

# Mommy Goes to Language Camp

by Maija Moilanen Rothenberg

I've packed a kid off to summer camp at least a dozen times. My son went to wilderness and music camps; my daughter, to a series of teenage camps in Vermont, the last of which she wistfully refers to as Coed Naked Shower Camp.

In my fifties, with both kids grown and gone, I finally decided it was my turn. I headed north to Bemidji, Minnesota, for Finnish Adult Week at Concordia Language Villages. My husband and I were planning a trip to Finland a few months later to look up some of my second cousins, and I wanted to be able to communicate.

During the summer Concordia Language Villages offers programs in thirteen languages for kids ages 7 to 18. In the off-season, the spring and the fall, it serves adults wanting to brush up on their Finnish, French, German, Norwegian, Spanish, and Swedish. Once you get there, the actual language classes are grouped by fluency, so everyone from beginners to advanced students is welcome.

All four of my grandparents emigrated in the early 1900s from Finland to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The U.P., with its rocky terrain and unbearable winters, must have been the result of a worldwide search by my grandparents for a place as harsh and inhospitable as the one they came from.

So I grew up hearing Finnish, a language that hasn't quite taken the world by storm. Less than one tenth of one percent of the world's population speaks Finnish—and for good reason: it's ridiculously complicated. Finnish has no articles and no grammatical future tense. It lacks what we, in English, consider prepositions; instead, endless prefixes and suffixes are added to the root word. So the word for "house" (*talo*) changes depending on whether you mean my house (*taloni*), your house (*talosi*), their house (*heidään talonsa*), in the house (*talossa*), under the house (*talon alla*), or over my dead body.

Before language camp my Finnish was limited to phrases I heard often as a kid, such as "come and eat," "sit down nicely," and "make your mouth still." I also could count from 1 to 99 (don't ask me for the word for 100) and let rip with enough Finnish curse words to bluster my way out of an argument. I figured my husband and I would need more than that in northern Finland.

A friendly woman from Concordia Language Villages picked me up at the Bemidji Airport. I knew I was headed for the right place because the other camper in the van, a retired program administrator from the Smithsonian, was a dead ringer for my Aunt Rauha.

The Language Villages house the adult programs in four permanent residential villages on or near Turtle River Lake. Waldsee houses the German program, Skogfjorden the Norwegian one, El Lago del Bosque the Spanish program, and Salolampi houses the French, Swedish, and Finnish programs. A fifth residential village, Lac du Bois, is used just by the kids in the summer.

The accommodations at Salolampi were clean and comfortable. We slept in same-sex log cabins, four or five campers to a cabin, each of us in a private curtained-off little room with a bunk bed and desk. A tall stack of fresh towels was delivered every morning, and we shared the two bathrooms. The cabins had been manufactured in Finland, shipped to Minnesota, and assembled onsite.

The main lodge, modeled after a 19th century Finnish railway station, houses the kitchen and dining room, library, classrooms, and a few private residential rooms for couples traveling together. When you've had enough Finnish for one day, you can go out on the large deck with your cell phone and phone home.

We had three language sessions each day interspersed with meals and snacks (all from authentic Finnish recipes), games, crafts, cultural presentations, films, music, and guest speakers, and dancing. The teachers were all fluent in Finnish; one was a native speaker. Everyone took a Finnish nickname for the week.

I woke up at 5:30 a.m. on day 2. A full moon was hanging over the treetops across the lake, and I was aware of random Finnish syllables rolling through my head; I couldn't even tell if they were real words or not. By day 3 I had figured out enough grammar and vocabulary to put

together simple sentences. My first attempt: *Minna hautua kyyppis* (which means, "My head is empty").

I would've been OK if I had had the sense to stick with the beginners. Instead, at meals, I plunked myself down at the Finnish-only table, signified by a little blue and white Finnish flag, where the rule was: No English. I tried to make sense of the conversation volleying back and forth. From the nonstop vowels and consonants streaming past at top speed, I plucked out the words for "milk," "twenty-seven," and "now." Not a lot to go on.

A woman named Päivi tried to include me in the conversation. She kept saying something over and over in Finnish. It was probably something like, "Do you want more potatoes?" or "Please pass the butter." But for all I knew, she could have been telling me my chair was on fire. I stared at her blankly. Exasperated, she finally switched to English.

"Say something. Anything! At least gesture!" she said.

"*En ymmärrä*," I muttered, which means, "I don't understand."

I could see I'd be using that phrase a lot in the coming days.

Surprisingly, not all the participants were Finnish-American. Two Mormon guys from Utah had learned Finnish when they were sent to Finland as teenaged missionaries. One continued to use his Finnish in the U.S. military reserves.

A medical librarian from Pennsylvania had heard a Finnish children's choir perform when it passed through his area, and he fell in love with all things Finnish. One

woman collected languages as easily as some people collect cookbooks.

A few participants were married to Finlanders (as Finnish-Americans affectionately call themselves) and were attending the camp in self-defense.

The first few nights I was too tired to sauna. Then one evening after dinner the air was still and the loons were calling back and forth on the lake, and I realized there'd never be a better time. My cabin mates and I went shivering down the sandy road toward the lake in our swimsuits, bathrobes, and flip-flops, telling stories about our families and gossiping about which classmates had sneaked away to a bar in Bemidji the night before.

On the sauna porch the benches were covered with little piles of bathrobes, towels, watches, and eyeglasses. When we stepped inside, the heat took our breath away and we couldn't see a thing. We huddled by the door for a minute, so we wouldn't walk blindly into the blazing stove, and waited for our eyes to adjust to the dim moonlight coming in from the window that looked out onto the lake.

"Who's here? Oh, hi, Tapani. Hi, Matti."

Put two Finlanders in a room together and the bad jokes start within five minutes. Put them in a sauna together and the jokes start immediately.

Eino and Toivo are riding in a car.

"Hey, Toivo."

"Yah, Eino?"

"Stick your head out the window and look at my lights, ey?" says Eino. "I hit a tree last night and banged up the front end. Are the blinkers still working?"

Toivo sticks his head out the window and takes a hard look.

"Yah... No... Yah... No... Yah... No...."

By the end of the week I was able to picture in my head the (probable) spelling of the Finnish words I was hearing all around me. This visualization is important to the way I learn. My vocabulary had grown only a little, but my understanding of the language had deepened considerably. By the time I left camp, the foreign syllables tumbling out of my mouth felt a little less, well, foreign.

Was it worth it? Two months later, when my husband and I sat down in our hotel restaurant in Suomossalmi, a Finnish village about 200 kilometers south of the Arctic Circle and 30 kilometers west of the Russian border, I said to the waitress, "*Saisimmeko yhden kalaa yhdelle, pihviä yhdelle, ja kahvia kahdelle?*"

I'll be damned if she didn't bring exactly what I'd ordered: one fish dinner, one steak dinner, and two coffees.

One caution about Finnish language camp, though. I was there in early May, only a week after the ice had gone off the lake. If you decide, like some of us did, to jump into the 38-degree water after poaching yourself in the 180-degree sauna for a half hour, the loud crash you'll hear will be the sound of your pores slamming shut.

Not the same as Coed Naked Shower Camp.

Better.

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## **If You Go**

The six nights of adult language camp cost \$450–\$550, plus your transportation to Bemidji. Northwest is the only carrier flying into Bemidji, and you connect through Minneapolis. The Concordia Language Villages provide roundtrip transportation from/to the Bemidji airport, bus station, and local motels for a modest fee.

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