Article history: Received 12 Nov. 2013; last revision 11 January 2014; accepted 21 March. 2014

Finnish refugee children's experiences of Swedish refugee camps during the Second World War

MERJA PAKSUNIEMI♦

Abstract
This article seeks to demonstrate how Finnish refugee children experienced living in Swedish refugee camps during the Second World War (1939–1945). The study focuses on children's opinions and experiences reflected through adulthood. The data were collected through retrospective interviews with six adults who experienced wartime as children in Finland and were evacuated to Sweden as refugees. Five of the interviewees were female and one of them was male. The study shows, it was of decisive importance to the refugee children's well-being to have reliable adults around them during the evacuation and at the camps. The findings demonstrate that careful planning made a significant difference to the children´s adaptations to refugee camp life. The daily routines at the camp, such as regular meals, play time and camp school, reflected life at home and helped the children to continue their lives, even under challenging circumstances.

Keywords: Refugee children; camp; Finland; Lapland; Sweden; Second World War.

Introduction

Millions of refugee children are being displaced with their families worldwide; in addition, the number of refugee children without families is extremely high (UNHCR, 2012: 2-3). In 2011, the number of unaccompanied children in the world seeking asylum was 17,700, primarily in European countries. (Heikkilä, 2013). Earlier studies have emphasised that these children were likely to have experienced or witnessed war first-hand; the experiences of these refugee children have resulted in mental health problems, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Almqvist & Broberg, 1999; Almqvist & Brandell-Forsberg, 1997; Fazel & Stein, 2002; Fazel & Stein, 2003; Nielsen et al., 2008). The previous literature has noted that it is difficult for refugee children to leave their families and familiar neighbourhoods. War leaves scars on the

♦ Faculty of Education, University of Lapland and Institute of Migration, Finland
E-mail: merja.paksuniemi@ulapland.fi.

people who live through it, and the memories of war almost always cause emotional, physical and economic insecurities (Jensen & Shaw, 1993; Loughry & Eyber, 2003). Studies have offered ideas for easing the lives of the children who have experienced war (for example, Betancourt & Khan, 2008), including several researchers who have emphasised a holistic approach that includes reuniting children with their biological families as soon as possible (Ehntholt & Yule, 2006; Mikkonen, 2013; Sapir, 1993). Children who are separated from their families are emotionally vulnerable and face serious problems, according to Harding and Looney (1977).

In this article, I direct my attention to the past (see Martiniello & Rath, 2010). I focus on the memories of children, who lived during war time and were evacuated to another country, as their memories may be a necessary addition to the research field. Chatty, Crivello and Hundt (2005) note that substantial recent research has focused on adults in this context and that there is a growing need to incorporate children into this process. The interviewees of this article were children during the war but are reflecting on their memories as adults.

Finland fought against the Soviet Union in the Winter War from November 30, 1939 until March 13, 1940. Then, the Continuation War began – in which Finland was allied with Germany – which lasted from June 25, 1941 until September 19, 1944. The Soviet Union won the Continuation War. The threat that the Soviet Union would attack Finland again was real, and the Finnish government began negotiations with Sweden regarding the evacuation of the people of Lapland province. Then, the situation changed, Finland and the Soviet Union made peace and the Finns were forced to drive the German troops out of Finland as soon as possible as part of the peace negotiations. The evacuations had already begun when the Finns and Soviets made peace, and Lapland was turned into a battlefield between Finnish and German troops (Kulju, 2013: 37). A third war, the Lapland War, began, which lasted from the autumn of 1944 until the summer of 1945. At that time, the population of Lapland province was almost entirely evacuated to southern Finland or to Sweden. Approximately 100,000 people and thousands of heads of cattle were evacuated to Sweden. Most of the evacuees were children. The children who were evacuated may not have actually experienced war, but they certainly felt its presence (Paksuniemi 2014: 52-54).

Research Questions, Method and Data

The purpose of this article is to answer the following questions: (1) What types of memories do refugee children have? and (2) What should be considered when receiving refugee children?

Earlier studies on refugee children employ the methodology of interviewing children (Heptinstall et al, 2004; Hjern et al., 1991; Hjern & Angel, 2000; Lustig et al., 2004), but retrospective interviewing is not commonly used.

However retrospective interviews may reveal information about children's perceptions of refugee life and will thus be used in this study. This article's data were gathered from retrospective interviews with six former refugee children. Five of them were female: Anna-Liisa, Anni, Aune, Helmi, Kaarina and one of them, Oskari, was a male. They were from small villages of Lapland province and were 6 to 11 years of age during wartime. An interesting fact was that even though that the interviewees were adults their memories were memories of childhood. For instance they didn´t remember the dates or months but they remembered the time of the year. They used frames like: "*during the winter*" for example.

Using an open method, all participants were interviewed about the same main themes: evacuation, living in the refugee camp, and what helped them adapt to camp life. The adults interviewed stayed in different Swedish camps for approximately six to eleven months when they were children. The retrospective interviews are interpretations of childhood experiences, in which adults revisit and share their memories of events that occurred 70 years ago. Memories may change over time, and the researcher's responsibility is to triangulate the interviews with other research data. However, as memories are very personal they may vary a great deal (for example Fingerroos et al., 2006; Gill et al., 2008; Neath 1998; Silverman 2005; Smith et al., 2003; Stewart et al., 2008). Conversely, when an adult reflects upon childhood memories, these memories may also acquire a deeper meaning retrospectively (cf. Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2000).

The interviews were transcribed and analysed, and the results are presented with relevant quotes. The data are discussed together with selected studies of child refugees. This combination increases the reliability of the study and offers a wider perspective on the topic (see Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2003; Smith et al., 2003).

Findings

Arriving at the Refugee Camp

The children of Lapland province were evacuated to Sweden with their families, i.e., their mothers, siblings, and grandparents. Fathers and older sons had either died in the war or were at battle in the army. The aim was to evacuate one village at a time so inhabitants from the same area could stay together. All interviewees remembered that objective precisely. For example, Oskari explained, *"My family and the people from my home village were all transported to Sweden together."* Anni reminisced: "*It was autumn and it was raining. The people from the village were gathered together into two houses. We were waiting for lorries. There were a lot of people. The situation was uncertain."* The journey lasted several days. The evacuees were mostly transferred to Sweden in lorries and trains. It was cold, the vehicles were crowded, and the children were hungry, but they were mostly afraid of losing their mothers during the evacuation (e.g., Anni, Aune and

Helmi). All the interviewees travelled with their families, but they were told about children who got separated from their families and had to make the journey alone.

The Swedish government and charitable organisations provided the children with clothes, which significantly helped the refugees. The clothes package included indoor and outdoor clothing and items related to personal hygiene. Outdoor clothing was extremely important for the children because the evacuation lasted the entire winter and the weather conditions could be harsh. Anna-Liisa described their minimal belongings: *"We could take what we could carry; it wasn´t much. I remember that I was really sad to leave my doll called Asta at home."*

The refugees were also given medical care to improve their health and prevent the spreading of infectious diseases (see Hafeetz et al., 2004). Anni was ill and had to spend some time at the hospital without her family, which she said had affected her self-esteem through adulthood. She reminisced: *"They took me into a hospital for some reason, I don´t know why. And I was crying. They told me that someone was going to collect me but no one even came to see me. The feeling of rejection has affected me until today.*" According to research, parental separation can be a traumatic experience for children and weaken their self-confidence (for example, Bowlby et al., 1956; Lupton & Barclay, 1997.) The other interviewees (Anna-Liisa, Aune, Helmi, Kaarina and Oskari) were healthy and did not require special health care.

After spending a few days at the first camp, the refugees were transferred to temporary transition camps where they remained for 14 days while they were registered. After this stopover, they were transferred to permanent camps, where they spent their remaining time during the evacuation. All interviewees experienced these transitions as stressful and exhausting. When they were asked to describe the circumstances at the refugee camps, the interviewees mainly remembered that it was at first chaotic moving from camp to camp and that there were many people living in small spaces. For example, Aune said, *"In Sweden, there were huge barracks where we lived in a room with a lot of people."* The children did not know that they were transported to another country. Other adults from the same village cared for the children who were separated from their families. After settling at the final camp and establishing daily routines, the children adjusted to camp life, as Helmi explained: *"I think it was all right to live in the camp, and everybody treated me well."*

Refugee Camp Life

The children arrived from Finland, a country that had been at war for five years. Although food had been regulated and children were used to having little of it, many children were still hungry. All interviewees mentioned that the refugee camps guaranteed regular daily meals (see Rautio et al., 2004). Some refugee women helped in the kitchen (Paksuniemi, 2013). The meal was

frequently soup, as Kaarina remembered*: "The tables were so long, and there were a lot of people eating! We often had soup."* The Swedish refugee camp workers tried to consider the refugees' wishes about meals; Swedish food was strange for the Finns in some ways, and it was sweeter than what they were used to (Rautio et al., 2004: 121-123). According to the interviewees, the children did not mind the food's sweetness; on the contrary, they liked it (Anna-Liisa, Anni, Aune, Helmi, Kaarina and Oskari). *"The food was so good!"* remembered Helmi.

Relatively quickly, adult refugees asked if it was possible for them to organise some type of school in order to restore the children´s daily routines and give structure to their living in exile as well as to keep them from disturbing the adults while they were performing their daily camp activities (see Paksuniemi 2013: 69-70; Rautio et al., 2004: 147-148). At age seven, children begin compulsory education in Finland. All interviewees remembered that school was held in a variety of buildings, such as barracks, houses or even churches – any empty space. Kaarina recalled, *"I remember long tables and chairs. One evacuated person was our teacher who taught us there. The material which was used was simple; we had some notebooks and textbooks."* Helmi reminisced: "*We had a school in a chapel. There were many children, more than 30 and one teacher. It felt like a real school."* Luckily, teachers were also evacuated, so the refugee children were able to have Finnish-speaking teachers. Although the Finnish government attempted to send textbooks and other teaching material to camps, transportation was slow, and materials were scarce in Finland. The children shared textbooks and obtained learning materials from wherever possible. For example, children took yarn out of old unused mattresses to use for knitting. There were many children in the refugee camps, and class sizes were relatively large – approximately 45 children per class (see Paksuniemi 2014, 70; Rautio et al., 2004: 84-84). By the end of 1945, 106 schools were functioning at the refugee camps, which showed that providing education was extremely effective under the circumstances.

Some refugee camps also had kindergartens for children who were under seven years old. These kindergartens and schools freed parents to work inside or outside the camp area, which also meant that children could not spend time with their mothers. Luckily, grandparents were typically evacuated to the same camp, and children had reliable adults around them. Some were not so lucky; they got separated from their parents and had no relatives in the camps. These children looked to other adults for safety. The care and support from adults was important for the children that were separated from their parents. Because people from the same villages were evacuated to the same camps, children knew the people around them, which meant that depending on other adults who were not their parents was easier. Separation from family members can cause physical or / and mental health effects later in life (Kinzie et al., 1986); therefore, caring adult support was important for these children.

All the interviewees highlighted that one thing was very important to them during their stay in the refugee camps: playtime. Some children left their

homes in a hurry and could not bring toys with them; few family belongings at all were brought. Swedish charitable organisations gave toys to the children, making playtime possible. Playing distracted the children from thinking about the war and their surroundings in exile, and playing allowed them to cope with their pre-migration and exile-related experiences (see Pynoos et al., 1999). The toys which they shared with other children were carefully selected, and toys that might invoke negative memories from the war were forbidden (Paksuniemi et al., 2013; Paksuniemi 2014; Rautio et al., 2004).

Although the children were taken care of, hundreds still died during the evacuation time. For example in one of the refugee camps 99 children died, 57 of them were under 3 years old. Some children also got born in the refugee camps: the beginning and the end of human life became known for the interviewees. (see Paksuniemi 2014: 71.)

Returning Home

When the German troops left Finland during Spring 1945 Finnish evacuees/refugees could start their way back home. At first, approximately 100 people were transferred each day. During the summer months, approximately 600 persons were moving back each day. The Swedish State helped the evacuees at this time too; for example, they provided food and supplies, such as hay for cattle, to these displaced persons. Even after the war had ended, living conditions were difficult. Eighty to ninety per cent of the buildings, bridges, roads, and infrastructure in Lapland province were destroyed (Kulju 2013; Paksuniemi 2013; Rautio et al., 2004).

The children were anxious to return home; for instance, Kaarina remembered, *"It was wonderful to go home!"* However, most of the children soon understood that they did not have homes to return to. The families lived in the buildings that were not destroyed – such as barns, saunas, and barracks—or they quickly built shelters in which they would stay during the reconstruction of their homes. For example, Oskari explained, *"Everything was burnt. Our family lived with four other families in a one-room barrack while our new home was being built. It was quite a shock for me."* The interviewees said that losing their homes marked a significant turning point in their lives because childhood memories were tightly bound up with their homes. Additionally, according to prior research, evacuated people and refugees who are unable to return to their homes are likely to feel rootless, including adults (for example, Ilonen, 2013).

Discussion

The refugee children did not know where they were being transported, and they changed camps several times, which exacerbated their feelings of displacement and chaos. This article shows that well organised evacuations can provide solid bases for refugees who are forced to leave their homes and homelands. The families of Lapland were evacuated with minimal clothing

and were thus unprepared for the cold weather of winter. Finnish refugees felt greatly relieved to receive clothing and personal hygiene products in the Swedish refugee camps.

Being able to rely on adults was important to these children. The presence of significant adults increased their sense of security. Concurrently, these relationships between adults and children show a sense of solidarity because the adults extended their care by looking after both own and other people's children. It was also important that people from particular Finnish villages were evacuated to the same refugee camps. People knew one another, shared similar backgrounds and spoke the same language. This cohesiveness helped foster social relations in the camp community. It also helped in organising camp schools because teachers had been evacuated to the same camps as their students (see Bowlby et al., 1956; Lupton & Barclay, 1997).

Regular meals contributed to the refugees' adaptation. Meals were daily highlights that ensured regular food intake and brought rhythm and structure to the day. Breakfast, lunch, supper and late night snack were also socially meaningful events that brought the camp residents together. Children found that playtime with toys was a good time to interact with other children and process their war- and exile-related experiences.

Children's daily routines in the refugee camps were similar to their daily routines at home, and this sense of coherence helped children adapt to their new life situation (see Antonovsky 1979; Sagy & Antonovsky 2000). Attending school was the main activity in the daily lives of these children. Although there were not enough textbooks for everyone, teachers and children shared and recycled materials. Thus, establishing schools was important to the young refugees.

This study shows that helping refugee children adjust to camp conditions requires stability and coherence. First, children should be placed at their permanent refugee reception/camp location as quickly as possible. Effective reception and placement procedures can avoid multiple transfers and may help children to get accustomed to their new "home" more quickly. Daily routines and rhythms should be restored to reflect life at home, as much as possible. These arrangements helped children to continue their lives, even under challenging circumstances. Without the everyday structures, children felt as though they were living amid chaos, which resulted in restlessness; the refugee camp adults noticed this restlessness and helped get schools started as a remedy.

Community spirit and caretaking occurred naturally as people knew one another and their backgrounds. According to prior research, it is important to determine what types of support are given to children in refugee camps and how this support is provided (for example, Paardekooper et al., 2003). Children missed their homes during their time as refugees and were happy to return home as quickly as possible. Some fortunate children returned to their

homes, but unfortunately most returned to destroyed buildings, including their homes. Losing a home was a significant childhood occurrence, but children were even happy just to return to their homeland and its familiar environment. Thus, no matter how well the children adapted to living in Sweden, there was no place like home for them.

Although refugee camps were chaotic at first, the children adjusted relatively quickly to camp life. Establishing homelike circumstances and daily routines at refugee camps helped children adapt to their changed living conditions.

The contribution of this article is its unique focus on children's experiences of being evacuated, living as refugees, and moving back to the home country; all from a historical perspective. The interviewees represent a special group of adults who had been refugees as children. In the interviews, adults described their childhood experiences, and these recollections represent a unique and rarely studied aspect of refugee studies. This research method provides a new perspective from which to study the experience of childhood during times of war.

This research acknowledges the importance of organising evacuations and informing adults and children about the plans in advance. However, this kind of planned evacuation rarely is possible for most forced migration in war time. This study also demonstrates that careful planning made a significant difference in these refugees' adaptation, along with shelter, medical and health services, nutrition and well-organised daily routines, such as school and kindergarten.

References

Almqvist, K. and Broberg, A.G. (1999). "Mental health and social adjustment in young refugee children y 3 ½ years after their arrival in Sweden", *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Abdolescent Psychiatry,* 38 (6): 723-730.

Almqvist, K. and Brandell-Forsberg, M. (1997). "Refugee children in Sweden: Post-traumatic stress disorder in Iranian preschool children exposed to organized violence", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 21 (4): 351-366.

Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, stress, and coping*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Betancourt, T. S. and Khan, K. T. (2008). "The mental health of children affected by armed conflict: protective processes and pathways to resilience", *International Review of Psychiatry*, 20 (3): 317-328.

Bowlby, J., Ainsworth, M., Boston, M.and Rosenbluth, D. (1956). "The effects of mother-child separation: A follow-up study", *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 29 (2): 11-247.

Chatty, D., Crivello, G. and Hundt, G. L. (2005). "Theoretical and Methodological Challenges of Studying Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa: Young Palestinian, Afghan and Sahrawi Refugees", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 18 (4): 387-409.

Ehntholt, K. A. and Yule, W. (2006). "Practitioner Review: Assessment and treatment of refugee children and adolescents who have experienced war-related trauma", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47 (12): 1197-1210.

Fazel, M. and Stein, A. (2002). "The mental health of refugee children", *Archieves of Disease in Childhood*, 87 (59): 366-370.

Fazel, M. and Stein, A. (2003). "Mental health of refugee children: comparative study", *British Medical Journal*, 327 (7407): 134-134.

Fingerroos, O., Haanpää, R., Heimo, A. and Peltonen, U.-M. (eds.) (2006). *Muistitietotutkimus. Metodologisia kysymyksiä* [*Studying memories. Methodological questions*], Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.

Gill, P., Stewart, K., Treasure, E. and Chadwick, B. (2008). "Methods of data collection in qualitative research: interviews and focus groups", *British Dental Journal*, 204 (6): 291-295.

Hafeez, A., Riaz, R., Shah, S. U., Pervaiz, J. and Southall, D. (2004). "Integrating health care for mothers and children in refugee camps and at district level", *British Medical Journal*, 328 (7443): 834-836.

Harding, R. K. and Looney, J. G. (1977). "Problems of Southeast Asian children in a refugee camp", *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 134 (4): 407-411.

Heikkilä, E. (2013). "Unaccompanied refugee children as a special immigrant group", *Siirtolaisuus – Migration, Supplement* 2013: 1-2.

Heptinstall, E., Sethna, V. and Taylor, E. (2004). "PTSD and depression in refugee children", *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 13(6): 373-380.

Hjern, A. and Angel, B. (2000). "Organized violence and mental health of refugee children in exile: a six-year follow-up", *Acta Paediatrica*, 89 (6): 722-727.

Hjern, A., Angel, B. and Höjer, B. (1991). "Persecution and behavior: a report of refugee children from Chile", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 15 (3): 239-248.

Jensen, P. S. and Shaw, J. (1993). "Children as victims of war: current knowledge and future research needs", *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 32 (4): 697-708.

Ilonen, A., (2013) *Rajan lapset – Identiteettityö Kannaksen evakkojen sukupolvissa* [*Children of boarder areas – Identity work in generations of evacuees of Kannas*], Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis 258, Rovaniemi: University Press.

Kinzie, J. D., Sack, W. H., Angell, R. H., Manson, S. and Rath, B. (1986). "The psychiatric effects of massive trauma on Cambodian children: I. The children", *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 25 (3): 370-376.

Kulju, M. (2013). *Lapin sota 1944–1945* [Lapland War 1944–1945], Juva: Gummerus.

Lev-Wiesel, R. and Amir, M. (2003). "Time Does not Heal All Wounds: Quality of Life and Psychological Distress of People Who Survived the Holocaust as Children 55 Years Later", *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 16: 295-299.

Loughry, M. and Eyber, C. (2003). *Psychosocial Concepts in Humanitarian Work with Children: a review of the concepts and related literature*, Washington, D.C: National Academies Press.

Lupton, D. and Barclay, L. (1997). *Constructing Fatherhood: Discourses and Experiences*, London: Sage.

Lustig, S. L., Kia-Keating, M., Knight, W. G., Geltman, P., Ellis, H., Kinzie, J. D. and Saxe, G. N. (2004). "Review of child and adolescent refugee mental health", *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 43 (1): 24-36.

Martiniello, M. and Rath, J. (eds.) (2010). *An Introduction to International Migration Studies: European Perspectives*[22], Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Mikkonen, A.G. (2013). "Myös Suomeen tulleet pakolaislapset ja – nuoret kaipaavat ja tarvitsevat perhettään" [Also refugee children and youth who came to Finland need their families], *Siirtolaisuus – Migration, Supplement*, 2013: 22–31.

Neath, I. (1998). *Human memory: An introduction to research, data, and theory*, Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.

Nielsen, S. S., Norredam, M., Christiansen, K. L., Obel, C., Hilden, J. and Krasnik, A. (2008). "Mental health among children seeking asylum in Denmark–the effect of length of stay and number of relocations: a cross-sectional study", *BMC Public Health*, 8: 293.

Paardekooper, B., De Jong, J. T. V. M., and Hermanns, J. M. A. (1999). "The psychological impact of war and the refugee situation on South Sudanese children in refugee camps in Northern Uganda: an exploratory study", *Journal of child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 40 (4): 529-536.

Paksuniemi, M. (2013). "Mummon lettuja kaaoksen keskellä – Lapin sodan evakkoaika lapsen silmin" [Grandmothers pancakes in the middle of chaos – Lapland War´s Evacuation Time from child´s point of view], *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 2: 3-13.

Paksuniemi, M. (2014). *Vahvoiksi kasvaneet. Lapin lapset sodan jaloissa* [*Grown up to be strong. Children of Lapland in the shadow or war*], Siirtolaisuusinstituutti [Institute of Migration], Researches A45, Turku: Painosalama.

Paksuniemi, M., Määttä, K. and Uusiautti, S. (2013). "Childhood in the shadow of war: filled with work and play", *Childrens´s Geographies*. Doi:10.1080/14733285.2013.828452.

Pynoos, R. S., A. M. Steinberg, and J. C. Piacentini. (1999). "A Developmental Psychopathology Model of Childhood Traumatic Stress and Intersection with Anxiety Disorders", *Biological Psychiatry*, 46 (11): 1542-1554.

Sagy, S. and Antonovsky, H. (2000). "The development of the sense of coherence: a retrospective study of early life experiences in the family", *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 51 (2): 155-166.

Sapir, D. G. (1993). "Natural and man-made disasters: the vulnerability of women-headed households and children without families", *World health statistics quarterly. Rapport trimestriel de statistiques sanitaires mondiales*, 46 (4): 227.

Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing Qualitative Research, Practical Handbook*, London: Sage.

Smith, P., Sean, P., Dyregrov, A. and Yule, W. (2003). "Principal components analysis of the impact of event scale with children in war", *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34 (2): 315-322.

Stewart, K., Gill, P., Chadwick, B., and Treasure, E. (2008). "Qualitative research in dentistry", *British Dental Journal*, 204 (5): 235-239.

UNHCR. (2012). *Global Trends 2011. A year of crises*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.