Finland goes from 'hunger bread' to 'top of the class'

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To many in Minnesota it was "the old country": Finland, where you once sent "care packages" of coffee and used clothing. Here is a small nation at the northern edge of Europe with a population similar to Minnesota's in number that has now been proclaimed the best country to live in, at the "Top of the Class" in academic achievement, in environmental sustainability, the least corrupt, the most democratic, with the greatest press freedom.

No longer an object of charity, Finland has become one of the most prosperous in the European Union; the land of Nokia, Formula One race car drivers, Europe's top rock group Lordi, and great orchestra conductors in demand by discerning orchestras across the globe (Esa-Pekka Salonen, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Minnesota's Osmo Vänskä,)

It was not always so. After centuries of rule by Sweden, then Russia, Finland became independent only in 1917, and then spent much of the next 50 years in conflict: a civil war between Reds and Whites, two wars against its big bear neighbor Russia, labor unrest and economic crises.

Finland had to surrender 10 percent of its territory (Karelia), resettle more than 400,000 refugees, and pay off a huge war debt to the Soviets while staying on good terms with them, without being swallowed whole. For much of the century most everyone was poor; in the worst times people used to make flour from birch-bark to bake "hunger bread." Many emigrated: My wife's grandparents left Finland to find a better life, coming to Minnesota's Iron Range to work in the mines and forests.

How did Finland manage this transformation? Perhaps geography explains the people's character: living with a long, dark winter, floods in spring, crop-killing frosts in May and August; an unforgiving land that has helped shape a culture in which "stubborn resilience, patient endurance and hard work are held in esteem" (David Kirby, "A Concise History of Finland," Cambridge University Press, 2006.)

Another explanation is that even under foreign rule, Finland carved out a civil society of cooperatives, local democracy (extending full suffrage to women in 1906), politics by consensus, respect for authority and education. Despite the inevitable internal conflicts, the people remained united by their singular language and traditions, which include a streak of tough defiance.

Once the Cold War was over, Finland could breathe easier and turn its face westward and join the European Union. No longer isolated, in recent years Finland has also begun to mediate in some of the world's most intractable conflicts - East Timor, Kosovo and Iraq.

My wife and I spent the academic year 2004-05 in Finland and have returned for visits several times since, getting to know the people and country better each time. It is a complex place. Under the people's austere, even shy demeanor, there's a sweet wackiness, distinctly and controversially helped along by alcohol.

The national dances? The tango, and samba clubs that re-enact Mardi Gras. The national pastime? Pesäpallo, Finnish baseball, devised to teach young men how to throw hand grenades. Games people play at county fairs? Mobile phone throwing.

Six weeks (without e-mail) at a cabin in the summer and weekly saunas, followed by sausages and beer, are Finland's answers to Prozac. The Finnish film maker Aki Kaurismäki gave a terrific send-up of both sides of the national character in the award winning "The Man Without a Past."

Finland could have remained a small, marginal country, depending mainly on the raw materials of its forests. Instead, it took bold and visionary steps in the 1960s to combine Nordic social welfare approaches with the dynamism of free enterprise. Finns pay high taxes but they live in pleasant, well-planned communities, have decent housing, health care, public transportation, parental leave and pre-school care for their children, and a public education system that is the best in the world.

Tax revenues are invested in Finland's most valuable asset: its people. There's a lesson here.

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