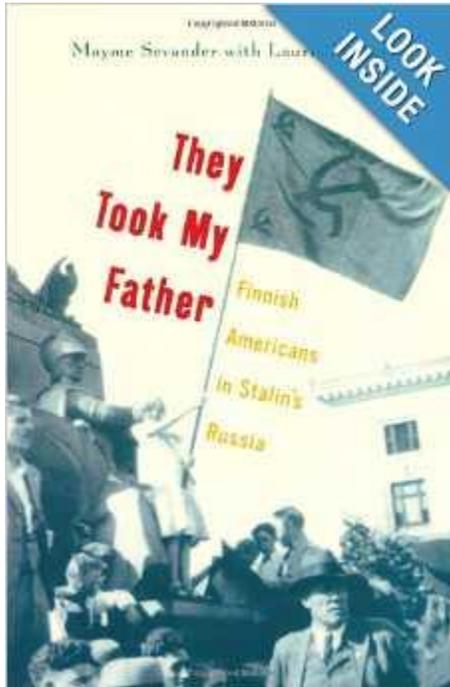


Oscar Corgan



They Took My Father: Finnish Americans in Stalin's Russia

by [Mayme Sevander](#) (Author), [Laurie Hertzell](#) (Contributor)

This is the book for those of Finnish heritage that are interested in a nearly forgotten time in our history. Mayme gives us a gripping tale about her time in Soviet Russia after being moved there by her communist agitator father **Oscar Corgan**. Oscar was one of the primary proponents of American Finns moving to Russia to begin a new life there. This time is called "Karelian Fever". Mayme's description of her life and times in Russia is harrowing. Even though her father was taken and killed by soviet authorities she remains unapologetic. This is a fine companion piece to "No Home for us Here" and "Karelia".

Lost And Found

Finnish-americans Turn A Forgotten Historical Footnote Into A Reunion Of Families Split By Ideology 60 Years Ago

August 05, 1992|By Ron Grossman.

“I was called ‘Little Red,’” Sevander said. “My father, Oscar Corgan, was ‘Big Red,’ an organizer for the American Communist Party. During the 1930s, Dad traveled through all the Finnish communities in America, recruiting workers to go to the Soviet Union and help build a socialist society.”

Because the Finns had a long tradition of radical politics, her father’s message found a considerable audience. As Finland had been ruled by other nations for centuries, Finnish-American immigrants had been second-class citizens in their own land before coming to the U.S.

In America, many Finnish immigrants did back-breaking labor for low wages as lumberjacks or in the iron-ore mines of the upper Middle West. If they protested against working conditions or tried to organize a union, the Finns would often be discharged en masse by their boss and blackballed by other employers. As a result, many Finnish-Americans eagerly embraced the utopian vision that organizers like Sevander’s father brought them. Virtually every town with a Finnish population had a meeting hall where itinerant lecturers and political dissenters would preach and argue for a new kind of society. All distinctions of rich and poor, worker and employer, would vanish.

“Karelian fever” inspired 6,000 Finnish-Americans to pull up stakes and move to the Soviet Union. Political radicals of other backgrounds also went, but no ethnic community sent anywhere near as many recruits as the Finns, a relatively small group in America. Many Finnish-Americans wanted no part of radicalism, preferring instead to stay and cling to their religious heritage. Sevander recalled that every community was split into “hall Finns,” a reference to those politically active community halls, and “church Finns,” with the two groups barely talking to each other.

“Once, I went to Sunday school with a playmate and my parents were furious, saying, ‘As communists, we consider religion superstition,’

” Sevander said.

“Ironically, all these years later a Catholic college, St. Scholastica, gave me the opportunity to preserve the story of my parents’ great dream.”

Just as the “church Finns” predicted, that dream quickly tarnished soon after Sevander’s family arrived in the Soviet Union in 1934. Josef Stalin began his infamous Great Purge in which millions were killed or sent to slave-labor camps. The purge ultimately claimed as victims anyone who stood out in a crowd. As foreigners, the Finnish-Americans were especially vulnerable to being denounced as spies.

“When I heard they took my father away, I thought it had to be a mistake,” Sevander said.

“How could anyone accuse him of being disloyal, a man who had worked for the cause of socialism all his life?”

Not only did his family never again hear from Oscar Corgan, but it took decades to learn his fate. Sevander made it a personal crusade to press Soviet authorities on the issue, and in 1956 she received a death certificate that claimed her father had died of cancer.

In 1991, after Gorbachev’s reforms, Oscar Corgan’s family received a new death certificate showing that, in fact, he had been shot shortly after being arrested.