹ Alice Heino wrote about how she had learned to dance

40 Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back*, ed. Laurie Bernstein (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 117.

41 Mäkelä letter to Benny, April 5, 1932.

42 For example, A. Heino letter, March 18, 1938.

43 Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, April 5, 1932.

44 A. Heino letter, March 18, [1938].

45 Pitkänen letter to Davis, November 21, 1934.

46 *Ibid.*

47 York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/034, 14, Tauno Salo letter to C. Heino, November 23, 1935.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Pitkänen letter to parents, November 9, 1933; Salo letter to C. Heino, November 23, 1935.

50 Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, January 24, 1932.

51 David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, NY:

so well in Karelia that she could teach anyone, adding that many boys had asked her to dance but she had yet to promise anyone a “lesson.”⁵² Reino Mäkelä also reported having learned to dance.⁵³ For older teenagers and young adults, Karelia provided ample opportunities to date. Lisi Hirvonen told her sister about a young man who had found a Karelian girlfriend very quickly, commenting, “well young men really do not waste time do they.”⁵⁴ Aate Pitkänen told friends in Lakeridge, Ontario, that dating was “like a disease” and that bachelors “change the old [dates] to new ones just as often as gypsies change horses.”⁵⁵ Exemplifying Finnish North American young men’s fascination with local Karelian and Russian women, Reino Mäkelä wrote about “blondes” and how with “Russian girls then you sure have fun with them.”⁵⁶ In March 1933, Aate told his sister: “There have been quite a few of these flares, summery, autumn, wintery, and springy and overnight flares. I haven’t had a steady one for a long time, since last year....”⁵⁷ In 1937 Pitkänen started to date Maikki and told his sister that people were very happy for them, except for some bachelors who had their eye on the “sweetest and cutest girl on this side of the north pole.”⁵⁸ The relationship with Maikki proved short-lived, and Aate ended up marrying Lilia. When couples like Aate and Lilia did settle into serious relationships, parenthood quickly followed. Tauno Salo referred to the speed at which couples had babies as a “socialist competition.”⁵⁹

The few mentions of dating and sexuality raised in the letters beg for further historical examination. Glimpses of these fascinating yet quite ordinary parts of youths’ lives are rare in other sources. Neither memoirs nor retrospective letters say much about the entertainments of youth. For example, in her vivid and endearing recollections of youth in the Soviet Union, Mary Leder does not elaborate on the everyday scope of, in her case, Komsomol activities, the details of a night out with friends, or the fresh emotions of youthful relationships.⁶⁰ Letters written in the 1930s, on the other hand, successfully capture the energy of the youths’ world because the writers were speaking from the moment and had not yet judged, consciously or subconsciously, whether those experiences were valuable to shaping the collective narrative or suited their developed sense of self, as happens in most retrospective accounts. The presence of such significant numbers of youths among the tight-knit North American immigrant community in Karelia led to new ways of conceptualizing and asserting sociability, courtship, and sexuality.

Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 32-33 and 129; Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne*, p. 39.

52 A. Heino letter to Martha, date unknown [likely very early 1938].

53 Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, January 24, 1932.

54 York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/042, 12, Lisi Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, April 20, 1933.

55 Pitkänen letter to “Lakeridge Residents,” June 20, 1933.

56 Reino Mäkelä letter to Benny, January 24, 1932.

57 Pitkänen letter to Davis, March 29, 1933.

58 Pitkänen letter to Davis, May 2, 1937.

59 Salo letter to C. Heino, November 23, 1935.

60 See Leder’s *My Life in Stalinist Russia*. Leder does provide a very brief discussion of youths’ approaches to birth control, in the context of the 1936 ban on abortion (p. 114).

North American Material Goods and Their Meaning

As is the case for these easily forgotten details of youth culture, personal letters prove the best source to illustrate the predominant role of ordinary goods in the migrants' lives. Historians have described the large items, like automobiles and tractors, that Finnish North Americans donated through the Soviet Karelian Technical Aid and the Machine Fund and how they contributed to Karelian development.⁶¹ Yet the smaller artefacts of everyday life mentioned in personal letters provide an excellent view of the material circumstances facing immigrants and suggest which items were most missed and most needed. The letters highlight the continuous process of requesting goods and acknowledging their arrival. In addition to analysing what the listed and discussed goods represented in real terms of need and the standard of living, delving into the narratives surrounding the objects offers insights into the emotions and relationships tied to migration.

As people made their way from North America to Karelia, those with family and friends already there sent along goods and messages for them. It could be months before such gifts and necessities arrived at their final destination, given both the travel time and the different regions to which Karelia workers were sent to work. The Karelian letters exemplify the scarcity of ordinary items like buttons and nail scissors caused by the focus on the production of luxury goods over all other consumer products in the 1930s Soviet Union.⁶² Items like darning needles, razors, aspirin, iodine, and alarm clocks were much appreciated by their recipients.⁶³ Letter writers asked for and received clothing including sweaters, underwear, socks, woollen long underwear, and especially shoes.⁶⁴ Thank-yous for paper, envelopes, and pictures were usually accompanied by requests for more letters.⁶⁵ The range of practical household goods requested and received, like clothing and needles, for example, offers a sense of everyday material needs not met in the hinterlands of Karelia. With special rations, access to the *Insnab* store, higher wages, and North American clothes and goods, Finnish Canadians and Americans in Karelia, like “foreign specialists” throughout the Soviet Union, were significantly better off than the region's locals. However, perhaps due to their community's insular nature or perhaps because comparisons may have roused censors' suspicions, available Finnish North American letters did not acknowledge their privileged position. Rather, the writers acknowledged a change in their own standard of living; North American products were seen by the letter writers as crucial contributions to their Karelian lives.

Often relatives and friends sent treats like cookies, candies, chewing gum, and especially coffee, which brought a taste of home and likely held some nostalgic

61 See, for example, Alexis E. Pogorelskin, “Communism and the Co-ops: Recruiting and Financing the Finnish-American Migration to Karelia” in Harpelle *et al.*, eds., *Karelian Exodus*, p. 38.

62 Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne*, pp. 68-69.

63 Pitkänen letters to “Lakeridge Residents,” June 20, 1933; and to parents, November 9, 1933, and January 1, 1939.

64 Pitkänen letters to parents, November 9, 1933, and January 1, 1939; J. and A. Heino letter to Martha, date unknown [likely very early 1938] and letter to Waino, January 25, 1933.

65 Pitkänen letter to Davis, March 29, 1933; J. Heino letter to Wiljam, June 16, 1941.

value for the recipient.⁶⁶ North American calendars had special significance for those in Karelia.⁶⁷ Calendars were hard to come by in Karelia and did not have pictures. Jack remembered making calendars with scrounged pencil stubs and cardboard.⁶⁸ The familiar scenery on calendars sent from abroad gave a glimpse of home, and the North American calendar lay-out kept the migrants connected to the temporal reality of their far-away friends and family.⁶⁹ After receiving a calendar, Aate Pitkänen told his parents: “That one calendar was so fine quality that people line up here so they can come and admire it.”⁷⁰ While obviously exaggerating to express his gratitude, Pitkänen nonetheless appreciated the calendar. Friends and family also sent books and Finnish North American Leftist papers like *Punikki*, *Vappu*, and *Työmies* to keep Finns in Karelia connected to their communities in Canada and the United States.⁷¹ Beyond their practical material use, letters and care packages also maintained ties with home communities, as the interest in the news of Finnish socialists in North America shows. Digging more deeply into the letter content demonstrates how the writers shaped their narratives to assert their place and past on ordinary items.

Lists and Maintaining Transnational Relationships

Letter writers were always careful to list the items received. Such lists acknowledged that goods had made it to the recipient and demonstrated good manners. However, this practice arguably held additional significance. The items symbolized a sense of self firmly straddling the home community left behind and the adopted community developing in Karelia. Objects sent between correspondents became, in Sonia Cancian’s words, “sites of memory.”⁷² Alice Heino cherished her phonograph in Karelia because it was a gift from her brother – a fact she mentioned in two letters.⁷³ In 1939, Aate Pitkänen listed all of the goods he had received over his years in Karelia, along with who had given them to him and whether he still had them.⁷⁴ For Aate, socks were not just socks, but “socks that [the] Hulkkos gave me” and paper “Antti Kari’s paper.”⁷⁵ By 1939 most ethnic Finns in Karelia had suffered severe repression; across the Soviet Union, the preceding years had been ones of dislocation and loss. Many had been removed from the region and sent to the Far North. Others had lost everything, selling prized possessions one by one. Yet Pitkänen still had many of the gifts that had been sent to him. As mentioned earlier, Pitkänen’s athleticism made him a

66 Pitkänen letters to Davis, March 29, 1933; to “Lakeridge Residents,” June 20, 1933; and to parents, November 9, 1933.

67 Pitkänen letters to “Lakeridge Residents,” April 8, 1933, and to parents, March 20, 1937; “Jack” letter to JL, November 29, 1983.

68 “Jack” letter to JL, April 8, 1978.

69 For more about the social significance of time and calendars, see Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

70 Pitkänen letter to parents, March 20, 1937.

71 Pitkänen letters to “Lakeridge Residents,” June 20 and April 8, 1933.

72 Cancian, *Families, Lovers and their Letters*, p. 48.

73 A. Heino letter to brother, March 18, [1938] and letter to Maritta, date unknown [likely very early 1938].

74 Pitkänen letter to parents, January 1, 1939.

75 *Ibid.*

valuable Soviet citizen with some of the advantages that accompanied his status in the Soviet hierarchy. Listing the items may reveal a covert attempt to convey to his family that he was safe. However, Pitkänen also personalized the items he had managed to keep. Perhaps the emotion attached to the possessions listed in his letter of January 1, 1939, reflects his recognition of the emotional and social distance that had grown between himself and the community he had left behind. Analysing letter writers’ lists of material goods contributes to an understanding of the material circumstances facing the migrants and the ways the transnational flow of small, everyday items aided daily life. The personalization of the lists allows for a deeper exploration of emotion and sense of self and place. As with the listing of goods, listings of correspondents likewise inform us about the maintenance of transnational relationships.

Relationships and social roles were solidified through the letter writers’ lists. Unfortunately, many historians have omitted listings and greetings from their edited letter collections, “for the sake of readability.”⁷⁶ However, historians have much to gain by paying attention to these seemingly mundane references. In addition to the common listing of goods requested and received, letter writers provided thorough lists of all the people with whom they had been communicating, as exemplified by Alice Heino’s March 18, 1938 letter. Lisi Hirvonen, who seemingly was not too interested in writing to a wide circle of friends at first began to include substantial sections that asked about familiar people as the years went on.⁷⁷ Such listings and questions can be seen as attempts to stay actively connected to the fluid social dynamics of the home community. With reports from North America, the emigrant in Karelia “could still mentally participate in the daily life and special events of [their] family thousands of kilometres away.”⁷⁸ Names and information flowed in both directions across the Atlantic; those in Karelia asked about friends and family, but also reported on all the others from their hometowns living in Karelia, building a bridge for continuing social relationships. In David Fitzpatrick’s words, “The recitation of familiar names, to the impatient historian a mere catalogue, evoked an irrecoverable aura of recognition for the intimate reader.”⁷⁹ One can imagine the visions of places and people evoked in the minds of letter writers as they reconstructed their social worlds through their lists. Thus Finnish North Americans in Karelia attached emotion to received objects and created elaborate lists of who had spoken to whom, revealing their longing to maintain links with their home communities to achieve a sense of “personal continuity.”⁸⁰

76 For example, Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds., *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 46-47; Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in 19th-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 9.

77 See, for example, Lisi Hirvonen letters to Anna Mattson, August 6, 1934, and January 30, 1935.

78 Yves Frenette and Gabriele Scardellato, “The Immigrant Experience and the Creation of a Transatlantic Epistolary Space: A Case Study” in John Willis, ed., *More Than Words: Readings in Transport, Communication and the History of Postal Communication* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2007), p. 196.

79 Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation*, p. 550.

80 David Gerber uses the idea of “personal continuity” as a basis for his analysis of immigrant letters (*Authors of Their Lives*, p. 4).

Even the best efforts to stay connected were strained by distance, time, and the tragedies of the late 1930s. Young Alice Heino claimed to be happy and busy in the early days of settlement in Karelia, yet schemed about returning to the United States for a visit.⁸¹ Failure to hear from loved ones could lead to a severe sense of loneliness and depression. After losing two young sons in Karelia and not knowing what had happened to her husband after his arrest, Justiina Heino expressed in her letters a desperate plea for ties to her family and old community. Justiina wrote that she had been wondering about all kinds of old friends and looking at the few photographs she had, but confessed she knew nothing of their lives, having been without correspondence for so long.⁸² Photographs and received letters, looked at over and over again, made poor substitutes for missed people, but provided a tangible link. During the dark years of repression and war, it was difficult to stay optimistic about past decisions to move to Karelia. Like Justiina Heino's letters, Lisi Hirvonen's letters from 1939 show a woman yearning for home and family and struggling with regret for having left Canada.⁸³ With uncertainty clouding daily life, nostalgic memories of friends, family, and the places left behind solidified the desire to maintain the security of belonging in the home community.

The extraordinary life of Aate Pitkänen took a dramatic twist during the Finnish Continuation War. Through research of official Soviet documents, journalist Anatoli Gordijenko discovered that Aate Pitkänen had become a Soviet spy, leading intelligence gathering missions into Finnish territory in 1941 and 1942.⁸⁴ Aate was captured and imprisoned by the Finns on May 5, 1942. In June 1942, just days before his execution by the Finns for wartime espionage, Pitkänen set his final thoughts and wishes on paper. He expressed remorse for not having been there for his parents, stating: "I am sorry that I have not been able to help you at all in your old age, but as you know yourselves, it has not been possible."⁸⁵ Pitkänen continued: "You did right, Father, when you returned to Canada in time, and didn't have to suffer these wars and become separated from home and family like me."⁸⁶ In his final letter, from June 12, 1942, Aate confessed: "It was always my wish to see you again one day, and particularly now that I have started a family of my own."⁸⁷ Though the reality of impending death would certainly inspire retrospection, Aate's writing echoes the sentiments expressed in Justiina Heino's and Lisi Hirvonen's letters. Even many years after they had separated from their past and established new lives, thoughts of family and the familiar continued to hold a special place. Through lists and correspondence, Finnish North Americans in Karelia maintained transnational relationships that made the distance separating people and communities more bearable. Letters also served as ways to come to terms with difficult memories of the life left behind.

81 A. Heino letter to [Wiljam], date unknown, circa 1938, and letter to Maritta, date unknown [likely very early 1938].

82 J. Heino letter to Wiljam, June 16, 1941.

83 Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, July 19, 1939.

84 Anatoli Gordijenko, "Aate Pitkäsen Elämä ja Kuolema," in *Carelia*, vol. (2006), pp. 125-127.

85 Pitkänen letter to parents, June 10, 1942.

86 Aate's father, Antti Pitkänen, had worked in Karelia from September 1934 to early 1937.

87 Pitkänen letter to parents, June 12, 1942.

Narrative Conventions and Difficult Memories

Not all memories of family life in North America were rosy. Examining letters that addressed thorny memories of North American life shed light on the narrative conventions also used to write about hardships in Karelia years later. Writing about the homestead of his youth, 41 years after departing rural Northwestern Ontario, Jack stated: “I say house, because it never was a home to me. I have almost no pleasant recollections of my youth there.”⁸⁸ Jack had received a photograph of his old house, by then abandoned, which transported his emotions to the site of his childhood and compelled a physical “creeping shiver.”⁸⁹ In Jack’s memory, the house was “hollow” and “had no spirit no soul which makes a home a home.” Jack stopped himself from elaborating on his “‘bittersweet’ youth,”⁹⁰ saying he had “[m]any, many more facts of which it was not nice to write about.”⁹¹ The statement reveals how Jack structured his narrative to suit what he believed his audience would and would not like to read in a letter. However, the statement also demonstrates what Jack could not bring himself to write about. Although Jack clearly demarcated his youth at the family farm as something less than “pleasant,” his letters also contained the nostalgic reminiscences of other letter writers like Aate Pitkänen and Alice Heino. His happy recollections and feelings were not of home, but about nature.

Over the 25 years of correspondence available, Jack regularly relived memories centred on the natural surroundings of his old farm. For Jack, the fact that his old house never had flowers planted by the porch symbolized its lack of “beautiful thought, deed, or word.”⁹² Nature served as the line between the hardships of routine life and a severe father-son relationship and his dreams of a brighter future. Jack remembered: “The biggest joy and peace I felt when I rambled in the bush listening to the sounds of nature.”⁹³ His letters repeatedly return to the same wording and imagery to emphasize the serenity he found in the forest; time spent there represented Jack’s “other life.”⁹⁴ The forest provided young Jack with an escape from the hardships of his ordinary life. By creating a distinction between his “real,” troubled life and his “other life,” Jack utilized the same narrative technique of creating multiple selves to explain existence between hardship and coping that he and other Finnish North Americans in Karelia used to make sense of what they experienced during the purges and war.

Flora and fauna dominated the memory imagery Jack used in his letters. Jack thought back on the tamarack trees that grew on the edges of the property, wondering if they were still growing there.⁹⁵ Likewise, Jack remembered a rare white pine that stood on the property and hoped that his relatives would plant a

88 “Jack” letter to JL, December 12, 1972.

89 *Ibid.*

90 “Jack” letter to JL, December 10, 1995.

91 “Jack” letter to JL, December 12, 1972.

92 *Ibid.*

93 “Jack” letter to JL, December 28, 1993.

94 See, for example, letters from “Jack” to JL from December 28, 1993 and January [6?] and December 10, 1995.

95 “Jack” letter to JL, February 20, 1972.

stand of white pines on the site of the old chicken coop.⁹⁶ “Jack’s Grove,” as he imagined it would be called, acted as an obvious symbol of the Canadian roots he cherished and strived to maintain through letter writing and physically through the planting of self-commemorative trees. The trees would mark the space where Jack’s memories of youth resided. Decades after finding refuge in the forest, he continued to use nature imagery to protect him from confronting the memories of a difficult youth. Nature-inspired poetry, like verses about blue jays recited some 60 years later, served as another form of escape for Jack from childhood to old age. In March 1978, Jack recalled:

[T]here wasn’t one animal, bird, or flower which I knew that I didn’t write a rhyme or poem.... These I wrote up to the age of about 16 yrs. The year when I was 13 yrs old and father had left me out of school to make pulpwood for him was the time I wrote the most.... All these writings I kept a top secret, for they were the only personal belongings I had....⁹⁷

Understanding the significance of poetry and the act of writing for Jack in his youth reveals the therapeutic value he found in letter writing in his later years, as he worked through memories of childhood, early life in Karelia, the purges and war, and the realities of aging and ongoing poverty. Jack’s letters reveal the ways in which such narratives could be used to protect the writer from difficult emotions and memories. Letters that address the painful feelings surrounding the topics of separation, repression, and war similarly show how the writers shaped their narratives to shield themselves from persecution and emotional distress.

Confronting Repression and War through Letter Writing

Reading the Karelia letters for mentions of repression and wartime is an emotionally stirring yet fruitful task. These narratives further develop our understanding of how Finnish North Americans viewed their identity and place in Soviet Karelia and bring to light the strategies they employed to prevent further disruption to their personal life narratives. The most significant letter dealing with the purges was written by Aino Pitkänen, Aate’s aunt.⁹⁸ She was able to describe vividly what was happening in Karelia in 1938 because she had somehow escaped from the USSR a few months earlier and was writing from Finland. The content is worth quoting at length:

Russia is undergoing a big cleansing. The whole winter we were afraid whose turn it is tonight. Soldiers came with bayonets to get people and after that nothing more was heard from them. From the whole river they took Finns so thoroughly that only four men were left.... You cannot believe what life was like last winter in the Soviet Union. People have [not] done anything bad, only hard work, and this is the way they are treated, some are imprisoned, others sent away.... All last winter we did not

96 “Jack” letter to JL, January [6?], 1995.

97 “Jack” letter to JL, March 8, 1978.

98 Aino Pitkänen letter to A. and K. Pitkänen, July 25, 1938.

dare sleep. All the time we kept an eye on the door wondering when the soldiers are coming as they always came during the night....⁹⁹

The letter recounted the names of people known to have been taken and continued to describe what happened. The freedom in writing afforded to Aino was not available to those in Karelia at the same time.

It was widely known in the Soviet Union that letters were intercepted and that foreign contacts were viewed with suspicion. Therefore, to evade censors, instead of writing directly, letter writers slipped mentions of the purges amid typical content.¹⁰⁰ Even without the advantage of extensive biographical information or the two sides of a correspondence, it is still possible to identify some of the ways in which Finnish North Americans addressed politically sensitive topics. For example, after Frank Heino had been arrested, Alice simply asked her brother, “Have you gotten a letter from Pop?” and otherwise left him unmentioned in the letter.¹⁰¹ However, with limited knowledge of what was happening inside the Soviet Union, many North American recipients of letters, like Mary Leder’s parents, did not understand the “hints.”¹⁰² Sometimes frustration and distress led writers to throw subtlety out the window. In a letter written close to the same time as Alice wrote to her brother in the example above, Justiina Heino overtly stated: “I got [a letter] from Martta now and she didn’t know that father’s been arrested even though I wrote her in as political way as I knew how but I still saw from the letter that she hadn’t received my letter.”¹⁰³ Perhaps exemplifying glitches in the Soviet mail interception system, Justiina’s letter that explicitly addressed arrest, the act of masking writing, and state censorship reached its destination.

Others remained silent about what was happening around them, but have left clues for the knowing reader. No letters written by Lisi Hirvonen in 1937 have been found. There is no way to know whether she wrote during that missing year, but, in February 1938, Hirvonen wrote that she had received her sister’s letter “ages ago.” According to Hirvonen, it had been left unanswered “because there isn’t any news really.”¹⁰⁴ Given Aino Pitkänen’s description of the same awful winter in Karelia, one can deduce that Lisi had chosen silence. David Gerber has argued that it is the historian’s task to “explain how it is that intentional, strategic silence, where we might be fortunate enough to find traces of it, may have been integrated into the negotiations that comprise epistolarity.”¹⁰⁵ In Hirvonen’s case, worries about censorship and the consequences of writing outright added

99 *Ibid.*

100 For other examples of these discrete letter writing practices, see Ann Goldberg, “Reading and Writing Across the Borders of Dictatorship: Self-Censorship and Emigrant Experience in Nazi and Stalinist Europe” in Elliott *et al.*, eds., *Letters Across Borders*; Anu Lahtinen, “There’s No Friend like a Sister: Sisterly Relations and the Rhetoric of Sisterhood in the Correspondence of the Aristocratic Stenbock Sisters” in Anu Korhonen and Kate Lowe, eds., *The Trouble with Ribs: Women, Men and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2007), pp. 195-196.

101 A. Heino letter to Wiljam, date unknown, circa 1938.

102 Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia*, p. 297.

103 J. Heino partial letter, date unknown, circa early 1938.

104 Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, February 2, 1938.

105 David A. Gerber, “Epistolary Masquerades: Acts of Deceiving and Withholding in Immigrant Letters” in Elliott *et al.*, eds., *Letters Across Borders*, p. 151.

another actor to her epistolary negotiation. In addition to protecting her sister from the truth of what was happening in Karelia, by avoiding the topic and adding assurances that she was “OK,” Lisi Hirvonen had to construct her letters in a way that protected her from a third party, overseeing the correspondence. Perhaps Hirvonen’s silence also indicates her personal process of trying to understand what was happening to the Finns around her. Writing on September 10, 1938, she acknowledged her silence, reporting that she had “so much to say but can’t maybe sometime in the future...”¹⁰⁶ She would never reveal all she had hoped to share with her sister. Nothing is known about her after a letter from Petrozavodsk, dated July 19, 1939. Sheila McIntyre accurately characterized the peril of letters: “... where conversation is fleeting, a letter is a written record of feelings, events, and opinions that is dangerously open to interpretation and misinterpretation – both intended and unintended – by readers.”¹⁰⁷ In a world of “whisperers,” the letter could speak too loudly.¹⁰⁸

Writers who openly discussed the effects of arrests and dislocation downplayed their own losses and pain to lament the overall consequences of the purges on Finns. While Justiina was not sure whether her husband was alive or dead, she deflected her own very evident mourning by saying that he was only one of thousands missing.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, Aate’s final letter to his parents follows the pattern of transferring his personal loss to the community’s grief. Pitkänen stated: “I was hoping that when the war is over we would all somehow get together and that we could help you when you need help, but one cannot change fate. And so many boys, and much better ones than me, have died after all.”¹¹⁰ Arguably following this tendency, Jack was frustrated by Mayme Sevander’s memoir, *They Took My Father*, because he felt that the book focused too much on the struggles of one family rather than the community.¹¹¹ Setting their own grief and trauma aside to emphasize the loss and horror confronted by the communal “we,” Aino Pitkänen, Justiina Heino, Aate Pitkänen, and Jack demonstrated how they had come to form a sense of self that placed them within a new community, based on language, ethnicity, and geographic proximity and solidified by collectively experienced terror. The letters suggest no discrepancy between maintaining a place in the communities they left in North America and the ways they began to understand their identity as grounded in Karelia.

By focusing on community loss, letter writers used the narrative device of “disowning” the voice or self that has experienced trauma to be able to confront it.¹¹² The letters of Jack serve as a poignant example. Early in the available

106 Hirvonen letter to Anna Mattson, September 10, 1938.

107 Sheila McIntyre, “‘From a Fine Pen Much Art and Fancy Flows’: Letter Writing and Gentility in Early New England” in Willis, ed., *More Than Words*, p. 183.

108 See Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), p. xxxii. Figes identified the fitting term from the two uses of the Russian *shepchushchii*, referring both to people whispering not to be overheard and to those who whisper about others.

109 J. Heino letter to Wiljam, June 16, 1941.

110 Pitkänen letter to parents, June 12, 1942.

111 “Jack” letter to JL, October [day unknown], 1992.

112 For a discussion of this distancing, based on the Holocaust testimonials gathered by L. Langer, see Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation” in Paul Antze and

correspondence, Jack distanced his narrative from the experiences of the purges and war. In a 1972 letter, Jack set out to “write at least a few sentences of our life here in the past and present.”¹¹³ However, that life story jumps from the birth of his son in 1931 to the death of his daughter in the fall of 1939, with no discussion of anything between. Although Jack wrote about the purges and war in several letters over the 25-year span of his correspondence, he never once described his personal experiences directly. In 1979, he wrote about a chance meeting with a woman he had originally met during the war.¹¹⁴ Interestingly, while Jack shared the experience, he narrated the circumstances of their initial meeting in the voice of the woman. Similarly, when Jack wanted to broach the topic of the purges with his niece in Canada, rather than using his own experiences and knowledge, he sent a newspaper article on the subject.¹¹⁵ Again, Jack used someone else’s voice to tell his lived experiences. The strategies employed by Jack and the 1930s letter writers – while likely subconscious – exemplify the distancing, deference, and disowning of the victim-self that is common to narratives of trauma. When Jack sent the newspaper clipping in 1988, the long silence surrounding the fates of Finnish North Americans in Karelia was beginning to thaw. However, those who had lived through the repression and war still had hard work ahead to get out their truths.

Getting out the “Truth”

The life stories of Finnish North Americans in Karelia were long kept silent by the unwillingness of Finnish North American communities to hear and the migrants’ unwillingness to tell. Despite fearing the repercussions of telling and coping with the scars of trauma, the desire to reveal personal and communal truths about life in Karelia was very strong. The migrants who had managed to return to North America had not found a willing audience in the very communities that had stood by their side to fight for workers’ rights and had seen them off to Karelia.¹¹⁶ While the significant and well-documented Finnish immigrant involvement in Left politics in Canada and the United States was in decline by the late 1930s, many still strongly believed, into the 1950s and well beyond, that the Soviet Union was a workers’ paradise and that Stalin was the true leader of the working people. It was difficult to believe that paradise had become hell on earth and that the Father of the Soviet Union could harm his own people. Child émigré, memoirist, and researcher Mayme Sevander blamed North American communists for silencing those who had lived through the purges, using “misrepresentations” to protect the movement.¹¹⁷ Even loving mothers would not believe what their returning sons and daughters recounted.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, in the eyes of the rising Finnish Right

Michael Lambek, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 189.

113 “Jack” letter to JL, February 20, 1972.

114 “Jack” letter to JL, February 6, 1979.

115 “Jack” letter to JL, December 4, 1988.

116 See, for example, Mayme Sevander, *Red Exodus: Finnish-American Emigration to Russia* (Duluth, MN: OSCAT, 1993), pp. 8-10.

117 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

118 See, for example, Hokkanen, *Karelia*, pp. 1-3.

wing in North America, people “foolish” enough to have turned their backs on capitalism and religion, or even worse, on their Canadian or American citizenship, seemed to deserve what they had experienced.¹¹⁹ Those who had lived through the repression were alienated by fear and the culture of silence that had developed in the Soviet Union, as well as the scorn of many Finns in North America. Return migrants kept quiet about their experiences in Karelia; some even moved away from their old home communities. The stories of what had happened to Finnish North Americans in Karelia were collectively silenced.¹²⁰

Following an oral interview about his life in Karelia, “Harold” wrote a series of letters to Varpu Lindström that touched on his feelings about having become a historical subject. In one letter, Harold apologized for the “tight-worded” replies he had given in the interview.¹²¹ He explained that he did “not yet believe that [in Russia] you can speak about things as they in reality are for many have totally without guilt been made to spend years in prison and those who have been there don’t have the mind to go there again.”¹²² Harold’s memories of imprisonment had stayed with him, as had the Soviet culture of silence. Interestingly, Harold felt comfortable enough to write about his hesitancy to speak. Memoirs reveal that very few Finnish North American Karelian survivors have been willing to draw attention to the period of the purges.¹²³ For example, other than a chapter entitled “How Can They All Be Guilty?” and a few other brief mentions of the arrests and disappearances in Petrozavodsk, the story of Lauri and Sylvia Hokkanen’s life in Karelia is likely to leave readers with the overall impression that the purges were just a minor part of an otherwise positive experience.¹²⁴ Perhaps some, as Jay Winters has suggested, “remain silent, since the speech act may be performative; that is, the pain described is inflicted once again through testimony.”¹²⁵

While the retrospective Finnish North American letter writers never employed words like trauma, it is useful to look at their silence through the lens of traumatic memory. Catherine Merridale’s study of death and memory in Russia demonstrates how questions of mental health are “taboo” and the label of “trauma” “is something that most Russians reject.”¹²⁶ The hesitancy to acknowledge the wide impact of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, as Merridale argues, can partially be explained by the ways starvation, illness, and other physical needs overshadowed concerns about mental health.¹²⁷ Paul Antze and Michael Lambek recognize that instances of individuals’ unwillingness to discuss or remember traumatic events

119 Lindström and Vähämäki, “Ethnicity Twice Removed,” p. 15.

120 For a discussion of the ways that “silence is a collective endeavour,” see Eviatar Zerubavel, “The Social Sound of Silence: Toward a Sociology of Denial” in Efrat Ben-Ze’ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter, eds., *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 36.

121 York University Archives, Varpu Lindström fonds, 2009-025/037, 6, “Harold” letter, February 1, 1989.

122 *Ibid.*

123 See, for example, the analysis of Eila Lahti-Argutina, “The Fate of Finnish Canadians in Soviet Karelia” in Harpelle *et al.*, eds., *Karelian Exodus*, p. 122.

124 Hokkanen, *Karelia*, pp. 89-96.

125 Jay Winter, “Thinking about Silence” in Efrat Ben-Ze’ev *et al.*, eds., *Shadows of War*, p. 14.

126 Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 16.

127 *Ibid.*, pp. 119 and 239.

“are less refusals to continue telling stories than to continue interpreting them.”¹²⁸ In an insightful analysis of the differing memory outcomes of child abuse survivors and Holocaust survivors, Laurence Kirmayer concludes that dissociative amnesia, “forgetting,” and an unwillingness to confront the past can be linked to abuse victims’ lack of a “social landscape,” within their families or in society, where they can narrate their experiences. Conversely, the readily available audience for Holocaust narratives integrates “remembering” and the sharing of individual experiences into collective history.¹²⁹ Kirmayer argues that, as with the collective memory of the Holocaust, “if a community agrees that traumatic events occurred and weaves this fact into its identity, then collective memory survives and individual memory can find a place (albeit transformed) within that landscape.” If, however, the community does not believe in the occurrence of trauma, “the possibility for individual memory is severely strained.”¹³⁰ Interestingly, Finnish North American purge survivors can be seen as fitting into both categories. Those individuals who wrote during the purges (through heavily censored mail) and immediately following their return to North America, when many Finnish North American Leftist communities continued to support the Soviet regime, did not have the opportunity to remember and share their experiences with fear, violence, and loss on the communal or social level. On the other hand, like those living through the Holocaust, Finnish North Americans experienced the purges collectively and talked, though in hushed voices, about events as they unfolded. “This narrative process,” according to Kirmayer, “served to maintain memory,” and, likewise, collectively experienced trauma created the space for “retelling.”¹³¹

However, the Karelian survivors had difficulty seeing how others could relate to their experiences. Like Aino Pitkänen, who twice wrote that the recipients of letters would be unable to understand what had happened, 50 years later Jack still believed that those who had not lived through the purges and war “wouldn’t understand anything about it or even believe it.”¹³² Despite his severe criticism of the work, Jack suggested that perhaps it was better that Sevander’s memoir was so “dilluted [*sic*]” because “the actual tragedies would be too hard for you to digest.”¹³³ While struggling to find a way to tell their stories, the Karelian letter writers were very concerned with getting their “truth” into the open. Perhaps the focus on truth can be seen in light of a broader post-Soviet fixation on continuously asserting one’s innocence,¹³⁴ stemming from Soviet-era mistrust, accusations, and arrests. For Jack, the “truth [was] much more tradgic [*sic*]” than how it was depicted in *They Took My Father*.¹³⁵ Although he was happy that journalists and other researchers were beginning to reveal the story of the Finnish North Americans in Karelia, he was critical of the trends he saw: “now the ‘fad’ of the

128 Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, “Introduction” in Antze and Lambek, eds., *Tense Past*, p. xix.

129 Kirmayer, “Landscapes of Memory,” pp. 188-190.

130 *Ibid.*

131 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

132 “Jack” letter to JL, December 4, 1988.

133 “Jack” letter to JL, January 14, 1993.

134 134 For example, Merridale, *Night of Stone*, p. 192.

135 “Jack” letter to JL, January 14, 1993.

times is that writers & journalists write about the crimes of that time & of people who fell victims to this crime, but they are silent about the criminals that convicted & shot these innocent people!”¹³⁶ The “truth” for Jack had to look beyond the role of Stalin as the sole perpetrator of the horrific crimes he had lived through. Perhaps his intimate knowledge of the victims and the crimes against them made Jack want to turn the focus away from his community’s suffering to the deeds of those who had betrayed them. Harold expressed more satisfaction with the work of researchers, writing: “I am thankful that I have been able to live so long that I have seen the day that the truth has after all become apparent.”¹³⁷ He went on to thank Lindström and Vähämäki for bringing “to the whole world this truth.”¹³⁸

David Gerber has suggested that “narrative truth, which assists in establishing continuity and stability amidst the inconsistencies and the frequent contradictions of life, is more important for individuals than literal truth when it comes to the ongoing work of constructing personal identities.”¹³⁹ It seems, though, that in the case of the Karelian retrospective writers, and perhaps for others who lived through Stalin’s reign, the quest for truth was caught somewhere between Gerber’s “narrative truth” and “literal truth.” Having endured immense hardships and witnessed “untold” horrors, those who looked back and felt secure enough to voice their stories had begun to insist on telling and being told the “literal truth” of what had happened in decades past. At the same time, though, these survivors had come to formulate their own “narrative truths” to explain what had happened and why they had made it through alive. Catherine Merridale reflected on the uniqueness of Russian elders’ memorized “monologues,” concluding that

It makes a difference if you spent the best part of your life without the luxury of comparison or collective context, relating the story only to your closest friends, and sometimes even not to them, without re-focusing the images. It also makes a difference if you never had the chance to acquire the knack, the discipline, of listening.¹⁴⁰

Through the study of these letters, it is possible to see the overlapping and sometimes contesting weight of these truths.

Conclusion

The letters of Finnish North Americans in Karelia demonstrate the multifaceted usefulness of engaging in the study of personal letters. The Karelia letters bridge communal history and unique personal responses to migration. They offer new understandings of youth culture and the flow of material goods, along with insights into individual negotiations of transnational relationships and identities, the strategies for coping with separation, repression, and trauma, and engagement in epistolary exchange. Such an analysis contributes to the work of others engaged

136 “Jack” letter to JL, October [day unknown], 1994.

137 “Harold” letter, August 26, 1989.

138 *Ibid.*

139 Gerber, “Epistolary Masquerades,” p. 147.

140 Merridale, *Night of Stone*, p. 190.

in letter studies and those uncovering daily life in Stalinist Russia. Personal letters, likewise, remind us of how dynamic life is. Daily life for Finnish North Americans in Karelia was certainly hard, but the immigrants’ letters show that there were also laughs, small joys, and festivities that came from working for what they had grown up to believe in and knowing that they were all in it together. To get at the multifaceted “truths” of the Karelian letter writers, a sense of their loss, both as a result of the experience of migration, and, more deeply, as felt through the uncertainty and fear of repressions and war, must be paired with the successes and accomplishments they celebrated in building socialism. Studying the Karelia letters lets us share the writers’ joy and grief and helps to heal the collective wounds of silence.