

## • NEWS-IN-ENGLISH

# The History of Finnish Americans Presented to Political Party Delegates from Finland

New York, NY  
Amerikan Uutiset  
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On November 4, 2019, the Consul General, Ambassador Mika Koskinen, hosted a sit down luncheon at his official residence in New York City for the purpose of a presentation by Robert Alan Saasto, Esq., President and founder of the Finnish American Lawyers Association, of the history of the Finns who came to the United States, with an emphasis on those settling in New York City.

Every year the Consulate hosts a program for political delegates to come to New York City to learn about political business cultural or UN affairs. The topics vary from year to year. One delegate is chosen by each of the political parties to make the trip, as well as one delegate from the UN Association. An interest was expressed in learning about the Finns who came to the USA and particularly to New York City.

Those in attendance included the Consul General, Ambassador Mika Koskinen; Deputy Consul General Maria Halava-Napoles; Anssi Vallius, Advisor for Cultural Affairs at Consulate General Office; Anders Adlercreutz, Member of Parliament 2015 to present, Swedish Parliamentary Group, chair 2019 to present; Fatim Diarra, Vice Chair, Green Party, 2019 to 2021; Riikka Pirkkalainen, Secretary General Centre Party; Janne Pesonen, National Coalition Party Secretary General 2016 to 2019; Riikka Keskitalo, Social Democratic Party, Service Director; Merja-Hannele Vuohelainen, Executive Director Social Democratic Women in Finland; Tiina Tuomela, chairperson of the Christian Democratic Women 2016 to present; Matias Turkki, Editor-in-chief for Perussuomalainen magazine and Suomen Uutiset; and Joona Mielonen, member of Kotka City Council and member of Board of Left Alliance.

Representing the New York City Finnish American groups were Eero Kilpi, President Finlandia Foundation, New York Chapter; and Jaana Rehnstrom, President Finland Center and Kotka Alliance.

Robert Alan Saasto gave an overview of the different immigration periods to the USA and the reasons.

The first immigrations were part of the Swedish settlement along the Delaware River in 1637. These Finns introduced the log cabins and the sauna to the area. In 1809 after Finland became a grand duchy of Russia, many Finns were part of the Russian fur trading expeditions in Alaska, which was then owned by Russia. After 1867, when Alaska was sold to the USA, many of those Finnish fur traders migrated south into Anchorage and Seattle.

## The major immigration in the 1860s

The major immigration of Finns commenced in the 1860s due to crop failures and famine, and extended into the 1920s, ending with restrictions placed on immigration due to the depression. It is estimated that 360,000 came from Finland to the USA during that time period.

Many went to work in the cooper and iron ore mines in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Ohio, as well as the coal mines in Pennsylvania, Montana, Wyoming and Washington. They became fishermen in Oregon, and worked in logging camps from Maine to Washington, Oregon, California and Michigan. Many obtained land when the US government passed the Homestead Act and gave acreage to farmers willing to work the land for at least 5 years.

The Finns were late in the land grab, and ended up with less desirable land, much like the land they had in Finland, requiring hard toil to survive. Finns settled in major cities including New York, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago. Life was very difficult, there was no gold on the streets of America. Approximately one third returned, and were generally looked down upon in Finland as the losers who left and could not make it.

## The Finns in Harlem

In the early 1900's and particularly the 1920s, many Finns settled in NYC because of the building boom and construction jobs available. Many joined the leftist labor groups.

There were two branches of socialist groups, one in midtown Manhattan and one uptown in Harlem. They merged in 1911 with 140 members. The group rented 2 floors of a building at 1941 Madison Avenue at 125th Street in

Harlem. The third floor was a large ballroom accommodating 500 people. Within 4 years the facility was overcrowded and fund raising commenced resulting in the purchase of the Fifth Avenue Hall at 2056 5th Avenue at 127th Street in Harlem in 1917. The three day opening ceremonies was standing room only. By 1921 membership rose to 914 members.

In 1921 the Socialist party split into the Communists and Socialists as an aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Approximately 500 of the 900 members left and became followers of the Communist system. The normal activities continued at the Fifth Avenue Hall: library, billiards room, restaurant, theater and dances.

The Finnish Progressive Society constructed the Labor Temple - Tyon Tempeli, a five story building, in 1924, at the corner of 126th Street and Lexington Avenue. It was modern with a new hall, swimming pool and sauna, meeting rooms, restaurant, stage, auditorium and roof garden for dancing and a pool room. The 1920s were very busy with plays and dances. During the depression years of the 1930s Finnish agents promised a better life and work in Russia and met at the Tempeli. In 1941 the 126th Street Hall became a section of the International Workers Order. In 1944 the Club was forced to give up the Labor Temple although the activities at the Finnish Temperance Hall until 1964.

Changes taking place in Harlem affected attendance at the functions of the Hall. Audiences of 800 decreased to 200. Most of the large population of Finns in Harlem moved to Brooklyn Sunset Park Finntown, Bronx, or upstate New York: Fishkill, Hopewell Junction, Lomala. In 1955 the building was sold to the Gospel Temple Church of God in Christ. The Fifth Avenue Hall was converted to a luxury condominium building in 2005.

## The Finns in Finntown Brooklyn

In the early 1900s until the 1960s, Sunset Park Brooklyn had up to 20,000 Finns in the neighborhood surrounding the Park. Finnish could be heard on the street. Finnish businesses served the community; Imatra Hall, the Socialist



The political party delegates from Finland visited New York early November. Robert A. Saasto, Esq., (3. from right) presented the history of the Finnish-Americans in the United States and New York area.

Hall, churches, restaurants, saunas, tailor, you name it. The Finns built and lived in the coops which were the first coop buildings in the United States. They pre-dated the coop laws in New York or the USA.

The first Finns who arrived in the early 1900s formed cooperative associations based upon socialist principles imported from Finland. A Board ran the building and each apartment or coop had a share or membership right. They were 4 stories high with 4 apartments on each floor. In 1916, Alku 1, which translates as Beginning 1, was the first coop built in the United States. Alku Toimon or 2 followed, and the building continued until eventually there were 24 Finnish Co-ops throughout Sunset Park, many surrounding the park. Mortgages were not permitted. Members belonged to the Association, all with different names and rules and regulations, many requiring new members to be of Finnish blood.

Closings were held in the basement after working hours, cash was exchanged, and new members received certificates of membership in one form or another. This continued into the 1960s but as time went on, the value of the apartments increased such that buyers needed mortgages and the banks would not lend unless the buildings converted to formal Coop status. The buyers ceased being Finns. The coops in these Finnish buildings are in high demand now and command large prices because of the quality and proximity to the park and the views.

By the 1970s into the 1980s the Finnish youth were not remaining in the neighborhood. No longer did immigrants come from Finland. The Finnish new-

paper New Yorkin Uutiset was sold to the Amerikan Uutiset in Florida in the early 1990s. The numerous Finnish businesses were closing or gone. Imatra Hall was sold in the early 1990s after celebrating it's 100th year of existence in 1992. In 1992 the street sign at 7th Avenue and 40th Street was changed to add Finlandia Street to commemorate the character of the neighborhood for the generations to come. Finntown became Chinatown.

## Alku 1 and 2, the Historic Sites in the US

In 2019 the National Register of Historic Places in the United States listed Alku 1 and Alku 2, located at 816 and 826 43rd Street, Brooklyn New York, as the first two coop buildings in the USA, built by Finnish immigrants, on the National Registry of Historic Places. Historical references in the USA and Finland were submitted to set forth historical proof to establish that in fact, (1) Alku 1 and Alku 2 were the first coop buildings in New York State and in the USA, which were built by Finnish immigrants; and (2) that the Finnish immigrants brought the concept of cooperative ownership to the United States.

## Robert Saasto's Finnish Immigrant Grandparents

Robert Saasto personalized the history of the Finns in the USA and NYC by using his grandparents, all of whom came in the early 1900s, as examples. His grandfather on his father's side, Onni Saastamoinen from Pihlpuudas, came because he was the youngest of 5, and therefore unlikely to receive the family farm because the custom then was that

the eldest got the farm, and the others had to fend for themselves. He settled in Cleveland and ran a chicken farm with his wife he met in Cleveland, Jennie Pulkkinen, who left Riitosari, an island south of Savonlinna, when she 19 years old. She worked as a cook in a rich person's home. Onni became a speaker for the IWW, the International Workers of the World. The Finns were educated and refused to submit to the harsh conditions in the logging camps and mines. They organized and led strikes. Jennie insisted on making her own way, divorced, and moved to Harlem to open a restaurant. She would later open a bar in the 1940s in Brooklyn by the piers and cater to the Scandinavian seamen. She made all the money in the family, sending her grandchildren to private schools to ensure a good education, and to become successful.

Robert Saasto's grandfather on his mother's side, Walter Aunio from Isokyro, came with his wife Hilda Latvala from Lapajarvi, with their 4 year daughter Irene Aunio, and settled in Finntown Sunset Park area in Brooklyn New York. Walter worked as a carpenter and as the bartender at the Finnish Imatra Hall. Hilda was the cook.

In the last census, 700,000 people indicated that they were of Finnish descent. According to one estimate, had the Finns never left Finland, the population in Finland would be over 7 million as opposed to just over 5 million.

The event was a perfect opportunity for the Finnish political delegates to get an overview of the Finns who came to the USA, and particularly to Harlem and Sunset Park in Brooklyn, in an