



# To the Undiscovered Country: Facing Death in Early Twentieth-Century Finnish Poorhouses

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## RELIGION, THE POORHOUSE, AND MODERNIZATION

Northern European workhouses and poorhouses<sup>1</sup> were an outcome of nineteenth-century liberalist legislation, according to which an able-bodied individual could only receive poor relief at an institution.

<sup>1</sup>In the Finnish scholarly discussion, the term “workhouse” (*työlaitos*) is used to refer to the state-maintained penal institutions for hardened vagrants and other criminals, while the term “poorhouse” (*köyhäintalo*) is used for the locally managed municipal poor relief institutions established after the poor relief reform of 1879. The Finnish poorhouses were decidedly smaller than the English New Poor Law workhouses but were likewise intended to implement “the workhouse test”, followed the principle of “less eligibility” and had resident staff. This sets them apart from the earlier Finnish attempts at institutional care for the poor, that is, the old parish poorhouses (*köyhäintupa*) that usually lacked the obligation to work as well as resident staff. For similarities between English and Finnish poor law institutions, see

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S. Katajala-Peltomaa, R. M. Toivo (eds.), *Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religion*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Experience, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92140-8\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92140-8_10)

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Conditions in a poorhouse were austere in order to deter people from resorting to poor relief and to punish those who did.<sup>2</sup> In Finland—at that time annexed to the Russian Empire as an autonomous Grand Duchy—a network of poorhouses was built after the passing of the 1879 Poor Relief Act. Finnish poorhouses were managed by local administrative parishes but monitored by state poor relief officials: an Inspector and three Instructors. The day-to-day management of the poorhouse was often entrusted to a female director, a matron.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian patriarchal order that underpinned the poorhouse system took the form of the constant surveillance of the inmates and the discipline imposed on them. Religion played an important role in this process. Previous research has shown that while the Finnish Poor Relief Act rested upon a Lutheran understanding of poverty, there were no guidelines for religious practice in poorhouses in principle. An ample body of instructions was instead distributed by state poor relief officials through guidebooks and their regular inspections of poorhouses.<sup>4</sup>

In the guidebooks, daily prayers, for instance, were portrayed as a disciplinary practice on the one hand. Prayers were a compulsory part of the rigid daily routine of the poorhouse, the meaning of which was to familiarize inmates with the benefits of a regular lifestyle, and to make the inmates control themselves through self-imposed conformity to contemporary upper- and middle-class norms. Prayers were normally led by the matron but occasionally also by visiting pastors or preachers.<sup>5</sup>

Annola, “Maternalism and Workhouse Matrons”; for British discussion on terminology, see Reinartz and Schwarz, “Introduction”, 2; King, “Poverty, Medicine, and the Workhouse”, 230–232.

<sup>2</sup> King, *Poverty and Welfare in England*; Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*; Markkola, “The Lutheran Nordic Welfare States”; Annola, “Maternalism and Workhouse Matrons”.

<sup>3</sup> The geographical area of modern Finland formed the eastern part of the Kingdom of Sweden until 1809, when the area was annexed to the Russian Empire as a Grand Duchy with a central administration and legislative bodies of its own. Finland gained independence in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917. For more on the ideal of female leadership in Finnish workhouses, see Annola, “Maternalism and Workhouse Matrons”. For more on how taking up the role of a matron affected individual women’s lives, see Annola, “Out of Poverty”, 145–155; Annola, “A Place in the Sun?”, 190–195.

<sup>4</sup> Annola and Miettinen, “Piety and Prayers”, forthcoming 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Annola and Miettinen, “Piety and Prayers”, forthcoming 2022. Christian devotion, the “living fear of God”, was an integral part of the mindset of a good nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poorhouse matron.

On the other hand, it appears that prayers were also expected to have a spiritual relevance to poorhouse inmates. By choosing her words wisely, the matron could instil “the fear of God” into the inmates’ minds and help them meekly resign to their fate.<sup>6</sup> In order to truly reach the inmates’ souls, the matron was not to repeat the same prayer day after day but instead keep her protégées in her prayers. She was to bring their everyday worries to the Lord. It was stated in one of the guidebooks that an honest, “living” prayer like this would make the inmates feel welcome in the institution “in the name of Jesus”, despite their flawed lives, and encourage an inner change in them.<sup>7</sup> While the guidance literature thus prepared some room for personal devotion in everyday life in the poorhouse, it should also be noted that a docile, devout inmate was regarded as an easy one to control. Thus, ultimately, devotion can be considered as one means of discipline.

Death was a regular guest in poorhouses. Despite the common image of the poorhouse as a “bastille” for the able-bodied,<sup>8</sup> most inmates were in fact infirm and died in the institution.<sup>9</sup> According to the 1879 Health Care Act, a dead body was to be buried before it was decomposed to the point where it would be harmful to its surroundings.<sup>10</sup> The rules for a Lutheran burial in Finland were stipulated by the Finnish Church Law (1869, 1908), according to which the deceased was to be buried either in a common grave or in a separate burial plot no longer than six months after death, and in all cases, a Christian funeral ceremony was to take place.<sup>11</sup> However, neither the Poor Relief Act nor the guidebooks provided any further instructions on the practicalities around the death of a

<sup>6</sup> Annola and Miettinen, “Piety and Prayers”, forthcoming 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Helsingius, *Köyhäinhoidon käsikirja*, 101–102.

<sup>8</sup> Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, 67–68, Annola, *Äiti, emäntä, virkanainen, vartija*, 49–53.

<sup>10</sup> In case it was “under certain circumstances” necessary to keep the dead body unburied for a longer period, it was to be stored “in a morgue or other such place where it would cause no harm”. Health Care Act 1879, VI, 41–42§.

<sup>11</sup> Church Law 1869, XI, 80–88§; Church Law 1908, XI, 80–88§. Unlike the Church Law of 1686, the more modern legislation no longer contained sections on, for example, the pastor’s duty of announcing the name of a dead parishioner “from the pulpit during the next service or an hour of prayer”, or on bell-ringing and preparing the body for the burial. Church Law 1686, XVIII, 1–5§. For the development of burial practices in Finland, see for example Viitaniemi, “Hautauskäytäntöjen muutos Länsi-Suomen maaseudulla”; Gardberg, *Maan poveen*.

poorhouse inmate. The sporadic source material hints that in some cases dead inmates were buried anonymously in a common grave at the expense of the local Poor Relief Board, while in other cases the relatives of the departed might volunteer to pay for a more elaborate coffin and a separate burial plot in the local cemetery.<sup>12</sup>

Previous research has identified the time between death and burial as a liminal state in which a person is no longer counted among the living members of the community but has not yet become one of its deceased members. In order to guarantee the departed a respectful and safe transformation from one stage to another, day-to-day life must be put “on hold” and a specific set of procedures must be followed. The fundamental purpose of these procedures is to draw a clear boundary between the dead and the living members of the community.<sup>13</sup> As there were no specific guidelines for dealing with the poorhouse’s dead, the liminal state was a grey area with plenty of room for negotiation and conflict.

This chapter discusses the death of two inmates at the Juuka and Liperi poorhouses in eastern Finland in the early 1900s. In both cases, the passing of the inmate resulted in a conflict, and the matron or the master of the poorhouse was publicly accused of showing disrespect to the departed and his kin. I ask how lived religion was manifested in the liminal stage, and how the conflicting understandings of a good and a bad death reflect a Lutheran society that stood at the threshold between the premodern and modern.

I understand lived religion as a set of shared everyday practices that carry a spiritual meaning or dimension. These practices relate to life in all its variety: giving birth, facing death, contracting a marriage, dealing with economic (mis)fortune or (ill) health, and carrying out daily duties. In the case of death, the practices include for instance funerary arrangements and, more precisely, dealing with the dead body. The practices are a means of establishing a link between the ordinary and the divine, and as such, they provide individuals with tools for arranging their everyday experiences and seeing purpose in their lives. These practices are negotiated within a specific community where they serve as a way of creating and maintaining communal cohesion. As such, the shared practices also mark the boundaries of the community.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief, Finnish National Archives.

<sup>13</sup> The term “liminal state” was in this context launched by Arnold van Gennep. See for example Gittings, “Thanatos ja Kleio”, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, “Religion as Experience”.

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Finland was characterized by industrialization, urbanization, democratization, and medicalization. However, the speed of modernization should not be exaggerated, and the development was not consistent throughout the country. While urban areas, inland industrial centres, coastal regions, and the old cultivated areas of southern Finland were at the forefront of modernization, the northern and eastern “hinterlands” remained untouched by railway and telephone networks, elementary schools, poorhouses, and health care facilities, and most people in these areas continued to live in a traditional way well into the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, modernization was a layered process: in all areas, there existed simultaneously modern and traditional practices. By focusing on lived religion in the Juuka and Liperi poorhouses, it is possible to yield more nuanced information about the gradual modernization of eastern Finland.

The main body of source material consists of poorhouse inspection records and digitized newspaper articles. The inspection records were produced by state poor relief officials, who inspected poorhouses on a regular basis, but also paid visits to institutions upon request if there were problems or conflicts such as in the two poorhouses in question.<sup>16</sup> As the records arose from a situation in which the normal routine in the institution was interrupted by state officials, it is likely that problems are over-represented in the material. However, it is often through these contested situations only that we may see a glimpse of the shared and negotiated practices that carried a spiritual meaning—in other words, lived religion in a poor relief institution. That being said, it is also important to bear in mind that even though the death of an inmate resulted in a conflict in the two poorhouses discussed in this chapter, this was not always the case.

This chapter proceeds in a chronological order. In the first section, the liminal state is approached through people’s reactions to an inmate’s death in Juuka poorhouse in 1905. The second section discusses the liminal state by analysing the turmoil around the dead body of an inmate in Liperi poorhouse in 1912. The findings are then summed up in the concluding section.

<sup>15</sup> Haapala, *Kun yhteiskunta hajosi*, 90–91.

<sup>16</sup> Pulma, “Valtio, vaivaiset ja kuntien itsehallinto”; Annola, “The Initiation of State Control”, 207–209.

## DEATH FAR AWAY FROM HOME

In August 1905, an inmate, a married man, suddenly died in Juuka poorhouse as a result of a “cramp-like” seizure.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the same month, a local newspaper published an open letter to Ida Karlsson, the matron of the poorhouse. The letter had been written by N. W. Troupp, a civil engineer, who was the technical manager of Juuka soapstone mine in Nunnanlahti village.<sup>18</sup> He accused the matron of delaying the death notice so the widow missed the burial of her late husband altogether.<sup>19</sup> In her open reply, the matron defended herself, explaining that as neither the poorhouse nor the widow’s cottage had a telephone, she had tried to “send the widow a word with some people”, who lived close by her and were visiting the poorhouse.<sup>20</sup> The engineer was not convinced of the matron’s explanation, maintaining that she had not done everything in her power to make sure that the widow received the notice in time. “There is no excuse for your behaviour”, he wrote, “And now a question arises: are you suited to take care of the Christian upbringing of the inmates?”<sup>21</sup>

In the end, the matron turned to the Inspector of Poor Relief for practical advice, asking how one should proceed “if an unexpected death takes place and the relatives of the departed have not arrived in three days”. She went on to explain that “in winter it is possible to keep [the departed here] for a longer time, but in summer it is difficult as there is no cold cellar in the institution”.<sup>22</sup> As a result, one of the Instructors was sent to Juuka to negotiate with the local Poor Relief Board, which took the matron’s side. The Instructor seemed equally unwilling to lay the blame on the matron, who, according to him, had always taken care of her duties in an exemplary manner. The Instructor also felt that as the death had occurred during the busy harvest time, it would have been less than ideal to disengage someone from work and send such a person to the nearest telephone,

<sup>17</sup>Torsten Lindberg to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, 29th November 1905, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:35 (Juuka), Finnish National Archives; Juuka Parish Archives, Deaths and Burials 1900–1906, 108.

<sup>18</sup>See for example *Karjalatar*, September 8, 1904; *Karjalatar*, August 14, 1906.

<sup>19</sup>N.W. Troupp, “Open letter to Ida Karlsson”, *Karjalatar*, August 28, 1905.

<sup>20</sup>Ida Karlsson, “Open letter to N.W. Troupp”, *Karjalatar*, September 5, 1905.

<sup>21</sup>N.W. Troupp, “Open letter to Ida Karlsson”, *Karjalatar*, September 26, 1905.

<sup>22</sup>Ida Karlsson to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, October 26, 1905, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:35 (Juuka), Finnish National Archives. It is unclear whether the length of the liminal period in summer, exactly three days, was derived from the 1879 Health Care Act, or if it was dictated by common sense.

which was seven kilometres away from the poorhouse. The Instructor ended up laying the blame on the visitors, who were supposed to deliver the death notice to the widow but had proved negligent.<sup>23</sup> Although no further measures were taken, the matron resigned the following year.<sup>24</sup>

Juuka poorhouse had opened in 1904, one year prior to the incident. The premises comprised a main building for 60 inmates, an infirmary with 20 beds, and a separate building for the mentally ill. The institution was of considerable size for a Finnish rural poorhouse, and as the main building had been constructed according to the model blueprints introduced by state poor relief officials, the premises were intended to be functional.<sup>25</sup> However, both the matron and the Instructor indicated that the poorhouse, albeit new, was not modern enough: in their opinion, the conflict had arisen because there was neither a proper cold mortuary nor a telephone in the institution. What they failed to see or express was that these technical inadequacies were a problem only because the man in question had died in an *institution*, far away from his home village.

Previous research has suggested that the transition from the so-called traditional death at home to the “modern death” in an institution took place relatively late in Finland.<sup>26</sup> While the local people in Juuka may not have regarded a death in a poorhouse as a bad death by default, it certainly was an unfamiliar one to them, as they were still new to the poorhouse. Death in the rudimentary hospitals had traditionally been reserved for the urban poor who could not afford a doctor at home or were ill with an infectious disease.<sup>27</sup> As there were no hospitals in rural areas, poorhouses were the first care institutions to intervene in traditional agrarian communities and separate the poor from their kith and kin.<sup>28</sup> Even though poorhouses were preferably located in parish centres or close by, there were always some inmates who hailed from the more distant villages. In the Juuka case, the family of the departed lived in Nunnanlahti village,

<sup>23</sup>Torsten Lindberg to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, November 29, 1905, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:35 (Juuka), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>24</sup>Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:35 (Juuka), Finnish National Archives; *Vaivaishoidonneuvajat, Suomen vaivaistalojen matrikkeli*, 97.

<sup>25</sup>Vaivaishoidonneuvajat, *Suomen vaivaistalojen matrikkeli*, 96–97.

<sup>26</sup>Pajari, Miettinen and Kanerva, “Kuoleman historian ääriivivoja”, 16. For periodization of death, see Walter, *The Revival of Death*.

<sup>27</sup>Pajari, “Kuolema maalla ja kaupungissa”, 107.

<sup>28</sup>For medical care in Finnish poorhouses, see Harjula, “Health Citizenship”; Annola, “Bad Nursing?”.

26 kilometres away from the poorhouse.<sup>29</sup> Because of the geographical distance, the wife was alienated from the death of her husband, and the slow delivery of the death notice became an issue.

In his open letters, the engineer portrayed the matron as a cruel gate-keeper who had turned the inmate's death into a bad one. According to him, the matron had not respected the feelings of her fellow human beings enough to deliver an important message in time. "How would you feel if your loved one, say, your own mother, was buried at the Poor Relief Board's expense [--], and you [--] were informed neither of her death nor of the date of burial?",<sup>30</sup> the engineer asked. He went on to suggest that there were rumours of other similar incidents at the poorhouse where "as soon as death had occurred, the dead body was placed in the coffin and the lid was nailed down".<sup>31</sup> By making such remarks, the engineer proposed that the poorhouse robbed the bereaved and the community of an experience of a proper liminal stage. In his opinion, this was the very thing that turned a death in a poorhouse into a bad death.

The shared rituals that traditionally took place between death and burial were a way of recognizing the worth of the departed to the community and giving him/her a new status as one of the dead.<sup>32</sup> If these rituals were not performed in an appropriate way, or if they were not shared, the send-off was disrespectful and incomplete. Previous research has shown that throughout Europe, the preparations after death usually began by washing the dead body before rigor mortis occurred. In Finland, like elsewhere, washing was normally performed by the members of the household or a close friend of the deceased as a duty of honour, but there were also professional body washers who received the dead person's clothes as a reward for their work. The corpse was then shrouded, that is, dressed in a burial costume. In the Lutheran areas of Finland, it was customary to place the dead body on a bier (a wooden board, *ruumislauta*) in an out-building for a couple of days before placing it in a coffin.<sup>33</sup> On the funeral

<sup>29</sup>Torsten Lindberg to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, November 29, 1905, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:35 (Juuka), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>30</sup>N.W. Troupp, "Open letter to Ida Karlsson", *Karjalatar*, August 28, 1905.

<sup>31</sup>N.W. Troupp, "Open letter to Ida Karlsson", *Karjalatar*, September 26, 1905.

<sup>32</sup>Fingerroos, *Haudatut muistot*, 23–263, 271–272.

<sup>33</sup>In the Greek Orthodox areas of eastern Finland, the dressed-up body was placed in the family's place of worship, the icon corner, for three days before burial. Rytkönen, *Savupirttien kansaa*, 62; Paulaharju, *Syntymä, lapsuus ja kuolema*; Pentikäinen, *Marina Takalo*, 231;



day, people arrived at the house of mourning to take a final look at the departed, after which the funeral procession embarked on its way to church.<sup>34</sup>

For the community, shared rituals were also a means of placing the dead body under social control.<sup>35</sup> In the folk belief tradition, the dead body was regarded as a potential threat to the living. The corpse—as well as everything that had been in contact with it, such as the washing water, the bier, and even the outbuilding—were believed to be imbued with *kalma*, the infectious power of death that could be harmful to the living.<sup>36</sup> In early twentieth-century Finland, it was still considered crucially important to treat the dead body in the right way so that none of the living would get a *kalma* infection and the departed would stay in his/her grave.<sup>37</sup> The fear of the dead also comes up in the Juuka case, as the engineer alluded to another strange rumour that allegedly originated from the poorhouse: a dead body “had been placed in the outbuilding in the evening but found the next morning with its legs twisted”.<sup>38</sup> The engineer himself dismissed the rumour as a mere ghost story, but at the same time he apparently wanted to emphasize that some people felt that dying in a poorhouse was not a good thing.

It is not known how the widow of the inmate felt about the death and burial of her husband: only the debaters’ contradicting second-hand descriptions of her reaction survive. The matron explained in her open letter that she had met the widow in the parish centre a week after the incident. The matron claimed that she had then asked whether the widow was sorry for not having been able to view the dead body of her husband. According to the matron, the widow had replied calmly: “What do I care of his dead body, if only his soul were intact.”<sup>39</sup> In her account, the matron portrayed herself as a humane poorhouse director, who was compassionate enough to inquire after the widow. She also depicted the widow as an elevated mourner, who ignored the corporeal aspects of death and instead

Talve, *Suomen kansankulttuuri*, 170, 232; Gittings, “Thanatos ja Kleio”, 43–44; Koski and Moilanen, “Kuolema ja tuonpuoleinen”, 69–70.

<sup>34</sup> Pajari, “Kuolema maalla ja kaupungissa”, 112.

<sup>35</sup> Eilola and Einonen, “Peukalot silkkirievussa”, 198–199.

<sup>36</sup> Koski, *Kuoleman voimat*, 154.

<sup>37</sup> Koski, *Kuoleman voimat*, 88–89; Koski and Moilanen, “Kuolema ja tuonpuoleinen”, 90–91.

<sup>38</sup> N.W. Troupp, “Open letter to Ida Karlsson”, *Karjalatar*, September 26, 1905.

<sup>39</sup> Ida Karlsson, “Open letter to N.W. Troupp”, *Karjalatar*, September 5, 1905.

emphasized the spiritual ones. In so doing, the matron perhaps wished to hint that the engineer was, in fact, paying attention to matters that were of secondary importance when it came to judging whether the death of the poor man had been a good or a bad one.

The engineer, however, claimed that the matron was lying: according to the widow's "sworn statement", the matron had inquired no such thing. The engineer also highlighted the widow's emotional reaction: "She was not calm but instead wept bitterly."<sup>40</sup> In his version of the story, the widow was not an eloquent and devout mourner but a wretched woman whose heart was broken by the bad death of her husband.

In the end, the Juuka case presents two outsiders discussing how local people should deal with death and what kind of practices were acceptable in the liminal state. Both matron Karlsson and engineer Troupp had arrived in eastern Finland in the wake of modern innovations, a poorhouse and a soapstone mine, and by virtue of their profession, both belonged to the emerging Finnish middle class. Karlsson, who was in her early thirties, was apparently a nurse by training and had managed the newly renovated Lohja poorhouse in southernmost Finland between 1902 and 1904.<sup>41</sup> During this period, one of the Instructors reported that some people who lived in close proximity to Lohja poorhouse inflicted "many difficult moments on the matron by unfounded meddling and spreading false rumours".<sup>42</sup> Thus, it appears that the co-existence of the poorhouse and the local community was not without conflicts in southern regions, either. However, it is impossible to judge whether these recurrent problems were due to Karlsson's personality or a mismatch between modernity and the more traditional way of life.

Engineer Troupp's reasons for developing such a keen interest in the ritual aspects of death are unknown. It is possible that his intervention resulted from a desire to cultivate an appropriate public image in the turbulent times of the early 1900s. In 1905, the defeat of Russia by Japan temporarily weakened imperial Russian rule, which gave rise to a large-scale political mobilization in both Russia proper and in its dominions. In Finland, the unrest culminated in a general strike at the end of the year. It

<sup>40</sup>N.W. Troupp, "Open letter to Ida Karlsson", *Karjalatar*, September 26, 1905.

<sup>41</sup>Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:3 (Lohja), Finnish National Archives; Vaivaishoidonneuvot, *Suomen vaivaistalojen matrikkeli*, 14–15, 96–97.

<sup>42</sup>Inspection record, April 25, 1903, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:3 (Lohja), Finnish National Archives.

appears that Troupp, who had in 1901 publicly objected to the Russification policy of Emperor Nicholas II,<sup>43</sup> suddenly became active again. In a public demonstration that took place in Juuka in November 1905, Troupp was chosen as one of the three “representatives of the people”, who demanded the immediate resignation of the allegedly pro-Russian Minister State Secretary of Finland.<sup>44</sup> In December, he appealed to the Governor’s Office against Juuka local council’s resolution to fine those who rented their premises for illegal dances.<sup>45</sup>

Were Troupp’s open letters to Ida Karlsson part of this process? It may be that by expressing his concern over the bad death of a poorhouse inmate, Troupp rendered himself a spokesperson for “the people”. His attitude may thus reflect the relationship between the nationalist-minded Fennoman part of the Finnish middle class and the uneducated rural people in general. On the one hand, the members of the middle class were to investigate the rural people, because Fennoman ideologists believed that the true essence of “Finnishness” lay in the humble lives and old traditions of the rural population. On the other hand, the middle class was to protect and educate the people, in other words, help the rural population become the best possible version of itself—albeit never as civilized as its mentors.<sup>46</sup>

### RODENTS IN THE MORTUARY

The second case discusses the proceedings after the death of an elderly male inmate in Liperi poorhouse<sup>47</sup> in March 1912. A couple of weeks after his burial, the local socialist newspaper published an article titled *Dead Body Robbed of Clothes*,<sup>48</sup> after which the story circulated in national

<sup>43</sup> According to a memoir published in *Karjalatar* in 1906, engineer Troupp had in 1901 objected to the new Conscription Act that weakened the autonomous status of the Grand Duchy of Finland. When the Act was read aloud in church as was customary, Troupp interrupted the Vicar by shouting: “There is no need to read that for us!” *Karjalatar*, January 16, 1906.

<sup>44</sup> *Karjalatar*, November 28, 1905.

<sup>45</sup> *Karjalatar*, December 16, 1905.

<sup>46</sup> Ollila, *Suomen kotien päivä valkenee*, 48. See also Rojola, “Sivistyksen ihannuus ja kurjuus”, 31–34; Vares, “Naisen velvollisuusetiikka”, 273, Annola, “A Place in the Sun?”, 195.

<sup>47</sup> Liperi poorhouse was opened in 1894. In 1908, the institution comprised five different buildings, some of which were new. Vaivashoidonneuvajat, *Suomen vaivaistalojen matrikkeli*, 90–91.

<sup>48</sup> “Ruumiilta vaatteet varastettu”, *Rajavahvi*, March 19, 1912.

newspapers.<sup>49</sup> According to the article, two Helsinki-based women had travelled to Liperi poorhouse in order to bring a ready-made coffin for their deceased father. They were promised that the corpse would later be dressed and placed in the coffin by poorhouse farmhands. On the funeral day, the women wanted to take a final look at the departed as he lay in the coffin. To the women's utmost horror, it appeared that not only had their late father been robbed of his burial gown but that rats had gnawed at his dead body, making it necessary to cover it with a rag.<sup>50</sup>

An Instructor was sent to the poorhouse to find out exactly what had happened. After questioning the poorhouse master and some of the inmates, he concluded that the story was heavily exaggerated. First, the women were not daughters of the departed but his kinswomen. Second, the women had refused to shroud the corpse personally and instead had chosen to leave the poorhouse, after which the body was placed in the coffin by two inmates, a man and a woman. Third, the said inmates, one of whom was the "mentally disabled son" of the departed, assured that there had been no burial gown in the coffin in the first place. This was later confirmed by the carpenter, who had sold the coffin to the kinswomen. Fourth, the dead body had not been attacked by rats but by *mice*. As these had nevertheless done some damage to the corpse, the Instructor advised the master to relocate the bier to avoid such incidents in the future.<sup>51</sup>

In his record, the Instructor dismissed the newspaper article as a typical socialist exposé—a shock story. According to him, these stories were not written by "true sympathizers of the poor and the suffering" but by "malevolent troublemakers, who sought to shake the legitimate societal order".<sup>52</sup> It appears that the Instructor was deeply suspicious of socialists, perhaps partially because he had already visited Liperi poorhouse only a couple of days earlier to inquire into a similar matter. That time, the same socialist newspaper had, under the headline *Human Torture in Liperi Poorhouse*, accused the master and the male mental health nurse of brutally abusing two elderly male inmates on a Sunday morning before shutting

<sup>49</sup> See for example *Työ*, March 21, 1912; *Työmies*, March 21, 1912; *Uusi Suometar*, March 22, 1912; *Aamulehti*, March 23, 1912; *Satakunnan Sanomat*, March 24, 1912; *Vaasa*, March 26, 1912.

<sup>50</sup> "Ruumiilta vaatteet varastettu", *Rajavahti*, March 19, 1912.

<sup>51</sup> Bruno Sarlin to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, April 5, 1912, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:33 (Liperi), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

them up in solitary confinement. Upon his investigation at the poorhouse, the inspector had found the accusation to be groundless.<sup>53</sup>

Socialists saw things differently: they regarded the poorhouse system as a prime example of inequality in municipal decision-making and the oppression of the poor. From the socialists' point of view, the main problem was that even though the Grand Duchy of Finland had in the aftermath of the previously mentioned Russo-Japanese war managed to introduce universal suffrage in national elections, the reform did not apply to local governmental elections. At the local level, the right to vote was still based on property qualifications, and the poorest people did not have a chance to participate in decision-making on poor relief, for example. In order to draw public attention to this grievance and to the bad living conditions of the poor in general, socialists were in the early 1900s eager to publish exposés such as the one in question here.<sup>54</sup>

Underneath the political wrangling, the Liperi case shows a mixture of old and new practices associated with the liminal state and understandings of a good death. For example, the kinswomen's decision to leave the poorhouse without shrouding the body seems peculiar, given that they had travelled 400 kilometres from Helsinki to Liperi to participate in the funeral, and that shrouding was traditionally considered a duty of honour. One reason for their reluctance may be that they were in fact late: as mentioned earlier, the corpse was usually washed and dressed immediately after death had occurred. By the time the women arrived at the poorhouse, the body of the departed had lain on a bier for a couple of days, and it is likely that the corpse was still stiff with rigor mortis. Was it more convenient for the women to leave the dead body to the poorhouse staff and the inmates? If this is so, the women's attitude marks a step towards the more modern approach to death: people were to a growing extent alienated from dealing with the dying and the dead, and instead preferred to leave these matters to professionals in hospitals, nursing homes, and funeral parlours.<sup>55</sup> For them, the lack of familial involvement in preparing the dead body for the funeral did not necessarily equal neglect or a bad death.

<sup>53</sup> "Ihmisräökkäystä Liperin vaivaistalolla", *Rajavahti*, March 16, 1912; Bruno Sarlin to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, March 29, 1912, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:33 (Liperi), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>54</sup> Annola, *Äiti, emäntä, virkanainen, vartija*, 234–239; Annola, "Kackerlackor i såsen?".

<sup>55</sup> See for example Eilola, "Johdanto", 31–33; Pajari, Miettinen and Kanerva, "Kuoleman historian ääriiivoja", 9–12.

As the women decided to leave, the corpse was left on a bier for one more night. According to the Instructor's record, there was no lock on the mortuary door, because the inmates were "known to usually be afraid of dead bodies". The mentally disabled son of the departed had nevertheless entered the mortuary the day after the kinswomen's visit and noticed that "a mouse had gnawed at the corpse a bit". One of the female inmates had then agreed to help him place the dead body in the coffin to avoid any further damage—without the master's permission—"as a favour to the departed". The two inmates placed the pillow under the head of the departed, and "covered him with the veil".<sup>56</sup>

In addition to this, the female inmate covered the face of the departed "with a clean handkerchief that had belonged to him and had been washed by her".<sup>57</sup> In the socialist newspaper article, this "greyish-blue piece of cloth" was portrayed as a lousy attempt at covering the damage "rats" had done to the body.<sup>58</sup> For one reason or another, the writer failed to note the old custom of covering the face of the dead person. However, it may be that in taking the trouble of washing the handkerchief and covering the dead man's face with it, the female inmate was indeed following this custom. It seems likely that *her* understanding of a good death included covering the face of the departed—her fellow inmate—because of respect on one hand, and because of marking the boundary between the dead and the living on the other.<sup>59</sup>

The source material gives an ambivalent description of the involved parties' reaction to the discovery on the funeral day of the damage the rodents had done to the corpse as well as the fact that the burial gown was missing. The Instructor's record gives an impression that there were no emotional reactions to the incident. According to the poorhouse master, the sane son of the departed had told him that "a mouse had gnawed at the lip of the departed a little".<sup>60</sup> When the master asked him whether the mouse had done any further damage, the son replied vaguely: "Not that much."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the kinswomen only mentioned the missing gown in

<sup>56</sup> Bruno Sarlin to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, April 5, 1912, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:33 (Liperi), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> "Ruumiilta vaatteet varastettu", *Rajavahti*, March 19, 1912.

<sup>59</sup> Rytkönen, *Savupirttien kansaa*, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Bruno Sarlin to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, April 5, 1912, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:33 (Liperi), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

passing: “Why, we told him [the carpenter] to include one in the coffin”, and the sane son stated: “They [the kinswomen] were supposed to purchase a gown.”<sup>62</sup> None of the bereaved thus laid the blame on poorhouse staff or inmates but instead kept their tone matter of fact, almost chatty. The record is in sharp contrast with the socialist newspaper article, according to which the kinswomen were “filled with absolute horror” because of the incident with the rodents.<sup>63</sup>

Why are these accounts on the handling of the dead body so different? While it is possible that the writer of the newspaper article was exaggerating heavily, it is nevertheless true that he/she was trying to catch the readers’ attention by describing the breach of social norms in detail. Given that the writer wanted to depict the poorhouse as a wretched place where poor people were deprived of their dignity even in death, the story was spot on. The dead body of a poor man, ravaged by rats and robbed of his funeral gown, was clearly something that would arouse sympathy in readers. As for the inspection record, it may be that it was in the interests of the poorhouse master to downplay the reactions of the bereaved, or that emotional expressions simply did not merit the Instructor’s attention as he was writing the record.

Another option is that the kinswomen and the sane son of the departed simply were not that shocked. It may be that rodents’ attacks on corpses were not uncommon enough to mar their experience of a good death or shame the involved parties in the eyes of the community. Another option is that the relatives did not associate a good death with the traditional ways of handling of the dead body so much as with giving the old man a send-off that would be regarded as impressive by more modern standards.

The mere fact that the kinswomen had purchased a ready-made coffin makes their take on funeral arrangements modern and even imposing. In the early 1900s, ready-made coffins were commonly used in urban areas, while in rural areas the coffin was usually built by a household member or the parish carpenter at home only after death had taken place.<sup>64</sup> It is likely that the Helsinki-based kinswomen were used to urban habits—or that by purchasing a ready-made coffin, they wished to draw a clear distinction between their deceased relative and the poorest of the rural poor, who

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> “Ruumiilta vaatteet varastettu”, *Rajavahti*, March 19, 1912.

<sup>64</sup> Pajari, “Kuolema maalla ja kaupungissa”, 116; Talve, *Suomalainen kansankulttuuri*, 232.

were buried very plainly. In the Liperi case, the coffin was not merely a wooden box but included (or was expected to include) a pillow and a veil with some elaborate embroidery—and a burial gown, which itself was a sign of a modern burial.<sup>65</sup>

Although the old man had died in an institution, the family and the community participated actively in his funerary ceremony. This time the notification of death had reached the bereaved in good time, allowing the kinswomen of the departed to travel from Helsinki to Liperi. The news of the old man's death had reached others as well: on the day of the funeral, people from near and far gathered at the poorhouse already in the morning, and many of them visited the mortuary to view the coffin, "as was customary".<sup>66</sup> When the kinswomen and another son of the departed arrived at the poorhouse, the mentally disabled son opened the coffin lid in order to "bid farewell to the departed, and to show the corpse to mourners". The coffin was then taken the one-kilometre trip to the church by poorhouse horse.<sup>67</sup>

Overall, it appears that apart from the confusion with the gown, the funeral day proceeded in a manner that apparently satisfied all involved parties' expectations of a good death. This is in line with the results of previous research, according to which the meanings attached to a funeral changed slightly over time, while funerary ceremonies, that is, the sequences of rituals connected with the burial, remained unchanged for a longer period.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Both Juuka and Liperi are located in eastern Finland, which has often been regarded as a more backward area in terms of modernization. This chapter shows that the truth is not that straightforward. First, the poorhouse itself was a sign of modernity, as was the soapstone mine in Juuka. Second, even though there was no railway coverage in these two parishes, they were connected to the wider world through a telephone network (albeit sparse),

<sup>65</sup> White burial gowns had become increasingly popular in Finland towards the end of the nineteenth century, but in some eastern and northern regions, the dead were still buried in full suit as late as in the early 1900s. Talve, *Suomalainen kansankulttuuri*, 170, 232.

<sup>66</sup> Bruno Sarlin to Gustaf Adolf Helsingius, April 5, 1912, Archives of the Inspector of Poor Relief Fb:33 (Liperi), Finnish National Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Haverinen and Pajari, "Kuoleman julkisuus ja yksityisyys", 320.



newspapers, and people. There were those who hailed from elsewhere, such as engineer N. W. Troupp and matron Ida Karlsson, and those who had moved to the capital but returned every once in a while, such as the kinswomen of the late inmate in Liperi, bringing new tidings and new habits with them. The Fennoman proceedings of Troupp as well as the articles published by socialists clearly indicate that the political currents of the early 1900s also reached the parishes under scrutiny. Overall, these two cases reveal an eastern Finnish region that was far from being backwards.

The cases also show the challenges present in a society that stood somewhere between premodern and modern. In the early 1900s, family networks were to a growing extent fragmented by migration from rural parishes to urban areas. In rural communities, poorhouses pulled inmates away from their home villages. As physical distances between individuals grew wider but the telephone network was not dense enough to mitigate this, the risk of information breaches and misunderstandings increased. At the heart of both cases lay such a failure: the matron of Juuka poorhouse failed to deliver the notification of death in time, and in the Liperi case there was clearly some kind of confusion over funeral arrangements between the Helsinki-based kinswomen and the bereaved in Liperi.

In these cases, lived religion manifests in the practices associated with the liminal stage, and the negotiations around a good and a bad death. The key problem seems to have been the different expectations and experiences associated with the handling of a dead body. While poorhouse staff and some of the bereaved in the Liperi case were mainly preoccupied with the storing of the corpse in a morgue, in an outbuilding, or in a coffin, others, such as the Juuka-based engineer, the socialists in Liperi, and probably also the feeble-minded son of the departed and his female aide, also emphasized the spiritual aspects associated with these proceedings. For all parties, a corpse was certainly something to be stored, transported, and eventually disposed. However, the surviving records imply that their answers to the question “How?” were at least partially different.

These answers—the different practices as aspects of lived religion—open up opportunities for a more nuanced discussion on the layered nature of the modernization process. It appears that there existed traditional beliefs and practices, such as the fear of dead bodies and the shelters that were used to store corpses prior to burial. The boundary between the dead and the living was marked by covering the face of the departed with a piece of cloth, and by viewing the body together prior to closing the

coffin lid for the last time. At the same time, however, more modern practices had found their way to eastern Finland: people died in institutions and were therefore sometimes buried without the presence of their kith and kin. In some cases, the bereaved were not interested in preparing the departed for the funeral but instead left these proceedings to contemporary care professionals. Perhaps related to this, coffins were no longer necessarily crafted and furnished at home but purchased ready-made from a carpenter.

As mentioned in the introduction, shared religious practices are used to create and maintain cohesion within a specific community. In both cases discussed in this paper, the complainants regarded a proper liminal state as essential for both the departed and his community. In the Juuka case, engineer Troupp portrayed the poorhouse as a place where dead bodies were hastily placed in coffins and buried at short notice, thus robbing the community of a chance to bid farewell in an appropriate way. In the Liperi case, the socialists felt that the humiliating incident with rodents and the missing burial gown shamed the dead old man and ruined the funeral for his community. In both cases, then, the poorhouse was regarded as something that severely disrupted traditional communality. It should be noted, however, that in these cases the complainants' shared appreciation for traditional practices probably stemmed from different ideological backgrounds.

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