

Dear Finns, Friends of Finland and all Finlandia Foundation members,

I'm delighted and honored to celebrate this 96th Independence Day of Finland with you!

Seems like many major events of the world history take place around these darkest months of the year. Today, while we celebrate the independence of Finland we also mourn the passing of the most remarkable statesman of our time, Nelson Mandela of South Africa at 95 years of age, and remember the devastating surprise attack on Pearl Harbor 72 years ago.

During my talk today, I want to look through a special lens how we got here, to 96 years of independence. Because history is typically very male-dominated, I'd like to insert a little bit about the role of women in this overview of the development of the Finnish society.

Finnish women are tough. They are determined. And they work hard. According to Kalevala, our national epic, which was compiled from oral folklore by Elias Lönnrot during the mid 1800's, they even defy death by going down to the Underworld (Tuonela) to bring back their boys. The stories from Kalevala describe the early Finnish society where men and women played at the same level, equal in terms of ability to destroy and create.

At the same time when Lönnrot was writing his version of the heroic past of the Finnish tribe, the national poet of Finland, Johan Ludwig Runeberg, wrote The Tales of Ensign Stål (Vänrikki Stoolin tarinat). It is an epic poem describing the events of the Finnish War (1808–1809) in which Sweden lost its eastern territories. As a result of this war, these territories – which Sweden had governed for some 700 years - would become incorporated into the Russian Empire as the Grand Duchy of Finland under the sovereignty of the Russian Czar.

(To put this into the US context, this happened at a time when Thomas Jefferson was the President and the importation of slaves into the United States was officially banned.)

The Tales of the Ensign Stål shaped the Finnish identity and was later even printed and given out for free during the Winter War to raise the patriotic spirit of the Finnish soldiers. The first chapter of the poem also became the national anthem of Finland, Maamme, Our Land. The music for the anthem was composed by the German immigrant Fredrik Pacius, and was performed for the first time in May 1848. The melody of Maamme is also used for the national anthem of Estonia.

In this famous poem, Runeberg describes a fictional woman named Lotta Svärd. According to the poem, a Finnish soldier, private Svärd - svärd means a sword in English - went to fight in the Finnish War in 1808 and took his wife, Lotta, along with him. Private Svärd was killed in battle, but his wife remained on the battlefield, taking care of wounded soldiers.

A hundred years later, women's suffrage caused turmoil around the world. The first European country to introduce women's universal suffrage – meaning women's right to vote and run for an elected position – was the Grand Duchy of Finland, on October 1st 1906.

(In the US women got the right to vote in 1920).

Universal suffrage was a monumental reform. No longer was the right to vote dependent on social status or gender. The reform increased the electorate tenfold. Today 43% of the parliamentarians are women in Finland – and of course, Finland has had a female president Tarja Halonen serve two consecutive terms.

(Currently in the US only 18.3% of the congress are women).

The early part of 1900's was tumultuous time in Europe; the World War I was raging on from 1914 to 1918. When communism raised its head in Russia and eventually led to a revolution and the collapse of the Russian empire, it was time for the Finns take a stance, fight for their independence from Russia and separation from the communist rule. The declaration of independence didn't take place on December 6th, however. It actually happened on the same day as the Bolshevik's declaration of power in Russia on November 15th, 1917. A part of it said this:

"The people of Finland feel deeply that they cannot fulfill their national duty and their universal human obligations without a complete sovereignty. The century-old desire for freedom awaits fulfillment now; The People of Finland has to step forward as an independent nation among the other nations in the world."

(At this time, Woodrow Wilson was the President, and November 15th, 1917 was also a newsworthy day for a different – terrible – reason in the US. It was the "Night of Terror": The superintendent of a prison, Mr. Whittaker, gave orders to the guards to brutalize some 30 women who were imprisoned in the WA DC area just because they were demanding voting rights.)

Though this declaration of independence was supported by most Finns and soon recognized by the Russian Bolshevik Council of People's Commissars, the fight for independence occurred in the context of the worsening power struggle; and therefore, failed to either unite or pacify the nation. The ensuing Finnish Civil War in 1918 was brutal.

The White Guards, led by General Carl Gustav Emil Mannerheim, constituted the victorious White Army during the Finnish Civil War. My mother's grandfather served as a soldier in charge of the stables and horses in the Kaarti or National Guard in Helsinki for 3 years. His sword is still hanging on the wall of my parents' house in Helsinki next to my grandpa's and dad's military swords.

In 1920 the name Lotta Svärd was adopted from the Tales of the Ensign Stål as the name for a new women's organization whose mission was to support soldiers.

Both of my grandmothers were active Lottas during the war and even my mother served as a "Little Lotta" helping the adults who supported staff not only in the front lines but also in the hospitals, communications centers, even in the air traffic control.

By 1944 Lotta organization included 242,000 volunteers. It had become the largest voluntary auxiliary organization in the world. But when the Continuation War ended in 1944, the Soviet Union demanded that all organizations it considered paramilitary or semi-fascist be banned. Lotta Svärd was one of those. However, the organization later evolved to Lotta Svärd Foundation – now offering assistance to former Lottas to attend outpatient or

institutional rehabilitation programs. The Finnish Lotta Svärd has inspired similar organizations in other countries and I understand there are still Lotta Svärd organizations in Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

During the Finnish Civil War, not all women were participating in the Lotta movement, which was affiliated with the White Guard.

The Reds had several Women's Guard (Naiskaarti) units made of voluntary 16- to 35-year-old women, who were given rudimentary military training. The fighting women of the Reds were shunned by the Whites but in the Red side they were admired and compared to the Amazons, the female warriors of the ancient times.

The 1947 Paris peace treaty concluded the Continuation War formally. The conditions of the peace treaty were harsh. The novelist Vainö Linna wrote in his famous novel the Unknown Soldier: *"The mighty Soviet Union won, but the small Finland took the second prize in this contest."*

What I wanted to say with this glimpse into the history of the last couple hundred years is this: the fierce need for *liberty, freedom and independence* lives in all of us. It is a powerful inherent force in all of us human beings, whether men or women, no matter where we live. It is our birthright and people everywhere fight for it.

As a proud Finn, I want us to celebrate the strong value of equality in our society. I believe that there are two major factors that contribute to this value. One is the deeply rooted respect for other people and the other is the very practical nature of the Finnish people. When you are a small country – everybody counts.

This sensibility for the practical has been the very characteristic of the Finnish women. It was obvious already in the songs of Kalevala. Let me remind you of an incident between Väinämöinen and Louhi, the dame of the Northland. Väinämöinen had provided her the musical instrument kantele as a gift in order to marry Aila, her daughter. Väinämöinen played it so beautifully that everyone was moved to tears, but when Louhi tried picking on it, it gave out such a horrible sound the even the mice ran away. So, Louhi, indignantly tossed the kantele on the table. And shrewdly pointed out this:

*"What good is the instrument without the player?
And even if I made sweet sounds,
would it get the farm work finished,
and the housework done?"*

That's a good reminder of how the hard-working, practical-minded Finnish women think: work first, fun second. Tonight, however, may it be time for fun!

Happy 107th anniversary of equal rights and happy 96th anniversary of independence!
Kippis!

05.12.2013

TASAVALLAN PRESIDENTIN TERVEHDYS ULKOSUOMALAISILLE

Suomen itsenäisyyspäivää vietetään jälleen suomalaisissa kodeissa ja yhteisöissä ympäri maailmaa. 1860- ja 1930-lukujen välisinä suuren muuttoaalton vuosina Suomesta lähdettiin maailmalle, erityisesti Pohjois-Amerikkaan, suurin joukoin. Vaikka Suomi jäikin taakse, ei kotiin jääneitä kuitenkaan unohdettu. Kirjeet, kortit ja valokuvat, joissa kerrottiin uuden elämän iloista ja suruista, kulkivat edestakaisin merten yli, pitkiä postitaitaleita pitkin. Kuulumisia odottavan aika saattoi tuntua kovin pitkältä. Suomen rajojen ulkopuolella asuu tänä päivänä noin 250 000 suomalaista. Määrä nousee yli miljoonaan kun mukaan lasketaan ulkomailla asuvien suomalaisten jälkeläiset. Halu ja tarve yhteydenpitoon Suomeen, omaan kulttuuriin sekä ystäviin ja sukulaisiin on tänä päivänä yhtä suuri kuin aikaisemminkin. Internet-aikana voimme kuitenkin jakaa arkeamme helpommin ja nopeammin kuin kirjeiden aikakaudella. Yhteydenpito toisille mantereille ja toisiin aikavyöhykkeisiin käy sujuvasti. Välimatkat ovatkin lyhentyneet. Toivon, että tämä vahvistaa ulkomailla asuvien suomalaisten yhteenkuuluvuuden tunnetta kotimaahansa. Suomessa käytävän ajankohtaisen keskustelun seuraaminen ja siihen osallistuminen sekä suomalaisen kulttuurin jakaminen ovat uskoakseni tärkeä osa suomalaisuuden kokemista. Maailmamme onkin pienentynyt ja tavatkin ehkä samankaltaistuneet, mutta Suomi ja suomalaiset erottuvat muiden valtioiden ja kansojen joukossa. Tänään tuhansilla ikkunalaudoilla eri puolella maailmaa sytytetään jälleen kynttilä Suomen ja sen itsenäisyyden kunniaksi. Toivotan kaikille ulkosuomalaisille hyvää itsenäisyyspäivää ja rauhallista joulun odotusta.
Sauli Niinistö, Tasavallan presidentti

Message from the President of the Republic of Finland to Finnish expatriate communities on 6 December 2013:

Finland's Independence Day is again celebrated in Finnish homes and communities around the world. In the great transatlantic migration between the 1860s and 1930s, many people left Finland to seek a new life abroad, particularly in North America. However, although they left Finland behind, they did not forget those who stayed. Letters, cards and photos detailing the joys and sorrows of the migrants' new lives travelled back and forth across land and sea. These messages were sometimes very long in coming. Today, there are some 250,000 Finns living abroad. If we include their descendants, the total comes to more than one million. The desire and need to stay in touch with Finland, with one's culture as well as with friends and relatives remain as strong today as in earlier times. However, in the age of the internet, it is much easier and quicker to share our everyday lives than it was back in the days of surface mail. Communication between continents and other time zones is straightforward. The distances have grown shorter. I hope that in the case of expatriate Finns this will strengthen their sense of belonging and ties to their home country. I believe that following and participating in current public debates in Finland and sharing Finnish culture are an important part of experiencing what it is to be a Finn. Although the world is smaller and perhaps more uniform in its ways, Finland and Finns remain distinct among all other countries and nations. Today, candles will once again be lit on thousands of window sills all around the world to celebrate Finland and its independence. I would like to take this opportunity to wish all expatriate Finns a happy Independence Day and a peaceful Christmas season.

Sauli Niinistö, President of the Republic