

Collector: Jim Leary

January 24, 1981

Informant: Richard Kumpula, Bill Joppi,
Lempi Luoma, Charles Karye, and other members
of the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church
Marengo, Wisconsin

When in Iron River on January 22 I stopped in at the Midland Coop grocery store. Charles Karye and Lempi Luoma had told me that one of their church "speakers," Richard Kumpula, was a butcher there. I found him behind the meat counter, introduced myself, explained the project, and asked if I might come to the weekend service. Mr. Kumpula said that would be fine. Roughly sixty, with greying hair, glasses, and a fair complexion, Mr. Kumpula's quiet manner immediately struck me as that of a man at once humble and open, yet strong. He told me that he wasn't trained to preach but that his neighbors had asked him to be one of their speakers and he consented. He doesn't prepare sermons, he told me, but tries to pick a text then let "the Lord speak through me." I had heard that Mr. Kumpula also wrote songs that were sung in the church. Again, he has no training as a musician, but words (in English and Finnish) and tunes come to him from time to time. He spoke briefly about the Finnish language, his first language, and how it seems more expressive and beautiful to him than English. Finally, he told me that some of the people might "get to rejoicing" from time to time during the service. I shouldn't be alarmed or amazed because this simply happens. Apparently, it has happened to Mr. Kumpula without his being fully conscious of what was occurring.

With all this in mind, I arrived at Marengo's Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church at about 7:20 on Saturday night. The service was to be at eight and I was the first to arrive (the place lies south and west of Marengo on County C). The church is a converted country school house, and its congregation meets on Saturday night and Sunday afternoon during the last "full weekend." of each month (i.e. when both Saturday and Sunday fall within the month). A few minutes later a van arrived bearing a couple and half a dozen or so children. I recognized the woman as Mrs. Luoma's North York neighbor and I followed these people in.

Church members alternately take responsibility for acting as janitors and overseers for the congregation's lunch. Each is a fairly formidable task. Since the church meets but once a month, the janitor must heat up the furnace enough in advance of the church session. When the weekend's meetings are over, the furnace

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must be shut off again and the water pipes drained (in the winter, anyway). Those overseeing the lunch set about to making coffee, getting silverware and dishes ready, laying out the food that members bring, and cleaning up.

The church' space is amply suited to both formal services and informal gatherings with food, coffee, and Kool Aid. The building is halved by a long hallway. On one side of the hall is the "lunch room" and on the other side is the room where the service takes place (see diagram). Predictably, the lunch room has a kitchen area separated from the main floor by a long counter. Occupying the main floor are eight or so tables with benches.

The church room (I'm not sure what they call it) is larger than the lunch area and split in the middle by another hallway (again, see the diagram). Against one wall and in the middle of the room there is a raised platform with a table and two chairs. To one side of the platform is a small alcove. The two speakers hold forth from the platform, while three "hymn singers" (those who select and lead the hymns) occupy the alcove. There were rows of what appeared to be old movie theatre chairs facing the platform and arranged on either side of the central hallway. Significantly, there were no icons, posters, or any kinds of religious objects in the area save for some hymn books in the singers alcove and Finnish and English Bibles on the platform table.

After surveying the layout, I returned to the church' main hallway. Besides supporting coat hooks, the hallway wall also held a large picture frame filled with old and recent photographs of people who I assumed to be deceased members of the church. Among them was a creased shot of a Mr. Lahti and his wife. According to accounts I heard later, the man and his wife were members of the Marengo congregation who were returning to Finland on the Titanic. According to survivors, Mrs. Lahti had the opportunity of being saved, but remained with her husband who preached a sermon and blessed people as the ship went down. Several people told me this story and it seemed pretty clear to me that the pictures on the wall were not simply pictures, but reminders to the faithful of the exemplary lives of their past brethren.

Beyond holding coats and pictures, the hall was also a space wherein people met each other. It was customary for those who entered to greet everyone else with a handshake and the words "God's peace." Since the services were held only once a month, they also served as a kind of homecoming. Many of those gathered were inter-

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related and, once a month, they return home to see their relatives and fellow worshippers. There were people in attendance from Ironwood, Eau Claire, Green Bay, Esco, Minnesota as well as from nearby towns like Mellen and Brule.

It was in the hall that I greeted Charles Karye, Lempi Luoma, Fel Milanowski's friend Arne Kovala, and Richard Kumpula. Once Mr. Kumpula arrived I asked again about setting up the tape recorder and he showed me where I might put it. So as to catch the sermon, the congregation's response, the work of the hymn singers, and any possible sounds of "rejoicing," I pointed the two microphones in an arc which, I hoped, would span the entire church. While I was setting up, I was surrounded by young children. It is worth noting that children were present in abundance. They were swarming about the place, chasing one another, and making a general racket. No one was trying to keep them, as might be the case in a Catholic church, from running around in a "holy" place since these people, in keeping with their faith, regard their building as simply a building where services happen to take place.

By the time I had finished fooling with the equipment, it was time for the services to begin. As the tape index will indicate, the event followed a definite structure. First came a hymn in Finnish. I wasn't quite prepared for the way in which it was performed. I knew, of course, from the singing of Charles Karye and Lempi Luoma, that the singing would be unaccompanied and in a slow paced, chant mode. But I was expecting the kind of half-hearted group participation that marks singing at most congregations. Instead, as the hymn singers commenced, all burst out in loud, full throated voices. The sound was so powerful and eerie that I expected the roof to float away. I had to jump up and turn down the levels on the tape recorder.

Following the hymn, Richard Kumpula gave a biblical reading in Finnish. It was brief and then it was Bill Joppi's turn to speak. Apparently the two speakers trade off preaching in Finnish and English. One night one preaches in English and the other in Finnish, the next day they reverse it. Joppi began slowly with a reading. He is a short, red faced, compact man of around sixty, with black horn-rimmed glasses and an intense, fervant manner. His speaking began slowly with a reading, but then he began to speak extemporaneously. As he went on his words, at first halting, began to flow together quickly and rhythmically. While I could not

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decipher the Finnish words, it was clear that the man was carried away by what he and the faithful called the "Holy Spirit." His style was formulaic in the manner of "old time" southern preachers and although he never got up from his chair, he generated a tremendous amount of energy and emotional power: leaning forward, gesticulating, occasionally thumping his chair or the table for emphasis. Although no one began "rejoicing" while he spoke (I was later told that my presence, as might be expected, inhibited people), I could easily see how they might respond powerfully to the emotional intensity of Joppi's preaching. Sometimes he came near to weeping and other times, as his face shone or he abruptly altered his rhythmic style, those present laughed. After about half an hour, Bill stopped, then gave a reading in English.

Taking this reading as his text, Richard Kumpula began to speak. He was not nearly so fiery as his counterpart, but his performance was equally gripping. He spoke in his quiet, humble manner and in a voice filled with sincerity and emotion. As Joppi's reading was devoted to Christ's use of parables, Kumpula stressed that Christ used these parables to show the people that religious truth was not a complex matter, but simple and within the understanding of everyone. Kumpula went on to stress several basic tenets of the congregation's beliefs: 1) that faith, not good works nor worldly stature, brings salvation; and 2) that faith is not to be gained through study and rational means, but by opening yourself up to the spiritual.

Following Kumpula's talk, which also lasted roughly half an hour, two more hymns were sung. The particular hymns were chosen by the song leaders who signalled the congregation by posting a number on a board suspended from the roof above their alcove. This time two hymns were sung, both in Finnish. With this, the service ended. Charles Karye bounded from his stand and asked if I'd ever heard such singing. I had to tell him no.

Then, as I began to pack up the recorder, Dick Kumpula invited me to stay for coffee. Mrs. Luoma also came up and told me there would be singing in the lunch room and that I might set up my recorder on a counter. When I entered the lunch room, a considerable feast was spread out: cheeses, sliced sausages, breads, numerous cakes, coffee, and Kool Aid. I fell into line behind Dick Joppi who was understandably a little hoarse from his preaching.

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We sat down together and I asked him a little about himself. He was born into a Finnish community in Bovey, Minnesota, but married a Marengo girl and has lived in the area for forty years. Religion is clearly the dominant force in his life and our talk was filled with his beliefs. He stressed that, in this church, no one person was better than the other. Although he was a speaker, he wasn't Reverend Joppi to his fellows, but simply "Bill." Along with Dick Kumpula, he took his turn at sweeping and cleaning the place. As he espoused his fundamentalist beliefs with references to the Bible, he told me about a recent split in their church. Apparently annoyed by the behavior of children - who casually ran in and out during the service and were a little noisy - some people had wanted to have services for adults. Joppi and the others objected on the grounds that there was no biblical precedent for such separation.

While we were talking Charles Karye and some others began singing as they sat around the tables. Apparently, during the service, only "hymns" are sung. Many of these hymns derive from Martin Luther and other known composers. The "songs," however, appear to be confined to the informal gathering after the formal service. Many of these were composed by members of the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Sect, including Richard Kumpula.

Employed in the singing were a half dozen song books, some in Finnish, many of the rest were English translations from the Finnish. I noted down the following:

Uskovaisten Virsia (Ironwood, Michigan), hard bound

Songs of Believers (n.d., n.p.) 90 songs

Elma K. Anderson, Translations of Finnish Hymns, Volume II (1951, 48 pp.)
Volume III (1959, 82 pp.), Volume IV (1962, 24 pp.), and Volume V (1963,
32 pp.).

Most of the songbooks had no printer's information. None had tunes. Presently the congregation is having a new songbook printed which will contain all of their current books. The work is being done by a printer in Hancock and will reportedly cost eight thousand dollars. It's planned to sell the books at \$6.50 each, with the balance of the publication costs being made up by donations.

The singing was initially in Finnish and emanated from Charles Karye. Since my recorder was shelved on a counter, I pulled the plug on the machine and, using battery power, set it up on a table in front of Karye. The first few songs were in English and most came from the "Red Book," Anderson's Volume three. The

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singers were divided between older people, married women, and young girls. Small children were either asleep or laying in the church area. Meanwhile, there were a good many men standing near the room's doorways or in the hall - smoking and talking.

One friendly young man, named Nuutinen (I hope I've spelled that right) assisted me by looking up and showing me which songs were being sung. He told me that sometimes people sing for only half an hour or so. On other occasions, singing went on until after midnight. Singing was especially intense around Labor Day when their half dozen or so kindred churches would all gather together for a combined service.

As the singing went on, I also talked with Richard Kumpula. He told me about one of the songs he'd written. Before meat cutting, he (I think) sold insurance around north central Wisconsin. He spoke about traveling one day around Owen. The entire week had been frustrating and he was feeling a bit depressed. As he drove, however, a song began to come to him. He pulled over, wrote down the ten verses, and realized that the week hadn't been so bad after all.

While the singing and conversation went on, I began to realize that, although nearly all people gathered were open and friendly toward me, others were a bit distant, and some suspicious. I had tried to minimize the latter emotion by speaking to as many people as possible prior to my coming about my reasons for recording. The word hadn't filtered out completely, however, and there were some who didn't know quite what I was doing or why I was doing it. Perhaps I should have asked if I could make a brief announcement, before the service, about my purpose, but I thought Kumpula might do the introductions and I didn't know quite what to expect. At any rate, one of Mrs. Luoma's daughters-in-law put me on the spot.

I had mixed emotions about this. On the one hand, it was good to get everything out in the open; on the other hand fieldwork, despite the fact that I enjoy doing it, always makes me a little uncomfortable. Now I was more uncomfortable than usual. In response to persistent questions about why I was doing what I was doing, and how I was going to "interpret" the material, I did my best to explain the purpose of the project and how I always try to honestly represent the point of view of those I record. Pretty clearly, I was treading on sensitive ground. Known to some in the area as "holy jumpers," these people were understandably conscious of the

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fact that some outsider might make a brief foray into their midst, make a few observations, then write up some poorly thought out, sensationa, negative statement. This sort of thing has happened plenty to Old Regular or "Primitive" Baptists in the south, and it only makes sense for Marengo's congregation to be on their guard against exploitation.

As I explained my purposes to Mrs. Luoma's daughter-in-law, I noticed that a good many people turned their heads to listen. Finally I was talking to a dozen or so people. And while I felt uncomfortable - wondering how they were responding - the entire exchange was certainly worthwhile.

Another experience that left me with mixed emotions was the propensity of various people to ask me what church I went to. I told them that I was brought up Catholic, but that I didn't like the social expectations and narrowness that so often accompanies organized religion. That statement raised a few eyebrows and several people encouraged me to come again to their church so that the Holy Spirit might fill me. While I appreciated their offer and concern, I also tend to recoil from the hard sell approach to religion. There are far too many groups in the world, with conflicting points of view, who are convinced that their vision is the "true" one. Consequently, I recoil whenever someone tells me, however sincerely, that I should do what they think I should do, or else be condemned to some awful fate. I was much more comfortable dealing with the "soft sell" style of Dick Kumpula and Charles Karye who were content to tell me their beliefs in an open, straight forward fashion and let me form my own conclusions. I suppose this paragraph goes to show that, within this congregation (as is the case within any congregation), there are people with diverse personal styles.

While the foregoing exchanges were going on, the singing ceased and the crowd thinned out. There would be another service the next day and they would all meet again. It was nearly midnight as I packed up the equipment, thanked those gathered, and drove home. The air was clear and starry, it was an amazing thirty degrees out; it had been quite a night.