

Kjell Westö

## THE MYTH OF THE CLEAN CITY

I`m going to speak about some myths and realities concerning my hometown Helsinki, the capital of Finland. The backbone of this short presentation is the research I made for a novel I`ve been working on for many years, a novel that was published just last week in two languages simultaneously, that is, in my mother tongue Swedish and in the language of the vast majority of us Finns, Finnish.

When translated to English, the title of the novel reads "Where once we walked." It`s a historical novel which takes place between the year 1905 and the year 1944. It is set in Helsinki, and the subtitle is "A novel about a city and about our urge to grow higher than the grass." That is to say, it`s a novel about Helsinki life during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It`s a novel about Helsinki-dwellers from all walks of life, dwellers in search for success and individuality and most of all, for their pride.

Helsinki is not necessarily a city of any global or even European importance. It is a young, small and upstart capital in the north-eastern corner of Europe. In a recent essay, the Finland-Swedish critic and scholar Michel Ekman called it "the world`s smallest city, or the world`s largest town". And Ekman continued: "Helsinki`s dimensions are such that a brisk twenty-minute walk in any direction will take one through suburbs, neglected scrap yards, and forests, or to the seashore. Here any house over a hundred year old is a historic monument, and by means of the only subway line it is possible to cross the entire city in six minutes." Here I must interject and slightly disagree with Ekman: you don`t reach the suburbs of modern Helsinki by means of a twenty minute walk, and the subway doesn`t cross the inner parts of the city in six minutes, you require ten.

By this I`m not trying to claim that Michel Ekman is mistaken when he delivers his rather harsh critique of his hometown. I will quote him

one more time: "Helsinki is not a beautiful city. That must be admitted even by those who could never imagine living anywhere else. Lack of planning, a hotch-potch of styles, the traces of destruction in the bombings of the Second World War and the reckless demolition work of the 1960's, the cult of the functional architect-heroes – all this has left marks that cannot be repaired. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century a European capital city can no longer be built. It must already exist."

In a European context Helsinki is a very young city indeed. It was founded by the Swedish king Gustav Vasa in the year fifteen-hundred fifty, and during the first two-hundred fifty years or so of its existence, Helsinki was a tiny, forlorn and pathetic fisherman's village with no wealth or power or influence whatsoever. Finland was a part of Sweden at that time, and Finland's number one city was Turku, the place where we have gathered now. In the year 1809, Sweden lost Finland to Russia in a war. Finland became a principality in czarist Russia, a principality with some autonomy, and a few years afterwards, Helsinki became the capital of the principality and started to grow, although at first rather slowly.

The Helsinki I grew up in in the 1960's and 70's was a quiet and orderly place with a very homogenous population: Finns, some Finland-Swedes and very few foreigners. As Michel Ekman points out in his essay, it was by no means a beautiful place: the scars from the war some thirty years back were clearly visible. The Helsinki of my childhood and youth was in some sense a quaint city, but not necessarily in a sympathetic way. It had something forbidding in its atmosphere. There was a sense of purity, or at least a sense of the *search* for purity. You could feel this aspiration for purity in the air, and as young adults my pseudo-anarchist friends and I used to joke that we lived in a city where things were commanded and decreed, and if they were not that, they were forbidden.

I conceived the Helsinki of my youngest days as some kind of Puritan city, a stern and rigid place where people obeyed the rules and where everything was in its right place. Naturally, I imagined the city had always been like that. This notion of mine was further strengthened

and reinforced by the fact that this was how my city presented itself to tourists and natives alike: as a clean and tranquil place, as the White Pearl Of The Baltic Sea, as the Daughter Of Blue Skies and White Snow, as a city with clean-cut functionalist architecture and an abundance of parks and forests.

There was one thing, though, that perhaps should have awoken my suspicions, should have made me aware of the possibility of another reality in the past. And this thing, this clue that I totally missed, was the part Helsinki played in nearly all older Finnish movies. In these films, Helsinki was always a hell-hole or a den, a place full of villains and sinners, where a young country girl or boy would be lured into sinful and disastrous adventures as soon as she or he got off the train at the main railway station. In short: In Finnish movies Helsinki was a place that tainted and tarnished the innocent newcomer immediately, in contrast to the tardy but pure countryside or village or small town where virtue always reigned.

I am only a second generation Helsinki-dweller. My parents moved to the city from the Ostrobothnia region on the west coast of Finland, and in my family, I´m the first person ever to be born in the capital. We moved around a lot when I grew up, and as an adult, I´ve continued to move around. At the age of 45, I have lived or worked in nerly every part of Helsinki. This strange kind of homelessness gradually made me more and more interested in my home town, and from the age of thirty I´ve been writing novels and short stories set mainly in Helsinki, stories where the city plays an integral part and where I try to depict its different stages of development, mainly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The further back in history I went, the more often I started to see things that I hadn´t expected. Around the year 2000, I was conducting research for a novel that was to be the first work of mine where I went beoynd the experencies of my own generation: it was a novel with a frame story dealing with the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but with flashbacks back to the 1920´s and even way back to the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And later on, when that novel had

already been written and published, I continued to do research for another epic novel, the one that I have finished this year.

And what did I find, then? I found a city quite different from the one I was accustomed to. Or rather, what dawned on me, very slowly, page for page, photograph for photograph, was that my city had another history, that it had had an atmosphere that was quite different from the one presented by the official sources. I found a classic harbour city, raw and hustling and bustling, full of brothels and illegal bars and people who had gone thoroughly astray. I found a city that at times grew so uncontrollably that its growth caused serious social unrest. And I found a city that at times, especially during the last decades of Russian rule, was quite multicultural, in stark contrast to the homogeneous Helsinki I had grown up in.

Having learned these things, I started to see through some of the false conclusions people drew during the 1990's, when changes in European history and European politics brought on changes in everyday life and in social dynamics everywhere, also in the remote city of Helsinki.

It is no secret that the downfall of the Soviet Union and the gradual opening of the borders between Finland and its eastern and southeastern neighbours caused an influx of Russian and Estonian prostitutes into Helsinki. People without historical insight claimed this was unprecedented in the city's history. But I knew of a survey from way back in the 1860's, a survey which claimed that Helsinki was among the most prostitute-dense capitals in Europe in proportion to the city's scant number of inhabitants at that time. And I knew of another study, conducted by the Helsinki police in the year 1908, when there had been a period of wide-spread turmoil in the whole Russian Empire following czar Nikolai's defeat to the Japanese in the war fought in 1904 and 1905: That study showed that Helsinki was infested with prostitutes, nearly half of them being between 16 and 19 years of age.

Right now, during the first decade of the new millennium, Helsinki is slowly changing into a more multi-cultural city. According to one high-ranking city official, the percentage of Helsinki-dwellers of foreign

origin was about two some ten-fifteen years ago: today the percentage is eight or nine. In my youth Helsinki was this extremely bland and homogeneous city; if you, for example, saw a black man in the street he was always seven feet tall, and you knew he had to be the American guest player in one of the city's basketball teams. Therefore, people of my age tend to think that multi-cultural neighbourhoods are something totally unprecedented in Helsinki history. In truth, some areas of the city, notably Kamppi and Ruoholahti, where true melting pots during the last decades of Russian rule, melting pots where Finnish-speakers, Swedish-speakers, Russians, Tatars, gypsies, Italian ice cream vendors and German musicians lived side by side.

Time only allows me a brief summary. To sum up, we might ask ourselves: Why does a city want to escape parts of its past, from where comes the yearning to remodel a somewhat coarse harbour town into a city of blue skies and functionalist buildings, into the White Pearl of The Baltic Sea?

The answer might be quite simple. The adjusting of Helsinki's image took place during the first five decades of the independence gained in 1917. It was particularly strong during the 1950's and 60's, when the country had recently fought two gruesome wars against the Soviet Union and the city had suffered repeated bombings. There had been a lot of grief, and perhaps the images of blue skies and clean functionalist buildings were just what people needed to forget the hardships, to keep themselves going.

If we look even further back, into what we Finns sometimes call the First Republic, the rear mirror will show us a troubled time. The First Republic is the period between 1917, when independence was gained, and the autumn of 1939, when the Winter War against the Soviet union broke out. Independence was secured only after a cruel civil war between the Whites and the Reds, and the war left deep scars on both sides. The Helsinki of the 1920's and 30's was characterized by deep social divides, abysses even, and it wasn't easy to make them disappear.

There was also a language fight during these first decades of independence. Finland had been under Swedish rule for almost 600 years, and during this period Swedish was the language of administration and culture, the language of political and economical power. This started to change during the fully one hundred years of Russian rule, but the change did not come about easily. We Swedish-speakers tried to keep hold of the power where we could: Helsinki University, to name one example, still held on to its Swedish-speaking traditions when national independence began, and the Finnish majority naturally wanted to make it a predominantly Finnish-speaking university. Therefore, the language question caused a lot of controversy during the first 20 years of independence.

All in all, the newborn nation had to deal with a lot of potentially explosive social and political issues, and the picture of a crude and alcohol-soaked harbour town was not the desired way to promote its capital. As a matter of fact, I have quite a deep understanding for our founding fathers' urge to create the myth of the clean city, the myth that was still alive during my own formative years in Helsinki.

But somewhere deep in my tainted heart I also confess to being rather happy that the Helsinki I live in today is a bit more easy-going and continental in its approach to things. This cautious optimism of mine is not altogether shared by the scholar Michel Ekman, whom I quoted at the beginning of this presentation. I will let him have the last word. In his recent essay on Helsinki he writes, and I quote: "Today Helsinki is a town that is growing frenetically, where the Nokia economy is generating block after block of new construction sites, and the tiny centre, the real Helsinki, is gradually being enclosed by an ever-thicker girdle of commercial property made of reflective glass, and enormous shopping malls where the citizens are urged to do their bit for economic growth."

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