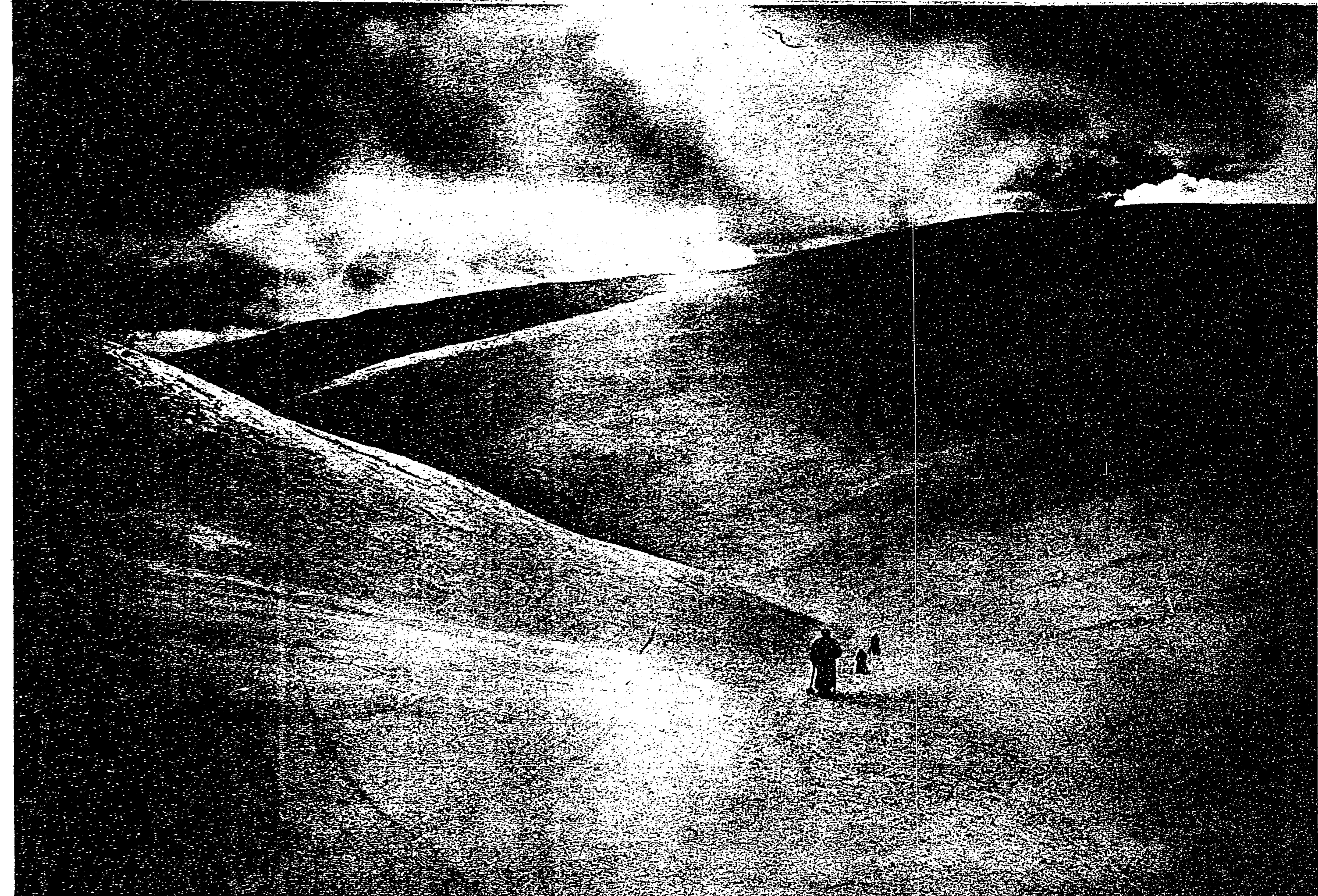

SISU: A WORD THAT EXPLAINS FINLAND

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THE Finns have a favorite word. They will tell you it is the most wonderful of all their words. It is not easily translated, because no other language has its precise equivalent. Even the Finns have difficulty in defining it, for, like so much of Finland which eludes definition, it is a thing felt, like religion or love. The word is *sisu*, pronounced see-su, with the accent on the first syllable. To understand sisu is to understand how a little country not much bigger than California, with no more than half the population of New York City, has so gallantly withstood the onslaught of a nation that covers one-seventh of the world's land area and outnumbers them in man power almost 50 to 1.

I first heard the word at Ilomantsi, the last town in its district of Eastern Karelia before one reaches the Russian border. I was having coffee with the Sheriff of the district; we were listening to the radio report of Hitler's army poised, ready to descend on Danzig. The Sheriff drew a knife from his pocket and handed it to me. It was sturdy, executive-looking, not long, not short. Its black bone handle fitted snugly, companionably, in the grasp of the fist. The six-inch blade ending in a curving point like the sharp tip of a new moon was razor edged. The Sheriff had carried it for fifteen years for sentimental as well as protective reasons.

"The young fellow who owned this knife," my host said, "had more sisu than any one I've ever known. Six older men attacked him and tried to kill him. He was in the right, but he had only this one blade between him and death. They fought for an hour. He cut the six to pieces. I saw the finish of the fight—it was a glorious display of sisu." The Sheriff took the knife from me and held it lovingly in the embrace of his fist for a moment. Then he slipped it into its embroidered leather holster.

"We shall have need of sisu," he said gravely, "to face what may come shortly." He turned off the radio and glanced out the east window that looked toward Russia. "But in the world we live in today," he said slowly, as if the idea was being born that moment, "sisu is the Finn's minus as well as plus. It makes it impossible for him to compromise with his ideals."

SISU, a Finn will tell you, thinking very hard, means "something still more." "A strong will carries its man even through gray granite," said one of the brothers in Aleksis Kivi's "Seven Brothers," the classic of Finnish daily life. Sisu signifies that special kind of strong will. It surpasses fearlessness and extraordinary endurance. It is a kind of inner fire or superhuman nerve force. It makes an athlete forget fatigue and pain, and risk his life to win. Sisu made Paavo Nurmi run and win sensational championships. It is sisu that enables Taisto Mäki, the new star runner, to break Nurmi's world records and his own.

Jean Sibelius defines sisu as a metaphysical shot in the arm which makes a man do the impossible. At the Helsinki station, on the September afternoon I left Finland, Nurmi gave me his favorite definition. "Sisu is patience and strong will without passion," he said; "it comes to men miraculously in times of stress."

TO the ancient geographers Finland was the utmost northern limit of the world. They called it Ultima Thule. On the very maps it looks remote and cold, lying wholly north of the city formerly called St. Petersburg and falling within the forbidding latitudes of Greenland. A quarter of a century ago it was still little more than the name of a far-flung land lying in Arctic and semi-Arctic regions along the eastern shore of the Baltic, a discontented protectorate of imperial Russia.

At the beginning of the century the one personal name familiar to the foreign public was that of a man of music. Only through the immortal compositions of Sibelius did mysterious Finland communicate anything of herself to the outside world. Then, at Antwerp in 1920, Nurmi ran into the world's arena bringing tidings of the birth of a new nation. In that year Finland entered the Olympic contest as an independent country for the first time.

In the twenty years that followed sporadic spotlights were turned on this corner and that activity of Finland. Ten-year-old school children learned that Finland was the only country that was paying her war debt to the United States. Cruise boats called at Helsinki. Tourists began to poke about the 60,000 lakes and to push up to the Arctic Ocean. Social and economic investigators went to look at progress in Finland and write admiring monographs. Helsinki was chosen as the seat of the next Olympic Games. Finland was preparing to be host to the world in 1940 when war broke out in Europe. First Finland's peril and then her superlative courage held the front pages. More attention was given Finland in the last three months of 1939 than in nineteen preceding centuries.

"Sisu" is more than bravery and endurance, says a recent visitor to the land; it is superhuman nerve force.

EVERY one who has ever been to Finland is asked, "What are the Finns themselves really like, and can they endure?"

The Finn is not well understood, even by his nearest western neighbor, the Swede. Despite a similarity in landscape, in the northern winds, the white nights of Summer, the red farmhouses, the shared boundary, the Finn is quite different from the Swede in temperament and character. He has a fresh, unspoiled, primitive side that exists in close harmony with nature. He feels stirring in his blood a special kinship with the wilder variety of nature—with virgin forests, unproductive fells, and the animal life that haunts them. Wherever his foot wanders, even into the city, his roots remain in the soil.

The rural Finn—and three-fourths of the population are still rural—has been self-educated in a heroic school. In Finland nature is impregnated with harshness. The stubborn soil does not render fruits in exchange for loving words or some hits with a hoe as it does in Denmark. It likes a tough struggle. Nature and man in Finland have many of the same traits of temperament.

"A typical Finn," a countryman said to me, "is an obstinate sort of fellow who believes in getting the better of bad fortune by proving that he can stand worse." But his Spartan qualities carry with them no hardness of heart, no selfishness. There is nothing mean about a Finn—no pettiness. He has always been one to help his neighbor and he can be sympathetic in trouble. "Pity never harmed a man," he says, "except when he pities himself."

"To understand the Finn you must remember Winter and what it does to us," a man from the Finnish Foreign Office said to me. "Winter is one of the keys that give access to a comprehension of the Finnish soul. Others are space and solitude."

Everywhere there is feeling of infinite space beneath the sun and the stars—space for a grown man's breathing. It is a companionable space. Unless a Finn looks up to the heavens, he never sees "as far as the eye carries." He is always met by the evergreen trees, by the familiar but magical forest.

"In our Finnish world, where everything must be paid for, we have our solitude in exchange for our endless space," said a young soldier poet named von Numers. "And the darkness of our Winters rich with snow against our marvelous Summers brimful of light. The melancholy you will find in our music and in our poetry is the black flower of the silent wilderness. You cannot find it among orange blossoms."

IN Finland the stranger senses security and fair-dealing straight-off. Even in the cities he feels no necessity for bolting doors, and above the Arctic Circle it is an unwritten law that doors be left unlocked, for in Winter nights the difference between a locked door and one that opens quickly may mean the difference between death and life to a freezing traveler. The oft-told tales of found purses being nailed to trees and retrieved by their owners months later are not exaggerations.

A Finn cannot see why people praise a man for anything as natural as honesty. In regard to the famous war debts to the United States, the Finns think it is pointless to make such a fuss. "Is it such a wonder," they ask Americans, "if I repay the money you have lent me? We did not intend to keep it, of course."

The Finns are relentless against boasting and pretentiousness. They do not encourage "personalities" among their compatriots. They are apt to discredit all "chiefs," and particularly those who rise too fast.

Rich men's sons are not pampered in Finland. Their fathers train them for the business of meeting life. "No tennis courts are allowed at our country place," the well-to-do son-in-law of Jean Sibelius said to me. "My boys can play tennis at school if they like. At home in Summer they are in the fields with the laborers at 7 o'clock every morning. They work until the laborers quit in the evening. The job hardens their muscles, and the boys get the peasant's point of view."

"Don't they ever get a vacation?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. The 19-year-old one is on vacation now. He's helping to build anti-tank fortifications near the Russian frontier, fitting the granite boulders in the holes."

History has taught the Finn in the brutal way which is her own not to hurry needlessly. Finns do not like haste, but they always arrive in time. An old proverb says, "God made time, but man made haste." The Finn often conveys the impression of being phlegmatic. When it is necessary, however, he can hurry.

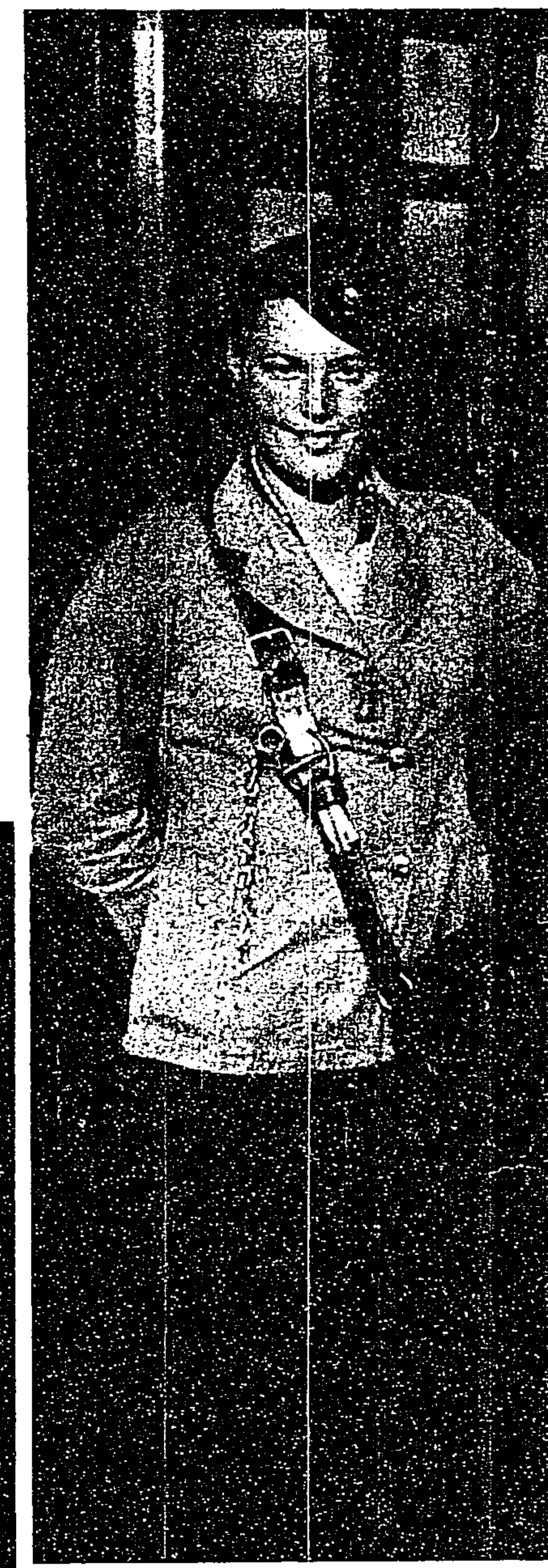
THE Finns are grounded in their folkways and cling to customs that reach back a thousand years. Yet there is no nation today more alert to new ideas. The Finns are not afraid of experiments. They were the first to try out prohibition. Some of their schools and hospitals and cooperative shops are so replete with modern equipment they seem to belong to future decades. Their factories and laborers' houses, often designed by their foremost architects, are calculated to beautify the district as well as to be models of efficiency.

Though Finns are not big talkers, they can be excellent conversationalists. And they can be eloquent with passionate appeal when something that matters is at stake—something that touches their patriotism. Patriotism is the Finn's real religion.

The Finnish passion for education and self-improvement is another kind of religion. The Finns feel a responsibility to uplift themselves and their fellow-man. There are more university students in Finland in proportion to the population than in any other country in the world. There are more books published annually per capita.

WHILE gratefully accepting the material aspects of better living, the new conveniences of modern culture, Finns seem to me to understand that spirit is life's only significant reality.

They savor living in their own peculiar way. A man of infinite patience, a Finn can be passive with the utmost calm. Yet without any prompting, he seems to know when it is his cue to act. And for all his cool-blooded rhythms and serene, poker-faced appearance, there is something dangerous in his make-up to be mightily feared if it is loosed. He himself does not fear death or destruction. When a situation looks particularly dangerous or grim, the Finn laughs and says, "Oh, well, nothing fiercer than death can come of it."



Penguin, Bonney-Elisofon, Solbelman and Black Star

"Nature and man in Finland have many of the same traits of temperament"—The somber Finnish countryside in the grip of Winter, Finnish ski troops and typical Finns.

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