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LEAKS

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RELATIVE LANGUAGE RELATIVES

WHY FINNS AND HUNGARIANS CONSIDER THEMSELVES BROTHERS

BY FINNISH AMBASSADOR PETRI TUOMI-NIKULA

There is one thing above all that connects Finland and Hungary. Regardless of country, continent, time of day or weather, representatives of these two countries always have to explain what the connection is between Finnish and Hungarian language. What is this peculiar, Finno-Ugric language family that both are part of? For Finns, is it easy to learn Hungarian? Do you understand each other readily? Or is there even any relationship between you? These are the questions we often get. This, of course, does not apply only to diplomats. The topic arises in any get-together where Finns and Hungarians meet people speaking different languages. For all of you who are interested: the situation is not easy for us, either. The connection that was discovered between these languages at the end of the 18th century has always been a target of passion and arguments. The affinity between the languages has been emphasized or diminished depending on the political situation or one's own preference. The fact still remains: Hungarian and Finnish languages are related - very distantly. The connection originated thousands of years ago and cannot be thoroughly explained. There are, and have always been, lots of theories from a common ancient home in the Egyptian deserts to aliens from outer-space. But what are the similarities? Are there any?

Similarities

For Finns, Hungarian sounds familiar but a bit strange. As if someone was speaking Finnish backwards. The impression probably comes from the fact that Istváns and Jánoscs, like us, stress the first syllable of the words. That develops a familiar sound, a bit of a singing rhythm which differs from other languages. I think that for Hungarian ears, Finnish also has the same sound. Grammatically, there are a lot of similarities. There are no prepositions, only suffixes. We say DebrecenBEN or TuruSSA - not IN Debrecen or IN Turku. We have an incredible amount of grammatical cases in both languages, though, the Hungarians beat the Finns overwhelmingly. Around 300 words of common vocabulary are recognized by professionals and even a regular pedestrian on Andrásy út recognizes around a dozen of them. Still, 'being relatives' is quite relative. Our languages are as close to each other as German and Russian, or Swedish and Greek. In our case, the apples have fallen a bit further from the tree! AT this point in our story, comes the



compulsory question: why, if Hungarians and Finns are relatives or kinsfolk - is there such a big distance between the two? The Swedish and the Greeks are not patting each other on the back or hugging each other drinking Retsina or Akvavit just because their languages are related - even though, their languages are even more closely related than ours. Not to mention Germans and Russians who, compared to us, are almost like identical twins!

Being alone

I think the answer is clear. In addition to the fact that Finns and Hungarians are quite laid-back and calm, fellows who easily get along - the reason is loneliness. As I mentioned earlier, neither Finns nor Hungarians have hardly any close relatives. The closest language relatives date back thousands of years and kilometers historically and geographically. Estonians make an exception to the rule. Their language is as close to Finnish as Tallinn is to Helsinki: 80 kms! Hence, almost shouting distance. Swedes, Slovenes, Germans and Romanians have almost too many close relatives to deal with! But us Finns, we have



to search in our family tree back thousands of years to find our first cousins. And when we find them, the happiness could not be greater. That is the reason why Finns and Hungarians emphasize their connection and brotherhood.

Fragile and distant affinity, and this is not all!

Especially this year, when the 1,000-year-old Finnish nation celebrates the first centennial of her independence, we should look at this issue from a few more perspectives. This fragile and distant affinity between our languages has spawned a lot of benefits for both of the countries, and I am not only thinking of orations or get-togethers. When, in the beginning of the 19th century, the Finns started building their case for national independence based on the Finnish language and culture, one of the references for them was Hungary. The Finns wanted to break free from Russia at the same time, the Hungarians wanted to break free from Austria. Both got an ego-boost from one another. The Hungarian revolution of 1848 was followed with great compassion in Finland - we were worried about the destiny of our 'kinsfolk'. At the end of the 19th century, scientists and politicians from both countries had vivid interaction with each other and after the First World War, it broadened to include the civil society - before we even knew what to call this connection of ours. In the 1920s, the amount of choirs, associations, experts, priests and cultural delegations that visited Finland from Hungary - and vice versa - were countless. We sought kinship in all areas of culture and when we found some, either real or imagined, it was celebrated enthusiastically. This

was the case especially during the Finnish Prohibition Act in 1919-32 when, I presume, the visits to Hungary were even more popular. In the 1939 Finnish Winter War, Stalin attacked Finland with the intention of attaching our country to the Soviet Union. Hungary was one of the few countries who sent a battalion of volunteers to help the Finns. In the 1956 Hungarian uprising, Finland was one of the countries, in proportion to its population, that supported Hungary most. When Hungary applied for EU membership, the Finnish political elite made the conditions as easy as possible for Hungarians. After the change of regime in Hungary, Nokia was the biggest export company in Hungary for years. There are countless examples of exceptional co-operation and will to understand and help each other during the past 200 years. Not one strategic, political, social or economic reason AN SICHT (in itself) explains this. Believe it or not - in the background there is that fragile and distant but wonderful affinity of our languages!

The power of relationship

For Finns, the relationship to Hungary and Hungarian language has always been quite easy. We have taken advantage of all the fun that has come with it. The thought of having black-moustached language relatives in Central Europe has always been easy to accept as, besides the Estonians, we have no other. However, as early as the beginning of the 19th century, Hungarians have had their doubts regarding the true nature of this 'fish-smelled' relationship. As far as I understand, there has primarily been a fear that this would also connect Hungarians and Finns genetically. For Hungarians, it would have been more elegant to find ancestors for example, in an Asian horseback riding nation. We do not have to worry about this, though. Old and also more recent research shows that there is nothing that could prove the genetic link between Finns and Hungarians. Finns find their closest genetic relatives in the area of the modern Netherlands and Germany and, of course, in Scandinavia and the Baltic countries. The relationship between Finland and Hungary goes beyond what the eye can see. It is a connection between languages, which has shaped the culture of both countries. This is the power of our relationship - it has lasted more than 200 years, survived the breakdown of two empires, the independence of both countries and the political and economic uproar of the continent. This is the reason Hungarians are treated a bit better than others in Finland and why Finns feel we get special treatment here in Hungary. It is a strength we should be proud of and that we ought to maintain for the next generations. **D&T**