

This article by Colin Bennett appeared in an edited form in the Winter 2005/06 edition of Dbl Review.

Suddenly a group of people moved across the pavement and cut me off from my quarry. I was momentarily disorientated. Where was I? And what was my quarry? Well, I was walking on the streets of Tampere, the second city of Finland (Ok: I know the good citizens of Turku claim that they are the second city of Finland but we will let that pass. It is certainly true that Turku, Abo in Swedish is the former capital of Finland and that should be enough for them). My quarry was one of those suitcase trolleys being pulled by a Swedish participant in the conference that we were about to attend. As long as I could keep sight of the trolley I could follow the Swedes in their quest to find their hotel. Everything was alright if I could stay a few metres behind them. I rushed forward and managed to capture the elusive trolley again- until the next time...

Eventually we reached their hotel and I was able to get my bearings and so find mine. It was early June 2005 and I had just flown into Tampere Airport to attend The 8th Helen Keller World Conference, held every four years in different cities across the globe.

Interestingly, Helen Keller had visited Finland and there exists a grainy film clip of her visit not long before her death. I was representing Sense, The National Deafblind and Rubella Association: the UK's largest charity in this field. Also taking place at the conference centre was the 2nd General Assembly of the World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB).

I had last been in Tampere in 1967 and thought I would recognise it but I could not. At the Airport I had met a group of Swedish participants and we were waiting for a bus into town. Taxis are rather expensive. Eventually we boarded a bus which we thought was the right one but it terminated well before the city centre and we were all decanted albeit in a friendly way. Another bus came along and we alighted in the city centre but we were lost and I cannot read maps nowadays. I decided to follow the Swedes as they seemed to know where they were going - I was wrong, actually.

After leaving the Swedes' hotel, I roamed around for half an hour (I recognised many of the street names but not where they led to) I found

my hotel which turned out to be a very modern one. I collected my key from the receptionist and I asked her if someone could show me to my room. "No" she said. But I was not surprised or offended. This was Finland after all and people are expected to be self-sufficient and they are plain-speaking. Hotels are of a high standard but not over-staffed. I hung around the lift and eventually someone helped me find my room and I settled in. It was very comfortable but I was presented with that terrible Finnish phenomenon: tiny pillows. There is always a spare pillow but trying to sleep on one tiny pillow perched on another or side by side is just as bad as dealing with one. However, Life has brought bigger problems to me than that.

The conference was based at Tampere Hall and lasted from 3 to 7 June 2005 and was attended by some 417 people from 45 different countries. The slogan of the conference was "Our Right to be Deafblind with Full Participation in Society" and the participation in and the organisation of the conference lived up to that ideal.

The arrangement was the normal one nowadays of workshops and plenary sessions. Also normal was the dilemma over which workshop to attend as they clashed. A further complication was the fact that the 2nd General Assembly of the WFDB was being held largely in parallel. A welcome feature of the conference was the information desk where very competent Finns were able to answer any questions. There was an unobtrusive contingent of Finnish student sign language interpreters who popped up whenever you needed them, complete with their fetching neckerchiefs. They were very useful for people like me who had no guide or communicator even though I do not sign. They spoke excellent English (the language of the conference) and could sign in Finnish and other sign languages. They were a great aid to me. We all had name badges which we wore day and night (perhaps I exaggerate) but one deficiency was that they were normal-sized. I contend that in conferences attended by people with sight problems these badges should be jumbo-sized with large lettering in contrasting colours.

The opening ceremony was preceded by a session in which the arrangements to assist people with sensory loss were explained. For me, an Usher Syndrome 2 person this meant induction loops and I am pleased to say that the quality of the induction loops was high. Also

remarkable was the quality of the instantaneous translation into English and Finnish of other languages including sign languages. There was always a copious supply of sign language interpreters at the front of the auditorium. An interesting feature of the conference was the continuous description in English and Finnish of everything that was happening on the stage. We got to know the Finnish word for "description" (kuvailu) as this word was used whenever the skilful describers gave us very comprehensive information over our headphones.

I will not give a blow-by-blow account of the proceedings of the conference as you can read about this in the published material. I want to mention the peripheral activities. Near the beginning of the conference we were all invited to a do at the Tampere Town Hall where we were welcomed by the Mayor using an excellent PA system. These functions are always difficult for people with serious hearing problems who cannot sign because of the background noise. I normally retreat to a corner to eat and drink the goodies (never a hardship) and hope that people will come up and talk to me which usually happens.

Another big event was the outing to Viikiinsaari, an island in a nearby lake. The island was a typical Finnish holiday place with a dance hall, a sauna and bonfire provisions. I well know that June days in Finland can be really warm and pleasant but I had a job persuading many of the participants that this was the case. The day was so cold and drab and I felt sorry for the African delegates huddled around the bonfire. Still, I think we all had a good time although we were very unlucky with the weather throughout the conference.

A memorable visit was that to the well-equipped Resource Centre and living quarters on the outskirts of Tampere. This is an exemplar not only for Finland but for the whole world. It is called Kuurosokeiden Toimintakeskus. I was slightly miffed as I couldn't detect a single mistake in the English of the interpretor for the day. However, we did forgive each other.

The conference finished on the Tuesday morning but I decided to stay the extra night. It's good practice for Usher people to start a trip as

early as possible in the morning to get maximum light - even in the Finnish summer. I wandered around the city and did a dry run at the station for the following morning. Early that next morning I got lost at the station because it is very big and mostly underground. At last I found the platform but I was three minutes late for the train. Amazingly, it was still there so I jumped in just as the doors were closing. When the ticket inspector came along I asked in mock indignation why the train was four minutes late: "What is the world coming to?" He hung his head in mock shame and the ice was broken among all the passengers in the compartment. Finns are like English people. They are rather reserved but they like a joke. So I was able to converse all the way to Helsinki Central Station and was taken right down to the correct line in the new Underground station there. The Metro system had been built since my last visit. I found my way - I don't know how - to Iiris, the headquarters of the Finnish Blind Society. The Finnish Deafblind Society has offices there and I met again new chums I had made at the Conference. I spent a couple of days in Helsinki with Heikki Majava and others. I then spent a few days with old friends near Lahti and departed from Tampere airport on the following Sunday.

Will I see Finland again?

Colin Bennett