



Scrutinizing scribblings of world leaders

History buff preserves practice signatures

World leaders take turns signing the Final Act while Mikko Pyhälä (left, with eyeglasses) and his colleagues stand ready to assist.
APA-IMAGES/Lehtikuva

BY KAIUS NIEMI

“The way it was torn shows creative thinking. It is completely scrunched up,” says Mikko Pyhälä with a smile, showing a piece of scrap paper that the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme used at the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1975.

The Finnish diplomat recounts how, as a 29-year-old attaché assigned to work in the Conference secretariat, he collected the sheets of paper on which leaders from East and West tested the thick fountain pens right before putting their signatures on the Helsinki Final Act — a document that many

researchers consider as having held back the tyranny of the Soviet Union in Cold War Europe.

Thirty years later, the sheets are seeing the light of day for the first time since Ambassador Pyhälä, now a senior Foreign Ministry official, put them in a bank vault in 1975.

“Now that three decades have gone by, I thought it might be a good idea to put the scribblings forward,” he says. “They reveal some insights into psychology and culture. They will probably be of interest to biographical historians, as well as experts researching the psycho-dynamics of the signing event.”

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He has never considered selling the collection. “This is national property, in a way,” he says.

Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky tested his pen using broad strokes, while East German leader Erich Honecker made do with a minimalist “E”. The notebook of Romania’s dictator Nicolae Ceausescu was in an upright position as he doodled some waves. Finnish President Urho Kekkonen tested the first letters of his name, “Ur” and “Urh”.

Olof Palme scribbled the names of countries, such as his native “Sweden”, and “Holy See” in French. “The spot for each signature had the name of the country in French, but the Secretariat had left the accents out,” Ambassador Pyhälä explains. “I noticed that British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Olof Palme tried to mark the accents in all the right places. These were the thoughts going through their minds.”

A few of the 35 signatories did not bother practising their signatures at all.

Some tore their note papers into tiny shreds. Ambassador Pyhälä salvaged them from ashtrays and pieced them together. He later pasted copies of the final signatures on the individual sheets to make it easier to compare them with the practice signatures.

To dry the ink after each signing, another blotter was needed in addition to the one lent by the Office

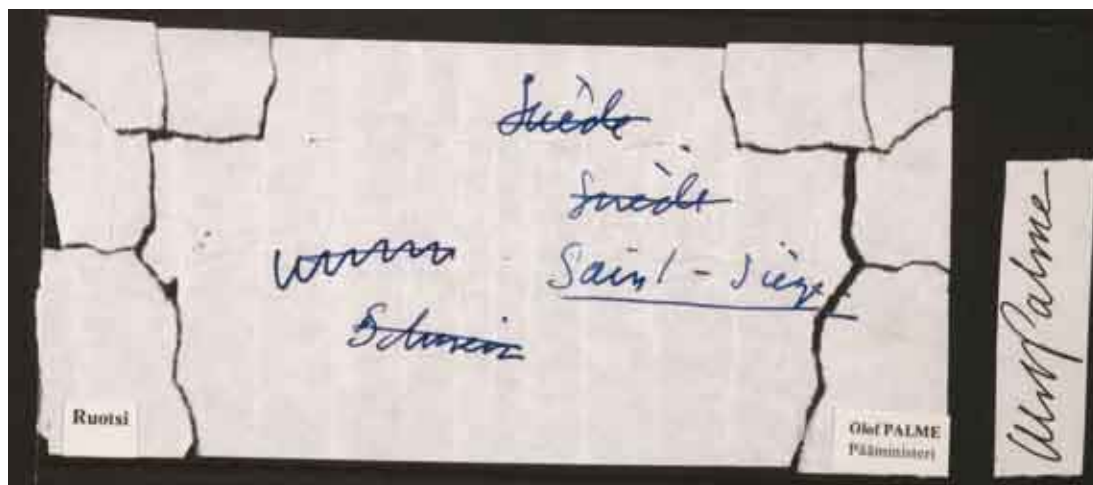
of the Prime Minister. When none could be found in the Foreign Ministry or other government agencies, Ambassador Pyhälä borrowed his father’s. “We didn’t have the nerve to ask the Office of the President,” he recalls.

There were a few awkward moments. The President of Cyprus, Orthodox Archbishop Makarios III, had to resort to his own fountain pen because he could sign documents only in red ink, in line with protocol in the Cypriot Orthodox Church.

In a security inspection before the meeting in Finlandia Hall, two pens disappeared from Ambassador Pyhälä’s cabinet. To preclude the possibility of bombs and other attempts at sabotage, he was asked to examine every pen.

The trial signatures and Ambassador Pyhälä’s other memorabilia can be viewed at the special CSE 1975 exhibition at the Urho Kekkonen Museum in Tamminiemi, on the outskirts of Helsinki, until the end of February 2006.

Kaius Niemi, City Editor of *Helsingin Sanomat*, was a year old when the Helsinki Final Act was signed. As a long-time staff writer in the daily’s foreign news section, he reported on conflicts in the Balkans and Central Asia as well as OSCE-related developments.



Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme thought he had wiped out all traces of his scribbles. After writing down some words on several sheets of paper, he folded each sheet several times and tore it up. Mikko Pyhälä gathered the shreds and pieced them together. Photo courtesy of Pertti Nisonen.

The signing: Panic, and a sigh of relief

As the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act approached, Mikko Pyhälä, Ambassador (Asia and Oceania) in the Finnish Foreign Ministry, found himself being sought after by local journalists in their efforts to recreate the heady excitement of the historic events in Finlandia Hall. Since he has enough material to fill a book, Ambassador Pyhälä agreed to reserve some of his favourite anecdotes for the *OSCE Magazine*.

BY MIKKO PYHÄLÄ

My role was to take care of purchases and oversee the restaurants and cafeterias in Finlandia Hall, but I also had another assignment that brought me

into direct contact with Heads of State or Government. This involved co-ordinating bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the gathering. On my watch alone, some 120 such meetings took place in three days in ten rooms.



COURTESY OF PERTTI NISONEN

Ambassador Pyhälä holds his father's ink-blotter and one of the two original blotter sheets with signatures which he keeps in a vault.

To put all this into perspective, it would have taken several years or more for these East-West meetings to be held — if they could have taken place at all — within that era's international diplomacy. Hungary's Janos Kadar, Poland's Edward Gierek and Czechoslovakia's Gustav Husak were suddenly sitting down separately with French, American, British and other western leaders.

Most significantly, it was also in connection with

the conference that the leaders of the two Germanies — Helmut Schmidt and Erich Honecker — met face-to-face for the first time.

During the signing ceremony, my colleagues and I stood behind each signatory, handling the ink-blotters.

I don't know how many people saw the highly original histrionics of Soviet

Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev, but some of us were certainly close enough to witness it.

When his turn came to sign the Helsinki Final Act, Mr. Brezhnev reacted disapprovingly with a wave of his finger as if to say, "I am not going to sign this." This caused us momentary panic, since we knew that there had been some internal opposition in the USSR to being party to the Act. But it turned out to be mere drama. Mr. Brezhnev quickly grasped the pen from its holder and signed. And we sighed with relief.

The last person to sign was President Tito of Yugoslavia. When it was all over, all the leaders rose to their feet and started leaving the podium. I figured I should stay on to make sure that all the items connected with the signing — the pens, pen-holders and table pads — would end up in safe hands. We had planned to turn them over to the respective delegations and indeed, most asked to have them as historical keepsakes.

Barely had the leaders vacated their seats when the chief of protocol of one of the Warsaw Pact countries jumped to the podium and made a dash for Mr. Brezhnev's pen. Luckily, I was faster; I literally had to push him down from the podium. He protested, saying that the pen should be saved for posterity. Well, that's exactly what I had in mind, too, and I promptly delivered the pen to the USSR delegation.



“The biggest since the Congress of Vienna”

“Everyone seems to be groping for a phrase that would sum up the ‘spectacle,’” said *Time Magazine*. The weekly publication's European edition of 4 August 1975 devoted a nine-page cover story (left) to the three-day Helsinki gathering, describing it as a “star-studded summit, the most spectacular gathering of world leaders since the 1814-1815 Congress of Vienna”.

The Chicago Sun-Times of 31 July said the conference, the culmination of more than two years of painstaking negotiations, was “a jet-age Congress of Vienna in which Heads of State arrive in Boeing 707s and Soviet *Ilyushins* instead of gilded carriages”.

British Prime Minister Harold Wilson's breathless description was widely quoted in the press: “In territorial coverage, in representation at top level of almost every State, large and small, this conference so transcends any previous meeting that it makes the legendary Congress of Vienna of 1814 and the Congress of Berlin of 1878 seem like well-dressed tea parties.”

One delegate also succumbed to hyperbole: “Helsinki will be a living Madame Tussaud's — the greatest show of living waxworks on earth.”

Noting that there were no precedents for the meeting, the *International Herald Tribune* of 29 July said: “The Congress of Vienna is cited, but there were only 32 excellencies there, most of them minor German princes.”