The Tornio River forms the border between Sweden and Finland, and flows into the Gulf of Bothnia in the Baltic Sea. Throughout the ages, writes Rosa Liksom, the world's travellers have navigated the river with a view to finding out about the mystical North.

I am a Finnish writer and artist, born in Finnish Lapland in 1958. I have a degree in anthropology from the University of Helsinki, and I also studied and travelled in the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev era and in Russia more recently. Over the course of my life I have sorted fish in a processing plant in northern Norway, cleaned hospitals and hotels in Stockholm, worked in a grocery store and sauna in the Free Town of Christiania in Copenhagen, lived in Texas and ridden a Harley-Davidson across the United States. Now I live with my family in central Helsinki.

Finland

No matter what part of the world you view it from, Finland is located quite far north. Finnish Lapland’s northernmost border runs eighty kilometres south of the Arctic Ocean. To the west lies the major power of Sweden; to the east, the major power of Russia; to the north, Norway with its suddenly acquired oil wealth; to the south, pint-sized Estonia. In a way, Finland is an island, surrounded by the sea to the south and west. In terms of area, Finland is twice as large as Germany, but we have a population of only five million. Finnish Lapland covers an area the size of Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland combined, but only 180,000 people and 200,000 reindeer live there.

For 800 years, Finland was a part of Sweden. Then war broke out between Sweden and Russia, ending in the defeat of Sweden. Thus in 1809 Sweden ceded Finland to Russia, and the term “Finnish Lapland” came into use. Previously, the area north of the Arctic Circle from the Atlantic to the Kola Peninsula had been called simply Lapinmaa, or Lapland. Finland was an autonomous part of the Russian empire for over a hundred years until the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia granted independence to Finland in 1917. Finland’s declaration of independence was signed by Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. Besides its independence, the Bolshevik Revolution also gave Finland a route to Petsamo (now Pechenga), a port on the Arctic Ocean. Finns had their own Arctic Ocean port from 1922
to 1944, when we lost it to the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. So Finland is quite a young independent nation, with its own Finno-Ugric language, culture and people whose ancestors came from the west, the east and the south.

**Lapland**

Finnish Lapland has been inhabited since the Stone Age. Stone axe heads dating from 6000 BC have been found along the rivers there. There have also been archaeological excavations in my hometown, where they found Stone Age objects. In 1962 my father discovered a woman’s piece of jewellery from the Iron Age on our land. Tests showed that it dated from 600 BC. The land was settled by nomadic Uralic hunting and fishing tribes, and later by Sámi peoples who then divided into four nomadic populations speaking different Sámi languages. When the Nordic countries came into being and national borders were drawn around the start of the nineteenth century, the Sámi did not accept those borders and instead continued to follow their reindeer herds over their old grazing lands. The central governments of Norway, Sweden, Russia and Finland tried to fetter these people, but they did not succeed until after World War II. Making the Sámi people into a settled population was a slow but inexorable process.

In early historic times, the people of Lapland moved along with their reindeer herds, progressing totally freely in an east-west direction with the seasons. To the north was the Arctic Ocean, while the way south was blocked by new Finnish settlers who gradually took over the land from the Sámi for their own agricultural use. The Finns kept pushing the Sámi further north, and now the Sámi live in the extreme northern regions of Norway, Sweden, Russia and Finland. For the Finnish conquerors were stronger than the original inhabitants and had superior weapons.

**Mother tongue: Meänkieli**

My ancestors on my father’s side were Finnish newcomers to northern Finland, while my mother’s side cannot be traced back outside of Lapland. My parents built a house in the village where my mother was born, on the western border near Sweden, and started a family that grew to six children. That area, around the western edge of the Finnish province of Lapland, has its own cultural as well as linguistic character. Our native language is called Meänkieli – the name literally means “our language”. Also known as Tornedal Finnish, it is spoken on both sides of the border between Finland and Sweden. It has a conciliatory nature: even within the language itself, conflicts are avoided and concord is always sought. It arose via early Finnish settlement to serve as a lingua franca between Finns and Sámi people.

All over the world, border communities are very special environments. The people who live in them see and experience more than people who live in other places: they are accustomed to otherness, and that can make it easier for them to accept difference. My home community, as a border community, has always been a place of international encounters because the Tornio River, which forms the border between Sweden and Finland, flows into the Gulf of Bothnia in the Baltic Sea. Through the ages it has been the all-important passage along which the world’s travellers have arrived to find out about the mystical North.
In addition to internationalism, another powerful influence on the culture of the area where Meänkieli is spoken has been the Laestadian movement. Laestadianism is a Christian revivalist movement which flourished in the nineteenth century with a system of internal rules and a lifestyle all its own. In some ways, Laestadians can be compared to the Amish in America. The influence of this religious movement runs deep, and its spiritual heritage is still alive.

My own family’s lifestyle was strongly Finnish, slightly Laestadian and not at all Sámi, even though almost every family member had their own reindeer earmark and a yard full of reindeer in the winter. We earned our living from small-scale cattle herding, logging, fishing and reindeer herding. We were largely self-sufficient, as were all the other families in the village where I grew up. When I was a child, it was customary in Lapland for each household to consist of many more people than just a nuclear family. At home, we had first my father’s parents and then my mother’s parents, various uncles on both sides, maiden aunts and usually a few people drifting through as well. There were huge logging sites in Lapland in the summertime that drew young, unattached men from southern Finland for work. The men needed somewhere to stay while they worked on the sites, and many stayed at our place. Lapland has long been a promised land for all kinds of drifters, adventurers and even criminals, with forested areas that are easy to hide in.

Even in the 1930s the Finnish government regarded Lapland as an undisciplined, lawless place, despite efforts that had been made to create order there since 1809. The huge distances, severe climate, poor roads and sparse population of Lapland made it difficult to maintain law and order there.

The mythical North: Wild, rugged, fearsome

The first written mention of Lapland is found in Germania, a work written by Tacitus in the year 98 AD. Kemi, a town on the very northern edge of the Gulf of Bothnia, was already a significant site for commerce in the fourteenth century. Furs, reindeer products and fish were exported, and salt and spices were imported. Tales of the mythical North spread along with sailors and merchants to central Europe, and eventually explorers, geographers, historians, adventurers and tourists began to come to Lapland. In 1555 the Swedish cosmopolitan and clergyman Olaus Magnus wrote a book about his travels to Lapland, in which he describes the inhabitants as strong, courageous people with a strong belief in magic. In the wake of that book and continuing into the 18th century, Lapland received visitors from learned societies and academic institutions all over Europe, but especially from England, France, Italy and Germany. These travellers wrote dozens of brilliant books about their journeys to the wild, almost uninhabited, regions where the sun never sets in summer and never rises in winter. A land where the Northern Lights illuminate the winter sky, where the wintry cold bites and where the beautiful summer landscape is enveloped in swarms of mosquitoes.

Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, a member of the French Académie des Sciences, reached Lapland with his expedition of 1736/37. His mission was to use the stars to measure the angle of tilt of the Earth’s surface at the Arctic Circle and therefore calculate the shape of the Earth to determine whether it was flattened or stretched at the poles. He determined that Descartes’ oval version was wrong and Newton’s oblate version was correct. His party spent a year in my home district, and stories about them and their odd habits were passed down through the generations. During that year, children were conceived who contributed to the expansion of our gene pool.
In the early 1800s, an Italian by the name of Giuseppe Acerpi visited my home district. His description of Lapland was horrific. He wrote a book about his travels which mentions a structure built from stout logs, without a chimney, where his party spent the night. During my childhood, that hut served as a cold store and it was only torn down in the 1980s, when it was completely rotten. Every time I passed that structure in my youth, I was amused by the thought of the Italian scholar on his research expedition, who found the people of Lapland wild and fearsome, brave and hot-headed, and the landscape barren, horrible and threatening.

Fear of the South

I was born and spent the first fifteen years of my life in Finnish Lapland, on the western border, in the Meänkieli-speaking area in the middle of the forest, and I lived my early childhood among trees and reindeer. The village where I lived as a child is a typical Lapland village. A few houses along a river, a small school, a small shop and one car in the village that we all rode in once a month to go shopping in Sweden. These days the village has been depopulated, and there is no longer a school. Not far away is Lapland’s first tourist destination, a mountain called Aavaksaksa. It is an ancient sacred site for the Sámi, and ever since the seventeenth century tourists have climbed up the mountain in the summertime to admire the midnight sun. The same mountain where de Maupertuis made his measurements.

Sharing a language with the people on the other side of the Swedish border has been a strong unifying factor, but speakers of other languages are not shunned. Often a language is something people use to hide behind. In the absence of a shared language, communication can actually be more direct – and sometimes even deeper.

Sweden – the West – was a natural part of the landscape of my childhood. We used to run across the bridge over the river that formed the border and buy things from the shops there like bananas, which were not yet available in Finland. Sweden was the major power; Finland was its oddball cousin. We who lived on the western border had the benefit of seeing on an everyday level how a major power which for centuries had not been the site of a war improved its well-being. We took Sweden as an example, but we also wanted to proudly preserve the special characteristics of our culture.

North was also a familiar and very natural direction for us. People went to northern Norway mainly for seasonal work in the fish-processing plants. Only a few ventured to southern Finland or Helsinki, which was regarded as a far-off place. People avoided and dreaded the south, for historical reasons. The south was where the government’s authority emanated from, passing laws and decrees without listening to the local residents. That’s why relations between Lapland and southern Finland are still frosty. The government’s efforts, beginning in 1809 and continuing up until the 1940s, to tame Lapland were disliked by the people of the northern province, who perceived the policy as a high-handed programme of subjugation. The views and welfare of the residents of Lapland were not heeded.

In 1941 during World War II, the Finnish government permitted Nazi Germany to basically occupy Lapland, and after the war, the government even suggested ceding Lapland to the Soviet Union so that the Soviets would drop their other territorial claims.
To the residents of Lapland, it felt as if Lapland was just a burden on the Finnish government or a football to be kicked this way and that. Lapland has enormous natural resources. There are vast forests, plenty of lakes and rivers and valuable minerals under the Earth’s surface. Following World War II, the economic exploitation of the region underwent another upswing. Waterways were harnessed to generate electricity for the manufacturing communities in the south, and this destruction of Lapland’s lakes and rivers is still a source of acrimony. Likewise, commercial logging operations in the Lapland wilderness and the downright rape of the forests are a perpetual topic of discussion. Rivers continue to be harnessed for hydroelectric power and forests continue to be cut down for the wood-processing industry, even though tourism is now Lapland’s chief source of income.

What about the East?

Lapland people’s attitudes towards the west and the north have been grumbling but favourable, while relations with the south have been difficult. What about relations to the East, then? Throughout history and regardless of what form of government has been in charge in Russia, Finns’ attitudes to their eastern neighbour have been divided, with some hating Russians, some being favourably inclined and the vast majority forming their opinions according to the prevailing propaganda. If the Finnish government and media launch a friendship initiative between Russians and Finns, the population will sing from the same hymn-sheet. On the other hand, if the official propaganda stokes a hatred of Russia, then that feeling quickly flares up among Finns. We have always had a certain number of power-brokers who have stoked anti-Russian sentiment and others who calm things down. In the 1920s Finnish ethnic fighters made forays to the east with the intention of liberating their fellow Finns from the clutches of the Bolsheviks. When the fighters got there, though, they discovered their targets did not want to be liberated and so they returned home empty-handed. The 1930s were a time when Finnish nationalism and anti-Russian sentiment flourished, while the decades following World War II were characterized by solidarity and Russian-Finnish friendship. Since 1991, when the world became unipolar and the United States, via NATO, became the global police force, entitled to wage war anywhere in the world without asking anyone’s permission, here in Finland we have also gradually returned to nationalism and the climate of anti-Russian sentiment of the 1930s.

The primary factor influencing the people of Lapland’s relationship to the East has been the border, which has occasionally been entirely closed. Up to Finland’s independence, the border was open. The people of Lapland roamed to the Kola Peninsula and back. After Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917, the border between Finland and the Soviet Union was gradually closed. In the 1920s people could still cross the border to the east relatively freely. When Petsamo, home to the Skolt Sámi, was annexed by Finland in 1922, some friends of our family moved there and established fish-processing plants. My grandparents used to go to Petsamo every year to visit them and would also stop off in Murmansk, which had been built up as the Russian tsar’s northernmost naval base. Before World War II, Murmansk was a bustling centre on the Arctic Ocean, and the entire Cap of the North was a paradise for spies.

Neither Russia nor the Soviet Union was particularly marvelled at in the Arctic regions, since we Finns belong to the same Finno-Ugric peoples who live throughout the Arctic
regions of Russia all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The Finno-Ugric peoples feel a special sense of community, though all the groups living in the Arctic regions have a shared spirit. When I lived in Christiania in Copenhagen, also home to many Inuit from Greenland, the Inuit were the first people I befriended. We didn’t share a language, but we understood one another immediately.

The alienation from our eastern neighbours began only as the Iron Curtain descended along the border between Finland and the Soviet Union. What you do not know is also easy to fear. Lapland remained in the west; the Wild East began at the Soviet border. But soon the people of Lapland managed to make two holes in the Iron Curtain, and it became possible to travel across via those border crossings. Bus tours from Rovaniemi to Murmansk began in the 1960s and traveller numbers increased year on year. People from Lapland took the bus to Murmansk for the weekend to enjoy the big-city atmosphere, good Russian food and cheap vodka. Vodka is well known as the favourite beverage of Finns, Sámi and Russians alike. What you know, you do not fear.

**Wintry wars**

Many Finns still fear the Russians. The main factor behind this fear is the experience of the Winter War (1939-40). At that time, nationalism was flourishing in Finland as in the rest of Europe, and nationalism often leads to war. And so it did in this case. At the end of unsuccessful negotiations on the cession of territory, the Soviet Union attacked Finland. The fiercest fighting in the Winter War was conducted in Lapland, and proportionally more soldiers from Lapland died than from any other Finnish province. The Winter War lasted 105 days, and it ended in peace negotiations. Despite the Winter War, there is far less hatred of Russia in Lapland. The people there are poor folk, and many had sympathetic feelings towards the Soviet Union. In the north, we are almost the same people in a way. Our northernness united us – the cold, the severe climate, our customs and ways of living and occupations. Things southern people didn’t understand. There were also some people in Lapland who did not want to fight against the Red Army. They identified far more with the Red Army than with the Finnish army, which was in the hands of the masters – the masters who were exploiting Lapland.

The Winter War was followed by the Continuation War, when Finland attacked the Soviet Union alongside Nazi Germany. The unhurried, poor, downtrodden and basically peaceful population of Lapland was not inspired by the idea of Nazi Germany and the Finnish army to form a Greater Finland that extended all the way to the Urals. They went to fight in the Continuation War with heavy hearts and only when forced. In Lapland the Continuation War was referred to as the Masters’ War.

Lapland was a central theatre in both wars. During the Continuation War over 220,000 German soldiers, most of whom were in the SS, lived in Lapland for five years. The Finnish population was just 150,000. In Rovaniemi, which became the Germans’ military headquarters, there were 6,000 German soldiers and 8,000 Finns – mostly women, children and elderly people. Throughout the Continuation War, the Germans were in charge of the defence of Lapland. The men of Lapland were sent south to fight, resulting in great bitterness. They had to leave their wives and daughters at the mercy of the Germans. Thus all of Lapland was essentially occupied by the Germans, though the troops were described as “embedded”. The civilian population became acquainted with
the German soldiers during the war years, and many Finnish-German children resulted from these relationships.

There were also prison camps in Lapland, built by the Germans and Finns for Russian POWs, in which tens of thousands of soldiers languished. Many of the Russian POWs died of hunger, cold and disease. They were also used as forced labour. They built roads for the Germans and did forestry work. Some who had Finnish heritage were placed in households in Lapland as labourers while the men of the families remained at the front year after year. These situations also produced children, and our gene pool was diversified.

Memories of the wars lived on very strongly in homes during my childhood, and people reminisced about war every day. My relatives had been at war; some of them died, some were injured, some continued to suffer from terrible post-war trauma until their death. All this was part of my everyday life as a child, and I learned to hate war very early on.

My father was a nationalist, but he also had a German mindset, and he enjoyed travelling even when he was young himself, which was unusual for the time. My father had moved to our village from Kemi, which had been a Hanseatic trading centre since the fourteenth century. My grandparents on my father’s side were civil servants, or masters; my mother’s parents, who lived in our village, were true members of the ragged Lapland proletariat. Growing up in an extended family, with parents from such different backgrounds and social classes, was worth a fortune to me. From my father’s side I got gentility; from my mother’s side, proletarianism.

The metropolis of Murmansk

As a child I listened to my father’s stories of his travels to Morocco, Malta and Britain, and I decided that when I grew up I would set off travelling. But my first trip abroad turned out to take me not to Germany but to the Soviet Union, due to the fact that my father had died and my mother got to decide everything on her own. I specifically wanted to go to Murmansk, because in the 1970s Murmansk was still the only major city north of the Arctic Circle. It was the nearest big city, and I yearned to experience the intense pace of life, energy and tempo of the city I had read and heard so much about. I was fifteen years old when I boarded the tourist coach to Murmansk, ready to encounter proper city folk and an urban lifestyle I only had a vague idea of, having grown up in a tiny village. In Lapland we had nothing but small communities that were difficult to think of as cities. That journey had a decisive impact on my life. I fell in love with Murmansk and resolved to start studying Russian. I fell in love with that gigantic city of 500,000 people, built on the shore of the fjord between the fells. The average age of its residents was 25.

I fell in love with Murmansk, its ethnic restaurants, its odd shop signs, its alphabet, its uncomplicated, visitor-friendly people. On my very first visit, the Soviet aesthetic intrigued me because it was so different from what we had in the West. The architecture, the packages of products on sale in the shops, the toys, clothing, clothing, ways of working. Everywhere I looked, I was just amazed. Everything was big, but somehow innocent at the same time. Everything seemed strange, weird, mysterious, fascinating and familiar all at once. I felt as if I had suddenly travelled through time both into my parents’ childhood and into the future. Murmansk was a mixture of the past, still vigorous
and alive, and the future, feverishly racing forward. In Murmansk I felt free of the constricted surroundings of my village, the oppression brought by Laestadianism. I felt there that the world was huge and open. That basically anything was possible.

When I returned home from my trip, I began studying Russian. My hope was that the next time I went to the Soviet Union, I’d be able to read the street signs.

Since my first trip, my hobby has been the Soviet Union and more recently, Russia. When I was a student in Moscow in 1981, I was enchanted by Moscow as well. Its irrationality, its craziness, its wildness, its Orthodoxy (even during the Soviet era), its incomprehensible size, its boundless throngs of people. When I was studying in Moscow I decided that as soon as I got enough money together I’d set off on the Trans-Siberian Railway on an adventure to Siberia and Mongolia. Just like those European explorers who had come to my home village since the seventeenth century. Siberia and Mongolia also fascinated me because Finnish anthropologists and linguists had travelled eastwards since the nineteenth century to study our related peoples in Siberia. I wanted to see and experience those same villages and cities for myself: how they had changed over a century or so, who lived there and how the Soviet state had changed those communities.

My trip to Siberia became possible in 1986, when my first book, *Yhden Yön Pysäkki* (“One-night stop”) won an award for the best debut of the year. There was a cash prize, and I immediately went out and bought some train tickets for Siberia and booked hotel rooms. Then I hopped on a train bound for Moscow. There I spent a few weeks preparing for my journey, and on the threshold of spring I hung my camera round my neck and boarded the Trans-Siberian train. Destination: Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia. This journey forms the basis for my book *Hytti nro 6* [1], which I wrote 25 years after the actual trip.

The Russian philosopher and writer Viktor Erofeyev has said that Russia is a writer’s paradise and a reader’s hell. I agree, because for me as a writer, Russia is an enormous treasure trove and source of inspiration. This is because Russia is always surprising. Everything changes into something else and then returns to its previous self in a different form. Like the rest of the world and the cosmos, Russia is constantly on the move; nothing stays put. Particularly in Russia, this motion continually gives rise to chains of absurd situations. Once again, Russia is in a state of ferment, and I enjoy following the development of that state.

In brief, I both love and hate Russia’s depth, its craziness, its superficiality and above all its unpredictability. You might see any of the following signs hanging in the door of a restaurant or grocery store:

Closed,
Open,
Closed for stock-taking,
On break.

If you try the door, it might seem to be shut at first, but if you give it a second try, the door turns out not to be locked and so the place is open!

**Border crossings today**
The border between Finland and Sweden in Lapland has been entirely open for years now. Houses have been built along the border in the Tornio River valley, and the small communities on either side of the border are in the process of growing together. The only way to save Lapland from desolation is through cooperation. Little by little we are returning to the situation that prevailed at the dawn of history, when Lapland was a single area, not determined by governmental boundaries. Norway, with its recent oil wealth, is drawing its own lines and is not keen to share anything. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has opened up its border. Last year Norway and Russia abolished the visa requirements between their countries, and now workers from Murmansk commute unhindered into Norway to work and then back home in the evening. Trade and tourism between Finnish Lapland and Russia are a significant source of income for residents of Lapland. The general rule in dealing with Russians is that we’ll take their money, but attitudes to them are a bit standoffish. Finns still regard Russians as odd and “other” and do not wish to get to know them. One of my brothers lives with his family in Ivalo, in the far north of Finland, and he has built up some shops there and runs a tourist-oriented business. Through him, I can observe the course of relations between the Kola region and Finnish Lapland. For two decades, Russian tourists have been coming to Finland to do their regular shopping, just as I did in Sweden as a child. But now that the EU’s economic sanctions against Russia have come into force and the ruble has fallen in value, it seems that cross-border trade has decreased along with it and the numbers of Russian tourists have nosedived. Tourism and trade in eastern Finland and Lapland are in crisis.

Despite the increase of mass tourism and adventure travel, Lapland is a unique place. The best thing about Lapland is the natural environment. It is still relatively clean, and the lakes, rivers, streams, mountains, huge bogs and the ring dance of its waterways form the heart of Lapland’s wilderness. The snowy winter forests, the cold, the Northern Lights, the crisp spring air, the white summer nights, the autumn colours are still there, even though they are all under threat from global warming.

Footnotes

1. *Compartment Number 6*, translated by Lola Rogers (Serpent’s Tail, 2014)