

## **Finland**

In 1917 Finland became an independent republic in northern Europe bounded by Sweden, Norway, Russia and Baltic Sea. Finland with the capital Helsinki is sparsely populated with five million people. The country's tablelands are covered with forests. It has 60000 lakes and 6500 islands.

Finland has a national Lutheran Church.

## Impi Freeland

I was born on 28.7.1913 in America as the oldest child to the Finnish migrant parents. My mother's older sister came to America first. She was a cook to goldminers in Alaska. Later she married a farmer near Seattle. When she returned to Finland she told everybody about the wonderful America. She took her sister, my mother, and her brother with her. Others followed.

Mum was a short stout woman. She must have looked exotic among blond Finns with her white complexion and dark hair. She was afraid that I will inherit her short legs but I have long legs and needed them to walk long distances to school.

Mum met dad in Seattle. They got married and I was on my way.

Dad wasn't impressed by America and couldn't wait for me to be born so we could board the boat and go to Fiji. As a girl I was a disappointment and a useless encumbrance to my parents.

My father was a romantic adventurer and a great talker. I must have inherited this trait from him. I never had time for hobbies but I looked forward to the train journey from work so I could talk to my fellow travellers.

Dad got a job in Fiji. When the ship arrived to Fiji mum was scared of the natives. They sailed ahead to Australia and my father fell in love with Australia. The fertile land and warm climate attracted both my parents.

Australia accepted northern European migrants after the WWI so as a child I was surrounded by migrants. Germans congregated around each other and so did Ukrainians and Finns. There were also thousands of British migrants.

My home was always Finnish but the world around me was English Australia. I have never been to Finland and at 88 I think I will never go.

Finnish was my first language because my mother never learned to speak much English. Finnish is easy because it is a phonic language. English is difficult as a second language because you say one thing and write another. I learned English naturally as a child and have become an interpreter for mum and other people.

I inherited some property in Finland and I wish that I could go and see the country of my parents. I heard so much about Finland that I feel like I know every inch of it.

I wasn't interested in Finland while I was young but with age I suppose there comes a need to belong and to be able to say who you are. One needs to find a place in the life's chain of the clan. My son Paul showed some interest in his heritage while girls were never interested in anything but themselves. Maybe girls are less interested in the past than boys. Maybe it is a boy's thing to search for roots and meaning and belonging. Death often makes you think of the clan that lives on when one dies.

My father insisted that we become Australians as quickly as possible. It has always been implied that those poor migrants were an unhappy lot but we

weren't really. Most quickly acquired a laid back lazy Australian lifestyle, love of the sunshine, wilderness, and the untouched beauty of nature.

We did not celebrate much because dad became an atheist. He refused to wait for God to fix things. He planned and did things for himself. He wasn't particularly energetic or capable or industrious but he was a thinker and a dreamer.

I think one must be mad to leave one's home and go to live in another country. If God is kind to you and keeps you healthy and strong you may survive. My father didn't.

My father and his friend Budsy bought a hundred acres of land on the outskirts of Sydney. Budsy earned some money by cutting railway sleepers while dad cleared the land. Dad sifted the good black soil through his fingers and declared to his family: You will never starve on this land. This land will feed you. And it did. We had no government help and nobody else to turn to so we had to look after ourselves.

People mistook Dad for a German because he spoke German so it was hard for him to find employment while England was at war with Germany during the WWI.

Mum produced another baby girl to dad's utter disgust.

After the First World War Australia was swamped by pommy whingers. The ones not killed in the war must have been shafted to Australia.

I believe that they starved in England and became incapacitated. They were not physically strong and bone-lazy as well but would pinch anything they could reach over the fence. They were hopeless. We wondered how they managed to survive. I learned later on, that most had no working class background. English society probably wanted to get rid of them so they paid their passage to Australia. The poor English migrants came from slums in England and have never seen a seed put into the ground and reap the reward for it. They were disadvantaged in that way.

It was fun for us to grow our food. We always bought land but these other people may never have felt the satisfaction of having land and growing what they needed. Eventually they learned to work.

People these days are becoming lazy, spoilt and weak. They are waiting for handouts so they don't have to dirty their hands with work. They don't even know how to help themselves. I remember a lady in Sydney who had a thin strip of land in front of her house and she grew all their vegies on it.

Everything changed when European migrants began coming to Australia because they wanted to come and because they saw great opportunities in Australia. They saw that the land is fantastic and they could grow things and they were willing and able to work. Europeans had to pay their own way.

Usually the whole family saved to get one of theirs in to the New World. That person was responsible for repayment of that debt in some way.

We always regarded Germans as more advanced in culture and technology but people never really like them. My father spoke glowingly about Germans. Nearby was a settlement of soldiers that returned from the WWI. They resented dad standing up for Germans. Dad was a union man, a good speaker but not really practical or political. He was not dedicated to any particular cause he was just a gregarious type who liked to impress.

There were also Italians. In my father's opinion Italians were wonderful because they managed to grow wonderful food. They prospered with hard work not like people do these days by cheating each other. Mum just scoffed at dad and whispered that Italians are Catholics. She told me to keep away from them and not to chase Italian boys. All the offshoots of Catholic Church hate Catholics because of their power. Italians were very industrious; they grew everything, managed well and had large families.

Mum was prejudiced against blacks, Jews and Catholics.

When dad died we had no one to help us so mum helped in the house of these Italian families and they kept us supplied with best of food. There were few Eastern and Southern Europeans at that time in Australia.

My father was enchanted by Australia. Next to our lot of land was a big paddock of wattle trees. Dad was mesmerised by the blaze of its golden beauty reflected in the sun. God's own given country, he romanticised while mum sweated and moaned over the washing and the hard work on the land. I don't think we would ever have survived without my father's dreaming. What a wonderful land, a fairyland, dad went on while mum toiled in the paddock.

I am always intrigued with the way things grow and how every seed knows what to become. To me and my family land meant survival and a source of food. I always lived on the land that fed us so we never felt poor. The family next to us in Sydney had the same land we had but they never cleared it. They always reached over the fence to get our fruit and vegetables while my dad admired the glory of their golden wattle trees.

Dad built our first home with a proper underground sauna like they have in Finland. The heat was contained underground, it was like an oven. Cleanliness was very important in our home. Mum scrubbed the wooden floor every week until it was white. When I started working I bought some varnish and painted the floorboards so we didn't have to scrub any more. Dad cleared our land of every tree so we could grow vegetables and make money. He gave things away. He grew enough food to feed an army so he gave it away to neighbours in basket-fulls. No one in our family ever made money. We never had money but we never went hungry either. Dad couldn't believe how cheap sugar was in Australia. He bought a whole bag of it and we ate it. I believe that we damaged our teeth with sugar in those days.

Dad travelled a lot and has seen different fruits growing so he said when he gets some land he would plant every kind of fruit tree. We had 37 fruit trees and the Poms next to us always came to us to get some fruit. Dad gave them seeds and seedlings and cuttings but they never planted anything.

From the trees dad cut down he made fire wood and stacked it near the house. We came from Finland where everything is used and nothing is wasted. Worn out clothes become dusters.

These days people waste so much and then they whinge that they are poor. It's the little things that make a difference. You have to save every day to become more comfortable. People become jealous if you have more than they have. That's why they hate Jews. Jews are careful with little things, their children are tidy and they learn to be careful with their belongings. Jews help each other; they stick together and get rich. People come to them to borrow money and then they curse them for wanting their money repaid. Other nations want to be like Jews but they are careless and lazy and they argue with each other instead of going ahead and sticking together. People hate Jews because they can not live up to their standards.

People these days take their good fortunes for granted. They spend their money freely and never mind tomorrow. We saved for a rainy day because it was surely going to pour. Mum left lots of junk when she died but most of it stayed in the house and is still there. The land must be worth a lot now.

We had no close neighbours; there were always acres of land between us. There was a railway station nearby where we lived and that was handy for going to the markets and to town.

A Syrian family lived nearby and mum asked me to go with the lady to the city and interpret for her. The city lady had let us into their beautiful home. I didn't understand either of their languages but both spoke a bit of English and I tried to make them understand each other. The lady of the house wanted my Syrian neighbour to do some embroidery but she refused to pay the price. I never before saw anything as beautiful as that house. They were very rich and our neighbour was starving. I realised then how rich people exploit the poor.

My father fancied himself to be more educated than he was. Education was a big thing in my family. Both mum and dad pushed me to become educated and I soon knew more than dad. The idea of me going to a little country school was exciting to my parents. What a wonderful country this is where my daughter can get free education, raved dad.

I became opinionated and arrogant with all this new primary school knowledge I got in the land of opportunity.

Mum comes from a pious Lutheran family and to her religion was culture. It was hard to find a Luthern church or a church at all in those days in East Hills

near Georges river on the outskirts of Sydney where we lived. Mum found a Church of England as the next best thing.

Later mum found a Catholic school and entrusted her daughters into the care of the nuns. I became Catholic from then on but my sister married a Jew and she took Jewish religion.

Mum did not like public school education because the children there were rowdy and disorderly. If there was any money in the house the books and education came first. I never had any toys or dolls.

Dad was about to begin a real job installing the electricity in the huge Anthony Hordens building next to People's Palace. We were all very excited about the prospect of our father being in charge of putting electricity into that beautiful place. I remember us going to buy all sorts of appropriate clothes for his work one day but the next day dad dropped dead. I never knew how or why he died. I did not understand death. I knew cats and goats and pigs die but not people.

I was eight and since then I grew under mum's influence and I suppose I became much like mum in my long dresses to protect my modesty.

Mum never went to school; many people in those days were illiterate. I just remember her being ordinary in her working clothes but she must have been beautiful to catch dad who was quite smart and handsome.

After dad died mum was down mentally, physically and financially. She was alone with two daughters to feed and look after. She sold our land. I heard that mum often came to look at the land she sold. She stood there crying and the lady who bought it saw her and felt guilty. The new owners never made anything out of the land. I sometimes wonder what became of it now that it is part of the city. I heard later that the lady bought the land because she felt sorry for mum and that they intended to give it later to me.

We rented a place and Mum began to work at RRR Railway Refreshment room and loved it there. Budsy married mum and they had another daughter.

I was eleven when Budsy died and mum was left on her own with three daughters.

Mum knew an elegant Finish lady who lived next to where they built the Sydney Harbour Bridge. With her English Gentleman husband Mr Top they ran a kind of a hostel first for Finnish migrants and later for migrants in general.

Mum let me go by bus and train to Sydney sometimes to take some produce to this lady and the lady let me stay with them for a few days. They were thrilled by fresh eggs and cream and cakes I brought and I was thrilled to be able to taste their lifestyle.

These trips to the city were the highlights of my life. As soon as I would come to the house I would go and wash my hands. They commended me how clean I was but I only washed my hands because I liked their scented soap. Being with elegant people in the rich home I got ideas that I would also like to have all the good things.

Mr Top went to the barber's every morning to have his face and his hair arranged.

I don't think I was a very good daughter when I was young. I didn't understand the attitudes nations have towards each other. Finns like most people consider themselves a bit better than the rest, cleaner, hard working, honest. On one hand I was a Finn migrant on the other I was Australian. Everything I absorbed during those growing up years became part of who I imagined myself to be.

At fourteen I had to go maiding to earn some money. There I was, blond with huge new bosom sticking out, a lovely bait for men to chase. I became a live in maid for ten shillings a week. The disgusting old man of the house was after me. I had no lock on my bedroom door so I stacked the furniture on the door at night.

I soon packed my bag and went home. I never told mum why I left. In those days you did not talk about sex or sexual abuse. You didn't talk about pregnancy or poo or anything like that. Sometimes I think that kids these days know too much about sex but then I wonder if anyone can ever know too much of anything.

Mum asked Mrs. Top once to talk to me about sex and short skirts. We wore modest long skirts.

My next employer was a lovely, kind, gentle Belgian family. The lady taught me a lot; I became quite uppity and she made me believe that I was as good as she was. She taught me a lot about the fine living and she smelled so nice not at all like us farm people who had to work with animals. We were clean family but not at all elegant. They had important guests and I served them. The lady lent me her black dress but it was very tight over my big boobs. With my bushy blond hair and rosy cheeks I looked a picture. Men followed me with their eyes and I enjoyed being admired. Her husband was a wool buyer and when they returned to Belgium they wanted to take me with them but mum would not let me go. She did not speak English and without a man in the family I had to take the responsibility.

I became confident enough to enrol into a secretarial course at the Business College. With all my new expertise I went to work for Farmers department store in Pitt Street where I met people who were quite different. Everything that happened later in my life was based on the pictures I formed about the world before I knew that there were other, quite different people in the world.

I worked for a firm of accountants. My boss had trouble with staff, people couldn't stand working for him but I loved it there. He paid well but he wanted the job done tiptop.

When Mount Isa mining opened I went to work in the office there. Men from all over the world came to work in the mine. About three hundred Finns came and most of them were young men. They wrote home how good it was in Australia and new eager migrants joined them.

It was an exciting time for a young girl like myself, admired and courted by all these young lonely men. Girls were scarce; especially Finn girls and I had a whale of a time attracting all the admiration.

I picked Aimo, handsome young Finn who came from a farming background in Finland. It must have been hard for him to adjust to the new country.

Aimo was never interested in farming and I did not want to marry a farmer either. Mum wasn't too happy when I brought him home. She said that I would throw my life away. I suppose she would have picked a Finn man for me before she would have me marry any other. Australians we knew were a rough, common lot so at 28 I married this Finn Aimo Sankkila and became pregnant with Gail. We got fed up with Mount Isa so we sold our home, packed up and returned to Sydney.

Coming to Australia was a first taste of freedom for Aimo and he liked it. He liked having a wife simply because having a wife was a sign of success but a wife also tied him down. Especially the wife that was constantly pregnant.

Money was always a problem with us; we never had any. Not having money was a lifelong theme in my life. I believe that neither Aimo nor I had been good managers. It never entered Aimo's psyche to build a home or buy the land so we could settle down.

Aimo became restless. We moved to Brisbane. Aimo did some labouring and I took some office work when I could get it. I wasn't very popular as an employee with three small children who could get sick at any time. We had two daughters and a son and we could not go anywhere.

Eventually Aimo decided to go to New Guinea to earn more money. I was to follow as soon as he settled down and got the place for us. He provided poorly for the children. Aimo must have caught something because in 1956 he died before I could join him. He was a poor useless bastard who left me to look after our children on my own.

I returned to Sydney because mum was very sick and she soon died. I applied for the deserted wife's pension. I was trying to feed my three children. My oldest daughter Gail looked after the younger two children when I had to go to work to supplement my pension.

Much later I married my neighbour Harold Freeland who was a widower living in his house next door. He was a bright and breezy man and a good company. He had no children but when he died his family home went to his sister who had three children. I did not contest the will and I had to find a place for myself. I considered going back to Mount Isa to work there but I was too old so I applied for widow's pension and started life on my own. I could



afford to buy a small place in the country but it had to be an interesting place. I would die of boredom in an ordinary country town.

In 1975 I came with my friends to Lightning Ridge which was an attractive, exciting place at the time. I always lived with people that came from different countries so coming to Lightning Ridge was like coming home. I have a strong personality and have always been considered wilful. In Lightning Ridge you can be anybody and people still accept you. Of course there is prejudice but people often have no power to discriminate against others because they are not in a position to give them a job or a home or do any favours.

People who do not get ahead in life often like to bitch against those that can. Lazy people bitch about those that work hard and keep themselves proud and tidy.

I like Lightning Ridge. I don't even need people as much as I need the cheerful warm town itself.

Sydney is a cold place with cold people. It is fine for young people to sharpen their wits there because if you manage to survive in Sydney you will survive anywhere.

People everywhere are many sided. I like to converse with people who are mentally happy and active, people who have enough intelligence to talk about events as they are without feeling criticised or judged, people who can laugh at themselves and the life generally. I don't like people who have no ambition or energy to improve themselves. It does not mean that you have to be financially better off but to become more alert and wise and knowledgeable.

The superstition says if you manage to grow a money tree you will never be poor. I brought a money tree and it grows well. I am not wealthy but I feel rich.

Australia is so very easy for everyone. If people feel poor that is their state of mind rather than lack of things. I still can not see the poverty and misery in Australia. People will always be poor unless they learn to grow things and help themselves.

I praise God for the wonderful world he created but I don't worry about little details of religions. Christians all believe in Jesus and fight each other in his name so I don't want to be bothered with little differences they have. I find it difficult to believe. Mum never went to school but she had her simple faith. I sometimes wonder if the Christian training I had is the way to the truth or is it just a story of people who helped and guided their fellow men. Animals always have a leader but I don't know if the same applies to humans. Are our leaders specially gifted? Maybe the masses just push forward certain individuals who are willing to fight for their benefits.

The leader has to have courage. He has to be prepared to stand out in front and take the flack. Most people rather duck instead. Politicians sometimes have convictions but commitment is even more important. They must believe

in themselves. Leaders love to be loved and they get egotistical satisfaction from being the centre of attention. Occasionally there is someone who stands out and have people follow his ideas. This someone might shun the limelight and not seek leadership. This someone might not have the courage and commitment to stand in front and represent and argue for others.

Politics is all about money. In Australia people are jealous of those that get money from the government. They resent Aborigines getting special benefits. I remember the poor wretched Aborigines who lived along the George River during the floods in 1915. An Aboriginal family came to our back fence. They were thin, cold and hungry. Mum was terrified of blacks but she packed lots of food and I took it down to them. I told them to leave the dishes at the fence when they finished. The next day I found the dishes washed and empty. We were amazed that they washed and returned the dishes.

The biggest sin in my childhood was stealing. The fact that they did not steal our dishes made me believe that they were not bad. We never saw them again. They lived somewhere on the riverbank. They had nothing to live in yet they didn't even try to build anything. It was hard for us to understand that they did not try to improve their situation. Their whole psyche was different. They asked for this and that but they did not change the situation for themselves. We learned that we must help ourselves but they did not.

Aborigines never learned to grow things and to this day they are not growing food. It was hard for us seeing Aborigines living in total poverty and yet they did not help themselves like Europeans did. It was clear to me that we were very different.

I don't tolerate ignorance well. People who have no ambition to improve themselves are rather boring. I don't mean that one should be rich but one should grow in knowledge, wisdom and understanding. I think factory work destroys people mentally. To do the same monotonous work all your life must do some damage but I suppose we have to have workers.

In 1975 I bought a block of land in Lightning Ridge and had a small cottage built for me. At the beginning I used to spend a couple of months a year in Sydney to work in the accountancy firm where I worked before. I earned money to pay my bills for the whole year. I loved my work. My boss always knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. I like people who know what they are doing and who are doing their jobs well. He liked my work too.

I don't consider myself especially maternal or a model parent. I haven't seen my daughter Leone and her two children for ages. I haven't seen my son Paul and his four children for a long time.

Gail is my oldest and she has always been my helper. She is staying with me and looks after me now.

My son Paul Sankkilia is remembered as the inspector Brennan in the TV series Phoenix. He is still acting in ABC programs. Leone is a successful psychiatric nurse. Both of them are driven to make money and get up in the society. I suppose I am a dead loss to them.

I came to the stage now where I don't want to have anything I don't use and need. I don't want to live in fear of thieves and of jealous people.

By telling my story I may finally get my name in print. I never had a desire to be famous or at least I thought that the price of fame was too high. It must be my impoverished background.