FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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Helena Tervonen
July 17, 1973

Douglas Ollila

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1. What is your name, your natural origin and your vocation?
R My maiden name is Helena Elna Raijala and we changed it to Rae later on. I was brought up in Toronto Canada.

I Where were you born?
R I was born in Finland and I came out when I was almost 9 years old.

I What would you consider your occupation?
R I went to a Commercial High School so I was an account or bookkeeper until I went to Toronto Bible College. Then I was in Missionary work after that.

I What is your husband's name and his vocation?
R My husband is Toivo Tervonen and he's a minister.

When did you arrive in Canada and then in the United States?
R Our family came to Canada in 1923 and I was married in 1946 and we came from Toronto to Painesville, Ohio.

When did you come here?
R A year later we came to Chisholm.

I Why did your family come to Canada?
R My family came to Canada because we lived out in the country and I would have had to go to school that fall. My father wanted to move to a country where children could stay at home and go to school and not have to be sent away to board.

I You mentioned before that the trip to Canada was a very interesting kind of trip but very difficult at first. What were some of those special hardships that you had especially those first years. You mentioned the one room house.
R Well we didn't have too much money and times were pretty poor. There had been a lot of immigration to Canada especially around the City of Toronto so work was hard to come by. My father had to accept small menial tasks. One year my father went out West harvesting. For a couple of years we lived in a one room and a rooming house where there was a stove out in the hallway where about 3 families took their turn cooking.

I So life was kind of difficult then
R Life was a little difficult but we didn't mind it.
I: Now this category is personal history, what would you view as the good times when you look back on your Canadian experience, what were the good times? I suppose that's very hard to answer because there were a lot of good times and bad times.

R: Well I would say we appreciated Canada, of course my father took ill only five years after we got to Canada. So he really never had the opportunity to work and make money as many people say. But our people saved their money and they were able to put a down payment on a house. My mother went out to work while my brother and I were still in school. My mother rented out rooms so we always had good meals and we were never in want. We had all we needed and we appreciated being here. There was a church nearby and I feel this is one of the things that provided my good times. Out in Finland we were so far from the church. I was nine years old and I think I had been to church twice in my life. But here I could go to Girls Club, Sunday School and Church and all this made a tremendous impact on my life. It made life a joy whereas so many of our people who stayed away from church and from the Gospel, they did not come in contact with the Gospel, they became embittered and were always complaining. It was always a complaint against the government and all these things and yet I feel that our government has been very wonderful to the immigrants. They have possibly done more than any other country for their immigrants.

I: They welcomed them all and made them feel as equal citizens and so

R: They have been tremendous. Of course for a while when I graduated from high school my brother was going on to the University and because my father was ill and my mother wasn't too well I felt that I couldn't go on with my education. I felt that I had been prepared to work. So when I graduated in 1942, even though I was the gold medalist in my class, in our accountant course in our Commercial High School, I didn't find it very difficult because of my Finnish name to get work.

I: Is that right?

R: Yes, to get the kind of work I wanted, the office work. So it took a little while until we made contact through one of the men at the church where I became a member. Then I was able to get the kind of work I was really able to do. At that time both my brother and I changed our name to RAE because the J in Raijala was very difficult and made that name more difficult than other names. I think those people with an English name found it much easier than we immigrants with a foreign name.

I: Who discriminated? Was it the English speaking element of the community that discriminated against all foreign groups?

R: Yes. Well I suppose to a certain extent those with the British background they were to be considered first. But I did not find this so in the church. This is the wonderful thing that Christians in the Baptist Church. Some of my most wonderful friends were the ones who helped us and one of my Sunday School teachers from the very first year of my going to Sunday School who still communicates with me every Christmas time.
This is why I appreciated Canada, because the people were so wonderful and there was so much life and Christian fellowship and this was a great help to me. It was a contrast to what I found in the Finnish Churches that I went to.

Let's get back to that a little later. You said you went to high school and then you went to Commercial School.

No, in Toronto, we had the high schools which were called Collegiate Institutes which were for those going onto the Universities. They were for five years. What were the Junior College here you took that right in the high school. You graduated after your fourth year and then took your honors course the fifth years. But they also had through the City what they called the Commercial High School. I went to the Central High School of Commerce which was for those who were interested in going into business.

I see, it was strictly commercial classes.

Oh yes, in the Commercial High School, we took the English classes, bookkeeping, mathematics, I took shorthand. There were certain subjects that weren't covered but I went through four years of high school there.

Then you went to Toronto Bible School.

Toronto Bible College, after I had been working. See I graduated in 1932 from high school and I began in the Bible College in 1939, seven years later.

How long was that?

That was a three year course and I finished it then.

I see, in high school, how did the different nationality groups get along together?

Well in high school at that time we got along fine because we lived in the downtown section and we had blacks, we had a great many Jews, in fact I can remember when there were Jewish holidays and there might be only a handful, maybe five or six from a class of thirty who were in school. We liked those Jewish holidays of course because we didn't do any special work. But in high school, I had friends of all different nationalities and there was no friction whatsoever.

That's unusual, you know.

In those years, we had a lot of Polish people, Russian, Ukrainian, Italian, that I knew and a great many Jewish people and all the other nationalities but there was no discrimination or friction at all.

How about anti Catholic spirit?

None of that.
4.

We had all the nationalities and we all joined in. This is what I think I appreciated in the Canadian Schools. We had a Bible reading in the morning in the public school and then we sang God save the King. In the High School, because it was such a large school, we went every second morning, but we always had a Bible reading, a hymn. I feel that this has to have a good affect. The Jews didn't have to come, but they did. I don't know if they joined in on the Lord's prayer, but they were there. What bothers me in America is to kick the Bible and prayer out of the schools. We take care of our physical bodies by watching our health and going to the doctor, we take care of ourselves mentally by being educated and reading. We are going to have to take care of ourselves spiritually and morally or else the whole structure will suffer. I always appreciated the Canadian education very much.

Do you still feel the same way about the multi-ethnic groups on the Iron Range, do you feel warmly towards these people?

Oh yes, Whenever, they have something special, for instance, the dedication of the new church we go. Personally I have nothing against anyone there.

That's very interesting, did you learn to speak English in school or at home?

I learned it at school.

You spoke Finnish at home then?

Yes.

You're parent's attitude towards formal education was quite positive, I take it that's one of the reasons why you moved here right?

Oh yes. I think that one the whole it is the exception rather than the rule for any of the Finnish people to be against the education of their children. All of them wanted their children to grow up just as far as they could. They would make any sacrifices to make their education possible.

Were your parents strict at your home?

Oh yes.

What newspapers and books did you read earlier and recently? That's a hard question to answer because I suppose you've read a thousand newspapers and a thousand books. What sorts of things have you read that you consider important? You mentioned the Bible of course.

The Bible of course, and Christian periodicals. I have always had the publications of Christian Life and I've always said if I have to choose I would take the Reader's Digest, the Christian Life and my Bible. Those three because I have been with them the longest.
I tried to follow the work of the Finnish people as much as I can. If I had more time I could and would do a great deal more reading but right now I have to do so much reading for my work since I'm doing my husband's work. In the ministry I have to do so much reading and background material for this. I have to keep up with the news items in order to relate Christian Gospel to our present day problems.

So presently, you would consider yourself a minister, pastor?

Yes, I'm the minister of the little Finnish Baptist Church because my husband had a stroke and is not able to carry on the work and for the time being there are a few of the older Finnish people to whom the message of the Bible means more in the Finnish language than English. They would get very little of the reading of the Bible in English or the message. Even some of our older generation who were born in America but were not able to be educated very far, we have a few of them in our church membership who were born in this country who still prefer the Finnish language and if you're going to reach them with the Gospel you have to do it in Finnish and because anything they knew was in the Finnish language.

You consider your area of work pretty much the iron range.

Oh yes.

You've worked as far as Virginia, I've noticed that you've spoken at the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Virginia.

Well when my husband was well, we had regular church services in Hibbing, Virginia, in the rest homes in Hibbing and Bule, we had regular services down in Duluth, Wisconsin, Two Harbors and then we occasionally went up to Thunder Bay, Canada, Port Arthur and Fort William. One week of the month we would go up to International Falls and Fort Francis area.

You conceive your work to serve the Finnish people wherever they are needed.

That's right, For instance, the other week on Sunday we were free and we saw the church over near Cokay was having a service so we went over there. They were mostly people who had heard us on the radio before and saw us before and we really had good fellowship with them. The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church was without a pastor strangely enough because there were no Finnish people available. It seemed strange to us that they would come to a woman and a Baptist but we got along real well. Excepting that I did not go through the Lutheran formalities but they appreciated and we preached the Gospel.

I would take it that your main concern would be to serve the people and preach the Gospel rather than trying to make everyone Baptists?

That's the important thing. We have always said when we came here twenty-six years ago that we were already twenty-five years too late. It was not important to make new church members but to have them find God as their personal Savior.
So it would not be a religion but true Christianity which is Christ
self.

And you've remained quite consistent in the twenty-five years that you've
been here.

Very.

Some of your earlier jobs, I take it you worked as an Accountant or some
Commercial job that you were trained in.

Yes, first of all I worked in a law office and this lawyer mostly worked
with real estate, then for a number of years I was a bookkeeper in a
factory in an importing firm and looked after the payroll of the factory
and ran the bookkeeping machine. I was an Assistant Bookkeeper.

What were wages like up in Toronto at that time, pretty poor?

Oh boy, yes in those years before 1939, I think my highest salary was
$125 a month. I think I started at $75 a month in fact in the law
office I started at $15 a week. It wasn't very much.

I have a few political questions here that you might be able to tell
me something about. Did you become an American citizen then? Or are
still a Canadian citizen?

My brother and I became Canadian citizens with my father as soon as we
had been in Canada five years. My father said he knows we're not going
back to Finland so we became citizens, the whole family did at that
time. Then when I married my husband who already was an American
citizen, I believe the time was two years, as soon as that time was up
I applied. I applied to get American citizenship and I got it. This
is where my work was going to be so I became an American citizen.

I take it you vote regularly, when is the first time you voted for a
United States President?

Yes, very regularly, let's see 1946 was when I got married and I don't
recall whether I got my citizenship papers in time in 1948 but I don't
think so, it took that much time. It must have been 1952.

I take it you're quite interested in what goes on politically?

Very definitely

How about local politics, are you interested in that?

Oh yes.

Do you keep very active in local politics, I suppose it's very hard
you.
Well, that's the thing, we have to be very careful. Sometimes we would like to go to political rallys and things like that, I feel that we are working with people so we don't make our personal views known or take sides. We have to relate what goes on in terms of the gospel and in terms of trying to clean up politics whatever the party.

These are a real concern to you I see.

Yes. These are the original American concerns.

Now this category has to do with social life here and I'm more interested in what goes on in Chism. I'm wondering how the nationalities get along here in Chism.

Well as far as I know, I don't know of any special friction. But perhaps the Scandanavians have always felt they were alittle better educated, for example, I think reading was encouraged more so they were more literate here than the others but I think this is to a minimum.

Especially now, where the Slovian groups in Chism have done very very well.

Oh yes, yes.

There are some very notable people who came out of Chism oh for example in the medical profession. It seems to me this feeling that this eastern European being something less than the others, this feeling has disappeared.

So much has disappeared with the passing of the older generation.

Yes. How about mixed marriages in Chism, is this pretty commin?

Very common.

How do you feel about this?

Well, personally my own reaction always was this. I could do more with my own people and I think I understood my own people, I had the opportunity when I went to Toronto Bible College, I knew a number of fine young men and I think the reason I never considered any of them for marriage was that possibly along the way there was someone from our own nationality.

How do you feel about this in the fourth generation?

Well, I was just going to say our first daughter is married to a young man of the Finnish Swedish background, his folks came from Finland. Our other daughter is married to an English boy and our son is married to one who has some Norwegian and Finnish blood. The older boy is married to one who has German background. As far as the children are concerned, because they would no longer be working with the Finnish language as I felt I would be, I feel as long as their partners are true Christians, this is the real concern.
That they have the same spiritual outlook because I feel there would be more chance of happiness when their spiritual sympathies were the same. I have not been too much insympathy with real mixed marriages. Even Catholic and Protestant because the Catholic church always tended to want the children to be raised in their church.

How about here today in Chism, is that pretty much the same case?

Well I understand now the Protestant member of the family does not have to sign the children over the way they used to have to sign. I understand that this has been discontinued, but, I think it will take a long time before the Catholic Church changes. We've seen just last week, the new pronouncements from Rome not to make too many changes, I think there have been certain American Catholic Church priests that have been more liberal. They certainly don't have the blessing of Rome.

There's kind of a conservative reaction from Rome

That's right. Well originally any Roman Catholic Church never considered any Protestant a real Christian. Basically it could be still the same. Although they don't make it known in the same way.

Okay, this category has to do with your religious background and that of your family?

Well in Finland of course my mother and father belonged to the Finnish Luthern Church. You couldn't get your passports unless you had been confirmed in the Luthern Church. But they did not go to church. When they were younger they had been taken to church with their parents but the church was not part of their lives at all. When we moved to Canada, my mother felt we should go on Christmas so I remember her taking my three brother and me but my father did not go. We went occasionally to the little Luthern Church there. But only a few blocks from where we were living, there was a Baptist Mission who were especially interested in the children of the immigrants. So right across the road from us lived a Polish family who themselves were Roman Catholics but their children used to go to the Mission every once in a while. So during our first few months in Canada, we didn't even really understand English. So we were taken there by this Polish Roman Catholic Boy and this became my spiritual home for many years. There were two ladies, an American from Buffalo, New York and an English woman from England. They were supported by the Canadian Baptist and they had this Sunday School for children, Sunday evening service, and clubs for the children during the week. They had vacation Bible School in the summer time. Not one week like they have now but four weeks. It was during that time that I realized that religion was not just a formality that we go through but it has to be a faith in the heart. This is where I feel that I was born again.

How old were you then?

I would say about 11 or 12.
It was during the summer school that you had this conversion experience?

No, it was at a girl's club meeting. My parents weren't too sympathetic, but they didn't disapprove. Then my brother and I went to Sunday School. I can remember these men sitting on their porches on this very narrow street. These men would make fun of us because there were no other Finnish children going to the Baptist Mission. I remember my brother always wanted to put his New Testament under his coat or in his pocket because he didn't want them to see it. But my mother and father both said if we want to go to Sunday School there we can go there. Then after we had been in Canada for about four years, the caretaker for the mission went away and my mother and father became the caretaker for about two years. We lived right there and my mother and father went to work but we kept up the mission and my brother and I helped. It became more of a spiritual home at that time because we were in such close contact with these two missionaries.

You would consider these conversion experience as being the beginning, the high point, the fundamental point in your life.

Yes.

And you look back upon it as that?

Absolutely, it was the turning point in my life. I didn't realize at the time how meaningful it would be but since that time I know that he has had his finger on my life and I feel that this was a result of a great deal of prayer for our family because my mother and father were not interested in religion. But my mother's sister used to bring little children's books and I'm sure she was praying for our family. Then my mother had an uncle who studied for the Luther ministry but also had a conversion experience during his ministry days but never accepted ministry with the Luther church but started working with the free church in Finland. He went out to China as an missionary and was always spiritually interested in the family but he passed away so early in life that I don't remember him at all.

What was his name?

Anti Makinen.

Anti Makinen, okay. What prompted you to go to the Toronto Bible College?

Well I always wanted to study the Bible more but because of my father's illness I felt I should help my mother more. Then in 1939 when the World War Started, there was all this trouble and I felt if I was ever going to go to school, I had saved up some money and I was able to do some work on the side as I went to school. I was twenty-five years old and instead of time slipping by I felt it was time I went to school. I felt that if God should call me to go to missionary work I should be doing something more than just keeping books for a business concern.

What did you do as soon as you graduated from Bible College?
Well it so happened that the secretary of the man who worked with the students at the Bible College, left so I worked as his secretary for two years at the Bible College. Then during that time there was a Baptist Mission in Ottawa working mostly among the French Canadians. They came to the Bible College, to Mr. Burns, my boss who was a Baptist so they came to him and he knew that I was a Baptist although the Toronto Bible College, was interdenominational. In fact he was the only Baptist on the faculty. He asked me if I would be interested in the position so once again I left the Bible College and worked there at the Mission in Ottawa for two years.

You did some personal work and some speaking also.

Yes, I did the same thing as in the mission where I myself had been converted. We had Sunday School, a Sunday evening service and children's clubs during the week.

Your husband's name is Toivo?

He's an ordained Baptist minister and I'd be very interested in finding out something about his background.

Well Toivo comes from a completely Baptist background because from his mother's side, the Johnson's came from Sweden into Finland and they were already Baptist so some of the first people who baptist in Finland were his relatives. He had his seminary training in the Baptist seminary in ___________. Even though he could speak in Swedish and Finnish he felt there were enough workers in Sweden and he felt his call in Finnish speaking. He especially worked among young people. Then in 1936 our Finnish Baptist Church in Toronto needed a pastor and I suppose as we wrote to Finland that we needed a pastor he was recommended. We wanted someone who was youthful and liked to work with youth. We wanted someone who might be interested in coming out to Canada. We wrote and were able to negotiate this so his family was able to come to Toronto to be our pastor.

What year was this?

He worked there until when?

He worked there for two years and we had a very close connection with the church in Fairport Ohio, and their pastor left and the Fairport Church called and wanted him to come over to the states. I suppose because in the United States there were a great many of the Finnish Swedish speaking people. Families he knew from Finland with the Finnish Swedish background. It was an attraction because he could use his Swedish whereas here he wasn't using it at all.

He served mostly the Finn-Sweds in the United States until he came to Chism?
Oh no. No, the Fairport Church was mostly Finnish people and he still served the Finnish people and was interested in the Finnish people, but still served the Swedish people and on occasions made trips to preach to the Swedish congregations where they no longer had a Swedish speaking minister.

Your husband would primarily regard himself as a Finn rather than a Finn Swed.

Oh yes. Well I don't know, his father had been a lay preacher in Finland for the Finnish people and had done a lot of work even among the Laplanders. Perhaps it was his father's influence but rather more the call of God upon his life. Because now that we have been back to Finland I would say all his relatives are more Swedish than Finnish because they all speak Swedish more than Finnish. Most of them know the Finnish but a lot of them don't even know the Finnish.

Very little is known about the Finnish Baptist Churches in America and very little is known about the Fin Swed Baptist Churches. I'm wondering if you could give me a thumbnail sketch of especially the Finnish Baptist in America. What you know of their history and relate it somewhat to the Finnish-Swedish movement also.

Well, I think the earliest Baptist churches in the early 1900's, well the early churches were organized between 1890 and 1900. There were Finnish Swedish Baptist Churches organized. Then because they wanted to have fellowship among themselves, in 1901 they organized the Baptist Mission Union. They called it the Finnish Baptist Mission Union. I think it was at their 50th Anniversary they changed it to just Baptist Mission Union. They called it the Finnish Baptist Mission Union, even though none of them spoke Finnish. It was comprised of Swedish speaking people but they still called it the Finnish Baptist Mission Union. They were interested in the Finnish speaking immigrants in America. They wanted certain ministers to come out and have services with the Finnish speaking people and I know for a fact that in Hancock, Michigan Reverend Mihainen did a lot of work to organize the Baptist Finnish Church there. In Duluth Minnesota, they had an early organized Baptist Church in the early 1900's. Then in the 1920's after the war, these Finnish ministers and I don't know what the reason was, they went back to Finland and these churches were left without a pastor. I'm almost sure there was an organized church in Massachusetts also. They were not able to get Finnish speaking Baptist ministers and gradually they disbanded. Eventually in Hancock they moved into the American Baptist Church. In Duluth some of them went into the Finnish Swedish Baptist Church and some to other churches and finally as the Finnish Pentacostals had opened a church in Duluth, Somewhere in the 1930's they joined that church for fellowship.

Then in 1929 the Finnish Free Church minister came to Toronto and the Baptist mission that I had been connected with, he started having Finnish services there because it was the only building available in that downtown section where all the Finnish people lived.
But for some reason that I really can't start to explain, the mission closed down then. The work was taken over by a church that was not too far away. One of the old Canadian Baptist Churches. Then Reverend Holpainen started having services there. This church had already a Russian speaking congregation ministering there and later a Congregation speaking and they were also interested in the new Canadian immigrants. So the church was organized in the early 1930's and this became my home church eventually. Then Reverend Holpainen moved from Toronto to Fairport Ohio. Then a couple of years later he left and my husband moved to Fairport Ohio and then we called another man from Finland and when I went to Bible College, during the summer we worked with the Finnish people in the Thunder Bay area. We invited both Reverend __________ and Reverend Tervonen to come up from Ohio and we had services and people were converted and some of them were baptized and the _______________Baptist Church was organized.

Is this still going?

Yes, Reverend __________ was there for quite a number of years. By that time when my husband was in Fairport Ohio, the church was built on the Painesville side. By that time we were in Minnesota and Reverend __________ came to minister in the Painesville Church and we did quite a bit of work up in Intola. In fact my husband drew the blueprints for the church and worked there three different summers. But they no longer have a Finnish speaking minister. They are part of the Baptist General Congress and have English speaking work only.

In a sense you're saying the purpose was to bring the Finnish people into the main stream of the Baptist Church. In other words by the time the second and third generation came along the Finns became part of the American Baptist Church?

Yes. Actually I think we always felt more or less like missionaries. We were there because the Baptist Church was very strange to our immigrants there. The immigrants that came here before the war didn't even know there were any Finnish Baptists because they lived in communities where there was nothing but the state churches and that's all they knew. But we always felt that Christ's call was not so much to make church members but to make Christians. For example when we came to Minnesota we had really not planned in organizing a church at all. We were going to work with the First Baptist Church. But these people became saved and wanted their own church organization so we did organize the church. But we felt our main purpose has always been to preach the Gospel.

How do you explain the success of the Finnish Methodist Church, the Congregational and the Baptists. Why did Finns take to these Churches?

Because when they came from Finland so many of them were tired of paying taxes to the church. They had not seen the Christian love and social concern in the church in the homeland. So many of them had gone into the stream of politics. They had very little use for the church.
These churches you mentioned came to them with the word of love, and understanding. Their ministers worked hard on very small salaries. For example, when we came here we could not get a place to live in the city of Chism, we had to go out to Balkan Township. We put a couple of hundred dollars down on an old place there. My husband being a hard worker remodeled the house so by now it is a lovely home. It had a big yard where we had outdoor services where a 150 to 200 people were there for Sunday services. We realized that God had a purpose for putting us down in Balkan Township. Someone asked us where are you living now, because we lived from September when the children went to school to December right in the Sunday School rooms back here because we couldn't get a place to live. So we said we're out there in Balkan about two and a half miles out of town. In Balkan Township, no pastor has lived there, people of Balkan Township don't want to have anything to do with the church. They have the IWW or Communist speakers that bury them, they don't want anything to do with a minister. After we went there, there were very few burials by these political speakers. We would have these services which gave us an opportunity to speak to a class of people who didn't come to church but came to funerals. I was going to also say when my husband was working there blasting stones from under the house in order to make a basement, these people would come over from the community and say we have never seen a minister who would dirty his hands. They couldn't believe it. There was a couple who came and he was in his overalls and they asked did we come to the right place, we'd like to see Reverend Tervonen. This was about the second summer we had been there. He said well I'm Reverend Tervonen and they were floored, they couldn't hardly believe it. So we felt that god had a purpose when he sent us right there that it was a demonstration when Christ said he came not to be ministered but to minister.

Here is one of the things the Suomi Synod among other churches experiences antagonism between the working class and the church and there was a real clash of alienation. What was your feeling about IWW, Communism and so on? How did you relate to these people?

Well I sympathized with them because I knew why so many of them had left the church, they had no sympathy with the state church. Because I realize there was an emptiness of heart there. The reason they were bitter and disheartened was because they had been left with an empty heart. They had not found Christ, they had found a church that demanded rather than gave. Many times we were confronted with things like our neighbor's cow was taken for church taxes we would say even if the church has done things wrong you read the new Testament, Christ did not do things like that, this was not his principle and I'm sorry there are people in the church like that.