

Stories from the Shed: *When speaking only English is the way to go*

John Pietila (2020)

- **Story-teller's** cultural background: Finnish Australian
- **Categories:** Travel, Migrant, Humorous, Serendipitous event
- This short story is one we might share over a cup of coffee. It shows what can happen when overseas where things may be done a bit differently to at home.

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When speaking only English is the way to go

John Pietila

This took place in my country of birth, Finland some years ago in 1984, while my wife, Pamela, and I were in Finland as tourists visiting family.

We had been generously lent a car, a functional blue *Saab-90* by my cousin, Ulla, who did not need the vehicle for a short while, and we needed one to use in travelling around the country. Unfortunately, she had negligently failed to inform his 'outlander' cousin, being me, about the simple but effective parking regulations generally used in smaller cities.

In places without formal parking metre systems, the alternative timed parking control consisted of a simple cardboard cut-out of adjustable clock hands which were to be set at the time of parking and displayed on the inside of the front window. A parking inspector would see this device in any car parked and could fine any one over the time allowed. I was not aware of this practice nor that our car had one of these in the glovebox.

What then happened showed the creative thinking one can use in rationalising that an incident incurring a consequence that was not your fault, should be somehow smoothed over. Sometimes playing ignorant really can overcome whole systems.

We arrived in the town of Varkaus. This was an industrial city of about 20 000 people in eastern Finland by the shore of a large lake, one of some 140 000 lakes in Finland. Being fine weather, and the CBD looking like it had a range of retail shops, we parked in a street which was not congested or had any signs of parking limitations.

After some hours of shopping and exploration, we returned to the car only to find a parking ticket 'duly attached'. Of course the writing was in Finnish, which I had no problem to read and understand. However I was NOT intending to pay a fine for something I didn't think I had been fairly warned about, and felt both indignant and a bit angry, so I went to the local Council office as an English-speaking tourist.

Having found a 'receptive person' who spoke English, I broke into a plaintive story of how we had come to explore their beautiful country and had unintentionally overstayed the parking limit of which I saw no signs anywhere. The officer explained that she needed to get approval from her superior for any leniency. When the superior arrived, they discussed the matter among themselves in front of me. Obviously they spoke in Finnish, which I totally understood. Their conclusion was, *"Of course we will let them off the fine, but we must not make it sound too easy"*. You can guess my difficulty in not showing relief over this reprieve on my face while they spoke among themselves and finally back to us in English. I was duly advised of my mistake and scolded appropriately before being announced exonerated.

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Incidents like this are a good memory, not only of a reasonable outcome but also of a hilarious use of a hidden skill on my part. My relatives thought it was quite funny. I do not recommend this method in any particular situation, but felt quite justified in this instance.

536 words by John Pietila (MGMS member 35)