

FREEDOM

By Lissa Herweg



Quiet, suddenly, at last, quiet. No more roaring of tanks, blasts of cannons, rattle of rifles. No more shrill, piercing, terror-arousing screams of the air raid sirens, no more human targets' cries of pain. Blessed silence. Peace.

What is the price a nation is capable of paying for freedom? The question of what the nation was willing to pay never even arose. This nation paid dearly, was willing to pay dearly, but could pay no more. Eighty-six thousand dead, 60,000 soldiers disabled 400,000 refugees to resettle, \$1 billion in 1944 dollars in war reparations, Petsamo gone, Karelia gone, the total of twelve percent of the area, gone. Whole subdivisions of cities bombed, burned, gutted; unexploded bombs lying on the ground and in the ruins waiting to spread destruction and death. This is the price a nation of barely four million people paid. Gone, also, was the ill-founded hope of foreign aid in crises. "Remember, here you stand on your own ground, not relying on foreign aid" is engraved on the arch of the "King's Gate" at the entrance to the island fortress of Suomenlinna just outside Helsinki. Chiseled there some 260 years ago. How bitterly true that proved to be!

That day, the fourth of September, 1944 was a day of relief, joy, and deep sorrow; a day of pride and gratitude—and grief. The war was over. Finland had survived—torn, bleeding, and mutilated—but she was still alive. It was time to close the chapter and pull the remaining bits and pieces together. As so many times before, Finland had to face the ruins and build anew.

Liisa Herweg
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As a child, I remember playing on the empty blocks, not yet rebuilt, full of rubble, among which one might find a child's toy, pieces of what once had been a crystal vase or a beautiful piece of china, and old photograph, its edges charred, stained by smoke and water. I remember finding chunks of melted glass, melted by the heat of fires started by incendiary bombs, a tiny, beautifully painted doll's chest—and shrapnel. I remember walking in the city streets with my mother, and her warning me not to walk by the bombed blocks not yet torn down and that were surrounded by wooden fences, as a brick or a piece of mortar might fall. I remember having my clothes made from my mother's, my grandmother's and my aunts' old clothes—there was no new fabric. I remember my mother scolding me about my crawling on the floor on all fours, as new stockings were not available. I remember the time when shoe soles were made of wood and purses of woven paper, for there was no leather. I remember my mother going shopping with a bunch of cards tucked into her purse—ration cards. Coffee, sugar, butter, flour, milk, meat. Everything was rationed. When things were at their worst, milk was available only to families with children: one small glass of milk a day per child, adults none at all. I remember marveling over my first orange, I remember my first banana: green, I thought it was some strange kind of pickle. I remember the miracle of the first display lights in the store windows on Aleksanterinkatu, the main shopping street of Helsinki. That was something to expressly go to see after the total black-out enforced during the years of war. I remember—oh, how I remember, the war wounded: blind, burned, scarred, lacking arms and on crutches, and the pity, the respect, and gratefulness we all felt for them. And they were so many!

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They are all gone now, but I cannot forget the sight of them in the years after the war!

Today, the scars of war are hard to find. But some small ones, just enough to bring it back, not often, but sometimes, can be seen. Enough to make you remember that what is today, was dearly paid for; so hold it dear, relish it, and nurse it, take care of it, for freedom can be such a fragile vessel, such a tender plant.

On the granite pedestals of the stature of the Three Smiths just outside Stockmann's department store and that of Snellman, outside the Bank of Finland, some chips are missing. Reminders of war, determination, and victory even in defeat. The most precious, the most cherished of all, what makes life worth living: freedom was retained.

Envision a city in the snowy night with candles lit in every window of every building. Envision a huge, white, floodlit cross against the black, cold, winter night's sky. See all these young men and women standing there, in front of the cross in silence holding live torches in their hands. See the rows upon rows of small, white marble slabs stating simply a name, date of birth, and date of death. We are at Hietaniemi cemetery where the men from Helsinki who died defending what is most precious to us all are buried. The day is Independence Day, December 6th, the time is 6 p.m. The students of The University of Helsinki have come here, as they come every year this day, this time, to remember and to pay their respects to those who gave us our freedom—to whom we owe our very existence. The small slabs mark the graves of those men and boys. The big white cross marks the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

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Slowly the flaming torches form a procession in the night. In silence they pass through the city streets bordered by buildings with lit candles in every window. They are headed towards the Senate Square. The University's windows, the Senate building's and the Police Headquarters' windows are all candlelit. The Cathedral, high above the square, shines floodlit, tall and white, against the black sky. On the steps leading to the Cathedral, about half way up, is a podium trimmed with spruce wreathes. The Archbishop of Helsinki stands on the podium. He starts a hymn—a hymn so very well known to all from times of trouble, the hymn played over the radio when news was broadcast about the Soviet offensive starting on November 30, 1939, the hymn that was played over the radio when news about the devastating conditions of peace, September 4, 1944 was broadcast, the hymn that sends chills up and down every Finn's spine, the hymn the Finns feel strongly tied to their destiny as a nation—"A Mighty Fortress is Our Lord." The Mayor of Helsinki speaks. He addresses the people, not with a fancy "Ladies and Gentlemen," but simply, "Citizens."

"Maamme," the national anthem is sung, and the students and spectators leave quietly, recollecting, reminiscing, understanding that it is a miracle that Finland still was free after the war as the only free European country that shared a border with the U.S.S.R. in 1939.

Things are different now, since the U.S.S.R's dissemblance. The threat from the east has taken a slightly less detectable form. However, Russia's present leadership has clearly let it be known, that is not in Finland's interest to join NATO. So be vigilant, Finland! Be watchful, Finland! Remember your past, and do not allow your past to become a mirror of your future. Remember!

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