

NEWS FROM FINLAND

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Obama: "We are ready to lead once more"

DAVID J. CORD
HELSINKI TIMES

BARACK OBAMA was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States in front of an estimated crowd of two million people. Millions more around the world watched the event live on television or on the internet.

The new president's inaugural address was given in his soaring rhetorical style that has drawn comparisons to the likes of **Cicero** and **Martin Luther King Jr.** While most of the speech was aimed at Obama's domestic audience, a portion was also directed at the rest of the world.

"So to all the other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend to each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more," he said.

Much of what Obama said during his speech addressed Finnish concerns, such as America's treatment of detainees, military involvements, the economy and the restoration of fractured international relationships.

Obama rejected that a choice must be made between safety and ideals, probably signalling that questionable activities like the Guantanamo Bay detentions would be ceased. He also announced that America would "responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan."

The new president promised to "roll back the spectre of a warming planet" and pledged to support clean technologies, industries and sustainable energies.

Obama reminded his audience that fascism and communism were combated with "sturdy alliances," which probably heralds his intention of shoring up America's shaky international friendships.



Barack Obama delivered his historic inaugural address on Tuesday after being sworn in as president of the United States.

Reduced waiting times for Finnish citizenship

DAVID J. CORD
HELSINKI TIMES

THE FINNISH Immigration Service expects that the processing speed for citizenship applications will be greatly accelerated in 2009. In the past the agency had been labouring under a huge number of applications for citizenship, but the resolution of all the old cases should ease the process for new applicants.

A number of measures have been taken in recent years to work through the backlog. In 2004 the agency had about 6,000 naturalisation applications under consideration while the average length of time for a decision was around two and a half years. At that time about 20 workers were transferred from the refugee and asylum section of the agency to the citizenship section to help with the enormous workload.

on the waiting time for decisions on citizenship however, as the citizenship unit is run separately from the refugee and asylum section of the Finnish Immigration Service.

Simonen points out that the easiest cases went through the citizenship process much faster last year. "In the clearest cases, where everything was in order and there was no investigative work, a decision was reached in 76 days on average," she explains.

For those planning on applying for Finnish citizenship, Simonen recommends that they have all their required documentation in order. If necessary papers such as language certificates are missing, processing cannot be gone ahead with until all the mandatory requirements are met. If a person does not meet the request within a stipulated time period, his or her application risks being rejected.

The Finnish Immigration Service announced that last year over 3,300 citizenship applications were received and 4,249 decisions were handed down.

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BARENTS OBSERVER
13 January

Reversed cross-border shopping

The financial crisis and the weak Norwegian currency has turned cross-border shopping between Norway and neighbouring states Sweden and Finland upside down, writes the Barents Observer.

TRADITIONALLY, Norwegians in the northern part of the country have travelled to Finland to buy petrol, meat, alcoholic beverages and tobacco. Now, when the Norwegian krone is weak against the euro, the Finns are coming in great numbers to Northern Norway to buy cheap foodstuffs."

"With the exception of tobacco and alcohol, most commodities are cheaper to buy in Norway than in Finland these days.

In the Finnish town of Kärigasniemi ... shopkeepers are experiencing hard times. Some firms have had a drop in turnover on 20-35 per cent."

THE STRAITS TIMES 12 January. Chua Hian Hou

Scientist wins Nokia award

Nokia Foundation awarded a Singapore researcher writes The Straits Times.

A LEADING Singapore researcher who specialises in improving the way people and computers communicate with each other has been picked by the Nokia Foundation to work and lecture in Finland"

Dr Li Haizhou, who heads the Institute for Infocomm Research's (I2R) human language technology department, will receive a grant of 10,000 euros from the Nokia Foundation.

Dr Li ... is one of the architects behind the robotic butlers which made an appearance at the official opening of Fusionopolis recently."

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DETROIT FREE PRESS 17 January. Erin Chan Ding

Heikinpäivä festival remembers Hancock's Finnish heritage

The most Finnish city in the US celebrates all things Finnish during their Heikinpäivä festival, reports the Detroit Free Press.

"**IF YOU** spend any part of this week shopping at the *heikin tori*, chowing out at the *seiso-vapöytä* and generally living it up at Heikinpäivä, there is only one place in the planet you could be: Hancock, the Finnish capital of Michigan - if not the nation.

Hancock is so Finnish that the city's street signs will read not just "Quincy" (the main avenue) but also "Valtakatu," its Finnish counterpart. Hancock ... is home to Finlandia University and the Finnish American Reporter, a monthly newspaper distributed in all 50 states and eight countries, including New Zealand, Namibia and yes, Finland."

"It's just a lot of fun," says Jim Kurtti, director of the Finnish American Heritage Center at Finlandia University and editor of the Finnish American Reporter.

"You kind of get the Finns and non-Finnish people really enjoying the music and different food and the whole event."

"The event includes boot-throwing and wife-carrying contests, a *vipukelkka*, or whip-sled that turns in circles and an outdoor Polar



The *vipukelkka* is one of the old Finnish activities the people of Hancock can enjoy during their Heikinpäivä festival.

Bear Dive into icy waters for the brave and insane."

Kurtti, 51, whose grandparents are Finnish immigrants and who is fluent in the language, estimates that 40 per cent of Hancock is Finnish. His wife, Debbie, also 51, is one-quarter Finnish and has just started taking Finnish lessons."

The festival draws a few thousand people each year."

"There's this thing," says Debbie Kurtti, 'called adult-onset Finnishness. People are learning Finnish and going to Finnish festivals and meeting other Finns and doing genealogy. People are now proud of their heritage."

THE LOCAL 15 January. David Landes

New coin commemorates Sweden's loss of Finland

Swedes mark bicentenary of Finland's separation with a special coin, reports The Local.

ON SEPTEMBER 17th, 1809, Sweden reluctantly relinquished control of the territories it held in present day Finland ... when it signed the Treaty of Fredrikshamn to end a war with Russia for influence in the Baltic."

"To mark the anniversary of the separation, all Swedish one krona coins minted in 2009 will carry a special design on the reverse composed by Swedish designer Annie Winblad Jakubowski."

"The upper edge of the coin will be inscribed with the quo-

tation 'DEN UNDERBARA SAGAN OM ETT LAND PÅ ANDRA SIDAN HAFVET' (The wonderful tale of a land beyond the sea), taken from **Johan Ludvig Runeberg**'s book *A student's visit to Finland* in 1857.

The new coin was presented on 15 January to King **Carl XVI Gustaf** and to Finland's President Tarja Halonen by the Chairman of the General Council of the Riksbank, **Johan Gernandt**.

The coin itself will actually be produced by the Mint of Finland."

ANDERS WIKLUND



These Swedish krona coins will be joined by special commemorative coins marking the separation of Finland from Sweden 200 years ago.

MP TALK



TARJA TALLQVIST is an MP with the Finnish Christian Democrats. She also directs and produces documentaries. In addition she is a qualified carer for the elderly and directs the carer department of nurse's union Tehy.

A childhood in Lauttasaari

I SPENT my school years living in Lauttasaari. As much as the place was and still is very much part of Helsinki, as an island it was also something of its own little world. Or at least that's how it felt to those of us who lived there.

LAUTTASAARI had a playschool, a primary school and a secondary school, as well as a collection of necessary shops, a church and chemist. The island also had its own doctor, who made house calls whenever necessary and got to know every family there.

From time to time the local pastor would try to incite fellow Lauttasaari residents to draw up the bridge connecting us to Helsinki and declare independence. It sounded incredibly exciting to us children, even if we didn't quite understand what the pastor meant. A permanently raised bridge would have been a wonderful sight. At that time, it was drawn once a day to allow the coal ships with their tall masts to glide under it. That was always such a striking, magical sight.

FROM my first years at primary school I remember our teacher Kerttu Kallio. As an enthusiast for healthy living, she was many years ahead of her time. She always fed us cod liver oil and vitamins, and even made a point of swallowing raw eggs in front of the class – much to our deep disgust. This was back in the 1950s when school food wasn't very nutritious, being made up mostly of a steady, unvarying diet of porridge and pea soup. One of the major motivations to continue our education to secondary school was the knowledge that at that level there were no school meals.

BACK then we didn't just go to Helsinki whenever we felt like it, even if the bus number 23 would take us to Erottaja in around 20 minutes. There had to be a good reason to make the trip, usually with our mothers. The Stockmann department store playground was an enduring daydream and fantasy for us.

WHENEVER we were headed for Helsinki we would put on our town clothes. Nobody would dream of walking the streets in t-shirts and jeans in those days. During the summer, people would be out and about in poplin jackets, while in winter it would be an overcoat. Underneath men would wear a suit and women a church frock. Children would also be in their Sunday best, their hair carefully and beautifully combed. At that time, people also knew a thing or two about proper public behaviour. I remember one front page of the Uusi Suomi newspaper carrying the scandalous headline, "Young couple seen kissing in Esplanadi park." That remained the talk of the town for weeks afterwards.

OCCASIONALLY we visited the Hietaniemi graveyard to feed the squirrels, a favourite family pastime. All of our near relations were still alive at that time, so we admired the gravestones almost like works of art. But the cemetery also contained some graves that were untended and looked the worse for wear. These ones would never have any flowers on them, which saddened me and my sister Itta, so much that we decided to do something about it. After the visit, unbeknownst to our parents and wearing our everyday clothes we crossed the Lauttasaari bridge on foot and went back to the graveyard. We collected flowers from gravestones that we thought had more than enough to spare and distributed them among the gravestones that were bare. It was a massive operation, and we returned home that evening feeling tired but pleased with ourselves. We were convinced we had done an honourable deed and had secured a place for ourselves in heaven. At home though, our father was waiting, angry and ready to punish us. Someone had informed on us! My sister and I soon felt we were made to suffer a martyr's fate.

Translated by Matthew Parry.