

# Between Russia and the Mediterranean

**Esa Aallas.** Journalist and writer

My family roots are in Karelia, Eastern Finland, on the shores of Europe's largest lake, Ladoga, sometimes described as a sea. Contact with the Byzantium and the Slavic world had already emerged in the 1000s, when Karelian traders and soldiers travelled along the Russian river routes to the Black Sea and Constantinople. Among the Finnish tribes, the Karelians were the only ones who adhered to the Orthodox faith. The Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, which was collected in the Karelian song lands, contains much evidence of these travels and the faith of the local people.

Like many other peoples of the border region, Karelians have also suffered from the curse of the borderland. During the Second World War Stalin wanted to swallow my country into his realm. However, Finland was able to maintain its independence which had been acknowledged by Lenin on the last day of the year 1917. But as a consequence of the war, the Soviet Union annexed a large part of Finnish Karelia. Up to 400,000 Karelians – a tenth of the Finnish population at the time – had to become refugees, like my father.

The Karelians settled in many parts of Finland in a satisfactory way. No Palestinian-style refugee camps emerged. In some places, though, Karelian Orthodox refugees were considered to have adhered to Russian faith. They were called in Finnish *ryssänuskoinen*, where *ryssä* is a pejorative word for Russian. This attitude ignored the fact that they had been

fleeing from the atheist Soviet Union. Nowadays both Lutheran (82% of the population) and Orthodox (1%) faiths are state religions in Finland.

There is plenty of space in Finland: in a country the size of Italy there are now only 5.5 million inhabitants, whereas in Italy there are 58 million. Finland is neither part of the West nor part of the East but much more of the North. Northern can mean simultaneously emptiness and spaciousness. Mediterranean, on the other hand, can mean crowdedness and denseness. During six decades the part of Karelia which remained on the wrong side of the border has experienced the fate of dreams which become stereotypes with time. When I have met Palestinian and Cypriot refugees, I have noticed a similarity in the way home sickness becomes romanticised. The home region acquires a golden tinge.

After the Second World War, Finland turned inward to lick the wounds suffered in the lost war. Simultaneously, it tried to get along with the great Eastern neighbour. The historical novels of our most widely translated writer Mika Waltari (1908-1979) served deeply felt needs. They not only offered a refuge from the grey everyday life but also widened our horizon in which the sun has not the strength to climb during the dark winter months towards the Mediterranean cultural sphere. Waltari's novels described the ancient worlds of Egypt, Rome, Byzantium and Islam, thus offering a



Church in Helsinki (Ignacio Caballero).

contrast to the prevalent Finnish literary tradition by then, which described Finnish peasant life. Readers quickly warmed to the stories about Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Etruscans, Turks and Jews, even if these novels differed from that tradition.

Waltari gained international fame with the story of Sinuhe, set in ancient Egypt, *Sinuhe the Egyptian*. The novel appeared in 1945 and was subsequently translated into thirty languages. It was followed in 1948 and 1949 by the twin novels *Michael the Finn* and *The Sultan's Renegade* (known in the United States as *The Adventurer* and *The Wanderer* respectively). These two novels brought Islamic culture into Finnish fiction. In the first one, the main character Mikael leaves medieval Finland travelling

through Europe and ending up in the Ottoman Constantinople of the 16th century. There he becomes an advisor to one of the Grand Visiers of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Lutheran Mikael Karvajalka converts to the Muslim faith and his name becomes Hakim.

The novel *Dark Angel*, which was published in 1952, described how the 1100-year old Byzantine realm was being crushed between the middle of the East and the West and was experiencing its last moments around the Bosphorus. In the novel *The Etruscan*, published in 1955, the main character first fights in the formative Mediterranean wars and then finally returns to his roots in ancient Etruria. The novel, which turned out to be Waltari's last, *The Roman*, describes the life of Roman senator Minutus

in the Rome of the emperors, Nero included. Waltari was still collecting material for another novel about the destruction of the Order of the Knights Templar in Terra Sancta, but exhaustion put a stop to his work.

At the end of the militarised decade of the 1930s the writer still felt drawn towards the rising Germany, as did many other intellectuals of the time. However, Finland lost the war of 1941-44, having joined the Germans against the Soviet Union. The war weighed heavily on the writer's mind. The patriot became a citizen of the world. During the war he had emphasised military virtues whilst working with the propaganda unit but after the war he lost his faith in absolute truths. He tended to be a pessimist but now he could be described as a tolerant sceptic, a defender of universal human values. Since the publication of *Sinuhe the Egyptian* the writer has reflected on the unchanged character of human individuals in the course of history. Sinuhe the doctor had bought a slave, Kaptah, who wanted to become rich, whilst the war lord Horemheb thirsted for power. They were both ready to hurt other people to succeed in their endeavours. Is this how things will always be? Will idealism always be followed by realism and promotion of selfish interests? Do humans not change with time? Waltari asks. Our most international writer, Mika Waltari, who was born a hundred years ago, produced a huge body of work: novels, miniature novels, poetry, plays, film scripts and radio plays. He also wrote hundreds of newspaper articles and book reviews.

My childhood home in Helsinki had bookshelves full of Waltari's books. The novel *The Etruscan* especially fascinated me with its magic Mediterranean world. As a small boy I explored the dark Etruscan tombs whilst

our family was spending a year on the Colli Albani, Southern Rome. The amphitheatres carved out of the limestone slopes of the hills and the pieces of marble which ended up in the pockets of my short trousers exuded a sense of history. Down in the valley of the River Tiber glittered the eternal city and further away one could just about see the Etruscan's harbour of Ostia on the shores of the Thyrrhenian Sea.

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Predrag Matvejević, the Croatian author of the book *Mediterranski brevijar*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1987, thinks that we Northerners are not only drawn to the Mediterranean by warm weather and strong light but also by a kind of Mediterranean spirit or a faith in the South. Of course we long for sun and light during the many weeks of Arctic darkness, when vitamin D is added into our milk for us to survive until spring. Anyone who can will move like migratory birds to the shores of the Mediterranean, to the refuge of the sun.

That unsurpassable Mediterranean man called Albert Camus possibly experienced similar ecstasy at the Roman ruins in Tipasa, Algeria: "I love this life in rapture. The sun, the sea, my heart jumping with youth, my body tasting of salt and this vast stage where tenderness and splendour meet as the yellow merges with the blue," rhapsodised the author of *The Stranger* (sometimes translated as *The Outsider*) in his *Nuptials* essays. Whilst on a reporting tour in Algeria at the end of the 1990s I wanted to see Camus's Tipasa. I had to travel from Algiers sitting between two security guards in a convoy

1. Published in English as a part of the book *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999.

of two military vehicles because there could have been “terrorists” at the road blocks ready to rob me and cut my throat.

The Mediterranean is constantly bleeding. The turquoise sea is also a vast mass grave. A couple of years ago on the Canary Islands and last autumn in Malta I witnessed how the coast guards rescued from the sea illegal immigrants who had sailed from Africa. There are no holiday flights from Africa to the Mediterranean.

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However, from the chaos of Somalia at the beginning of the 1990s some airplanes took off to Moscow. The Somalis then continued by train across our Eastern border. As I was working at the time as the information officer of the Finnish Refugee Council, I witnessed how thousands of African Muslim refugees arrived in our country for the first time in Finnish history. The cultures clashed when a Lutheran policeman asked a Somali man why he had two wives. The Somali women assured him that they both loved the same man.

Now a community of several thousand Somalis has integrated into Finnish society with some difficulties. Only a few have been able to return to their chaotic home country. Now a Muslim congregation works in peaceful coexistence with Lutheran and Orthodox parishes. Furthermore, our small Orthodox Church is growing because the number of Russians who are migrating to Finland is constantly increasing. Now there are about 40,000 people in our

country who speak Russian as their mother tongue.

When Finland joined the European Union in 1995 our 1,340 kilometres long Eastern border also became an external border of the Union. To cross the border I myself, as a son of a Karelian refugee, still need a visa, as do the Russians who want to come to my country. However, nowadays more than six million people are crossing the Finnish-Russian border every year. Last Christmas the queue of lorries heading for Saint Petersburg at the Eastern border reached a new record: over 70 kilometres.

For historical reasons the relations between the Finns and the Russians cannot be claimed to be very warm. Mental borders still divide us. Many Finns cannot forget the bloody armed dialogue in conditions of below  $-30^{\circ}$ , with soldiers wearing white camouflage in the snow. They see the Eastern neighbour as an eternal enemy which forces the Finns to be ever ready to defend themselves. However, there is nothing one can do about geography. The majority of Finns understand this.

But what about the Mediterranean where the Byzantine, Orthodox religion, Jewishness and Islam influenced the birth of modern Europe? The culture of this sea also produced to our sorrow the rucksack bombers of Madrid in March 2004 and car bombers of Algiers in April 2007. There are people who fear that the European Mediterranean is threatened by an Islamic Sharia State just like Soviet Communism was a threat earlier; there are others who think that Israel with the United States' backing is threatening everybody else. *Homo res sacra homini*, if only humans were sacred to other.