

The Finlandia Foundation National unites new Finnish expatriates and Finnish-Americans with a fractional heritage

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Finland's Ambassador to the U.S. Kirsti Kauppi and FFN President Ossi Rahkonen at the National Capital Chapter Finland 100 gala at the Finnish Embassy in Washington, D.C.

The Finlandia Foundation National (FFN) is 65 years old this year. It is the largest nonprofit Finnish organization in the U.S. It was founded and led in the early years by Yrjo Paloheimo, a Finnish diplomat and businessman born to wealth and who was committed to winning friends for Finland shortly after World War II.

Americans were very sympathetic towards Finland during the Winter War of 1939-1940, when the Soviet Union clearly wanted to annex Finland again (as it did in case of the Baltic states). Finland fought alone, without assistance from Germany or any other country. There was a lot of bitterness in Finland as it lost its second largest city (Viborg) and a large part of its territory with 12% of its population (which had to be evacuated to the rest of the country). As a result, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, Finland saw an opportunity to get back the territory it had lost and attacked the Soviet Union on its own. Finland and Germany had a common enemy, but there was never an alliance (as Germany had with Mussolini's Italy and Imperial Japan, the axis powers). During the Cold War of 1947 to 1991, Finland had to maintain a dance of benevolent neutrality towards the Soviet Union, a policy that did not conform to the U.S.'s attitude of us vs. them.

The visit of Finnish President Urho Kekkonen and his wife for 17 days in 1961, created a lot of pro-Finland sentiment. He met with President Kennedy twice and he was hosted by FFN chapters and other organizations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.

Most of the 300,000 Finnish immigrants in America in 1920 spoke little English. The majority of today's 700,000 Finnish-Americans are either 4th, 5th, or 6th generation who do not speak Finnish or Finnish citizens living in the U.S., often for business or employment reasons.

Currently, about 75% of the FFN members speak only English or very

limited Finnish.

One of the greatest challenges of any charitable heritage organization today is the growing divide between early immigrant generations and successive generations of hyphenated-Americans who no longer speak their mother tongue from the Old Country.

Today, FFN has solved its identity crisis and has found the means to promote the Finnish national brand, and simultaneously, to reach out to younger generations with scholarships and grants, particularly in the arts and music.

FFN is a loose affiliation of 58 chapters and about 7,000 members. Most of the chapters are incorporated as 5.01 (c) 3 nonprofits and operate independently, but endorsing the FFN mission statement and objectives. The local chapters do what is best done locally, and FFN provides the fundraising and financial muscle to provide cultural platforms for young, talented students. The objective is to help these individuals get their careers jump-started by providing a national audience.

Ossi Rahkonen

In many ways, Ossi Rahkonen's life has mirrored various stages of Finland's modern history. He has witnessed those changes, lived them, and influenced them.

When Ossi (photo on left) was almost four years old, with his father away at the war, his mother sent him and his brother by train up north where they crossed over to Sweden at Tornea. For the next 3½ years he was cared for by Swedish foster parents. When the call from his mother came, Ossi discovered that his standard of living back in Finland was disappointing. They were a family of seven crammed into his grandparents small house, not counting the Karelian refugees living above the barn.

Ossi had forgotten his Finnish, and so he went to a Swedish school in his town of Turku. It was another three years until he changed to a Finnish school so that he could qualify to enter

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As part of the Sibelius 150 celebration in March of 2015, Finland's Ambassador to the U.S. Ritva Koukko-Ronde (at left) applauds as FFN President Ossi Rahkonen presents the inaugural Finlandia Foundation Award of Excellence to Seattle Symphony President and CEO Simon Woods.



In recognition of Finland 100 in 2017, FFN sponsored the U.S. tour of Sibelius Inspiration by Finnish cellist Jussi Makkonen and pianist Nazig Azezian, including this performance hosted by Finlandia Foundation Colorado.

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a Finnish secondary school. When it was time to take the entrance exams for the secondary school, he passed everything except the Finnish language component. He spent that summer back in Sweden with a Finnish Bible, which he used to learn his Finnish. At the end of the summer he passed his test. He was eleven years old at the time. He attended secondary school for eight years and applied to a Swedish University and graduated in 1963 with a Masters degree in Economics.

After his military service in 1963-1964, Ossi worked for the Finnish government and also international engineering/consulting firms in Africa, South America and Asia during 1967-1972, before he joined World Bank in 1972.

One of the first things he did upon arriving in Washington, D.C., was to join the Capital chapter of FFN. His experiences during the next 17 years with the World Bank could easily fill a book. In 1989 he left the World Bank for the second time to work with the Finnish Embassy, and in 1994, he started his own consulting business, working as a subcontractor for large American, Finnish, and French firms, and as a consultant to the World Bank.

There were 23 chapters in 2003, when Ossi was elected a trustee of FFN, and today, 15 years later, there are 58. Ossi says today 50% of the trustees are born in the U.S. and 50% are Finnish born, ample evidence of the growing presence of Finnish expats now living in the U.S.

Adapting the FFN mission and services to a changing world

FFN has changed partly because Finland has changed from the poor agricultural backwater country it once was, to the tech leader it now is. As a national cultural icon, FFN carries considerable influence with the home country well beyond bonhomie and emotional attachment. For a small country, the Finns have made their mark in the world. FFN has grown in status and significance in tandem with Finland. It has a bifurcated but not mutually exclusive mission; to



A Finlandia Foundation Signature Event for Finland 100, FFN sponsored the September 2017 all-Finnish concert by the Minnesota Orchestra under the baton of Music Director Osmo Vänskä, here greeting Finland's President Sauli Niinistö (right).

nurture international connections and also to serve the homegrown base; it is a combination of black ties and miners boots, which is the title of the organization's 2010 history written by Jon L. Saari. To quote from the epilogue of that book, a former president of FFN, John Laine, said: "We Americans are Everyman—Finns, Czechs, Chinese, Sudanese, Ukrainians, in America—all their immigrant ancestors shared the same human aspirations for a better life."

FFN is best known today for its scholarships and grants for individuals and events, from folk life hoe-downs in small communities to extravaganzas in large urban centers. Soiva Music Camp [see the separate article in this issue] takes place annually at Concordia College in Minnesota and also in Finland every third year. It was started

at Bemidji, MN. The Finnish Salolampi language camp is still at Bemidji, for those who want to intensify their cultural identity by learning the language of their ancestors.

Two of FFN's programs are designed to bridge generational gaps among Finnish-Americans communities, and also to bridge gaps between rural and urban Finnish-Americans.

The first of these programs is the Performer of the Year (POY), whose purpose is to provide a national stage to talented performers such as musical groups, singers, humorists, film makers, and masters of such instruments as the accordion, organ, bassoon, and the kantele. The awards are carefully balanced between the Finn Hall tradition and classically trained vocalists and instrumentalists. A performer who wins this award



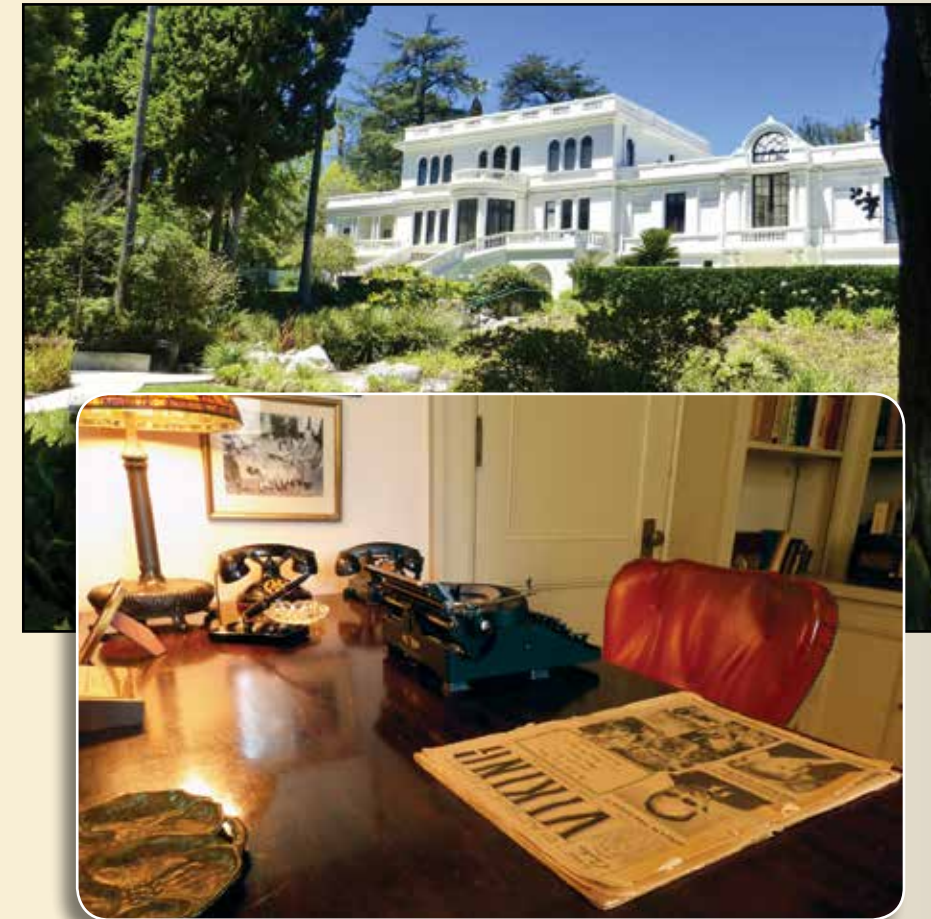
Lauri Saukko (right), former dean of Salolampi Language Village in Minnesota, received a grant from FFN to support his Finnish language book Opi 3; proceeds support the Salolampi Foundation Scholarship Fund.

presents at the annual FinnFest and also performs as a guest at a range of FFN chapters, giving the performer crucial publicity and the opportunity to teach their art to other aspirants.

The second of these cultural bridges is the Lecturer of the Year (LOY). This program is about intellectual substance rather than entertainment, although the participants all need to be excellent communicators. Each lecturer is challenged to select some part of Finnish culture, whether architecture, music, history, literature, or folk traditions and trace its evolution, including differences between Finland and Finnish-America.

The travel and lodging expenses of both the performer and the lecturer are jointly supported by the local chapters and FFN.

With all of FFN's programs, the ultimate criteria for acceptance or winning a competition is not one's DNA, but the level of expertise on the topic or skill. Friends of Finland are very welcome because their presence and participation is a relationship of choice, not just an accident of birth. Cultural exchange, like different types of music, is a celebration of differences within a context of basic shared values.



Finnish Consul Yrjö Paloheimo's office in his home, the founding site of Finlandia Foundation. The Fenyens-Paloheimo mansion is now part of the Pasadena, CA, Museum of History.



FFN Patron, composer and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen, with FFN members following a Chicago Symphony Orchestra concert in March 2017.

Visit www.finlandiafoundation.org



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