

Armas Vaino Laurila
by Daughter Mirja S.
Bishop
Finnish Immigrant
Estonia
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Armas Vaino Laurila

Sisukas Suomalainen

The Finnish word "Sisu" is frequently used to describe the Finnish temperament. It is a word without an equivalent in the English language but combines characteristics such as stubbornness, perseverance, "pig headedness" and an unwillingness to give up even under the most adverse of conditions. Undoubtedly it is the "sisu" of the Finnish people that has helped them endure, survive, and flourish under the most adverse of political and economic conditions that have existed in their tiny country during the past few centuries. My dad, Armas Vaino Laurila, had the spirit and toughness seen in so many Finns and he was most certainly a "Sisukas Suomalainen".

My dad, or "Pa" as I will call him was the 3rd of 6 children born to Wilhelmina and Karl Laurila. He was born in Helsinki, Finland on September 5, 1906. All but one of his siblings died before they reached adulthood. Pa's hero, as a little boy growing up in Finland, was his dad. His father was a policeman and in Pa's eyes he was the most honest, trustworthy, hardworking and respected of men. In 1918 when Pa was only 12 years old he experienced the worst tragedy that would ever befall him. During the height of the Finnish Civil war that took place after Finland gained its independence from Russia, his father was taken prisoner. His only crime was that he was a policeman. Pa learned of this while at school and ran home to find his father and other war prisoners being marched through town. He recalled how he ran alongside his father crying and begging for his release. His dad would eventually end up in a prison camp at Suomenlinna, an island off shore from Helsinki. There several months later he would die. Pa remembered how his sister and mother cried when they found out about his death but he became angry and cursed those who had killed his father. He would never forget the tragedy of the event that took his father away from him at such a young age. His life would never be the same.

Thus, at the age of 12 his formal schooling ended, he became the breadwinner for his family. His first job was as an errand boy but he always kept an ear open for other jobs that would offer him a "better future" and more money with which to support his family. It's hard to imagine that he was only 12 years old! He soon learned how to drive a taxi, he became a streetcar mechanic and eventually learned the machinist's trade which would become his lifelong career. He spent 2 years in the Finnish army and there excelled as a soccer player. Life in Finland in the days following the civil war was hard, but with his Finnish "sisu" he always had a job and was able to support his mother and sisters.

In 1929, at the urging of his mother who had emigrated to Canada the previous year, he decided to leave Finland in search of a better life. He was 22 years old when he traveled from Helsinki to Copenhagen where he boarded the S.S. Estonia bound for New York City with a stop in Halifax. He spent his 23rd birthday aboard the ship and certainly must have wondered what lay ahead for him in this new world. On September 8, 1929 the S.S. Estonia docked at Pier 21 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Pa stepped onto Canadian soil for the first time. He cleared the immigration process and boarded a train bound for Montreal. In Montreal there was a pretty blond who 3 years later would become his wife and with whom he would share a life of 55 years. Pa took on the challenge of life in a strange country where he did not even speak the language with the same determination that allowed him to survive the war years in Finland. He took whatever jobs were available and these included helping to repair the train station, building roads, logging and eventually working as a machinist. He would excel at this trade and quickly became a foreman at both Rubenstein Brothers Machine Shop and Canadair Aircraft where he remained until his departure for the United States in 1953.

During the 24 years that Pa lived in Montreal many of his dreams came true. From his very meager beginnings he was able through hard work and perseverance to purchase a home, accumulate savings that would enable his daughter to attend university and to provide for his family with a comfortable life. He proudly became a Canadian citizen and was active in the Civil Defense effort during World War II. The Montreal Canadians hockey team, hunting and fishing were the loves of his life while in Canada. In 1953, the family moved to the United States to follow Ma's dream of seeing Hollywood. Pa died in 1993 at the age of 86 years, He never forgot his Finnish roots but his love for Canada was deep and sincere. On that September day in 1929 when he first stepped on Canadian soil at Pier 21 with \$25 in his pocket and a heart full of dreams and hopes, Canada welcomed him and a world of opportunity, unlike any he had ever seen, opened up for him. Pa like so many other young immigrants, took on the challenge of building a life for himself and his family and in doing so, helped to build Canada into the great country that is today. I can't begin to imagine how difficult it must have been for my dad. He was indeed one "Gutsy Finn" - a Sisukas Suomalainen!