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Blind Esperantist's Trip

to

Finland and Sweden,

to attend

**The Fourteenth International
Esperanto Congress.**

BY W. PERCY MERRICK.

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By W. PERCY MERRICK.

On Thursday, August 3rd, my wife and I left Hull on the “Arcturus” with some fifty other Esperantists, including Mr. John Merchant (President), and Mr. Warden (ex-President), of the British Esperanto Association. Until Saturday the sea was smooth, though the weather was dull, and we all ate heartily and chatted and joked in holiday mood. The ship’s company were all Finn’s, and none of them spoke a comprehensible language except the Captain and Purser, who spoke English well. The waitresses were very demure, some of them wearing their hair strained back from the forehead in puritan fashion. The only time they were known to laugh, despite the efforts of the more frivolous members of the party to make them do so, was on the Sunday evening, when one of the tables having been vacated by the diners, a lurch of the ship shot all the crockery on to the floor in a heap of ruins; then they stood round and laughed merrily; here was a real joke!

The meals were served in the Finnish manner: a substantial breakfast at nine; lunch at twelve, and dinner at six began with hors d’œuvres, set out on a special table, from which you chose what you thought you would need before taking your place. There was usually a quantity of pickled fish, cold ham, tongue, sausage, salad, butter, cheese, and several kinds of bread, one of the nicest being the “hard-bread”—half rusk, half biscuit—of which all Scandinavians seem very proud. Then the hot meat, and at dinner, fruit or a large portion of ice was brought to you. Throughout our stay in Finland we could never quite solve the problem as to how much of the hors d’œuvres we ought to appropriate in order to leave the exact amount of accommodation for the dishes that were to follow.

Friday evening we came to the Kiel Canal, and during the night were joined by some German and other Esperantists, among whom were several who were blind; Dr. Bano, from Budapest, Miss Polandova, from Prague, and three or four from Germany. Mr. Stejskal, of Prague, and Mr. Hendricx, of Ghent, both energetic helpers of the blind, saw to their safety and comfort. We much enjoyed long talks with them on the Saturday, when the sun shone brilliantly all day.

Sunday was “a day of rest but not of gladness,” and after breakfast most of us retired to our cabins, the few who did not succumb feeling very proud of themselves. By lunch time some of us were convalescent, but the Esperanto service so elaborately arranged the day before did not take place, as both of the clergymen and most of the congregation had more pressing engagements. But on Monday morning we were all

alive again and enjoyed a sunny entry into the beautiful bay of Helsingfors with its many islands, and the town with its fine buildings and churches spread out before us. A large crowd of Esperantists, with flags and cries of welcome, received us on the quay and guided us to our hotels as soon as we had made a purely formal procession through the customs. Here we scored over non-esperantist passengers, who had their baggage searched diligently! Our hotel, the “Fennia,” was most comfortable, with an English-speaking porter. Their big ices after dinner, strewn with raspberries or strawberries and drowned in cream, quite won the hearts of their lady visitors.

Most of the blind congressists were entertained for the whole time gratis, at the blind school, a large stone building with wide corridors and spacious rooms, about a mile from the centre of the town. Although it was holiday time many of the teachers had returned to look after their blind guests; they were exceedingly kind and devoted ladies, and we were heartily sorry they did not speak Esperanto, so that we could have thanked them as they deserved. I spent as much time there as I could, for besides the official meetings of the blind sub-congress, they had arranged several social evenings with much good music and recitation. All there seemed thoroughly happy. They attended the opening and closing meetings of the Congress, the Concerts, the Theatre, the National Costume Ball, etc. Mr. Robert Bergh, a quiet, good-humoured blind man, was our president, and much interesting information on blind matters was reported, and many subjects ardently discussed. Our ever-sprightly friend, Miss Melchoir, of Denmark, told us how she had started what is perhaps the first home for blind babies in Europe. It is now an important branch of the institution in which she lives and works. One morning, Dr. Privat came and spoke charmingly on Dr. Zamenhof, his interest in the blind, and his work as an oculist.

The Finns have the reputation of being a silent race. At first they seemed to be rather shy, but as the week wore on they became increasingly anxious to talk to their foreign visitors. One felt everywhere, in the streets, in the “Akceptejo,” in the blind school, that they are a seriously-minded folk, somewhat slow in thought and very cautious in adding up bills, but thoroughly trustworthy and keenly anxious to promote universal fellowship. They seem to be idealists with a strong love of poetry, which one of them attributed to the rhythmic nature of their language, but which I venture to think is an essential part of their character. Their voices, like those of the Swedes, are very clear, and the tone of their famous mixed choir, “Suomen Laulu,” which sang unaccompanied in the concert room and in the theatre, was as pure and thrilling as that of the best choirs of the north of England without the least suspicion of harshness. It was with real delight that I heard an old grey-bearded bard in the theatre chant some runes of the great epic, “Kalevala,” to a beautiful old—perhaps pre-historic—modal melody. Here, too, we heard much Finnish music, saw national dances, and enjoyed a Finnish play acted in Esperanto.

The temperature at Helsingfors during August is very pleasant, and the weather was very kind except for one wet morning and occasional showers. The air is fresh and invigorating until you get into the large halls, for the Finns seem to think that doors and windows are meant to be kept shut. They are doubtless quite right for nine months in the year, and the short summer does not give them time to cultivate a taste for draughts.

Helsingfors is essentially a modern town with good hotels and restaurants, electric light, good tram and telephone services, and many fine buildings in quite modern style. There are several nice promenades and parks where bands play in the evenings, and the streets are wide, though alas! they are paved generally with round cobbles which tire one's feet and make the traffic noisy. The market, where one can buy country produce and household utensils, is open every day till noon, but so far as we could find the shops contained little that could not be bought in other towns in Europe, excepting, perhaps, some fine cut glass, said to be made in Finland.

The buildings in which our meetings were held were spacious, and the "akceptejo" (headquarters), where the Congress had Post office, Bank, books for sale, light refreshments and conversation rooms, was a general meeting place for Esperantists of all nations.

Drinks containing more than two-and-a-half per cent. of alcohol are prohibited by law. However, one hears thrilling stories of fishermen turned smuggler-millionaires, and one sometimes meets people who steer an erratic course.

The arrangements for the comfort and entertainment of the members of the Congress were perfect in every detail.

On Wednesday, August 16th, some sixty of us started for a tour through Finland. We had sleeping cars to Viborg, a much older town than Helsingfors, where we spent most of Thursday. The principal sight seems to be the museum, but they kept the finest exhibits on the upper floors, and as many of us had not found it easy to sleep in the train, we preferred an after dinner nap on a low stone wall or on the grass near by. We spent the night at Imatra, where are two fine waterfalls. The river, some fifteen or twenty yards wide, falls over a rocky bed with much noise and foam, and brings down hundreds of logs thrown into it for use in paper mills below. Often these logs stand on end and look like men struggling in the water. We passed Friday night on a steamer to Savonlinna, where is a very fine old ruined castle, now carefully preserved, from the towers of which one gets a splendid view of the lake and surrounding country. The lakes are full of islands of all sizes and covered with pines and a few silver birches intermingled with rocks. We stayed the week-end at Punkaharju—the only place, so far as I could find which did not have two distinct names, according as one heard it in

Finnish or Swedish. It is a long narrow peninsular, with lakes on either side, of which one caught glimpses between the closely growing straight pines. An Esperantist doctor at a huge sanatorium for consumptives invited us all to coffee on Sunday afternoon, and showed us the institution, which seemed quite up-to-date. We returned to Helsingfors by train on Monday night, after having had a most delightful trip, the pleasure of which was enormously increased by the presence of several Finnish Esperantists, who came with us as guides and translators.

On Wednesday morning, August 23rd, we left Helsingfors in the "Birger Jarl," for Stockholm. Several Esperantists came to see us off, and one of our Scottish friends photographed us as we leant over the side of the boat. All day long we passed innumerable islands, much like those we had seen in the lakes. We found some Dutch Esperantists on board and enjoyed a pleasant chat with them.

On landing at Stockholm next morning we were met by an English gentleman who took us in a taxi to the station for Saltsjöbaden, where we stayed for four days with Mr. Thulin, who had very kindly invited us to visit him in his beautiful villa. Mr. Thulin has been blind for many years, and devotes his time and energy to the collection of money for the higher education of the blind in Sweden. The "Bokfond," which he founded some years ago, provides Braille text books of science and languages, and gives scholarships to promising blind students. Mr. and Mrs. Thulin and her sister, who lives with them and helps in the Braille work, are a charming family, and in their hospitable company we felt we were seeing Swedish life under ideal circumstances. Saltsjöbaden is a beautiful place on the coast of the Baltic, dotted with villas, where the chief inhabitants of Stockholm spend the summer months. On Monday, 28th, Mr. and Mrs. Thulin took us in a motor car to Osmo, which we reached about midday, after a pleasant drive through woods and open country. Mr. and Mrs. Thilander were waiting in their garden with the Swedish flag flying in our honour. Their little country house, like so many in Sweden, is painted red. It stands in a garden with grass and abundant fruit trees, and at the back is a wood, which gives it a picturesque appearance from the road. Osmo is near the port of Nynashamn. It is a large and straggling parish with a fine church dating from the fifteenth century, a railway station, electric light and telephone. The neighbourhood is very pretty; the ground is undulating, with woods, pastures, and a few corn fields.

And now came the most memorable and delightful part of our holiday, of which we had so far enjoyed every moment. I had seen the Thilanders before they were married, in Cambridge, in 1907, and I knew that Mr. Thilander was blind, somewhat of a cripple, and so deaf that no one but his wife could speak to him intelligibly through his speaking tube. Mrs. Thilander, too, is blind. Yet it is a revelation to be with them, for they are the most devoted, the kindest and the merriest couple I have ever met. Their lives are spent in working for the blind; he editing magazines and stereotyping

Braille books, and she proof reading and seeing to household affairs. Their work brings them an enormous amount of correspondence, more than enough of itself to occupy the working hours of an ordinary mortal. He is a perfect mine of information on all matters relating to the blind of all countries, and yet has room in his memory for items of local history and tradition, and can talk interestingly on almost any subject. He speaks Esperanto and English with correct intonation, although he can never have heard their sounds perfectly as he lost his hearing when quite young. They take in and read Braille magazines in various languages. He never seemed to be at a loss for the right English or Esperanto word to help us out when our vocabulary was deficient! Their talk was full of wit, and no little joke escaped their appreciation. He thoroughly understands the mechanism of the machines he uses, and has devised many improvements to Braille stereotyping machines, and one of great importance to the "Picht" typewriter, which is now being adopted by the makers. He has brought his Braille printing to a fine state of perfection. Their gaiety was infectious, and we never had a dull moment during the week we stayed with them. When they were busy with work that had to be done to time, we rambled in the woods, to the little lake or the sea, and enjoyed the sights and sounds of the countryside. One day I noted a musical cattle-call sung by an old man as he led his cows home to be milked. In the evenings I sometimes played chess with Mr. Thilander, while his wife, an excellent musician, played and sang to us. They call their little house, "Solkojan" (Sunny Cottage), but I would translate it "the happiest home in the world." Living there one soon forgot their disabilities and ceased to wonder at the things they could accomplish. Their welcome was so hearty that it was quite a wrench to leave them; one felt that an important and interesting part of one's life had passed away. We often spoke to him for a short time, but listening to long conversations evidently tired him greatly.

At Stockholm we spent two busy days. On the Tuesday we visited Skansen in the company of Miss Josefson, an Esperantist friend of the Thilanders. This is the great open-air national museum, where you see old Swedish houses from various districts, set up and furnished in the original manner. There are also some Lap huts inhabited by Laplanders. These are small round chambers made by lodging split pines against a central upright and filling in the crevices with moss. There was, too, an old wooden church, in which, I was told, service is held on Sundays. The old furniture and household implements interested me very much.

The second day we visited Tomtebodan, the chief blind school in Sweden, where Director Ostrand gave us a rapid but most interesting sketch of the history of the blind in Sweden. He took us through the institution, and then Mr. Blom, the music teacher, with some of his pupils played and sang to us delightfully and gave us coffee. It is a splendid school with a real wood for a playground and the education is quite up-to-date and practical. The girls learn housewifery, and before they leave go through a

course of cookery in a kitchen purposely made quite simple and free from mechanical luxuries, so that the pupils should not miss them when they practise their art in their own homes, or as often happens in Sweden, when they find places as servants. This visit we owed to Mr. and Mrs. Warrilow, who being in Stockholm, very kindly took us.

Copenhagen we reached on Thursday, September 7th, in the morning, and were met on landing by Mrs. Blicher, whom we had met at the Congress. She at once found us a nice hotel, and then guided us to three blind institutions, where we found a few Esperantists and one or two pupils who read English. In the school are some interesting models, especially one of the building itself. Music is taught to the blind more here than in Sweden. The next day Mrs. Blicher took us to see the city itself; the Town Hall, a very fine modern building; the Ethnological Museum, containing pre-historic implements and much beautiful furniture; the Thorvaldsen Museum, wherein are preserved most of the works of that famous Danish sculptor, who, in his later years, collected and presented them to the nation. In the evening she took us to her comfortable flat and gave us a real Danish supper and showed us many interesting Esperanto books that she and her husband had collected. She had also invited Mr. Ommerbo, our Danish blind Consul, and we all chatted in Esperanto by telephone to Miss Melchior, whose institution is unfortunately too far off for us to have visited. In short, Mr. and Mrs. Blicher made our stay in Copenhagen most active and interesting.

We returned through Germany and thought we had come to the end of the Esperanto part of our holiday. But having an hour to wait between nine and ten o'clock on Saturday evening at Hamburg, I had just remarked that it seemed strange not to have Esperantists to talk to, when a young couple came up to us on the platform. They were Mr. and Mrs. Bünemann, who had come an hour's journey by rail and on foot to see if they could help us in any way. It seems that Mrs. Blicher had telegraphed to them to say that we were passing at that time. We were delighted to meet them, and it seemed quite a pity for their sakes that we did not need help. This shows what trouble Esperantists will take to help one another, and how entirely they make you feel at home in a strange land.

At Frankfort we stayed six days with an octogenarian friend, whose years and cares sit lightly upon him. So genial and kindly was he one would never have suspected that he has been ruined by the depreciation of the German Exchange and has to deny himself what we should consider the necessaries of life. He took us to the blind school, a rather old building, where we found among the teachers and pupils some fifteen Esperantists, all eager to hear about the Congress and about the "kara redaktoro" of "Esperanta Ligilo," Herr Thilander. We were the first to bring them the news that the next Congress is to take place at Nuremberg, and many of them hoped they would be able to come to it.

We heard of a blind gentleman who has a wonderful dog as a guide; when it comes to a busy crossing it lies down till the street is clear enough to cross. These dogs are trained at the Sanitätshunden Verein, Oldenburg. It rained most of the time at Frankfort, an unwelcome change from the lovely weather we had enjoyed before.

At the blind sub-congress I had heard that in many blind schools in Germany all the pupils are taught hand-writing, but at Frankfort only the partially blind are taught this useful accomplishment.

We returned home by the Hook of Holland. At Cranenburg, on the Dutch border, we had a tussle with our bags, having to carry them through a big waiting room crowded with other passengers in a like predicament. One traveller standing next to us was led into an adjoining room to pay duty on toys bought in the Black Forest. We slept well on the boat, and so ended our most delightful holiday.

Long Live Esperanto!

For the publication of this note the Author is gratefully indebted to the Hastings Esperanto Group.

Se donas Di' al vi favoron, Li sendas vin for el la dom'Por montri sian mirlaboron, La belan mondon, al la hom'.

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Monthly Review.

“Esperanta Ligilo” is edited and published by Harald Thilander, Majorsgatan 12, Stockholm. Founded in 1904 by Professor Cart it has now a circulation of about 700 Copies each month in 32 countries, in some of which other literature for the blind hardly exists. It contains literary articles, poems, songs, amusements, maps, correspondence and reports concerning matters of interest to the blind, new apparatus, newly-printed books, etc. Blind Esperantists who so desire receive it free. It is appreciated by many institutions for the blind, eight of which from seven countries help to support it by gifts of money. Further financial assistance will be very gratefully received by the Treasurer, W. P. Merrick, Woodleigh, Shepperton, England.

All Braille Esperanto Books can be obtained from:—

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