



4-8 July, 1999 XVI Soroptimist International Convention,
Helsinki, Finland

Sunday 4 July
Opening Ceremony

by Judy Dreis, Kent Club, Washington District 1, Northwestern Region, SIA

At 5:00 p.m. July 4, 1828 Soroptimists gathered together in Helsinki's jewel, Finlandia Hall, for the opening ceremony of the 16th Soroptimist International Convention 1999.

SI 1999 Convention Chair Irmeli Torssonen gave the welcome and presentation of flags. 79 out of 199 countries are represented here this week. Flags from countries present at the previous International Convention in San Francisco were posted on the stage. New Soroptimist countries: Bosnia Herzegovina and Haiti both represented by the SI Flag, were followed by flags from Albania, British Virgin Islands, Burkina Faso, Croatia, Ecuador, Latvia, Malawi, Mozambique and Slovakia were presented separately, followed by the flags of Finland, United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia and the United Nations.

The first dignitary to offer greetings, representing the Republic of Finland, was Sirkka-Liisa Anttila, 1st Vice Speaker of the Parliament -- and Soroptimist. Sirkka-Liisa was the first of several speakers to point out that Finnish women were the first in the world to be able to vote and stand as candidates for Parliament. Indeed they have had full equality since 1906. 37% of the 200 Parliament seats are held by women. Finland, at the beginning of the month, assumed the role of President of the EU and will lead the European countries until the end of the year. They wish to stress the importance of feelings and emotions along with the practical everyday lives of the people of the EU. Sirkka-Liisa concluded with the important role IGU plays in Soroptimism saying, "By serving others we are also developing ourselves."

The next speaker was Helsinki's Lord Mayor Eva-Riitta Siitonen who began with a few words about Finlandia Hall, designed by Alvar Aalto, Finland's most famous architect. She said as Finns they sometimes take for granted the equality they have developed in society, but they must not forget how many countries still dream of attaining that goal. Soroptimists, she said, work to build a better world through the preservation of human rights and improvement of the status of women. People from other cultures learn to know each other, and develop lasting friendships. Eva-Riitta spoke of the high level of education of the citizens of Helsinki, and Helsinki's role as a leader in high technology and communications. Helsinki has been designated one of nine European cities of culture and will celebrate its 450th birthday next year. And as leader of the EU, it has the honour to steer Europe to the new millennium.

Their Excellencies Ambassadors Gavin Hewitt of the United Kingdom and Eric Edelman of the

United States expressed their official greetings and good wishes to all Soroptimists and guests for a successful congress. They each concluded with the hope that we take some time to learn about the Finnish culture and meet the Finnish people who are welcoming us so warmly to their country and to their capital.

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Irmela Torssojnen introduced representatives from the following organizations who presented greetings: International Federation of Business and Professional Women, Zonta International, International Federation of University Women, The National Council of Women of Finland, Lions Club Association in Finland, Rotary International of Finland and UNIFEM.

In her few opening remarks, Soroptimist International President Hilary Page spoke of Finland - a land of nature, lakes, cell phones and Moomins, a reference to the characters in Finnish author Tove Janssons much-loved childrens books. She next thanked the Convention Organizing Committee -- in Finnish. Finally, she introduced the new statement just passed by the International Board, "Soroptimist International is a worldwide organization for women in management and professions working through service projects to advance human rights and the status of women," and declared the 16th Convention of Soroptimist International in session.

Entertainment prior to adjournment to the Friendship Evening was provided by the child choir Verajapalon Kuoro, girls ages 10-23, whose clear, sweet bell-like voices enchanted us all with traditional and folk songs from Finland and Lapland, concluding with Jean Sibelius' Finlandia, and a Welsh lullaby.