Nordic Heritage Museum
Nordic American Voices

Interview of Rita Vermala Koski
On February 19, 2011
At Seattle, Washington
Interviewed by Mari-Ann Kind Jackson and Tonya Westby

Mari-Ann Kind Jackson: This is an interview for the Nordic American Voices Oral History Project. Today is February 19, 2011, and I'll be interviewing Rita Vermala Koski. We are at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, Washington. My name is Marianne Kind Jackson, and with me is Tonya Westby.

We are happy that you are here, Rita. We'd like you to start by giving us your full name and your date and place of birth. Then we look forward to hearing your whole life story.

Rita: [00:52] Thank you, Marianne. My name is Rita Elizabeth Vermala Koski. I was born on December 18, 1936 in Helsinki, Finland. I'm an only child. My parents, Aino and Serge Vermala met on a cruise to Estonia when they were young. My dad was born in Russia. My mother was born in Finland.

[1:20] I lived a rather charmed, wonderful childhood, maybe because I was an only child. [Laughs] Life was good according to pictures, anyway, and stories that I heard in my very young toddler years. My first real recollection of any kind of things being out of the normal was one fall mid-afternoon when I heard sirens. My father was home. He had not had to report for army duty yet.

[01:56]Mom and Dad were home, and the alarms came. My father ordered my mom and myself out of the house, we lived in a high-rise apartment building, onto a grass-covered cliff that was covered in fall leaves. I heard some airplanes I thought, overhead, and I heard some popping noises. At that time I didn't know what popcorn was, but now I realize [laughs] that it sounded like popping popcorn.

[02:28] My father pushed me down to the ground very hard and flew right on top of me and covered my body with his body. He didn't have time to say anything to me certainly. I'm sure he probably told my mom to get down on the ground, too. What the popping noise was and what I viewed from underneath being under my dad were the leaves were just jumping all over all around us, the fall leaves.

[03:01] What I later found out that was, they were Russian bombers that were making their first attacks on Helsinki. They had machine gunners at the back of their bombers, and the machine gunners were trying to do as much damage as they could. Now the interesting thing is why did we go outside? Why would you [laughs] be told to go outside if there's an attack alarm? In those days for some reason, that was the rule.

[03:36] All of the high-rise apartment buildings that were in our neighborhood had bomb cellars. But for some reason, and I don't know why, we were not encouraged to go to the bomb cellars at that time. I guess they were worried about strikes, red strikes on buildings, and that we would then perish. I don't really know, but the rule of thumb was get outside, get down on the ground, and lay as flat as you can.

[04:03] Well, I had a chip on my shoulder, you can imagine [laughs] for quite a while against my dad. [laughs] It wasn't funny to be shoved down when you're just a little girl. But those memories soon faded, and my dad joined the army. My mother was very active in the home front women.

[04:22] The order of the day again was that everybody who had gold rings would put them in for collection. They got a little iron band in exchange so that the collection for funds to outfit the Finnish Army. That was a part of it. Anybody who had reasonable linen sheets, pillowcases, whatever, they were torn into strips for bandages for the Red Cross and for the Army Corps of medics to use on the home front.

[04:57] There was a lot of sacrifice as a youngster or as children. Our chore was to collect, for example, dandelion roots. They were then dried and then made into chicory root, which was like a pretend coffee or tea for the forces. We also collected raspberry bush leaves,

which again were dried, and they were made into a kind of a tea. So there was something for everybody to do during those years.

[05:27] However, after a while my mother felt that it really was unsafe for me to be in Finland. So Mom and Dad had made arrangements. My father was in the hotel business, so he had colleagues in Stockholm. Arrangements were made for me to be transported to Stockholm to stay with a family that we knew.

[05:51] So I went the first time, I believe it was 1940 or maybe '41, on a ship from Olba to Stockholm, was met by my Swedish family, and became a part of their family very quickly. Learned to speak perfect Swedish very, very quickly and totally forgot Finnish. So when my mother made a call at Christmastime, I was there over Christmas--I believe I was probably about five years old--she made a call at Christmas and wanted to speak with her daughter.

[06:25] I came on the phone. I didn't understand a word she was saying. She didn't understand a word I was saying, and she was crying her heart out on the other end. I was just shrugging my shoulders, [laughs] and my foster parents couldn't do anything because they didn't speak a word of Finnish. So that was traumatic for her, and a few months later she said she wants her daughter back in Finland.

[06:45] Things had calmed down anyway, so I was shipped back to Finland. Of course, it didn't take me more than a few weeks to relearn my Finnish, and I never did forget my Swedish, thank goodness. Soon after I came back from that first trip, things started heating up again. The alarms for the sirens were going off almost every day. The orders were to go into the bomb cellars, and there was one time that we spent six nights in the bomb cellar without being able to come up at all.

[07:22] We forged a lot of great friendships. Obviously, the families pretty much knew each other living in the apartment complexes, but we forged stronger friendships and a lot of innovative ways to entertain the children. A lot of these bomb shelters were also cellars, so people would have their supply of potatoes there. So we learned to carve faces on potatoes and make puppets out of them and do all kinds of goofy stuff.

[07:52] As soon as that longest stay in the bomb shelter was cleared, Mom decided that if it's going to be like this, Rita might as well go back to Stockholm. So this time I was put on a bomber plane. Yeah, it was a bomber, but all the guts were taken out. There were about 80 or 90 of us children that were all strapped down on the floor of the bomber. We flew over to Sweden the second time.

[08:22] I think the reason we were flown was that it was not safe anymore to have ships traveling between Finland and Sweden, especially passenger ships because the waters were mined. There was a lot of war activity going on. So back I went to the family then. The second time I was enrolled in a school in Stockholm, Sofia Folk Skola.

[08:44] I went there for a full year, had an incredibly wonderful teacher, learned a lot of incredibly wonderful things about growing, making, and an appreciation for life. We grew our own wheat on a windowsill. We dried it. We chaffed it, separated the kernels. We ground it between two rocks and made bread out of the flour that we made. It was just wonderful [laughs] for a city girl to see how it really happens. It's great.

[09:19] I stayed there for a year that time, and then came back home and went for the next two years of school in Helsinki. Then the war ended. My father came back from the war. He went back into the hotel business. Now he was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and he escaped during the Revolution in 1917 to Finland with his grandmother and his aunt, who had a condominium in Helsinki.

[09:55] There was a lot of travel between Russia and Finland by the aristocratic families, so they had places to go to. So he was five years old at the time when they came to Finland, and he was brought up by his grandmother and his aunt.

[10:14] His father had been killed, murdered actually, in Murmansk by a adjutant of his, because he was a general in the White Russian Army. His mother had escaped to Canada right at the Revolution with the intent of sending for her mother, her sister, and her small son. But then, of course, the World War interrupted all those plans.

[10:38] So Dad was then brought up by these two wonderful ladies and went on to be a great school boy and a wonderful attribute to the community. He was a water polo player and went with the Finnish water polo team to Berlin in the 1936 Olympics. He established the first orphan boys' home or shelter in Helsinki. So he was very active, a very positive, very wonderful, fun, kind guy, but his past caught up with him.

[11:14] So after the war, the war crimes tribunals started, and people were being brought in to answer for war crimes against the Russian people. It was an agreement between the Finnish government and the Russian government that this could take place. So we had a knock one evening at our home, and dad answered. He was asked to step outside, and we didn't see him for a day or two after that.

[11:41] Records indicated that he was born in Russia, was a Russian citizen, and had fought in the Finnish Army against the Russians throughout the war. In other words it was a Russian fighting against the Russians, so therefore he would be charged with war crimes against Russia.

[12:00] He came back from that. I don't remember very, very much, but things started happening that I later on realized that there was some sort of preparation being made, which I didn't pay much attention to. I was going to school, playing outside, having a good time, going to Girl Guides, and whatever.

[12:16] Then probably about a month or so after that first knock on the door came a second knock on the door. This time Dad was interrogated for about two days, and he got home from there, too. That time I remember he came home and he was very pale.

[12:31] He and mom went in the kitchen, closed the doors, and had some sort of a pow-wow. It wasn't too long after that that we simply escaped from Finland to Sweden, long story short, because Dad would have been arrested and sent, I don't know, to Siberia or [laughs] whatever.

[12:50] So there we were in Sweden. Dad was a Russian citizen. No passports to go [laughs] anywhere, but he had his army papers to show that he'd been in the Finnish Army. Mom

and I were issued Finnish passports, so we were basically free to go wherever there would be immigration availabilities.

[13:10] Through the intervention of the President's wife, Allina Paasikivi. Paasikivi was President of Finland at the time. Allina Paasikivi and my grandmother had gone to the same girls' school in Saint Petersburg. So my grandmother re-established that connection and explained that she had a son who was stuck in Sweden at the time, and that she will be the sponsor to get her son and his family to Canada. But he needs a passport.

[13:39] So through her invention, have no idea what all was done, but lo and behold after about three months my father was issued a Finnish passport by the Finnish embassy in Stockholm. Off we went by ship from Gothenburg to New York. We were given a 48-hour transit to go through the United States, that was the longest we could stay in the States, and to Canada.

[14:01] So that in a nutshell is what happened in the war years. They were memorable. I was shielded from a lot of the agony obviously. I was shielded from the lack of food, the lack of clothing. My mother always made sure that I had something to eat, several versions of oatmeal porridge if nothing else. [laughs]

[14:29] We got school-issued shoes. So when there no more shoes in the shoe stores, the schools were issuing two pairs of shoes a year for us. There were no choices. They were black. One pair you got with wooden soles, and the other one was a cardboard composite sole that the first time you went in the rain, of course, the soles just completely disintegrated. But those were fun memories now because it's all in the past, and life is good.

[14:58] Having immigrated to Canada through Montreal in 1947, I went to school there. I graduated from high school there. And then as a graduation gift, my father said, "I will pay for four years at McGill University or..." My parents by this time had divorced. My mother was back in Finland. My father was in Canada. I was living with him. "...Or you can to go to Finland and visit with your mom." Well, 18 years old, just out of high school, I was going to Finland. And off I went.

[15:34] I worked as a translator at the American embassy, as a correspondent for Valmet, a large train manufacturer, train and truck manufacturer. And I met my first husband. And we were child mates, baby mates. We had pictures of each other at, we were exactly the same age. We were both 10 months old sitting on a blanket sharing a cookie. And so it was my obligation to look up his parents when I went back to Finland, and I did. And from that, then, became the acquaintanceship.

[16:11] So I was back in Finland, got married. A year later, we had a little boy. Marriage didn't work out very well. And so little Kent and I moved back to Montreal where my dad was. And I went back to work, and my grandmother, of course, we established a relationship with my grandmother. She was taking care of Kent while I was working. And one year after the other.

[16:37] Kent died in a very tragic accident. He fell through the ice in the middle of winter at a ski resort. And that, of course, has always been the tragedy of my life, regardless of whatever else has happened. That is the tragedy. So he's buried up in the Laurentian Mountains. And...

Mari-Ann: [17:04] How old was he?

Rita: He was two-and-a-half years old. And it was very, very tragic. The little river, the little stream that he fell into was completely solid ice. And there was a farmer who had made sure that it was. His children would come with their little sleds and with their pets and play on the ice and whatever.

[17:21] But what had happened was there was a huge boulder in the river, in the stream, and just under the ice. And it created a whirlpool. And so that part never really iced over, because there was activity around the boulder. And it just so happened that that's exactly where he went down. So we were able to retrieve his body that same night still. The Army Corps Engineers came from Montreal and blasted the ice until he was found, and my father was the one who recovered him dead, and dove into the icy water and recovered him.

[17:59] So that all is a very, very sad, sad part of my life. And then I met and married my second husband, and we had two daughters. One now lives in South Carolina and has four children of her own, and my other daughter Randi lives here with me, and has a daughter of her own. So the generations have started to grow, and life is good.

[18:30] Now Marianne, I am going to have to turn to you and say, do you want me to backtrack at this point? Where do we go?

Mari-Ann: Is there anything we need to go back...We didn't get the names of your parents.

Rita: [18:43] OK. Yeah. My mother's name was Aino Gustava Lindel. That was her maiden name. My father's name was Sergei Borevich [indecipherable 18:52] , which was changed to Vermala, because it just wasn't cool to have Russian fancy-schmancy, you know, a cross between a Russian and a Swedish name. So his buddies, when he started working at a hotel, his buddies said, "OK, enough of this [indecipherable 19:14] business."

[19:16] And so how he really came up with Vermala is very, very interesting. He had already met my mom at this time. So the guys said, "OK. Give us the letter of every girlfriend that you had before you met Aino. And let's see what we can do with it. We'll try to make a Finnish-sounding name out of it." And sure enough you know, a Vera, and Annie, and Mary, whatever they were, they juggled around the name until it looked pretty Finnish. Then they added--my mother's first name started with an A so they put the A--they got like to "Vermal" or something and they needed one more vowel, so my mother's name.

[20:00] So it's Vermala, which sounds very Finnish. It means nothing. It's not Finnish. It's a made-up name. You hear Finnish names, Latva, Latoyvala, whatever, they're all real good Finnish names. Vermala is nothing. Vermala actually happens to be a ski area in Switzerland, Vermala de Montagne. But of course, they didn't know that at the time or whatever. They just thought that was a pretty nifty name. So that's how that came about.

[20:28] And is there any area that you want to concentrate on now? You've got my childhood, pretty much, my immigration to Canada. Did you maybe want to know how I got to Seattle?

Mari-Ann: I would like to know, why was the choice Canada?

Rita: [20:50] Because no other country would pretty much take my dad, even though...and besides, my grandmother, his mother, who had said goodbye to him when he was five years old hadn't seen him. So from 1917 until 1947, 30 years, she hadn't seen him. And now he was a 35-year-old man with a wife and a child. So, I mean, that was logical too.

Because her initial plan all along was to go to Canada. She had friends over there, to quickly create a situation where she could bring her mom and her sister and her young son, five-year-old son to Canada. But then all the wars came in between.

And then obviously Dad became a young man and got a good job in the hotel industry. Met and married a Finnish lady and had a child. So the time for him to have been taken to Canada should have been before all the wars escalated so there was no way to, because it was all by ship, and I'm pretty sure that my great-grandmother probably wouldn't have gone anyway. She lived to be 100, but I don't see that she was willing to relocate to Canada anyway.

So that's how Canada came into it. But also, apparently they had thought about the United States, but that was not possible. The United States was not accepting immigration from Finland at that time. So that's why we had that 48-hour transit visa, because the ship landed in New York, and then just straight up by train to Montreal.

Subsequently, then my husband was transferred from Montreal, he was in the shipping business, transferred to Chicago. So we moved to Chicago in 1963, and my younger daughter was born there. Tanya was born in Montreal, my older daughter, and then Randi was born in Chicago.

And there we lived...I moved to Seattle in 1981. By then, my older daughter was grown, starting a family, actually in Florida. Randi and I moved here together. My husband passed away. I was a widow. And unbeknownst to me, there was going to be a widower in my life. In 1987 I met Al. The years from 1981 to 1987 I established a travel agency on Lower

Queen Anne, and bought it in 1983 and worked in it, actually, until...Oh gosh, I think the year 2000. So, from...I don't remember exactly when I sold it. Anymore, time just goes.

But in 1987 at a social function I was introduced to a very nice man by the name of Al Koski, and the rest is history. Al and I have been married for a number of years, and life is good. He's a fellow Finn, he's being interviewed right now in room number three.

OK, and that brings me to present, then. I am a retired travel agent, and have been very active in the Nordic Heritage Museum when the windows were still broken and mice were running around here. And there were no ethnic rooms yet, and there were no logging rooms or fishing rooms or anything. There was just a lot of willing people to roll up their sleeves and start fixing and shoveling and cleaning and polishing.

And I think probably my most poignant memory of this area right here in this building is, owning my own agency, I obviously did not clock watch like my staff. They had a certain time that they were allowed to leave. I wasn't allowed to leave. And it was probably the last week of November, and Thanksgivings and Christmas things were starting for families.

And it was a Friday evening. I had promised Marianne Forssblad that I would come. And in those days, we only had one Christmas tree at Nordic Heritage Museum, and it used to be right over there. And I promised that I would come and I would decorate it, because she just didn't have anybody else. They were so busy doing other things. I said, I can do that, and I said I'll probably be over around 7:00 or 8:00, no problem, whatever. I'll tell...I don't remember who the caretaker was at the time. It doesn't matter.

By 8:00 or 9:00 or 10:00 I realized it wasn't happening, but I had the caretaker's phone number and I called, and I said, how late can I come? And he or she just said, I don't care, just call me when you're here. I got here at 1:00 in the morning, having had to work in the agency that late. The tree was here, and all the boxes of decorations were here, and I stayed until 5:00 in the morning and decorated the tree.

Went home, my home was in Edmonds at the time. Drove home, took a shower, had a cup of coffee, turned around and went back to work, and swore I would never decorate a tree in an empty, mysterious, ghost-filled [laughs] museum ever, ever again, and didn't.

Mari-Ann: How did you come to know about the Museum, and get involved? Do you remember the very beginning?

Rita: Well, yes, kind of, in the sense that it had to do...But when I came here, it took me about a year to find out that there was a Finnish community in Seattle. So, about 1982, '83, whatever, came to find out that there was a Finnish community. And once I found it and they found me, I was like a vacuum cleaner, and I was just sucked into being President of Finlandia Foundation, Vice President of the church council...It went on and on and on.

And in conjunction with all the different people that I met and all the activities I was involved with, I was asked to start considering becoming a board member almost immediately. I came here and I volunteered with odds and ends of things. But I was approached I think by [indecipherable 27:06] Keranen , who at the time might have been a board member or was thinking about it also, whatever, and I was approached by him. And so, that's kind of how it happened. First as a volunteer truly helping with grunt work, and then came on board. And I'm sure that the Museum records probably...

Actually, they're not correct. I'm recorded as a board member two years after I actually became a board member. The records weren't really all that clear. But I've seen the records once, and I knew that I became a board member two years before it's recorded.

So, basically the community just said that there's a place in Ballard that needs all our help. All of us, every Nordic organization community person needs to go there and see if there's anything they can do, if they can pull weeds in the yard, if they have knowledge of polishing some floors, or building some walls from drywall. Maybe arranging papers, classifying papers, categorizing items, whatever. So that's how that happened.

Mari-Ann: So, that was in 19...? About...?

Rita: Well, it had to be like '82? What's the history of the Museum? The Museum actually was opened up for business, what year was it?

Mari-Ann: '80.

Rita: In '80, OK. So then, yes, actually it could've been '81 then since I came here, January of '81. It could've actually been towards the tail end of that. But there was still so much to do in those days. Yes, so somewhere in there, but not before '81, anyway.

So, it's been interesting, and certainly the Finnish community has been using this facility a lot and will continue to do so, and we're all very proud of everything that has gone on in this building. And we'll continue to be very proud, regardless of whether it's here or down the road [laughs] .

Mari-Ann: It will be down the road.

Rita: It will be down the road, OK. I'll take your word for it.

Mari-Ann: Are you still involved in both the Museum and the Finnish organizations?

Rita: Yeah, I'm a member of the Museum, and I am President of Finlandia Foundation, Seattle Chapter, and also still on the church council. I'm a trustee of Finlandia Foundation, which is the national organization for all of these Finlandia chapters. There's 39 chapters right now.

And in all of this, I'm always involved with the museum. The museum approaches Finlandia Foundation national for grants quite often. And I'm chair of the grants committee, so I see the grants as they come through. Finlandia Foundation, Seattle Chapter is approached for donations for the auction and other happenings at the Museum, so obviously we do support all of the activity. The organizations that I am sitting on the executive boards of are organizations that support the Museum and the activities that happen here.

Mari-Ann: Are there any war memories that you can think of that you haven't spoken about yet, regardless of whether it happened in your family, or in the community, in your city, and so on?

Rita: War memories. So, these are childhood memories, or memory memories? Well, going back to my childhood, I really just...Well, going back to my childhood I really just...You know, it was war, and it was a time of need, and it was a time of friends losing their fathers at the war front. It was families separated, and illness, and cold, and misery. But for me, looking back on all of it I had a wonderful childhood.

My mother and father, when he was available, somehow or other made life into an adventure for me. They never focused in on the negatives. They taught me to be generous with what I had within the limitations that I could be as a child. And they instilled...You know, those days, there were collections. If you collected 100 glass bottles, you got a book, you got a brand-new book [laughs] . If you collected x number of kilograms of old newspapers, you got another book.

And these were treasures, these were wonderful things, because I would collect. I would knock on doors and ring doorbells, and I would get a bottle or two or three from neighbors and friends and whatever, and put them in boxes. And Mom would help me carry them to school, and they would be counted by the principal. And when he got to 100, I knew I had gotten another book.

And these are wonderful, wonderful memories, because there was nothing else. Like Christmas, you did not open up a package and find a doll. You found maybe a gingerbread man that Mom had baked. So, all of that part is just good, because it molded me to be the person that I am today, and I'm able to live in my skin. I feel OK, it's all right.

My years in Canada, the same way. The only sad part about it was that by the time I turned 14, my Mom and Dad had decided to divorce. My mother could not abide North American life. She wanted the calm of Finland, the smallness of Finland, her brothers, her sisters, her family. She never learned to speak English, so it was very difficult for her.

But I had a great youth in Canada. Again, I loved school. My schoolmates were great. We did a lot of fun stuff, and life was good. And so, all of these steps have been good. The move to Chicago was just fine. The move to Seattle was absolutely great. And so, you go back to that deep abyss, and that was the loss of my son.

You know, that of course is...He would turn 52 this year, and that is the sad, sad void in my life. But other than that, I really just can't complain. Great parents, great childhood, wonderful cousins. There was 13 of us cousins. One of them has passed away, so now there's 12. And they were all pretty much born pretty fast. The youngest one right now is 67, 66, and I'm the oldest one at 74.

So within eight years all of these 12, 13 kids were born, so age wise we just have a lot in common and we stay in touch. And they visit me here, I visit over there, and so that's a pretty neat thing, too. They were technically my brothers and sisters since I didn't have any. Every one of the others had a brother or sister or more. I'm the only one who didn't.

Mari-Ann: With your refusal of four years at McGill from your father...?

Rita: Yes.

Mari-Ann: What happened? Did you then go to school? Did you get a degree?

Rita: I have an associate's degree in horticulture from South Seattle Community College, and I have an associate degree in travel and transportation from the College of DuPage in Illinois, so I have two associate degrees. But no, because then when I went back to Finland, I got married about a year after I went back. And I had my son, and then there was nothing much to do except go to work. My husband had to go in the Army, he had to put in his one year at the Army.

So I went to sell music at Stockman's, which is a large department store, so I sold both sheet music and recorded music. And then from there, when I moved to Canada, my father had connections in the restaurant and hotel business, so I went into that area until I married, and then I was a housewife for quite a while, and then discovered that the travel business is where I really needed to be. So I went ahead and actually got a job, and then later on I became an instructor of travel and transportation at the College of DuPage and decided, well, this is silly. I'm teaching it, I might as well do something with it, too. So I also then worked towards the associate degree.

So my education unfortunately stopped. I don't know where I'd be today if I'd gone to McGill for four years [laughs] . So, anyway...

Mari-Ann: Did you learn to speak French while you were living in Montreal?

Rita: Compulsory. When I left Finland, I spoke Finnish and Swedish, obviously, for two reasons. One, Finnish was the home language, Swedish was what I learned when I was Sweden. But also, it was compulsory to learn Swedish in Finland at that time. When I moved to Montreal, obviously, I learned English, and French was compulsory at the time. So I kind of got four languages for the price of two. So yes, there was no way of getting away from that.

Mari-Ann: And was your father OK with the fact that you had refused his generous offer about four years, and that you got married and had a child? Was that...?

Rita: He never chast...You know, Dad, he never, never held it against me in any way. Actually, he didn't really touch on it too much, because again, then he was delighted to have a grandson [laughs] . He could see what he had seen in himself, I think.

He was a hotel and restaurateur from the time he was probably 15 or 16. He ended up being the worldwide catering director for British Airways, but it was always the hospitality, the catering, the hotels.

He could see that in me too, that I enjoyed that. I hostessed at one of his restaurants. I was a cashier, and he could just see that this was going to develop in something that has nothing to do with going... my idea was actually to be a dentist before everything else happened. I guess he probably realized that it would've been wasted money. There was never any kind of chastising of if you had gone to university, your life would be so different.

Mari-Ann: When did you lose your parents?

Rita: My mother passed away in 1990. My dad passed away three years before that, so in 1987. Dad passed away in Florida. He had retired to the west coast of Florida, in Clearwater

Beach, and my mother passed away in Tampere, in the city that she went back to after she left Montreal.

I was very fortunate. My uncle called me and said that there's a problem with your mom, if you can jump on an airplane, this is the time to come. SAS at the time was very, very kind, and within a few hours, I was already winging it. I made it, and I was able to be with mom for a few days before she passed away. That was a good thing.

Mari-Ann: You still go back?

Rita: We go back about every two to three years. My husband is from the west coast of Finland. He comes from a large family of 10 siblings. Some of them live here in the state of Washington, but seven of them are over there. We go back for family occasions, and just to visit. We'll be going there next year again. Not this year, but next year. Then at the same time, of course, we connect with my cousins and just enjoy Finland.

Mari-Ann: Lovely, lovely. Do you have any questions?

Tonya: I just wondered about your daughters, and if you have any Finnish traditions that you share with your daughters, if they have a chance to travel to Finland as well?

Rita: Yes, my older daughter, Tyna, who was born in Montreal, and the mother of four grown children, all of their home traditions on special occasions are Finnish. She's the editor of the Finlandia Foundation Newsletter. She edits it in South Carolina. It's distributed in Seattle. Everything, she's so immersed in her Finnish, and always was. Sometimes teenagers, they put a halt to it. They come back to it, if there are some ethnic ties.

She always just wanted to be known as the little Finnish girl. The Christmases are celebrated, as in Christmas, Easter, birthdays. Her sons had to wear beautiful white christening gowns, much to the chagrin of her American Yankee hotshot football-playing husband, but he had no choice. We have a family christening gown, and that's what the two boys wore.

She cooks in the Finnish way, she appreciates everything in Finnish decor and home design, and her home is full of the usual Marimekko and Aalto vases and things like that. She has been to Finland probably at least a dozen times. Her oldest son went as an exchange student from Virginia Tech to the Technical University in Helsinki for a year as an exchange student. That was at the insistence, not the insistence, but the recommendation of his mom, and myself. He then became totally immersed in Finnish culture, and is very proud of his heritage.

Randy, who was born in Chicago, dances with the Finnish folk dancers here, and her life, she speaks Finnish. Tyna doesn't anymore really, my older daughter, but Randy lived with my mother for a year after she graduated from high school, just because my mom said, "Send her over here, it will be so much fun to have her. She doesn't really have any career thoughts yet." Randy speaks Finnish, and her mindset is.

My granddaughter, Randy's daughter, is also very, very Finnish minded. She helps out here as a volunteer, in the name of her Finnish roots rather than any other roots. You'll see her here during Yulefest and all kinds of other events. She's usually a runner at the auction or something like that, and always does it in the name of her Finnishness and her Finnish heritage and culture.

There's a lot of pride that came automatically to the youngsters, I think, because that's how our home is run too. We observe things the Finnish way.

Mari-Ann: Has your family had reunions of many people in...

Rita: My husband's family does. They have several summer birthdays within that large family, and we kind of make that a family reunion then. My cousins, they're kind of scattered a little bit, even though they're all in Finland. When I come there, we just try to incorporate them into my husband's family reunions, so they come with their spouses and children.

Very often, there will be 100 people just milling around the buffet table and the saunas. Yeah, the reunions are not necessarily my family's, but they are of my cousin's families and my husband's families.

Mari-Ann: You mentioned sauna. Do you have a sauna in your home?

Rita: We do, yes we do. Absolutely, can't live without it, can't live without it. My husband has two brothers who live here, one in Olympia and the other one in Aberdeen, and they both have gorgeous saunas too. We don't live without those things, you just can't do it.

Mari-Ann: Wonderful. Unless you have something to add, this was wonderful, Rita. Thank you for sharing your life story with us.

Rita: It's been a privilege. I hope it adds to the amount of work that you've already collected, and maybe there's something in there that might be of interest. As I said, it's my story, I lived it, it's nothing extraordinary for me. I think it's always good to hear how other people arrived here. It's an immigrant story, and how we all have arrived to this neck of the woods is always, I think, somewhat interesting for me.

Mari-Ann: Absolutely. The childhood stories of the war and so on, it's very interesting, and it will be a treasured part of the archive and the museum.

Rita: That's good. Thank you for having me.

Mari-Ann: Thank you very much, and thanks for your long support and good support of the museum. Much appreciated.

Rita: We do what we can.

Mari-Ann: Thank you.

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