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Trapped in Hospital. The Life Course of Refugee Psychiatric Patients in Finland after WWII

The paper examines the life history of psychiatric patients who were placed in the Rauha psychiatric hospital as refugees from the ceded parts of Finland during and after WWII. Finland lost 11 % of its surface area in the peace treaty in 1940 and over 400 000 Karelian refugees had to be resettled. The fate of the psychiatric patients of the ceded areas was sealed with a well-meaning legislation in 1940, according to which the state took over the hospital fees, but also decreed where the patients should be treated.

Most of the patients were placed in Rauha hospital, situated close to the eastern border. The refugees were usually settled to the south-western regions of the country and thus the contacts within the family were easily severed. The solution was very likely meant to be a provisional one, to solve a problem in a crisis and to secure the treatment of the patients who couldn't fend for themselves. However, as an unintended consequence of the legislation, the relocation of the psychiatric patients closer to their families became impossible. It was mostly due to the resentment of the municipalities being reluctant to take responsibility of the costs as well as to the stigma attached to the psychiatric diseases. Thus, the refugee patients stayed in the Rauha hospital until their death. The initial number was approximately 300, most of them suffering from chronic schizophrenia. The number decreased slowly due to the deaths of the patients, the last one passing away in 2016. Several of the patients had been in institutional care for more than 70 years.

This paper analyzes the life and hospital care of the longest surviving 40 patients with a help of their hospital records: their initial cause for entering the hospital, their social background, treatment and the development of their disease. The research material gives a rich perspective to the past: the changes in psychiatric care, both medical treatment as well as the attitudes towards the psychiatric patients over a time span of more than 80 years. The fate of these patients mirrors the vulnerability of psychiatric patients in a time of crisis, which is still true in the world today.

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