Chapter 20

Freemasonry in Finland

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The Arrival of Freemasonry in Finland

During the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, Freemasonry experienced a time of expansion in many countries in Europe (MacNulty 2007). Freemasonry came to Sweden at the beginning of the century and as early as 1756 the first lodge intended for Finland, St. Augustine, named after the Church Father, was established in Stockholm. The first Worshipful Master (the senior officer in a masonic lodge) was John Jennings, cavalry captain and later to become Master of the Royal Household. In 1762 the St. Augustine lodge transferred its activities to Helsinki. This was because the majority of the members were officers posted to the fortress of Sveaborg/Viapor (now Suomenlinna) off Helsinki. (Many cities in Finland have a Finnish and a Swedish name, since both languages are official languages of the country. Where relevant, both names are given, separated by a slash and with the Swedish name first.)

The first meeting in Helsinki was held on 28 August 1762 with Baron Hans Henrik Boije af Gennäs as Worshipful Master. He also became number one in the roll of members (Gräsbeck 1954). During the years 1765 and 1766, the lodge met in Stockholm, since the Swedish Parliament assembled there and many of the members of the lodge therefore lived in Stockholm. During the time in Stockholm the lodge gained new members.

Freemasonry soon generated criticism from the church because of its ideology and activities. As early as 1769, the diocese of Borgå/Porvoo looked upon Freemasonry as a threat to the ecclesiastical order.

The early 1770s were a period of decline for the lodge’s activities. However, after Carl Björnberg had been made Worshipful Master, activities revived once more during the latter part of 1776. After that, the lodge seems to have thrived. On 17 July 1782 Duke Charles (later to become King Charles XIII, 1748–1818) visited the lodge, and this was of great importance for the stabilisation of the lodge’s work. During the years 1787–1790, however, the lodge’s activities again declined because of Gustavus III’s war against Russia.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the lodge experienced a new revival under Baron Axel Gabriel Leijonhufvud’s leadership. After the war between Sweden and Russia in 1808–09, Finland became a Grand Duchy under the Russian tsar. Since contacts with Sweden were more or less impossible after that, it was decided in 1813 to discontinue Freemasonry in Finland. The
funds accumulated by Freemasons were handed over to the city of Helsinki to be used for the welfare of the poor. In 1822 the tsar ordered that Freemasonry should be banned in the Russian empire. Further additions to the ban were issued by the tsar in 1826 and 1848. Individual Freemasons nevertheless continued in secret to be members of lodges abroad.

Varieties of Freemasonry that worked with the higher degrees also reached Finland during the Swedish era. In 1777 the Phoenix lodge that conferred Andrew degrees was founded in Helsinki. The St. Andrew Phoenix lodge started its activities only in 1790, however. For the higher degrees the chapter lodge, Finska Capitlet (Finnish Chapter), was set up in Åbo/Turku in 1778. Its activities remained modest, however (Bergroth 1991; Ahtokari 2000; Bergroth 2006; Nyberg 2005).

It may be noted that other orders and societies established a foothold in Finland during the period of union with Sweden. These included the Timmermansorden (Order of Carpenters), the Arla Coldinu Order, and the Aurora Society. The Order of Carpenters, which was, allegedly, founded in England in 1522, was active in Viborg/Viipuri and Åbo/Turku. Some 500 persons, mainly officers and civil servants, belonged to the two lodges. The activities of the order were quite similar to those of Freemasonry and focused on the pastoral aspect. It had close links with the Swedish royal house. The Arla Coldinu order was founded in Sweden in 1765 and soon acquired lodges in Finland, e.g., in Viborg/Viipuri. Charitable activities also formed part of its programme. It has revived its activities in Finland and still operates today. The Aurora Society was active primarily in Turku and operated in collaboration with the Swedish university, Åbo Akademi. It focused on culture and on overall education. Consequently, it published the first newspaper in Finland, Tidningar utgifvne af et Sällskap i Åbo. A number of other orders and societies were founded towards the end of the eighteenth century in Finland. Many of them concentrated their attention on helping others but also on developing social life (Stenius 1987; Ahtokari 2000).

The period of Russian rule meant, as we have already seen, that Freemasonry was discontinued. Nonetheless, some individual Freemasons met and discussed common topics of interest over a meal together. A somewhat strange memory of the Russian times was the visits paid to the grave of Major Fredrik Granatenhjelm in the Kajsaniemi Park in Helsinki. Granatenhjelm was a well-known benefactor in the eighteenth century, and Freemasons organised his funeral in 1784 although he never was a Freemason. In the early twentieth century, it became the custom among Freemasons to lay a wreath on Granatenhjelm’s grave each year on 1 May, a custom that continues to this day. It was also decided to set up a society in his memory. In 1913 this was transformed into Granatenhjelm’s Stiftelse (The Granatenhjelm Foundation), which came