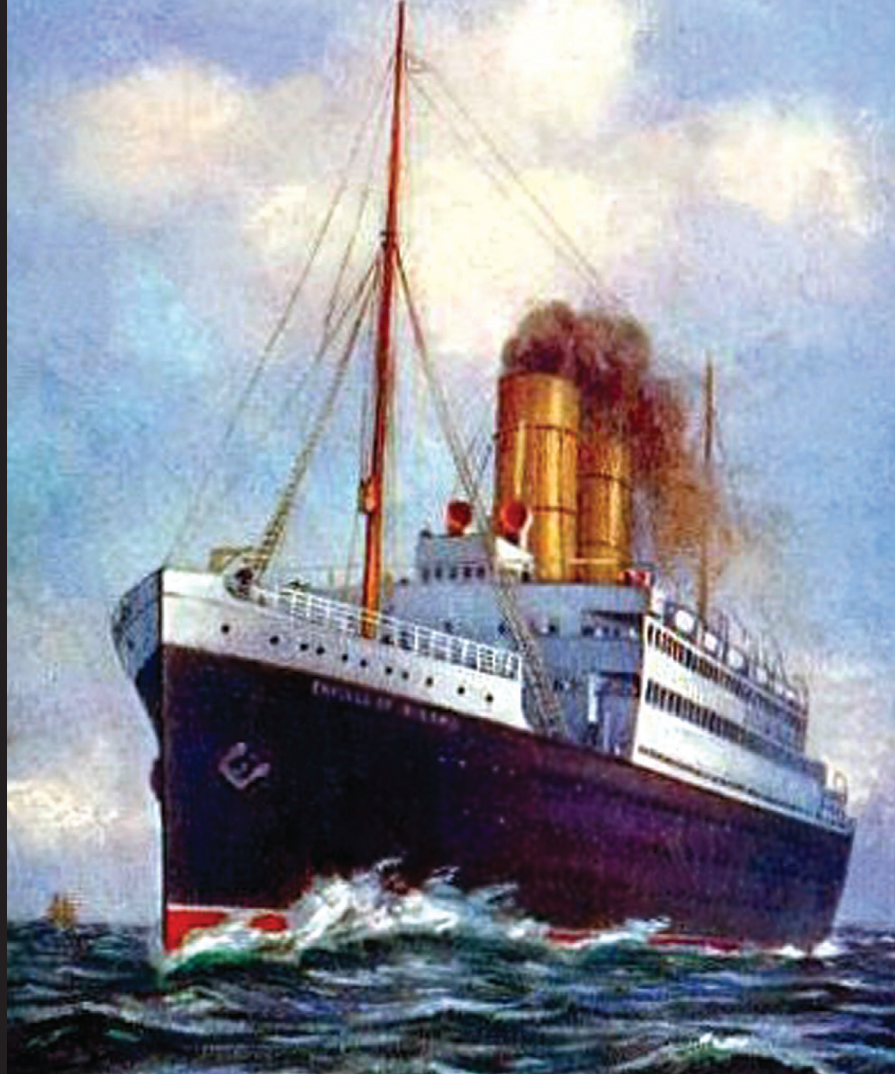


SUNKEN DREAMS



SURVIVOR OF THE SINKING OF THE EMPRESS OF IRELAND

THE STORY OF FRANS PRAKSI

Aulis Hirvelä



Siirtolaisuusinstituutti
Migrationsinstitutet
Institute of Migration

INTRODUCTION

The Story of the RMS Empress of Ireland

The Empress of Ireland was launched on January 26, 1906 at the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Co. yards in Glasgow, Scotland. The 14,191-ton vessel was 174 meters long with a beam of 20 meters. The ship had twin propellers which produced a service speed of 18 knots (33km/h). The passenger capacity of the Empress was 1,580.

The steamship Empress of Ireland belonged to the Canadian Pacific Railway company (CPR) and it was built to carry immigrants and other passengers across the North Atlantic between Quebec City and Liverpool. In the winter months the port of departure was Halifax. The company proclaimed that they offered the fastest and shortest passage across the Atlantic.

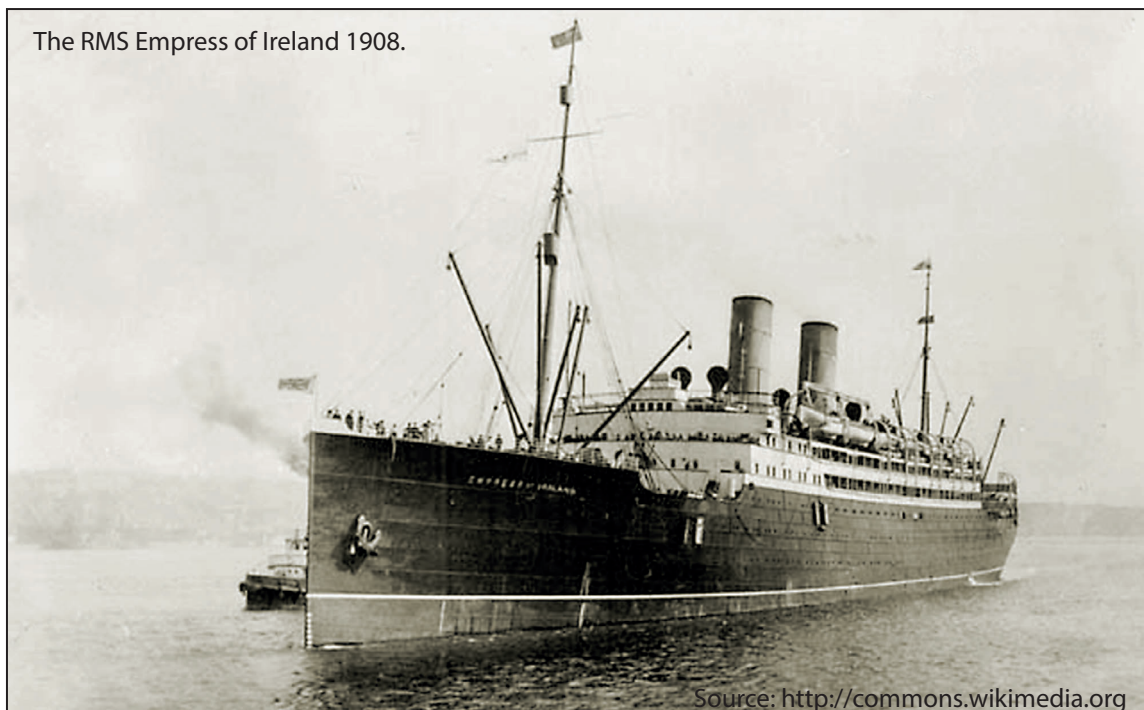
The Empress of Ireland bound for Liverpool departed from Quebec City in the afternoon of May 28, 1914. There were 1,057 passengers and 420 crew members on board. The last stop before the ocean journey was the small village of Pointe-au-Père (Father Point) in the town of Rimouski, at the mouth of St. Lawrence River. In the early hours of May 29, 1914, shortly after the departure and in

dense fog, the Empress of Ireland collided with the Norwegian coal carrier Storstad. Most of the passengers were asleep at the time of the collision and did not have time to save themselves, but drowned quickly.

1,015 people perished in the worst maritime disaster in Canadian history. The number of survivors was 462, a significant part of them members of the crew. Of 134 children embarked on the ship, only four survived. On board the ship were 93 passengers heading for Finland; all of them traveling in third class. Only 21 of them survived, 72 drowned and vanished in the deep waters along with the ship.

The accident of the Empress of Ireland has always been overshadowed by the sinking of the Titanic, even though the passenger death toll was higher. There were also more Finnish fatalities. The Empress of Ireland faded into oblivion, because it sank only a few months before the outbreak of the First World War, and people had turned their attention elsewhere.

Elisabeth Uschanov



Survivor of the Sinking of the Empress of Ireland

Frans goes to America

Frans Oskar Praksi was born in Ylistaro in 1888, and he was the oldest child of Jaakko Hirvi (formerly Braks) and Maria Ikola. He died in 1939. Jaakko and Maria had eight children; all of them were born in the village of Järviranta, in Ylistaro. The family moved to Isokyrö and bought a farm in Palonkylä in 1907. Frans as well as some of his siblings used the family name Praksi instead of Braks. Praksi is probably a Finnish “translation” of Braks, but the family on Jaakko’s mother’s side had also been using the form Praksi. The family name Hirvelä, which Frans and some of his siblings later on used, originates from the name of their farm, Hirvelä. The family name written in his passport, when he embarked for America, was Praksi.

More than 8,000 people (1) have emigrated from Isokyrö and Ylistaro, so it was not unheard-of that Frans, like so many others, left to earn money for a house of his own. Frans headed for Chisholm, Minnesota in the fall of 1913. The route was well-known: aboard a ship from Hanko to Hull, then to Liverpool by train. From Liverpool the journey continued on SS Canada towards Quebec. The departure from Liverpool was on September 20, 1913 and the arrival in Quebec on September 28, 1913. On the passenger list Frans’ name is printed among those whose final destination was in the United States (2). However, on the passenger list Frans’ name is erroneously spelled as Frans Brake. This is the reason why in so many existing databases he appears under an incorrect name. Nevertheless, the rest of the information in databases corresponds to Frans and so confirms his identity.

The journey went on from Quebec by train towards St. Albans (Vermont) in the United States, where the passengers arrived on September 28, 1913. On the same day, the names of those entering the United States were written down in St Albans; Frans’ name is mentioned among them and so is his destination, Chisholm (3). As his documents to enter the country were in order, the train trip continued toward Duluth. The train crossed the Canadian border one more time and a note of this border crossing can be found in Huron (Michigan) on September 31, 1913 (4). Apparently Frans was traveling alone;



Pic.1: Frans Praksi in 1913 (approx.)

no relatives or friends of his have been detected on the passenger list. Pic.1 shows Frans. The photo was probably taken in 1913 for his travel documents.

Mining in Chisholm

Iron ore was mined in Chisholm and in its immediate surroundings in several locations for both industrial and military purposes (The First World War was still ahead). The region abounded with Finnish immigrants. Even to-

day, their descendants live around the area and there are place names of Finnish origin. As a result of a quickly spreading forest fire in 1908, almost all of the buildings in Chisholm burned down, so by the time Frans arrived there in 1913, the city must have undergone quite a transformation (5). It is recalled that Frans worked at an open pit mine, where solvent extraction technology was applied (6). More accurate information about Frans' work in Chisholm cannot be found. Databases have not been able to confirm Frans' work in mining, but the investigation continues (7). Nowadays a museum of mining (Minnesota Museum of Mining) (8) as well as the Minnesota Discovery Center in Chisholm operates (9). They introduce visitors to the history of mining and investigate it further.

In the spring of 1914, Aino Arkkola (Frans' bride) sent a postcard to Chisholm addressing it to Chisholm Po N 319. For some reason or other, the card was returned to sender, and it has been carefully preserved. Minnesota Discovery Center has been trying to figure out the address but, for the time being, without any success (7). Pic.2 depicts the postcard Aino sent to Frans, postmarked February 16, 1914.



Pic.2: Aino sent Frans a postcard to Chisholm. Aino in the back row, on the left.

Frans remained in Chisholm only for one winter. He departed from Duluth back to his homeland the same route he had taken there. The exact dates are not clear, but the sea voyage was probably bought to combine with the train schedules. It is possible Frans had bought a "package tour", as they were already available at the time. The train fare from Duluth to Quebec was planned to match with the departure of the Empress of the Ireland from Quebec on May 28, 1914.

Frans embarked on the Empress of Ireland at the port of Quebec (Old Port nowadays) on May 28, 1914. He had a third-class ticket, like most of his fellow Finns. He is not known to have been accompanied by any friend or relative. However, on the passenger list can be seen the name of Erik Piirainen, whose postcard sent to Frans has been preserved (Pic.3). The connection between Erik and Frans remains obscure. The family society of Eskil Piira is currently working on the identification of Erik (10).

The Empress of Ireland departs Quebec for Europe

The Empress of Ireland set sail from the port of Quebec right on schedule at 4:30 p.m., on May 28, 1914. Before the actual ocean journey towards Liverpool began, the ship picked up some mail bags at Pointe-au-Père. Shortly after Pointe-au-Père, a thick fog bank started rolling in at St. Lawrence River and made it impossible to see what was ahead. At the same time, a Norwegian coal carrier,

Storstad, was also at St. Lawrence River sailing towards Montreal. The captains knew about each other, but as the fog closed in, they decided to change course. Both captains blew their ship's whistle as a warning (11). These blasts of siren made also Frans take action. Most of the passengers were already sleeping in their cabins as it was very late, past 1 o'clock at night. Despite the late hour, Frans got up and left for the boat deck to see what was wrong (6). This probably saved his life, as so many passengers in third class, in the lower decks, drowned in the sinking. Frans was on the boat deck when the accident happened so, apparently, he witnessed the collision between the two ships. However, there is no recollection of this.

The Storstad crashed into the Empress just below her water line, and water started to pour in very fast. The sinking of the ship took only fourteen minutes. Only few life boats were safely dropped, before the Empress listed rapidly and started to sink (11). Before sinking the stern of the ship briefly rose out of the water, and made it even more difficult for people to abandon the vessel. Thus hundreds of passengers were forced to jump into the freezing water. This is what Frans did too. The crew of the ship had instructed people to swim as far from the ship as possible, as quickly as possible, fearing the suc-

tion would drag them to the bottom of the sea. Indeed, Frans could advance in the icy water very little, if at all. He remembered well all the screaming and cries for help he heard while trying to swim further, away from the sinking ship (6). The fog was still very thick, and Frans with other survivors in the water did not know the location of the lifeboats (12). The fog did not only cause the accident, but also made the rescue operation much more arduous. Frans was in the water, exhausted already, when he finally reached a lifeboat, thus being saved from certain drowning (6). At the same moment Frans was picked up by the boat, the cries for help ceased; Frans himself believed he must have momentarily lost consciousness (6). Wife Aino credited Frans' rescue to his excellent swimming skills (12). Possibly in the lifeboat there were already others, who helped to pull him in (6).

Apparently there were two men in the lifeboat, Frans and an English-speaking man, who were trying to indicate, by shouting, the location of the boat to those still in the water: Frans in Finnish and the other man in English (12). After that, the boat became filled very quickly. As there were only few lifeboats and a whole lot of swimmers in the water, there were more comers than the boat could carry. Using force and their oars, the survivors in the boat tried to stop the people from overcrowding it (13). Where Frans was taken to from the lifeboat, we do not know. However, Frans recalls having seen a dim light through the fog, the origin of which he could not identify. Only in the morning, after the fog cleared, it could be seen that the light came from the coast, possibly from Pointe-au-Père. This suggests that the survivors spent quite a while in their lifeboat before being rescued by some ship. It has been said that there was a ship nearby, possibly carrying weapons, which did not participate in the rescue operation (13). Frans' children believed the forthcoming First World War was to blame for this.

It has also been recollected by someone, that Frans would have saved the life a small child. How this happened, we do not know. If this information is accurate, it must have happened aboard the Empress. As only few of the survivors were children, a slight possibility still exists, that one day this will be confirmed.

Back home

The survivors were housed in Quebec for a few days, before they embarked for Europe. What happened in Quebec during those days, and what kind of questions Frans was asked, remains unknown. We can only imagine what Frans and his fellow-survivors were going through during those hard days. Frans was coming back home, he had bought a ring for his betrothed Aino, he had just boarded the wonderful Empress bound for Europe and



Pic.3: Erik Piirainen

then everything fell crashing down and he only barely survived. Quebec was in total confusion after the accident and disaster relief, as we know it now, did not exist yet. The rescued were in some kind of dormitory accommodation in a place that was fairly large (6). Frans returned to Europe aboard the Alsatia, which departed from Quebec on June 4, 1914 (14).

The news reached Finland slowly, as did the names of the survivors. Oftentimes their names were misspelled or they were totally missing from the lists. Frans' name was inaccurately registered on the passenger list of the Empress, as his first name was spelled Frank. For this reason, in most documents regarding the Empress, Frans' name is erroneously Frank Praksi. Several newspapers in Finland commented on the accident. Also the newspaper Aamulehti published an article with the names of the survivors. Frans' name was included on the list. How this news finally reached Frans' family or his fiancée Aino, we are unaware of.

In America Frans had bought Aino an engagement ring, but his entire luggage, including the ring, was



Pic.4: Frans' siblings and his young family



Pic.5: Frans and Aino with their musician friends

swallowed by the sea. The only piece of luggage from America that survived the sinking was his purse and the money he had in it. The next generation inherited this purse from Frans, but as time went by, it became so fragile it could not be used anymore and was finally thrown away. On the return journey Frans purchased two clocks for Aino; one was a table clock and the other one a wristwatch. He bought them in Quebec, at some intermediate port, or somewhere near the port. When Frans was sitting in the train on his way home, for some reason or other, the alarm of the table clock went off. It kept on ringing for a painfully long time and Frans' fellow-travelers found it hilarious. This clock was later inherited by Aino's granddaughter, who still has it in a safe place. The wristwatch (wristwatches were novelties back then) Frans had bought for his fiancée ended up with Frans' younger sister, who had staked a claim on it. The final destiny of the wristwatch is not known (6).

Life goes on

Life continued after the sinking of the Empress. Frans and Aino got married in 1915, and they had one daughter and three sons. For a while, the family lived in Vähäkyrö, but Aino insisted that the family move somewhere else. There was a garrison next to their house and she was very frightened by the loud voices coming from the gendarmes training their troops. They later purchased the Varsanpää farm from the Orisberg manor house (through an agent) in the village of Orismala, in Vähäkyrö. The family lived off their farm, which was situated next to Aino's childhood home (6).

The basic values of Frans are well described with the words 'home', 'religion' and 'fatherland'. Aino and Frans

were frequently visited by their friends and family members. From his mother's side Frans was related to the Ikkolas, so there were many reporters and photographers among their friends. This is the reason why different family events in the 1910s–1930s are so well documented in photos. Pic.4 depicts Frans with his own family and his siblings. The picture was taken around 1920.

Young Frans took an interest in, among other things, wrestling and music. He had several instruments he played with his friends and family when they gathered in his house. Pic.5 shows Aino and Frans with their musician friends on the Varsanpää farm.

However, Frans could never forget the Empress, and he had nightmares about the accident. The heart-rending screams of the dying at St. Lawrence River did not leave him alone, but kept on sounding in his head and reminding him of the past (13). Frans used to say: "The man who does not learn his God on land, let him go to sea" (12). He lived his eventful youth in the 1910s, when he started a family, experienced life under the Russian rule, lived through the liberation of Finland from the gendarmes, witnessed the independence of Finland and the tragic beginning of it, and also saw a different world on the other side of the ocean. All this gave him perspective and experience, which inevitably influenced his later life. Frans died of stomach cancer in the summer of 1939, when dark clouds were already gathering over Finland.

* * *

These events were written down by Aulis Hirvelä, Frans' grandson.

References:

- (1) Jouni Korkiasaari, Institute of Migration
- (2) SS Canada, passenger list, attachment 1
- (3) St. Albans, immigration document, attachment 2
- (4) Huron, immigration document, attachment 3
- (5) <http://en.wikipedia.org>
- (6) Yrjö Hirvelä, Frans' son
- (7) Sue Godfrey, Minnesota Discovery Center
- (8) <http://www.mnmuseumofmining.org/>
- (9) Minnesota Discovery Center, Iron Range Research Center, <http://www.mndiscoverycenter.com/>
- (10) The Family Society of Eskil Piira, <http://www.eskilpiira.fi/Etusivu>
- (11) Forgotten Empress, David Zeni
- (12) Aino Hirvelä, Frans' wife
- (13) Tauno Hirvelä, Frans' son
- (14) Empress of Ireland – 70 Finnish immigrants drowned, Arto Tuominen

Layout by Sisko Tampio & Jouni Korkiasaari



SUNKEN DREAMS

The Institute of Migration was founded in 1974. The principal tasks of the Institute of Migration are to promote the collection, storage and documentation of material relating to international and internal migration in Finland, to carry out and to promote migration research, to publish research reports, books and articles on migration, and to develop co-operation between the universities and other organizations related to migration.



Siirtolaisuusinstituutti
Migrationsinstitutet
Institute of Migration

Eerikinkatu 34, 20100 TURKU
Tel. +358-2 - 2840 440
www.migrationinstitute.fi
Open 8–16

Emigration 1860–2012

Destination	1860-1944	1945-2012
Sweden	(45 000)	580 000
Other Europe	(55 000)	210 000
United States	300 000	30 000
Canada	70 000	24 000
Lat. America	1 000	5 000
Asia	500	18 000
Africa	1 000	5 000
Oceania	3 500	23 000
Total	476 000	895 000

Finns Abroad 2012

Country/Cont.	1. gen	2. gen
Sweden	164 000	261 000
Other Europe	55 000	100 000
United States	23 000	81 000
Canada	19 000	35 000
Lat. America	1 000	1 000
Asia	2 000	2 000
Africa	1 000	1 000
Oceania	8 000	15 000
Total	273 000	496 000

