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Reconstructed Landscapes of Northern Youth Reading the Autobiographies of Finnish Youth, 1945–1960

Three consecutive wars and the ensuing years of reconstruction changed the Finnish landscape and mindscape in profound ways. Particularly in northern Finland, burnt buildings, destroyed roads, and devastated villages were rebuilt apace, and the pre-war agrarian landscape was modernised rapidly. Along with the rebuilt landscape, people started to rebuild their lives and adopt the new and modern way of life.

Children and young people hold a special position in the experiences of the changing landscape, places, and environments of the Finnish reconstruction era. When adults were busy with the actual rebuilding, children and young people were the first ones to fully adapt to the new surroundings and mindscape. However, the experiences of children and young people are often overlooked in analyses of the reconstruction era. Moreover, children and young people living in rural regions have been neglected, as historical research has tended to focus on the lives of these age groups in urban environments.¹ A profusion of research has been done on the history of the Second World War, but only few studies have examined the war and its aftermath from the point of view of children. In recent years, as the field of history of childhood has become more robust, historians have acknowledged children as independent and social actors and shown interest in their experiences of war.²

This chapter focuses on memories of childhood and youth in northern Finland after the Second World War. We explore how post-war landscapes, growing up environments, and childhood are remembered in autobiographical texts written in the 2010s. Specifically, we ask: How have the children and youth of the reconstruction era built and reconstructed their identities and mindscapes through memories of post-war landscapes and places? What are the most significant places and what kinds of emotions are associated with them? What is the weight they give to their childhood landscapes in defining their present identities? In short, we investigate what the mindscape of their childhood and youth looks like.

The empirical source material for our analysis consists of written autobiographies depicting childhood and youth in twentieth-century Finland. The autobiographies are entries submitted to “Generations of Youth”, a national writing contest organised between May and November 2010 by The Finnish Youth Research Society, The Finnish Literature Society, and the young authors’ literary association *Nuoren Voiman Liitto*. The contest sought to gather autobiographical narratives and personal perspectives on Finnish youth in different decades.

¹ Farrugia 2014; Malinen and Tamminen 2017; Edwards 2019. See also Tuominen and Löfgren 2018; Tuominen 2015.

² For history of childhood see Musgrove et al. 2019; Sköld and Vehkalahti 2016. For histories on childhood and war see McCulloch and Brewis 2016; Marten 2002; Fast 2010; Näre et al. 2010; Welshman 2010; Kennedy 2014; Bell 2017.

The result was a sensitive and multivocal study of generations of youth.³ The contest received 376 autobiographies from people of different ages, with these divided into two categories: “Youth today” (contributors under 25 years of age) and “Youth yesterday” (contributors 25 years and older). The authors in the latter category (274) were born between 1917 and 1985, with those born in the 1930s and 1940s being the largest age cohort.

The contest material contains 33 autobiographies that can be placed geographically in northern Finland. For present purposes, this is defined as the region north of the city of Oulu (see Map 0.1), primarily the province traditionally known as Lapland. For our analysis, we have narrowed the sample down to authors born between the years 1930 and 1955. The resulting source material consists of 16 narratives: those of authors born just before the Winter War in 1939 (6), during the war years of 1939–1945 (4), in the post-war Finnish “baby boom”⁴ (2) and during the last years of reconstruction in the 1950s (4). Five of the authors are men, and eleven women. The autobiographies have been anonymised and are referred to using a code such as 41_M_1931, where the first number indicates its ordinal number in the contest, M or F indicates the gender of the author (M = male F = female), and last number his or her year of birth. We use pseudonyms for several authors whom we cite frequently.

Written autobiographies and life-writing contests are a distinctive Finnish method of collecting memory-based research materials on the past.⁵ The Finnish Literary Society has collected written traditions and memories since the early twentieth century, and its archives hold a considerable volume of written autobiographies, personal experiences, memories, and written testimonies. Characteristic of these collections is the diversity seen in the social background of the contributors.⁶ The calls organised by the Finnish Literary Society attract submissions from not only educated middle-class respondents but also ordinary Finnish people with a modest educational background.⁷ Of the 16 authors selected for this analysis, four had attended only the compulsory elementary school in their childhood, five had studied in the lower classes of upper secondary school, and five had finished upper secondary school and completed the national matriculation examination. Two respondents did not provide information about their elementary and secondary school backgrounds. All participants had supplemented their studies later in life at vocational schools or on vocational courses.

Although the analysis of written memories requires a particular approach, the basic methodology lies in the interconnected theoretical fields of oral history tradition and memory studies.⁸ The distinctive difference between an oral history testimony and a written autobiography is the presence (or absence) of an interviewer. The oral history tradition emphasises that legitimate memory narratives and fair opportunities to present them are constructed in a dialogue between both parties of the interview.⁹ Authors submitting entries to “Generations of Youth”, in contrast, wrote their memories on their own. They were free to focus

³ See edited volume by the project *Nuoruuden sukupolvet* (Vehkalahti and Suurpää 2014b).

⁴ The large age cohorts born after the Second World War are internationally recognised and referred to as “baby boomers”. In Finland, the term typically refers to those born between 1945 and 1949, a period when over 100,000 children were born each year. Finnish scholar Antti Karisto has even calculated the exact birthday of this generation: 15 August 1945. The Finnish baby-boomer generation has some unique features compared to that in other Western countries. First, the cohort was born immediately after the war, whereas in many countries the birth rate did not rise until a few years later. Secondly, the birth rate rose markedly for a very short period. (Karisto 2005, 20–23.)

⁵ Nordic and Baltic countries have a long history of collecting written memories, folklore and life-writing and different organisations house extensive collections of written, memory-based materials. In Great Britain, a national life-writing organisation, Mass Observation Project has collected personal writings of volunteer contributors on variety of topics Heimo 2016; Edwards 2019.

⁶ Heimo 2016.

⁷ A total of 181 respondents born before 1960 took part in the “Generations of Youth” contest. Fifty-two reported compulsory primary education as their educational background; 88 reported upper secondary education (either comparable to A-level exams or a shorter upper-secondary education); 41 did not report their educational background. For more details on the social and educational background of participants, see Vehkalahti and Suurpää 2014a.

⁸ Fingerroos et. al. 2006; Jouhki 2020.

⁹ Abrams 2010, 27.

on the topics that they considered relevant and omit ones they preferred not to “talk” about. Another distinctive feature of written autobiographies is temporal distance. When writing, the authors are able to return to their story again and again, to erase, reorganise, and re-interpret the narrative as long as they feel that the story is the one they want to be archived.¹⁰ However, written memories and autobiographies should not be regarded as free-floating. Written life writings are also produced in interaction between the researcher and author, as the authors choose to participate in a writing contest and decide which questions in the contest call they will answer. In the end, even personal memories are told for a particular purpose and audience. As pointed out in several studies, multi-layered conventions of writing, such as prevailing genre conventions of the autobiographical narrative, also constrain individual stories.¹¹

In addition to memory studies, we have applied methods of humanistic geography and historical research. Terms such as “place”, “space”, “environment” and “landscape” are usually associated with geography, but they can also be approached from the standpoint of the human sciences. Humanistic geography focuses and reflects on geographical phenomena with the purpose of better understanding people, their actions, and the world. Other research interests in the field are subjective experiences of place and personal places.¹² Environmental psychologist Louise Chawla has argued that experiencing a significant landscape as a place is both stimulating and restorative. She suggests that recollecting special places creates ecstatic memories, which sustain us and bring us happiness.¹³ Memories and remembering are essential tools in analysing experiences of a personal place. Time, places, and memories constitute the coordinates of our personal histories, with the places in our memories becoming our special mindscapes. Therefore, a place or a landscape can be lived, experienced, and, above all, remembered.¹⁴

Our analysis relies on the theory of *topobiography*, put forward by Pauli Tapani Karjalainen, a Finnish professor of social geography. Where biography refers to a description of the course one's life has taken, topobiography is the expression of the course of one's life as it relates to lived places.¹⁵ Karjalainen claims that all autobiographical memories are topographic, meaning that we associate personal life-events and histories with specific landscapes and places. Personal biographical places can be both physical landscapes and landscapes of the mind.¹⁶ Memories thus act like anchors to physical places, but also to the past, present, and future.¹⁷ Written reminiscence sources serve as tools for reliving and remembering past places and mindscapes.

Based on a comparative and close reading of the autobiographies, we were able to tap a wealth of very different memories of childhood and youth in northern Finland during the post-war reconstruction era. Autobiographical memories provide an interesting platform for interpreting growing-up environments, mindscapes, and place histories in post-war northern Finland.

“Remember Where You're From”: Home as the Most Important Place

Authors of the “Generations of Youth” writing call were not specifically asked or instructed to write about the environments in which they grew up. However, most of them describe the landscape of their childhood and youth in great detail. Nearly all begin their autobiography with a detailed description of their childhood home and its surroundings: buildings in the yard, the

¹⁰ Abrams 2010, 21–22; Jouhki and Lalu 2018, 15.

¹¹ Vehkalahti and Suurpää 2014a; Savolainen 2015.

¹² Tuan 1976, 266. For the earliest applications of humanistic geography, see Tuan 1974, 1976; 1977, Relph 1976. For more recent applications, see Adams et. al. 2011. For Finnish pioneers see Karjalainen 2006, 2009.

¹³ Gieseking and Mangold (eds) 2014, 256; Chawla 2012 [1990].

¹⁴ Vilkkö 1998, 28.

¹⁵ Karjalainen 2009, 31.

¹⁶ Karjalainen 2006, 83.

¹⁷ Meriläinen-Hyvärinen 2010, 66.

surrounding nature, important playgrounds, and exact distances to other places.¹⁸ *Toivo*, who was born in 1934, wrote vividly about his childhood home:

As a schoolboy, home was the centre of my world. It was the dearest place I knew. When I was home, I didn't want to go anywhere else. When I was away, I missed home. Mother and my brothers were there. And memories of my father. Everything was familiar. Every nook and cranny of the house and other buildings, grandfather's stables, father's garage and workshop, a large stone in the middle of the field [...] A forest slope and a mysterious hill behind it, riverbanks and an islet, our swimming place, the view of the Torniojokilaakso [Tornio River Valley], and the hills in the background, and the bestknown one, Aavasaksa, just 10 kilometres to the north. That was my home.¹⁹

For *Toivo*, home is both an important landmark and an essential part of who he is. He describes the surroundings of his home as if they still existed. According to a pioneer in humanistic geography, Yi-Fu Tuan, longing for permanence is a universal human characteristic. It is reflected especially in the case of significant places that we hope have remained unchanged. For Tuan, home is a prime example of such a "sense of place": home is the place where we build our identities through a sense of permanence.²⁰ Much like *Toivo*, other authors also describe their childhood home as unchanged and almost eternal. Narratives of their childhood home are an important physical and mental landscape that they keep re-living through their memories.

Home is after all the most important place, a fundamental part of our history and identity. It is our first secure corner of the world, but at the same time is vulnerable to change and shattering.²¹ During the Second World War, the children and young people in Lapland experienced stressful family conditions, their fathers and close relatives being at the front, uprooting and evacuation from their homes, and, finally, a return to their destroyed villages and homes.²² As a result, the childhood home was not necessarily a secure corner for all the writers. However, the autobiographies selected demonstrate that a physical or a mental return to the landscapes of one's childhood usually brings out nostalgic emotions and memories; things might seem better than they actually were. Nostalgia is often understood as longing for a specific place, but more than that it is longing for a different time, most often for the lost, innocent times of childhood. Nostalgia produces somewhat inaccurate memories, as actual events and places are mixed with longing for a place and a time that never necessarily existed as such.²³ This being the case, the authors' childhood memories tend to be excessively positive, yet this is not to say that no negative events or memories are recollected at all.

Tuan has suggested the term *topophilia* to describe a strong and positive emotional tie between people and places. In *topophilic* accounts, places are portrayed as peaceful and tranquil, but above all as possessing a strong "sense of place". In contrast, descriptions may be called *topophobic* where places evoke negative emotions and memories, such as a sense of outsidership, being neglected, as well as wanting to get out of or not belonging to a place.²⁴ Most of the autobiographies are topophilic. Even though descriptions of hardships and shortages are very common, memories of childhood environments are usually positive and warm. Only two autobiographies can be interpreted as negative, or topophobic, descriptions of the authors' childhood homes.²⁵

¹⁸ 141_M_1931; 039_M_1934.

¹⁹ 039_M_1934

²⁰ Tuan 2006, 18–19.

²¹ Gieseck and Mangold 2014, 147; Hecht 2001, 123.

²² In comparison, Finnish folklorist Ulla Savolainen has written extensively on the written memories of former Finnish Karelian child evacuees and the intertextuality of reminiscing Savolainen and Kuusisto-Arponen 2016; Savolainen 2017.

²³ Boym 2001; Lasch 1990, 19.

²⁴ Tuan 1990, 92, 2006, 18; Relph 1976.

²⁵ 136_F_1942; 069_M_1945.

Maiju's autobiography is an illustrative example of topophobic experiences, as her narrative is defined by the loss of her father and a constant feeling of being lost. She describes her mother as distant and preoccupied with rebuilding her own life rather than looking after the remaining family; Maiju feels neglected as a child and a daughter. When her new stepfather was about to move in, she expressed her worries as follows:

If the clock stopped ticking and time stopped, everything would remain as it is. Mother would still be Mother, and our home our home. But if the clock doesn't stop, Henri will move in, and there will be no more room for me.²⁶

The stepfather moving in did change things, for a new family structure and dynamic began to take shape. For Maiju, things changed for the worse, for arguments with her family grew more intense and she experienced sexual harassment by her new stepfather. In other words, her childhood home was no safe haven for her. Instead, she found shelter and happiness in other places, such as nature and her grandmother's care.

Eino's autobiography is another illuminating example of conflicting memories of home and landscapes. Eino was born during his family's evacuation journey to Sweden, the second oldest of seven siblings. His father had built their home under harsh conditions in the middle of the forest just before the Second World War. Eino describes how there was no road, electricity, plumbing, telephone, or radio. His autobiography is more like a story of survival under incredibly difficult circumstances: in his childhood, he experienced his mother's death, had to do hard labour at an early age, received no formal education, and felt a strong longing for something better in life. At first glance, his experiences could be interpreted as topophobic, but in the closing words of his autobiography, he literally returns to his childhood home:

I drive down the very familiar road to our yard. When I arrive, I see a well-kept birch forest at the end of the road. The buildings that once stood there are all gone. All that is left is a decaying playhouse and what remains of our fire place. Its glow once gave light and warmth for our home even at the darkest moments. The thought comes to my mind, whether all the hard work we put in has gone to waste. Surely not! Here is where we got the strength for our own lives.²⁷

In the end, Eino recognises the importance of his experiences and comes to appreciate the environment he grew up in. In his narrative, he minimises the hardships and instead finds the warmth and light in even the most distressing memories. In essence, home is the place where our identities and personality are born and shaped. Home is one of the most important locations, one where the "sense of place" is at its strongest. Remembering and telling about home is a natural convention in remembering childhood, but it is also a well-established convention in relating life histories in general. Home is the anchor for remembering; it is where everything starts and where everything usually ends. Not surprisingly, home is remembered as part of the good as well as the bad, since it plays a crucial role in shaping who we are.

Reconstructing the Landscape

For many Finnish people, successive years of war fundamentally shook the perception of home. The devastation of the war and then active rebuilding changed the physical landscape, but also people's sense of place and mindscapes. New homes were built to replace the old ones, or homes were found somewhere else altogether. Even though some of the authors were born either during the war or in the years after it, memories and stories of the evacuation journey

²⁶ 136_F_1942.

²⁷ 069_M_1945.

that were passed on to them and the destruction of the war are present in their memories.²⁸ Many authors begin their autobiographies with descriptions of the devastation of Lapland or mention of burnt down villages. *Maiju* writes the following about her first childhood memories of Rovaniemi:

“Thank the Lord”, repeated Grandmother Erika, shedding tears of joy and clasping her hands. Cottages by the city had survived the destruction although the Germans burned down almost the entire city while retreating [...] Charred and blackened chimneys stood behind the bookstore, even though the war had ended almost two years ago. Reconstruction took its time. Bridges and roads were destroyed. Ruins, clutter, destroyed vehicles, rusted barrels, tin cans, ammunition, and mines were all around. Muddy and partly collapsed gravel roads connected burnt down northern villages, where the last standing walls and chimneys stood in small groups.²⁹

Repairing the war damage and building new houses for the relocated citizens were some of the greatest post-war reconstruction efforts in Finland. As Anu Soikkeli illustrates in her chapter in this volume, what were known as type-planned houses became landmarks of the period.³⁰ Within just a few years, the landscape once again looked very different. For the authors of the selected autobiographies, the rapid rebuilding and the constantly changing landscape impacted the memories and experiences of their childhood and youth. The role of children and young people in reconstruction efforts was significant, as most had already become accustomed to hard labour before and during the Second World War.³¹ It was only natural to be part of the rebuilding. Most of the authors remember how even small children were required to take part in household repairs and farm work. Some of them think that they were in fact too young at the time to do things like repair barn roofs, dig ditches in the fields, or slaughter farm animals.³² However, these were all tasks that had to be done, and children and young people did their share. Moreover, most were aware of the grim situation and shortages in their families and were more than happy to help and contribute whatever they could.

Even though the Finnish government provided affordable loans for building, there was a serious shortage of building materials and almost everything else. A woman born in 1937 remembers how the shortage of building materials was so dire that her brother could not find bricks to buy and had to mould and burn them himself. She adds that those with money could buy materials and better food and clothing from Sweden. In her memories, the land across the Swedish border seemed like a different world. She remembers how they used to look across the border river *Tornioväylä* and see the glimmering streetlights of Sweden, whereas their only sources of light were “the moon, the stars, and the Northern Lights”.³³ Surprisingly, the authors remember how the reconstruction era was marked by a certain equality after all: the shortages were the same for everyone.³⁴ Rebuilding and new type-planned houses did not automatically mean modernisation. For example, Toivo remembers how his home cottage in Tornio did not get central heating, running water, or plumbing until summer 1957. At that time, he was already moving to Helsinki to study.³⁵ In many rural parts of Finland, and especially Lapland, most houses did not get proper plumbing or electricity until the 1960s. Development was slow even in bigger centres such as Rovaniemi:

²⁸ See also Savolainen and Kuusisto-Arponen 2016.

²⁹ 136_F_1942. Many of the authors refer to Rovaniemi as a city, but until the 1960s Rovaniemi was considered a small town. Before Rovaniemi gained city status in 1960, only Kemi and Tornio were officially regarded as cities in Lapland. However, in perspective Rovaniemi was the biggest village in Lapland as well as its rail hub.

³⁰ See Soikkeli's chapter in this volume.

³¹ Junila 2012.

³² 141_M_1931.

³³ 170_F_1937.

³⁴ 039_F_1934; 170_F_1937.

³⁵ 039_M_1934.

In autumn 1954, Rovaniemi was a real city of ruins, even though the Lapland War had ended 10 years ago. One winter, I lived in a small log cabin that hadn't been burned during the war; it had no modern conveniences – just a washbowl by the door, an outside toilet, and a pail to carry water. My landlady was a good cook but a real penny-pincher [...] at first, I had a 40-watt table light, but since it consumed too much electricity, it was replaced by a dimmer, 25-watt one.³⁶

Homescapes and cityscapes were not the only landscapes that changed during and after the Second World War. Children and young people are like natural explorers, curious about their surroundings. The authors wrote that on their expeditions they often found new and interesting places and things, and they were not always safe. Many authors write about running around in the outskirts of villages and happening upon old German campsites with old rusted tin cans and different kinds of wartime debris.³⁷ When the last German troops withdrew in May 1945, they left extensive destruction in their wake. In addition to burnt down villages, they left the forests and fields in Lapland filled with old wartime equipment, mines, and unexploded ammunition. In Finland at large, wartime ammunitions killed over 200 civilians during the period 1944–1949; almost 60 of the victims were children. Accidents involving mines occurred even as late as in the 1960s.³⁸ However, nature and dangerous sites were the kingdoms of children and young people. While parents and adults were occupied with rebuilding houses and other everyday worries, younger people could walk freely and create their own personal places and spaces.

Reconstructing Mindscapes

A woman born six years after the Lapland War wrote about the mental landscape of her childhood in the 1950s. Even though the war had ended long before her birth, she still recognised the subtle significances and reminders of the war:

Intense rebuilding began after the war, since the village of Salla was destroyed completely. I was born six years after the war. Signs of the war endured in the surroundings; I even used to play in the trenches. The proximity of the war was very much present in the talk of the older people and was passed on as a mental legacy. My parents didn't talk about the war. Work was therapy and there was plenty of it. Being a good worker was the measure of a man.³⁹

The other, darker sides of the post-war period, such as poverty, shortages, rationing, traumatised war-veteran fathers, and tired mothers, impacted the lives of numerous families throughout Finland. It is widely recognised that the mental reconstruction in post-war families was often difficult and that the mental legacy of the war was passed down to future generations.⁴⁰ However, the everyday lives of children tended to have shielding factors that eased the stress at home. For most of the authors, nature was a special place where they felt safe and at home. A woman born in 1942 writes the following about her memories of nature in her childhood: "No one bothered or bullied us, judged, or shouted at us. There was happiness and balance".⁴¹ A woman born in 1939 shares these feelings as she recalls the constant rebuilding and changing landscape in her childhood:

We children were excited about all this fuss. In this new village, our

³⁶ 170_F_1937.

³⁷ 136_F_1942; 198_F_1952.

³⁸ Junila 2012, 193; Malinen and Tamminen 2017, 82.

³⁹ 198_F_1952.

⁴⁰ Tuominen 1991, 2001; Näre et. al. 2010; Kivimäki 2013; Malinen and Tamminen 2017, 75.

⁴¹ 136_F_1942.

previous secluded life far away from neighbours became the centre of action. Every day there was life around you, always something happening; you never had to come up with things to do on your own. It was easy to be part of it; you just had to look around [...] Walking in the woods, along riverbanks and in the warm winds that blew in from boundless Lake Oulujärvi allowed us to shake off the everyday worries our parents unwittingly passed on to us. Sometimes we would sit on top of a bridge and wave at the trains going by.⁴²

She writes about the positive sides of rebuilding, the indomitable spirit and constant energy that prevailed. However, she does recognise adults' worries behind the façade of coping. She recalls that as a child she used to be almost oblivious to the hardships, and whenever the negative sides of life got overwhelming, the children could run off into nature to clear their minds.

Interestingly, Finnish historians Antti Malinen and Tuomo Tamminen have also argued that nature was an important coping mechanism for the children who had to deal with post-war stress at home. Children tended to close their eyes to adults' problems and concentrate on all the positive energy around them.⁴³ In particular, places in nature became favourite locations where children could clear their minds, cry their sadness out, or dream of a better future.

Reconstruction and resettling the evacuees created an enormous movement and relocation of the Finnish population throughout the country. Most of the authors who were evacuated from Lapland returned to their hometowns, but some moved to completely new places. In any event, the old village communities of their youth were no longer the same. A woman born in 1932 describes her home village as a tight community where everyone was related to or knew each other. However, the rebuilding changed things:

Lapland was completely destroyed, so intense reconstruction began at the end of the '40s. The way of life changed, many workers came from the South, and the population grew fast [...] I had a party when I turned 17. I invited both boys and girls, and I served coffee with pastries and lemon soda. We had so much fun. One boy played the accordion and we danced and sang.⁴⁴

The newcomers were mostly resettling families and construction workers. The authors remember how the spirit of the community changed with the incoming population, but not necessarily for the worse. Villages grew into cities and the modern way of life gradually reached even the most secluded parts of Finland. Memories of the woman born in 1932 illustrate how progress was being made: people were happy, the war was over and new homes, better ones than before, had been built. She marks her autobiography with a very significant occasion in 1949, her seventeenth birthday, and the luxury of sweets and dancing that went with it. The memory of the war no longer overshadowed the everyday life of children and young people. Life simply went on and brought new aspirations along with it.

Shared Rural Identity

Despite the poverty and shortage described earlier, in Finnish literature the 1950s are often described as a "golden age", or time of happiness and hope. Nostalgia for the 1950s is also a common theme in discourse in international studies.⁴⁵ However, descriptions of a golden age best fit southern Finland. The northern and eastern parts of the country lagged badly behind the South and were seen as peripheral and unproductive rural areas in Finnish politics. The Finnish

⁴² 209_F_1939.

⁴³ Malinen and Tamminen 2017, 15.

⁴⁴ 122_F_1932.

⁴⁵ In his classic work *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, historian Eric Hobsbawm calls the 30-year period starting from the end of the Second World War "The Golden Age" in Western countries (Hobsbawm 1994). On the Finnish context, see Hytönen and Rantanen (eds) 2013.

baby boomer generation was born in a country where 75 per cent of the population still lived in the countryside, and most on small, self-sufficient farms. In 1950 over 46 per cent of Finns made their living from traditional agriculture or forestry.⁴⁶ The reconstruction period marked the beginning of urbanisation and a gradual shift in the economic structure of the country. However, unlike in other European countries, urbanisation in Finland was slowed by housing policy. During the immediate post-war years, the population evacuated from areas lost to the Soviet Union (12 per cent of the population) had to be resettled. In addition, returning soldiers had been

promised farmland during the war. As a result, approximately 100,000 new small farms were established with government assistance in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The policy was motivated by the fact that a considerable share of agricultural farming land had been annexed by the Soviet Union. Most of the post-war resettlement was directed to unfarmed land available in the north and east. Substantial migration from the countryside to bigger villages and cities was not fully under way until the 1960s, when the children born on these farms grew up and agrarian labour market rapidly changed due to mechanisation.⁴⁷ All in all, it appears that the opportunities, living environments, and mindscapes of childhood and youth varied greatly in different parts of Finland.

Most of the authors contributing entries to "Generations of Youth" spent their childhood and youth in rural locations. Rurality as a mindscape evokes strong and contradictory emotions and memories among the authors. The hardships of the rural way of life are present, but rurality often evokes nostalgia. For example, idyllic descriptions of the Northern Lights, sleigh rides and playing in the forests and fields recur in the texts. Professor of Social Geography Gill Valentine has studied the geography of childhood and argues that rurality is often synonymous with certain kinds of warm, close relationships and communities, whereas urbanity and urban landscapes are regarded as more individual, anonymous, and solitary.⁴⁸ Valentine's theory reflects a shared ideal of a rural way of life and a clash between the romanticised countryside and dangerous urbanity. In their narratives, most of the authors share a certain sense of community and construct a strong rural identity. In essence, the rural identity is based on the proximity of nature. For most of the authors childhood and youth were controlled by the old agrarian way of life, where nature was a source of income through farming, forestry, hunting, and fishing. Livestock shelters, fences, and fields formed essential elements of their childhood landscapes. In addition, the outdoors was the natural site for their everyday activities. Long distances and an untouched and unbuilt environment encouraged and enabled children and young people to explore their surroundings. A man born in 1931 gives the following description of his childhood landscape:

The large yard and its several buildings were exciting and as if made for children; animal shelters had piles of hay and straw you could dig little hiding places in, your own dens where you could play and daydream [...] Then there were the attics full of curious things, and the foundations of buildings, where only our cats and I were small enough to move around [...] The crystal-clear surface of the river gave a fine opportunity to explore the life underwater. And one saw colourful dragonflies, water fleas, beetles and butterflies playing by the river. At the bottom of the river swam striped perch, and on the surface pike bathed in the sun. Nature extended to our yard, with squirrels, weasels, and rabbits visiting us almost daily. Sometimes in the autumn and winter a few of our neighbour's reindeer would wander over to eat in our yard.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Haapala 2004, 235, 238.

⁴⁷ Roiko-Jokela 2004; Hartikainen 2016, 17, 24.

⁴⁸ Valentine 2001, 250.

⁴⁹ 141_M_1931.

Very detailed descriptions of nature recur in the autobiographies, and they are often so vivid that you can almost see, feel, and smell the landscape. In addition, the Finnish education system at the time produced well-established images and ways of depicting national landscapes. Teachers, schoolbooks, and writing assignments taught students to view nature and landscapes in a certain rather romanticised and patriotic way.⁵⁰ These educational and pedagogical conventions have had an impact on how the authors of autobiographies have described and written about landscapes and their homes. Nature is a substantial part of their childhood and youth and it sustains important attachments through time: to the present, the past, and the future. Time and nature are linked by strong emotions and senses; our minds can travel back in time even at the smallest prompt, such as smells, sounds, and scenes. For most of the authors, rurality and nature are essential parts of who they are.⁵¹

A woman born in the hinterlands of Salla in 1952 writes about her strong connection with the wilderness and Lapland. Although life has taken her to different places in Finland, she keeps missing her roots in Lapland. She writes: "as important as it is to leave, is also important to return to one's roots".⁵² In terms of humanistic geography and phenomenology, she had a sense of existential participation in which she felt at home in the north, full identification with a place and an experience of "this is where I belong".⁵³ However, rurality is not a positive and nostalgic mindscape for everyone. Many of the authors yearned to leave their home and see the world and, on the other hand, some were forced to do so.

Reconstructing Places and Spaces of Childhood and Youth

Environmental psychologist Louise Chawla has argued that childhood places hold ecstatic memories that we carry throughout our lives. She notes that ecstasy may however involve both shivers of fear as well as delight. A sense of place and ecstasy are not associated with other people but with the place itself.⁵⁴ Finnish folklorist Pirjo Korhokangas has also pointed out that memories of childhood are often associated with places of play and delight.⁵⁵ Our collection of autobiographies has opened up a multivocal presentation of childhood experiences of place. The authors of the autobiographies spent their childhoods and youth during a time of enormous changes in their environment, in both the physical and mental landscape (mindscape).

Our chapter has demonstrated that despite the drastic changes in the landscape, one thing remained the same: home. Home is the most important childhood place for the authors. However, in a finding consonant with Chawla's, the authors' memories of home as a place were not always delightful and happy; they also contained feelings of fear, sadness, and worry. In the end, home as place and a mental space is such a significant part of our identities that we keep recollecting and returning to it even if not all the memories associated with it are particularly pleasant ones.

The children and young people of the reconstruction era in northern Finland witnessed changes in their homes and in the built landscapes. In addition to home, there was one other significant place that stood still and remained unchanged: the local nature. The authors of the autobiographies found escape and modes of survival in the tranquillity and proximity of nature. We argue that memories associated with places in nature are illuminating examples of ecstatic memories. For the authors, nature has served as a lifelong source of strength and an important basis for their identity.

⁵⁰ Granö and Koivurova 2013, 18.

⁵¹ See Louise Chawla on environmental memory and memories of childhood places and nature. (Chawla 1992, 2012 [1990]). Also Kahn and Kellert 2002.

⁵² 198_F_1952.

⁵³ Relph 1976, 55; Tuan 2006.

⁵⁴ Chawla 2012, 278.

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