

ROTARY 120TH ANNIVERSARY SPEECH

Dear Madam President of Rotary International, representatives of Rotary Foundation, Fellow Rotarians, Friends, and Honored Guests,

I welcome you all to honour our shared journey of 120 yrs, as presented here from a Finnish perspective.

1. THE BEGINNING

Feb 23 in 1905, a meeting of four businessmen in **Chicago** founded Rotary movement.

2. THE ROTARIAN & ROTARY INTERNATIONAL

The **National Rotary Association** was established in 1910 in the US.

However the foundation of **London Club** in the next year made it necessary to re-invent the **Rotary** as **Rotary International** - as well as the creation of the **International Rotary Magazine**, 'The Rotarian' in 1912.

3. BYLAWS

In 1915 Mr **Arch Klumph** drafted our first **bylaws**, and the **districts** - based on train connections - were established in **San Francisco** to facilitate Rotary administration.

4. INNER WHEEL

Already before the **World War I**, the spouses of Rotarians founded their own Rotary clubs. However the 1921 **Convention in Edinburgh, Scotland** produced the **Standard Club Constitution** stating: "*A Rotary Club shall be comprised of men*" only. . .

In 1924 the '**Rotary Ladies**' adopted the name '**Inner Wheel**' instead. The **International Inner Wheel** was founded in 1967 - being today the world's largest non-religious women's organization with 120 000 members in over 100 countries.

5. FOUNDATION

A **Public Restroom in Chicago** was the first **Public Service project** of Rotary in 1907. In 1917 the same Mr. **Arch Klumph** founded an '**Endowment Fund**', which became global in 1921, and known as **The 'Rotary Foundation'** from 1928 onwards.

It started from low. Only the invention of **Paul Harris Fellowship** ten years after his death in 1957 began to gather more funds. In 1994 a **permanent capital fund** was established in addition to the **annual program fund**. This innovation finally rocketed RF to the top of the foundations.

6. PEACE

Peace Building became a part of Rotary's mission in the above mentioned **Edinburgh Convention** of 1921.

49 rotarians were drafting the charters for the **United Nations** in 1945. Also the **UN Education, Science and Culture Organisation UNESCO** was based on a Rotary meeting in London in 1943. Moreover the **UN's 'Declaration of Human Rights' of 1948** was based on a Rotary resolution of 1940. Rotary continues to have an intimate relationship with the UN, including **Peace Building**.

7. FINLAND AND THE BALTICS

In 1920, the first club on the Continental Europe was founded in **Madrid**. Rotary reached **Norway** and **Denmark** in 1922, and the first Swedish and Finnish Rotary meetings were held in 1926. Thus Rotary in **Finland and Sweden** can celebrate their centennial next year. *Skål, Kippis!*

The first **Estonian** club was opened in 1929 in **Tallin** - and soon others elsewhere in the Baltics, thanks to a certain Mr. **Paul Thorwall** from Finland.

8. YOUTH EXCHANGE

Rotary Youth Exchange started in 1927 by **Copenhagen RC**, hosting several boys from North America. By the mid-20th century the idea of the "*Youthful Pilgrims of World Peace*" spread via USA worldwide. However, the **COL decision** of **RYE** becoming a part of Rotary was made only in 1975. Finland embraced this with enthusiasm.

9. PAUL HARRIS

In 1912 **Paul Harris** retired from ordinary Rotary life - after only 7 years - and began to travel across the world as "*President Emeritus*".

In 1932 he began to plant "*a Tree of Friendship*" where ever he went, as happened then in **Oslo, Stockholm, Tallin**, and in the **Kaivopuisto Park** of **Helsinki**. In Finland he also visited the above mentioned **Paul Thorwall**, his good friend. Thanks to **Thorwall**, Rotary began to spread across Finland, to **Tampere** in 1933 and then to **Oulu** and **Vaasa** and elsewhere. Next year **Thorwall** was honoured to become the first Finn on the board of RI.

10. FOUR-WAY TEST

The "**Four-Way Test**" was created in 1932 during the **Great Depression**. Originally a guide for business ethics, it became Rotary's cornerstone in 1943.

11. WWII AND AFTER

Soviet occupation of the Baltics ended Rotary there in 1940. While darkness fell across Europe, Finland endured. Our clubs remained active, maintaining ties with Sweden and Denmark.

Rotary filled "*a spiritual void*" left by the war traumas. In 1949 Finland had already 52 clubs in one district, and a **Rotary Office** was established for them in Helsinki. Next year Finland was divided into 2 districts, while by 1956 we had already 94 clubs and 3 districts. Several of our new clubs won the **European Rosanoff Trophy** by nearing a 100% attendance.

In the 1960s, the **Rotary Office** was moved to **Tampere**, before it was returned back to **Helsinki**.

In 1969 Finland was divided into 4 districts. The **Finnish National Rotary Council** was established, nowadays known as the '**Rotary Service for Finland and Estonia**'.

Mr. **Rolf 'Rolle' Klärich** from **Oulu** of **Northern Finland** served on the RI Board in 1970-72 as the fourth Finn - and as the first Finnish **Vice President**.

Thanks to our extraordinary activity, Finnish was an official Rotary publication language for 23 years, from 1977 to 2000.

By 1979, Finland had already 219 clubs with over 9,000 members—reaching one of the highest rotary densities in the world! This enormous growth was noticed, and in 1980 '**Rolle**' **Klärich** was invited back to the RI board, and in 1981 he was given the honour to serve as the only Finnish **RI President** so far.

In 1984, the growing Rotary in Finland was divided into 6 districts!

In 1989, as Tampere's own Mr. **Risto Eerola** served on the **Rotary International Board**, the old motto of "*Service Above Self*" became official, and **Rotary Headquarters** was moved from downtown **Chicago** to **Evanston**, the home town of **Paul Harris**.

12. WOMEN IN ROTARY

The proposal to admit women back to Rotary came from **India** in 1950, followed by **Sri Lanka** in 1964, and the U.S. in 1972. Already in 1976 **Finland** honoured Mrs **Irina Slotte** from **Kokkola** with a **Paul Harris Fellowship**. Two years later in 1978, the **Duarte Rotary Club in California** admitted three women as members – and **Rotary International** bluntly revoked its charter, sparking a legal battle.

In 1986, the **California Court of Appeals** ruled that excluding women from Rotary was discriminatory. The **U.S. Supreme Court** upheld this decision in 1987, and two years later in 1989, the **Council on Legislation COL** finally welcomed women back into Rotary, ending the schism of 40-years.

13. POLIO

Fighting polio has been the most important accomplishment of Rotary.

The four-time U.S. President **Franklin D. Roosevelt**, a **Rotarian** and paralysed polio sufferer himself, founded the **National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis** in 1938. It funded the '**Inactivated Polio Vaccine**' **IPV**. Its inventor **Dr. Jonas Salk** tested the injections first on himself and his family, and then, in 1954, on 1.6 million children in the **US, Canada**,– and **Finland!** Cases in the US dropped by 90%.

However only the **Oral Polio Vaccine OPV** by **Albert Sabin** finally broke the chain of transmission and made it possible to eradicate the disease altogether.

Rotary opened its fight against polio in 1978 with its '**Health, Hunger, and Humanity**' program. The first **3H**-project vaccinated orally 6 million children under 5 in the **Philippines**.

In 1985 9 Finns contracted polio, and our entire population was swiftly vaccinated orally by sugar cubes. The same year, perhaps following the Finnish success, **Rotary** initiated a two-decade '**Polio 2005**' campaign - with a goal to end polio by the centennial of the Rotary. After vaccines against 5 other deadly diseases were adjoined, the campaign was renamed '**PolioPlus**'.

In 1988 **Rotary, World Health Organisation** and **UNICEF** created the **Global Polio Eradication Initiative GPEI**. Its results were remarkable. The **Americas** were declared polio-free in 1994. In 1995 mass vaccinations took place in **China** and **India**. In 1996 the **Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs** contributed \$330,000 through the RF – and later more – causing an unexpected overflow of **Paul Harris Fellowships** for the Finnish Rotarians!

Unfortunately Polio did not vanish by the **Rotary Centennial** of 2005.

In 2007, the 'final' 10-year '**End Polio Now**' -campaign was bolstered by a \$100 million matching grant from the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** – later they gave much more. As a result **South-East Asia** was polio-free in 2014. But unfortunately the disease was not eradicated by 2018 either, as planned.

By 2025, the **Rotary Foundation** has grown into a most effective global humanitarian leader with a net worth of over \$1 billion, having the **16th top rating** in row from **Charity Navigator**. It dedicates up to 1/3 of its humanitarian financing to polio. 3 billion children have been vaccinated, and after the **African region** was freed in 2020, there were just two endemic countries left—

Afghanistan and **Pakistan** – with only a handful of sick people. Plus recently **Papua New-Guinea**. However, we are nearing the finishing line!

14. RUSSIA & THE BALTICS

Finnish Rotarians introduced Rotary to Russia already in the 1970's, and established their organisation – reaching 11 time zones! – and run it for the first 15 years from 1991 until they got their own District in 2006. The first post-Soviet Rotary Club was rechartered in **Tallin** by Finnish support - right after the **Estonian** independence was restored in 1991. Finland sponsored new clubs also elsewhere in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. From 2000 Estonia and Southern Finland have formed their mutual District 1420, with alternating governors.

15. IT

By the 1990s, the rotarians of '**Nokia-Finland**' emerged as digital pioneers. District 1420 was the first in Finland to launch a website - winning the first prize in the **International Computer User's Federation of Rotarians** competition. Finnish clubs won similar recognitions.

Rotary Norden Magazine, founded in 1936, adopted digital layout in 1993, under the Finnish leadership. By 2000 it had become the **third-largest Rotary magazine** globally. By 2024, it ceased to print altogether and went fully digital—offering parallel contents in all five Nordic languages.

16. THE PEAK

As Mr. **Jorma Lampén** from Finland served on the Board in 2000 the **Rotary** reached 1.2 million members across 160 countries. In Finland there were now 300 clubs with 12,000 members. Thus we had 1% of World Rotarians while only 0,07% of World's population. Moreover, Finland had the highest number of **exchange students per capita** in the world, covering allegedly 5% of all youth exchange!

17. CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

After the first Finnish rotary club dissolved in 2001, the closures became more common. **Rotary** proposed merging of our 6 districts into 3, but the execution was postponed. In response, Finland joined a global pilot program to modernise Rotary.

In 2013 the Clubs were freed from the **Professional Classification System**, and Finland's districts and clubs were **registered as ordinary associations**. These changes led to more **transparency** and removal of outdated practices—like **absence fees**. Rotary became more open and relaxed.

18. DEI IN ROTARY

In 2019, as one quarter of the Rotarians were already women, **RI** adopted **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion DEI** as its **Core Organizational Value**. An **Action Plan** of 2020 reinforced a **global initiative 'Women of Action'**, celebrating women leaders within Rotary. As an example Mrs **Virpi Honkala** was the first Finnish lady on the RI Board, serving there the 12th term by a Finn.

After that we got our first female RI president Mrs **Jennifer Jones** in 2022. And today, we are deeply honored to be joined by the second female president in the history of Rotary International—**Madam Stephanie Urchick**. Let us raise a cheer—not just for these remarkable leaders—but for a future leadership in Rotary equally accessible to all: a future where **diversity** is celebrated, and **equity and inclusion** are part of everything we do - at least for the next 120 years with amazing results!

Cheers! Thank you!