

## SUMMARY

### AN “OLD FINN” IN THE AGRARIAN UNION. JALO LAHDENSUO’S IDEALS AND WORK IN PUBLIC LIFE

Jalo Toivo Lahdensuo was born in Lapua in 1882 and died in Seinäjoki in 1973. His father’s family were gentry of yeoman stock from southern Finland who had returned to peasant farming when they moved to Southern Ostrobothnia. On his mother’s side, his roots were in Southern Ostrobothnia and Savo. His father, *Fredrik Lagerstedt*, had been a bold pioneer, clearing the marshland to make himself into a large estate owner. He was active in local politics, a Member of the Diet and an agricultural reformer whose exemplary methods were highly productive.

From his home Jalo Lahdensuo received a faith in the land that was to give a direction to his whole life’s work. On the foundations of this faith he built his noble idealism of the spirit of the land. In this his mentors were *Hannes Gebhard*, a leader in the co-operative movement, the writer *Arvid Järnefelt* with his Tolstoyan ideals, *Per Jönsson Rösiö*, a Swede known as “the Apostle of the Spirit of the land” and the founder of the Hagaberg Scandinavian Agricultural College, and another writer, *Santeri Alkio*, who was the founder of the Agrarian Union. In Lahdensuo’s thinking, the spirit of the land was embodied in patriotism and in a belief in economic progress based on agriculture. In this he was strongly influenced by some of the great figures of Finnish history, the poet *J.L. Runeberg*, the folklorist and writer *Zacharias Topelius* and the philosopher *J.V. Snellman*. In a spirit of national romanticism, at the end of the nineteenth century the Finnish-speaking peasants had begun to educate their children in order to create an administrative class of their own to counterbalance the Swedish-speaking élite. Thus Lahdensuo attended Vaasa Finnish Lyceum, which had been founded by his father, and it was from here that he received his first ideas about the nature of society.

His father had hoped that he would be a farmer, but that he would also train as a lawyer. There had also been some hope that he might become a minister, but the boy’s own choice of career, that of an actor, in no way corresponded to the wishes of his parents. Indeed, Lahdensuo’s first years as a young student with a thirst for knowledge were troubled with a conflict between the cultural pursuits of the capital, Helsinki, and the agricultural way of life at home. In the end it was the countryside that prevailed in this internal struggle. Almost everything of value that happened to Lahdensuo in his later life was connected in one way or another with the countryside and with “Honkimäki”, the farm whose leasehold he had inherited from his father. While still a student he married a girl called *Aliina Kero*. Although he himself participated actively in running his

estate by giving advice and directions, and when the occasion presented itself by working on it, a considerable portion of the credit for the success of the farm belongs to his wife.

The young Lahdensuo grew up in an atmosphere of fervent unrest under the oppressive rule of *Czar Nicholas II*. As a schoolboy he had been interested in culture, and when he was a student he had been a keen choir singer, inspired by the composer *Heikki Klemetti*. Under the influence of the writer *Jalmari Finne*, he also developed an enthusiasm for acting and planned to take it up as a career, but he renounced this ambition on the advice of Finne himself and of his own brother, *Jalmari Lahdensuo*, who became the director of the Finnish National Theatre. His love for music, however, he maintained throughout his life. His tour with a choir to Hungary when he was a student was one of the high points of his life. In the prevailing spirit of national romanticism, he changed his surname from the Swedish-sounding *Lagerstedt* to the Finnish *Lahdensuo* to honour of the centenary of the birth of J.V. Snellman.

During his years as a student, Lahdensuo became more and more interested above all in social questions. After qualifying as a surveyor, he became a member of the Finnish Party, which was inspired by the spiritual legacy of J.V. Snellman, and whose members were known as the “Old Finns”. He participated in organising party activities in his home town of Lapua, and he worked for the party as secretary of the constituency of the Northern Province of Vaasa during the first parliamentary elections in 1907, before beginning a second period of study. He chose the Finnish Party because he had an idealistic belief in it as a party that could unite the nation, though he was undoubtedly also influenced by his surroundings. In his first political speeches he boldly addressed issues of the day, such as the relationship between the church and society, the social ideal of young people, and the question of socialism, but at this stage he was still strongly opposed to the Agrarian Union, which had been founded by Santeri Alkio in 1906. During his period as constituency secretary, the Finnish Society of Lapua became embroiled in a fierce internal dispute, with the major peasant clans of the Lapua area opposed to each other. As a result of the dispute, his elder brother, *Oskari Lahdensuo*, a member of the Diet, joined the Agrarian Union. As a constituency secretary of the Finnish Party, Lahdensuo became acquainted with the ideas of Hannes Gebhard for a new rural party. He was overwhelmed by Gebhard’s rural idealism, and over the years it was to influence his actions in later life.

It also inspired Lahdensuo to take up a career as a teacher. As Director of the Lapua Agricultural Lyceum, he entered the front line of local and rural politics. In summer 1917, in the turmoil that followed the February Revolution in Russia, he became an activist. The unrest created by the Russian Revolution was soon reflected in internal conditions in Finland, which were characterised by increasing oppression and food shortages. The main bone of contention became the question of how Finland should achieve her independence. The serious domestic political crisis was also reflected in a patriotic celebration held in Lahdensuo’s home locality in summer 1917, in which the idea of full

independence for Finland was proclaimed with exultation. And later that same year Finland in fact proclaimed herself independent. But before that, the country had been plunged into a deep political crisis, in which the opposing factions were the peasant class and the bourgeoisie (the *Whites*) on one side, and the left (the *Reds*), who received the support of the Russian military that remained in the country, on the other. As a result of this conflict, Finland's war of liberation turned into a tragic civil war.

With the domestic conflict coming to a head, Lahdensuo became one of the founders of the Lapua Home Guard, and then in 1917 the founder and first chairman of the controversial Southern Ostrobothnian Home Guard district. At the beginning of the War of Liberation, Lahdensuo took part in skirmishes against the Russians in the Seinäjoki area, and he fought in a battle against the Reds at Vilppula. After that he worked behind the front lines as chairman of the advisory committee to the supreme commander of the White Army, General *Gustaf Mannerheim*. In this capacity, he had to deal with questions concerning the treatment of Red prisoners. His activities shed further light on the atrocities perpetrated by the Whites. When the war was over, he hoped that social peace would be restored, and that the Reds would be once again integrated into organised society.

After the end of Russian rule, Lahdensuo joined the Agrarian Union. In a letter to Santeri Alkio, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the official organ of his own party, and asked to be admitted as a member of the Agrarian Union. Partly due to his defection, the Finnish Party was plunged into a crisis which led to its break-up and the founding of the right-wing National Coalition Party. The royalist sympathies of the Coalition Party were not to his taste, and nor were its anti-socialist right-wing policies. If he had for some years been attracted to the Agrarian Union, as he explained in his letter to Alkio, his sluggishness in making his choice of party, on the other hand, indicates that he had hoped that the Finnish Party might resolve its problems. That not being the case, the Agrarian Union seemed at that point in time to correspond better than other parties with his ambitions to improve conditions in the countryside and the living standard of the peasant class. His motive was approximately the same as it had been when he joined the ranks of the Finnish Party: he had been an "Old Finn" then, and he continued to be one in the Agrarian Union.

Within the Agrarian Union, Lahdensuo quickly rose to the summit of political life. Partly this was due to Alkio, partly to the support of the party secretary *Kyösti Kallio*, but it was also a result of the fact that his party was almost constantly in power. Above all, however, it was thanks to his education and his courage in expressing his opinions in public. His rise was also connected with the passing of Land Reform Bill (*Lex Kallio*). He had gained his knowledge of land settlement questions as a member of a committee of the Senate's Justice Department that drew up land distribution statistics. Lahdensuo belonged to the centre-right of the party, and he was thus well disposed to co-operation with the National Coalition Party. On the other hand, he was also attracted by the western agrarianism of *J.E. Sunila*, who had been his university teacher.

Lahdensuo held ministerial posts five times, once as minister of agriculture in the cabinet of *Lauri Ingman*, twice as minister of communications and public works in the administrations of Kyösti Kallio, and twice as minister of defence in the governments of J.E. Sunila. He was several times one of the Speakers of Parliament, and he served on numerous parliamentary committees, of which the Grand Committee was the most important. During the 1930's he served under *J.K. Paasikivi* as a member of the defence section of the important Standing Committee on the National Economy. As a politician he was industrious and efficient. His main achievements are connected with his two terms as minister of defence under J.V. Sunila, when he became an expert on questions of national defence. In addition, his efforts as minister of communications to combat mass unemployment during the Depression were noteworthy.

Together with his fellow party members, *Albin Manner* and *Juho Niukkanen*, he was one of the most important ministers of defence in Finland before the outbreak of the Winter War in 1939. He was a keen supporter of national defence, and within the limits imposed by the country's economy he did his best to maintain defence appropriations. He strove to make the organisation of the armed forces and the home guard more democratic, partly using the French model, so that power would be concentrated in the Ministry of Defence and other state organs that were based on democratic principles. This could be seen in his organisation of the home guard in the 1920's, and in his brokerage of power relations between the Defence Council, which was headed by Gustaf Mannerheim, and the Ministry of Defence. In foreign policy he was a supporter of the so-called border state policy in the 1920's, though towards the end of the decade he leaned towards Britain, partly perhaps because, unlike the majority of his party, he favoured the building of a navy. In the 1930's he was also cautiously inclined towards Scandinavia.

Like other right-wing members of the Agrarian Union, he was sympathetic to the fascistic *Lapua Movement* in its early stages, but in the early 1930's he joined its opponents. As a conservative of principle, he could not accept the campaign of terrorisation waged by the movement against the communists. And he finally disassociated himself from the Lapua Movement as soon as it set itself up against the "peasant" government of Kyösti Kallio in 1931, and following the party line he joined the struggle against it. Coming from Lapua himself, where the movement had its origins, there is no doubt that he was close to this popular uprising, and he personally knew many of those involved in it – indeed, some of them were family relations. In this way, his attitudes may have been influenced by certain individuals and events.

As minister of defence in Sunila's administration he was centrally involved in the suppression of the 1932 *Mäntsälä Revolt*. He was the brain behind the so-called *High Command of the President of the Republic*, the other members of which were the President *P.E. Svinhuvud* and Generals *Hugo Österman*, *Lauri Malmberg*, *Aarne Sihvo*, and *Lennart Oesch*. He favoured harsh measures against the rebels and found himself in conflict not only with the Mäntsälä rebels themselves but also with *War of Liberation Veterans League*. Inside the

Lapua Movement he was branded a renegade. Quite apart from personal reasons, it was his activities during the week of the Mäntsälä Revolt that were behind the attempt by the Lapua Movement to forcibly transport him over the border into the Soviet Union, a procedure that they characteristically resorted to with many of their political opponents. The *Patriotic People's Movement*, which grew out of the Lapua Movement never met with his approval.

Lahdensuo's political career at parliamentary committee level ended when he became Governor of the Province of Vaasa, a post which he held from 1938 to 1943. During the Winter War (1939–40) and the Continuation War (1941–44) against the Soviet Union he endeavoured to keep up public morale on the home front and to inspire the civilian population with a determination to defend the country. During the Continuation War he placed his faith in the Germans. He considered the requisitions of certain agricultural produce imposed on the farming population for public consumption to be out of proportion, and this caused friction with the authorities that were responsible for national defence. His term as provincial governor was an unhappy one, and he became embroiled in a conflict with his permanent secretary, partly as a result of his own stubbornness. The government of *Edwin Linkomies* found him unsuitable for the post and dismissed him. This great disappointment heralded the last phase of his life, during which he continued to be active, serving on the boards of numerous national and provincial organisations.

His last active years after the war were stamped by an embittered struggle against President *Urho Kekkonen* and his party policies (the so-called "K Line"). At first it took the form of criticism of Finland's new direction in foreign policy after the war, but from the 1950's on it became more and more an opposition to the political career of Urho Kekkonen. This culminated in the presidential election campaign of 1956, but it still continued in the next election campaign of 1962, which was marked by the unsuccessful efforts of the so-called Honka League to oust Kekkonen. As a conservative, Lahdensuo did not understand Kekkonen's foreign policy, which he condemned as too pro-communist and pro-Soviet, nor could he accept the methods Kekkonen employed in domestic politics.

As he only held his farm on a lease, Lahdensuo never became the owner of a large estate. It was only in his later years that he was able to purchase the little bit of land that remained after numerous land settlements. Thus he never got to benefit from the rise of agriculture in the same way as the other, land-owning, members of his family. His worries about the fate of the farm were particularly great when the original term of the lease was drawing to a close in the early 1920's. Despite this, he was an exemplary farmer and exponent of his faith in the land. During his last years he lived to witness the rural depopulation and urbanisation of the great postwar structural change in Finnish society, but it never really shook his faith in the power of the spirit of the land.

His main characteristics were industriousness and enterprise; he was extremely efficient and hard-working. He also had a ready tongue, and he could be vehement and stubborn over certain matters. He tended to deliberate

issues thoroughly, but once he took a decision he pursued his aims consistently and decisively. He was deeply religious, but he also believed in dreams and portents, and he was afraid of flying. Fundamentally, it seems that he was a sensitive and lonely man with a romantic view of nature.

Translated by Gerard McAlester