

Risto Pönniö

# The evacuee girl's centennial journey



Biography

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From Harlu to Kotka

Biography

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## **C O N T E N T S**

**Forewords 9**

**Läskelä 14**

**Everyday life in childhood 24**

**Farmhouse seasons 37**

**The end of childhood 47**

**Broken idyll 57**

**Back in Läskelä 69**

**Goodbye Läskelä 81**

**On the threshold of adulthood 88**

**Immigrate to Sweden 100**

**Return to Finland 108**

**The beginning of a new life 116**

**Life stabilization 126**

**Fulfillment of happiness 136**

**Golden middle age 146**

**Everything changes 155**

**Towards home 161**

**Time without goodbyes 170**

**To a new home 176**

**The beginning of the new millennium 183**

**Time for detachment 189**

**Security of your own home 196**

**Last move 202**

**Final words 213**

**Sources 215**







## FOREWORDS

The bus rocked on the main road, winding along the poor-quality oil-gravel surface. The journey had been well over two hours already, and the news had been shared with those sitting nearby, and the places of residence, now and then. The thick, mixed forest blocked the view to the sides, and the road ahead seemed to repeat the same unpredictable rhythm, which was incoherent and bumpy. If the knocking of the diesel engine, the howling of the wind, and the rough crunch of the asphalt hadn't penetrated the bus, one could have heard the various chirps, whimpers, and squeals of the surrounding nature and felt the proximity and smell of the great body of water. It was early summer 2013.

Not yet-not quite yet. The anticipation boiled down to the quietening of the chatter, impatient peeking at the right side of the bus, whispers, and taking the hand of the person sitting next to you. For some, this was their first trip, and for those who had already experienced it before, this moment — the opening of a large expanse between the trees — was the first harbinger of anticipation on the way to the fulfillment of happiness. A fulfillment that had been dreamed of, but which had not been considered possible now or perhaps ever-after all, Ladoga Karelia had been a forbidden area for Finns since the evacuations of the Continuation War.

Risto had come home from elementary school with his twin brother Sakari sometime in the mid-1960s when their mother had invited Mrs. Helka Vilkki to their house for afternoon coffee. The coffee was served in the living room rather than on the oilcloth on the kitchen table, and there were various pastries on offer, 'seven kinds' as had been the custom in Karelia. The ladies had hardly even noticed the boys' arrival, as their eyes were glued to the large photographic book opened on the white tablecloth, which they were studying side by side, their backs hunched. Although the boys had not yet paid attention to the book that had just come from the press, with the word 'Harlu' printed in large gold letters on the blue leather spine, it had later been given a place of honor in the middle of the living room bookshelf.

The boys later learned that the Harlu municipality was located in Ladoga Karelia, and that the Läskele settlement had developed there due to industrialization, right on the shores of Lake Ladoga, in its northernmost part. The Jänisjoki River flowed through Läskele, in the delta of which the Läskele wood grinding mill, sawmill, and paper mill had been built in the first decades of the 20th century. The boys' grandfather, Johannes Pieviläinen, had earned extra money in the paper mill's warehouse, which was a source of income for the everyday life of a small farming house of five children in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in winter, when there was no agricultural work and the family's mother, Helmi, and the older children had taken care of the farm animals.

But that early winter during the budding boom of the 1960s had been the initial impetus for the awareness

that there was one original home for the mother in the world, a fulfillment of happiness and security, which no subsequent residence, home, or community could fully replace. For children under ten years old, their own home had been the best and safest thing that existed. Still, their mother's longing for somewhere else had brought a vague, dark additional nuance to the domestic happiness in which the boys had grown up since birth.

A fleeting flash, the refraction of the sun's rays from the almost calm surface of the narrow bay, made the bus passengers whisper and ask if this was it. The bus made another left turn, climbed up the slope, and curved back to the right towards the southeast until it opened up - the great sea, Ladoga. Some held their breath, some exclaimed loudly and rushed to the right side of the bus to admire the expanse delimited by the jagged coastline.

As if from one mouth, without prior agreement and spontaneously, the song "In the Villages of Karelia" resounded into the air. Mother had sung it countless times alone and together with friends, at meetings of Karelians in different parts of Finland, and now on this bus. For each of the passengers on the bus, the song meant their own, intimate memory of their childhood home and family, its fields and pastures, but now, sung together, it also meant an inseparable sense of community - the Karelianness of Ladoga.

This was already the eleventh trip to her homeland for the mother, and she thought it would be her last. Risto had been with his mother on her first trip to her homeland in 1990, the last full year of the Soviet

Union's existence, during Midsummer, and now on the bus they both knew what to expect. The houses had been demolished to the ground and the best grain fields had already been covered in hay in 1990. Now they were overgrown with mixed forest undergrowth, while the less nutritious bog fields cleared by Grandpa Johannes were overgrown with unkempt 50-year-old dense forest. The home birch, which in 1990 had still been visible from the stump of the ridge above all the surrounding trees far into the fields of the former industrial community with its hanging branches, was now, almost a quarter of a century later, almost completely rotted, except for a few green lower branches.

The village of Läskelä in the foothills of Lake Ladoga, surrounded by an agricultural society, was the frame of reference of childhood that defined Sirkka's world and against which she always reflected her life and made comparisons, whether it was her early youth and adulthood as an evacuee in Ostrobothnia, her years as a migrant worker in Gothenburg, Sweden, or her life after starting a family and settling down in Karhula, Kotka. Although Sirkka was unjustly and violently forced to leave Karelia, Karelia did not leave her. On the contrary, the more years Sirkka accumulated - when even the last childhood friend and relative who had seen the war had been taken one after another to different parts of the country and passed away, the last being her younger brother Lauri in January 2022 - the more time she spent reminiscing Karelia, recounting her own memories and unraveling the string of pearls of memories for those who wanted to.



## L Ä S K E L Ä

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a series of rapidly growing industrial settlements were established on the banks of the Jänisjoki River, which flows from Lake Jänisjärvi to Lake Ladoga. The river valley, which was rapidly separating from other nearby areas, began to establish its own self-government in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The river valley became a powerful industrial center focused on wood processing, around which the new Harlu municipality was established in 1922, separating it from the extensive lands of the Sortavala rural municipality and later annexing additional areas from the municipalities of Suistamo and Ruskeala.

Harlu municipality was dominated by the Jänisjoki River, and its fast-flowing rapids had been a good place to establish industrial plants. Of course, there were also a large number of farmers in the Harlu area, but the proportion of industrial workers in the population was exceptionally high. Three significant factories had been established along the Jänisjoki River: the Hämekoski factories, the Leppäkoski factories and the Läskelä factories.

The closest city to Harlu was Sortavala, from which Harlu could be approached by land through the villages of Sortavala rural municipality. The dirt road wound between the forests and the shores of Lake Ladoga, sometimes deviating deeper inland near the village of Helylä, following ancient routes, and sometimes extending to the shores of Lake Ladoga in the

area of the villages of Kirjavalahi and Rautalahti. The distance from Sortavala to the village of Läskelä was about 30 kilometers.

In the summer, the journey could also be made by the Siro inland steamship along the archipelago route to Hiidenselä and Rautalahti, from where the journey continued by road via the villages of Heinäjoki and Harlu to Leppäkoski, the municipal and parish center of the municipality, and to Hämekoski and from there on to Suistamo and Värtsilä. From Rautalahti, another road led eastwards, first to Honkakylä, which was Sirkka's home village, and then to Läskelä. From Läskelä, the road continued eastwards to Impilahti, a neighboring municipality of Harlu, and further to Salmi and Suojärvi. A more direct water route from Sortavala to Läskelä was possible by the Voima ship, which came directly to Läskelä Joensuu and from there to the village of Läskelä.

The third option to travel to Harlu was by train from the north through the Ruskeala municipality area. The railway ran from the Maaselä junction station to Pirttipohja and further to Jänisjärvi. From here, the journey could be continued either via Suistamo to Suojärvi or south to Hämekoski and from there to Läskelä, from where the railway continued via Impilahti towards the Soviet border.

The nature of Harlu was rich and varied due to its proximity to Lake Ladoga. The southern part of the municipality was connected to the shores of Lake Ladoga, where the shore cliffs and grassy bays varied. On the northeastern border of Harlu was Lake Jänisjärvi, from where the River Jänisjoki continued after



Läskelä as River Läskelänjoki. The river had several rapids, the most important of which were Hämekoski, Leppäkoski, Läskelänkoski and Läskelän Joensuu Rapids. Near these regional centers were villages where agriculture and livestock farming were practiced. The nature of Harlu municipality was small-scale, with woodlands, lakes, ponds, mountains, and hills varying. Nature was rich in species and lush, and the fields in the valleys were stone-free and fertile clay soils. Many deciduous trees such as maple, linden, and elm thrived wild in the forest. The highest points on the terrain were Pötsövaara and Kilketti in the village of Harlu, Piispanvuori in Rautalahti, and Hiidenvuori in Joensuu.

Harlu had an area of about 300 km<sup>2</sup> and by the time of the wars, its population had risen from about 5,000 people in the year of its foundation to almost 8,000. Harlu did not represent the old typical Finnish municipality, in which one central place such as a church village, would have been the center of activity. Rather, it consisted of Harlu, which was the official village name of Leppäkoski, as well as Läskelä and Hämekoski.

Harlu's oldest village was Läskelä, which was located southeast of Leppäkoski, only 6 km away. The Jänisjoki River divided Läskelä into two village groups, eastern and western. It has been said that the village of Läskelä and its surroundings were perhaps the most beautiful place in the Jänisjoki Valley in terms of nature and scenery, with rapids, sunny backwaters, and high spruce slopes.



As if from one mouth, without prior agreement and spontaneously, the song "In the Villages of Karelia" echoed into the air. For each bus passenger from their home region, the song meant their own, intimate memory of their childhood home and family, its fields and pastures. Still, now, sung together, it also meant an inseparable sense of community - Ladoga Karelianism.

What is the secret to longevity? It is a question that is most often posed to 100-year-olds. It is difficult to give an explanation based solely on historical background and the experiences of siblings or one's parents. Early youth and adulthood, ruined by war and the deprivation of one's roots from the soil of lost Karelia for the Soviet Union, could not have been a safe starting point for a long life.

Finns born in 1925 were the youngest entire generation that had to bear the responsibility that adults had been given for defending Finland both on the war and home fronts. This biography explores the survival story of one representative of that generation from the war years to the present day.

Risto Pönniö is a Finnish author who, in this biography, describes the life of his mother Sirkka Pönniö as the son of an evacuee, a listener, and a scribe.

