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Child Evacuations During World War II: This Should Not Happen Again

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ABSTRACT
There is little research about the long-term effects on children that were separated from their parents and moved from Finland to Sweden during World War II. The aim of this study was to capture these now-lifelong reflections, and so questionnaires were sent to 14 potential participants. Ten persons aged 73—81 responded. The themes that emerged concerned pride over professional achievements, the pain of separation, and feelings of alienation and loneliness. The informants emphasized the importance of sibling relationships. The conclusion was that the participants, despite the hardships connected with the migration, had successfully lived a good life in Sweden.

At the end of 1939, the Soviet Union canceled the Finnish-Soviet nonaggression pact of 1932 and attacked Finland. During the Finnish Winter War and the Continuation War between 1939 and 1944, about 70,000 children were evacuated from Finland, mainly to Sweden (Kavén, 2003, 2011). Evacuations were also made within the country (Korppi-Tommola, 2008). Famine and malnutrition were the main causes for these evacuations. Most of the affected children came from cities and industrial areas.

Those who were evacuated to a new country were separated from their families and had to change both language and culture. The children who traveled to Sweden had to endure a long journey that they now describe as sometimes arduous and “at times even considered by some to be more dangerous than allowing the children to remain in Finland” (Nehlin, 2017, p. 139).

Evacuations during the second World War also took place in England, where about three million children were evacuated from urban and industrial areas to the countryside by the government’s promotion. The English child migration was made without parents if the children were older than...
5 years. Teachers often accompanied the children who were older than 5 years. As the migration took place within the country, the children did not have to change language and culture, as the Finnish war children did. The migrations in Finland and England are unique in their kind and offer great opportunities for research on how children can be affected by temporary or permanent separations from their parents. Already, in the initial stage of the war, Bowlby, Miller, and Winnicott (1939) argued that these migrations could be harmful and warned about the long-term effects of separating young children from their mothers. Also in Sweden and Finland, critics warned about potentially harmful effects. In interviews that Kavén (2011) made with critics of the child transports, the interviewees compared the traveling with a soul murder of a child. Kavén argues that the travels and separations have been an open wound for many war children during their whole life. Descriptions of children’s reactions from transports and other events were sometimes censored in the newspapers, and no action was taken to stop the travels. Children were believed to quickly forget their experiences, and were left alone with all the memories without any help or resources to process what they had been through (Kavén, 2011).

During the last decades, some research has pointed to the consequences of the separations of the evacuated war children (Heilala & Santavirta, 2016; Lagnebro, 1994; Mattsson, Maliniemi-Piispanen, & Aaltonen, 2017). Longitudinal studies have revealed both mental and somatic problems in the former war children. In the Helsinki Birth Cohort Study, symptoms of depression and psychiatric disorders later in life among these persons were detected (Eriksson, Räikkönen, & Eriksson, 2014; Räikkönen et al., 2011). Santavirta, Santavirta, Betancourt, and Gilman (2015) did not find a larger proportion of symptoms of lifelong depression or hospitalization for psychiatric disorders among Finnish war children who had been in foster homes than among other children, but other studies seem to corroborate findings of long-term adverse health effects (Alastalo et al., 2009, Andersson, 2011). A higher risk of personality disorders in separated Finnish war children has been found among individuals with other kinds of serious mental disorders, particularly in men separated before the age of 5. Parental separation should therefore be seen as a specific vulnerability factor for personality disorders (Lahti et al., 2012). Even though physical and psychological consequences from the war and the separations have been found, Santavirta (2014) did not find any sign of increased mortality among Finnish war children.

Bowlby was the first to investigate separation reactions in children and their long-term consequences (Bowlby, 1997). By seeing the attachment in an evolutionary biological way, he pointed at small children’s automatic
and instinctively vital dependence on the physical proximity between the child and the caregiver during the first years of life. In good circumstances, a secure base is created to which the child can return for exploratory excursions. If the safe base is disrupted, uncertainty about the attachment may affect the child negatively. Traumatic events, like the separations during wartime, can lead to insecure attachment. In Bowlby’s early research about attachment, he showed how children reacted to repeated long separations from their parents. Children who had been hospitalized without visits from their parents reacted first with protests, then despair, and then apathy. This was followed by a depressive withdrawal and after a few weeks the baby in a superficial way made herself available to all who communicated and showed interest. Losses often push grief aside until an appropriate opportunity, and the question why then arises in the reaction phase. Thoughts of what happened and guilt feelings are evoked. Psychosomatic symptoms such as difficulty concentrating, impaired memory, insomnia, stomach pains, and impaired immune system have also been found as an effect from loss (Malesevic & Wallin, 2014).

The migration was probably quite traumatic for some of these children. Some of them refused to eat and withdrew into seclusion (Lagnebro, 1994). Narratives of positive experiences may indicate a superficial adaptation to the new culture and situation. As in all separations, a sense of guilt may have been felt by these children about their relations to their parents. “Have I been disobedient to my parents? Why should I go?” (Lagnebro, 1994, p. 31). Several children felt insulted when forced to become dependent on other people’s discretion (Lagnebro, 1994).

However, it might also be surmised that many of the children who experienced traumatic separations during their lifetime may have found ways to create new bonds to important persons in the new country (Mattsson, Maliniemi-Piispanen, & Aaltonen, 2017; Pannula, Paksumiemi, & Westberg, in press).

The purpose of this study was to study long-term effects on persons who were separated as children from their parents. The participants in this study live in Sweden and are organized in an association for Finnish war children. Specifically, the question was in what way memories and experiences of these persons had shaped them into the persons they are today.

Method

Material and method

Ten persons who had been Finnish war children and who now live in Sweden participated in the study. Data collection was made through e-mails and letters. The research material was collected after contact with a Finnish
war child association in Sweden. The chairman and deputy chairman recommended contact with the 14 members of the board. An information letter and a semistructured questionnaire were sent to them. The letter contained a personal presentation of the first author, the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality, and author and supervisor contact information. In the attached questionnaire, the respondents were asked to provide information about date of birth, age of first arrival in Sweden, and of repeated trips between Sweden and Finland. They were asked to openly and in their own way describe how childhood circumstances may have influenced their lives. Did they perceive any potential turning points, and if so, had they experienced any significant impact of these?

Answers were received from 10 persons: 7 men aged 73–81 years (M = 74.8, SD = 2.8) and 3 women aged 73–76 years (M = 74.7, SD = 1.5). The material ranged from one to four pages. In addition to the question responses, 4 informants attached additional information about activities in the Finnish war child association. To preserve the anonymity of the informants, they are described in the text with a number followed by M for male and F for female. The 10 informants were evacuated from Finland to Sweden when they were between 2 and 7 years old. Most of them ended up in foster homes and 2 of them became adopted. Some of them traveled back and forth between Finland and Sweden several times, and one informant described that he had to change home six times before the age of 10. All informants are now permanent residents in Sweden.

The journeys to Sweden took place between the years 1939 and 1945. The seven informants who gave information about their travels came by train through Haparanda. They had a name tag or badge number fastened around their neck as proof of identity on their journey. When the children first arrived to Sweden, they were debugged and got new clothes. The boys had to shave their heads and the girls’ hair was washed in methylated alcohol. Then they traveled a few more hours to another town to get examined by a doctor who decided their health condition. The healthy children were put in quarantine. Many children who were malnourished were placed at sanatoriums.

**Data analysis**

The 10 response letters were examined by analyzing the narratives they contained. The emphasis was on how the informants expressed what they considered important and also how they presented themselves. Recurring patterns and themes were examined from a holistic content perspective (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The reading was done with
empathy, care, and an open mind. The resulting presentation has excerpts for readers to make their own interpretations of the material.

Ethical considerations in keeping the informants’ anonymity have been well maintained by the letter communication. The procedure has given the informants full freedom to decide how much they want to express, and the possibility to respond in their own way.

**Results**

In the analysis of the answers, three themes emerged: the happiness of the good life that the informants had attained, the pain in the separations, and feelings of alienation.

**The happiness of the acquired good life**

Although many tragic episodes were described, the participants did not report that these had affected their lives negatively. The informants had a strong sense of belonging and support through their contacts with other war children in the Finnish war child association. The participants had actively sought and found much information about themselves. The letters showed openness with contact details, and a will to share more information on request. The letters had an optimistic tone and overall showed gratitude and pride to have fared so well through life. The participants described that they had struggled in order to get confirmation of being as much worth as others. In the texts there is a large gratefulness for having been given the opportunity to live in Sweden.

If I had been placed in another family in the village, I would probably have had to return to Finland like most of the other children. My foster family didn’t have any children of their own and they were fighting to get through an adoption. The relocation for me into the new country became a success. I educated myself as a teacher and worked until my retirement even though I always had to struggle to show that despite the fact I come from Finland, I could be as good as others who were born in Sweden. These opportunities to get all I got in Sweden would never have been possible in Finland, which was financially burdened by the war, rationing and poverty (4M).

I can not feel I had a problem with moving to Sweden, I was so small. Sweden has been positive to me (7M).

We have three wonderful children who are doing so well in life! We have three grandchildren who are the spices in our lives (10M).

It is apparent that the informants in this situation, when they are asked to think back, want to describe that life has become quite satisfactory. Such satisfaction and pride was particularly evident when they described their
professional lives. Many of them carefully presented their studies, careers, and family structures.

I completed the medical studies at Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm and became a registered doctor (2M).

During school in Finland I was eager to find a job to save money to be able to travel to Sweden. I delivered newspapers and got my ticket to Sweden. In Sweden I found an advertisement in the paper where they searched a telephone operator. After more than two years on this job, I wanted to educate myself and took the junior secondary school grades followed by nursing school. Then I worked on a hospital for about two and a half years before I took district nurse education. I have worked as primary care nurse most of my professional life except for the last 3 years when I served as health planner in five municipalities. My family consists of my husband, two daughters and four grandchildren (3K).

The second time I moved to Sweden was in 1961 after military service. Then I visited Finland every summer and mastered the Finnish language better than Swedish. I went to school a little later than other people my age, but I had not lost the language, so that was good, and that my studies were going well. The stay in Sweden, 1.5 years, gave only positive memories, except for the longing for my family. The second time in 1961, I moved as labour immigrant and I think I’ve found it easier to adapt to the country than many others. I think I have done well despite orphanage and other difficulties (5M).

My father was very involved in a lot of things, he was for example a juryman, which resulted in many people visiting our home, which of course was exciting and interesting for a little boy. When I got older I started studying, which I think they were a little proud of. I cannot feel that I had a problem with the migration to Sweden, I was so small. Sweden has been positive for me, I think (7M).

I always thought it was fun to go to school. As a 15 year old I got a job as a babysitter in different families. Then I connected phone calls and worked for many years as a shop-assistant. I became a Swedish citizen, 8 May 1959. For 23 years until I became retired, I was employed as a bank clerk where I got on very well. In my spare time, I have never had employment problems. Have tried most of hobby works painted paintings in oil and watercolour, batik, birchbark and various stoneware pottery. I am also interested in club activities and do gymnastics and swim 3 times a week. Have family and is married since 1961, have 2 well behaved children, a boy and a girl, 5 grandchildren where one died in a traffic accident in 2009 (9K).

Getting a good education and a satisfactory economic standing is an obvious sign of success in a new country. The informants are eager to describe how they have succeeded. No one has portrayed any major difficulties in working life or relationships, or described themselves affected by any serious health problems or substance abuse problems.
The pain of separation

The significance of the ties to the biological parents was apparent to several participants. Many of them traveled with siblings and these relationships turned out to have a central role in their stories. No informant had any memories of the first trip to Sweden. Several informants describe the journey back to Finland as a repeated painful separation experience. The grief the children felt when they had to break up from close relationships in Sweden were not always allowed to be expressed. Children were often asked to be good, which meant that they should not cry at separation. One informant gave a picture of her naive surprise over this demand when she saw her foster mother burst into tears at her departure:

My foster mother had a hard time explaining it all to me but she repeated a sentence that I remember. "Now we'll have to be very good, so it will go well." I thought long on the word "good." When one is "good." If, for example, falls and knees scrubbing and an adult clean the wounds and not crying usually the adult say "how good you are," thus—not cry. We went away to where children from different places gathered up and I stepped aboard the train that would take us to Stockholm. The doors closed. We waved. We did not cry though many children did. But the strange thing was that when the train started I saw my "mother" cried. My thought was, but we were supposed to be "good." Thus—not cry. When we came to Sweden my younger brother wrote little notes he put in the mailbox. On the notes stood written—come and get me. He used to set off on the railways, trying to go home. He was sick in the winter. I had difficulty eating . . . the winter was tough. Filled with homesickness to Sweden. Winter must have been hard even for our parents who brought home a couple of kids who "just were homesick" (3K).

My little brother and I protested energetically and loudly anytime someone wanted to take the one of us. This was surely the reason why we two were left as the last of the children's group. We refused to be separated and in the end a physician's family decided to take care of both of us (2M).

When I was 6 years old I was asked by my mother if I wanted to go to Sweden, as the authorities encouraged one family member to move out of the war zone. It must have been hard for a mother to select one child and send him to a foreign country (5M).

When the travel date arrived we said goodbye to Mom. We stood around her hospital bed and sang to her. Dad went with us to Helsinki to arrange all formalities. It took a few days and then we parted from him, too. I do not remember the farewell. But I felt sorrow when we were on our way on the train. I had no one to talk to about my losses. Perhaps the truth is that if I had had someone to talk to, I probably would have chosen a different topic than the sadness about the separation (6K).

When my twin brother and I came to Sweden no one wanted us both so my foster family's neighbour took him. In the summer of 1944 I had to witness my brother
drown and that was probably more traumatic for me than the journey from Finland. I sometimes think how life would have been if I had returned to Finland or stayed there and have had my twin brother alive to spend time with. I miss him, it would have been good if we could have supported each other (7M).

The twin brother has thought a lot about how life would have been if they had never traveled to Sweden. Did he experience his brother’s death as his responsibility that he also would bear the blame for? The Finnish war children traveled alone and therefore probably felt great responsibility for themselves and their siblings.

*Feelings of alienation and loneliness*

The children often had experiences of something being wrong with them when they arrived at new places. Some were well received, while others had to suffer being teased by peers because of habits, language, clothing, and strange names. This was repeated several times when they were transferred between Finland and Sweden. Several of them were very young and two of the informants wrote that their foster parents never mentioned anything about their origin. The consequences once it was discovered sometimes evoked negative reflections and low self-esteem. Children were often selected or deselected and had to pass between parents who sometimes were not able to take care of them, which meant that the children felt betrayed and abandoned:

> At my first arrival I was 1 year and 11 months. Have no memory of that. Next trip I’m about 4.5 years, separations are always very tough. The next time I came to Sweden I was 7 years. So I have changed home six times before I was 10 years old. Went back to Finland again in 1949, when my Swedish mother died, and no one could “take care of me” anymore (1M)!

I called my foster mother “mom” but my foster father by his first name. Some older boys started teasing me and called me by that name. I was also called “Finnish boy.” By this I occasionally became more reserved and pulled a little aside and went on my own. I did not want to hear about being Finnish and Finland. After a lot of letters through a law firm and my biological mother, it was decided that I should stay, become a Swedish citizen, be adopted and additionally get supplements of first names. My given name was kept because many already knew it when I at the age of 7 started school. After this, I really felt that I was Swedish and didn’t want to hear anything about Finland because that was embarrassing. The first time I told anyone that I was born in Finland was in 2005 to my teaching colleagues. Right now I am not ashamed of my Finnish first name anymore. Earlier when people asked and said it was an unusual name, I used to just answer, that the name is more common in Finland (4M).

When the war was over, came dad from Finland and asked my new parents if they wanted to adopt me. My mother had died shortly after I arrived, and dad wanted to
marry himself. Although I had a good time in my new home, I felt like he betrayed me and that he didn’t want me (6K).

It was very poor [in Finland], there was much fighting in the neighbourhoods we lived in. Often I was bullied for my nice clothes and I did not understand the language (8M).

Having to change homes several times and never really being accepted anywhere might have been a driving force for many of the war children to prove for themselves and others that they could be successful in their professional lives.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to analyze written descriptions of how life had developed among 10 persons who had come from Finland to Sweden during World War II and who were now active in an association for former Finnish war children. The results of the analysis of the letters indicate that the participants, despite the hardships connected with the migration, have succeeded in living a good life in Sweden. This accords with other studies showing that immigrants felt satisfaction and gratefulness about the upbringing they received (Hull, 2017). The results may be interpreted in the light of resilience and motivation to compensate for early relational losses. It is important to be aware of the fact that these persons are active members of a war child association. They may be less representative of persons who have had more troubles throughout life. But they do represent the large number of persons who successfully find satisfactory lives in new countries that they have been forced to move to.

Most of the Finnish war children probably experienced the travels between Finland and Sweden as turning points in their lives (White & Wu, 2014). During the journeys the participants sometimes got psychological and social support from their siblings. Two brothers described how they by protesting were allowed to come to the same family in Sweden. However, no one described forceful transfers, as have been described elsewhere. Several participants have remained in contact with their siblings, and the foster parents respected the value of sibling relations and made sure the children could stay close to each other or have the opportunity to visit each other. At the time, psychological knowledge about parent–child separations as well as consequences of separating siblings was poor. The significance of sibling relations was not given much consideration. Leathers (2005) found that siblings who were placed in foster care together had better capacity to become integrated and had a stronger sense of belonging in the new family than those who were separated. Leathers (2005) assumed that siblings who are placed together in a foster home will get increased
attachment capabilities that facilitate accommodation and strengthen the ties with foster parents. Such ties may function as protection in conflict situations and effectively prevent a disrupted stay. In the future it is important to understand the significance of sibling separations and to emphasize the importance of unbroken sibling relationships.

Our informants wrote that they had to withhold their grief during the separations and described their sadness in an objective manner. One informant talked about tears without talking about sadness. This informant raised the question whether psychosomatic problems could be traced to the restrained tears that she lived with for most of her life. Another Finnish war child described the severe eczema he got when his youngest brother unexpectedly passed away 30 years after the war (Kavén, 2003). The eczema was found to be the same kind of eczema that was described in his medical record from 1944 when he had been separated from his mother. Other authors have described similar psychosomatic symptoms among Finnish children (Lagnebro, 1994).

A few informants described a feeling of not being wanted. This feeling might have been due to the particular situation of children exposed to war. They were very young and traveled alone. First they had to evacuate to Sweden and after between one to five years, in five of these cases, they were forced to return back to Finland to their biological parents. They were children and had to have faith in the responsible adults they had on their side. They could protest and hope for response. In the cases where no adult could stay and fight for them, they experienced abandonment every time they had to leave their secure base. The results of this were that they often felt excluded and tried to overcome this by proudly presenting professional successes. For most persons, professional identity and social status are important parts of their self-image (Arvidsson, 1998). The informants reported about career and studies. This might be a way to prove how talented they were and that they had a longing for being as good as any other.

**Limitations**

The participants in this study were a homogeneous group who may have had more favorable conditions than the majority of Finnish war children. It is important to keep in mind that all participants were affiliated with and active in a Finnish war child association. Their way of describing their life destinies might be influenced by common discourses in this group. However, they have also had great possibilities to reflect on the long-term consequences of their fate.
Conclusions

Several findings stand out as important. The lives for these former war children seem to have developed in a positive way. Sibling relationships may have served as support during the separation. It is not possible to know whether their positive way of relating their life narratives should be seen as compensating for the complicated and painful experiences that they may have had or if life has been generous to them.

Finnish war children are a group that, with their history and common background, could contribute to further longitudinal research for more evidence to draw conclusions about cause and effect. Highlighting historical events of World War War II, and after decades determining their consequences, should provide useful information for negotiations in the threat of war and its consequent suffering, which civilians fear. Reminders of forgotten history seem to be necessary to prevent new repeated mistakes.

Notes on contributors

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