

Just a Vagabond

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Gold medallist, movie star and a troubadour loved by everybody. Who else was Tapio Rautavaara?

Oulunkylä is an ordinary suburb in North Helsinki, with houses, a small shopping centre, a train station and a motorway to Tuusula. Even though Oulunkylä is located only 4 miles from the city centre, it only became a part of Helsinki in 1946 during a large annexation.

Up until the 1970's, a taxi passenger, wanting to get from the centre to Oulunkylä may have needed to give instructions to the driver. The name Oulunkylä, however, was known all over Finland. Many believe it was all because of one man.

“Oulunkylä's big boy” Tapio Rautavaara kept alive also the reputation of his home area on his numerous journeys, singing around Finland. There are many stories about Rautavaara. To some he was a legend, to others, a genius. “An all-around talent, the kind that is born once every thousand years”, said one influential person of the music industry. To many he was always a man of common people, Tapsa, who supremely depicted the Finnish mindset.

The legend still lives on, also among the young. Arto Saari, a 20-something Finnish skateboarder living in the States, recently told in an interview that when he gets homesick, he puts on Rautavaara's songs. Another dedicated fan of the late troubadour is Ville Valo of the well-known Finnish love metal group HIM.

If one wants to get to know Tapio Rautavaara, Oulunkylä is the place to start.

“Red Guard's Brat”

Summer is at its most beautiful as I walk along the idyllic Mestarintie street in Oulunkylä. I've come here to find the secret of Rautavaara's success.

An elderly man is waiting at a bus stop. Maybe he can tell me. From what I've heard, the elderly Oulunkylä population cannot talk about their neighbourhood without a mention of “Tapsa”.

“I'm from the neighbouring suburb Käpylä and never knew Rautavaara”, he says.

I decide to keep walking and try to imagine what Oulunkylä used to look like in the 1920's when Rautavaara first arrived from Tampere. It was mostly fields with little cottages and farms.

Having grown up in the messed up Finland of the 20's, young Tapio had had a difficult early childhood. The people, battered by the civil war, were still licking their wounds and there was shortage of almost everything. Prison camps were still in use and the tension between the right and the left had not disappeared. This was especially obvious in the working class city of Tampere.

As the son of a poor single mother, Tapio did not have it easy in elementary school. All the teachers were conservatives while Tapio was from a working class family. His friends would call him “a Red guard’s brat” – the Reds were the forces of the Social Democrats while the forces of the non-socialist, conservative-led Senate were called the Whites – sneeringly asking him where his father was. It was a question even Tapio couldn’t answer.

At times, he had to steal bread and sausages from the market square, just to calm his hunger down. Sometimes the Russians would offer sugar cubes.

At the age of 10, to earn some pocket money, Tapio wound up selling newspapers on the streets of Tampere. The paper of the Reds was selling big quantities outside the Finlayson textile factory when the workers ended their shift.

His mother had, however, decided that the family would move to Oulunkylä, where she had previously lived. She travelled south and the 10-year-old Tapio was left behind in a children’s home in Tampere to wait for his turn to leave. In the end, he had to wait for almost a year before his mother said he could move in with her. As he left the children’s home, little did he know that he would return in 30 years as a famous star, to perform with his guitar.

Fear of the Reaper

The atmosphere was more tolerant in Oulunkylä than in Tampere and Tapio was no longer bothered by bullies. However, his health was rather weak. He was getting taller by the year but not developing any muscles. He was diagnosed with rickets and was encouraged by the doctor to do more sports, otherwise the “reaper” would come meet him.

In fear of the reaper he started throwing the javelin. It seemed a natural choice as throwing rocks had always been the only sport he had enjoyed. He joined the local team, Oulunkylän Tähti – Oulunkylä Star, a part of the Finnish Workers’ Sports Federation. He stayed with the workers’ federation for the rest of his life, even though he was later often requested to join rich non-socialist associations.

He dropped out of school after sixth grade of elementary school as he decided to continue his job as a newspaper boy. He ended up selling newspapers and books on trains and that was when his life on the road started. He did not abandon reading altogether though as he reported having read each of the books in his bag before selling them.

Tapio made big money as a paper boy. He was earning the same as an average mason and could therefore cultivate his rising interest towards music. With his salary he bought a mandolin and a 12-string mandola and sought his way to the conservatory in Helsinki to take violin lessons. His mother wasn’t very enthusiastic about his violin playing but he wouldn’t budge. He completed a three-year course in one year.

Fool's Years

The easy life didn't last long. In 1929 the New York stock came crashing down and the aftershock rocked the whole world economy. The Great Depression of the 30's reached Finland as well. The railway paperboys were out of work since people couldn't afford to buy newspapers anymore.

Rautavaara was ordered to do relief work at the Oulunkylä sports field that was under construction. His job was to make rubble out of cliff blasted rocks with a little hammer. His salary was paid in food coupons.

During these times of misery, something beautiful happened as well. The 17-year-old Tapio started dating his future wife, a shopkeeper's daughter, Liisa Handell.

His hobby, the javelin, went on despite the poverty and in 1932 Rautavaara won the FWSF regional championship. Playing the violin got more difficult though as his arms started getting wider because of the physical relief work he was doing. However, he made his debut as a singer at a closing ceremony of a sports contest and the Christmas party of his sports club, among others.

In the 1930's, Tapio spent altogether three winters as a "fool" – hammering rubble at the sports field. Now and then he would find more reasonable jobs. For a while he worked as a helper to a well maker and fixed railways. He spent one summer as a lumberjack in Padasjoki and realised that the only way out of this misery would be through sports.

He got his first long-term job as a dispatcher at a co-operative mill in Helsinki. Even his mother cried happy tears that day.

One Man's War

In 1936 Tapio got called up to the army and served the country for nine months in the navy. During his time in the army he got to participate in the Workers' Olympics in Antwerp, achieving silver in the javelin.

When the Winter War began in 1939, Tapio Rautavaara, then 24 years old, reported for service. There was, however, no need for marines as there were more trained men than there were places on the ships. He continued his work at the mill also during the war. At times he would monitor the Helsinki airspace from the rooftop of the mill but never had to fire any shots.

Many people felt bitter about the Moscow Peace Treaty that ended the Winter War. The solution that was reached seemed more like a truce than permanent peace, therefore the Continuation War didn't come as much of a surprise. When Finland stormed towards the eastern boarder in the summer of '41, together with the Germans, Tapio's services were also needed.

"My experiences from that time are just flashes of one man's war", he says in his memoirs. He never wanted to place himself on an exact spot on the great wheel of world history.

The war left its mark on Tapio and destroyed his belief in the church. He has said that later in his life he tried to make up for the things he was forced to do in the war.

In the Continuation War his friends gave him the nickname “Daddy” since he was several years older than them. This father figure also became the entertainer. He started off by singing and playing the guitar but soon was chosen to be the announcer in the Maaselkä radio that was founded in Karhumäki. His job also included singing. The signal of the radio station reached the border area of the Soviet Union and, reportedly, his voice was well appreciated on the other side of the border as well as in Finland.

There was also a sports field in Karhumäki, which gave him the opportunity to practise his javelin throwing. Sometimes he would get some amazing results. He is said to have thrown over eighty meters while practising in 1943, well over the record of the time. Measured only by a friend and witnessed by a few local elderly ladies, the throw was left outside official statistics.

Principal Lover

When the war ended, Tapio was 29 years old, clearly past his best athlete years. He had never gotten to show off his top condition on international fields, but in the 1944 Finnish Championships he showed that he was still the best thrower in the country.

He felt a big need to show what he was made of and decided to pursue the 1948 London Olympics. His coach gave him the permission and the results of months of systematic training are well known: the only Olympic gold medal in athletics that Finland got between 1948 and 1964.

Tapio had changed during the war, and not only because of his encounters at the front. He was now a married man. He had said yes to Liisa’s proposal letter and they got married on his first furlough.

He was now being offered a lot better jobs than that at the mill. The artists that had visited the Maaselkä radio during the war had spread the word of the handsome singing Tapio across the country. He got booked on many gigs and Toivo Särkkä from FS Film was training him to be a movie star. The first Rautavaara film was made already in 1945, a year before his first recording. His movies were often filled with melodrama, music and romance. He would often be casted as the principal lover.

Peter von Bagh, a Finnish film historian and director, has argued that the film makers didn’t make full use of Tapio’s natural charisma as they wrote a lot of lines for him that sounded unnatural. Tapio himself enjoyed making movies but admitted that the romance people associate with it is usually not there.

He earned his reputation as a man of common people, mainly as an athlete and a performing musician – as himself. “Finns appreciate sweat more than anything”, Rautavaara has commented after his fame rose significantly through winning the Olympic gold medal.

Rillumarei

The job of a top athlete didn't pay as well in the 40's as it does now. Also Rautavaara had to make his money some other way. With time he gave up his job at the mill after realising that he made more money as a performing musician and actor. He never wanted to work in the theatre as he didn't really see himself as a real actor and he didn't believe that working in a theatre would be lucrative.

In 1945 he was performing at Puistola community hall in Helsinki. During intermission a man came and presented himself as Reino Helismaa. The two bonded immediately and formed a twosome that would go into Finnish entertainment history.

Tapio realised that "Repe" was a great lyricist and singer, mainly singing kupletti songs - comic songs. Helismaa wrote Rautavaara's first hit song *Reissumies ja Kissa* and soon they got on tour together. Later the line-up was completed with accordion player Esa Pakarinen.

Rautavaara described the trio as the "terrific rillumarei threesome of the later 1940's" – rillumarei means the type of entertainment, based on kupletti music, that was performed at evening parties in the 40's and 50's, after the war. The venues would fill up all around Finland – people wanted to forget the bleakness of the war and come listen to the humorous music that included some more serious bits as well. Cars were a rarity, so people would arrive at the venue on bikes. The trio had to travel only 20 miles to the next venue to find a whole new audience.

While on tour, they got to know the nation and sometimes they'd have to be careful, too. The jokes that people found funny in Lapland, people in Parkano might have frowned upon.

Rautavaara was now making money for his family by singing. In 1948 his family grew as their third daughter was born. They also started to slowly build a house on Teinintie in Oulunkylä.

The Only Father

Teinintie is a sympathetic street with beautiful houses lined up. This is where Tapio took off on his countless tours, from the comfort of his home.

The stone base is the only thing left of Rautavaara's old house. Opera singer Raimo Sirkiä caused a stir when he took down the house and built an impressive stone house on the foundations. Raimo Sirkiä has now moved out as well and the house has a new owner.

I can tell by the way the neighbours look at me that I'm surely not the first one to come and wander around the house. But it turns out that they don't have any memories of Rautavaara either: "We're new here."

Rautavaara's three daughters grew up in the Teinintie house. Two of them still live nearby and one has moved to Kouvola. The daughters have already reached middle age but can undoubtedly tell us something about their father.

“We had a countryside childhood in central Helsinki”, Leena Rautavaara, Tapio’s youngest daughter, recalls. She says that as children they didn’t worry so much about their father being away a lot. “We had our mother, two grandmothers and the neighbour’s kids. There wasn’t much time to think about how much dad was away.”

Next to her is big sister, the first-born of the family, Irma Rautavaara-Lehmuskoski. “Touring was dad’s job”, she adds.

When on tour, Tapio would also remember his family. The packages sent from his singing trips in the US were the most special to the girls. These gifts would include high fashion skirts and rare vinyl albums. “Elvis, Paul Anka, Pat Boone and Marty Robbins, who sang those country and western songs”, Leena lists.

We always talk about Tapio Rautavaara as a singer, an athlete or a film star. But what kind of a father was he?

“We have no other dad to compare to”, Leena says. “He was the one and only for us. He was nice and in a good mood when he came home and always told us those jokes of his. We were rather the guinea pigs for his jokes.”

Village Celeb

Tapio Rautavaara has a legendary reputation as a raconteur, but he never talked to his daughters about the war and the depression. “He didn’t talk and we didn’t ask”, Irma says.

Leena Rautavaara says she understood that Tapio was eventually quite the loner. “Afterwards I’ve been able to be also a bit critical of him. He didn’t know how to be a father in the sense that he would’ve taken us along to his hobbies, like archery.” says Irma.

Irma was once chauffeuring Tapio on his midsummer concert tour but other than that the girls rarely went to his gigs. “It might be that dad didn’t think there was anything special to the gigs. So why would he have taken his kids there?” Leena ponders.

Tapio was a village celebrity in Oulunkylä already before his big national breakthrough. While as a child Tapio had been called a fatherless child by his fellow pupils, his daughters experienced quite the opposite. “Everytime there was a new kid in school, the first thing they were told is that *that* is Rautavaara’s daughter. It continued in the work life as well.”

The girls haven’t been bothered by their father’s fame. It has been a part of their lives since the beginning. Tapio himself has said that at times it took a lot of effort to keep his feet on the ground, to be able to ignore the ever increasing offers and temptations brought on by his fame.

However, the fame didn’t happen over night – it was the result of a lot of hard work over a long period of time. “The more you have to work to make it, the stronger the foundation will be”, Tapio has said.

He almost prophetically talked about the celebrity culture of today, stars coming and going in an instant. “The celebrities of today often gain fame too fast”, Leena Rautavaara says. “Maybe that is why their marriages don’t last. When Tapio came home from the war, the movies, sports and other things came little by little. Mom and dad grew together with the fame.”

Rautavaara always talked about his wife in a very respectful manner and said that finding her was the greatest accomplishment of his life. “Liisa has kept me whole”, he said.

Sometimes Tapio’s fame reached a cult-like status and people would come to the house in Oulunkylä in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the troubadour mowing the lawn, Irma says. The girls had a difficult time trying to understand what made their father so interesting.

Despite the success, the Rautavaara family wanted to lead a normal life. “Mom taught us that if someone asks how much some thing had cost, we’d just reply three half-burnt wooden pennies”, says Leena.

The family had a house in Oulunkylä and a summer cottage in Sipoo. That was all that was needed.

Not a Schlager Star

Tapio Rautavaara wanted to keep his distance with the traditional Finnish schlager music. For him, as a storyteller, schlager music represented monotonous love babble. He then became known for only recording songs that had some textual content in them.

Reino Helismaa was the most important lyricist when considering Rautavaara’s career, although his long and extensive career does include other lyricists as well. The most important conductors were probably Toivo Kärki and George de Godzinsky.

Kärki and Helismaa were the unbeatable forces working behind the entertainment industry in the post-war Finland. Their collaboration resulted in songs that Rautavaara memorably interpreted. Rautavaara himself knew that the line-up was unique: “It was such a blessing that Reino Helismaa, Toivo Kärki and myself happened to be born roughly at the same time. Helismaa wrote the lyrics, Kärki composed the music and I burred them to the people.” Each a master in their own field, they have released such famous songs as *Rakovalkealla*, *Peltoniemen hintriikan surumarssi*, *Lapin Jenkka* and *Reppu ja reissumies*.

The Break-up

Kärki and Helismaa’s co-operation was unbroken, whereas Rautavaara and Helismaa sometimes drifted apart for long periods of time. In 1950 the men were again touring Finland together with Esa Pakarinen when Rautavaara all of a sudden decided to break up the line-up, now at the top of its success.

Tapsa reasoned that if they’d each be performing on their own, they would be making more money per person. He was probably also growing tired of the constant touring. Hotels being a rare luxury, they most often had to spend their nights in hostels or farmhouses. Being around the same faces every day must have gotten boring, too.

The break-up was a blow in the face for Helismaa and Pakarinen. Helismaa was still a rather unknown lyricist and Pakarinen only a background musician. It wasn't as easy for them to continue on their own as it was for the "gold medallist / movie star" Tapio Rautavaara, whose name was selling their concerts.

Rautavaara has later said that breaking up the combo has since benefitted the whole entertainment music and show business scene in Finland. As it happened, Toivo Kärki hired Helismaa and during the years they have created countless movies, revues and music together. Esa Pakarinen rose to fame later as well, as he starred as Pekka Puupää in a series of films, written by Helismaa.

The Lone Wolf

Breaking up a successful tour shows the contradiction of Rautavaara's character. On the one hand he was a common man who understood the difficulties people had as he had had a very difficult childhood and youth himself. He often sang of issues that were important to him as if from the bottom of his heart. On the other hand, underneath his vagabond exterior was an artist who knew his own worth, and knew it well. Toivo Kärki knew this, too:

"There was something artificial about him when he was young, a mock masculinity, that I really didn't appreciate. He wanted to be above us somehow as we were playing schlager and he didn't think much of it. Amongst musicians he was a lone wolf, envied by others and despised by others", Kärki writes in his memoirs.

Reino Helismaa died of a long-term illness in 1965. He and Rautavaara had, however, patched things up by that. After the passing of his friend, Rautavaara returned to the studio to record some songs that Helismaa and Kärki had once written for him but which he had turned down. Some of these songs, for example *Kulkurin iltatähti* and *Reppu ja reissumies*, remain to be among his biggest hits.

Kärki says that Rautavaara got to his senses with time and wasn't as arrogant anymore. In his memoir, the conductor recalls the time when Rautavaara came to record the songs that he had previously turned down. "None of the other executives at Fazer Music cared for him at that time. Now people can't even remember anyone else having sung those songs."

Towards the end of his memoir, Kärki states that "after considering all that was good and all that was bad about Rautavaara, I only have positive things to say about him."

Out With the Old, In With the New

In the 60's, a lot of structural changes happened in the Finnish society. These were bound to affect the life of a performing artist. As the standard of living rose, the TV became more common and some of the audience stayed at home watching TV instead of going to the concerts. At the same time, a brand new youth culture, influenced rather by rock'n'roll than the schlager tradition, was spreading over Finland. Instrumental rock music bands, with

electric guitars as their leading instrument, were gaining foothold over the previous generation rillumarei singers.

“Our group just could not compete with the young and long-haired boys, rocking on stage.” Rautavaara has stated. The old school guy would sometimes be pretty confused in the changing, modern, world. He used to have pretty heated discussions with the family over dinner.

“I remember how dad used to go on about how awful the youth were. Just drinking and making out all the time. At the end of the day, dad was really virtuous”, Leena Rautavaara says.

Already in the 50's, as he made a U-turn from being a fierce javelin thrower to being a team world champion in archery, he showed his capability to change. Therefore not even the always changing world could leave him unemployed.

Little by little, the bigger venues were giving way to smaller performances, topping-out parties and shows at shopping centres. According to his own words, Tapsa had “a sense of a vagabond, which was appreciated by construction men, and a little bit of a cheap jack, which appealed to shopkeepers”.

He also acted in five movies in the 60's. He made his last appearance on the big screen in 1970. Tapsa was also seen on TV when he co-hosted a music programme with Repe Helismaa.

Rautavaara continued recording until his last year, although the pace slowed down towards the end. Nevertheless, his dark voice remained at the top of radio playlists regardless of what went on elsewhere. This has not changed to date.

A Couple of Bottles of Algerian

Tapio Rautavaara stayed sober well until his late thirties. Partly to fill the void caused by ending his career in sports and partly to compensate his rough life in entertainment, he, too, had the occasional drink or two.

“Hey, Miss, give us a couple of bottles of Algerian red wine, to keep the smile on my face”, Tapio has been quoted to say at the liquor store.

Nevertheless, Rautavaara had a strong sense of honour and self-discipline. He would therefore sometimes stay sober for several months at a time. He was very well aware of the deceitfulness of his profession, as every day was another chance to get utterly drunk, for free. These experiences helped him load up his song *Tuopin jäljet* (The Marks of my Pint), also a Kärki-Helismaa production, with a lot of emotion.

In spite of the temptations, Tapio tried to look after his health by swimming regularly. After his morning swim he'd have a lot of spare time before his concert in the evening. He often spent this time at Finnlevy studios in Pitäjänmäki, Helsinki, where a young aspiring lyricist, Vexi Salmi, would love to listen to the stories of the master raconteur.

“Most young people at the studio were not into listening to an old man’s stories. I was always interested in sports and past times. Tapsa was great to talk with and I kept asking him for more and more stories. Tapsa used to love that. We were drinking coffee and smoking so many cigarettes that the room would turn blue from all the smoke”, Salmi thinks back on the 60’s.

According to Salmi, Rautavaara knew also how to listen, and despite the times changing, he always had an understanding for the youth as well. “There was solidarity in the music business. The atmosphere was rather a supportive than a dismissive one.”

A Jolly Good Fellow

There’s a bunch of youngsters sitting by a hot dog place at the Oulunkylä shopping centre. As 21st century teenagers, they live in a world of constant flow of media where the music supply is just too much for one to take in. Is there an empty slot in today’s music for Tapsa Rautavaara’s production?

Two of the kids shake their heads but one knows that he was a good javelin thrower. “There’s a park named after him, too. Turn right after that pizza place and pub over there.”

The park is where they said it would be. Right in the middle of a little green area there is a statue of Rautavaara – a tall man playing the guitar for a swan standing next to him. The monument is Oulunkylä’s way to honour its own boy. “A jolly good fellow he was, although sometimes a bit too proud”, says a man, sitting on the bench.

I think I’ve seen what I need in Oulunkylä but there’s one thing still bothering me. What made Tapio Rautavaara so special? I mean, Finland has always had its share of good singers.

Vexi Salmi has an answer: “I can’t think of another artist as masculine and as Finnish as Tapio Rautavaara was. Malmstén, for example, has marvellous melodies but they are not as touching. They are just a fiddle-faddle of love.”

According to Salmi, Rautavaara’s songs are stories about real life in ballad form. “They were Finnish country music, before that genre was even invented.” Rautavaara’s influence in other areas of life was just as essential. “There are few men in the world who have an Olympic gold medal, a world championship and one hell of a career in entertainment.”

Toivo Kärki has said that in the big world Rautavaara, Helismaa and Pakarinen would have been “dollar millionaires”. These men probably didn’t worry about the millions they never made. The war had turned them into artists and in the heart of their entertainment was always the need to entertain only this one nation and help them forget the bad times they had had.

The Final Act

The Malmi cemetery in Helsinki is a massive place where one needs a map to find anything. This is the place where also Tapio Rautavaara was brought after his accidental death in 1979.

There is a certain irony to the fact that Tapio, always very athletic, should injure himself severely during sports of all things. He slipped and hit his head in a swimming hall in Tikkurila. At the health centre they just presumed he was drunk and sent him home. Rautavaara died of cerebral haemorrhage the following night.

At only 64 years, many think he left too early. "I have often thought about Tapsa's passing", Vexi Salmi says. "Tapsa carried himself with posture. He was a very physical person but with a lot of softness to him as well. There was a great deal of masculinity in his performance also. Had he lived until he was 80 years old, I don't know how he would have handled the aging and the physical decline."

"Cruelly thinking, one might say that Rautavaara left at the right moment", states Salmi. This way people never got to see him age strongly. "It could've affected his career or the image that was left of him in people's minds. More often than not, the last years are what people remember others by, not their younger years."

This is what happened to Olavi Virta, for example. As a singer he was a legend, often compared to Rautavaara, but people also remember the image of an old man, crushed by illness.

Rautavaara would be amazed if he could live in the 21st century. What would he say if he knew he was still famous, generation after generation?

"I'm sure he'd be very pleased, of course", Leena Rautavaara imagines. "Maybe he'd sneer a bit but inside he'd be very flattered."

Rautavaara's last resting place is in Malmi cemetery, under a cherry tree. The Olympic rings and a military badge are attached to his tombstone. Later on, his wife Liisa was buried next to him. A Lotta Svärd sign was attached in memory of her work.

I see now how impossible it is to find out the whole truth about a man that I had no personal relationship with. Even to his contemporaries, he was a man of common people and yet a lonely traveller whose deepest thoughts were only open to few.

In his version of a traditional song, *Kun minä kotoani läksin*, Rautavaara sings: "My longing won't fade here in the company of strange, until the rose of a slave blossoms by my grave."

Today, someone has brought a bouquet of fresh tulips at the graveside.

This story is based on the Rautavaara biography, *Päivääkään en vaihtaisi pois*, by Juhani Tamminen, *Toivo Kärki – Siks oon mä suruinen* by Maarit Niiniluoto, *Kulkurin taival* compilation and Yleisradio archives.