

The end of the world

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Last autumn, Jussi K. began to plan his disassociation from Jehovah's Witnesses. But if he left the apocalyptic movement, he would lose everything: his friends would refuse to meet him, as would probably his parents.

HE MADE UP his mind last September. He would disassociate from Jehovah's Witnesses. He was 30 years old, had grown up in a devout Jehovah's Witness family, had been baptised as a teenager, and had married a fellow Witness.

I shall call him **Jussi K.**

Jussi K. had devoted his life to serving Jehovah. He had dropped out of school after matriculating and begun going door-to-door, *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines in his satchel.

Some of us may have opened our home for him. Some may have listened and, out of countenance, accepted a copy of the *Watchtower*; or simply shut the door on him.

Twice a week, Jussi K. would dress up and take part in a meeting in the Kingdom Hall. He had done so since he was a child, and had developed into a popular speaker. As a sign of the trust he had earned, he had been appointed as an elder in his congregation.

He therefore found out matters not revealed to the average Jehovah's Witness. He had, for example, served in the judicial committee of his congregation, considering the sins of others.

Outside the Kingdom Hall, he knew virtually no one. Besides exercise, he had no hobbies. Every morning, he would get up at 5 am and go jogging or swimming, alone. He had told no one that he had begun to question the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. No one knew what he was thinking as he sat at the Kingdom Hall, beside his spouse and children, singing Kingdom songs.

Who could he have talked to?

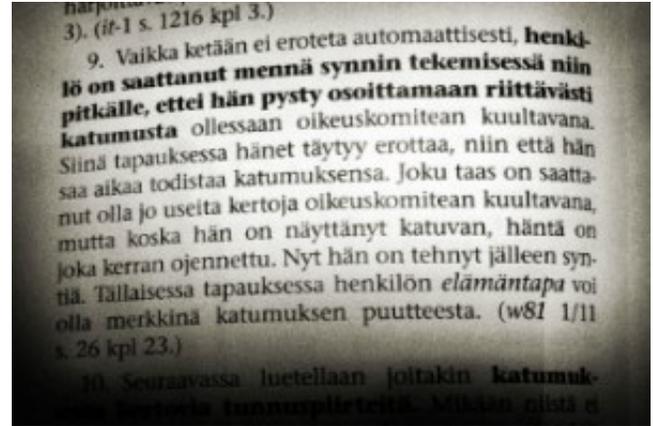
If he had brought the matter up with his loved-ones, they would have had to immediately report his doubts to the congregation. He would have been approached.

Jussi K. did not want to discuss. He had made up his mind. He would disassociate from Jehovah's Witnesses before summer.

IT WAS autumn, and Jussi K. was scared. He had seen what happened when someone left Jehovah's Witnesses: even their parents and siblings ceased all communications with them. Ex-Witnesses are called apostates. Apostates are non-repentant wrongdoers, who are to be disassociated with and shunned.

The boundary to the outside world is absolute. That is why Jussi K. had dared not to leave sooner. He was scared of losing everyone in his life.

It is rather like planning to defect from North Korea.



Elders are instructed how to detect sincere repentance in the secret manual of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Three years earlier, he had sat by his computer, looking up something on the Internet, and stumbled on a website called *veljesseura.org*. Jussi K. recognised the name. He had been told at the Kingdom Hall that the website is maintained by apostates. Reading such apostate websites was forbidden. The apostates, Jussi had been taught, wanted to poison the mind of Witnesses.

But the human being is a curious creature, and Jussi K. wanted to find out what was said about Jehovah's Witnesses. At first, he thought the claims on the discussion forum were ludicrous. He knew how to rebut them, and had begun to formulate the right arguments.

Then he felt sick, the prick of conscience. He was annoyed with the thought that if the Jehovah's Witnesses possessed the truth, why was he not allowed to see how it was criticised.

He would not return to the website, he decided, to be on the safe side. A recent issue of the Watchtower had cautioned against the spiritual dangers and inappropriateness of studying texts written by apostates and other critics of the organisation, be it in print or digital form.

He remained resolute for a while. Then, Jussi K. stumbled upon a website called *johanneksenpoika.fi*, whose author, **Jari-Pekka Peltoniemi**, is an ex-Witness and has compiled an abundance of material criticising the faults of the organisation.

Jussi K. also came across a blog called *Ex-JT-tytön elämää*. The author had disassociated from the Jehovah's Witnesses years ago, as a teenager, but Jussi K. remembered her. She was now a young woman writing what it is like to live shunned by her family and former friends.

Last summer, Jussi K. had sat and listened as conference speakers in the Helsinki Ice Hall discussed apostates in greater length than usual. A male speaker had argued how apostates were “the henchmen of the Devil” and “part of the Serpent's seed”, and how they “can use slick words on the Internet or on the television”.

The speaker had advised how to protect oneself against apostates: “We must identify the carriers of the disease and then shun them. What is the right approach? We shun them, as if we were trying to avoid a contagious epidemic.”

Then he continued: “We should not, therefore, let apostates into our home – not through the Internet, not through the television, not through letters, nor through any other medium. Shunning all forms of contact protects us against corrupt ideas.”

Jussi K. sat on the side beside his family and listened.

WHEN the parents of Jussi K. joined Jehovah's Witnesses in the mid-1980s, the movement had already established itself in Finland. It had over 10,000 followers, and dozens of Kingdom Halls had been built all across the country, with the help of volunteers and donations. The movement had been adopted from the United States in the 1910s and grown into the fourth largest religious community in Finland.

Jehovah's Witnesses was founded in the 1870s by a Pennsylvania garment salesman **Charles Russell**. On Good Friday 1878, Russell gathered his following on the Sixth Street Bridge in Pittsburgh to await for the apocalypse and their ascension to heaven.

Nothing happened, no one soared into the heaven, but for some reason that did not bother the followers of Russell. The movement grew.

What is known about the background of Russell is that his parents were Presbyterian Christians, his father ran a men's clothing store and his mother died when he was nine years old. Russell was a deft businessman and sold “miracle wheat” to farmers – but got caught for the scam.

Russell reportedly became obsessed with the Bible. There must have been something special about him for by the time he was 28 years old a few dozen small congregations had developed around him.

The religious landscape of North America was shifting constantly. Mormonism had been created a while earlier, as had been Seventh-day Adventism. Russell decided to spread his teachings by publishing a magazine, which later developed

into the Watchtower.

He recruited followers to preach and distribute literature of the movement. With the proceeds, he built a printing plant and a headquarters in New York. A dormitory for the volunteers was also built, and named Bethel.

The first branch office of the Jehovah's Witnesses was established in London. Russell preached at least in Scotland, Ireland, Turkey and Russia; he even visited Helsinki, to speak at the Volunteer Fire Brigade Hall in the autumn of 1912.

Worldwide, the number of followers had exceeded 50,000.

Russell was particularly captivated by biblical prophecies, and he cleverly associated them with real-world events. The apocalypse, Russell calculated, would come in October 1914. Such a precise prophecy stirred the interest of people. What if Russell was right?

Yet again, however, God's kingdom did not come.

When Russell two years later passed away, one of his followers, **Joseph Rutherford**, began proclaiming that in 1914 a war had erupted in heaven and that Satan and his fallen angels had been cast out.

The last days had begun, and the Armageddon was nigh.

The Jehovah's Witnesses sect considers itself a representative of primitive Christianity. It proclaims that all governments have failed and will be abolished by God. As a result, the believers abstain from military service and voting. The sect only approved of civil service in 1996.

Its teachings remain full of numbers and dates. Belief in the battle between good and bad, Armageddon, where the armies of Jesus annihilate Satan, remains a fundamental tenet. Naturally, only Jehovah's Witnesses will survive the battle. They will live forever in paradise on earth. Others will be exterminated, for there is no hell.

The paradise is governed by an elite of 144,000 followers, the anointed, who live in heaven. Only the followers who claim to be members of this heavenly class are allowed to partake of the bread and wine at the annual commemoration of the death of Christ – invariably, there are a few of them in Finland. Others stand by.

As a child, Jussi K. was afraid that his parents would be tortured when Armageddon came. During the time of the end, he had been taught, the believers will be persecuted. But if one survived that, one would spend an eternity in paradise.

Jussi K. had always thought of himself as part of the group that would be rescued. "I often thought how exceptionally lucky I had been, having found the right cause," he says.

"My future lay in paradise."

AFTER THE WORLD did not cease to exist in 1914, the prophecy was revised. Next, the second coming of the Christ was to take place in 1918, and then in 1925. Later, the Watchtower Society began to refer to the year 1975.

As the year 1975 drew near, the number of baptisms multiplied. There were over two million Jehovah's Witnesses.

The imminent apocalypse was discussed in meetings and conventions. The expectations followed suit; it was now or never.

"I dropped out of school after junior high school, because we were waiting for Armageddon," tells an over 50-year-old woman, who grew up in a Jehovah's Witness family. Education, she was told, was needless. Instead, she started working at the age of 16. Her Witness peers became "pioneers": they set out to the field, went door-to-door preaching and distributing literature.

When the year 1975 ended but the world did not, the Governing Body of the Jehovah's Witnesses cast the blame on the believers: Armageddon did not come, because they had drawn their own conclusions about it.

"What was taught about the apocalypse has changed drastically over the years. New interpretations have emerged, there has been 'new light'," the woman says.

She, like many of the nine ex-Witnesses interviewed for this story, insists on anonymity. The relatives of many remain members of the community. A few interviewees remain officially Jehovah's Witnesses, although they no longer participate in the meetings.

The interviews highlight how difficult it is to detach oneself from the community. Some of the interviewees did not disassociate but were disfellowshipped. The fate of the disfellowshipped is the same as the disassociated: all communications with them will be ceased.

“You are not allowed to have any contact with the disassociated and disfellowshipped. That is a key tenet in the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. It is gone over and over in meetings and in Watchtowers,” says **Eeva-Liisa Pirttinen**.

Pirttinen is a 53-year-old ex-Witness. She was baptised at the age of 13 in 1974, one year before the anticipated Armageddon.

“It was a day of joy. A ridiculous number of new Witnesses were baptised at the time. The end was to be right around the corner.”

“We were the people of God, and we had the winning ticket. I absolutely believed that this was the only true religion.”

Pirttinen reveals that she was a fanatic Witness until she underwent a difficult pregnancy. In accordance with the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, she refused a blood transfusion although both she and her baby were in mortal danger.

The premature baby weighed less than one kilo.

“I understood then that there can be no God who would demand such a sacrifice. My child had to suffer due to my religion.”

Pirttinen remained a member of Jehovah's Witnesses until the death of her mother. After that, she stopped participating in the meetings and announced her disassociation to the magistrate's office. Her husband was relieved, having been ready to disassociate from the movement earlier.

Following her disassociation, Pirttinen has donated blood and voted. “Today, I find it difficult to understand my life as a Jehovah's Witness,” she says. “My life was not unhappy, only very strange. I spent most of it visiting the Kingdom Hall three times a week. I forced myself to read Watchtowers. The stories now seem childish.”

IT WAS cold and cloudy on 22 June 1996. It was Midsummer Sunday, and Finland had retreated to the peace of the countryside. The summer convention of Jehovah's Witnesses was held in the silent Helsinki.

Jussi K. had changed into a pale suit and tie, put on his better shoes. His entire childhood culminated in this day. His childhood had been that of a Witness. No Christmas carols at school, no Christmas or Easter crafts – except at times, although that was a sin, for he had wanted to belong.

His first childhood memories are associated with him going door-to-door with his parents. He gave his first speech at the age of nine: read the foreword and afterword written by his father and roughly two dozen verses from the Book of Revelations. The speech lasted five minutes.

He was soon allowed to write the speeches on his own. At the age of ten, he gave a small speech every few months, as did other members of the congregation. When other boys ran off to play football and ice hockey, he distributed magazines. He is not bitter, however; for him, it was a good childhood. He was allowed to adjust the microphone and to manage the sound system during meetings at the Kingdom Hall.

For his last three years of compulsory school, he decided he no longer cared what other thought of him. He did his homework, got excellent grades and tried to have as little to do with his classmates as possible.

Now, he sat among his own, on the front row of the Helsinki Ice Hall, in front of the stage. The roughly 70 believers to be baptised were all dressed up. The majority of them were young, 13—15 years old.

He was nervous.

They were asked: On the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have you repented your sins and dedicated yourself to Jehovah to do his will?

“Yes,” answered Jussi K. in chorus with the others.

Do you understand that your dedication and baptism identify you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with God's spirit-directed organisation?

Yes.

Then they were transported by bus to Tikkurila, Vantaa, where the Finnish headquarters, the branch office, of Jehovah's Witnesses is located. The Witnesses call it *Betel*, after the global headquarters in New York.

Roughly 180 Witnesses work, without wage, and live in Vantaa. Betel is where all the Watchtower and Awake! magazines are translated from English to Finnish.

On the top floor, there is a pool. That is where Jussi K. was shown. He took off his pale suit and put on swimming trunks. One of the brothers standing in the pool pressed his head under water.

“When I rose from the pool, I did not feel at all blissful. I did not quite realise what the dedication meant, and I was too embarrassed to ask,” he says.

After the baptism, he put on his pale suit, tie and his better shoes. He was driven back to the Helsinki Ice Hall. Photographs were taken, people smiled. Everything was well.

EARLY last November, Jussi K. joined *veljesseura.org*, an Internet discussion forum for ex-Witnesses. He felt anxious, but it was nothing compared to what he did next: he joined a private discussion group for ex-Witnesses on Facebook, which consisted of over 170 people of all ages from all parts of Finland.

Jussi K. was welcomed with open arms.

It was exciting to see who was in the group. Jussi K. immediately recognised a couple of names. He introduced himself to other members of the group, admitting that he had yet to talk about his disassociation plan with anyone, not even with his spouse. He did not want to put his wife into a difficult situation: if he told her, she would have to contact an elder of the congregation.

Outside the Jehovah's Witnesses community, Jussi K. only knew his colleagues, but he only talked to them about work-related matters.

He had completed a joint high school and business and administration diploma after completing compulsory education. As a child, he had dreamt of becoming an archaeologist, architect or biologist, but it was best not to talk about such aspirations before the congregation. Jehovah's Witnesses discourage academic pursuits, because studies can be an introduction to the world.

The ideal occupation is one that provides just enough to get by and does not consume too much time. As a result, several Jehovah's Witnesses are employed as delivery workers, janitors and cleaners. Free time is to be used to volunteer for the congregation: field service, building Kingdom Halls, organising events.

In addition, meetings for worship are to be attended twice a week.

The pioneers are especially revered. They are “in the field” at least 70 hours every month, equivalent to two weeks' work. The most revered are the “special pioneers”, who are in the field 120 hours a month.

The evangelists are every month required to submit an individual S-4 Field Service Report to the congregation. Thereon, the information is entered into their personal files. These S-21 forms are stored at the Kingdom Hall and must include information on each evangelist dating back a minimum of eight years.

If a member of the congregation fails to return their service report, they are labelled irregular. If the irregularity continues for

six months, they become “inactive”. It is frowned upon.

Diligence, on the other hand, is commended. This autumn, it had been announced that a sister at the congregation of Jussi K. had begun field work after completing her compulsory education. Everyone had clapped. Jussi K. did not want to clap. He had been a pioneer for three years after high school. He had earnestly tried to study the teachings. He had read the Bible three or four times, and devoured literature produced by the Watchtower Society.

Yet, he felt that many of the explanations offered by Jehovah's Witnesses were extremely complicated, even irrational. He had felt embarrassed reiterating them in the living room of a stranger, a Watchtower in his hand.

The uncertainty, he observed, had to be concealed. Unanswered questions had to be forgotten.

THE LOVING arrangement is what Jehovah's Witnesses call the shunning of the disassociated and disfellowshipped. In reality, it is a form of blackmail, according to **Aila Ruoho**, who studied collective religious violence in her Master's Thesis in practical theology in 2010.

Shunning is a way to compel as many ex-Witnesses as possible to return to the congregation. “Jehovah's Witnesses may [...] be Witnesses in the third generation. Their whole family may be Jehovah's Witnesses – in the worst case, so is the family of their partner – and therefore the abandonment is more absolute,” writes Ruoho.

Spokespersons at the Finland branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses have repeatedly denied the shunning allegations. **Veikko Leinonen**, a spokesperson and a member of the branch committee, has invariably responded to such inquiries by insisting that the disassociated and disfellowshipped are not shunned.

The same is written on the website of Jehovah's Witnesses, *jw.org*:

“Those who were baptised as Jehovah's Witnesses but no longer preach to others, perhaps even drifting away from association with fellow believers, are *not* shunned.”

Leinonen confirmed the position of the organisation also for this story. On the other hand, he also stated: “If someone disassociated deliberately or lives in violation of the principles of the Bible, of course we shun them – and especially those who make this into an issue and launch an outright battle against us. Of course we shun them.”

Already in the early 1990s, a task force appointed by the Finnish Association for Mental Health compiled ethical principles for religious communities, prescribing that it must be possible to disassociate from a religious community without being “subjected to any kind of pressure or discrimination”.

Leinonen represented Jehovah's Witnesses in the task force.

The public statements made by the Jehovah's Witnesses leadership flagrantly contradict the customs of the congregations and the advice provided in the publications.

Watchtower said in April 2012: “Good [...] can come when a family loyally upholds Jehovah's decree not to associate with disfellowshipped relatives. [...] Think of that if you are ever tempted to violate God's command not to associate with your disfellowshipped relatives.”

As Jussi K. was weighing up his disassociation decision, Watchtower said: “What your beloved family member needs to see is your resolute stance to put Jehovah above everything else – including the family bond. Do not look for excuses to associate with a disfellowshipped family member, for example, through e-mail.”

JUSSI K. mulled over his disassociation from Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the winter. At times, he began to suspect that the Witnesses were right after all. He would then face damnation when Armageddon came.

Before the autumn, he had thought he would continue in the congregation despite no longer believing in its teachings. Surely, he could pretend that much. He then understood that he did not want to live a such a life and tried to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

First: what would his wife say? How would they live, when he was no longer a Witness? Under the rules of the society, the

partner is not required to shun the disassociated. They could continue to live together, but they would not be allowed to discuss religion. He would have to leave the room, when his wife studied the Bible with their children.

Second: what would his relatives do? Would his parents, brothers and the relatives of his wife cease communications with him? How would he explain the situation to his children?

He did not want to lose his family. He only wanted to abandon the religion.

He participated in the meetings as usual, twice a week. He even held speeches, kept repeating the old phrases. He wore a suit jacket, a tie and suit trousers for the meetings. The dress code of Jehovah's Witnesses is determined in the United States: women must wear a modest skirt or dress and men suit trousers, tie and suit jacket.

There was a convention in Hämeenlinna one weekend in October. In the closing speech, the overseer underscored that Jehovah's Witnesses have to adhere to the rules and shun the disfellowshipped.

One evening, Jussi K. was watching the television show *Arman and the Last Crusade*. The protagonist talked about leaving your comfort zone. It was a topic Jussi K. had heard in training events organised by his employer: leaving your comfort zone reportedly enabled you to experience something special.

Jussi K. was, certainly, leaving his comfort zone.

He tried to forget the dark thoughts by listening to music on Spotify: Rammstein, Linkin Park, Metallica, Chisu, Kotiteollisuus, Limp Bizkit, Kent, Jenni Vartiainen, Laura Närhi.

Let me go, sang Chisu. I don't belong here.

JONI Valkila, the executive director at the support group for victims of religion (UUT), is a former Jehovah's Witness. Both his parents and grandparents were devout Witnesses. When he was disfellowshipped from the community at the age of 22, he was the first in his family to be shut out from the community.

Valkila was disfellowshipped due to dating a worldly girl.

Although he had been reprimanded, he refused to end the relationship. Jehovah's Witnesses call all non-Witnesses worldly.

Valkila was summoned before the judicial committee.

Relatively little is known of the judicial committees in the outside world. The committees are the courts of justice of Jehovah's Witnesses congregations. The committee convenes whenever a member of the congregation is suspected of a disfellowshipping offence.

Such sins include extramarital sex, homosexual relations, criticism of the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, participation in the worship services of other religions, abortion, theft, fraud, slander, smoking, excessive alcohol use, drug use, gambling, *porneia*, lewdness, child sexual abuse, and so forth.

Porneia, according to the exhaustive list, "involves the use of genital organs in either a natural or perverted way with lewd intent. [...] It includes anal and oral sex, and the manipulation of the genitals of an individual to whom one is not married."

The judicial committee typically consists of three elder brothers; sister cannot be appointed as elders nor, consequently, as members of the judicial committee. Because Jehovah's Witnesses does not use trained ministers, the elders are no more knowledgeable than the people whose sins they consider.

Instead, the elders consult a special manual. Only the elders are allowed to read it. The cover of the 140-page bound book says: Shepherd the Flock of God. The manual contains details instructions for judicial committees, advising for example how to detect sincere repentance.

The committees tend to ask very specific questions about the actions of the accused, even regarding their sex life. If the wrongdoer is disfellowshipped, a detailed written report of the case must be sent to the branch office in Vantaa.

The congregations were drawn up new instructions regarding child sexual abuse in 2012. The instructions stipulate that two elders must ring the legal department of the branch office without delay upon hearing abuse allegations. They will be provided with “legal advise”. They are not, however, urged to contact the authorities.

The privacy protection allowed to the accused before a judicial committee is weak. Documents pertaining to the case can be stored for years in, for example, the home of an elder, while all the elders may have access to the filing cabinet.

Valkila was summoned before the judicial committee in the summer of 1997. He was asked by the elders of the congregation to confess to having sex with his girlfriend. He did not deny the allegations, but dared not reveal that he no longer believed in the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses. He was disfellowshipped and consequently shunned by his family.

Over the subsequent 17 years, Valkila has met his five siblings and father only twice, once at the funeral of his mother and once at another funeral. No one from his family attended his wedding, not even his parents. Before the death of his mother nine years ago, he was only allowed to visit her once in the hospital.

Today, Valkila is 39 years old and knows dozens of people subjected to systematic shunning. In Finland, he estimates, there must be hundreds of such ex-Witnesses.

Jehovah's Witnesses also disfellowship and shun minors, he says. Under 18-year-old apostates can continue to live at home but must leave the room when other Witnesses are visiting. Unless they repent and request reinstatement, the punishment is for life.

“There are no indications that the Jehovah's Witnesses community are ready to relax the shunning punishments,” Valkila says.

He describes how isolated a life devout Jehovah's Witnesses live. Children born to a Witness family become alienated from their peers, because they are not allowed to make worldly friends, hold birthday parties and discouraged to pursue hobbies. They may be taught that Satan sends children to sports clubs to lure them away from the truth.

Because premarital sex is forbidden, Jehovah's Witnesses marry at a young age, typically under the age of 20.

“Disfellowshipping may result in serious emotional problems, as you lose your identity, world view and loved-ones,” says Valkila. “Shunning hurts you deeply.”

“Many are left with nothing. Not all ex-Witnesses are able to adapt to life outside the community. Detachment is tough and can result in alienation and mental health problems.”

In addition, it may be difficult to find help. “Many complain that therapists fail to understand what it is like to leave the community. I know several ex-Witnesses who have committed suicide. Last year, there were two of them.”

Shunning is monitored. It is prohibited to greet a disfellowshipped ex-Witness. If one gets caught associating with a disfellowshipped, they will be reprimanded by the elders. If one continues to associate with a disfellowshipped non-relative, they will be summoned before the committee.

There are always exceptions, however. Some stay in touch with disfellowshipped family members secretly.

Valkila draws comparison to Conservative Laestadianism and to Pentecostalism. “For them, the experience of detachment from the community may be similar, although they do not have such systematic and comprehensive shunning practices as Jehovah's Witnesses.”

ON A SUNDAY evening in late 2003, **Tom-Kristian Heinäaho** received a text message: Could you come to the Kingdom Hall on Monday evening?

The message was from the judicial committee.

Heinäaho was a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation of Töölö, Helsinki. Although he was only 33 years old, he had been a member of the body of elders for seven years. He liked to perform and was a popular speaker. He had spoken before a large convention, even at the Helsinki Ice Hall.

On occasions, Heinäaho had been summoned to consider the sins of other members of the congregation – typically, adultery or premarital sex. He still remembers a case, in which a husband suspected his young wife of infidelity. The members of the judicial committee interrogated the woman, and she was then publicly reprimanded before the congregation.

The sinners were at times exposed by their fellow members of the congregation, but typically they brought forward their sins independently. “It is an indication of the mind control exercised by Jehovah’s Witnesses,” Heinäaho views.

After receiving the text message, Heinäaho knew that this time he would be the accused: he would be accused of relations.

The judicial committee convened in the library of the Kingdom Hall, located across the street from the Töölö Sports Centre. The Kingdom Hall had been built in a former cinema and its library was a window-less back-room with an entrance from the courtyard.

A long table stood at the centre of the room. Heinäaho sat on one side of it, facing the members of the judicial committee. All three of them were his friends from the congregation: one worked as a hospital assistant and at R-Kioski, one as a car dealer, and one at Bethel.

Suspicions about his sexual orientation had arisen after he had won third place in a poem competition, and a member of the congregation had looked for, and found, his poems online. The men brandished a wad of papers. Had he written the poems? Did he have relations with other men? What was the name of his boyfriend? Were any other members of the congregation gay?

Heinäaho had been a Witness since his childhood. When he as a teenager realised that he preferred men, he had tried to suppress the sensations and dared not to discuss it. “Our family was held in high regard in the congregation, and homosexuality was forbidden,” he says.

He had been swept over by guilt, although he recognised that he had not chosen his orientation. After he had grown up, he concealed his relations with men and continued in the congregation. Although his faith in the teachings of Jehovah’s Witnesses had gradually begun to waver, he dared not to resign, because his entire family was part of the community.

The hearing of the judicial committee did not last very long, less than half an hour.

“But it was disgusting and outrageous,” says Heinäaho. “I was told that I am a cancer that had to be removed from the congregation.”

Heinäaho was told that he would be disfellowshipped, even if he repented. The disfellowshipping was announced at the Kingdom Hall, and his friends and relatives began to shun him. He was no longer greeted by members of the congregation he knew.

“It was a hard blow, because I had no life outside the meetings.”

Heinäaho had no education and had worked here and there to reserve as much time as possible for field service. Most recently, he had helped patients at the cancer ward of a hospital.

Three years after his disfellowshipping, his little brother committed suicide. Heinäaho blames the community for it. The brother had been dating a worldly girl, tried to leave the community behind and become depressed.

“If you accuse Witnesses of shunning, they say that you were the one who left us. They believe my brother became depressed because he left them.”

IN FEBRUARY 2014, it had been five months since Jussi K. made up his mind in September. He balanced the books and calculated how much of his life he had given to Jehovah’s Witnesses: thousands and thousands of hours in meetings, conventions, out in the field.

The summer was coming. Soon he would tell.

The news would upset everyone in the congregation. He had been an exemplary Witness. At a younger age, he had even considered seeking a position in Bethel. It is thought that only the most devout brothers and sisters get to Bethel. It is, in a way, a representation of paradise on Earth: a garden, unlocked doors, communal dining, friendly faces – but no children. Jussi K. had even filled up the application, but in the end did not send it.

He had visited the headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States. The contents of the books and magazines is produced, and hence stems their sparkling American imagery. Later, the English texts are translated into over 500 languages.

IN NEW YORK, also the so-called Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses is based: seven elderly men take decisions that concern nearly eight million Witnesses. For the believers, they represent God. The Governing Body may on occasions revise its decisions; it is said that there has been "new light".

Jussi K. had become annoyed with numerous aspects of the operations of Jehovah's Witnesses. An investigation into the finances of the Watchtower Society carried out by the American media found that it was among the 40 wealthiest corporations in New York.

In Finland, the power is wielded by 15—20 male members of the religious community. They elect among themselves a governing committee.

The roughly 18,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Finland are associate members of the community and have no influence in its decision-making. They are members of the roughly 300 local Jehovah's Witnesses congregations in Finland, each of which is overseen by a body of elders.

The community has little taxable income: roughly 20,000 euros in 2011 and roughly 7,500 euros in 2012. Yet, that hardly implies that the community has no assets.

The operations of Jehovah's Witnesses are financed by donations. The Kingdom Halls all feature a box for cash donations, and in conventions donations can be made with a cash card. Instructions how to donate or bequeath flats, securities, and valuables and how the community can be designated as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy are available on the Finnish website of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Spokesperson Leinonen declined to comment on the value of the community's assets for this story. Even conservative estimates, however, suggest that Jehovah's Witnesses own real estate worth tens of million of euros in Finland. When in the summer of 2008, a new Kingdom Hall was constructed in Turku, its construction costs of nearly 400,000 euros were covered by donations.

IN THE ONLINE support group, Jussi K. engaged in discussions with former Jehovah's Witnesses. The members of the group were the first people he talked about his decision to disassociate from the community. "I cannot understand how some people had the courage to make this decision before the Internet age," he wrote.

Many shared their experiences of shunning on the website. They are not invited to the funerals of relatives. They no longer know the e-mail addresses or phone numbers of their parents or siblings.

The members also regularly discussed the longing and encouraged each other, as is customary on the Internet. On occasions, the discussion revolved around childhood memories, demons and guilt. Several of the ex-Witnesses feel that nothing was enough for the community; there was always someone who had done more field service.

Jussi K. was told it would be difficult to make new friends.

He noticed how also others had often detested field work. Women recounted with disgust how they had to stand in swimsuits under the critical eyes of old men during baptism. Many confessed that they had not felt at all special after the baptism.

Links to articles about Jehovah's Witnesses were posted on the website. Jussi K. learnt that in Sweden it was debated whether or not Jehovah's Witnesses isolate their children and raise them in constant fear of the apocalypse.

Every once in a while, someone from somewhere in Finland would join the support group.

JUSSI K. TOLD everything to his wife one early spring evening in 2014. It was Sunday, and they had spent the afternoon at the Kingdom Hall. In the middle of clean family cars in the car park of the Kingdom Hall, Jussi K. had thought that this may be the last time. Later, they had put the children to bed as usual.

Then Jussi said it: He no longer believes in the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. He will disassociate from the community.

His wife was shocked. Jussi K. refuses to reveal what she said, as promised her that he would not discuss their relationship in this story.

Outside, behind the curtains, it was dark. Jussi K. wanted to cry but could not. The following day, he told his parents, his brother and the co-ordinator of his congregation that he will disassociate from Jehovah's Witnesses.

Think it over, the co-ordinator urged.

Jussi K. tried to explain his decision to his children. He knew, however, how he would be seen by everyone around him: a new victim of Satan. Jussi K. received a couple of text messages and letters from members of the congregation, hoping he would not leave. The letters were sincere and beautiful.

Jussi K. felt that he was told things usually told about the dead. To these people, he was dead.

He did not go to the next meeting. He was left alone in the empty house. He wondered what his loved-ones thought, when they had to explain to the congregation why he was not there.

He had planned his letter of disassociation for months, but in the end wrote it quickly. The letter was short, one page in length. He printed it out and dropped it alongside his keys to the Kingdom Hall and the manual for elders to the mailbox of the co-ordinator of the congregation.

In the letter, he cited an issue of the Awake! magazine from a few years ago:

“No one should be forced to worship in a way that he finds unacceptable or be made to choose between his beliefs and his family.”

“I am no longer able to believe in the teachings of the organisation,” he wrote.

The following day, his disassociation was announced at the congregation, the meetings of which he had frequented for 28 years.

THE HANDSHAKE is firm. A personable young man sits down across the table. A rucksack, quilted jacket, jeans, wool jumper, short brown hair. Jussi K. is pleasant, polite and solemn. He speaks in a clear and calm manner, looking in the eyes. He seems... ordinary.

After his disassociation was announced at the Kingdom Hall, no one from his congregation or of his former Witness friends have contacted him. “They shun me, because that is what they have been taught to do. That is the only right way for them, and they believe they are doing the right thing. They cannot see this the same way I do,” Jussi K. says.

He has dreamt that he is in a meeting at the Kingdom Hall, although everyone knows about his disassociation. In the dream, he often wonders what he is doing there.

Instead of meetings and door-to-door visits, he now has time. He is thinking about starting studying with the open university, history perhaps.

He feels light.

However, he thinks about and misses his parents every day. They always acted with his best interests in mind. He has wondered if there is anything that could have shocked his parents more than his disassociation from Jehovah's Witnesses. What if he had told them he had committed adultery? Or any other crime. He would have been disfellowshipped, but he

could have repented and would have been welcomed back to the community.

Is there anything that would have been worse? What if he had been found dead? “Even that would not have been as painful for my parents,” Jussi K. says. “If I was dead, they could start waiting for the ascension and reunion.”

As it is, there is no hope of that.

The story is based on interviews of former Jehovah's Witnesses. The author was also allowed to monitor the discussions on an online support group for former Jehovah's Witnesses for several months. The group consists of nearly 200 people from various parts of Finland.

Anu Nousiainen – HS

Aleksi Teivainen – HT

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