

The Volga's Children - Finland

by Alina Lehtinen - 03.09.2012

About 150 years ago, a Tatar man arrived in Järvenpää, a Finnish city 37 kilometers north of the capital of Helsinki. Upon arrival, our hero noticed the land surrounding the town was cheap. The geography was mostly forest and fields, and perhaps it reminded the man of his home back near the Volga river. He bought some land and had a dream of building a Tatar village there. Many more Tatars followed him and, soon the region had several Tatar settlements.

In its glory days, Järvenpää had around a few hundred Tatar residents. Since then, the figure has gone down to about fifty due to migration and assimilation.

"Active Tartars are a very, very small amount of the population. It's almost my family, my cousins," says Fazile Nasretidin, who is the President of the cultural foundation of Finland's Tatars (Finlandiya Türkleri Birli-giry in Tatarça).

Tatars came to Finland in the 19th century due to political unrest and religious tumult in the expanding Russian Empire. Most of them were originally from Tatar villages located in the Nizhny Novgorod Oblast by the Volga River. Today there are around 700 to 800 Tatars in Finland, a country of about 5 million people. Most Tatars in Finland live in the Helsinki region. Though a small group, they have been successful in maintaining their cultural identity while at the same time blending in with mainstream Finnish culture.

When talking with the Tatars in Finland, it is not hard to understand why they have been able to keep in touch with their roots for all these years, especially when meeting with a Tatar family with a captivating love story. All love stories at least a bit captivating, supposedly, but Rushan's melts all hearts with hers.

A Love Less Ordinary

Smiles and loving gazes fill up the small room situated in the upstairs of the mosque in Järvenpää.

"It was love at first sight for," Rushan Nasretidin says as she looks at her husband Tarik sitting next to her. Judging by his face, he couldn't agree more. The couple found each other with a little help from Rushan's grandmother, who was an active figure in the Tatar diaspora.

According to Fazile Nasretidin, who is Tarik's mother, Tatars never had problems migrating to Finland. "The situation is very good here. We have always had a good position in Finland," she said. Most Tatars in Finland speak Finnish as well as Tatarça. There is a Tatar kindergarten in Helsinki and Helsinki University even offers courses in Tatarça.

The ancestors of both Rushan and Tarik come from the same area of Tatarstan. But while Rushan's family ended up traveling through Turkey all the way to California, Tarik's great-grandparents were some of the first migrants to Finland.

The two met when they were young, long before they had any concept of romantic love. Unaware of their future, they played together in a local swimming pool.

Years later, Rushan traveled to Finland to take part in a summer camp for young Tatars. At the camp, they met again and the 13-year old Rushan developed a girlish crush on Tarik, age 16. In 2000, they got married in a traditional Muslim Tatar ceremony and moved to Finland together.

Rushan and Tarik's story is not an unusual one among Tatars, a group that is deeply proud of its cultural heritage. Rushan's brother also found his future wife among the Tatars in Australia – a country almost entirely on the other side of the world - through semi-official Tatar network. "Even if it was not a real network, if you are in town you make an effort to meet the local Tatars," Rushan describes.



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Finno-Tatars, but Not the Final Tatars

According to Kadriye Bedretdin, a Tatar researcher at Helsinki University, Tatars have a sort of double identity in Finland. "Tatars are Finns, but at the same time they also have their own Tatar culture," she said. "Tatars in Finland are seen as an example of a group that has been successfully integrated to the Finnish society without giving up their own cultural identity."

Muslim community centers often not recognized by the European states until after World War II. Yetsurprisingly, Finland - a country known for its hard policies towards immigration and a lack of immigrants in general relative to the rest of the EU- was the first Christian country in Europe to recognize an Islamic Centre in 1925, which was founded by Tatars. According to Bedretdin, it would not be until 1975 that the second country, Belgium, would recognize their Muslim community in this way.

The influence of the Tatar settlers can be seen more vividly in Järvenpää than anywhere else in Finland. The main street of what was traditionally the Tatar neighborhood is still named Tatar Lane (Tataarikuja), and the hill where many of the settlements were initially located is still called Tatar Hill (Tataarinmäki). However, the most prominent sign of Tatar history in the small town of about 39,000 people is unarguably the mosque in the city center. Built by the Tatar settlers in the 1940's, the beautiful, yet modest wooden building stands proudly on a grass yard gently reminding the residents of Järvenpää of the town's unique past.

"This is a such an old mosque. Everyone knows this is the Tatar mosque," says Fazile Nasretdin. "The residents have welcomed us." Even today, it is the only purpose-built mosque in Finland. ❖