Interview of Ritva Kivinen
On February 23, 2013
At Seattle, Washington
Interviewed by Gordon Strand and Brandon Benson

Gordon: Today is February 23rd, 2013. We're at the Nordic Heritage Museum and we're going to be interviewing Ritva Kivinen. This is for the Nordic American Voices oral history project.

Ritva: [0:18] , could you start by giving us your name, when you were born, where you were born, and a little bit about your early life and your family in Finland?

Ritva Kivinen: [0:28] OK. My name is Ritva Annalee Kivinen and I was born in Finland city named Tampere. You need the year too? [laughs]

Gordon: [0:43] Yeah.

Ritva: [0:48] My birthday is My 28th, 1934.

Gordon: [0:56] Tell us about your family.

Ritva: [0:58] I had my mom and dad, and I had two sisters. Then at the right time my parents took one of the boys who was from Baralia in Russia to go over, and they moved to our city and the fine people took one of them, so that way I had a brother also.

Gordon: [1:23] Was he an orphan then?

Ritva: [1:26] Well, he was an orphan, but they had many children and when they run away from Russia, and the border, they went to different cities and whoever could take them. They always couldn't take the whole family because some houses were small, so they went to different families.

Gordon: [1:50] But he grew up in your family then?

Ritva: [1:52] He grew up with my family. Yeah.

Gordon: [1:54] Oh, OK. Give us the names of your father, mother, sisters, and your...

Ritva: [2:01] My father's name is Moscarlow Misterilina, and my mother's name was Symie Amanda Nikkinen, and one of my sisters was Amelisa, and other sister was Anja.

Gordon: [2:21] And your brother was?

Ritva: [2:25] Oh, he was Mikko.

Gordon: [2:33] Where did you live? Talk about your home, what that was like.
Ritva: [2:39] Well I was really small when we lived in Tampere, so I don't remember too much, but then we moved to a city named Lhati and I had a really nice good home. Our city had a big open market and my parents had a fish market in there, and that's what most of their life they did. Winter time my dad may even load up his cart to be sold, so we had a room in the house and a yard, and it had cement things where he put the water, and then whatever he did to make them, and then he was selling them. But before we had those cement things, where we lived we had a [indecipherable 03: 3:14 48] where we go and get the water. The faucet was far away from our house so we had to go to the street.

[3:59] Now I was youngest one, but we all were bringing two bucketfuls of water to help him to fill those. It was winter time too, so it was slippery. It was a pretty hard job, but when he got the faucets and those cement things then we didn't have to do that anymore.

Gordon: [4:21] This is where he made the [indecipherable 04:23].


Ritva: [4:25] Then he sold that at his market.

Gordon: [4:28] I guess I didn't know lutefisk was popular with Finns.

Ritva: [4:32] Oh, yeah. It was really...Well I can't eat any seafood, so to me no. [laughs] I have been allergic since I was born, so I can't eat any seafood.

Gordon: [4:44] Oh, OK.

Ritva: [4:48] I don't feel like I miss anything either.


Ritva: [4:52] My husband loves it and I make it for him now, but I just...

Gordon: [4:58] Tell us about the war and what you remember of it starting, and what was happening in your home, and your town, and your family.

Ritva: [5:08] Well what I remember from starting, we knew already then that it had started, and we heard some airplanes coming, and they were bombing in our town. In our house you have a picture here about it. One of those, in Finnish they were called [foreign word]. I don't know what they would be here. They went in through our roof, and went to the attic. For some reason, it changed and went outside from a different hole. It was burning next to the house. [5:54] Then, after that, my sisters and my mom, we moved to the countryside. We had some friends there. A lot of people moved to the countryside those time. We had friends there. Before we moved there, one thing that I remember being a child that really made me unhappy. My neighbor girl, my best friend, we went to the movie. In the middle of the movie, there was bombers coming. There was a siren going on.
[6:36] We had to leave. We were so mad that we couldn't see the movie, all the way to the end. That was one thing that I remember even now. It was scary. One time we were on the countryside. Middle of the night we heard lots of noises.

[7:00] There was always also from Russian guys they came by when they drop them from the airplane. How you call that?

**Man 1:** [7:10] Paratroopers?

**Gordon:** [7:13] Yeah, paratroopers.

**Ritva:** [7:15] They were so big like many people would be walking there. We were really scared. Finally, I don't remember who opened the door or window to look at it. There was a whole bunch of cows from the houses near there. There was no Russian people. That was a relief. Those are the kind of things that they stick to your mind for a long time.

**Gordon:** [7:45] You were only seven or eight years old, maybe? Nine?

**Ritva:** [7:49] There was two wars. I think one of them ended in '44. I was 10 years then. Seven, eight, nine from the first one. I don't remember what year that started. But I think it started '39, so I was only 5.

**Gordon:** [8:11] Five.

**Ritva:** [8:12] Yeah. When it started.

**Gordon:** [8:15] Your father went into the military?

**Ritva:** [8:19] Yes. He went to the military. Everybody had to go to the military who was able to.

**Gordon:** [8:26] Was he gone for a long time?

**Ritva:** [8:30] He was gone two different times so I can't really tell how long at the time he was. I remember at that time, my parents had a fish store, inside store. Of course my dad couldn't be there, so we had somebody else working there. At those times we had coupons for all the food that people had to have. They got very little of everything. I was a young girl, and I couldn't figure out that there should be as many fish in the larder, war time or not. [9:17] I couldn't understand that there was enough men available to fish. They have to be like any other food that they had coupons for them. That time you couldn't really figure out what was going on.

**Gordon:** [9:37] How did your parents talk to you about the war? Do you remember?

**Ritva:** [9:44] I don't really remember anything special, but of course we talked about it and we were scared. We had some old radios that we were able to listen even where we were. [10:00] They told us some things that where they happen and where they are. Everybody was scared. You never knew where they were coming down. We weren't close to the border. We are 60 miles from our capital, Helsinki.

**Gordon:** [10:28] Did you ever see or interact with Russian prisoners?
Ritva: [10:32] Yes. I was in a children's summer camp. They were really close there. We were close to the fence. They had wire fence and we were trying to talk to them. I should have bring that. I have a ring that I got from one of those...No, it was a bracelet I got from one of those Russian guys. When I was little, I was a talker. [laughs] I wasn't afraid of anybody. That was really nice. That reminded me, I was visiting my cousin in a different town. She was Lotta. She was nighttime working on the tower by [indecipherable 11: [11:19] 36]. I remember I was able to go one night with her to that tower to see how scary a feeling. I was scared to go even to the tower.

Gordon: [11:53] Was it the lookout tower?

Ritva: [11:54] Yeah. They had lookout towers. She had binoculars and she kept her eye all over the place. They had some radios that they were able to talk. That was another city where we lived. My aunt lived there.

Gordon: [12:15] Tell us about Lotta. What that was, and how you got involved, and your sisters.

Ritva: [12:22] That was [indecipherable 12:27] when there were soldiers. There was younger boys. They had to be 18. I don't remember what they were called. They were -- I don't remember what they were called -- but they were doing laundry and helping. They had the uniforms also. Then there was a Lotta Svärd. There was a [indecipherable 12: [12:49] 51]. My two sisters belonged to that. Of course I got involved because of them. I had the same kind of dress that they had. There's one picture of my sister wearing a dress. They had white collars. When I donated my dress to the museum here, I did not have that collar anymore. We were also wearing those. What I was doing, for instance, [indecipherable 13:22].

[13:25] There was one family who had many kids. We went to help her. We went to the store for her, and we did somewhat cleaning. What we were able to watch her girls when they went somewhere. We had the same family where we went. Then we belonged to some kind of a girl's club.

[13:51] We were making some little things there. I don't remember anymore what they were. For the war.

Gordon: [13:58] Did Lotta exist before the war?

Ritva: [14:01] Oh yeah. Because we got that bombing. Yes, it exist. We moved from Tampere to Lahti when I was a very little girl.

Gordon: [14:18] You and your sisters were all members of...


Ritva: [14:23] Yeah. I had my dress like I told you. I sent the letter with my dress to the museum, so they should have that. I did not have any pins, but I happened to have my sister's pin, one of the sister's pin. I sent that here also. It would be with that dress.

Gordon: [14:50] Did you hear from your father when he was...?
Ritva: [14:54] Yeah. He was able to write letters. When my mother passed away, I have some of the letters that he used to send home. I have been even thinking, but I don't think I ever do it. I have been thinking that maybe somebody could make a little book out of them. There was quite a few letters that he sent from there to the mom. He wrote what they could write. They couldn't write everything probably.

Gordon: [15:30] You think he was probably on the front?

Ritva: [15:34] Yeah. He wrote many things, but probably not everything what was going on.

Gordon: [15:42] Did he say much when he came home or was it...?

Ritva: [15:47] I can't recall that. I'm sure he did. Being that age, I probably wasn't so interested in. I don't know. If I did, I can't remember.

Gordon: [16:04] Is there any other stories during that time that you remember? Any other incidents, or people, or places, events that stick out in your mind?

Ritva: [16:21] Probably not. In a way we lived a normal life. But then in a way we weren't home. We were in somebody else's home and they happened to have an extra room when we went to the countryside.

Gordon: [16:38] You stayed there quite a while then.

Ritva: [16:40] We were two different times because there was two different wars. We were in different family's place. One of them lived there theirselves, but they had extra room. Other place where we were, I'm sure you know what [indecipherable 17:01] is. It had a big dressing room. It was in the countryside by the water. We stayed there on our second time when we thought that those Russian guys were jumping out of the plane. We were scared. There's many things but it's hard to remember them anymore now. [indecipherable 17: [17:13] . We did not have enough food either. I don't know what it's called here. People, when they have cows, they sent their milk to some place. They bottle them, and they do this and that. It was skim milk they was able to, went up with a coupon and, of course, the young kids went to stand in the line because the adults were doing something else. I was many times there. Sometimes when I got to the steps there, they ran out. I found out later when my husband and I had been talking, we had been in that same line for the milk. That's one thing that stayed in my mind.

Gordon: [18:36] Did you have school? Was school normal during those times?

Ritva: [18:40] There was school and it was normal, but it was sometimes in a different place than it used to be because they didn't want to stay in the schoolhouse. They would have been noticeable. We were maybe in countryside some of the time. My sisters they were bigger than me so my older sister worked, they both in a hospital and my youngest sister was in an office. My older sister was helping but it was a war hospital, so she was helping with whatever she was able to do there. I was too young to do that.

Ritva: [19:45] My husband came in 1960 and I came in 1961. My girls and I came in '61. In those days, you couldn't just come here and stay here. It took my husband, when he got his papers and he was able to come here, he came alone. It turned out to be that when it was time for girls and me to come here, I was maybe 10 or 11. I had a big old [indecipherable 10: [20:09] 24] in the lungs. I missed two months of school. That scar showed in the pictures when they took pictures from us. That's how the girls and I ended up waiting 9 months before we were able to come.

Gordon: [20:46] All because you were...

Ritva: [20:48] It was so strict even for my husband. On his papers, he needed to be able to come, it said there that he was in the army. They had a meeting or something and he happened to have a cigarette in his hand. It wasn't lit, but he had it in his hand. Those were even in his papers that he's had a cigarette in the class in the army. Now you can come here and nobody asks anything anymore. But that's why it took so long for the girls [indecipherable 21:41] back then.

Gordon: [21:37] What was the decision to come? What was the reason?

Ritva: [21:41] We were young and wanted to see some different places and my husband had an aunt here in Ohio. When he first came, he went to Ohio to his aunt's place and he found a job there, but he had cousins in Seattle. He ended up moving there but he did not stay with the cousins. [22:15] He stayed with one guy who was working at the same place he got the work at the auto repair shop. He came here and then when we were able to come, we came. We came first to Toronto and we brought whatever we could bring, but it was very little. You couldn't bring furniture and stuff like that but he was able to rent a furnished apartment where we started it then.

[22:57] After that we moved to one with a driveway in Balto.


Ritva: [23:06] We bought a little...

Gordon: [23:07] A little Finn hill...

Ritva: [23:08] Yeah. We bought a little house from a man that was retiring, so that's where we stayed, a couple more years. But then one of husband's co-worker and him decided to get minks and the co-worker had a farm which he inherited from his relative, so that was in [indecipherable 23:46] . [23:49] We ended up selling that house and rented the house and they started that mink farm at his friend's place and a few years of that. That wasn't so good anymore, either. They also had chickens on that farm. We ended up moving out there and went.. I don't even remember where. We ended up moving quite a few times.

[24:28] Right now we are in Shelton and we have been there almost nine years, but we used to be at the lake. We actually bought a lot much much earlier there. We ended up building a house at the lake. We were thinking of staying there forever, but taxes got so high and all different things.

[24:55] I was working at the bank in Finland and when I came here I was also working at the bank, but I was working night time first year or so. As a matter of fact, in Boulder, I lived there.
Before that I was cleaning people's houses and one day I thought that there's got to be something else, so I went to see at the First Bank and they hired me, but they hired for nights. I was working with the checks at night and then later on I was working at the daytime. Until '93, I was always in savings and loans. 18 years in one savings and loans, then I was in another saving and loans when they merged and didn't need all of us. I was in Metropolitan Savings and Loans in Seattle. None of those exist anymore, I don't think. I was administrative services manager and vice president at the end. I guess I had something in me.

Gordon: [26:24] How, was his name Nick, the brother from..

Ritva: [26:29] No, his name was Mikko.


Gordon: [26:36] That must have been hard for him, to leave his family. How did he turn out in life?

Ritva: [26:43] He turned out really good. He was working for my dad for many, many years. He's still living. He's getting pretty old and he has a nice home now, but it's an apartment because he wasn't able to any more keep up with his house. He had a summer place. He turned out to be really good.

Gordon: [27:10] Did he ever reunite with his family?

Ritva: [27:13] Yes, one of his brothers played around, I don't know, and he ended up being with my parents. Then he moved back where his mom was, but they were separated when they came out of there. I guess my parents were pretty good-hearted and were able to beg somebody else.

Gordon: [27:47] He must have felt very accepted, too.

Ritva: [27:50] Yes. The first time Mikko stayed he was found out and got married. We still have been writing and last time I got the Christmas card from his daughter who was writing about him. He's getting older. He was older than I was, but we still keep in touch.

Gordon: [28:19] There were a lot of Kareleans that had to leave

Ritva: [28:22] Yes. Everybody who was able, they gave them at least one room of their house if they were able. There was many people who did that.

Gordon: [28:38] Was it difficult after the war in Finland? Or did things improve quickly?

Ritva: [28:45] Not really quickly but things were getting better and better. Of course things were good in Finland when we left. I don't know why we left, but we were young and wanted to see different places. We have been travelling to Hawaii and Mexico. We have survived. So far, so good.

Gordon: [29:20] I think we hit the war years pretty much. Is there anything else you can think of that you want to tell us about? Food was scarce.
Ritva:  [29:29] Oh yeah, and you had to have coupons.

Gordon:  [29:32] Coupons? What was a typical meal then?

Ritva:  [29:37] I don't know if there really was too much to make a meal. Potatoes were always available. Most of the other things you had to have a coupon. We got very little for a month. There was very little of everything in my family. They gave every one of us our share and we either ate it that day or we ate it during a long time because that's all we got at that point. [30:16] I don't think there was too many fat people there. There was fish, like I said, and there was some meat, but you couldn't get every kind of meat. There were people who were in the countryside who had animals and they had a lot of things. Some people went. I understand later on that was against the law to go to get the food somewhere else.

[30:48] But, they did. [laughs] They knew somebody on countryside, and they visited them. They were giving them some. For instance, which I couldn't care that time. There was no coffee available, which seems to be really important to everybody. There were really small amounts. Then, one other thing I remember now, my parents took them.

[31:21] We had three different dogs. They were German Shepherds three different times. We kept them nine months and then they went to the school for blind people. It was really hard to get rid of them then, but we had to take them to the school. From there on, they went to the...

Gordon:  [31:45] I'm sorry. Who were they?

Ritva:  [31:49] They were dogs.


Gordon:  [31:56] Oh, guide dog. OK, I'm sorry.

Ritva:  [32:00] We have three time dogs and we get them nine months.

Gordon:  [32:04] It was difficult to have them go, right?

Ritva:  [32:07] It was very difficult because I was the one, for instance, who took them to the school during the whole nine months. Then after nine months, we have to give them away. We knew it when we took it, but it was still really difficult.

Gordon:  [32:25] You became attached to them?

Ritva:  [32:26] Oh yeah. I probably even have one of my pictures there. I'm on my parent's yard sitting on the ground, and there was a dog. [indecipherable 32:39] the dog maybe on one of those pictures.

Gordon:  [32:43] Who gave you the dogs? Where did they come from?

Ritva:  [32:47] It was certain organization who had them. They gave them to you if you wanted to. You kept them, and you fed them.

Ritva: [32:59] They even got coupons for their food because they were for special purposes.

Gordon: [33:08] That would have been hard.

Ritva: [33:10] More and more when I think about it, my parents must have been really something else.

Gordon: [33:17] Could they ever visit you here in America?

Ritva: [33:19] Yes. Both parents visit a couple of times. My mom visited four times when they were alive. My sisters have been visiting. One of their husbands quite a few times. [33:33] My other sister lost her husband after four years. He had tuberculosis, too. She has been visiting quite a few times. Both of them are gone now too, so I'm all alone. Only one left.

Gordon: [33:54] Interesting.

Ritva: [33:55] I have two daughters myself now, if you need to know that. Three grandsons and one great-grandson. We only had daughters. When I was at the hospital having my daughters, one doctor told me, "[indecipherable 34:12] don't worry. You can have boys with your daughters." I got them.

Gordon: [34:18] You finally got them. Same thing happened to me basically. Came from all boys and ended up with three granddaughters. I think that's good. I'm sorry it's been so difficult.

Ritva: [34:35] I was probably nervous to start with, and I'm nervous now.

Gordon: [34:38] Oh, you did fine.

Ritva: [34:40] I made it. I still can't understand how I was so stupid. I have been at my...