

Language Minority Stories

Annela Teemant & Stefinee E. Pinnegar

Story One: Antii Jilava

Finnish Immigrant to Sweden



The principal of my new school did not really know what to do with me when I was admitted; she was just as embarrassed and at a loss as I was, and when she escorted me to the elementary third-grade classroom we walked hand in hand. Holding hands was the only language we had in common.

There was a vacant seat in the back of the room. The boy I was put next to protested vehemently, but I was ordered to stay put. The boy

whose bench I had to share was called Osmo. It was a Finnish name and he came from Finland, but even so for some reason, he refused to speak a word of Finnish. Later I came to understand why he behaved as he did; and if I had only guessed that his fate would also be mine, I would have taken to my heels and run for my life.

When the others wrote in Swedish, I wrote in Finnish. From the time I had learned to spell, it had given me pleasure to put together sentences on paper. But the teacher grabbed my pencil and angrily shook his finger at me. In spite of everything, I continued to fall back on my mother tongue. The teacher tore up my paper and stamped on my words he had thrown on the floor. I went into a tantrum. In the principal's office, I got my hair pulled and a Finnish boy from an upper grade was brought in to tell me writing compositions in Finnish was prohibited.

That night I threw a stone through the window of the principal's office. I never again wrote in Finnish. I just sat idly at my desk, silent and bewildered. If grandma hears that I've stopped writing in Finnish, she'll die.

By the time I was promoted to the junior grade, I had picked up quite a lot of Stockholm slang. The language of my textbooks and teachers, on the other hand, was middle class Swedish. As time passed, I fell more and more behind my class. When the idea had eaten itself deeply enough into my soul that it was despicable to be a Finn, I began to feel ashamed of my origins. To survive I had to change my stripes. Thus: to hell with Finland and the Finns! Everything I had held dear and self-evident had to be destroyed. I had trouble sleeping. I could not look people in the eye, my voice broke down into a whisper, I could no longer trust anybody. My mother tongue was worthless. I gradually committed inner suicide.

I practiced pronouncing words to make them sound exactly like the ones that come out of the mouths of Swedes. I resolved to learn

Swedish word perfect so nobody could guess who I was or where I came from. At the age of 13, I was just about ready. I spoke Finnish only when it was absolutely unavoidable. When word came that my grandmother had died in Finland, I shrugged my shoulders in indifference and went over to see my one Swedish friend. I would not allow myself to think of grandma, who had existed once upon a time, long ago, when I used to live in another world. I had to cut off part of my life, and this caused me inexplicable distress, which later developed into a sense of alienation. At school, others were way ahead of me in knowledge, so I had to study as hard as I could. But it was no use, no matter how hard I tried—the meaning of words eluded me. My examinations turned out badly. I always got the worst marks. This made me think I was stupid. At least on the athletic field, I had a chance to engage in honest competition. It helped a bit to salve my wounds and restore my self-respect. What it did not give me was a healthy soul. And a healthy soul was my deepest desire. I was without a people, without ties. Perhaps this is what made me feel empty.

I was sixteen years old one June day when I stood in the sun-drenched schoolyard and looked at my graduation diploma. My ears burned red with shame. In front of the stairs, little Timo was sitting. He had come from Finland just three weeks before. I folded up my diploma to make a paper swallow and got Timo to come to the attic with me. I let him fling my swallow into the air. Timo shrieked in delight. As for myself, I was no longer capable of yelling in Finnish—even though in my heart I might have had the desire to do so.

Adapted with permission from: Jalava, A. (1980, translated by P. Sjöblom). Quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1981). *Bilingualism or not: The education of minorities* (L. Malmberg & D. Crane, Trans.). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. (pp. 320-321).

Story Two: Kee

Indigenous Minority Student in the United States

Kee, a Navajo child, was sent to boarding school when he was six. When he entered the boarding school Kee spoke only Navajo. His adult teachers and most of the dormitory staff spoke only English. When Kee spoke Navajo he was punished. Kee went home only at Christmas and during the summer. His infrequent contact with his family and his lack of development of skill in Navajo created distance between him and his family. He lost contact with his family.

At boarding school, Kee was not very successful as a student or in learning English. As he grew older Kee withdrew from the both the White and the Navajo world because he could not communicate comfortably in either language. He became one of the many thousands of Navajos who were non-lingual—a man without a language.

By the time he was 16, Kee was an alcoholic, uneducated and despondent—without identity. Kee's story is more the rule than the exception.

Adapted with permission from: Platero, D. (1975). Bilingual education in the Navajo Nation. In R. C. Troike & N. Modiano (Eds.), *Proceedings of the first Inter-American conference on bilingual education* (pp. 54-61). Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics. Quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1981). *Bilingualism or not: The education of minorities* (L. Malmberg & D. Crane, Trans.). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. (pp. 309-310).

Story Three: Richard Rodriguez

Immigrant Student in the United States

Richard Rodriguez grew up in Sacramento, California. Spanish was the primary language of the home during Richard's pre-school years. He spoke Spanish with his parents and siblings. However, when he entered school, the school was conducted completely in English. For the first six months, Richard said nothing in class. This was so disturbing to his teachers that they visited his home and asked his parents to speak only English at home so that Richard could learn to speak English.

After dinner each night, the family gathered to practice our English. . . Laughing, we would try to define words we could not pronounce. We played with strange English sounds, often over-anglicizing our pronunciations. And we filled the smiling gaps of our sentence with familiar Spanish sounds. (Rodriguez, 1981, p. 20).

Weeks after the home language switch from Spanish to English, Richard volunteered an answer in class. However, as an adult, Rodriguez comments that when his parents quit speaking Spanish to him things became silent. The rich language of the home of his early childhood was replaced with silence because his parents wanted him to be successful and were willing to change even their own language to support his development. He describes the impact of the change:

. . . as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents. Sentences needed to be spoken slowly when a child addressed his mother or father. (Often the parent wouldn't understand.) The child would need to repeat himself. (Still, the parent misunderstood.) The young voice, frustrated, would end up saying, 'Never mind'— the subject was closed. Dinners would be noisy with the clinking of knives and forks against dishes. My mother would smile softly between her remarks: my father at the other end of the

table would chew at his food, while he stared over the heads of his children. (Rodriguez, 1981, p. 21)

Adapted with permission from: Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
Rodriguez, R. (1981). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez: An autobiography*. Boston: D. R. Godine.

Story Four: Kurdish Girl

Involuntary Minority in Turkey

I was seven when I started in the first grade in the Turkish boarding schools in 1962. The Turks wanted to isolate the Kurdish children from their parents, but the Turks were not willing to live in primitive Kurdish villages so the government built the boarding schools close to the teachers rather than the parents.

My sister who was a year older started school with me. We did not know a word of Turkish so we were totally mute during the first few years. We were not allowed to speak Kurdish at school at all. Instead, we played silent games with stones and things like that. The teachers watched us carefully and anyone who spoke Kurdish was punished. The teachers hit us on the fingertips or on our heads with a ruler. My sister and I were always frightened at school and we did not want to go.

But the really tough indoctrination did not begin until I was at teacher training college. At the boarding school only our teachers were nasty, but at the college, the older pupils were hostile too and treated us younger Kurdish girls badly. Most of the older girls were Turkish and teased us for not speaking Turkish well. They called us Kurds with

tails, which was the worst thing to be. We were constantly jeered and ridiculed by other students—Kurds were dirty, bad people.

We weren't allowed to read newspapers, listen to the radio or read the books we wanted. We were just to be brainwashed into becoming fascist Turkish teachers. They didn't want us to develop, just to becoming robots. With more freedom, we could have learned more, but the Turks were afraid of that.

With this kind of training, we were sent out to teach other Kurdish children to become good Turks. Every morning we had to start the day with lines from one of Atatürk's speeches, "I am a Turk. I am strong. I never tell a lie. I have respect for my parents, for children, for old people. I love people. I want to sacrifice myself for my country." We learn about Atatürk as savior and dear father, yet every Kurdish family can recount stories of his atrocities toward the Kurds. Those of us who refuse to teach this version of history are threatened with dismissal, imprisonment, or exile to western Turkey. I am in this situation at this moment. I'm soon to be put on trial. I've already been exiled. I don't know what will happen to me. But even if I have to die, I shall continue to tell the Kurdish children the truth.

Adapted with permission from: Clason, E., & Baksi, M. (1979). *Kurdistan. Om förtryck och befrielsekamp*. Stockholm: Arbetarkultur. Quoted in Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1981). *Bilingualism or not: The education of minorities* (L. Malmberg & D. Crane, Trans.). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. (pp. 310-311).

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Principles of Language Acquisition

Bohdana Allman



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