



TRUTH IS THE HIGHEST VIRTUE

A Biography of Pekka Ervast

Erik Gullman

Foreword by Dr. Tim Rudbøg
Literary Society of the Finnish Rosy Cross

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By Erik Gullman



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Contents

Foreword by Dr. Tim Rudbøg.....	9
Family Background	14
Back Injury	15
A Gifted Child	16
Mother as Educator.....	19
Touches of the Invisible World.....	20
A Mother's Death and a Feeling of Emptiness.....	20
Life Goes On.....	22
School Years	24
Languages as a Hobby	25
A Strange Meeting	26
The Joys and Sorrows of Young Pekka	27
The Author Wakes Up	28
Freedom from Anger.....	29
Youth	31
Elias and Andreas.....	31
The Rebellious Schoolboy	32
Student Years	33
University.....	34
Confirmation	37
Theosophy.....	39
Theosophical Dreams	41
A Strange Experience on the Streets of Helsinki	42
Lapland Trip	44
The Fire of Love.....	45
Ervast as Theosophist	46
Tolstoy and the Doctrine of Jesus	51
The Ecstasy of Love - Marriage in the Making.....	53
The Split in the Scandinavian Theosophical Society.....	57
A Crisis.....	58
The Rebirth Experience.....	59

To Become a Farmhand?.....	63
Theosophical Work	65
Woodcraft School and The Secret Doctrine.....	65
Working for Theosophy	66
Separation	69
The Beginning of Public Work.....	70
Member of the Esoteric School.....	71
Independent Work.....	72
Newspaper Articles.....	74
Linguist for Albertus.....	75
Judgian Ervast.....	77
Stockholm Congress.....	77
Effects of the Esoteric School	78
The White Temple.....	78
The Finnish Theosophical Society	79
A Higher Purpose in Life.....	80
Katherine Tingley's Universal Brotherhood.....	83
Ervast the Theosophist.....	85
Society on the Move	87
Grant Application	88
The February Manifesto	93
Towards the Light.....	93
An Aborted Trip to India	94
Father's Death	96
Sweden or Finland?.....	98
Ervast ja Olcott.....	99
In Sweden.....	101
The Birth of <i>Uusi Aika</i> Magazine	101
Annual Meeting of the Scandinavian Theosophical Society, 1901	102
Meeting the Mediums	104
Working in Sweden.....	106
Back Home Again	107

Independent Esotericist	110
Theosophy for the People	111
Ervast's Socialism	113
The Messenger of Light – Valon airut	114
Light from the North	115
Theosophical Cooperation under Russian Rule	119
Passive and Active Resistance.....	119
Besant in Stockholm	119
What Is Death?	121
Omatunto Magazine	122
London Congress	123
Life and Death	125
The General Strike	127
Matti Kurikka and Väinö Valvanne	129
Which Way?	130
The Socialist Reform Party	130
Establishing the Finnish Section.....	131
Olcott's Death and the Change of Power	132
The Finnish Section	134
<i>Tietäjä</i> Magazine	135
Bankruptcy.....	135
The Lotus School.....	136
The New Religion.....	137
The Great Religions Lecture Series	139
A Theosophical Headquarters	141
Leo Tolstoy.....	143
The Move.....	145
A Second Split in the Theosophical Movement.....	149
A Stormy Annual Meeting.....	151
Late Spring 1911	152
Finland Put to the Test	153
Rudolf Steiner in Finland.....	154
Steiner and the Finnish Theosophical Society	156

Ervast and Steiner	158
Steiner and Krishnamurti	160
A Theosophical Summer Course	161
Novel Currents	163
The Star in the East in Finland	164
Finland's National Deva	164
Congress in Stockholm	166
Hosannas and the Star in the East	168
St. Petersburg	169
The World War.....	171
The Secret of the Sampo.....	173
Annual Meeting, 1915	174
Sunnuntai Magazine	177
Split into Two.....	178
The Key to the <i>Kalevala</i>	180
Policy Debate	183
The March Revolution.....	184
Annual Meeting, 1917	186
Towards War	187
The Rebellion.....	188
Annual Meeting and the Summer Course, 1918	191
Kaarle Krohn and The Key to <i>Kalevala</i>	192
Collaboration with Peltola	194
The Rosy Cross	197
Dispute	199
Annual Meeting, 1920	202
Establishment of the Rosy Cross.....	205
Mission of the Theosophical Society	211
Meditation Group	212
In the Footsteps of St. Paul.....	213
Opening of the Temple.....	217
Stenman's Palace of Arts.....	218
A Home Is Found.....	219

Jinarajadasa	219
Co-Masonry	221
The Finnish Co-Freemasonry Jurisdiction	223
National Federation of Finland	223
The Lost Word	225
The Finnish Mystery Temple	227
The Work Takes Root.....	230
Eino Leino.....	231
The Lotus School of the Rosy Cross	232
Summer Course in Kanneljärvi	232
Congregation of the Rosy Cross.....	234
Jyväskylä Temple	235
Gösta Stenman	236
Annual Meeting, 1927: The Question of a Temple	237
Valentin Zeileis and the Enchanted Castle of Gallsbach	240
Summer Course in Terijoki	241
Krishnamurti and the World Teacher	243
Paris	244
New Winds.....	246
Matter or Spirit?	247
Summer Course in Jyväskylä, 1928	248
In the Shelter of the Kulmakoulu School	251
A New Human Being: An Expanded Life Picture	256
Summer Course in Jyväskylä, 1929	258
Ervast's Policy	260
The Resurrection of the Individual.....	263
Not Fighting, but Winning	264
Lessons on the Life of Christ	268
The Centenary of H.P. Blavatsky	269
The Tattarisuo Case.....	272
The Special Status of Jesus.....	273
Freedom and Brotherhood	276
Health and Economic Concerns	282

The Thirteenth Year	283
Testament	286
Travel Preparations	290
Last Public Lectures.....	292
American Wonderland	294
Ojai.....	296
The Great Adventure	299
Return Home.....	301
Finland, the Sweet North.....	302
The Last Day	305
After Death	306
Biographical Information on Erik Gullman	309
Notes	311
Index of People	357
Photo Appendix.....	367

Foreword by Dr. Tim Rudbøg

This biography represents a significant milestone in the study of Theosophical history, offering profound insights for scholars and interested alike who are captivated by the extraordinary experiences that can shape the human journey. In meticulous detail, Erik Gullman reconstructs the life of Pekka Ervast—a pioneering figure in Finnish Theosophy—in a highly engaging and accessible manner. Ervast’s life unfolds before the reader’s eyes, illuminating how Theosophy was lived amid personal tribulations, the evolution of the Theosophical Society, and the myriad societal challenges confronting both the Finns, the independence of Finland in 1917, and the rest of the world between 1875 and 1934.

Biographies like this one help draw aside the curtain of events often cut off from subjective individual experiences, as is frequently the case with social, institutional, and intellectual histories of people and events. Equally important, this book provides the reader with understanding of the inner workings of an individual mind—in this case, the mind of Ervast, who became one of the main driving forces in establishing and developing Theosophy in Finland.

On one level we learn about his outward dedication, activities and innovative contributions to the development of Theosophy, such as founding the Finnish Theosophical Society, giving numerous lectures, writing books, embracing Leo Tolstoy, interpreting Christianity in his own way, translating Helena P. Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* into Finnish, promoting the esoteric aspects of the *Kalevala*, advocating vegetarianism, and cultivating his own take on socialism, the Rosy Cross, co-Masonry, and the spiritual community at large in Finland. We learn about his travels to

both England and the United States and how he forged personal connections with significant first-generation theosophists such as Countess Wachtmeister who sponsored him for a time and told him about Blavatsky's emphasis on the importance of Finland and H. S. Olcott for whom he functioned as interpreter, as well as second-generation theosophists from various societies, including the American, Adyar, and Rudolf Steiner's circles.

Yet, the book also offers another dimension. Long, relevant quotes from important source material speak to us directly from Ervast's own descriptions of his spiritual experiences—how he saw strange spiritual entities, received answers to lingering existential questions, and gained higher understanding of important spiritual matters in times of crises. Not to mention his proclaimed experiences with spiritual masters that transformed his life and kept him from losing his mind or even his life. The combination of these outer and inner dimensions gives us a more complete picture of how a person like Ervast found meaning in his life, directed his will, and chose to work dedicatedly with Theosophy from early on, until his death. How his own inner questioning found answers and alignment in the Theosophical movement at the time. In many respects, Ervast's life unfolds through a series of transformative episodes—from out-of-body experiences and striking visions to personal crises bordering on madness and, ultimately, moments of profound spiritual rebirth. Immersed from an early age in esoteric literature and mystical circles, and sustained by a commitment to meditation and dream-work, he embarked on a lifelong journey of self-exploration and changing the world around him.

Early in the narrative, Ervast emerges as an exceptionally sensitive, introspective, and self-directed individual who questioned the prevailing social order. Rejecting the conventional academic career he briefly pursued due to his talent for languages, he renounced the privileges of upper-class life as the necessary cost of spiritual freedom. To illustrate his thinking as presented in the biography, this

quote is particularly telling: “For Pekka, even death would be better than existing merely to work, eat, drink, sleep, and breed. These reflections became so painful that he avoided suicide only because he had a ‘mysterious hope and faith’ that he ‘had to find out sooner or later.’” His unwavering skepticism and independence propelled him into the depths of existential inquiry and crisis; yet, the insights derived from such episodes seems to have opened in him the renewed inner resources required to continue on his life’s journey.

A critical turning point occurred in January 1898 when, during an out-of-body experience while contemplating death, he had an experience of encountering the Master Morya (M.) in which he realized that “If you come into contact with the adept, you will awaken a strange consciousness of truth that will show you so clearly your worthlessness, sinfulness, and selfishness that you cannot bear it unless you are truth seekers with all your heart. For the seeker of truth, on the contrary, it is a great joy to meet the Master, for one’s spiritual path and mission are then clearly shown to one.” This seminal event appears to be the pivotal point of the biography and Ervast’s life, providing him with the conviction of his lifelong Theosophical mission to promulgate a nuanced understanding of life and work for the development of the Theosophical Society.

Ervast’s contributions to the development of Theosophy in Finland were both bold and transformative. His early alignment with William Q. Judge eventually gave way to affiliation with the Adyar Society after resigning from the Katherine Tingley led society, his efforts in founding a new branch of the Theosophical Society challenged established orthodoxy at the time and became crucial for Theosophy in Finland. His unanimous election as general secretary at the third founding meeting of the Finnish Section on 15 September 1907 affirmed his pivotal role in the movement. Notably, while deeply involved in the organizational activities of the society, Ervast maintained an independent intellectual stance, seeking the right to teach his own way, to offer his own experienced take on Christ’s teachings, Tolstoy, and the worker’s cause. He

insisted that the society should not evolve into a formal religion and that ultimate salvation resides within oneself and not with another. This, however, does not mean that one should focus on oneself, “because daily practice in the many virtues and deeds of brotherhood teaches us, in reality, to forget ourselves and to take the position that Christ lives and feels in us.”

Throughout his Theosophical career, Ervast communicated his visionary insights with rigor, both through his many lectures to Theosophists, spiritual seekers and in workers’ associations in Finland and elsewhere, seeking to promote the cause of universal brotherhood and the importance of Finland’s spiritual contributions. His lectures on the Kalevala culminated in the establishment of the Kalevala Lodge, an initiative that seamlessly intertwined national cultural heritage with esoteric inquiry. Moreover, by adopting vegetarianism and engaging with diverse mystical orders—from the Rosy Cross to co-Masonry—Ervast articulated a vision of an enlightened society free from doctrinal constraints. He maintained that no single teacher, whether Krishnamurti or any other, could embody ultimate freedom; instead, he posited that the divine spark is an intrinsic quality universally shared. His advocacy for progressive, ethical socialism and his outreach to workers further underscored his commitment to integrating spiritual insight with social reform.

In his later years, Ervast’s relentless quest for understanding and truth transcended geographical boundaries. In the company of his close associate G. Kaade, he explored modern cultural centers such as New York—where he marveled at landmarks like the Empire State Building—and embarked on an ambitious journey to Ojai, California. Although a much-anticipated visit by Krishnamurti failed to materialize, these experiences enriched his grasp of contemporary global society and the extent of the Theosophical movement.

As you delve into this comprehensive biography, you fairly quickly and even without realizing it find yourself embarking on



Pekka Ervast (1875–1934), founder of the Finnish Rosy Cross (*Ruus-Risti* in Finnish), was one of those rare cultural figures who sought to convey their profound spiritual experiences in a form accessible to the general public.

Ervast presented his spiritual and mystical experiences as the basis for his worldview and actions. In this, he differed from the way science and even traditional religion understand existence and human life. Ervast was a pioneer of the Finnish Theosophical movement and left an extensive literary output. Moreover, he had a significant impact on Finnish social and cultural life.

The motto of the Theosophical Society is “There is no religion higher than truth”. Ervast also expressed this as “Truth is the highest virtue.” In this way, he emphasized the absolute ethical basis of spiritual life.

The author of Ervast’s biography, Erik Gullman (b. 1951), is a Finnish theosophist with a master’s degree in literature. He has conducted research on Ervast’s life for four decades.

