

Grandmother Liisa by Anna Nicholas

When I knew her she was a little lady of stocky build, very neat and with her grey hair combed until every hair stayed in place, then braided and worn in a bun in the back. She was always very plainly dressed in clothes of her own making, seemingly cut from the same pattern, differing only in color or weight. "Mumma" as we called her, had large deep-set piercing blue eyes and a fine aquiline nose which always put us in mind of pictures of Queen Victoria. Her hands were unusually soft and white. Every evening before retiring she rubbed them carefully with white vaseline and always used "wool soap" as she called it when washing anything. She was an expert seamstress and tailor, a "bone setter", and a masseuse. She was also deeply religious and well versed in the Bible, which she quoted at every opportunity.

In a crowd she would have passed unnoticed, yet she proved she was of sterner stuff. She gave her place in a lifeboat to save a young woman when the "Empress of Ireland" sank fifty years ago, in the upper reaches of the St. Lawrence River with most of her passengers on board. Knowing her, I can well imagine her saying to the young woman, "Go my child, and God's Peace go with you."

Grandmother Liisa was born in Finland of Finnish parentage, the youngest in a family of seven children. In her youth she was a tiny slim lady, less than five feet tall, with heavy red hair and fine, fine skin that redheads have, lavishly sprinkled with freckles. She married a man twenty years her senior, who left her widowed at the age of forty with one child, my mother, to bring up.

Once on our many walks in the field she paused, and laughing merrily, with her blue eyes twinkling, she told me of sitting on her husband's knee and stroking his long brown silky beard and wondering why she married him. Years later, but before she came to make her home with us, she was married again, this time a sailor nineteen years her junior. He left on a ship to Peru, South America and never was heard of again.

Mumma often told us tales of her life in Finland, which was not an easy place to live in at that time because of continuous wars. Finland in the early days was shuttled between Russia and Sweden for a period of nearly 600 years. Food was scarce and comforts few.

Once during her childhood while her country was at war with Russia, her parents took what few possessions remained to them and hid her under a huge pile of hay in the back of the wagon. Their horse was halted and the Russian soldiers questioned them, letting them go on but not before poking in the hay with bayonets. Luckily the little red head was not hurt.

During the famine that followed they ate black bread made of ground bark. White turnips replaced the potatoes when they were eaten or taken from them by the Russians.

In peace years the wealthy and learned people who owned most of the land, hired the others to work for them as was the custom in most European countries. They were hired by the year and often for three year periods. A yearly wage usually amounted to what is equal to \$3.00 in the United States. That included keep. The food was very simple, but anyway they ate. There were groups for indoor and outdoor work, so each became specialists of a sort in time. Grandmother wove and sewed.

Church was very important, so early on Sunday morning they all went by boat. Whole villages went in what were called "Church Boats."

Each went bare-footed, carrying their Sunday shoes tied together and over their arms, to be put on when they landed close to the church. The more the shoes squeaked the better the young folks liked them, grandmother related.

Most traveling was done by boat. When the families gathered to attend the funeral of an older member it sometimes served two purposes. If a wedding was to be held in the near future it was customary to wait three or four days while preparations were hurriedly made, so the young couple could repeat their marriage vows while the relatives and minister were there, saving a long trip as they lived mostly in wooded roadless areas.

Within the twenty-five years that grandmother made her home with us, she made two visits back to Finland and was on her third and final trip when she sailed on the ill-fated Empress of Ireland

She was the only passenger from Calumet, Michigan.

My dad provided her with all the comforts of country living, but being of a very independant nature she left periodically to visit her many friends in town, enjoy all the church meetings and to work a bit at her many trades. She enjoyed people, and was a good judge of character. She was witty and full of life, happiest in group gatherings.

"Mumma" was no ordinary person. There were times when she gathered groups of people around her, simply by sitting down on a low stool or straight chair whenever there was a group gathering of Finnish people. Then she would begin talking from the Bible in her well modulated voice and in no time it became a prayer meeting.

As we children were confirmed we were presented with a Testament and hymnal printed in Finnish, autographed in her quaint but legible handwriting. "Use them," she reminded us, "don't just look at them."

Grandmother Liisa never learned to speak English, but somehow was always able to make her wants known in the stores. It wasn't her way to flap her arms and crow like a rooster, nor cluck like a hen when she needed eggs as one old lady did. She just pounded on the counter with her fist and repeated in Finnish what she wanted, each time a little louder until one of the smiling clerks, offering one item after another finally caught on.

Then contentedly she'd pick up her many bundles and bags and trudge off to the street car. The fare was five cents to the end of the line. From there the road was downhill all the way to the farm, a distance of about a mile.

We kids welcomed her with all the joy of childhood. We older ones ran to meet her offering to carry her many bundles, knowing she would bring a little treat, very often a small red and white striped paper bag with a nickels worth of peppermints in it.

She was refreshed in mind and spirit, bubbling over with bits of news to tell mother about happenings in town, spiced with a few choice bits of gossip, to be hashed and re-hashed over numerous cups of good Finnish coffee.

Grandmother Liisa's room was upstairs, and we considered it a great privilege to be invited up to partake of her cooking or baking. It was completely furnished as a one room apartment would be today.

She slept in a Finnish bed. It was long and narrow and in two sections. The bed proper had four little wooden legs and the other part which pulled out resembled a drawer and had two little legs. It was all made of wood and had no springs. During the day it was pushed together with all the bedding folded in, until it looked almost as tall as she. The head and foot board were high and no one ever thought of sitting on it--perish the thought.

"Muma's" summer clothing was made of sprigged calico which sold at two yards for a shilling with the thread thrown in. Long sleeves to her wrists and full skirts to her heels. A narrow band around the neck served as a collar. The summers in the Upper Peninsula are cool, so she wore a light weight shawl.

Winters she bundled herself into a dark grey woolen shawl of her own weaving. It was handsomely bordered with a deep lighter grey fringe and worn Indian fashion, held in tight with her arms. On her head she wore a soft woolen kerchief. She never wore a hat nor a coat but dressed as they did in Finland in her day.

Being slightly pigeon toed, it seemed that her narrow toed shoes twinkled when she walked, under her long woolen skirts that fairly swept the ground. The hems of the skirts were finished off with brush braid to save wear and tear on them.

When "Muma" first came to live with us, she was amazed at the few clothes people had. "They were forever washing", she said. "How much more simple it would be to have dozens of everything, then one need wash only a few times a year as they did in her homeland", she complained.

She came with trunkfuls of everything in the line of wearing apparel and linens--home-grown, home-spun, and hand-woven and home-made. They seemed to last for years.

Her choicest aprons were especially noticeable. They were long and quite narrow, woven into intricate designs, mostly in shades of blue with white. A heading in the top had a cord through it to allow the apron to fit anyone.

by the Blacka one was a woman with her arms tightly clasped around a child.
** the woman who wrote Danish ship is because the Caterer paper printed that. It was a Norwegian ship*

When Grandmother Liisa finally made up her mind to go back to Finland to spend her remaining days with her oldest sister who was ninety years of age and blind she wasted no time.

As was her nature she made her final arrangements, and after tearful goodbyes were said, stout hearted "Muma" left in the old horse drawn surrey with the fringe on top which we rode to church. It was a warm spring day. The apple trees were in bloom wafting their fragrance towards us as we stood in a little group. She had her chin up and her back very straight, ready to face come what may.

The Empress of Ireland was built in Glasgow, Scotland in 1906 and was valued at \$2,000,000. The captain's name was Kendall and the number of passengers was reported to be 1,387 with quite a few in the steerage returning to visit European homes.

When 150 miles from Quebec on the St. Lawrence River not yet having reached the ocean, another vessel appeared on the scene. It was the Danish Collier Storstad. Captain Kendall signalled the Danish ship when two miles away as a precaution against collision. The Collier kept on through fog that had closed in, and soon after the two vessels had sighted each other, it rammed the Empress of Ireland when the latter was virtually motionless. Then, despite his plea to the master of the collier that he run his engine full speed ahead, to keep the hole in the liner's side plugged with the Storstad's bow, said Captain Kendall, "the Danish vessel backed away." The water rushed in, and the Empress sank within fifteen minutes in ninety feet of water and in sight of land.

When they collided, the Empress listed under the severe crash and water rushed into the steerage quarters. A few minutes later there was an explosion that shook the water. People were shot out of the ship by the impact. There was only time to launch four life saving boats of the thirty or forty on board. The rest floated aimlessly--empty of survivors. A few people were picked up by the Storstad, twenty-two died of injuries and exposure. Of the 1,387 who were stated to be on board 954 perished.

Only thirty women were saved. Of the 300 bodies picked up by the Bimoska one was a woman with her arms tightly clasped around a child.

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When the pilot boat Eureka arrived from Father's Point, there was only floating wreckage to be seen, a few rafts and life boats silently drifting down the river.

A monument in Canada is the mute reminder of the wreck of the Empress, and of all who perished with her.

Grandmother Liisa left us many happy memories of the only grandmother our house full of kids ever knew.

Her bravery and courage are a never ending inspiration of what is known in Finland as "Sisu" meaning inner spiritual strength and gumption.

It all happened fifty years ago on May 28th in 1914.

Anna Nicholas, Author

Aunt Anna was Grandma Grant's older sister,

Anna was 20 years older than Grandma Grant.