



**UPF Universal Peace Federation – Deutschland e.V.**

NGO with advisory status with ECOSOC of the UNO.

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## ***International Café Event***



The Giessen UPF International Café event on 24 February 2024 continued the series of life stories and faith testimonies and drew an audience of thirty, at least seven of whom were first-time attendees.

In the spotlight on this occasion was Seppo Makkonen. He was supported by his wife Brigitte who acted as MC and added several well-placed questions and comments to augment her husband's power-point backed presentation.

Seppo was born on a farm near little known Pielavsi, Finland, the last child of seven who survived to adulthood. Seppo's parents and three older siblings had been forcibly relocated to Finland from a part of Karelia after it was annexed by Russia at the end of WWII. The family farmed the agricultural and forestry land allocated to them, on which there was a cattle shed with a living space. They had to pay off the land bit by bit.

Religion as a member of the Russian Orthodox Church was a part of his upbringing. This was, and still is very much a minority religion in Finland; services were often held in member's homes-including that of Seppo's parents -and as a young schoolboy Seppo experienced religious persecution in the form of mobbing and even beatings from classmates.

The death of his father meant that the not quite fifteen-year-old Seppo had to assume responsibility for the farm, and to a certain extent for his mother. Although he was supported by neighbours, this duty brought with it a loss of hope and perspective for the young Seppo.

A change in direction came six years later when his sister introduced him to the teachings of the Unification Church which she had met in Helsinki. Seppo was immediately inspired and felt that he had found answers to matters which had plagued him such as his experience of being mobbed, the breakdown of a love relationship and his internal struggles.

Fortunately, another of Seppo's older sisters and her husband were willing to take over his responsibilities for the farm, making it possible for him to move into the church center in Helsinki where he lived for two years before making the decision to broaden his horizons and strike off for the USA.

He made the most of his time in the land of unlimited possibilities, and in New York worked his way up in seven years from being an unskilled worker and truck driver to the position of a restaurant manager. And this without initially knowing the language.

And it was in New York where in July 1982 he was blessed in marriage by Rev. and Mrs. Moon to Brigitte from Austria, in an unprecedented ceremony in Madison Square Gardens along with 2,074 other couples.



When he moved to Germany in 1985, where Brigitte worked with SAEILO (a machine tool company founded by Rev. Moon), Seppo again showed his tenacity and adaptability by learning another language almost from scratch and working his way up in SAEILO from repairing company cars and cleaning machines to being a successful salesperson. He finally retired in 2020 – although for Seppo this means continuing to look after long-standing customers.

But when not selling machines, Seppo has more time to spend with his family which has now expanded to 2 children and 2 grandchildren. As a family they have embarked on some adventurous travelling such as to Korea, Brazil, the United States and Israel, as well as multiple visits to both of their home countries, Finland and Austria.

Seppo ended his presentation by explaining in a little more depth his path of faith and briefly describing some events which he classifies as ‘a near-death and other spiritual experiences’.

And finally, we saw a video about the 1975 CSCE (Conference for Security and Cooperation) held in Helsinki, at which Finland’s then President Urho Kekkonen -also a native of Pialevesi -delivered a historical speech in which he called for reconciliation and understanding between the then hostile geopolitical blocs of the cold war era.

link: <https://youtu.be/q8NsFzVBHrk?si=6jirYR--CKaDc8P0>

Seppo’s comment is one we should all consider deeply; that in this time when so many parts of the world are in crisis and at each other’s throats, such voices of rapprochement and reconciliation are desperately needed more than ever before.

The presentation stimulated several questions from an audience which had obviously enjoyed this event very much.

*Report: Catriona Valenta*