

# THE LAPP KING'S DAUGHTER

A FAMILY'S  
JOURNEY  
THROUGH  
FINLAND'S  
WARS



Stina Katchadourian



# *The Lapp King's Daughter*

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THROUGH FINLAND'S WARS



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2010 · FITHIAN PRESS, MCKINLEYVILLE, CALIFORNIA

*With deep gratitude to  
The Finlandia Foundation  
Helen Bing  
Finlands Svenska Författareförening*

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Printed in the United States of America

Maps by Johanna Roto

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Published by Fithian Press  
A division of Daniel and Daniel, Publishers, Inc.  
Post Office Box 2790  
McKinleyville, CA 95519  
www.danielpublishing.com

Distributed by SCB Distributors (800) 729-6423

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Katchadourian, Stina.

The Lapp king's daughter : a family's journey through Finland's wars / by Stina Katchadourian.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56474-498-2

1. Katchadourian, Stina—Childhood and youth. 2. Katchadourian, Stina—Family. 3. Lindfors, Lale—Correspondence. 4. Lindfors, Nunki, 1904-1987—Correspondence. 5. Russo-Finnish War, 1939-1940—Personal narratives, Finnish. 6. World War, 1939-1945—Personal narratives, Finnish. 7. World War, 1939-1945—Finland. 8. World War, 1939-1945—Lapland. 9. Lapland—History—20th century. 10. Finland—Biography. I. Title.

DL1102.5.K38 2010

940.53'489770922—dc22

2009050523

*To the memory of my parents,*

*Nunni and Lale*



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# The Lapp King's Daughter





CHAPTER ONE

*The Winter War*

IN THE FALL of 1939, my father was forty-one years old and had a good administrative job in a firm connected to the Finnish forest industry. He had recently spent several weeks in the Reserves receiving military training. My mother was thirty-five and a teacher of physical education. They had moved from their first home in central Helsinki and were renting a spacious apartment on an island called Brändö (Kulosaari in Finnish), which was connected to the city proper by a tramline crossing a rickety wooden bridge. This idyllic, newly developed community, they reasoned, would be an ideal place to raise a family. My sister was six and about to start school, and I was two years old.

But the idyll did not last long. On October 5, 1939, the government of Finland was asked, ominously, to send a delegation to Moscow, in order to discuss “concrete political matters.” People’s concerns over the future of the country grew with the deepening autumn darkness. When our parents sat by the radio to listen to the news, my sister and I knew we had to be quiet.

Joseph Stalin himself met the Finnish delegation at the Moscow train station. He announced to them that “the border of Leningrad is situated too close to Finland. Since we cannot move the city, we have to move the border.”

The Finnish government took a tough stand and refused the

demand for a border adjustment. True, the border lay within artillery range of the outskirts of Leningrad. But international opinion supported the position of the Finns: "It is hard to imagine that the Scandinavian states harbor plans that would stop Leningrad's inhabitants from sleeping soundly in their beds," wrote *The London Times* on November 15th. In the minds of most Finns, a concession to the Russians would have been the first step on a slippery slope toward the loss of independence, and historical documents have shown that an occupation of Finland was precisely what Stalin had in mind.

Three Finnish delegations shuttled back and forth to Moscow, their every move followed by an anxious people. The situation was deadlocked, and many Finns were beginning to feel that war was unavoidable. Others thought the Soviets were only bluffing. Nevertheless, the situation was tense. The army was mobilized and put on high alert. Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, a former Tsarist officer who had been Commander of the White forces during the Finnish Civil War of 1918, saw the conflict coming and pleaded, in vain, for a military buildup. In November 1939, the apprehensive Mannerheim was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Finland's seriously deficient armed forces.



My father expected to be called up any day. With war looking imminent, civilians were encouraged to leave the cities. On a dark October afternoon, my father, already in uniform, accompanied us—my mother, my sister Maj, Riikka, and me—to the Helsinki railroad station teeming with frightened people. He put us on an overcrowded train bound for his native Vaasa and Grandma Nanny. On board the train, I told anyone who cared to listen that my Papi had "gone to scare the Russians."

When my father got back to our apartment from the railroad station, he found his mobilization order tacked to our front

door. Two hours later, as our train was heading north, he was on a military train going east, with sealed orders. The country held its breath.

On November 13, 1939, Lale wrote to my mother: “Well, now Tanner and Paasikivi (the chief Finnish negotiators) have packed their bags and returned home. This was of course to be expected, since the demands of the Russians were so unreasonable. Now we’ll just have to stay put here, since the Russians are practicing a war of nerves. No problem with nerves here—just let them try.”

To my six-year-old sister, he wrote reassuringly: “Papi is well and commands one hundred and forty men and one hundred and twenty-eight horses.”

Our train to Vaasa finally arrived, twelve hours delayed. “Wonderful to come to a warm home,” my mother wrote from Grandma Nanny’s. “Our beds were made up, there was tea and porridge waiting for us, and then we just stumbled into bed. Maybe you won’t have time to read long letters, but I’m trying to write as legibly as I can so you can read fast. I just hope everything is well with you—please don’t worry about us, we are fine. Maybe God will hear our prayers.” Maj and I had now added a few extra words to our usual evening prayer: “God bless Papi and Mami and Finland and all the soldiers and let there please be no war.”

But God did not hear our prayer. On November 26, 1939, the Soviet Union staged a classic border incident. Shots were fired, and the Russians claimed the shots had come from the Finnish positions and had hit Red Army personnel in the border village of Mainila. These shots actually turned out to have been fired by the Russians themselves. On November 30, the Red Army crossed the Finnish border as planes rained bombs over Helsinki and other cities. That same day, as Finns huddled in front of their radios, the Finnish President Kyösti Kallio declared the Republic of Finland to be at war.

“Oh, it’s hard to explain things and to answer all the questions a child can put to you within the span of one day about all of this—those little hearts get more anxious than one would think. If I could only spare them some of the fear they feel,” my mother wrote. “Everything is so horrible and meaningless, isn’t there some way to stop all this? But don’t worry, dear, you and I will get through this together, somehow.”



Other relatives had also sought safety in Vaasa. One of my mother’s cousins, Aunt Ruth, was one of them. She was a petite beauty with a romantic and turbulent past. Her first husband, Yuri, a dashing Russian cavalry officer in the Tsarist army, had swept Ruth off her feet and she had followed him, unquestioningly, from Finland into a Russia swirling with revolutionary sentiment. In St. Petersburg, Ruth gave birth to a girl, Militza, who reportedly was baptized in champagne. Then came the revolution, and Yuri disappeared to fight the Bolshevik armies. Ruth, baby Militza, and their faithful Russian servant somehow made their way back to Finland. After some time, Ruth abandoned hope of ever seeing her husband again, and married a Finnish aristocrat and owner of a manor house in southern Finland. Soon after this, word came that Yuri had in fact survived and was in Finland, looking for Ruth and his daughter. Ruth was terrified: would she be accused of bigamy? The family closed ranks, and poor Yuri disappeared, never to be heard from again.

And now, Ruth was in Vaasa, with Militza and her two half sisters. My mother enjoyed her company. Ruth was wise and worldly, and had an irreverent sense of humor. She was also artistic, and Militza, to no one’s surprise, grew up to be an artist. Ruth provided Nunni with a welcome counterweight to Nunni’s sister Birgit’s somewhat pedantic personality. “Oh Biggi, Biggi, and her circles,” Nunni would say in exasperation

when her sister found it hard to roll with the punches. “She wants everything to be just so, and it just can’t be.”



Aunt Biggi, four years older than my mother, was very different from her sister. She was taller, and stiffer, both literally and figuratively. She had none of my mother’s artistic talents or athletic abilities. But she was exceedingly kind and patient, and knew how to listen to children and take them seriously.

There was enough turbulence in Uncle Bert’s early life to explain why he chose to marry a placid and steady woman like Aunt Biggi. Bert, a good-looking man with bushy eyebrows, half a head shorter than my aunt, was born in Estonia into a family of German extraction. Bert, or more properly Albert, was the youngest of thirteen children. In 1906, after his mother died, the family moved to St. Petersburg where Uncle Bert in 1916 applied to officer’s school at one of the famous Tsarist regiments, the Pavlov Regiment. As a way of stressing the importance of proper table manners, he used to tell us stories about the application process for the Pavlov. To assure themselves of choosing officers who would be sophisticated men of the world, the selection committee invited the candidates to a series of dinners with the cream of St. Petersburg society. During these dinners, specially appointed ladies with eagle eyes would be seated next to the candidates and were asked to watch them carefully. Were they using the right fork, the right spoon? Were they holding the wine glass properly? Were they raising their glass to the correct height when toasting someone? Were they proposing toasts to the right people, in the prescribed order? Was the quality of their dinner table conversation worthy of an officer of the Tsar?

Uncle Bert was accepted, and became a Russian officer under the Tsar during the First World War at the worst possible time, just as the enlisted men in revolutionary fervor were beginning to revolt against their commanders. Once the Russian

Revolution had broken out, he managed to return to St. Petersburg and then tried to join a White regiment in Siberia. He got on a train going east, pretending to be a Siberian peasant. He faked his Russian accent successfully, but was nevertheless found out by Bolshevik soldiers patrolling the train because he had hidden a toothbrush in one of his boots—a toothbrush being a telltale sign of an educated man. He and two of his fellow officers were taken off the train and imprisoned in a cowshed in a small village. During the night, they managed to kill the guard and escape.

Uncle Bert returned to the chaos of St. Petersburg in 1918, trying desperately to hide his military past. He, like the rest of the city, was starving. He used to tell stories about living on “black market sausage” made of meat from dogs, cats, and rats. Finally, he fled to Finland and ended up in Helsinki, speaking neither Finnish nor Swedish.

One day he ran into a Finn he had met on a previous visit to Helsinki. This young man took pity on Bert and invited him home to meet his wealthy parents. Charmed by the cultivated but destitute stranger, they taught him some Swedish and found him a job as a correspondent in Russian and German in the export business where my aunt Biggi was working. An office romance led to their wedding in 1925, one year before my parents married. As Uncle Bert's Swedish improved—his Finnish always remained shaky and a source of mirth in the family circle—he did well in the business world and eventually became co-owner of a shipping company. Bert received his Finnish citizenship the year after he married, and remained a staunch Finnish patriot all his life, just as suspicious of Hitler as he was of Stalin.



Even Vaasa turned out to be unsafe. After Russian planes had hit the city twice, Nunni decided we would move to the nearby countryside. She rented two rooms from a woman in the small

village of Petsmo, and that is where we spent most of the Winter War. The winter of 1939 was extraordinarily cold, and it was hard to come by wood to heat the small cottage. I remember thinking it was a natural thing for one's breath to show up as a white cloud indoors. There used to be hoarfrost on the heads of the nails on the walls when we woke up, and we would stay in bed under the covers until Nunni had gotten the fire going. We slept with our clothes on, in addition to which Nunni wrapped us in layers of newspaper when she tucked us into bed. The cowshed was by far the warmest place, and that is where we walked with our potty when we needed to, since the place had no indoor plumbing.

Nunni worried constantly about Lale. Was he keeping warm? Had he received the helmet cover that she had knit for him, the extra heavy socks? How about the knee-warmers? She kept skiing across the frozen countryside, and would hide in the forest when enemy planes flew overhead. "Do be careful when you see enemy planes," Lale wrote. "Don't ever show yourselves outside—there have been instances when they have shot at you even after they have passed."

"I long for you constantly, and I love you from the bottom of my heart."

I missed Lale, too. One day we encountered a family—a father, a mother, and their child—on one of our walks. The father, in uniform, was on leave. As we were passing them, I turned to my mother and announced: "I want my Papi, too." Many nights, as I lay in bed—and this Nunni was careful to note in her letters to Lale—I would knock on the wall next to my pillow. "This is Papi knocking. He is on his way." Any stranger would be informed that "Papi had gone away to scare the evil uncles." To me, he was a King. He had a uniform, and a thick leather belt, and round glasses that could see through anything. He would protect us from all dangers.

The freezing weather and the new snow turned nature around Petsmo into a winter postcard. "How does anybody feel

like fighting when nature is so beautiful?" my sister wondered as she was scanning the sky for enemy planes.



The Winter War pitched David against Goliath. The Red Army of the Soviet Union fielded 450,000 men, two thousand cannons and grenade launchers, thousands of armored tanks, over one thousand airplanes and a strong fleet, against 275,000 poorly equipped Finns. The whole world was following this battle and expressions of sympathy for Finland's cause came from everywhere. "I am so incredibly happy that things have gone well so far," Nunni wrote to my father. "But shouldn't we soon get some different kind of help, not just expressions of sympathy—I do mean troops! Or airplanes!" The Finns were particularly bitter over the fact that the Swedes, anxious to preserve their neutrality, refused to send regular troops. They did assist Finland with generous humanitarian aid, with supplies and more than 8,000 voluntary troops, but their unwillingness to throw in their lot with the Finns left a lingering bitterness. The outcome of the war, however, most historians now believe, would probably have been the same since any Swedish aid could not have arrived in time to make a difference.

The Winter War was a three-month-long conflict fought in the bitter cold of the easternmost province of Finland, Karelia. The war helped wipe away the lingering traces of class hatred after the Civil War, and it united the Finns as never before. They fought fiercely, and the struggles of the Finnish soldiers on skis in white camouflage against an overwhelming Russian force created admiration and sympathy for Finland throughout the Western world.



In his letter from a place he was not allowed to name, my father tried to sound reassuring: "The mood here is tops and the Ivanoffs [the Russians] have gotten what they deserve. I assume you

have followed the news on the radio. The quality of our troops is in all respects superior and well makes up for what we lack in numbers.”

In the same letter, however, he added a carefully worded note: “On November 29, I received a letter from Erik Lindeberg in Sweden. He assures us that if you or any other of our relatives or friends deem it necessary to evacuate to Sweden, then he will do all he can to assist you or them. I don’t for one moment believe that this will be necessary, but I want to give you his address just in case. God willing, you will never have to use it.”

This was the first, but not the last time, my father would make contingency plans for us to seek refuge in Sweden. Lale worried about us: on a clear and cold Sunday morning in January, twenty-eight enemy planes had subjected Vaasa to a devastating bomb attack. And despite some initial successes and the bravery of the Finnish soldiers who would approach Russian tanks with Molotov cocktails, the war was plainly not going well for the Finns. Toward the end of February the Finnish military leaders, abandoning all hope of assistance from Sweden or from anyone else, realized that a Soviet break-through would eventually be inevitable. The Soviet military supremacy was simply overwhelming. They now had forty-five divisions, up from the initial twenty, or around six hundred thousand soldiers in the field. There was no choice for Finland: from a position of weakness, in March 1940, Finland sued for peace.

My sister’s joyful shouts of “Peace! Peace!” are among my earliest memories. Nunni had taken the bus to Vaasa and was on her way home, but someone told my sister. She rushed out, got on her skis, and disappeared into the forest to meet Nunni at the bus stop. When they returned, Maj’s mood had completely changed. Instead of meeting happy people, everyone she met had been somber. Some were crying. Nunni tried her best to explain to us that yes, there was indeed peace, but it was not a peace to rejoice over, for now.

The peace terms were indeed crushing. On March 13, 1940,

flags were flown at half-mast across the country. Many newspapers framed the news of the peace terms in black borders. In the streets, strangers greeted each other in silent grief, as the Finnish troops on the eastern part of the Karelian Isthmus and north of Lake Ladoga surrendered their positions. Along with them marched the 400,000 Karelians of the newly ceded areas. "The exodus of the Karelians, a civilian Dunkirk, was a human tragedy as vast as had been the war itself," wrote the Finnish diplomat Max Jacobson. "By a stroke of Molotov's pen, every eighth inhabitant of Finland had been deprived of home and livelihood." Miraculously, even under the harsh post-war conditions, the Finns managed to absorb these refugees from Karelia into the rest of the population without having to put them in refugee camps.

This was a tragic defeat for Finland: 26,600 men died, and over 550,000 were wounded. Over one thousand Finnish civilians were killed. The Hanko Peninsula west of Helsinki was leased to the Soviets for thirty years to be used as a naval base. The bitterest pill of all was the loss of the whole Karelian Isthmus, the area between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga—one tenth of Finnish territory, as well as the country's second largest city, Viipuri. The Soviets, however, lost five times as many men as the Finns. At the time, that was no consolation, but the stiff resistance of the Finns created a respect for the country even among the Russians themselves. "The Finns fought like heroes," was the grudging praise of Soviet Marshal Timoshenko after the Winter War.

Where would help come from, the Finns asked themselves, if Stalin decided to try again and war would break out anew? As we left Grandma Nanny in Vaasa and took the train back south to Helsinki, that question would loom over the country like a dark cloud.



*ABOVE: A bombed apartment house in Helsinki  
BELOW: An old refugee woman in Lapland*

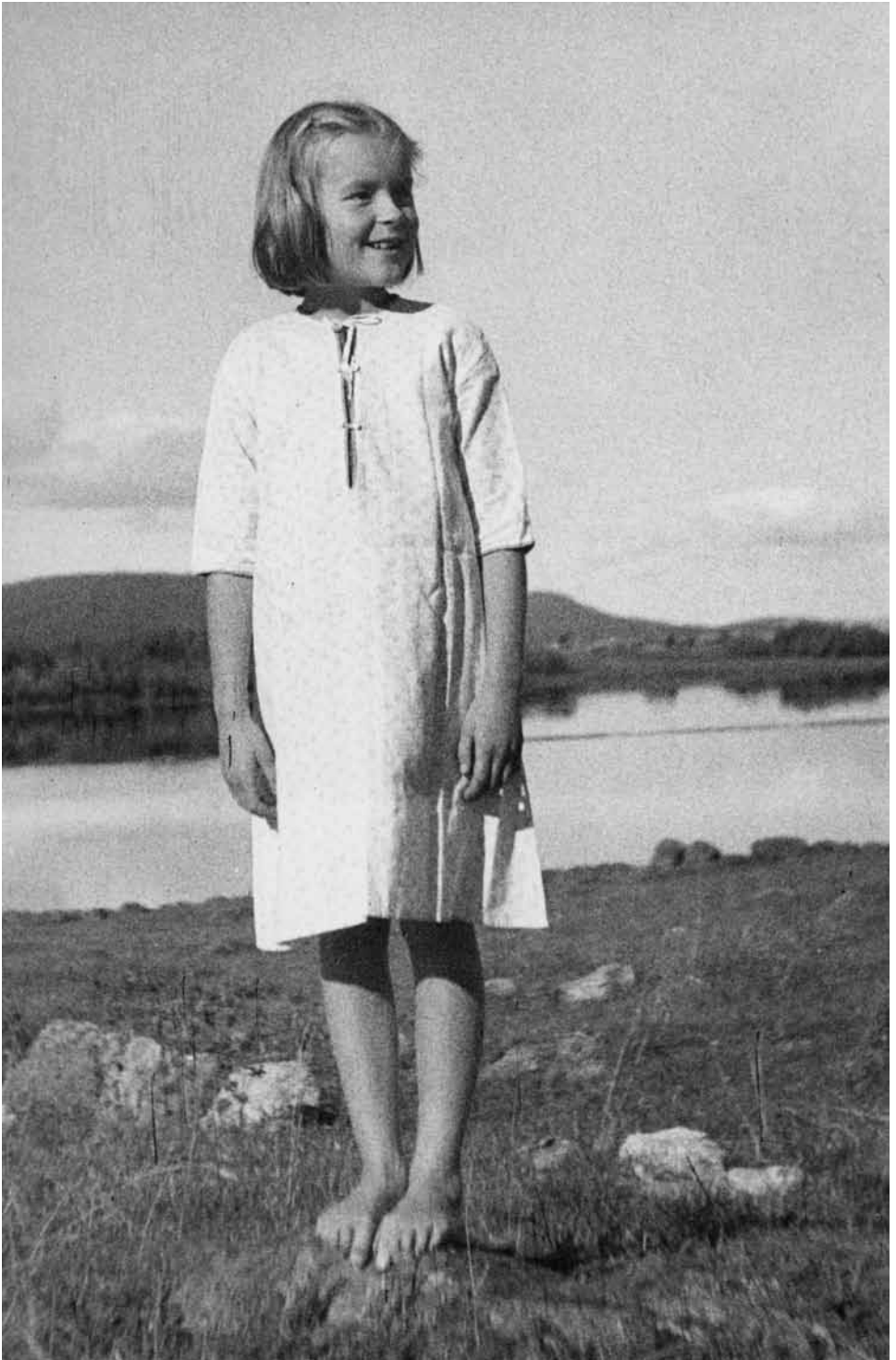




*Nunni milking*



*The farmstead in Ylitornio*



*Stina in her nightgown, Lapland, 1944*



*Cattle on the Lapland Road*



*All over Lapland, the destruction looked like this. Ivalo, 1944.*