



Nordic News

240 Sparks Street, PO Box 55023, Ottawa, ON K1P 1A1

Mannerheim at 150 and the Centennial of Finland *(by Hilde Huus)*

Dr. Lennard Sillanpää's Sept. 27 talk on Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim and his contribution to his country, the Republic of Finland, was attended by many people of Finnish extraction who appreciated Dr. Sillanpää's in-depth knowledge of the subject. It was also very enlightening to those of us who have not had the opportunity to study Finnish history (such as myself) and may have been a bit vague as to what exactly did happen in Finland during World War II and the years leading up to it. Lennard's talk, which launched the CNS's celebration of Finland's 100th anniversary, was a most appropriate way to learn some of the history behind what exactly we are celebrating.



Baron Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim

In 1808, Finland was ceded to Russia by Sweden and became the “Grand Duchy of Finland.” It had its own senate and legislative assembly but all major decisions still had to be approved by the Tsar. Mannerheim was born under this regime in 1867 and had a 30-year career in the Russian military, achieving the rank of Lieutenant General in 1917. The 1917 Russian Revolution led to his falling out of favour with those in power and he returned to Finland. When Finland declared itself independent on Dec. 6, 1917, Mannerheim was elected its temporary regent. He set about to establish Finland’s role within Europe, gaining British and American recognition of it as an independent state, and in 1919 confirming a new republican constitution. But he lost the presidential election and left public life for several years, during which he travelled extensively through Europe, Asia and India.

He returned to public life in 1931 when he was appointed chairman of Finland’s Defence Council and then in 1933, Field Marshal of Finland. He worked towards preparing Finland’s defences in case of Soviet attack and tried to create a Nordic neutral zone with Sweden but in this was not successful.

On Nov. 30, 1939, three months after the outbreak of WWII, the Soviet Union did invade Finland and, at age 72, Mannerheim became Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Armed Forces. The Finns were able to repel the Soviet attacks for several months, even though the Soviets had more than three times as many soldiers as the Finns. This was the only war being fought in Europe at that time and the eyes of the world were on Finland. Lennard told us that the Finns gave an incredible account of themselves, and gained almost legendary status as they fought on when other countries around them had quickly been occupied. Mannerheim’s role was key in this period which became known as the Winter War.

Hostilities ceased with the signing of the Moscow Peace Treaty in March of 1940, under which some Finnish territory was ceded to the Soviet Union. But Finland had managed to retain its sovereignty and greatly enhance its international reputation. (One CNS member confided to me that as a young boy in Britain, he and his schoolmates were avid fans of Mannerheim and were heartbroken when he “lost” the Winter War.) Mannerheim retained his role as Commander-in-Chief and worked for a time with his Soviet counterparts. But at the same time, he was establishing ties with Germany in hopes of regaining the ceded territory, and he committed to participating with Germany in an invasion of the Soviet Union. The apparent weakness of the Soviet forces during the Winter War had led the German High Command to believe that such an invasion could be successful.

On June 22, 1941, the Axis powers (primarily Germany) invaded the Soviet Union. Finland participated as a “co-belligerent”, never having signed the treaty to make it a legal member of the Axis. Finnish soldiers were responsible only to their own Commander-in-Chief and did not work with any other nation’s soldiers. Finland continued to maintain diplomatic relations with the United States until December of 1941, when the Allies declared war on Finland.

Finland was able to regain the territory it had ceded to the Soviet Union and hold its own for the next three years while the German forces were catastrophically depleted at the Battle of Stalingrad and gradually defeated by the Allied Forces.

On June 10, 1944, the Soviet Union attacked Finland once again. The President of Finland, Risto Ryti, signed a pact with Germany, hoping for support to forestall the Soviet offensive. In August, Mannerheim replaced Ryti as President of Finland through an election by a special Act of Parliament. In September, Finland signed an armistice with the Soviet Union that required some land had to be given up to the Soviet Union. Finland had the monumental task of moving the occupants out of the forfeited territories and resettling them in a very short period of time. The armistice pact also required that Finland demand the removal of the remaining German armed forces by September 14. The German armed forces resisted and retreated to northern Finland, fighting to retain control of Finnish nickel mines and shipping. But the German forces did co-operate in the peaceful evacuation of about 180,000 residents of Lapland to Sweden and southern Finland. When the Finnish forces then began attacking, the German forces systematically destroyed bridges and roads behind them as they retreated. By January of 1945, they had retreated out of Finland into northern Norway.

By the time the War ended, Mannerheim was 78 years old and in failing health. But he had the support of his armed forces and most of the Finnish population as he dealt with its difficult aftermath, including dealing with the refugees from Lapland and the ceded territories. He arranged a parliamentary election in 1945. Despite weak community leadership and a strong bastion of support for communism, the Finnish constitution established under Mannerheim in 1917 held, and a new government was sworn in. Finnish democracy and independence had prevailed.

Lennard explained that it was Mannerheim who throughout the war years stood at the pinnacle of Finland's decision-making. He noted that Finland could so easily have been occupied and destroyed, but this was avoided. Finland was not dissolved and did not become part of the Soviet Union as did many of its neighbouring territories. If it had not been for Mannerheim, Finland might have been a very different country today. During its greatest crisis, no-one did more than he to ensure Finland's survival as a nation. Mannerheim is generally regarded as Finland's greatest statesman, and in a 2004 poll, he was voted the greatest Finn of all time.

An interesting period of questions and discussion followed Lennard's talk. One of our members, Marje-Liisa Hansen, was able to tell us that she lived not far from Mannerheim as a girl and remembered her family greeting him when they were out walking and being offered a salute in return.

The evening ended with a draw for a most appropriate door prize of Finnish "Martial Coffee" (named in honour of Mannerheim), donated by Tuula Bigras and greatly appreciated by the winner of the draw.

November Luncheon and Christmas Luncheon

Our November luncheon is on Monday, **November 6**, at the Army Officers' Mess, 149 Somerset Street West, at noon.

December 4 is the date for our Christmas luncheon, for which reservations are required. This is complete Christmas dinner, with turkey and all the trimmings, plus Nordic musical entertainment! It is held at the Army Officers' Mess, 149 Somerset Street West, at noon. Please save the date. More information to follow!

“Hard Work Conquers All”

“Labor omnia vincit” are the words that appear above the entrance to the Finnish Labour Temple in Port Arthur, a city that is now part of Thunder Bay. It translates as “Hard Work Conquers All,” which is the title of a recently published collection of essays that “explore the nuanced cultural identities of Finnish Canadians, their continued ties to Finland, intergenerational cultural transfer, and the community’s connections with socialism and labour movements.” It is edited by three professors in the Department of History at Lakehead University and published by UBC Press. For more information, go to: <https://www.ubcpres.ca/hard-work-conquers-all>.

Tenth CNS President Sirkka Omholt-Jensen (1977-78) and her husband Edward Omholt-Jensen (by Hilde Huus)

I must admit I am having a lot of fun tracking down information about the CNS past presidents. I guess it has always been my nature to be curious about people and the internet helps me indulge this weakness! I embark on my searches for information about the CNS past presidents with anticipation and love the process of gradually uncovering information that helps me put together their stories. Their lives were usually very interesting and quite adventurous, and reflect the history of Nordic immigrants to Canada over the years. Here is what I found out about Sirkka Omholt-Jensen, the tenth president of the CNS.

She was born Sirkka Sterner in 1919 in Canada, likely to Finnish parents as Sirkka is certainly a Finnish name. Sterner is a German name but it is also common in Sweden so her father may have been of Swedish Finnish extraction. She went to the University of Toronto at a time when it was not so common for women to attend university, and graduated around 1942.

Somehow she met a Norwegian pilot who was at the “Little Norway” training camp that was established around the Toronto Island Airport in November of 1940. Norwegian aviators came there to train to fight the German Luftwaffe as part of Britain’s Royal Air Force, but in their own Norwegian squadrons. Was Sirkka one of the “Vikettes” auxiliary - the young Canadian women who arranged for sleigh rides, parties, and entertainment for the young pilots so far from home? That would certainly not be surprising but I can’t confirm it. In any event, she ended up marrying Norwegian pilot Edward Omholt-Jensen. They were the first to buy a lot and build a home in “Ridge Group”, the first residential development in Chelsea. “Ojai Road” is named after the family as a short form for Omholt-Jensen.

Sirkka appears to have been quite an active, athletic woman. The Omholt-Jensen family were among the founding members of the Gatineau River Yacht Club, and Sirkka took charge of the junior program, including the life-saving program. Sadly she died in 1986, at around age 65.

While researching Sirkka, I came across quite a bit of information about her husband Edward (Edvard), who was born in 1909, so was 10 years older than Sirkka. Since he must certainly have been a member of the Canadian Nordic Society along with Sirkka, I will include the information I found about him as well.

Edward Omholt-Jensen was apparently a keen aviator well before the outbreak of World War II, serving as General Secretary of the *Norsk Aero Klubb* from 1937 to 1940. This was the national federation of all air sports that was founded in 1928. None other than Roald Amundsen, the famous polar explorer, was its first Chairman only a few months before he was killed in a plane crash while on a rescue mission to the Arctic. Omholt-Jensen was an active participant in air sport competitions, including one which involved releasing balloons up into the air and trying to pop more of them than your opponents using your plane's propellers!

During the time Edward Omholt-Jensen served as General Secretary of the *Norsk Aero Klubb*, a man named Ole Reistad served as its President. Reistad was a very famous Olympic athlete in Norway as well as being an air force officer. When World War II started and Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany, Ole Reistad was a key player in setting up the Little Norway aviator training camp, serving as its Commander throughout most of the War. Edward Omholt-Jensen worked closely with him to raise funds for the training camp through flight shows, parades, lectures and films. They worked with Time Inc.'s filmmaker Louis Rochemont to produce the film "Norway in Revolt," which was seen all over the western world including in secret performances in occupied Norway.

After the war, Edward Omholt-Jensen worked as a lawyer for the CBC. He also did some writing - assisting Henry A. Larsen, the Canadian Arctic explorer and father of CNS member Doreen Riedel, with the Norwegian wording of his autobiography which was published in 1967 in English under the title "The Big Ship." Doreen tells me that her father spoke a regional dialect from the Hvaler Islands which in his day was an admixture of Norwegian and Swedish with some Danish.

In 1986, Edward published the biography of his friend Ole Reistad and called it "The Spirit of Little Norway." In 1989, he published his autobiography, "En rar tid" (*A strange time*). He died in 1995.

I would like to know more about Sirkka herself, so if anyone has any memories of her to share, or any additional information about her, I would love to hear from you! You can email me at communications@canadiannordicsociety.com.

Upcoming Events of Interest

- **The Danish Club of Ottawa's Annual Bazaar**, Saturday, **November 4** from 11:00 AM until 2:00 PM at the Ron Kolbus Lakeside Centre at Britannia Park.

- **Edna's Bloodline**, documentary movie on TVO, starts Wednesday, **November 22**, 9:00 PM. (IMDB plot summary: *An Inuit and a Swede, both descendants of arctic explorer Petter Norberg, embark on a quest to learn about Petter's life in the Canadian north and to trace his last journey up the Coppermine River from Kugluktuk, to the Bloody Falls where he mysteriously disappeared decades ago.*)
- The [European Union Film Festival](#) runs from Friday, **November 17** until Tuesday, **December 5** at the [National Gallery Auditorium](#), 380 Sussex Drive, Ottawa. Among the 26 films from all over Europe to be shown are the following Nordic films:
 - From Sweden, **The Square**, Monday, **November 20**, 7:00 PM (Swedish, Danish and English with English subtitles)
 - From Finland, **Tyttö nimeltä Varpu (*Little Wing*)**, Saturday, **November 25**, 4:00 PM (Finnish with English subtitles)
 - From Denmark, **Rosita**, Monday, **November 27**, 7:00 PM (Danish with English subtitles)

Thank you to Ross Francis for bringing this Film Festival to our attention.

Contributions to Nordic News

We appreciate receiving your articles and news to include in the *Nordic News*! Please email them to the editor, Hilde Huus, at communications@nordicsociety.com

Canadian Nordic Society Co-ordinates

Our website is www.canadiannordicsociety.com, and you can contact us by email at info@canadiannordicsociety.com.

The CNS council list, including email addresses and phone numbers, is available at: <http://www.canadiannordicsociety.com/council.html>

And the CNS has its own, very active, [Facebook](#) page.

Join CNS or Renew your Membership

You can join CNS or renew your membership online, by mail, or in person. We encourage you to pay online using PayPal. This is the quickest and most efficient method.

Online

To pay online, go to the CNS website (<http://www.canadiannordicsociety.com/join-cns.html>) and complete the membership form . Payment may be made through PayPal.

Note: it is not necessary to have a PayPal account.

By mail

Please print and complete the membership form below, enclose a cheque payable to the Canadian Nordic Society and mail to:

Canadian Nordic Society
240 Sparks Street
Box 55023
Ottawa, ON
K1P 1A1

In person

You can pay in person when you attend one of our luncheons or speaker events. Please speak to any one of our Council members.



Canadian Nordic Society

240 Sparks Street, PO Box 55023, Ottawa, ON K1P 1A1

www.canadiannordicsociety.com

Membership Application/Renewal

Date: _____

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