



# The IRS Commissioner Visits Finland to Attend

I have always been proud of my Finnish roots. Both my mother's and father's parents came from Finland to the USA at the beginning of the 1900s. My father's parents, Johan Alfred Koskinen and Ida Maria (formerly Poikonen), emigrated from Karstula, in Central Finland, to Cleveland, Ohio in 1905. I recall meeting my grandmother, Ida Maria, but we didn't see her often enough to hear stories about Finland. Her husband died years before I was born.

My father Yrjo Koskinen was born in Cleveland and met my mother Irja there. (My mother was born in Chisholm, Minnesota where her parents settled upon arrival from Finland and she moved to work in Cleveland after high school.) I was born in 1939 in Cleveland which had an active Finnish community. When we visited my mother's home in Minnesota, a highlight was a visit to the family sauna. Unfortunately, both of my parents died at a relatively early age. They spoke fluent Finnish, but they did not teach their children Finnish because they wanted us to integrate into society without an accent. We always knew something interesting was going on whenever they began to speak Finnish. My pride in being Finnish stayed with me and, when



**John A. Koskinen in front of the house where his grand parents were living early 1900-hundreds. John Koskinen's second cousin Kaija-Liisa Hietala stands to the right of him.**

as the Deputy Director for Management in the White House generated enough publicity that I came to the attention of Judge John Pessala (executive director and co-founder with Robert Alan Saasto Esq., of the New York City based, Finnish American Lawyer Association, or FALA). The Judge called me to say that he recognized my Finnish name, and asked me to join FALA. I agreed but

ner at the Estonia House, in New York City. I was delighted when I found that approximately 50 FALA members and guests had gathered in my honor, presenting me with a plaque that recognized my career in public service.

Prior to the award dinner, Robert, who had become one of my most enthusiastic supporters, connected me with Finnish reporters who wrote articles in numerous Finnish newspapers about my career and my Finnish background. Unfortunately, I had few details about my Finnish roots to offer. A reporter in Finland expended considerable effort to locate my Finnish roots, but he was unsuccessful because the name Koskinen is very common in Finland. But an amateur genealogist in Finland found some basic information that led to an article in Finland, complete with a picture of my grandfather's family in Karstula.

According to the article, my grandfather Johan's father (my great grandfather) was Juho Koskinen who was a founding member of the Karstula Workers' Association. My grandfather's step brothers, Oskari and Artturi Koskinen, were politically active. Unfortunately, Oskari was killed as a young man in Tampere in the Civil War in 1918. Artturi Koskinen later became a SKP representative and served 18 years in that capacity.

At about this time, Robert connected me with a FALA member, W. Bruce Matson, who lives in Seatt-

le. (Talk about having trouble attending meetings.) Years before all of this, Bruce had sent Robert an article that mentioned that Bruce's relatives came from Karstula Finland, which is very close to Pihtipudas, where Robert's relatives came from. Incredibly, this past year Robert just happened to be going through old materials and came across the article, saw the reference to the Karstula Koskinens, and put Bruce in touch with me.

After considerable effort, Bruce was able to uncover a tremendous amount of information about my Koskinen and Poikonen relatives in Karstula and Saarijärvi. He sent me a wonderful book with background information including the ship's manifest listing my father's parents as passengers to the United States in 1905. It was this incredible chain of events that led to me being put into direct contact with my relatives in Finland whom I had never known anything about before.

As a result, when I learned that there was going to be a Poikonen family reunion in Karstula in July, I decided that there would never be a better time to make my first trip to Finland. My wife Pat had planned to join me, but a bronchial infection led her doctor to advise her not to fly until she got a lot better. (Which she ultimately did.) I assured my security personnel, who travel with me whenever I take a business trip, that I would keep a very low

profile in Finland so that they did not have to come along. (The irrepressible Robert had started to formulate plans for meetings and press conferences in Helsinki which he happily kept to himself once he understood the security implications.)

It was a long trip to Helsinki for a three and a half day visit, which was all the time away I could take, and it came complete with "planes, trains and automobiles" to get to Karstula, but it was worth it. I arrived in downtown Helsinki early Thursday afternoon, July 9, took a quick nap and went on a four hour walking tour of the city, led by Tiina and Sakari Lindholm and Pekka Nettaanmaki, who had met me at the airport. They are my relatives on the Poikonen side of my family. (Picture # 1 is me and my tour guides taken in front of a house previously owned by a Finnish woman who went to Siberia, married an elderly gold miner and then a diamond miner,

returned to Helsinki upon their deaths and donated the house to Helsinki upon her death ).

The forecast was for rain every day I was in Finland, but we didn't get rained on once. It rained in places before we got there but not while we were there, which I took as a good omen. Especially as we saw the sights of Helsinki on foot.

We had dinner that night at the hotel (Radisson Blu) and were up on Friday morning for the 10:00 train to Jyväskylä. Pekka is the Dean of the school of Mathematics and Information Technology at the University of Jyväskylä and the plan was to have lunch there and then drive the two hours to Karstula. Pekka is presently considering ways to take advantage of an offer from the Finnish government to Universities in Finland to match financial contributions to the schools. He intends to make a trip to the United States this November, in part for that purpose, and I'm sure he would appreciate support for a very good cause.

I had also corresponded before going to Finland with another relative who had discovered me, Kari Hokkana. Since he couldn't go to the reunion, he suggested we get together at the train station in Jyväskylä for tea. Instead, he had arranged with Pekka to meet us at the University. When Pekka and I arrived, we found a trio playing in the foyer, including an accordion player, a bass player and an electric guitarist. Kari turned out to be the accordion (and violin) player. (Picture on the right is the trio with yours truly, once an accordion player, pretending to be part of the group.)

Kari and the group were just returning from two days at a Finnish Folk Life festival and decided this would be their welcome to Finland for me. (They had been a traveling group for a



**John A. Koskinen with his tour guides in a picture taken in front of a house previously owned by a Finnish woman who went to Siberia to make her fortune by marrying wealthy men.**

I was at Duke University, I prepared a research paper on the Winter War in Finland.

Before this summer, I had never been to Finland, although it was always on my list of places I wanted very much to visit. How I got there this year was a result of a chain of circumstances going back 20 years.

My career of managing crises in the private and public sectors has been well documented so I won't repeat it here. But in 1994, my confirmation

noted that I hadn't practiced law in a long time and would probably not be able to attend meetings.

When I was nominated by President Obama in the summer of 2013 to be the IRS Commissioner, Robert Saasto sent me an E-mail, congratulating me and inviting me to a FALA dinner he would arrange whenever I was able to come to New York. When I subsequently wrote Robert that I would be visiting the IRS offices in New York in March, he arranged for a cocktail reception and din-



**"I was struck by the well kept cemetery of graves of young men from Karstula killed in the Winter War and the Second World War."**



# a Family Reunion in Karstula and Saarijärvi

couple of years -- the bass player had played for years with the symphony -- and they were very good.)

Then Pekka and I journeyed North, stopping on the way at the farm of Taisto and Marjetta Poikonen for tea and more desserts than you could possibly eat. Taisto turns out to have been fascinated by family history since he was five, collecting information over the years on everyone. (As we were sitting at the table, he got out a pencil and small piece of paper and started to collect information on my children, so he's still at it.)

Then we were off to Karstula for more food at the home of the closest relative I met, Kaija-Liisa Hietala, my second cousin. She only speaks Finnish (she's 84) but her daughter Auli and son Veli-Pekka were there to translate, along with Pekka. (Auli's husband is Juha Pekkola.

Veli's wife Pia was also there with their children Anttu and Pauliina) Picture 3 is the group in front of Kaija's house, built in 1902 and the last place my grandparents lived before leaving for the United States in 1905. (Kaija was born in the house in 1931. She is the daughter of Eino Artturi Koskinen, the step brother of my grandfather and grandmother. As noted earlier, he served in parliament for years as did Kaija's husband, so politics clearly run in the family.)

That night I stayed at a lovely, small hotel on the Island of Summassaari (you get to it by driving over a short, low bridge) and on Saturday morning did an interview with a reporter for the Keskiuomalainen newspaper which covers the Lakeland area. I remembered my promise to my security detail to keep a low profile, but I figured, how much trouble

could I get into five hours North of Helsinki? Then the paper sent another reporter/photographer to interview me at the reunion itself (she found herself in the big book of relatives that Taisto was selling to anyone interested, so it's a small world). And then, at the end of the day, I did a radio interview. The result was quite a spread the next morning in the papers. So much for the low profile.

The reunion was a great experience and was well organized by Tiina with various historic documents, pictures and historic tools that people had provided for the occasion. We had lunch and the program began with Tiina's son asking me questions after Pekka gave my background, in Finnish. All the while, there was a slide show running of pictures that Taisto and others had collected, including a picture of me coming out of the White House during my Freddie Mac days.

Others I met included Laurie Koskinen, who was secretary of the meeting and read the minutes from the last gathering; Erkki Poikosen, an 87 year old with his new wife (he had been a very successful shipping broker around the world) ; and Ossi Pekkonen, a local Lutheran priest who was master of ceremonies for the "meeting" during the reunion and conducted a church service for everyone at the end of the day.

The church service early that evening included singing and an organ recital by a talented young woman. I was struck by the well kept cemetery



Dinner at Pekka's home with his mother, two sisters and a brother-in-law. Pekka is not in the picture because he took it.

of graves of young men from Karstula killed in the Winter War and the Second World War. Afterwards, I went with Pekka to his family's house for a dinner with Pekka, his mother, two sisters and a brother-in-law. (Picture taken by Pekka, so he's not in the picture.)

The next day was arranged by Pekka, starting with a brief phone discussion with the Vice-Chairman of the Finnish Parliament -- a friend of Pekka's -- who discussed the situation in Greece and the upcoming European Union vote on whether and how to support the Greeks. We then visited the stoneage museum which turned out to be near my hotel. One of the young women running the entrance shop had seen the morning paper and, at the end of our tour of the facility, mostly outdoors, presented me with a lo-

vely book about trees in Finland.

From there we went to lunch at the hotel and then on to the local World War II museum for a quick run through. I met Pekka's wife here. She's the "mayor" of an area of central Finland and had been busy up until then with official events.

Then we took a short drive to the civic center where I gave an hour presentation (about 40 minutes of talking about lessons learned in my years as a crisis manager and recent directions in international taxation and 20 minutes of questions and answers from the crowd of about 80 people, about 20 of whom had been at the reunion.) This was part of a series of discussions that Pekka and the University arrange on occasion. At the social afterwards, I met the gentleman who had helped initially gather information

about my family once he had seen articles about me two years ago in the Finnish papers.

Then Pekka's son drove me the 45 minutes or so to the Jyväskylä train station and I was off to the airport hotel in Helsinki for my 7:30 flight home the next morning. My wife, Pat, is anxious to meet everyone, so one of these days we'll repeat the journey. But for now, I have checked off the major item on my "bucket" list, since I have always wanted to go to Finland.

None of this would have been possible without the unlikely, fortunate chain of events that led to the discovery of my roots and to a series of wonderful meetings with my previously unknown, extended family.

Article and Photos:  
John A. Koskinen



John A. Koskinen would fit well into Finnish band as an accordion player.