

Rajalta Rajalle skiing diary

RR2 1998 8-14.3 1998

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Day 1: Get-together Oivanki

Day 2: From Saunavaara to Kuusamo

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Day 4: From Taivalkoski to Piikkusyöte

Day 5: From Piikkusyöte to Ranua

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Day 8: From Honkamaa to Tornio

Day 1. The get-together at Oivanki 8.3.1998

pipo = skiing cap

omakuva = self portrait

pipojen jako = the distribution of the skiing caps

I was busy all morning trying to get everything packed. The feeling of uncertainty was hiding in my mind behind all my busy thoughts. How will I ever manage to ski as far as 444 km next week? Butterflies in my stomach kept asking stubbornly. In which bag shall I put our big shoe drier (machine that blows warm air into ski shoes to make them dry after skiing, not during it)? Where shall we keep our ski waxes during the week? It might be possible to save a little room in the bags if there are two skiers in the same family, I thought. We only need one collection of ski waxes, my husband Seppo and I. How many skiing suits do I need? Space was running out in my personal bag, and I had to leave my hair-dryer at home. And I was not going to miss it too badly.

Early that morning it was 625 Celsius (-13 F) and that temperature was an omen for the whole week. Almost every single morning during the Rajalta Rajalle 698 week would be at least that many minus degrees. The sun was shining brightly from a beautifully clear, bright blue winter sky, and fortunately that appeared to be a sign, too. We managed to find place for our bags and skis in our car and after an effort, for those of my parents too. They joined us to drive our car from Oivanki back home to Oulu after spending a weekend at Ruka. Ruka is a popular skiing winter holiday week and my parents were going to stay overnight in the same house. My sister was there with her family (one husband, two children and one young tomcat). The cat had in fact kept everybody in the cottage awake every night by singing about his solitude and lack of female partners as loudly as he could. And that tomcat was certainly an expert in making argumentative noises. Even when he was put outside the house my mother was still deep in her mind hoping that a fox or wolf would come and eat the lousy creature. She did not tell that to my sister of course. Foxes or wolves did not appear either. But soon after the winter holiday the cat had an operation that significantly reduced his habit of keeping people awake during the night. So in fact Seppo and I made quite a good choice by deciding to go to lousy skiing-marathon instead of going to Ruka. At least we could sleep well every night!

While driving all four of us admired the white snow of the Finnish late winter. Snowdrifts were decorated by beautiful blue shadows of snow covered trees on both sides of the road. We only got a little bit lost near the fork of the road of Ranua, because we could not decide in time who of us should be the map-reader. At Oivanki Leirikeskus we were given a very peaceful and tidy room, which soon was much less tidy after we had unpacked our bags and skis.

And then we went to ski a little, naturally. But it started far from perfectly, my skiing, I tried on my old skis that I had not used for some years because they had the wrong kinds of bindings. Now the skis were awfully slippery, so was almost impossible to go uphill. That pair of skis appeared to be much too stiff for me. Maybe they had hardened because of their bitter loneliness during the long years on the attic of our garage. So no extra pair of skis for me this week. I changed the horrible skis for my regular ones and now I felt I was skiing a little better. I still got some extra skiing tips from my father. Well, I have practised this noble winter sport: cross country skiing for nearly 40 years, I thought. Naturally, I still have a lot to learn. After these short experimental skiing trips, 5 and 6 kilometres long (4 miles) we the four of us decided to examine the delicacies of the dinner table at Oivanki.

The leader of Oivanki Leirikeskus is Pirkko Maatta, who used to be one of the best crosscountry skiers of Finland some years ago. We met her in the main building, and she told us that it had been -30 C (-25 F) that morning in Oivanki. There was another Rajalta Rajalle group of 96 persons that had started the same morning and most of them had had too warm clothes on. In the afternoon it was only -8 C. I have to keep that in my mind, I thought. If I have too warm clothing I sweat too much and that makes skiing very hard indeed. If a person loses 5% of body fluid he loses some 20% of his strength.

During the dinner (Hungarian goulash, salmon and mushrooms) we were also watching the skiing experts at all the other tables. We are quite a collection of skiers, I thought. Some of us seemed to know each other well and some were shyly glancing around like us. After dinner my parents started their journey towards the hilly landscapes of Ruka. I presumed that they might have been just a little bit jealous of not being in our skiing shoes now. They are both in excellent condition considering their age, thanks to their love of cross country skiing. They still ski about 1500 km (1150 miles) each winter. Day trips of more than 50 km (39 miles) on the shiny white round treeless fells of Lapland with them have been the highlights of almost every late winter during the recent years.

Seppo and I started to prepare ourselves for the sauna or to be more precise for the saunas. There were in fact two saunas: one for the men and another for the women, as in almost every place where we stayed overnight during the week. In the women's sauna I met one lady from Rovaniemi, who was in Rajalta Rajalle for the seventh time. Seppo had chatted in his sauna with a man who was participating in RR for the 13th time. That is also an almost complete sequence. This is the 15th Rajalta Rajalle.

At 7 pm started the Rajalta Rajalle 2 (RR2 for short) briefing. The starting time was 2 hours earlier than in the papers that were sent to us beforehand. Somebody had forgotten to mention the change of time to the chief guide of the race, so he didn't arrive in time. The information was dispensed by Anitta Jaakola from the county of Ranua. She told us in Finnish, English and Swedish about the route marks and other important details of the event. Because this RR2 was the 15th anniversary event and because of the hideously cold weather we all were presented with a red and white ski cap. I'll make a warm hair band of this cap, I thought, because I very seldom ski with a cap on. There is one bad thing in my skiing without a cap: some fellow skiers want to criticise my style of not covering my head. Well, we are not living in an Islamic country, I think stubbornly. It's nicer to have dry hair on my head than a soaking wet ski cap (pipo in Finnish). But don't you try to imitate me in this sense! My head happens to have an extremely lively blood circulation and warm thick hair. A person with thinner hair might just turn his brains into ice in such cold winds and low temperatures where I still have had no difficulties.

During the overview we were told that there was a group of 13 people coming from Slovenia and at least three of them were women. Quite exotic, isn't it? The total number of nationalities was 8 including Finland, Sweden, Norway, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Liechtenstein. In the group RR1 that started one day earlier than RR2, skied also one man from Canada. In the group there were about 30 people from Finland. The next largest groups were from Sweden and Germany. About one third of us were women and in our group were some ten married couples. After the briefing an elderly lady came to talk with us. She appeared to have been born in the same little village in Pudasjärvi where my husband Seppo came from. She even knows Seppo's mother. It's a small world after all even if Pudasjärvi happens to be one of the largest counties in Finland.

Later in the evening we waited eagerly to see the TV weather forecast. Sunny but cold! People from southern Finland and central Europe had sad conversations about this year's warm and bad exercising conditions. Seppo and I didn't dare to advertise our 1400 skiing kilometers (930 miles) of this winter which had been one of the best skiing seasons in Oulu I have experienced. And with a little bit of luck this fine siding will continue until the end of April, I thought. So it actually did this year. On the first of May we still had one-meter of thick ice on the Bothnia near Oulu and it was wonderful to ski on the ice under the warm spring sun one day we were ice when it was +19 C in shade. That was like having summer and winter both at the same time.

Day 2. From Saunavaara to Kuusamo: 63 km (42 miles), 8 hours

It sure was hard to ski the first kilometres of the RR2 race this morning. The bus took us early near the eastern border but at first we skied further east until we saw the watch towers of the Russian side of the border quite close by. We didn't ski exactly on Russian snow, but they it were not far. The landscape around us contained pine covered round hills and some little lakes surrounded by snowy birches. Birch is the most common deciduous tree in Finland and also a very significant feature of the Finnish nature. In June birches get their small light green leaves that smell like paradise. It is this heavenly aroma of summer that makes us take the birch twigs into sauna, too. We don't love them as masochists, even if some ignorant foreigners like to think about it that way. In that case we would prefer to beat ourselves with leafless twigs in the sauna instead of the soft birch leaves. But even in winter without their leaves our snow covered birches are often as beautiful as dazzling brides in white marriage gowns of lace. I think that it is particularly the purple and rosy light of northern midwinter sunrises or sunsets that sometimes makes these snow covered trees absolutely unforgettable.

Perhaps I was concentrating too much on the lovely trees around me while skiing. I suddenly managed to take part in a chain collision of skiers. The first one that fell down was probably a Slovenian skier. All six of us were lucky. Nobody was hurt. The biting coldness made the ski track quite sticky. It was easy to climb upwards the mighty hill of Saunavaara with my sticky skis. The temperature was slowly rising from the early -24 Celsius (-11 F). We climbed several 3 long uphill that morning and on one of them Seppo got in his head the idea of going faster than I could. No problem, I thought. Probably I shall not have to ski alone today even if Seppo goes his way. And so it was going to be.

Before the first 20 km were behind me I started to be terribly thirsty. My clothes were too warm and that made me sweat. At the first service point I hastily drank three cups of sweet juice and that made me feel considerably better. From this point I had only 7 kilometres to the next service point named Virkkula, but they sure were hard kilometres for me. Good Heavens, I have only 27 km of the total of 444 behind me, how do I manage to be so tired already? How shall I ever be able to ski the rest, I thought. At last I came to the yard of Virkkula, a typical farm house of northern Finland situated on a hill. I first took my skis off and threw myself blissfully on a garden chair, which some thoughtful soul had brought near the tables on which our snack: sandwiches, juice, pickled cucumbers, raisins and oranges were waiting for us. Oh, this is wonderful! I must suggest to the staff of RR that they put some garden chairs or why not even couches at every ten kilometres along our skiing path. That sure would make skiing nice and comfortable. I spent a long while studying all the choices of the snack table. The time went lazily by in the afternoon sun. I even found a nice clean toilet inside the farm house. At last, when I no longer found anything new to see or do in the sunny yard, I sighed and went back to my skis.

Well, it was worth it, my idleness I mean. During the time spent on the farm the snow had become much easier to ski on, and the skiing track was from now on made by a good big and heavy machine that makes a better track than the smaller ones.

Our track went next towards the slopes of Valtavaara which is the second largest hill in the Ruka area. Rukatunturi is of course the highest one and gives its name to the whole skiing centre. The managers of Ruka wanted some years ago to expand the possibilities of downhill skiing from Ruka to southern Valtavaara, but they had a strong opposition from nature protectors, who later won the battle. I'm happy the environmentalists were the winners. The Valtavaara skiing path is the nicest in the whole region and would had been totally ruined by down hill skiing, which is so dull and boring anyway, compared with the excitement and adventures of long distance cross country skiing. After spending so long a time in Virkkula it was astonishingly easy for me to ski up the Valtavaara. I was photographing some nice snow covered pines on Valtavaara when a Slovenian man of our RR2 group joined me. His black beard was so snowy that it resembled the white beard of Father Christmas, who by the way is originally Finnish and lives in Korvatunturi in Eastern Finnish Lapland, and not near the North Pole as some ignorant Norwegians or even Canadians might suggest. The Slovenian gentleman was admiring all the pure white snows he had seen that day. We do also get some snow during our winters in Slovenia, but it turns from white to brown in only a couple of days. Well, that might happen sometimes in Finland too, at least in the southern parts of our country and especially in Helsinki and other bigger cities, I thought, but said nothing about it. During this RR2-week I didn't have to be ashamed of dirty skiing tracks. We were going to have enough brilliantly shining white snow for every single skiing kilometre of the week.

By the way, did you know that in our peculiar Finnish language we have more than 100 words describing different kinds of snow. So it is much easier to write interesting texts about winter in Finnish than it is in English. We also have many nice Finnish words for the sounds that snow makes when you ski or walk on it: nirskua, narskua, kirskua and nitistä and narista are some typical Finnish verbs describing snow sounds. The snow surely wasn't silent today, because it was so cold. On that noisy sticky snow there was a young girl skating. She lived in Helsinki. Her name was Lea, and she had been unlucky to put her skating skis that day. Not right from the beginning but from Virkkula (from the service bus). She was in big trouble with her skis during the rest of the day's trail. I also prefer the skating style of cross country skiing when the snow is grainy and slippery enough, as it should already be by this time of the year. But skating on fine new sticky snow in low temperatures is far from being a pleasure. The traditional skiing track was today much easier to ski. But she was tough, this first timer Lea. She managed to reach the school of Nilo in Kuusamo on her skating skis. But for the following six days of the skiing week Leas skating skis were on holiday and she only used her traditional pair.

But she wasn't the only one of our group who had chosen a wrong pair of skis. Jean Paul, a Frenchman man had gone to a sports shop in Paris, where they had sold him a pair of broad and awfully heavy Telemark skies. These are the original Scandinavian skies they had told him. Maybe that pair might be practical on Norwegian mountains, but on our machine made long distance skiing tracks they are much too broad to fit. Seppo and I didn't hear about his mistake until Ranua where we mentioned it to Anitta Jaakola, one of the organisers. She managed to find a pair of normal skies to fit this man who was too shy to complain enough before. Later some of the people who have participated in RR races several times told us frightening stories about people who had tried to ski the 444 km race on Never Wax - skies. None of them had wanted to suffer more than one day. After the day's miseries they voluntarily changed their equipment to somebody's normal spare skies. So don't you even think about using Never Wax skies either! It's easy to learn to use ski waxes. And even if you suppose that you are the exception who doesn't learn it, there will be surely several waxing experts in every RR event. They will gladly give you more advice than you need.

Our skiing path was marked with yellow RR-signs that stood in the snow or with red bands that hung from trees. There were a lot of yellow RR-signs along our path in Kuusamo. The trouble was, that somebody had wanted to spare the red marking ribbon for some other more important purposes; or maybe it was just a political resolution not to use much red ribbon. Anyway even I wasn't all the time sure that I was using the right path. Some inventive young lads had changed the direction of one yellow sign. There-by they made some tired RR2 participants to ski an extra 3 km path that went around the school of those young rascals. I would call that quite unreasonable sense of humour. To be or not to be, on the right path? That was the question, when I skied nearer Kuusamo. Are we skiing against the sun, when we get to Kuusamo? I was asked by one muscular male Swedish Wasaloppet-skier in the morning on the bus. It might as well be the moon, that shines against my face when I will be that far, was my answer. Well not quite for me this time. But there were several Slovenians still siding at 7 pm in moonlight. There is a rule in RR that if a skier comes to the last service point after 5 pm he or she must use our service bus for the last part of the path. But nobody could convince the tough but slow Slovenians to accept this kind of rules, and so they skied late almost every evening. Actually there was a beautiful full moon half of the week and sometimes even northern lights, so maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

Wasaloppet is probably the most famous long distance skiing competition in Scandinavia. It takes place in Sweden and is about 90 km (60 miles) long. In Finland the most popular one is Finlandia Hiihto, which is about the same length. Both these two events attract several thousand skiers every year. There are several others, too. In Oulu we have Tervahiihto which is the oldest long distance skiing competition in the world. It has been arranged 109 times to date. The number of skiers at Tervahiihto (the tar skiing) has recently varied from 2 000 to 4000. I have skied it 9 times now. The longest distance is 70 km traditional skiing (47 miles) and then there is 50 km (33 miles) of free style siding and 40 km (27 miles) of traditional skiing. The start of these big skiing events is always a thrill. I was once in Tervahiihto when all the skiers started some seconds too early. Normally the sign to start was a canon shot, but that time the noise from the many thousands of skis totally covered the bang. Only some light gray smoke came from the mute canon.

At last I reached the yard of the white school building of Nilo. Even in the sauna I still was half faint with exhaustion. But there was nothing wrong with my appetite when I later got to the table with Seppo. We had meatloaf for dinner. I missed a little those beer cans that I had to leave at home when I could not find enough space for them in our bags. In the evening we took a short walk to the centre of Kuusamo. The subzero temperature pinched our faces quite rudely. During the evening snack we chatted with one German skier who lives in Berlin. He was participating in RR for the third time. Can you imagine, that at home my friends think that there only is some three hours of sunlight in Finland at this time of year, he told us. There is also another prejudice that Finnish tourist advertisers have excellently succeeded to put into the German mind: they think that most of Finland is bare and treeless mountain Lapland. No wonder that Germans so eagerly want to protect our 'rare' forests!

Day 3. From Kuusamo to Taivalkoski, 65 km (43 miles), 7h 40 min

Our thermometer was reading -27 ° Celsius (-17° F) early this morning. Last night Kuusamo was the coldest point in Europe with its record figures -30 °C (-25 °F). Of course! This is just our bad luck! Our group started to ski one hour later than was earlier planned. I was even more afraid of the fluffy snowflakes that were floating slowly from the grey clouds than the subzero. If we get some centimetres of that kind of soft new snow under our skis it will effectively prevent us from reaching our goal too easily today, I thought. Fortunately the sky soon turned clear blue again and the temperature also began to rise rapidly. It was already in -17 °C (+1.4 °F) when we started the skiing.

We skied along a former railway track, though there were no rails any longer. It had been a temporary railway built by German soldiers during the second world war. The Germans used prisoners of war as labour. I've been told that under this track lots of human bones could be found, the remains of Russian war prisoners or German runaway soldiers who were killed by the hard work and horrible working conditions. I bet this road is haunted at night, I thought while climbing the even railroad line. I must keep a decent speed today, so that I'll get out of here in good time before dark.

I watched people and their style of skiing. We were in the middle of nowhere, so all the skiers I could see were surely members of the RR. I knew by now the nationalities of most of them. The Scandinavians could be distinguished from many of the middle Europeans by their style of movement. Of course there were exceptions like Jean Pierre from France or Claudia and her husband from Liechtenstein who had nothing wrong in their skiing style. But many of the southern skiers looked like they were walking on skis. They used neither kicking nor gliding. They had no difficulties in skiing up the hills or downwards, but on even paths they were quite slow compared to their strength. Today it was possible to skate on some slippery forest ways. For a little while I made the mistake of trying to ski in a row of skiers whose leader was Kaarina, a young Finnish woman with long light brown hair. Their speed was much too breathtaking for me. I prefer a speed that doesn't prevent me from talking to my fellow skiers. It's also nice to sing sometimes while skiing. And most enjoyable the skiing is to me when I have company that also likes talking or singing. The rest of the skiing today went nicely with an elderly fellow, Pentti from Savo, the middle part of Finland who not only is a gifted story teller but also has a very nice sense of humour. Pentti is one of the three persons who were here in RR for the 15th time.

Pentti and I were talking about Kilpisjärvi (the north-western part of Finland, the land, as it looks like on the map) when Pentti asked me suddenly: Do you know Hotel Urtas? Oh yes, I do indeed. I had seen the name Urtas Hotelli ornamentally carved on a fine copper plate fastened to a grey and very worn out old wooden door. That door belonged to the grungiest little cabin of the whole Kilpisjärvi region. That says quite a lot, because most of all the other cabins there are not so luxurious either. (There are hundreds of little wooden cabins in different parts of Finnish wilderness which are free for hikers and never locked up). That peculiar and picturesque cottage was situated near the beautiful crystal clear lake Urtas, at least two days of hiking from the nearest local road. Seppo and I found the cabin last summer on our hiking tour and we decided to go inside to eat our lunch. Opening the door was a surprise because someone had attached the wire of a mechanical music box to the door and the opening caused the box immediately to start playing the tune: Oh my darling Clementine. The song has a Finnish name: Mummolaan kun pyöräilemme. The music box wasn't the only musical instrument in this 1,5m*2.0 m large Hotel Urtas. On the table we found a black iron frying pan that had one string fattened over it in such a way that a person with an average imagination could think it resembles a black one stringed violin. Seppo and I ate our lunch on the bench of the cabin. Besides the two benches and a small table there was just enough room for a little iron stove. We wondered who wanted this cabin to bear the exaggerating copper name plate and who brought the musical instruments here. Now at RR2 I found the answer to this mystery. It was Pentti and his friends who were to blame. They had visited Hotel Urtas several times and the men also have a tradition of always wearing a tie at Hotel Urtas. To have a shirt or not is of no importance. If there were ladies hiking with them they should wear high heeled shoes on and sometimes they would even wear flower decorated hats. Naturally one of Pentti's friends is an expert frying pan violist. Well what do you learn, when you get older. We must remember these new rules of etiquette, when we next time are packing our backpacks for the wonderfully barren wild and treeless hiking and skiing region of Kilpisjärvi.

We had enough time to discuss several other subjects too before the 72 km of the day were behind us. The wind helped us by pushing us on the open plains and under the high voltage power lines. The Laplanders used to live in skin covered tents that resemble the teepees of the Red Indians. That kind of round tent is called 'kota' in Lapland. Today we ate our lunch in a kota-restaurant that was built especially for RR near Sarkela. We sat on dried hay blocks and were served salmon or meat soup and newly baked local thin bread called rieska. I felt luxurious, and sat thus such a long time that my legs were quite stiff when I at last got myself out of the kota.

During this afternoon all the lakes, marshes and young forests were glittering with their white drifts of snow and even the 110 volt power lines didn't look too bad either. Maybe I should for my profession's sake write here the most positive sentence about electric power lines that I've ever found on paper: They give the landscape an active and technical appearance. True or not, before I started to be bored by the long power lines our trail started to climb over round hills on which grew sunny pine forests. This part of our skiing track was once prepared for Osmo Karjalainen's skiing exercising. He was one of the best male cross country skiers in the world. There were several nice downhill runs that pumped some adrenaline into my blood and that gave me extra power to ski on. One of the slopes was probably a little dangerous because it ended up at a small road.

The last juice serving point was near a big lake. It was easy to ski on the ice of that lake: the wind blowing behind and the sun shining ahead of us. I regretted later that I did not take a photo of a very young little boy and girl who had bunches of small perch in their hands (attached to willow twigs). The children had been winter angling with their father on the sunny ice of the lake. Winter angling is a very popular sport among the Finns. During the sunny early spring days hundreds of people (mostly men) sit patiently for hours and hours on light chairs they have brought with them above the little holes they have bored into the ice of the sea or lakes hanging hooks from short rods in their hands. Near Oulu, where I live, I once counted at least 200 cars parked at the same time on the ice of the Gulf of Bothnia all containing happy winter anglers on their seats. The Finns love this kind of odd fishing so passionately, that they forget to stop it early enough in spring before the ice is weakened by melting. Many people are drowned every year in weak ice. This kind of fishing gives you mostly small perch or roach. Winter angling competitions are also very popular in Finland. Some of them gather thousands of participants and the prizes might be very good like snowmobiles. Professional fishermen don't angle. They prefer more effective traps like nets.

From the shore of the lake I still had to climb the steep uphill to hotel Taivalvaara. This hotel Taivalvaara has a beautiful view around it being situated on a high hill. There were also some small downhill skiing slopes and ski lifts available. When I reached the hotel my mood turned suddenly very bad. Seppo had carried my clothes to Hotel Ruska that lies some kilometres from Taivalvaara. We had our room in Hotel Ruska for that night. Without my clean clothes and swimming suit I could not go to the nice sauna and swimming pool of Taivalvaara. The worst thing was the disappointment of not getting quickly to the sauna after skiing. There was also one sauna at the small hotel Ruska but it was full of men when I came there. I didn't want to wait for the women's shift so I first had a shower, changed into dry clothes on and then we both, Seppo and I went back to Taivalvaara to its luxurious saunas and swimming pool. It was worth it! There were even water massage showers in the pool. I easily feel cold after long distance skiing if I cannot immediately go to the sauna. I also feel that the heat of the sauna heals my aching muscles after any strong exercise.

The sauna is among the best of Finnish inventions. The Swedish might be better salesmen of sauna heaters, but there are many fewer saunas in Sweden than in Finland, not to mention if some of the Swedish ones have heretical fitted carpets on their floors or some other peculiar features in them. In fact every single one-family house in Finland has a sauna of its own. Of course all houses have normal bathrooms too. The Finnish summer cottages always have one or two saunas. The one on the shore is unavoidable. Then there may be a winter-sauna in the main building, which is heated by electricity. The really passionate sauna enthusiasts have yet a third one, which of course is the king of all saunas: the traditional smoke sauna. In recent years it has become more and more popular to build separate saunas into individual flats, too, even if most of the flat owners have traditionally had the possibility of using the big sauna in the apartment building once a week. Of course once a week is not enough! By the way the genuine Finnish sauna has by the way nothing to do with sex. It's always much too hot (at least +80 °Celsius and 175 °F) for that.

Day 4. From Taivalkoski to Pikkusyöte; 55 km (37 miles), 7 h 10 m

This morning was warmer than yesterday, only -17°C ($+1.4^{\circ}\text{F}$). Hotelli Taivalvaara is at a considerably high altitude. Seppo and I started earlier than the others because we wanted to get to Isosyöte in time to participate in Seppo's mother's the 80th anniversary party of in Pudasjärvi. Our friends were spending their skiing holiday week in Isosyöte and they had promised us to lend their car. We started slowly. First we glided down the slalom slope and then skied slowly along hilly pine forests. On our right side the long and gorgeous gorge named Pahkakuru glittered in the early morning sun. What a pity that our skiing trek didn't go along the gorge.

At the first juice service point the fastest skiers of RR2 caught up with us. The first man to come was the Swedish Wasaloppet man. öHärligtö was his comment, which means wonderful in English. The second one was probably Finnish because he was silent Jean Pierre from France was the third one. He was participating in RR for the 9th time. The fourth man spoke German. Quite international, wasn't it? Now I again parted the company with my dear husband. He wanted to rush with the speed-demons. Nobody takes the times, but still some of the RR2 skiers find it very important to go as fast as they can. Fortunately not all of us want to compete. Otherwise I would not have any people to chat with.

After a bright white and sunny frozen lake we reached the second service point, Ooka-Stoppi by the road to Kuusamo. Actually it is a popular road cafe. One room was reserved for RR2. We ate sandwiches with coffee, tea or hot chocolate. Also many kinds of alcoholic drinks were for sale, but I didn't see anybody wanting to take such risks. We still had a long distance ahead of us today.

Now the hard headwind part of the trek started. Our path turned surprisingly towards the north and over the open swamps where an icy wind was blowing into my face. Fortunately the sun had already made the temperature rise. The next service point was found on the western shore of a lake. The place was quite warm, because the nasty wind could not reach it. There I took a photo of the vehicle that was to pick up those RR2 skiers who no longer had the strength to continue. It was a cute red cabin pulled by a snowmobile. The driver was taking it easy. He was lying in the relaxing warmth of the sun on his snowmobile. On a small plain I found funny big footprints later that day. Someone had dragged his feet over our skiing trek with snow shoes on. That was surely a foreigner, I thought The Finnish people gracefully use their 2 m long and 10 cm broad forest skis if they want to move around on soft snow drifts. They wouldn't put snow shoes on, otherwise their neighbours would think that they had lost their mind. In Pudasjärvi they arrange the World Championship Competitions in deep snow skiing every February. The event lasts two days and one night. The first day the competitors have different kinds of tasks to solve in wilderness ski hiking and some 40 km (27 miles) of ski orienteering. Everybody carries what they need to overnight in the forest in rucksacks or on a sledge. The last day there is a deep snow skiing competition as a chase. The length of the race depends on the success of the teams on the first day. Everybody starts at the same time and every team has a monitor that ensures that they ski on unbroken snow.

After some smaller hills the mother of all the uphill of this RR2 skiing trail started. Maybe Saunavaara was steeper, but it definitely didn't take as long to climb. I surely enjoyed this uphill for a long time. Fortunately it was so curved that one could not see its immense length all at once. Otherwise a lack of faith could have defeated me. The weather was still fine and there were some rabbit tracks to admire. It was peaceful and calm around. Then I suddenly saw one skier rushing towards me at a terrible speed. He wore a plastic RR2 mark flapping under his chin and his face was lit by more than a happy grin. Pentti and I had just enough time to give way to this phenomenon on skis. Of course! There are people who want to climb this lengthy uphill more than once a day. Apparently some don't get exercise enough during the normal 444 km of the RR. Well, we finally reached the top of the hill and were rewarded by the views. The speed of the downhill part was unfortunately slowed down by the headwind.

At the bottom of the hill was an idyllic old farmhouse called Jussila waiting for us. I couldn't resist opening the door of the immense white brick oven in the big old room, called a tupa in Finnish. There was enough room in the oven for three average sized men or more than 30 loaves. This oven is apparently not a microwave, I thought. Maybe maxiwave might be a better expression. Tupa used to be the most important room in old Finnish farm houses. It was a combination of kitchen, dining room, children's playroom and even a workshop, where men had enough space to build sleds or repair nets. Normally a tupa had long wooden benches around by the walls. Its size was often more than 100 square meters. Also in this sense this tupa of Jussila is a representative example. Its walls, uncovered dark hand whittled logs give the big room the original feeling of calm that is nowadays becoming more and more difficult to find. Most of the big tupas of old Finnish farm houses have either been divided into several rooms or otherwise modernised, and thereby lost most of their original charm. On the other hand modern Finnish architecture has adopted some of the ideas of the ancient tupa so that nowadays it is very common to have open kitchens combined with living-rooms, so that the cook of the family doesn't have to work in solitude.

After Jussila the siding track became wider. It was sometimes possible to skate also. It was easy to use my last strengths on the last uphill of Pikkusyöte. One of our group was lost today near Romekievari. To me these paths are so familiar that I could easily find my way even in thick fog ski lift of in darkness, I suppose. We did not have to climb all the way up. We were allowed to use the ski lift of Pikkusyöte. There was a separate lift dedicated to RR-skiers.

Probably I could even have used the lift twice, but somehow I preferred to hurry to the sauna and did not use the slalom possibility. Maybe next year. In sauna I chatted with Claudia who was the fastest woman of our group. How long did it take you to come here today? I asked her. She answered happily: I have not the faintest idea. The time has no importance to me anymore. I finished to compete in skiing a long time ago.

When we drove back from Seppo's mother we saw the most wonderful northern lights we have admire ever seen. When they were at their greatest, we had to stop beside the road and step out to admire the sky. The driver in front did the same thing. The sky was astonishingly covered with such bright northern lights that they even caused the stars to dim. The green rays formed an immense majestically moving kota or tepee around us. Only a small circle at the highest point of the sky was dark.

Our hotel for this night was Kurssikeskus Syöte. There is a wonderful view from the Kurssikeskus restaurant, but its architect has almost succeeded in spoiling the view by balconies that collect high snow drifts behind the windows in winter. The rooms are comfortable and quiet and the ski waxing room is big enough for several dozen people. Overall Kurssikeskus Syöte was a nice hotel where we got extremely delicious food.

Day 5. From Pikkusyöte to Ranu a; 75 km (50 miles) 8 h 45 min

This morning at Pikkusyöte we had only -12 °C (+10 °F) but at the same time down in the valley of Pärjänjoki (the river of the bear in English) the coldest place of the whole week: -37° Celsius (-35 °F) was waiting us. We were lucky to hear the numbers only after we had already passed the biting subzero temperatures and were already in the relatively warm highlands of Ahmatupa. Ahma is wolverine in English, and tupa you already know by now. Some of our foreigners seemed a bit shocked when they heard the figures -37 °C. It was a bit difficult to keep my hands warm during the cold downhill to Pärjänjoki and the breeze sure was biting my cheeks. The snow creaked loudly under the skiing poles. The gliding of the skis was poor because of the strong friction from the snow.

The wolverine is very rare in Finland. The reindeer owners hate them. It is said that a wolverine sometimes kills many reindeer at the same spot. I've never seen any snow prints of wolverines in Finland, but summer 695 I was lucky to see three wolverines in a row on the snows of Kebnekaise, the highest mountain in Sweden. That happened in June. I was climbing the snowy uphill of Kebnekaise with Seppo and our elder daughter Satu who then was 13 years old. There was a noisy river under the hard snow and thick fog surrounding us which probably was the reason why those animals did not recognise us until they were very close. When we climbed higher the wind started to blow the fog away. Then suddenly our daughter stopped us, and pointed with her finger back down where we had come: Look mother, over there, dogs are running! They were so near that we could not make a mistake. Three wolverines, probably a mother with her two grown up cubs were crossing our path. Their fur was long and it was moving around them when they jumped, so that it looked as if they were having over-sized fur coats on. Their fur was dark brown with a lighter area on the side. They looked so happy and free in that magnificent landscape of Kebnekaise, that I still feel that it was a wonderful gift of Mother Nature to allow us to see them.

From the ice of Pärjänjoki a long exhausting uphill started lasting until Ahmatupa, but the climbing at least kept me warm. The immense old spruces were carrying more and more snow as we went higher. This Isosyöte area gets more snow in winter than any other part of Finland. The heavy snow breaks the branches of normal spruces, so they don't survive here. This area has only high snow specialised spruces with very short and bending branches. We call that kind of tree the candle spruce. And today they actually were like giant candles in their round snow covered shapes. Higher up the hill they looked more like trolls of Tove Jansson (a Finnish author) than any representatives of the flora. I took out my camera only to find out that I had no more film. So I just had to watch and envy the busy photographing foreigners.

At Ahmatupa we were served the usual hot juice with a snack. I boasted to some Germans that actually today is my resting day. I'm going to ski the 75 km of this day really slowly. Man muss doch manchmal ein Ruhetag haben. Probably they did not believe me, but I really had decided not to rush today. I occurred to ski with others who had a speed even slower than my regular one. And it was good company in other ways, too. One could hear songs in three different languages at the same time when we were gliding on slow downhills with a tailwind.

After Pentti joined our company we started to plan a small joke for our foreigners. There were so many newcomers skiing with us and they probably were not specialised experts in the Finnish fauna. We made a plan to try to convince some ignorants that the footprints of a tiny reindeer or a beefy rabbit would be those of a wolf. It was Pentti's idea. In addition, I came up with the idea that, if our foreigner did believe us, I could calm him down by saying that he doesn't have to be afraid of wolves with us. This Pentti here is a well known wolf killer, who doesn't even need a gun to dispose a normal sized wolf. He kills them practically with his knife. If our audience looked convinced, we would tell them that in true handling of a wolf Pentti would just need an extra jacket that he could put around his left hand. Then he could stick this covered hand into the mouth of the wolf to prevent it from biting and easily end the life of the beast with his short Finnish knife. We wanted to check our story in reality, but always when we had suitable foreigners nearby there were no reindeer footprints or vice versa.

Would you have believed me? In fact the story about the knife is true. Pentti has not tried it yet, but it is the way of the Laplanders protecting their reindeer. But first they would have to chase the wolf by skiing in soft snow that carries the skier but not the wolf until the animal is totally exhausted. The wolf only attacks a man when it sees attacking as its only chance. So don't be afraid of the big bad wolf! It fears you more and escapes. I found the knife trick in one of the many interesting books that a Finnish anthropologist Samuli Paulaharju has written.

There is also an interesting book about wolves written by a professor of biology of the University of Oulu. The writer, Mr Pulliainen raised two cubs of a wolf at his home during his research work. He praises the loveable and dog like behaviour of his two pets in his book. He probably learned a lot from his wolves: he is nowadays a politician. The wolves eat a few dogs every year in Finland. The bears of Finland killed one male jogger last summer. They haven't harmed any women in 200 years. During the RR skiing our bears are still sleeping deeply in their winter nests. You'll have nothing to fear from them, unless you happen to push your ski pole too deep into the big round snow drift that has a breathing hole in the middle.

Willow ptarmigans are in winter cute totally white small poultry that sleep under the snow. Their only coloured areas are red eye brows and nosy black eyes. Their hairy white feet function like snow shoes and make beautiful funny paths in the snow. These white birds really like walking. There were lots and lots of willow ptarmigan trails in the snow under the birches of the high banks of Siurua river today.

The sunny open marshes gave me the same relaxed feeling as skiing at home on the broad ice of the sea in good weather. There is so much light and space around you, that one gets the feeling that the time has stopped. We skied fast the Sotivaara downhill. The first stop was at Rytinki and the second one at the school of Kela. The pupils of Kela welcomed us warmly already in the woods near by. They had made us nice little presents, wooden medals. We had delicious sausage soup for lunch and home made coffee bread (called pulla in Finnish) with coffee for breakfast.

We Finns are a nation that drinks coffee to excess. We definitely must get some cups of coffee in the morning, in the evening and during the daytime too. We are also very pedantic about the quality of our coffee. Instant coffees will not do in Finland. Some foreign instant coffee companies have tried now and then, but we find their advertisements very funny. We even want to carry one kg of Finnish coffee with us when we travel to foreign countries to get some decent cups of coffee also during our holidays. Of course we take some of our dark rye bread with us too. Hapankorppu is the dried form of this necessity of ours. It is easy to carry, because it doesn't weigh much.

Until the school of Kela the track was very beautiful. Then the long and boring electric power lines started. It was most depressing to see the wires hanging higher and higher almost up to the sky ahead of me. I had to leave my nice travel companions, because my skis became too slippery for their slow speed. Today I made a bad mistake: I tied my left skiing shoe too tight. I began to feel pain in my left ankle, but could still skate on lakes. The skiing track went on the ice along the shores. So they managed to put there more distance in the trail than by going directly from one point to another. The moon was quite high on the sky when I managed to reach our hotel Ilveslinna with its big snow castle in the yard. It was nice to take the skis off, but the best moment of the day was again to sit in the warmth of the sauna. The name of the hotel Ilveslinna is in English the Castle of Lynx. Lynx (ilves) is a very beautiful and charming spotted light brown wild cat (about the size of a lamb) that lives in the wilderness of Finland. This creature is very rare and needs around itself some 1000 square kilometres to survive.

After the dinner (beef stroganoff and salmon) we enjoyed a fashion show of reindeer leather and fur clothes. They were nice looking and of high quality, but I'm afraid that we skiers had already difficulties in taking care all of our luggage so that we were not too eager to get even more of them. Maybe they could have sold some warm slippers. Several skiers had been admiring my soft lamb fur slippers, that were so nice to put on my tired feet after the skiing. It was here that we talked with the Frenchman about his Telemark skis a' la Paris. Perhaps we shouldn't have helped in changing his equipment. If we hadn't he could get his name into the Guinness book of records after having skied the longest continuous Telemark race of the world.

This was the fourth clear and sunny day in a row. The sun began to show on most faces in varying orange, red and brown colours. There were also other changes in our faces. Next morning I heard many complaints about the inconveniently strong lights of the bathrooms. I was also horrified to see my face early in such an unfavourable lighting. I had significant extra water supplies above and below my both eyes. Next time I'll take a candle and some matches with me to avoid that sight.

Day 6. From Ranua to Hosio, 44 km 5h 20 min

makkaranpaistoa : grilling of sausages

Ranuan latukone: the skiing track machine of Ranua

poron lämmin heinäpeti: the reindeer's warm hay-bed

Today was cloudy, windy and grey and there were snow flurries all day long. Some group photos were taken in the snow castle of Ilveslinna before we started. The big snow castle had been built for an opera performance. We Finns love opera and snow castles. The snow castle of Kemi (a coastal town between Oulu and Tornio) is even bigger. Last year they had in Kemi the biggest snow castle in the world, and our most famous female opera singer, Karita Mattila performed in a concert there. In summer we no longer have snow castles. So we have to use a medieval stone fortress, Olavinlinna, as the scene for the big Opera Festivals of Savonlinna in July. Savonlinna is a lovely small town surrounded by one of the most beautiful lakes (lake Saimaa) on earth. We have some excellent modern opera composers in Finland, for example Joonas Kokkonen and Aulis Sallinen that have composed wonderful new operas in recent years.

There were enough frozen swamps to ski along on the trail today. Under the grey sky they all were monotonously flat and dull. They were so even, that it wasn't possible to recognise the siding track in the snow. Without the wooden snow-mobile route marks we would have lost our way. Fortunately the breeze blew behind our backs and the snow was not the worst possible either. Today I made my second bad mistake. I began to ski too fast with Seppo in those unbroken snowdrifts. For a while we had also the Wasaloppet-man, the Swede in our group. Härligt (wonderful) was his comment again. I shouted at him: öMycket härligt between the flurries.ö

It would have been much wiser of me to ski at the end of any long and slow line of RR2 skiers, because my left ankle began to turn more and more painful. The first half of today went without major problems but soon after we had grilled some sausages at our service point my left foot almost totally refused to co-operate with me. I could stand on my left ankle but not much more.

There you see how unhealthy it is to grill sausages! My siding style became quite eccentric and lop-sided. I stood on my left foot and kicked with the right one. It probably looked funny, but I was not amused. I had to yell with pain whenever my left foot slipped in the snow. Seppo skied all day with me and opened the track in front. That helped a lot. I had to hurry not to get cold in the wind to keep me warm. The breeze blew my hair on to the left side of my head. In spite of the cold wind I had to open the collar of my jacket because the RR2 plastic sign attached to it began to hurt my skin by flapping in the wind. There are lots of marshes in Ranua. Enough for today and enough for tomorrow too. Maybe I should return in summer to pick some cloud berries, I thought. Think positively, I said to myself. It is so fine to have half of your legs in great condition, isn't it. If my right one were as bad as the left I would have to stop skiing and start to crawl. I felt a small conflict inside, one leg wanted to go faster and the other one slower than I did.

The second stop of today was at a school. We were welcomed by school children waving paper flags. We wrote our names on their flags, but I couldn't stay long in my thin clothes. Where do you come from?, asked one girl. We come from the Russian border and we are skiing to Tornio, at the boarder of Sweden. We are some kind of maniacs. Hasn't anybody told you about it? No they haven't, she answered. Near the school building there was a fence for reindeers. One of them was lying on a pile of hay. He was lazily eating the hay around him and looked as if he was really having a good time in the warm hay. Other reindeer in that field didn't look so happy.

The rest of the day brought us into new open swamps, of course. They were all of different shapes and sizes but they had one thing in common: If there once had been a ski track in the snow, it sure wasn't there when I needed it. We managed eventually to leave the last one of them behind us and were cheered up by a metal sign that had the text: VAUHDIKAS LASKU!. That means: Speedy downhill! It's good they had put that sign there. Otherwise we wouldn't have recognised that it was so speedy at all. I suppose that many foreigners didn't notice this speedy downhill of Ranua at all, when there was only the Finnish text. That's a pity!

When we reached the school of Hosio, we got good cups of coffee with pulla. The bus took Seppo and me to the school of Ylikärppä. I suppose my average speed today in spite of my bad leg had been quite fast, because Claudia was the only woman of those that stayed at Ylikärppä who was on the first bus with me. That was to be my first and last speedy day in this year's RR2. After the sauna I put snow in a plastic bag and tried to cool my ankle with it. That helped me to endure the pain, but it didn't prevent my ankle from swelling badly. At the school we had delicious reindeer meat for dinner. We also got some stove cheese that was made from the thick milk that the cows give when the calf is new born. That cheese happens to be one of my absolute favourite desserts. It is best when you eat it warm with cold milk, sugar and cinnamon. In the evening we had pancakes with coffee.

My bedroom for this night was the library of the school. I slept there with Claudia and Mari, our bus guide. The library inspired Claudia, his husband (both from Liechtenstein), Seppo and me to have a passionate literary discussion. We were almost late for the evening snack. During the snack we taught the foreigners some practical Finnish. We started with the handy three words: hiihto, hitto and kiitos (=skiing, damn, thanks). One of us wanted to teach also one ugly word that begins with pe and ends le, but we others didn't recommend them to use it. Its of no use, said Claudia. Everybody can say it already. Some Finns learned how to say cheers in the dialect of eastern Finland (Savo). That is: Hölökyn kölökyn. And if your are polite, you answer by lifting your glass: No hölökympa hyvinnii kölökyn. Our nice bus guide Mari had severe difficulties in learning the answer part. Fortunately most of our skiers from Savo (Pentti for example) were sleeping at the other school tonight, so that Mari's lack of language ability didn't matter so much.

Day 7. From Hosio to Honkamaa; 56 km (37 miles), 6 h 50 min

At night my aching swollen ankle kept me awake until Mari gave me some aspirin. The medicine killed most of the pain. The snow flurries had gone with the wind and the sky was cloudless and blue again. By the time the bus took us from Ylikärppä to Kivalo, the school was already empty. All the RR2 members who had slept there were already on the skiing trail. Today was windy like yesterday, but it blew from behind and helped us a lot. The sun intensified the colours of our faces significantly. The flurries and winds of yesterday had decorated the surfaces of the snowdrifts with ornamental curves that in some places looked like the scales of a giant white fish.

That reminded me of the delicious Finnish whitefishes, perches, pikes, perch-pikes, herrings, burbot, flounders and salmon that live in our thousands of lakes, in the Baltic Sea and in our river. My three favourite Finnish fish meals are smoked perches, small herrings which are grilled over an open fire and a soup made of midwinter burbot, that are caught by hooks under the ice of the sea. In summer the taste is not the same. Finland is one of those rare countries where excellent fish is cheaper than meat. Burbot is made in Finnish. So the expression: Made in Finland, has two meanings to us Finns.

Today I improved my one-legged style of skiing of yesterday and became quite an expert, probably the best in the world. I've never seen anybody else using that style. I learned more about the swampy nature of Ranua. We skied across some peat marshes, where peat was collected into some big stacks. One foreigner was photographing the stacks, when I asked him: Do you know what those small hills are? Maybe they have something to do with the Finnish army, he suggested. Well, not quite. Dried peat is collected into stacks to be transported later by trucks to the power plants, that burn it to generate electricity and district heating. There are several peat-burning power plants in Finland and I used to work for one of them before my present job. Finland has more swamps than any other country in the world compared to its surface area. Not only do we have tens of thousands of lakes but also tens of thousands of forests, islands and swamps. Not too bad, is it?

Today I skied with Lea, a young female cyclist from Helsinki. Her skiing speed was slowed down by one mark (a Finnish coin that we use until it is changed into Euros) sized blisters in both her heels to the speed that I with my bad ankle could ski. So it suited us to ski together. The snow had less friction than earlier this week. The skiing trail was visible almost everywhere. By the trail I saw quite incredible footprints of wolves but both Pentti and our foreigners were missing, I told Lea the knife trick and she almost believed me. At the end of the skiing day we passed the former French Telemark skier. Je suis comme un avion maintenant. I'm like an aeroplane now, he said to us. Me too, but probably a plane with only one engine working. At the last service point we got some very good blueberry juice. Blueberries are very common in Finnish spruce forest.

In Finland we have a so called every man's right which allows picking berries or mushrooms in any forests if the place is not very close to houses. We pick lots of them every summer. For most people, like myself, berry picking is a nice hobby, but some Finns also sell part of their berries or mushrooms to get some money. The berry season begins in July with yellow cloudberry that grow on swamps. It's hard work to walk on wet and soft marshes to get to them. Sometimes mosquitoes and heat make the task almost infernal, but it is a good summer exercise for RR skiing. The taste of cloudberry is between mango and peach and there is lots of vitamin C in them. At the beginning of August the raspberries start to ripen. Those bushes like to grow in logging areas, where the young growing trees are not yet too high to cast shadows. Blueberry is the most common berry in Finland. Lots of them are left in the fir forests especially those years when the price of blueberries is low. Where the soil is mostly sand and quite dry the most common tree is pine. Under the pines there are bright red lingonberries. They won't ripen before September. Some autumns they are very common and some other years really hard to find. The last berry of the year is cranberry. It won't ripen until the frosts begin. They can be found on swamps until the snow covers them. They are still good if you find them early in the spring after the snow has melted. I once picked cranberries on the same swamp with four cranes who were on their spring journey to the north. I was so concentrated on the cranberries that I didn't notice the big birds until they began to sing and dance by moving slowly their big grey wings quite near me on the ground. Their beautiful sad voice was so loud that I was frightened at first, until I found out where it came from. Our most famous composer Jean Sibelius loved cranes and their voices. They can be heard in his music. Another important bird to Sibelius was the national bird of Finland, the singing swan. This beautiful white straight-necked swan had almost vanished from the surface of the earth until Yrjö Kokko, a Finnish writer wrote a wonderful book about them. The name of the book is: "They'll return.", and so they did. Having been only twenty pairs of singing swans in northern Lapland they can now be found in thousands and their nesting area is spreading into central Finland and even to south. And nobody shoots them in Finland. Yrjö Kokko succeeded in his book to make the killing of a singing swan to be regarded as a murder. Somebody should write a book about the lynxes. They are in danger now. Some pleasure hunters like to shoot those delightful creatures. That's something I cannot understand. People don't eat lynx meat!

The women of the county of Ranua skied a long time today again. Lea and I waited some time for them to come to the sauna with us. That sauna was probably the hottest one I've ever been in. There was no thermometer, but the temperature was at least 120 °Celsius. There is one sauna in a cottage at Isosyöte that was nearly as hot. We rented it some years ago

for a weekend. The name of that cottage is Luppokurikka and in the cottage visitor's book some renter before us had written: "You only have to show the firewood to the sauna stove and it becomes too hot." That was the truth. That nice cottage is still available for rent. Try it if you don't believe me! To be able to sit in a hot sauna calls for special preparations. You'll have to put some cool water on the place where you intend to sit but if you don't sit on it fast enough the water might turn too hot or even vaporise into the air. Tonight we didn't have to throw water on the sauna heater as usual. It was hot enough without the steam. I heard later that foreigners sat as low-down as possible that evening in the sauna of Honkamaa.

Kurssi-ja Leirikeskus Honkamaa was a nice and quiet wooden group of buildings in the middle of snowy forests. There was no sound of traffic. Above us we had a beautiful starry sky that was not spoiled by street lamps. Seppo and I got a double bedroom for a change. My left leg was not okay, but it wasn't lethal either. I phoned my sister, the doctor, about it and she didn't try to prevent me from skiing the rest of the trail. Probably she wouldn't have succeeded if she had. Tomorrow is the last day of the RR2. I have already got this far, so I'll try my best to manage the rest of the 444 km (300 miles) too, I thought before falling into deep sleep.

Day 8. From Honkamaa to Tornio, 76 km (51 miles), 8h 45 min

Today I woke up early. Last night I had packed my sauna bag with clean clothes for the evening party beforehand. One thing I've learned this week is that it's practical to have your sauna bag ready when you come from skiing. It was lovely to get to the sauna as quickly as possible after sidling and it was also so nice not to have to force my brain to make such difficult decisions as what to take with me in that state of ultimate exhaustion. Optimistically I had packed a skirt for the evening party. I took a quick look at my ankle. It resembled an acute case of bilhartsia, the elephant sickness that people get from tropical waters. I sighed, and put instead my black jeans in my bag. My legs have such a significant dissimilarity, that I'd better cover them. I could not bend my left ankle too much, but my right one was still in an excellent shape.

On the last evening we were advised to ski in the order of the slowest first and the faster skiers later. Or we were supposed to do that. But the fast Wasaloppet man rushed to the path right after us, the crippled pair, Lea and I. Are you homesick? Har du hemlängtan? I should have asked this Swedish speedy Gonzales. It wasn't very wise of him to start so early. The service points were not yet ready, when he reached them. Maybe he hadn't heard about today's system the previous evening.

This day was hard. We had been lucky this far to have tailwind almost all the time. Now we had a ablowing cold tailwind that was awfully strong on the open plains. The skiing trail was beautiful and varying and it was long enough. It was marked so that it first looked as if the length of the track was only 65 km. Then there was the big surprise. Near the shore of the Baltic Sea after Keminmaa we suddenly found ahead of us some extra ten kilometres to ski. This news was not particularly exhilarating to most of us. These extra Tornio-river kilometres were added to avoid the shorter but very hard headwind path on the ice of the Baltic sea. The wind blew quite strongly on the Tornio-river too. Some of those RR2 skiers who had skied the trail before, took the shorter way, and said that it was easier after all. I as a first timer don't know who was right.

First thing in the morning we skied some kilometres that we had already done the previous day. There was an odd plain between two hills, where I wondered whether there was turf or stone under the snow. Later we went along the highlands of Kivalonharju. It resembled the open landscapes of the Lapland fells. We had some speedy downhill a' la Ranua (vauhdikas lasku in Finnish). Because of the lack of braking abilities of my left ankle I found myself off the skiing trail after one downhill. It was not easy to make a comeback from the deep and soft snowdrifts. I could see from the broken uneven surface of the snow that somebody else had also practiced deep snow skiing here.

Soon we arrived in a protected area of marshes. That was written on a big metal sign: SOIDEN SUOJELUALUE. There we skied through pine woods, dark fir forests and some mixed wood hills. We could not see a glimpse of any swamps. They have indeed protected their marshes well, I thought. Probably they think their swamps are too valuable to allow anybody ski on them. No problem. We did see some marshes in Ranua both on yesterday and the day before.

There was an accident case at the first juice point. One RR2 skier had succeeded in breaking one of his skis. I had to act as a translator in this serious situation. The Finns at the service point wanted to drive the man on their snow-mobile to the RR2 service bus that was waiting on the road some 15 km ahead. In the bus there were some extra skis available. Those Finns didn't know to whom they were talking to. I understood well that this would have been a lousy way to solve the problem for the RR2 man with the broken ski. The RR people want to ski and not to sit on snowmobiles. The spare ski was delivered later by a Finn who skied it from the bus. Mobile phones are so practical in emergencies, (especially the Finnish Nokia mobile phones). Later we saw the "accident case" skiing with an elegant pair of two different coloured skis on. One was blue and the other violet. Ski designers, this is a hint for you!

The highest point of today's trail was Sivakkavaara (in English ski-hill), although one half of it was already transported elsewhere by trucks. Did those trucks destroy a nicely named skiing centre of the future? Then we came to the downhill towards the Kemi river, that Lea and I thought for a while to be the border river Torniojoki. The skiing centre Kallinkangas of Keminmaa put us back on the Finnish map. Now the bumpy and narrow skiing trails turned into broad skiing avenues made by a big machine, on which it was possible to use the skating style too. The snow became crispy and slippery and took the last remains of ski waxes from the bottoms of our skis. On Kallinkangas we had a nice snack with open fire and all. One of the ladies of RR2 came in with her face bright red. She had forgotten to use sun protection lotion. Lucidly some of it was found, to give her first aid. The sandwiches with bouillon and oranges were good. After the break we skied along the outskirts of some fields and birch woods.

Then we arrived at the seaside service point where we heard about the extra 10 km. Some Slovenian male skiers came to drink juice and hot chocolate at the same time as Lea and I. Maybe those men were depressed knowing that our goal was suddenly so far away, or maybe the extra strong headwind on the ice of the river hindered their skiing more than it did us, because Lea and I left them a long way behind us. We were forced to use the skating style. Otherwise the wind would have blown us backwards. We didn't have enough ski wax on our skis anymore. My left leg didn't like skating as much as the former one-sided 'stand on your left and kick with your right' style. The wind weakened after some kilometres when the banks of Tornio-river grew higher. The sunshine began to warm our wind bitten faces. Now at last even Lea's face started

to get some sun tan. The colour of my face was clearly closer to red than brown. We admired some nice summer cottages and old farm houses that were built on high river banks and continued stubbornly our skiing against the wind. I tried to convince Lea, that all these hardest kilometres will later be among our most valuable memories, but she didn't seem to believe me. Maybe later.

On the next service spot we praised the staff who gave us juice: "You people of Tornio are very generous. You give us ten more kilometres to ski at the same price." We skied on for a while. Then suddenly I heard Lea use some quite angry and ugly words. I stopped and looked behind. My skiing companion was lying on snow and hitting the ground with her fists clenched. Are you hurt? I asked frightened. No I'm not, I'm just furious that I fell down, she answered. That incident would have made an interesting photo, but I dared not photograph her, when she was so angry. Falling is quite understandable when you are skating on uneven icy snow and have more than 70 km skiing behind you in a heavy headwind.

Then at last the riverbanks started to have a more and more urban look. Then finally we saw the flags of the customs between the Finnish and Swedish border. We heard furious cheers when we climbed the bank of Tornio river. The applause was not meant for us, unfortunately. There was an ice-hockey game on very near on that side of the river, where we were skiing. Suddenly some extremely loud music started: the theme from the movie: The Impossible Task. That suits us! we thought, Lea and I. 444 km in 7 days, and we actually have skied every single kilometre. Someone might call that an impossible task.

We only had to ski some hundreds of meters to see the welcoming flags of RR. There were flags of many countries hanging in the wind on the ice of the river. Where is the flag of Slovenia, we asked the two young men that were welcoming at our goal. We don't have any, they answered. Oh, that's a shame. A big group of tough Slovenians will arrive quite soon. You should at least have a good excuse for not having their flag here. Tornio has no friendship town in Slovenia, and that's why we don't have any flag, they answered. I hope that your explanation will prove acceptable. Lea and I should have skied the track that came near the Finnish flag, but being both first timers we did it all wrong. We'll be better next year, we promised.

It sure was nice to come to Peräpohjolaopisto. There were guides to take care of us, to make sure that we found our rooms and saunas (with a swimming pool). In the women's sauna we discussed the various injuries to our feet. It was nice to swim after the sauna. The 50 first in our group went by bus to the Lapinkulta beer brewery. Lea, Seppo and I were among them. They were doing some renovations to the floors of the beer factory, and therefore the visit was shorter than normally. It didn't bother us. They explained everything in four languages without simultaneous translation, and that took quite a long time anyway. The different beers tasted excellent after our 76 km of skiing today. Vive la Lapinkulta.

Then it was time to go to the Joen Talo (= house of the river) for the evening party dinner. The dinner table was beautiful with its rose decorations. Among others the table offered delicious Finnish fish dishes. Ten marks for the cook! One of our RR group got the diploma of skiing counsellor. That title is given to somebody, who manages to ski RR ten times. Mrs Voutilainen, the female half of the Voutilainen skiing machine, who was in RR for the 15th time made a speech in several languages. She promised to take part in RR until she and her husband become so slow that they would need the service RR snow mobile to carry them on the skiing trail. They were so speedy this year, that I wouldn't worry about their need of snowmobile or bus transportation on RR trail for a very long time. The Swiss gave Elina Verronen two huge photographs that they had taken of her last year in RR. Elina made also a speech about her skiing. She was so disappointed, because she had had to use the RR bus sometimes this year. She is the oldest person in our RR group, and had been in a cycling accident and hurt her leg. After the accident she did not want to go to the doctor, because she was worried that he would try to prevent her from taking part in the RR skiing this year.

There was a sad feeling when we had to begin to say good-byes to all the nice people we had met during RR2 this week. There were hugs and smiles. I hope we will see you next year again!

Summary:

Rajalta Rajalle skiing race is a very special event in many ways. It is so tough, that you need to exercise for it. If you haven't skied a lot the year and you want to participate in RR, it need not prevent you, provided that you have achieved your long-lasting strength by some other means: jogging, cycling or hiking. Lea had skied only 63 km this winter, but she had cycled a lot. In this event it is wise to compete only with yourself. If you managed to ski without the aid of the bus your day is a success.

It was nice to have new trails to ski. Seppo and I know quite well the tracks of almost all our big cross country skiing centres, even if they have as many as 250 km of machine-made ski trails as there is in Ylläs. So it was most interesting to see new views. We slept every night in very different places, and that made the week quite interesting. The food was prepared by different cooks for each meal which made it to taste superb.

But the most fascinating part of RR was all the different kinds of people from various countries. During a "normal" holiday its not possible to get to know so many people so well. After skiing we were too happy to play any swaggering roles. I loved the opportunity of speaking 6 different languages every day. That really made my brain work hard, although there was always a strong possibility mixing up the words of the different languages. I was quite an expert in mixing German and Swedish. Fortunately it didn't matter when I spoke with those who could speak both of those languages anyway. If I ski on RR again next year, I must start to practise my French and Italian before March.

The feeling during the dinners after sauna can be described by the word euphoric, despite us all being physically tired. When reaching the goal in Tornio both Seppo and I were almost as happy as that morning we finally sat on the top of the Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain of Africa (5685 m) last winter, in February 1997.

Those Finns who take part in Rajalta Rajalle, the longest continuous skiing race in the world are not average people. The foreigners that come to Finland for RR are probably even more special. There must be something wrong with our heads, too, said one of us when we were discussing all the blizzards and other minor problems that we had experienced. Probably true, but I still want to send many happy greetings to all of you, who share my love of extra long distance cross country skiing from the writer, photographer and skier of this story, Teija Pohjanvesi.

PS: Many warm thanks to all the people who have made the Rajalta Rajalle ski possible every year. Lots of nice people do wonderful work without beeing payed. I want to thank my English teacher Anne Sjöberg and also both Clifford Lamb and Steven Walters who have had lots of trouble in removing many funny mistakes from my English translation.

Teija Pohjanvesi

Last page with images

Rajalta Rajalle - Border to border - is a guided skiing event from the Russian border to the Swedish border. The route goes near the Arctic Circle. Border to border is the world's longest guided skiing event, 444 kilometers.

The event will last for seven days. In the evenings sauna, self-service buffet and evening activities will be supplied. The accommodation is both in school and in hotels. Luggage will be transported to the destinations on the bus.

The most important thing is enjoy the skiing in your own pace, the beautiful scenery and the quietness along the track. All the refreshment points will be available daily until 17.00 (5 PM).

The tracks are designed for the traditional skiing method. There will be marker points showing the way.

Entering

We can fully cater for only one hundred skiers per race. To enter you must first pay 100 EUR entry fee and return the entry form as soon as possible. When we receive both money and entry form you will get further information concerning the event.

The whole price 600 EUR will cover everything during that week. At the finish everyone who took part in the skiing will receive a diploma and souvenir in remembrance.

Insurance

We would recommend that take out your personal insurance. Border to border organizers are not responsible for any accidents during the skiing week.