

## **"Creating Common Ground: The Struggle for Tolerance and Inclusion of Minority Speakers, A Study of the Finnish and Estonian Experiences"**

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When I told friends and acquaintances at the end of spring semester about my plans for the upcoming summer, I got a lot of confused looks and requests for a map. I had been awarded a Kellogg Undergraduate Research and Travel Grant to pursue an independent research project about minority language speakers and their rights in Helsinki, Finland. I also planned to make several visits to Tallinn, Estonia to gain a comparative perspective on the situation there. While Finland and Estonia might be a ways off the usual tourist path through Europe, I found them to be fascinating places with unique cultures and languages, interesting historical experiences, and a great environment in which to conduct my first major research project.

I based my studies in Helsinki, Finland, a capital city with a population of about a half a million people. It is as far north as cities in Alaska and does not get dark in the summer until about 11:30 pm. Due to its geographical location and the difficulty of the Finnish language, Finnish society had remained fairly homogeneous until recently. There are now more immigrant groups settling in Finland; most notably groups from Vietnam, Iraq, and Somalia. In keeping with the Nordic values of tolerance and integration, these immigrant groups have been welcome in Finland and enriched the diversity of the country. My project concerned the themes of tolerance and integration, in terms of the historical language groups of Finland. Finland was ruled by its neighbor Sweden for 300 years until it became an autonomous duchy of the Russian Empire in 1809. The Swedish language remained the official language of Finland, spoken by elites and much of society. The Finnish language did not gain prominence or popular support until the early 20th century with the Finnish nationalist movement. It then became an official language with Swedish and gradually came to be

dominant and the language of the people. Today, the population that has Swedish as its mother tongue has shrunk to 6% of Finland's five million inhabitants. This group has a great deal of social capital and wealth due to the previous prestige of Swedish in Finland, and continues to thrive despite dwindling numbers. Finland was and is an important case to study due to its successful model of coexistence among language groups and the role of NGOs in facilitating the tolerance and understanding needed for that coexistence.

Conducting an independent research project in a foreign country is the ultimate experiment in "sink or swim." While it was at first daunting to be on my own in a new city where I knew no one, I soon adapted to the Finnish culture and found my niche in Helsinki. I spent hours in the libraries of the University of Helsinki and city of Helsinki system, and began interviews with NGO employees and academics. These interviews led to more contacts and thus more interviews. People were very accommodating and eager to help me with my project. Many expressed surprise that an American student would choose to study Swedish speakers in Finland. I was lucky enough to attend the Swedish People's Party's annual party congress as a guest of their youth branch, Svensk Ungdom. Here I was able to observe the inner debates and workings of a political party that works to serve the interests of the Swedish-speaking population. I also met many young people involved with the cause and formed friendships that still continue now that I am back in the States. I visited the Swedish speaking university in Turku, Abo Akademi, and got an inside look at student life there and the programs provided by the government and university. Other highlights of my research included a private tour of the Finnish Parliament and an interview with a government official there. I visited research institutes, government agencies, important nongovernmental

organizations, cultural foundations, and Swedish-speaking cultural sites like theaters and restaurants.

I am currently preparing my senior thesis in political science on my research conducted in Helsinki and Tallinn and am very grateful to the Kellogg Institute for providing me with the means to have this incredible opportunity. I grew so comfortable in Helsinki that I was sad to leave! I hope to conduct similar projects in the future, and it was valuable to my intellectual and overall development to realize that I could undertake such an ambitious project in a new environment and hold my own. It was truly a privilege to become part of a new culture, meet such accomplished and interesting people, and overall, to explore a worthwhile subject and a beautiful country.