

The booklet contains a number of articles written by foreigners born in the Americas, Africa and Europe who have come to Finland for different reasons. Each contributor discusses a different aspect of the foreign students' experience, drawing on their own recollections of years spent in Finland.

These articles offer insight into the legal as well as administrative and cultural order prevailing in Finland and attempts to open up dialogue between foreigners and Finnish society. The exceptionally small number of foreigners residing in Finland, compared to other industrialized countries, makes this dialogue a valuable basis for common understanding.

HYY:n julkaisusarja
Gaudeamus



Gregory Moore — Adrian Soto (eds.)

Strange days

The experience of foreign students in Finland

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Ray W. Taylor
Kirjastostaan

Gregory Moore — Adrian Soto (eds.)

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"People are strange when you're a stranger,
Faces look ugly when you're alone,
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted,
Streets are deserted when you're down,
When you're strange,
Faces come out of the rain,
When you're strange,
No one remembers your name,
When you're strange,
When you're down,
When you're strange."

Gaudeamus

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Mannerheimintie 5 C
00100 Helsinki 10
Finland

HYY:n julkaisusarja

Kyriiri Oy
Helsinki 1984

ISBN 951-662-341-7
ISSN 0780-2803

Introduction

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Steve Huxley

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words by the Doors, 1967

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Introduction

This collection of articles by no means is intended to give an all-inclusive portrayal of the situation of the foreign student in Finland or Finnish reality, and quite rightly may be called one-sided in its outlook. Important and useful information about Finland is available from numerous sources, and publications specifically designed to assist the foreign student are extremely valuable to anyone intending serious study in this country. Nevertheless, the contributors and editors feel that foreign students coming to Finland are often unprepared to confront certain difficulties in interacting with Finnish society or the peculiarities of this culture. We hope that by better preparing for what they face here and through greater patience and understanding, foreign students will be in a stronger position to experience the many wonderful aspects of life here. Keep in mind as you read, although many articles seem critical towards specific features of life here, most of the writers have chosen to live in Finland for many years.

It is also our hope that this booklet would be of interest to the ever-growing group of enlightened Finns sympathetic to the difficulties of the foreign student and the position of resident aliens in general. Some gains have already been achieved in the revision of archaic laws and administrative practices which affect resident aliens and the admittance of refugees. It has been the support of this group of Finns, which has been so important in advancing this cause. In this respect, we owe our deepest gratitude to Oy Gaudeamus Ab for courageously consenting to publish this little book without any pre-conditions.

The foreign student community is small — disproportionately small compared to any industrialized, indeed, any country. The voices in this book represent a numerically insignificant group, systematically limited by the authorities. Discussion of the foreign student, naturally, is linked to the discussion of the position of legal aliens in Finland. Their voices are throttled by covert prejudice and language. The game of cultural politics remains heavily skewed against the "ulkomaalainen" (literally "from outside the country and in a deeper sense, from outside the world). Finnish culture is tight-knit, to be *in* Finnish society is vastly different from being *inside* Finnish borders among Finns. Quite appropriately, *outsiders* are administered by the Ministry of the *Interior*. Foreigners who live peacefully for many years here are usually *outstanding* individuals, and only gradually do they begin to grasp how literally the meaning of outstanding has been taken: they are required to stand outside, both in the abstract sense of social

and cultural participation and often in concrete matters like housing and admission to restaurants.

This is what the foreigner should be ready for when he comes to Finland — preparing to orient himself in an interior landscape far different from his home culture. Sure, some of the landscapes will be shared; such is the nature of all human experience, but someday he may notice some deep heaviness burdening a friend or glimmers of happiness and the desire for closeness held back as if behind glass. Then comes the terrifying moment of enlightenment all foreigners eventually confront, they realize they don't understand shit about what's really going on. Not many hang around to find out. It probably is the same thing that lead Scandinavian myth singers to characterize the Finns as a magical tribe not to be messed with. In fact, the top figure in Finnish mythology is a wizard (*tietäjä*, literally "the one who knows"). A new arrival to this country can begin his climb up the hierarchy of knowledge by admitting he knows nothing without direct experience.

Foreign students are basically a nuisance, as far as the university administration is concerned. It has actually been commented that all this fuss about the position of the foreign student is a bit absurd because so few bother to stay around long enough to get a degree. Well, all we hope is that such a statement betrays the weird twists of logic used to thwart a student's progress every step of the way. Foreign students must keep in mind that *nearly all* foreign students fail to accomplish what they came here to do, and more important, *it is not their fault*. Too often, we have seen individuals shoulder a burden of self-pity and shame which they became unwilling to share with family and friends back home. The consequences are devastating.

Some anthropologists classify the Finns as a shame culture, which in practice means that they are unwilling to take risks. When something is forbidden, and many things are forbidden to the foreigner, the why or the extent or even the possible consequences of doing the forbidden act remain forever unclear, and to a great extent, irrelevant. "Ei saa!" It is not done, it is just not done by human beings. People don't question rules, and because they are unwilling to take the risk of breaking rules, they are by and large exceptionally honest. Ultimately, any argument with an institutional representative will lead to the border of the "forbidden zone". "Ei saa" is the only explanation needed to suffice, once the border is crossed it is highly unlikely that a foreigner stands any chance of taking his case further.

The tales of many foreigners who have had unhappy endings is due in most cases to the foreigner's inaccurate assessment of Finnish attitudes, emotional make-up, and the toughness of the current socio-cultural model of Finnish society. The different chapters in this book are contributions to the discussion of the fascinating way of life in this country. It should be obvious to any Finn reading this book, that the writers, despite years of residence do not fully understand many aspects of the Finnish lifestyle. But then, probably not all Finns understand them.

In the land of Sibelius and Sillanpää, everybody will claim that culture is a wonderful thing, but in the end, scandalous news items concerning local

political figures and celebrities or a third-rate sport result seem to have more appeal than a good book or a cultural magazine. People love cats and dogs very much and teach respect for every living thing. Yet, they apparently don't feel the same about their next-door neighbors or about their work and school mates.

Finland is a very young country. Modern industry and urban expansion arrived after World War II. As migration from the countryside enlarged the towns, Helsinki lost its classification as Finland's only city. As the cities expanded, towns were erected to keep people close to nature and close enough to their working place at the same time. The result of such experience is a sad one. People living in these areas, characterized by monotonous block housing, are often blindly searching for their identity. They feel, and even worse, they behave in a rootless manner, no longer country folk or city people. They constitute a significant percentage of the population.

Finns are at their best at their summer cottages, when the sun slides along the horizon in the late evening, the loons cry distantly across the still lake, and the forest is emersed in pleasant mellow light. Add the rich odours of the sauna and a little vodka and beer, and you may know Finland at her best.

One final comment, that is the difference between networks and communities. Networks are absolutely essential to any foreigner expecting to survive here longer than a few weeks. The network of foreigners is supportive and by and large accessible to newcomers. In a network, you can be with people who understand you and share the same problems, you can solve them together, you can even be important. The local Finnish community is just about the opposite, you can be with people who don't understand and don't even care about your problems. They won't help you solve your problems and you are always unimportant. Yet, it is the contact with the community which has always made the difference in whether a foreigner stays or leaves, it is the community (language, custom, social experience) which keeps the foreigner sane.

Obviously, this booklet cannot pretend to give a full portrait of the country. It also cannot be a cult to Finland's achievements, which some people might consider dazzling and noble. If anything, the tales contained in this book could be described as those of a disappointed lover who still has some hope left.

The editors.

Some reflections on life here

STEVE HUXLEY

"How have you managed to survive over six years of living in Finland?" For the newcomer this may seem to be an inappropriately negative question to ask of someone who is free to leave when he pleases. Yet, the frequency with which this type of question is asked of veteran foreigners here, not least of all by Finns themselves, is indicative of a fairly widespread attitude: This attitude is that, despite the many positive aspects of life here, there is some kind of basic difficulty, a socio-political difficulty if you like, which faces the foreigner in Finland. The foreigner who remains in Finland must learn to accept foreignness as an indistinguishable part of his personhood.

The reasons for success in enduring the difficulties of life in Finland, as well as fully enjoying its delights, are multisided. Above all, the fact that my closest friend is a Finn, that I am especially interested in Finnish history and that I have been able to procure work in my own field, have made life here not only endurable, but very rewarding and enjoyable.

The foreigner who makes it in Finland, especially as a student, is definitely in some kind of privileged position — or else he is exceptionally tough. This privileged position consists of having access to grants and student loans, as well as being among the chosen ones who receive a work permit. It is almost impossible for a foreigner to survive here if he has not overcome these basic material and legal obstacles; I have met many embittered foreigners who have tried and failed.

At first thought, it came to mind that my ability to speak Finnish has been central to my success in getting along here; in general this is true, however, in a strange, perhaps ironic, way just the opposite has also been true. When I first came to Finland I arrived at the most idyllic time of the year, summer. I went directly to work in rural eastern Finland where I was deeply impressed by the beauty and cleanliness of the surroundings. Very few people in the area spoke English and I spoke no Finnish. Therefore, for the first year of my stay here I remained, to a great extent, confined to my own preconceptions of the Finns and Finland, as well as to many of the prevailing stereotypes.

The language barrier prevented me from becoming more thoroughly

acquainted with Finnish ways of thinking. Perhaps it was just this lack of language that allowed me to remain, for a while, in a rural dream. I had no abrupt encounters with the more difficult sides of the Finns; the purity of the *Suomi neito* remained unthreatened, at least for the time being.

There are foreigners who have survived many years in Finland by maintaining ignorance, by remaining content with the "peace" which comes through not being able to participate in political life, the peace which comes when one has only a minimum of rights. I realized that I had, for a time, been one of these people.

Of course, as I gradually became proficient with the language my more naive views disappeared and a certain mild disillusion concerning Finnish life set in. At the same time, however, a new enthusiasm for getting to know Finns and their culture grew as my ability to speak Finnish grew. This enthusiasm has been an important source of strength for overcoming the more depressing sides of life here.

The problems that would have beset me were I a dark or black skinned man, or if I came from a third world country, probably would have been almost overwhelming. Perhaps I would have left earlier; if not, I am sure my attitude towards Finland would be tinged with a much more bitter taste than it is now.

How many times I have listened as my dark-skinned friends tell of the Finns' awkward, insulting and violent behavior towards them. Almost every time I walk through the streets with one of my more "foreign" looking companions, some Finn figures out a way, more or less grossly, to emphasize our otherness, our foreignness. Therefore, the fact that I have white skin has definitely helped me survive here; however, my disillusion has definitely grown since I became aware of this.

Already by the end of my first semester at the University of Helsinki, I realized that I would receive very little inspiration and intellectual support from either the instructors or students. Now that I look back upon my years of study and research here I realize how very lonely, academically and intellectually lonely, they were. I received most of the inspiration for my work from people living outside of Finland.

At first I had the feeling that as a beginning student I was somehow personally unworthy of the attention of the instructors. However, gradually I began to realize that Finnish education, despite the great deal of information it succeeds in conveying, subtly instructs and conditions students to be insecure and unsure of themselves. Time after time I found myself in university seminars in which very few of those attending dared to put forth their own ideas and opinions. How frustrating this is when one is thirsty for intellectual contact with one's student companions!

My fellow students and I, both foreign and Finnish, have experienced a certain general lack of communication at the university here. There seems to be no control over whether the knowledge given is truly understood. Students are provided with only a bare minimum of feedback and criticism concerning their studies and research projects. The authorities often seem to

maintain barriers between themselves and the students.

Despite the general difficulties, I can honestly say that I enjoyed my years at the University of Helsinki. Being an independent person I was able to make good use of the freedom the student is given to read and take exams according to his own pace. To survive and prosper at the university here you must take the initiative into your own hands. You must seek out and politely demand aid from professors and instructors. Amidst the general lack of communication it is possible to make very valuable intellectual contacts; I am very grateful to those professors and researchers who were willing to assist and advice me in my own work.

To live, work, and study outside of one's own land is to be foreign, to be "other", in some degree no matter in which country one is in. A lot of things we foreigners say concerning our lives as aliens in Finland could apply to the lives of strangers living in any land. From this point of view the difficulties of foreigners in Finland must be seen as part of the set of problems which people who are culturally strange to one another must face everywhere.

Too often foreigners here criticize Finland and the Finns for problems which should be seen on a broader, world-wide scale. I think that if foreigners could see many of their difficulties from this point of view it would be easier for them to survive here.

Nonetheless, Finnish society definitely has its own way of intensifying the problems of relating to foreigners and of creating its own unique versions of general difficulties, both on the interpersonal and governmental levels.

A common myth here has it that the Finn is initially very difficult to get to know, but once the first barriers are surpassed he will be a reliable friend for good. The victim of this myth is usually one who has not had much more than a superficial contact with Finnish culture. In reality, the foreigner who has a more thorough exposure to Finns will find that the strong and sturdy *Jussi* of the myth, the man of *sisu*, is often a man tormented by insecurity and lack of self-confidence; he is a man with whom a truly cross-cultural friendship, which goes beyond a superficial level, is very difficult.

The foreigner who succeeds in socially and psychologically surviving in Finland must, all too often, become a *Jussi* among *Jussis*. A famous Finnish political low-profile becomes, on the individual level, a disheartening and depressing form of self-suppression and censorship. Sometimes one must be diplomatic in the extreme if one is to maintain "peaceful" relations with one's fellow workers. How often I have sat mute among the employees at the factory where I work for fear of offending their Finnish sensibility. On those times when I have dared to speak out on subjects about which my working companions usually maintain self-censorship, I have been met with a cold and embarrassed silence. Over the years, slowly and subtly, I have become culturally Finnish in many ways; for better or worse, this definitely helped make it possible for me to get along here for so long.

Some of my foreign companions have suggested that their relationship to

Finland has been like that of a disappointed lover who still has some hope left. I can certainly understand why they use this metaphor. Finland, the *Suomi neito*, has succeeded in projecting to the rest of the world a fantastically beautiful image of herself. Just think: the land of a thousand sky-blue lakes, of deep Kalevalan romanticism, of enlightened rusticism, of unusual political stability, of the international Helsinki spirit, etc.; these and other stereotype conceptions make it easy for the foreigner who has only a limited contact with Finland to see it as a kind of a paradise.

It is no wonder that many foreigners, after having lived in Finland long enough to penetrate this facade of stereotypes and half-truths, find themselves disappointed. You can just imagine the bitterness of the foreigner who discovers that behind the curtain of the spirit of Helsinki there often awaits him a whole complex of ironically bitter experiences, such as being subject to arbitrary and unjust official treatment, and coldness, even hostility, socially.

Yet, personally, my disappointment with the *Suomi neito* has never been complete; some of the finest moments of my life have been spent in the cities and villages of Finland. I have a sincere admiration for many aspects of Finnish life and have learned a great deal from my Finnish friends and associates. My relationship with these friends, combined with the many interesting projects I have been involved in, have made my life very fruitful indeed. Association with those foreigners and Finns here who are working for better cross-cultural relations has helped break down the alienation which comes after contact with the bleak sides of Finnish life. I still have hope.

Expectation versus reality

ENRIQUE TESSIERI

Before coming to Finland in December 1976, I had everything going for me: a six-month scholarship offered to me by the Ministry of Education of Finland; a year and a half fieldwork behind me on the Finns of Argentina and Paraguay; a B.A. in anthropology from the University of California at Los Angeles; a knowledge of the Finnish language; a positive attitude of Finnish academia and society; and finally, the eagerness to integrate myself into a new milieu. This, I thought, would not be difficult since my mother is Finnish and I had spent a most summers of my youth and childhood in Finland with my maternal relatives.

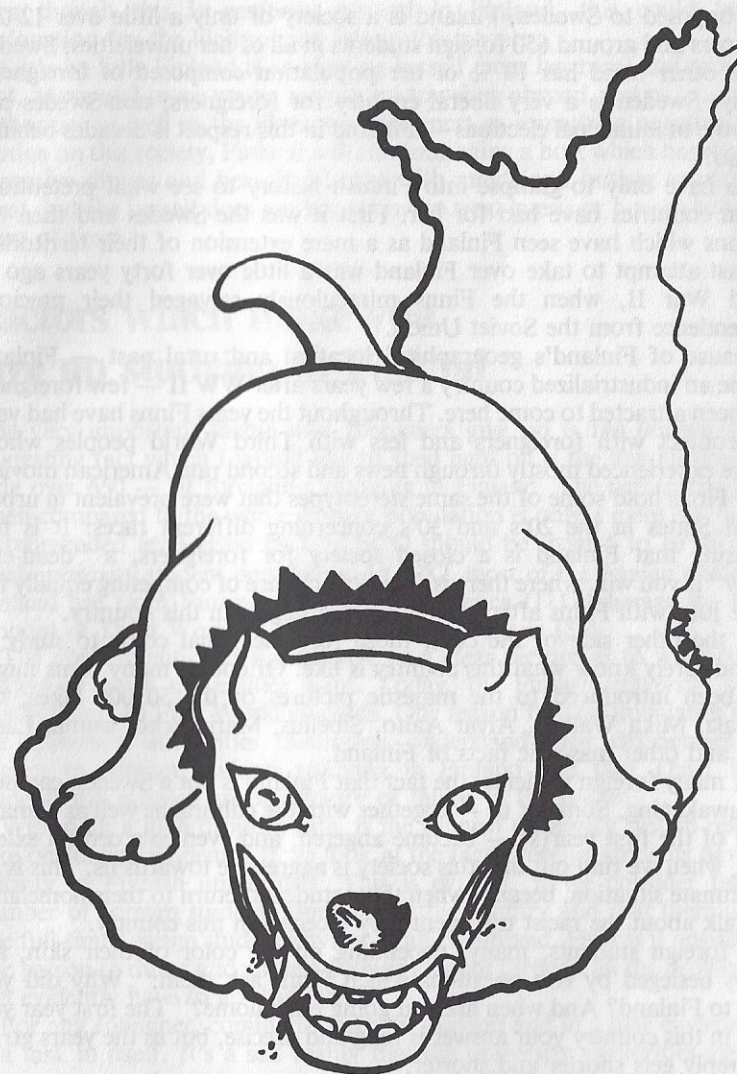
Today, looking back on those six years that have gone by and analysing my educational experiences in both the universities of Turku and Helsinki, I can come to one conclusion: I am one of the majority of foreign students that fail in the Finnish university system.

Finland is not Sweden

Heikki Waris, considered by many as the "father of Finnish sociology", published a small booklet in 1965 entitled "An Introduction to Finnish Society", which I read before coming to study in Finland. One of the outstanding aspects of Finland according to Waris is the "high degree of homogeneity of Finnish society" and that "consequently, racial prejudice and discrimination are nonexistent (in Finland)".

Racial prejudice comes in many forms and the argument behind Waris' statement is that since in Finland the minorities are so small — the largest of these are the Sami which only number around 3 000 — they don't even count. But if you look deeper into Finnish society you will find a type of covert racism which is waiting to lash out as soon as the size of the foreign and minority population increases.

Most foreign students that come to Finland for the first time erroneously believe that Finland, because it is part of Scandinavia, is a Sweden. Finland is not Sweden by a long shot. Finland is Finland.



BEWARE OF DOG

As opposed to Sweden, Finland is a society of only a little over 12 000 foreigners and around 650 foreign students in all of her universities. Sweden on the other hand has 10 % of her population composed of foreigners. Legally, Sweden is a very liberal country for foreigners; non-Swedes can even vote in municipal elections — Finland in this respect is decades behind. Why so?

You have only to glimpse into Finnish history to see what pretensions foreign countries have had for her. First it was the Swedes and then the Russians which have seen Finland as a mere extension of their territories. The last attempt to take over Finland was a little over forty years ago in World War II, when the Finns miraculously salvaged their precious independence from the Soviet Union.

Because of Finland's geographical location and rural past — Finland became an industrialized country a few years after WW II — few foreigners have been attracted to come here. Throughout the years Finns have had very little contact with foreigners and less with Third World peoples whom they've experienced mostly through news and second rate American movies. Many Finns hold some of the same stereotypes that were prevalent in urban United States in the 20's and 30's concerning different races. It is not surprising that Finland is a closed society for foreigners, a "dead-end society" if you will, where there is dear little chance of competing equally for choice jobs with Finns after having taken a degree in this country.

On the other side of the coin, those foreigners that come to study in Finland rarely know what this country is like. Of course many of us might have been introduced to the majestic pictures of the 50 000 lakes, the Kalevala, Mika Waltari, Alvar Aalto, Sibelius, Marimekko, sauna, Lasse Viren and other mascarinic facts of Finland.

For many foreign students, the fact that Finland is not a Sweden can be a rude awakening. Some of us — together with the cultural as well as climatic shock of the first year(s) — become angered, and even to a certain extent bitter, when we find out that this society is aggressive towards us. This is an unfortunate situation, because when these students return to their homelands they talk about the racist treatment they received in this country.

As foreign students, many, depending on the color of their skin, are always besieged by two questions which Finns ask them: "Why did you come to Finland? And when are you going back home?" The first year you study in this country your answer is long and precise, but as the years go by your reply gets shorter and shorter.

The psychological pressures a foreign student must go through because he doesn't feel "at home" or "at ease" or that he is an "eternal outsider", make life tough for him. Some, I'm sure, give up studying in Finland because they cannot live on books alone. Culturally, Finns are an introverted people. Just because Finns don't say hello or greet you warmly every time you run into them, doesn't mean that they are rude towards you. Finns have been taught to show the least amount of feelings possible and

even though this is perfectly normal in Finland, this could be one explanation for the high suicide rate in this country.

Little by little Finland is awakening herself from her rural and provincial past. More and more young people are traveling abroad, but as long as the authorities as well as the Finns see foreigners as something negative and a burden on this society, Finland will continue being a host which has the most expensive dinner and beautiful house with maids and butlers to offer her guest, but she herself does not know how to treat guests or how to behave in front of them.

Factors which make you give up studying in Finland

One very important factor why foreigners give up is *the university*. An interesting fact which I would like to shed light on is the low number — a little over 650 — of foreigners studying in Finland. The percentage figure when compared to the whole student population is only a mere 0.8 %. The recommended level given by UNESCO should be from 5 to 10 % of the total university student population. In 1982, most of the foreign students in Finland are from Europe (288), North America (111) whereas the largest amount of Third World students come from Nigeria (31).

The above-mentioned figures give us a clear picture as to what type of students Finnish universities want. Today, the Finnish university system mostly caters to First World students. One reason for this imbalance is that the university authorities themselves understand their deficiencies with respect to foreign students studying in Finland and that Third World students run a much greater chance of failing in the system.

With such a high dropout rate, is the Finnish university system ready to take on foreign students? If we look at the facts, foreign students have low priority in Finnish universities. This is evident, if we consider the low number of foreign students studying in this country and that there is only one full-time foreign student advisor in all of Finland. How is it possible for one person to direct and guide a foreign student through all the problems he will evidently have to go through?

For any foreigner, coming to study in Finland and in a new environment is a task in itself. It's a sad reality that the university authorities expect a foreigner to survive in a system which he is literally thrown into and expected to make out the best he can by himself. Guiding and counselling foreigners or even Finns towards becoming degree holders, as well as to make most of their studies, does not only mean telling the student which entrance exam he must take or which form he must fill out.

There is a great amount of human energy a foreign student must expend on informing himself. There is very little information exchange among students. If you don't ask, nobody will tell you. This becomes even a greater

problem for the foreign student when most of the information — e.g. study guides — is printed in Finnish. In this sense, foreign students are extremely handicapped and leads to a lot of unneeded confusion.

There are stringent controls as to who will be allowed to study at a Finnish university. How long you'll be given a residence or work permit depends on who you are. Foreigners are literally treated on a *a la tête du client* basis i.e. individually. Why do some Third World students have to deposit a fee of four thousand marks which they are allowed to take out when leaving Finland? Why are some students told that they should have applied in their country for work permits and others are able to apply in Finland? Why do some students obtain more credit for a degree or parts of a degree taken abroad? This arbitrary system gives a lot of power to the university authorities leaving the student on a "take it or leave it" basis with very little chance of appealing successfully.

Those of us who plan to make our homes in Finland after finishing our studies discover that there is no work for us in our chosen field. Many foreign students have given up their studies because they know that their university degree in Finland will only be a paper which they can hang on their wall. Because jobs are so scarce in Finland for degree holders, the standard hiring practice you'll be faced with is first Finns and then, maybe, you. Most foreigners holding university posts are in the foreign language departments.

The way the universities are run with respect to foreigners reflects the narrow-minded policies of the Office of Alien Affairs, i.e. to keep Finland's student and resident foreign population as low as possible so as to conserve this country's "high degree of homogeneity". Thus as a foreign student you are welcome very silently to study in Finland but not encouraged to do so.

The second aspect I would like to talk about is *language*. If you are going to study in Finland for a few years it is highly advisable that you learn to speak Finnish as well as possible. But let's be candid, Finnish is an extremely difficult language to learn and through time and hard work you'll be able to carry out modest conversations.

A wrong attitude to take, but a very prevalent one among foreign students, is to learn as little Finnish as possible so as to get by. Many foreigners studying in Finland take the attitude of "Why should I learn this country's language if I'm leaving in a couple of years?" or, "I can get by with my English almost anywhere I go". It's incredible, but I know some foreign students that have lived in Finland for six years and have picked up hardly any Finnish as well as some who have almost learned to speak it correctly and fluently. Remember that Finns are by nature generally introverted and feel uncomfortable when speaking a foreign language. If you want to intermingle with them and contribute to your mental well being, learn as much Finnish as possible. If you don't, you'll be more of an outsider than you already are.

Since English is the third language after Swedish in Finnish universities,

those people that come from non-English speaking countries are at a real disadvantage than those that come from the United States, Canada or Great Britain. A good example is José, a Bolivian economics student at Helsinki University. Every time he studies for an exam an enormous task awaits him. First, he has to get through the language barrier in the book and finally, understand what he has read and write it down in English — which he speaks modestly — when taking the test.

The final factor worth mention is a very subjective one called *loneliness*. When studying in Turku, I could literally have locked myself up in my room for days with occasional walks to the kitchen to cook something. Rarely did I see anyone in the kitchen since, as is the case with Latins, we usually eat dinner no earlier than eight.

If you're going to do postgraduate studies in Finland you won't be required to assist many classes. You can study in your own room or the library and take the exam whenever you want. For me, this type of "independent" study was something new. Most of the contacts I had with the professors were of a formal nature. For some cultures human contact can be equally important as their studies.

One way to meet Finns is by going to a night club, but these can be dangerous places for foreigners since it is there where Finns get drunk and lose their inhibitions. Some Finnish men can get extremely annoyed seeing a *mutakuono* (mudface) — a racial slur used for Latins and *taatelin tallaaaja* or date stomper for Blacks — dancing with Finnish women.

But don't lock yourself up in your room under piles of books. One cheap way of getting to know people is through your local foreign students club where you can meet other foreigners who share the same problems as you. For me, other foreign students have been a great source of help and encouragement.

Conclusion

I came to Finland to study with the expectation of taking an advanced degree. I ended up working as an English/Spanish teacher and recently I have gained some recognition as a journalist. For five years I had to narrow the distance between my expectations of what was possible here and reality. I've come to terms with that reality and in many respects, I lead a very rewarding life. But then I was lucky, I had a lot more going for me when I came here.

A letter from Africa

OBI MARIZU

Dear Prospective Foreign Students to Finland

Looking back, the memories of my years of stay in Finland are still as fresh as if they occurred just yesterday. I am happy and at the same time sad to remember my years at the University of Helsinki not only as an Education/Political Science student, but also a common student activist.

“A great mind
A great courage,
A great energy.
And a great persistent patience”
— Elizabeth Browning.

I have used this philosophical statement of Browning because that is what it entails to live and survive as a foreigner in Finland. It might sound superfluously disenchanting for a foreign student to come to Finland. The intention of the author is not to scare you, rather I request that you appraise the real situation in Finland. Life before admission into any form of high institution of learning is not as easy as many would have imagined. To start with, to gain entry into Finland, you have to obtain a temporary visa which varies from three days to three months duration, as the case might be.

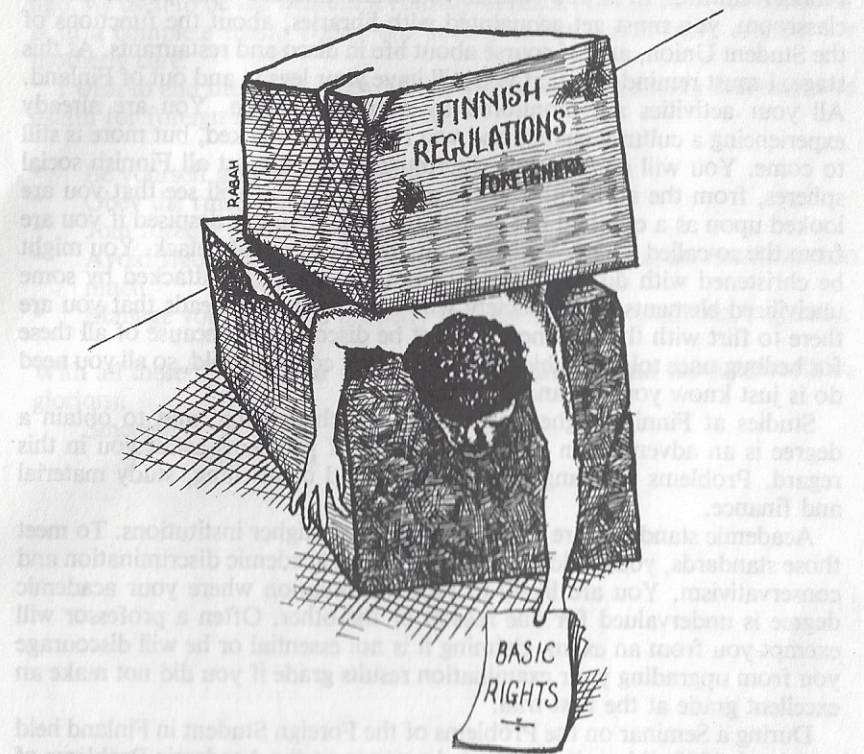
When you are safely in Finland, properly searched and questioned at the Vantaa airport or harbour to ascertain whether you possess some marijuana or drugs, what next?

You are given a partial or non-admission before arriving here, the next thing to do is to get yourself in any Finnish language courses and prepare yourself for the police harassment via telephone calls or letters.

When your residence permit is expiring, get a letter of introduction from your Finnish language teacher to the police. Get the visa form properly filled and get set for the police interrogation which includes probing questions like; “How do you hope to live and study here? How many Finnish girl friends do you have? Why do you choose to come here to study of all

countries of Europe? Don't forget to go and pay up your repatriation fee to the KOP Bank and submit the receipts to this office. You will hear from us after two weeks.”

Your residence permit is granted, please, come and collect it within fourteen days so and so amount of money for stamp duty. Note that the



renewal of this permit will depend of your success at gaining admission into institution of learning. The entrance examination into the most university faculties for new students usually come up in September and January.

“Hi guy! How did the examination go?”

“I made it.”

“Oh? Big congratulations.”

The office of the study affairs writes:

Dear applicant:

This is to inform you that your application for admission to the of the has now been considered and you have been offered a place in faculty of

You are to report to the foreign student adviser for registration and collection of your study book. Time will show you how important that book will be for you. You are ready for the academic battles only as a full-time student. Extra students are usually discriminated. The Autumn term starts in September. From the beginning, you ought to run to register for lectures, attend Finnish language lessons and acquaint yourself with social life of the Finnish culture. In a few weeks you must interact with people in the classroom, you must get acquainted with libraries, about the functions of the Student Union, and of course about life in disco and restaurants. At this stage, I must remind you that you still have your legs in and out of Finland. All your activities are monitored by agents of doom. You are already experiencing a cultural change and you feel rather shocked, but more is still to come. You will come across discrimination in almost all Finnish social spheres, from the authorities to the grass roots. You will see that you are looked upon as a criminal not as a guest. You are more despised if you are from the so-called Third World or you are conspicuously black. You might be christened with different racist names and might be attacked by some uncivilized elements of the society who have it in their heads that you are there to flirt with their women. Do not be discouraged because of all these for bedbug once told its babies that what is hot could be cold, so all you need do is just know yourself and be yourself.

Studies at Finnish higher institutions are challenging, and to obtain a degree is an adventure in perpetuity. A lot of problems await you in this regard. Problems like language, guidance and counselling, study material and finance.

Academic standards are very high in Finnish higher institutions. To meet those standards, you could encounter practical academic discrimination and conservatism. You are likely to face the situation where your academic degree is undervalued for one reason or the other. Often a professor will exempt you from an exam, claiming it is not essential or he will discourage you from upgrading your examination results grade if you did not make an excellent grade at the first trial.

During a Seminar on the Problems of the Foreign Student in Finland held on March 1982, this writer presented a paper on the Academic Problems of the Foreign Students and spot-lighted the various mediocre ways in which academic decisions are made on foreign students. I then enquired why foreign students, in general, are at the bottom grade level of the Master Degree Thesis. Back to my home, here in Nigeria, after years of studies in Finland, I keep the sincere desire that Foreign students up there, in that Nordic Country should join hands together with the Association of Foreign Students in Finland, just to improve the situation.

Thinking about my happy and sad experiences in Finland, I have come to the conclusion that they have been very enriching despite all the odds. They have moulded me in all aspects of life and made me believe that road to success is not easy.

Now I am here, back home rich in experiences and a lot of good ideas, but still I find it difficult to fit properly into my own complex society. Nigeria has changed a lot since I first left the country. The changes have been so vast that they affect every aspect of our life: politics, economics, culture, etc. As an example, I would say that when I left Nigeria we had a military dictatorship, now we have a democratic government elected freely. Years ago, we used to be the wealthiest country in Black Africa, now our economy is in a complete mess. Today our society is like a sick baby seeking for motherly care.

I wish to end this letter from Africa with a few suggestions that might be useful for foreign students in Finland:

- * Be yourself and know yourself
- * Obey the rules and laws of the land
- * Join foreign student organizations
- * Avoid frequent visits to discos and restaurants and do not drink too much.
- * Manage your finances properly and always settle your bills regularly.

With all these tips my dear friend, you will make it, and the future will be glorious.

Sincerely,

Obi Marizu