

Biography.

On the 12-th of July of the year 1884 a baby boy was born. His parents were Peters and Katrina, née Amolin, Steiks. Place of birth: the farm "Oshi", in the parish Umurga, county of Valmiera, state of Vidzeme. The word "Oshi" in the baby's mother language, the Latvian, means ash trees. The farm was given that name because there grew about 3 dozen ash trees, unusually tall. These trees could be seen above all other trees for miles around. These trees grew only on one small area in the pig's pasture, and nowhere else in the whole state. How these trees got there and in this particular place of dense woods before farming was started, would have to be answered by someone of three generations back. This particular variety of ash trees grows very slowly; the annual rings could

be seen only under high magnification. Consequently, the wood was very hard; almost as hard as the Caucasian Kizil.

The name of the parish "Umurga" has no meaning in the present Latvian language. In the mother language of the Latvian language, the Sanscrit in India, it means little stream or creek.

Latvia at the time of my birth was part of czarist Russia. It consisted of three provinces which were known as gubernias. All Russia was divided in gubernias, governorships. The province Vidzeme, (=Midland) officially by the Russians was called Liflandskaya gubernia. The Germans called it Liefland.

It might be of interest here to know what the Latvian called themselves in their own language, the Latvian

language, the oldest spoken language in Europe. It should be understood that not all inhabitants are Latvians. Geographically speaking there were the original natives. They called themselves Latvyashi, in plural, or Latvyatis in singular. These words have no translatable meaning in Latvian language. They have a meaning in the language of "Livi" (Levee), also old inhabitants of the territory, and Latvyatis in their language means a man who cuts down trees and bushes to make cultivatable fields. The Livi are almost extinct; perhaps, less than 100 families are left.

I was baptized in the local Lutheran church when I was about 2 months. It was the custom to baptize babies early. I was given the name Karlis Teodors. I had a godfather and godmother. They were

our neighbors. according to the Lutheran church these godparents obligated themselves to take care of the child if it lost its parents. It was considered a great honor to be asked to be godparents.

Why is my name now Karl Teodor Steik, without the s at the end of each word!

Because alexander the 3-rd started the so called „Panславism“, and he intended to transform all inhabitants of Russia into Russians. Since the „s“ at ~~the~~ the end of most of Latvian names was characteristically Latvian nationalistic, it was forbidden and is absent in all my documents.

Ethnologically (race) speaking other inhabitants of Latvia were: Russians, Germans, Estonians, Lithuanians, Swedes, Norwegians, Poles and Jews. At the height of population Latvia had about 3 millions; $\frac{2}{3}$ of them Latvians, ethnologically speaking.

Before continuing my own biography, I should say something about my father. His genealogy is not very definite. A grandfather of his is supposed to have been a Danish nobleman who was mixed up in some sort of a revolution on the losing side. For safety he escaped to Latvia which at the time was colony of Sweden and was known as the bread basket of Sweden. The time between him and my grandfather, who still retained his nobility rank, is obscure. The mothers thru all generations were Latvians. Thru gambling my grandfather lost everything, so my father inherited nothing.

As soon as he was able and old enough he started to earn his living, at first as a shepherd, later as a farm hand working for a German landowner. There was a time when practically all land in the province of Vidzeme was owned by the invaders, the German knights.

Gambling may be generally

considered a sin, but for my father and others, it was a blessing. The landowners were notorious gamblers and in gambling, somebody had to lose. The loser in order to get cash to pay his debts usually sold some land.

Father was a thrifty man and saved as much as possible of his pay. And with the savings bought a few acres of land. Most of it was forest, with some meadow land. Then part of the time he worked on his own land and rest for the landowners, thus saving some morning and evening board.

The new virgin land was very fertile and crops grew profusely. Flax and barley were the money crops. Flax was sold to England to make Irish linen and barley to Denmark, England, and Germany for making beer. Some of the famous Belgian laces were made from Latvian linen. Money was coming in at a great rate and more and more land was purchased. When the land around father's first farm

was sold and wanted a larger farm, he sold the first farm and bought new land to make a new farm. As a guess, this one had about 250 acres; all woods, except the meadow along the river Brasla.

Again the virgin soil was very fertile and prices for the flax and barley were good. Here father built a large orchard. Trees, shrubs, and flowers were his hobby. More fruit was grown on the farm than could be used at home.

Everybody had an orchard and city markets were too far. So every summer a number of pigs were selected for home pork and these pigs were fed fruit - apples, pears, and berries. The pork from the pigs had an exceptional flavor, especially the smoked hams.

Father was an amateur Burbank. He was always doing some experimentation, grafting and cross-pollination. As a result, he developed a few new species of

winter rye, oats, and barley which were more suitable for local conditions. I remember when he brought home from the woods a good sized wild apple tree and grafted on it every variety of apples that he had in his orchard and got some from neighbors. That tree when in bloom was something to admire. Blossoms of a variety of colors and fruit of various sizes and colors ripening at different intervals.

In a corner of the orchard near the house father had made a sofa of earth and covered with dense grass. Thick growth of lilacs furnished privacy and shade. We all liked the place. The house was a 2-storied one. Not far from it, near the orchard, was the grainery and behind it a fish pond that had fish in it. The fish were from the river. Two varieties grew well in the standing water of the pond.

Every time I think of my mother, tears come in my eyes.

She was grand and we loved her. She never had to ask us twice to do something. Farm houses did not have running water and bath tubs. Every farm had a bath house; a separate little house with 3 rooms. One room was the living room for an old man whose sole duty was to get the bath house ready for Saturdays, and that meant to heat up enough water for washing and heat up a pile of rocks in the corner of the bath room. The purpose of the hot rocks was to make steam when water was thrown on them. Along one wall of this room, were sort of platforms, two of them, one above the other. On these platforms, everyone who wanted to get steamed thru fanned himself with bunches of birch branches. The older men usually took the upper, the hotter platform. The third room of the bath house was the dressing room. The Latvian name for the bathhouse is "pirts," equal to the Finnish,

"sauna." Usually we were quite tired after the bath house procedures. I remember father carrying me to the house in a bucket and telling me about the man in the moon.

To keep us clean in the summer days mother used to put us in a barrel of warm water, scented with all kinds of good smelling flowers. We really were glad to have these barrel baths. When the weather was warm we had the barrel baths in the orchard, otherwise in the kitchen. How I wished that my mother had lived longer than she did.

I do not know just what caused mother's death. I recall that her breath smelled like apples. Of course, at that time, I did not know anything about acetone. After mother's death it was time for me to start to go to school. I never did go to the neighboring precinct (?) school or the parochial school, about 3 miles distant.

Brother Pete went to both of them. when going to the parochial school, Pete came home Saturday afternoon and back on Monday morning. Father usually took care of transportation. I recall very vividly something that happened one winter afternoon. Father took a short cut over the meadows. The sledge was pulled by a partly broken in colt. The man had hitched her too short: when running her legs were hitting the front of the sledge and because of that started to run wild and father lost control. From the house we watched and wondered what will happen. Father just directed the young horse directly into a hay stack. That stopped the run and gave a man to come up with a well trained horse.

I was about seven years old when mother died. She was my first teacher.

sitting on her lap or kneeling besides her
I learned to read and write Latin;
also the 10 commandments and stories
about Christ.

Another incident at home I remember
very vividly. I always liked to ride horseback.
In summer when the work horses were taken for the
night to their fenced in pasture, I usually
rode along. The work horses had good sized bodies
and my short legs stuck out almost horizontally.
(No saddle). When they trotted I was frequently
shaken off. One day father asked me to go
and bring a certain horse from the field.
Like a flash I went. Then father happened
to remember that this particular horse would
not go over a bridge, and there was a
bridge over a drainage ditch on the way. When
I ~~got the~~ father remembered that he tried to
call me back, but I was beyond hearing distance.

When I appeared in the yard riding the horse that balked to cross a bridge, my father could not believe his eyes. Naturally, he wanted to know how I did get the horse over the bridge. I told him that I got the horse running full gallop, he could not stop at the bridge and by inertia went over. Father thought that it was a smart trick and as reward for my strategy he brought me a small keg of broiled little eels put up in tomato sauce. He knew that I enjoyed them.

At this age, of course I did not know anything about Macedonia, King Phillip and his balking horse who had thrown every man who ever tried to ride him. So he put up a proposition to his sons that the one who succeeded to ride that horse would succeed him on the throne. The youngest of the

sons, Alexander, apparently had studied Julius Caesar's tactics, namely, study your enemy if you want to conquer him. He did study the horse and decided that the horse was afraid of his own shadow. Rode it on a cloudy day and again against the sun. Both times successfully. He became the King Alexander of Macedonia. But what has Phillip's horse to do with the ground hog. Well, the ground hog, too, is afraid of his own shadow.

As soon as able, every child on the farm had some chores to do. I was the smallest of all the children, therefore, one of my duties was to collect the eggs. We did not have a regular chicken house. The hens laid their eggs wherever each one liked. From morning till noon I watched them to find out where their nests were located. One little hen, looking like a

partridge, always sneaked away unnoticed by me. After some days she appeared only some days for a little while, to feed. She was sitting on her eggs and one day proudly appeared with a bunch of pretty fluffy chicks. Only many days afterwards I discovered her nest in a hazel nut bush, across the road. I never suspected that she could sneak away that far without being noticed some day. But she did. She, certainly, was not a dumb chick.

Chores did not take all day. In summer we went swimming in the river Brasla that was flowing thru the meadows. Several "varieties" of fish, including bass, were there. Pete was the best fisherman by any method: angling, catching by hand in tunnels under rocks, in holes in the bank and pike with a loop. Except the hooks, all fishing equipment was home made. The fish pike is a still hunter: motionless he

picks an unconspicuous spot in the water plants or under the bank. ^{to pole} The loop, usually made of horse hair and attached to a pole. With utmost quietness the loop was slipped over the pike's head beyond the first fin, then jerked and the loop closed on the fish. The fin did not permit it to slip off. A primitive way, but very effective when executed by a skilful man.

In those days people did not believe that everything should be taught by an instructor. One day I was standing on the bank and an older boy pulled me into a rather deep for me pool and, behold, I started to swim. A job that the children had to perform every summer until late in the fall, was to collect blossoms, leaves, stems and certain tubers. What for? Mother used to dry them and use the various, 'tees' for various sickness. And they, really worked. I believe in folk's medicine

along the edges of the meadows and fields we had a lot of uncultivated, wild strawberries. They just grew and when the berries were ripe, they were just super delicious. No variety in all the nursery catalogs in the country could be as perfect. And in the bushes and woods we had black berries, blue berries and harel nuts in the fall.

We did not have much by the way of toys. I only remember a set representing farm animals, made of wood. But we did have a home made little cart that we used as a truck and for pulling each other around. Usually towards evening, we, i.e. boys and girls had the job of supervising the feeding of calves. One of us would stand at each bucket of feed and see that the faster eating larger calves would not infringe on the feed of the smaller ones. This job required close attention and

study of each individual calf's personality. On the strip of land between fields the grass grew luxuriously. The strips were too narrow for cutting the grass, so the boys led the colts to feed on these strips. This feed was considered a treat. We kept the colts far enough apart, so there were no boundary territorial disputes.

We did not go away any distances for our picnics. Our ~~or~~ outdoor cooking was usually was on the river bank. First, somebody caught some fish, and mushrooms. Potatoes, salt & butter came from the house. The fish and mushrooms were broiled; the potatoes were baked in the ashes. Of course, things started just fine. We had no difficulty about poisonous mushrooms. Only one variety was really poisonous. It was well marked: white with bright red spots all over, spread like spots on a Dalmatian dog. These poisonous mushrooms were used as insecticides, particularly for flies. A parboiled mushroom, with some of the

water from parboiling was put on a plate. Little sugar was sprinkled over; then put were there were a lot of flies, like in the barn yard. In a short time the whole plate would be covered solid with dead flies.

After brushing them off, the plate was exposed for new victims. I think it might be worth to determine the toxic ingredient in these mushrooms. Then either cultivate these mushrooms, make extracts or synthesise the toxic compound and sell it. It is not toxic to chickens, and other animals, of course, would not eat flies. So, these mushroom would not contribute towards "Silent Spring". Birds do not eat such flies either.

Mushrooms were plentiful. To gather them was the business of the children.

After a rain, particularly, they were in great abundance everywhere. What were not eaten within a few days were preserved

for winter. Two methods were in use. The mushrooms were strung up on strings in put to dry in the sun, or, they were parboiled in ~~some~~ somewhat salted water, put in a cheese-cloth bag on a flat stone and weighted down to squeeze all the water. Mushrooms usually were eaten for breakfast with bacon, fried to a desired flexibility. I still can remember how good they were when fried in bacon fat. There was a variety of mushroom, called coxscombs because of their curly configuration and orange-red color. These and the "boroviks", ~~a~~ Russian name, were especially delicious.

And we played a game resembling golf. It was competitive in actual performance. A wooden ball, about 5-6 inches in diameter, was hit with a wooden club to drive it to a designated distance from the starting point, in both directions. Which ever side got there

~~First~~, was the winner. It was something like hockey. It was played on the road as much as possible. We did not have any elaborate clubs; just one club of no particular design or shape.

There were some other games, all very simple, with home made equipment. A chore in which boys and girls participated was to collect blossoms of wild flowers. Of some wild plants we collected also leaves, stems and tubers. What for? To make home medicines. There was some sort of extract from some particular dried flowers or roots for almost any kind of sickness: colds, coughs, swellings, stomach aches, etc. And these concoctions, really, did the job. Mother was the usual "medicine man." The effects of these various concoctions and their usefulness were found by the trial and error method. It was many many years before bacteriologists knew anything

about the effect of alkalinity and acidity on bacteria. But, whenever somebody in the house was sick with diphtheria or scarlet fever, in the sick room were hanging from the ceiling towels moistened with vinegar. The vapors of acetic acid killed the germs. Of course, the M.D.s condemned the method as witchcraft. Now they know better.

Latvia being a part of Russia had as teaching language & in gymnasiums the Russian language. Graduation from gymnasium was prerequisite for entering university or any higher technical schools, called institutes; like institute of civil, mechanical, rail road engineering. Home on the farm I never heard a word of Russian. Only once a year saw a Russian. He was a peddler for all kinds of ceramics - pots, plates, cups, etc. as payment he received discarded linen towels, sheets, rags, etc. These linens were used for making

the finest writing paper. For the children this ceramic man had a "musical instrument" in the form of a duck. For obtaining the various tones of the scale, the duck had holes on its sides. The wind was supplied by blowing thru a hole in the ducks tail. The sounds were like those of a skarino. The duck was about 6 inches long.

Before I could enter a gymnasium it was necessary to learn the Russian language, and that meant going away from school in Russia proper