

## **A Closed-Down Village // Hanna Koikkalainen**

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### FOREWORD

Suistamo came into my life one spring day in the village of Paanajärvi in White Sea Karelia. I had become acquainted with a group of musicians, and one of them asked me to join her project, which was about a place called Suistamo.

Right then, I didn't need to know more than that this place was in the part of Karelia ceded to the Soviet Union after World War II, and that we would go there to take pictures. At home, of course, I had to check where exactly Suistamo is. After seeing the place on a map and getting to know its history, I grew even more interested. This is how I started to work with the musician Anne-Mari Kivimäki.

### Suistamo – The Laboratory of Tradition

A Closed-Down Village is a multidisciplinary art project in which we work with the thematics of departure and leaving a place behind through the means of photography and music. The exhibition is part of Anne-Mari's project Suistamo – The Laboratory of Tradition, which is also her artistic research project at the Sibelius Academy (University of the Arts Helsinki).

The project has its origins in the archival recordings of the Suistamo-based accordionist and storyteller, Ilja Kotikallio. Following Kotikallio's footsteps, Anne-Mari and her team have made research trips across the border to Suistamo, gone through archival material, and met former residents of Suistamo.

As a result of this multidisciplinary cooperation, a meandering, visual-and-musical project was born: the project deals with evacuees, wartime, being forced to leave home, and present-day life in a small Russian village.

### About my work process

For me, the Suistamo project has been a documentary research trip into a country that no longer exists, into a closed-down village and living memories. The work has been like assembling a jigsaw made of memories, a jigsaw complicated by pieces of present-day reality.

I have felt it very important to meet people from Suistamo and to hear their experiences about the place. This book contains a small part of the results of those interviews, and I am very grateful to all the Suistamo residents I met. Each story I heard is important and worth preserving, even if they didn't all end up in this book. I feel very privileged to have shared those special moments with the interviewees. I hope this book will preserve even a tiny piece of those beautiful moments from the Suistamo of memories and the present day.

I have had the privilege to be present while the descendants of evacuees explored their own history and found objects, letters, house foundations, berry bushes – tangible things which make shaky memories stronger and more true.

How many flowers, berry bushes and apple trees are currently growing in Finland with roots that used to rest in Karelian soil?

Everyone has the right to their own past, their own story and their unique roots. It is very human to want to know where your own roots are buried. Even though some people's roots have been torn away from their own soil because of the machinations of world politics, the power of stories and memories will keep them alive.

I have been allowed to peruse many people's photo albums, and through them to glimpse old places and stories. Following these signposts, I have travelled to Suistamo with my camera and experienced many surprising moments. Places that I had heard many lively stories about turned out to be hard to reach or utterly unrecognisable.

This is why my photographs – in this book and the exhibition – show the place as quiet and deserted.

I have occasionally had great trouble connecting the living place of the stories with the current deserted landscape. New photographs are therefore paired with archival photographs showing the lively life that I heard people talk about in their stories.

Luckily many places were also worth reaching. So much natural beauty! Many of Suistamo's villages are completely empty: fields and garden trees are the only evidence of people having lived there once. Beautiful flower plantations remind us of the former life of the place – they haven't been destroyed by being abandoned and left as part of a new territory.

Every spring, there bloom tulips planted by someone who has already passed away. People leave, but the tulips remain: they will continue living even when we start to decompose. Nature's memory acts as a continuation of human memory.

Garden trees sway in the wind and burrow their roots into the earth even though political changes shake the world. The trees have stayed and seen the changes of history. It is as though they breathed in us, in the river of time. Every year is carved into the annual rings. What is written on them?

Water has seen millennia, and water has mirrored images throughout the ages, through changing ideologies and wars. The same lakes are still on the map. Water remembers its channels, it doesn't care about anything else. It keeps flowing in spite of us, and will continue to do so after we are gone.

I am from Karelia, but only through this project have I gained insight into the world of Karelian evacuees. I have therefore also had to examine my own background as a Karelian, a photographer and a Finnish tourist in Russia. The project has opened up some matters, but has also brought me new questions and topics which I will continue working on.

Since time immemorial, Suistamo has brought many interesting things into Karelian and Finnish culture – and even though its once lively villages are quiet now, I believe Suistamo will continue to give us new things in the future as well. This book and album are evidence of that.

You can find new things in the old, and new perspectives for our own age through history. Refugees are always a current topic. Perhaps we might be able to get new perspectives on the refugees of our own time if we remember our own history?

I've had a child during these years of the Suistamo project. She first travelled in my womb along bumpy roads to the village of Ihatsu, to see Ilja Kotikallio's house foundations. Later, she joined me on the bike when I cycled to explore the deserted village of Äimäjärvi. I'm happy I have been able to show her a piece of the culture, landscape and music of Border Karelia. This whole time, I've become even more certain that I want to show her where she comes from and how she is part of a long cultural continuum. I believe this will help her on her own journey.

Working with a musician has opened up a new, intriguing world for me as a photographer. I've listened to Anne-Mari's music a lot during different phases of the project: on photography trips in Suistamo as well as at my computer in my workspace. Her music has given me tools to find the right atmosphere for the pictures.

Combining music and pictures opens a gate beyond words, to the level of emotions. There are things that cannot be put in words, but can be composed into music. Anne-Mari's music can be described fittingly by the old words: "Music is made from sorrows, woven from woes."

This book is intended to be browsed while listening to the music, in the spirit of free association. Let the music and pictures take you on a journey to a closed-down village. Thus its life will continue in all of us.

On a hot stormy day in Ahola,  
Hanna Koikkalainen

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"On the evening of 4 December 1939 an express messenger came to tell us: 'On 5 December 1939, tomorrow morning, the last evacuee train will leave from Loimola station. Take as much as you can carry, and enough food for five days.' Mother made us eight children ready for travel. Everyone had to wear five layers of clothes in case of possible bombings. Everyone was allowed to pack their most important things in their backpack. I took the book of memories which I had received from Aunt and Uncle Väyrynen. We all thought we'd be able to come back home in two weeks or so, because Finnish soldiers were protecting our borders. We children set off feeling as if it was nothing more than a holiday trip."

Aino Heikkilä (2014)

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"More and more orders came. And now another command. Father had to go and load things onto the wagon. I went to the station too, and saw a scene of war. There were wounded people on stretchers everywhere. The waiting room was full and the yard was full and there were many people who could move, but no one complained.

Often a tear would come to my eye and there was always a bitter lump in my throat, but you couldn't let sorrow take over. You had to accept everything that happened with a cold heart. Everyone was quiet, no one was chatting. Sometimes you saw tears on someone's cheeks, but no one comforted them, because everyone would have needed to be comforted. I too have shed my share of tears in secret. When I went to the forest for the last time, my own beautiful forest, to say goodbye, I can't describe in words the longing that was in my heart. And when I went to sleep at night in my own pretty attic room, I used to watch the beautiful landscape from the window for a long time: the hills and tussocks, forests and fields, my neighbours and my beloved play areas.

On the evening of 10 July 1944, my brother with the horse, and I driving the cows – we set off from our home and started our evacuee journey towards the unknown, accompanied by rain. It was the start of a hard journey. We travelled all night in the pouring rain. Everyone was wet through but no one said a word. We were oppressed by sorrow. So the homes were left deserted and empty, and the fields grew full of vegetation."

Aili Tamminen (1944)

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"It was July, but why was no one making hay? Horses went past pulling huge loads, but not hay. What was going on? Furniture and other things, and everyone was going to the train station at my village, Alattu station. There were huge piles of all kinds of things, and more was being taken there, people emptying home after home, leaving their rooms uninhabited. The homes seemed to wonder at all this, to ask what it meant."

Aili Tamminen (1944)

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"When the road to Karelia opened up again, I went back there. On 2 June 1942, in Joensuu, they gave us a travel permit enabling us to make the journey. It felt so strange to travel through the war-torn area. Arriving at my home station felt almost like a dream. There were many signs of war and destruction and bombing, but the land, the dear much-trodden land, was the same as before. Some of the familiar old trees were still standing, and they bid us welcome in their summer greenery. The blue waves of Lake Rieg could be seen through the trees, and there on the other side of the lake was our dear home. Soon I was at the same gate by the meadow where I had taken my last glimpse of home together with my husband. Now I stood there alone, and I don't quite know if I was happy or sad. Of course I was very glad to be home, but the joy was diminished by the sorrow caused by returning alone, without my dear life partner. When I reached the yard I discovered that our home was not the same as when we had left it. The windows and doors had been broken, the stove had been taken away, and there was a horrendous mess everywhere."

Martta Kähmi (1951)

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"My parents are all from Suistamo. When we left as evacuees in 1944 there was quite a commotion, because Alattu was being bombed. I was safely in my mother's womb when we left, and I was born when we had reached our destination: Lapua in Ostrobothnia.

I was scared when I was small, when my parents told war stories. I would go into another room to cry. Always the same story. I was scared: would the war come again?

I was working with a volunteer group in 1994. When the church's paint was being worked with, I used to look out at that lake and think: oh, if only I could move here somehow. In 1995 I arrived with a moving van and since then this has been my other home. I take care of the church and open doors for people.

The best thing about Suistamo is the landscape. In spring when the snows melt, leaves bud in the trees, bird cherries flower, and the rowans and the grass grow. They all smell wonderful. This is a nice peaceful place. I think it's beautiful here, at least. Now I feel like I'm at home, that I've come back the other way round, come here as an evacuee, and I can stay here."

Reijo Leinonen

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"I remember our departure, but it can't be put into words. It's too horrible. We went to Alattu station on foot. The journey was hard and there was nothing in my head."

Iiris Rantala (2014)

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"From the year 1944 I ran a Lotta kiosk in Suistamo. People had already been evacuated and the village was deserted. The only people left were soldiers and young people with work duty: they had to reap the grain and make the hay. I remember when I walked down from Suistamo church and met a nice-looking, small and dark Tatar man and he was very interested in me, but I had a crush on someone else. He wrote a poem into my guest book that I still remember by heart: 'Throw dust towards the stars and moon; what help are alms and goods when you cannot change fate'."

Lauraliisa Pitkänen (2014)

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"What I remember about the first time we had to leave is that one of the dogs howled dreadfully when we left, and Mama left food and drink for the cats and dogs in earthenware pots onto the floor of the main room. I hid my own toys, porcelain crockery and cows made from pine cones, under a big spruce tree in the sand. When I next went home in 1942, I looked for my toys, but I didn't find them. Yes, the only things I remember are how I covered up the toys and how the dog howled. We left it there to howl alone. I also remember Mama making the sign of the cross in front of the windows when we left: there were three in the main room and three in the bedchamber, and Mama crossed every one of them.

I also remember the war heroes' funeral in Suistamo. Mama cried terribly, she was on her knees, and I cried with her. I cried when Mama did. Mama crying was the most dreadful thing. Then the men were blessed and covered up. My brothers Santeri and Vihtori were both lying there beside each other.

What I remember about when we left for the last time is that Mama stayed at home, and the rest of us took the hay wagon and we had our cows and heifers, Omena and Ilona, with us. It was 13 July 1944. My brother Valeri sat on the haystack and drove the wagon. Valeri and I went by the clearing and picked strawberries before we left."

Maria Kenttä (2014)

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"Father cleared a field of nine and a half hectares in the marsh. It remained just a field when we left. During the Interim Peace, we were still tending it with Mama and Valeri. When I went back to see my home district, I saw that the field had gone back to being a marsh. I thought: that's the field my father made, and here it is and I'm somewhere far away. It does make me feel things. After all, I'd always been a bit cross at myself and everyone else about the reason we had to leave. I thought that others live in the same area all their life and they have treasures in their attics, and all their memories. But for me, it's all out there somewhere."

Maria Kenttä (2014)

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"I'm standing under the birch tree in our yard, watching my surroundings with flowers blooming around me. It's raining softly, and the lilacs and cow parsley are spreading their sweet smell everywhere. Everything seems to have succeeded: everything is green and growing. Is this what we laboured for here? An old saying comes to my mind: 'never love anything in this world as your own'. The drizzle caresses my face in farewell. The landscape sinks into my mind and stays there."

Lahja Lehtomäki

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"The places of my childhood shrank when the world grew wider, but the trees were the opposite. The only thing that has remained is a spruce wood that used to be consecrated to the dead. Now even the crosses have rotted, and only the growing trees are left. At least they didn't cut down the sacred trees."

Harri Vuorinen

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"May 1944 is exceptionally warm and beautiful. The spring work starts really early. Ahvenlammi school holds a Mother's Day party just like it always does. Each mother receives a bunch of flowers to wear at their breast. Cousin Seija sings the song the teacher has chosen: 'Don't cry, Mother, don't, dear Mother, even though my father is in the black earth...', although it is a difficult song. The adults wipe tears off their faces. Everyone knows that Seija's father was killed in action in July 1941.

Soon after the party, the atmosphere changes. Adults start talking in hushed voices. Children are often sent to fetch firewood or water, away from the adults' conversations. Fear creeps onto the village road. Big wooden boxes appear in every house. One day in June, my whole family is on the construction site of our new house. Father started building it along with his other work soon after we returned in spring 1942. The walls and roof are beautifully light-coloured, even the windows are all in place. Father has a big pail full of wet mortar that smells of clay, and he is whistling as he bricks up the chimney. Mother is handing him the bricks and Inkeri, my 12-year-old big sister, is sweeping the floor. I am playing barefooted in a pile of wood shavings, wearing only breeches. There is a wonderful smell of new wood. The sun makes the house's logs look golden.

Then a man in a soldier's uniform comes into the garden riding a bicycle. He runs in, hands us some piece of paper, and continues onwards in a rush, waving his hand. Father tosses the trowel into the pail of mortar and says: 'Fuck. I have to leave for the front.'

The men have to leave for the frontline that very night. Families have to start packing their things at once. Father lifts the big wooden box into the main room of the house together with Mother, and puts the new house's stove doors and oven doors onto the bottom of the box. They are still in their packages.

Just a moment ago everything was well, but now my throat is oddly tight. From what Father says, I realise that we have to leave home for good. We can never return. Father sets off for the station and Mother wraps his tools carefully in paper. Wiping tears off her face, she sighs: 'Oh, oh dear, please come back safely to use these tools. God only knows whereabouts in the world we'll be.'

All the necessaries fit into the box: household things and clothes.

On the evening of our departure, as the summer night is getting dark, Mother makes the sign of the cross at the corner of the new house and touches the log wall: 'Lord, just keep us all alive, no matter where you toss us.'

She has a big backpack, as does Inkeri. I try to hang onto their skirts, one or the other, so that I don't lose them. Globeflowers shine on both sides of the road like yellow carpets. Glow worms shine dimly, as if wishing us a good journey."

Eila Anttila (2014)

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"I thought our departure was just exciting, nothing more than that. As a child I couldn't think of anything more than that. I didn't cry when we left, at least. I've thought of it more afterwards. Now when I think of these old things by myself, I might laugh or I might cry. In the old days we used to just go with the flow. You got used to war, it was like ordinary life. It was part of life and that was it."

Aili Pöyhönen (2014)

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"We took each other by the hand and made a vow chanted by my brother. I remember the words exactly. Our vow went like this: 'Even though we're leaving now, we will come back. Let them burn the houses, cut down the forests, destroy everything – but the land will remain. They can't do anything to the land. The lake will remain – what could they do to the water? We will come back even if the only things left are the land and the lake. We can't take them with us. They will wait here for our return.' We were ten and seven years old; we left the cottage, and closed the door gently and carefully."

Aune Kalkkinen (1995)

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"Slowly, so slowly we went across the field to the shore, and along the shore to the meadow and the gate where the forest began. There we stopped and stood for a while, looking behind us. There it was: home, the dearest place in the world, and we had to leave it. Our steps took us away from it. My husband usually never showed it when he felt bad. But now we cried, we cried with tears in our eyes, stumbling as we continued our way along the dear familiar path. Our hearts guessed that we would be separated from home and home district for far longer than we dared to admit even to ourselves."

Martta Kähmi (1951)

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"On 6 January we returned to Suistamo and oh, we were happy: there was so much snow and it was well below zero, and there were no roads at all, but we gambolled in the snow like young colts. Our home had not been destroyed and the volunteer Lottas had cleaned it so well.

Then spring came. Oh joy! We cleaned the containers in the storehouse with Sylvi, and there were lots of Russian clothes there. Aimo harnessed a horse and me and Sylvi emptied all the troughs and took the things to our high hill, and we burned it all. And Sylvi and I sang really loudly: 'Evacuees are hurrying to their homes on Karelia's dear shores, freedom came to the Karelian tribe, losses became victories. The Russians didn't bother us for long, because now they're the ones running away as evacuees.' We sang that when the evacuees went to Muunto and Teronvaara. And we were happy."

Maire Saralehto os.Jeskanen (2014)

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"An inner voice whispered to me: go, look, there's still time to walk these familiar grounds. As if compelled by some inner need, I went to my home's ruins, feeling even worse. There now lies the result of many generations of work, a peaceful home, utterly destroyed and burned as a victim of war. A glance at the familiar lake, mirroring the sky, brings a tear to my eye. Must I really give up all this?"

Helena Sinokki (1951)

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"I felt indescribably happy when I came back. After all, it was almost summer, and a swallow was singing from the chimney above the ruins. My local lake was as still as a mirror, the familiar marigolds were growing on its shore, and it was my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. I got my home district back on my birthday. The familiar yard of my old home, even though it had suffered. Every rock, every piece of crockery seemed to say – do you remember me, do you remember your childhood and youth, even if it was harsh?"

Helena Sinokki (1951)

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## ILJA KOTIKALLIO

*To me, you are a black-and-white, strong-chinned man: handsome, but with a dark shadow around you. You are a mystery, a nobody but so much of a person. Your speech chatters on from a tape recording and shows me a life that I cannot find in the bushes and empty fields of Karelia.*

*You are a link. You are a historical fact but also a fiction, the soil of the earth and notes ringing clear and bright. Your repetitive accordion will play on the archival tape long after my photographer's eye has dimmed.*

*You, an ordinary person, live on in the scratchy tapes and booming noise of the archives. What a coincidence it is that you, a man from a small village in the middle of the forest, from beyond bumpy roads, should be the one to make me travel to those forests and cart roads. On a shadowy summer night, I follow your footsteps to your home in the village of Ihatsu. There is nothing there, just the moon and the mosquitos' whining. On the road a pawprint acts as a sign.*

*I am on the right path. This is what I am taught by a black-and-white man with an accordion in his lap and a smile on his face, as he looks from one age to another.*

Anne-Mari's project came about when – as a result of many coincidences – she found the archival recordings of Suistamo resident Ilja Kotikallio from the attic of a house in Karstula, Finland.

Ilja Kotikallio (previously Sinda) was a skilled folk musician and storyteller from the village of Ihatsu in Suistamo. He was born in Suistamo on 31 July 1894 and died in Ruhankylä, Lapua on 26 May 1961. Kotikallio is said to be one of the best and most talented Karelian storytellers of all time. On interviews in the archival tapes recorded by the Finnish Literature Society, he recounts stories of local saints' day celebrations, dance parties, bear hunts, going off to get some home-brewed spirits, birth and death. He played his one-row accordion (called a *karmuuni*) all around Suistamo and was talented at lively storytelling. He must certainly have been a popular guest and excellent company!

An evacuee train took Ilja from a war-torn Karelia to Lapua, in Ostrobothnia, Finland's flattest region. The talkative Karelian entertainer must have been considered quite strange in his new community. It says something about Ilja's state of mind that he no longer played his beloved accordion in Lapua.

The Karelian musician, forced to flee from the forests of Karelia, didn't find his place in Ostrobothnia. Kotikallio's life ended tragically by his own hand: apparently emotionally crushed by relationship troubles, he killed himself in a barn. The great musician had moved on to the other side.

Ilja Kotikallio's life story is one sad tale among tens of thousands of evacuee stories. Many evacuees didn't manage to fit into the area they moved to, and their personalities didn't thrive in a strange culture. People kept quiet about their Karelian culture: assimilating to the dominant community was considered an easier way to survive. Unfortunately, this also meant the loss of a great deal of Karelian tradition.

#### Info box

##### Suistamo

Population: 9,000 at the time of Finnish rule

Area: 1623.80 km<sup>2</sup>

Largest villages: Suistamo parish village, Loimola, Leppäsyvä, Uuksjärvi, Alattu and Jalovaara.

Nowadays Suistamo is part of Suojärvi, and Suistamo means the old parish village area. Loimola, Leppäsyvä and Roikonkoski have the biggest populations these days.

##### The part of Karelia ceded to the Soviet Union

410,000 Karelian evacuees – 11 per cent of the Finnish population – had to leave their homes. 10 per cent of Finland's area was handed over, including 39 parish municipalities, 3 cities and 2 market towns.

"We cried, we hugged each other. It felt like a goodbye. For many people it was in fact the final departure. When the train left it all felt so empty. The village was not the same as it had been."

N. Savolainen

"We realised that everything we loved and that belonged to us had to be left once again, and that we might never get it back. Summer was at its most beautiful. The birch groves of Karelia were green and the cuckoos were busily calling, as if to bid us farewell as we parted from our dear homes."

Helena Sinokki (1951)

## References

The memories from residents of Suistamo have been gathered as follows:

The quotations from Aili Tamminen (née Ihatsu) are from her diary, written in Lapua in 1944. Her family have given me permission to use the diary.

I have personally interviewed Aili Pöyhönen, Maire Jeskanen, Maria Kenttä, Lauraliisa Pitkänen and Iris Rantala in 2014.

The memories of Helena Sinokki and Martta Kähmi are from the folk poetry archive of the Finnish Literature Society, from the questionnaire "Recording memories from the age of evacuees". The questionnaire was done by Karjalainen Heimoseura.

The memories of Lahja Lehtomäki, Harri Vuorinen and N. Savolainen are from the archives of the National Board of Antiquities, where texts written by the people in question have been archived.

Eila Anttila and Aino Heikkilä gave me permission to use their own texts in 2014.

Aune Kalkkinen's story is from the book *Farewell, Suistamo* (published in 1995 by Suistamo's society for tradition).

The information on Ilja Kotikallio in the foreword is from Anne-Mari Kivimäki's research.

The State Treasury's archive for the department of compensation of the Ministry of Finance, Compensation applications and decisions for the displaced population, the National Archives of Finland

The picture collections of Suistamo's society for tradition

The picture collections of the National Board of Antiquities