Hanna Snellman

"I JUST LEFT": NARRATED FEMALE MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

After the Second World War, the whole of Europe was an arena of migrants flowing south to north, east to west. Supply and demand coincided when Sweden needed workers and the rural regions of Europe had plenty of workers, but no jobs. In 1965, almost 50,000 people migrated to Sweden for work; nearly half of them came from Finland. About 4,000 from Yugoslavia and almost 3,000 came from Greece, with equally 3,000 arriving from Germany and Denmark. The peak in immigration to Sweden occurred in 1969-1970, when Finnish net migration amounted to 100,000 persons. In the ten years from 1960 to 1970, the Finnish population in Sweden had more than doubled.[1] In 1972, Sweden stopped its recruitment of foreign workers.

In 1986, Nancy Foner had described how immigrant women had emerged from academic invisibility and female migrants had become a recognized presence.[2] Ten years later, she wrote, *"We have come a long way from the days when immigration scholars lamented that women were ignored in migration studies. Yet there is still much research to do to clarify and deepen our understanding of the complex and often contradictory ways that migration affects women".*[3] Caroline B. Brettell criticizes earlier research as either ignoring women completely, or as portraying them as passive followers of the initiating male migrants, or as homemakers, staying in the countryside and assuming many of the responsibilities that were previously the domain of men. *"This particular conceptualization of the relationship between women and the process of migration suited modernization theory – women represented the traditional pole of the continuum and men the pole of modernity. Today it is apparent that not only are women often some of the first to migrate, but they also outnumber men in some international migration streams. [...] Gender has been shown to be important in the decision to migrate – as well as in the process of settlement in the receiving society."*[4]

Caroline Brettell also pays attention to the fact that as a discipline, anthropology came quite late to the study of migration. It was only in late 1950s and early 1960s that American anthropologists paid attention to migration as a research topic. Growing cities attracted their attention as they explored routes of rural emigrants to big cities. Rural villagers found employment as unskilled or semiskilled workers and were living in neighborhoods with people of their own ethnic group or home community. Furthermore, according to Caroline Brettell *"the number ethnographic monographs on these particular migration streams increased significantly during the 1980s and 1990s, as migration was established as a central topic in anthropological research".*[5] Nancy Foner points out that anthropologists' involvement in the study of

[1] Junila & Westin 2006.
[2] Simon 2001. VII.
[3] Foner 2001. 16-17.
[4] Brettell 2000. 109.
[5] Brettell 2003. IX-X.

immigrants initially grew out of their research in sending countries. Having experience from both sides of the migration chain has shaped their research in many ways. They are especially sensitive to the links that immigrants maintain with their home societies, and they are equally interested with migration's impact on those who immigrated and those who stayed.[6] As European ethnology was anthropologized in the 1960s, migrants gradually found their way to writing desks of Nordic ethnologists, too. However, in Finland migrants have been more a study object to sociologists and historians, not anthropologists and European ethnologists.

In this article, my aim is to describe and analyze interviews with fifteen Finnish women that I conducted in Västerås, Sweden in 2005, regarding the circumstances under which they immigrated to Sweden. Biographical interviews are often the only way to obtain information about decision-making in the course of life, and so it is in this case.[7] Official documentation often fails to portray the humanity of the migrant. Authorities are not necessarily even interested in individual reasons for immigration; there was for example no control over immigration between Finland and Sweden after 1954.[8]

Västerås, located at the Bay of Mälardalen, was chosen as a site of my research for several reasons. Firstly, I wanted to collect my research material in a middle sized town. I had earlier done interviews in a big city, Gothenburg, and interview material on Finns in smaller communities of Sweden is available in archives. Secondly, Finns in Västerås have also earlier been objects of studies. These sociological studies by Magdalena Jaakkola, Elina Haavio-Mannila and Vilho A. Koiranen make an excellent background material for my ethnography. Choosing the location of interviews was easy. Much more difficult was to find the interviewees. Because there are no official records where one could pick names of Finnish women living in Västerås, I decided to try to look for them from the Finnish association of Västerås, Katajaiset. When I called the association, I asked for names of Finnish women in Västerås, not necessarily active in the Finnish association, but other forums as well. I was lucky to find a person who sought for names and phone numbers. As I did the interviews I asked for more names, according to the principles of snow ball method. The interviews proceeded in similar patterns. I contacted the interviewees by phone and fixed the time for the interview. The actual interview started with my explanation of the research setting and after that we more or less discussed about the interviewee's life in Sweden. This time experiences of constructing home away from home and the Finnish representations in people's homes did not interest me as it had in my previous study.[9] Neither did I have a set of questions I would have asked all the interviewees, but I tried to be as broad as possible. My aim was simply to find themes that are topical in Finnish women's lives in Sweden in 2005. I asked what kind of activities the women had currently and had had in the past. Many times a lot of time was given to coffee drinking, and also old photo albums were leafed through. The interviews were taped and transcribed word by word afterwards. The material will be filed at the Provincial Archives of Oulu, where I have donated interview material also earlier.

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[6] Foner 1999.
[7] Todd 2005. 18.
[8] Snellman 2003. 13.
[9] Snellman 2003.

As it happens of the 15 interviewees six were born in Oulu or in the area around it, five in the countryside in central and eastern Finland, three in the industrial towns of southern Finland and one in Karelia which nowadays belongs to Russia. The interviewees were born between 1928 and 1955 and they had migrated to Sweden between 1960 and 1979 between ages 18 and 38. Seven of the interviewees had children already at the time of migration. Some had divorced before migration. Two of the interviewees had also been in Sweden during the Second World War as war children. Three of the interviewees had returned back to Finland some time after their migration to Sweden, but returned back later.

I have grouped my interviewees according the shared experiences of the women. As such, the groups are not based on age of the interviewee, but on the time of her immigration. My life stage analysis thus emphasizes social age rather than calendar age, a perspective that Tamara Hareven cites as being important in the life course paradigm.[10] Interviewees belonging to the first group were early pioneers who immigrated to Sweden between 1960 and 1965. The interviewees of the second group immigrated to Sweden between 1968 and 1970, when there was a "gold rush" to Sweden and tens of thousands of Finns immigrated to the country within a few years. Persons in the third group immigrated to Sweden between 1974 and 1979, the time period when immigration from Finland was dwindling gradually. The pseudonyms of persons belonging to the first group start with the letter P, the second group with the letter H, and the third group with the letter M; thus, in the following, the name of the person reveals the immigration time-period for the person discussed. Consequently, the pseudonyms not only protect the identity of the interviewee, but also serve as an analytical tool. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and I have translated the citations in English.[11]

STANDING ALONE

Paula left Finland in 1960 when she was 26 years old. Her hometown was in an industrial part of southeastern Finland. She completed eight years of elementary school, then worked first as a babysitter for six months, then in two different shops for a total of seven years. Eight months before migrating to Sweden, Paula was working in the paper mill of her hometown. She had a permanent, well-paying job. Paula was already familiar with Sweden at the time of immigration because she had been a War Child in Sweden during the Second World War. She was not certain about dates, but remembered that she had been in Sweden for a couple of years before she emigrated permanently. She was sent first when she was four or five years old, and again when she was eight years old. When she was ten years old, she returned to her mother, who had remarried; Paula's father had been killed in an accident before the war. Paula described her childhood home as an *"ordinary working-class home"* with her father working for the paper mill and her mother at home with the children. The strongest recollections of her visits to Sweden were of homesickness and homecoming. Finnish and Swedish are completely different languages, so at first Paula could not understand

[10] Hareven 2001. 29.

[11] This article is a part of my the Academy of Finland funded project *"Dimensions of Sway – the Meaning of Social Networks for Finnish Migrants in Sweden"* (decision number 211152)

a word of Swedish, nor was she able to express her needs in Finnish because there was nobody around who spoke the language. However, when she returned to Finland, she had forgotten Finnish and could not talk with her mother, whom she had missed so much. By the time she returned to Sweden again, she could no longer speak Swedish. Paula returned home in 1946. In 1960, she decided to immigrate to Sweden. She strictly denied that the experience of being a War Child had any effect on her decision to immigrate. It all happened by chance, she explained: *"Many Finns in Sweden have come here to look for work, or because they were married and the husband wanted to emigrate. I just left [...] I was on summer vacation, I had three weeks of vacation, and my girl friend who lived in Turku asked me to come to Sweden to look for work at Algots, to come with her [...] I thought, why not, ok. Let's go [...] She asked me to spend a few nights with her so we left, and we arrived at Algots [in Burås]."*[12]

Even though Paula was of the opinion that she was not typical because women usually followed their husbands, several other interviewees also seem to have made the decision to migrate alone or as an equal partner. Seventeen-year-old Helmi visited her cousin in Västerås in 1968 and decided to return the following summer and look for work.[13] Pirkko was accompanied by her nine-year-old son, who went to school in Sweden through the fourth grade. She was twenty-nine years old and divorced. She soon married again in Sweden, but the decision to immigrate was made alone.[14]

Heta was by no means following her husband to Sweden; rather, her aim was to escape from him. She was a trained hairdresser who owned her own salon and had three children, born over nine years. Her husband was violent and Heta realized that the only way she and her children could escape him was to emigrate. She called her childhood friend near Stockholm and asked for help.[15]

Hilkka migrated to Sweden for the first time in 1969, but as did many other Finns, she and her family decided to return to Finland after a few years.[16] In 1976, Hilkka and her family decided to move back to Sweden. At that time she was in her thirties, married and had two children. She had started living independently at the age of fourteen, when she finished school. Her career path was quite typical. She started out in her home village working on a wealthy farm, then moved to work in the cafeteria of her home village. Her first job outside of her home village was as a babysitter. She adjusted to life in a bigger town and moved on to work in a shop, where she remained for three years before migrating to Sweden. Hilkka's description of her education is typical for a girl living in the Finnish countryside in the 1960s. She started working at an early age without vocational training, as a result of her parents' poor financial state. Also, like many girls, she wanted to start a life of her own and enjoy being part of a consumer society.[17]

Part of the immigrant experience is constructed in narratives. The way Hilkka described her decision to migrate to Sweden had many typical features of an "ideal"

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[12] Interview on June 23, 2005.
[13] Interview on June 29, 2005.
[14] Interview on June 22, 2005.
[15] Interview on June 21, 2005.
[16] Rahikainen 2007. 101.
[17] Interview on June 21, 2005.

migration story. Migration was not planned and, in many ways, not weighed: *"Well, it was so that [...] I was working and my husband was working, he was working at the mail bus depot, and his colleague immigrated first here to Sweden. He went on leave because his father came for a visit from Hyrynsalmi and they said [...] they came to me at work and told me that they will make a trip to Haparanda [in Sweden, by the Finnish border]. And I said, what are you going there for? (And they said) We'll go and see if there's work. So they did go to Haparanda for a visit, but they did not return home in the evening, and I was wondering how far they had gone. The next afternoon they returned home. They had driven all the way to Västerås. They just came to my workplace and said that now we are going to move to Sweden. I just had to resign my job and..."*

LOOKING FOR A BETTER LIFE

Starting a new life from scratch is a typical immigrant narrative.[18] A prospective migrant has to know something of the world beyond her own and perceive them as better and attainable.[19] Contrasting is commonly used in the narratives of immigrants, and the concept of immigration is, in itself, contrastive.[20] Many of the titles that describe immigrant lives include a message about "a better life" in the new country.[21] Labor migration experiences usually include hope that living standards will improve.[22]

Several of the women I interviewed made the decision to emigrate for financial reasons. Pirjo, as one example, intentionally made her way to Eskilstuna, Sweden in 1961. At the time of her migration she was thirty-three years old, married and had five children. The eldest had completed schooling through the fifth grade, and the youngest was two years old. A sixth child was born in Sweden. A poor economic outlook was the deciding factor in her family's decision to emigrate; her husband was constantly in danger of being unemployed, and the wages he earned were not sufficient to cover the cost of food. *"The only thing we owned was children,"* summarized Pirjo with regard to the family's economic situation.[23]

At times, when there was plenty of work available, occupational mobility could lead to better working conditions or better pay. When Pälvi immigrated to Sweden in 1965, for example, she first settled in Dannemora, fifty kilometers from Uppsala where Pälvi's husband got a job in a mine. Finding a place to stay was not a problem because her husband's employer provided them with an apartment that included a kitchen. However, as Pälvi put it, her husband wanted to move on. He found a new job in Vattholm, and again the employer provided an apartment for the couple and their three children. Pälvi's husband was not satisfied with the pay, however, and he sought work in Upplands Väsby, near Uppsala, where Pälvi was working as a cleaning woman. He worked in Upplands Väsby for only three days before deciding

[18] Brettell 1982. 3; Iacovetta 2006. 42.
[19] Gabaccia 1994. 4.
[20] Eastman Attebery 2007. 37.
[21] E.g. Barton 1975; Yuan-Yin Hsu 2000; Wolf-Knuts 2000.
[22] Hareven 1982; Iacovetta 1995; Lindström 1988.
[23] Interview on June 27, 2005.

he did not want to stay there, even though the family would have received an apartment from the employer. The pay was good, but the working conditions were miserable. Next, they moved to Sandviken, where the husband worked in an iron factory, and from there to Forsbacka. Pälvi's work stayed the same: she was working as a cleaning woman in a hospital in Gävle from 6:00 pm to 12:00 am every night. That changed when they decided to move to Alingsås in southern Sweden, where Pälvi's husband could work as a lumberjack with her brother. Next, they both found work in Svaneholm's rubber factory. In 1971, after six years in Sweden, they decided to look for work in Västerås, where they settled permanently.[24]

Most roving Finnish immigrants were far from their childhood homes and family support, but a Finn looking for a better job could always rely on the Finnish community. The younger you were, the more you were supported. Consequently, employers could be sure that there would be fresh immigrants to replace those who changed jobs. In turn, a job-seeking immigrant could rely on the fact that, with the help of other Finns, it would be possible to find a new job. Thus, those who changed jobs were not "drifting", because there was a certain logic to their mobility.[25]

IMMIGRANT OCCUPATIONS

In her study of female migrants in New York, Nancy Foner found that a number of Haitian and Hispanic aides in the New York nursing home that she studied in the 1980s were full-fledged nurses when they emigrated; however, their qualifications were not recognized in the United States and language problems prevented them passing the requisite licensing exams to practice nursing in New York.[26] Language problems were a reality for Finish professionals working in Sweden too. The only nurse in our sample of Finnish women in Sweden was recruited to Sweden primarily because she was a trained nurse. In the beginning, although she dressed like a nurse at the hospital, she was paid for a lower position, mainly because of language problems: *"And then I arrived in Stockholm. I had a sister already living in Stockholm, she had come a little earlier with her husband, a younger sister, they were working near Stockholm, and then [...] I started, I got a place to stay in Roslaxtull, the hospital had arranged a place in a dormitory. But it was difficult, because I noticed immediately, and so did others as well, fellow workers and the director, that I couldn't manage, that is, I could not succeed at being a nurse because of the language. Then we made an agreement that I would work as an auxiliary nurse until I learned the language. And I remember how difficult it was [...] how difficult it was to be an auxiliary nurse and for all that [...] there was an authoritarian head nurse who was fond of the Finnish nurse's uniform and she wanted me to wear the uniform even though I did not do nurse's work."*[27]

We do not know whether Hannele's experience was a typical procedure in Swedish hospitals or not, but the recognition of Finnish qualifications in Sweden was by no means automatic. For example, when Heljä applied for a job in a metal factory

[24] Interview on June 20, 2005.
[25] Todd 2005. 49, 113.
[26] Foner 2001. 4.
[27] Interview on June 22, 2005.

in Västerås, she had to take a test to prove her qualifications for machine drawing. She did not criticize this requirement it in the interview, but it was obvious that she found it demeaning. Indeed, she has previously completed the necessary education in order to become qualified for the job: *"In 1971 I went to work at ABB. But for that I had to, even though I had two years education, I had to do a test there. There were sixty candidates, Swedes and there were two or three Finns in the group. We had to do a test in order to be able to work in just that office [drawing electric motors]. And for my part the test went well of course even though I did not speak Swedish very well, because I had just studied the same thing in Finland. And I got the job... ABB had its own fast training to become a drawer there, and that way I could get a job at ABB right away. So I took the course first and got a job at the office after that."*[28]

For Heljä, vocational training in Finland clearly meant a good start in Sweden. At that time there were about six hundred employees in the metal factory in Västerås mentioned above, and 36 percent of the employees were of Finnish origin. Heljä was the only Finn working at the office at that time. Office work meant improved working conditions; it also meant working daytime shifts, rather than rotating shift work in the factory.

Marja was the only interviewee with a high school diploma. In addition, she had a diploma from a commercial college. However, she started her career in Sweden at the bottom of the ladder. Her first job was as a cleaning woman. At first, she did not even attempt to look for work where she could use her education because of language barriers. She also felt that the pay for manual labor was very good.[29]

"Cleaning has always been the work of immigrants, you don't have to talk when you clean" explained Pirjo as to why she, along with several other interviewees, had chosen cleaning as her first occupation in Sweden. For women with small children, working as a cleaning woman was a practical decision because of the hours: you could work in the evenings and at nights and care for your children during the day. You could also add more cleaning tasks, as the children grew older.[30] Many of the occupational solutions female immigrants found speak of lack or general distrust of public childcare programs, as well as non-relative baby-sitters in general.[31]

Nancy Foner points out that many immigrant women who had professional or white-collar jobs in their home society experienced downward occupational mobility when they arrived in New York. Without American-recognized training, English proficiency, or green cards, highly qualified women were often consigned, at least temporarily, to relatively low-level positions when they arrived. Many Jamaican private household workers that she interviewed in her research, for example, had been teachers and clerical workers back home. Some of these women experienced what Maxine Margolis called the transition from *"mistress to servant"*.[32] This downward transition was a reality for Finnish women in Sweden as well. Hellevi had been the head of a small post office in Finland, but in Sweden she had no chance at white-collar work without further education.

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[28] Interview on June 18, 2005.
[29] Interview on June 30, 2005.
[30] Interviews on June 27, 23, 21, 20, 2, 2005; February 7, 2005.
[31] Brettell & James Simon 1986. 14.
[32] Foner 2001. 4.

It has been pointed out that, in general, women emigrate at a younger age than men because young women can easily get a job as domestic help.[33] Babysitter, live-in maid and domestic help were the typical first occupations for female Finnish immigrants in Sweden. Such occupations enabled women to migrate to Sweden at an early age, right after compulsory education. Usually, though not always, the employers of these women were close relatives. In many cases, domestic work was a positive occupational choice, since it provided a kind of domestic apprenticeship and thus was an improvement on agricultural work. It was often considered standard practice for an employer, particularly if he or she was a relative who had brought the young woman from Finland, to help the family's babysitter to get a better paying job at the factory right after her eighteenth birthday. For Swedish families, a Finnish babysitter was most likely the best alternative if a Swedish babysitter was not available. Finnish young women did not necessarily speak Swedish, but often had experience working as babysitters in upper-class and middle-class families in Finland and were familiar with bourgeois values. Women from southern Europe were different from Swedish women in many respects, particularly with regard to religion. It is known that Protestant American housewives were worried about Irish Catholic servants *"corrupting their children."*[34] Employing a Finnish babysitter increased the likelihood of a babysitter with familiar (and Lutheran) values.

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[33] Todd 2005. 123; Lindström 2003. 93.

[34] Gabaccia 1994. 48.

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