

The Carlsons: At Home in Estonia



U.S. Consul Harry E. Carlson (Eesti Filmiarhiiv)

U.S. Consul Harry E. Carlson and his wife Laura Reynert Carlson were two early fans of Estonia. While the normal tour of duty for a U.S. Consul was just two years, the Carlsons spent almost eleven years in Tallinn from 1926 to 1937. They liked life in Estonia so much that they kept summer homes in Haapsalu and Valgejõe where they spent their weekends and summers just like many Estonian couples. Making Estonia into a real family home, Harry and Laura's son Harry Edwin Reynert Carlson was born in Tallinn on October 21, 1927 – thereby setting a precedent which many U.S. diplomats have since followed. Harry Jr.'s sister Margaret Elisabeth Reynert Carlson was born here several years later on January 30, 1932.

The Carlson's made themselves at home in Estonia in many other ways. Harry was a well-known fisherman and went fishing every chance he got. On February 1, 1937, *Rahvaleht* described Harry as belonging to a "family of famous sports fishermen." Like many Americans, Harry also liked to drive – he would take his car and drive his family all across Estonia to fish or spend time in the country-side. According to *Postimees* (May 5, 1932), one of the Carlsons' favorite places was Rõuge in southern Estonia near the town of Võru. By the end of his extended tour in Estonia, Harry seemed to have developed a particular affinity for Estonian summers. During his farewell interview to *Uus Eesti* (January 21, 1937), Harry was quoted as saying: "Estonia is not so rich in nature and the climate here is not that pleasant either, but the short Estonian summer is very appealing." By the time the Carlsons left for their onward assignment in London on February 1, 1937, they seem to have adjusted quite well to life in Estonia.

Although the Carlsons left Estonia seventy years ago, their view of Estonia seems remarkably contemporary. Many Americans who have visited Tallinn would agree with the assessment Harry made to *Uus Eesti*: "The medieval look of Tallinn is particularly appealing to an American. *Old Europe* can be felt and seen here just as an American would envision it. Already during their school years, Americans get an idea of Europe as an ancient part of the world with numerous historical attractions. But as they arrive in Europe they might be surprised by the similarities that big cities in Europe and the U.S. have. For example, Helsinki looks like an American city, likewise Berlin. In Tallinn, we find a European city as we have imagined it. The charm and mood of ancient time can be felt here."

During his eleven years in Tallinn, Harry also had a chance to observe the remarkable changes taking place in Estonian society – in much the same way that any frequent traveler to Estonia over the last sixteen years will have seen. As Harry described it to *Uus Eesti* in 1937, "I cannot but mention the significant progress Estonia has recently made. For instance the look of Tallinn – how it has changed! As well as the development of industry, economic growth is visible everywhere. An important and noticeable fact is that your government, headed by President Konstantin Pats, has notably increased people's standard of living. Estonian people also stand on a high spiritual level. This is particularly recognizable in theatres and at concerts. In Tallinn one can hear exceptionally good concerts performed both by Estonian and foreign artists." Harry was a frequent participant in Tallinn's cultural scene – so much so that he was transformed into a cartoon along with other well-noted people in Estonia published in the newspaper *Vaba Maa* (September 18, 1934).

Given the small size of the foreign diplomatic community resident in Tallinn, most of the Carlson's friends would have been Estonians. Back in the late 1920s, there were only three other American citizens living in Tallinn: the U.S. Consulate's rotating vice consul as well as the

Carlson's long-time acquaintances, YMCA Director Herbert S. Gott and his wife. Judging from the various newspaper articles written about them, Harry and Laura's friendly manner seems to have won over even the most reticent Estonians. When Baroness Irina Ungern-Sternberg came to write an article about Estonia for the prestigious *National Geographic* magazine (it finally appeared in the December 1939 issue), one of the first people she called on was Laura Carlson who helped arrange several meetings for her including one with Maria Laidoner.

Harry seems to have earned the respect of the Estonian community and kept company with Estonia's elite. In 1929, Carlson was one of the seven men who founded Estonia's first Rotary Club chapter. His six partners included: General Johan Laidoner (the hero of Estonia's War of Independence and both the former and future Commander of the Estonian Army), Ants Piip (a former Estonian Prime Minister and Estonian Ambassador to the U.S. who was also a former and future Estonian Foreign Minister), Juhan Kukk (a former Estonian Prime Minister, Finance Minister, Commerce Minister, and the Chairman of the Estonian Central Bank), Joakim Puhk (owner of one of Estonia's largest companies – J.Puhk & Sons), Claus Scheel (Executive Director of Estonia's largest private bank, "C.Scheel & Co"), and Herbert S. Gott (the YMCA Director).

Banned for fifty years as an "anti-Soviet" institution during the long decades of Soviet occupation, the list of Rotary Club presidents before and after the war reads like a who is who of Estonian society. Johan Laidoner won election as the first President of Estonia's new Rotary Club. The last pre-war president of the Rotary Club was Alfred Kalm, a leading businessman who built the building on Kentmanni Street which housed the U.S. Legation from 1930 to 1940 and then the U.S. Embassy from 1992 to the present day.

Apart from his activities in the Rotary Club, Harry was an active participant in the activities of the Estonian-English Cultural Association and attended their regular evening lectures. Harry also gave speeches on topics related to America, its culture and literature, but he also touched upon the question of social inequality. For example, *Päevaleht* (May 9, 1934) covered one of his speeches on "Education to the Unemployed" where he pointed out the benefits of working in the agricultural sector compared to the unstable industrial sector. Harry is quoted as saying: "Out in the countryside, everyone's daily bread is safe, while in industry every worker can end up on the streets."

Both Harry and his wife Laura were involved in community service – and their efforts were noticed and appreciated. Harry received the Order of the Red Cross 2nd Class for his humanitarian services to Estonia in 1932. Laura received the same award in 1934. Their friend Herbert S. Gott over at the YMCA won the Order of the Red Cross on two different occasions – first in 1927 and then again in 1937. Like many of Americans of their generation, both the

Carlsons and the Gotts were active members of their local communities and did their best to live up to the Rotary Club's motto of "service above self."

While almost everyone seems to have been impressed with Harry, he did not make the best impression on George F. Kennan, one of the many rotating vice consuls during his long tour in Tallinn. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoirs, Kennan describes Harry in 1928 as follows: "The consul was a timid, anxious man in middle age, who went through life with the worried air of one who earnestly tries to do things correctly but meets with constant frustration." Although the description is rather harsh, Kennan was by his own admission not on his best behavior at the time – and gave no allowances for the fact that Harry at the time was the father of an infant son. After being invited down to the Carlson's summer cottage in Haapsalu to spend the weekend, Kennan confessed: "There, for some reason, I reverted to the worst reactions of my neurotic student youth, behaved with atrocious lack of sociability, and merited the general ostracism I received thenceforth in the little diplomatic-consular community." While Kennan's Estonia was a pleasant place to study Russian in order to bring him one step closer to his ultimate career goal (serving in Soviet Russia), Estonia was exactly where Carlson wanted to be.

Born on March 17, 1886 in Morris, Illinois, Harry Edwin Carlson was educated at public schools in Joliet, Illinois and graduated from Joliet Township High School in 1904. He entered Lake Forest College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1908. After college, Carlson taught elementary school in Lafayette, Louisiana, and then high school in Lincoln, Illinois. In 1913, he moved to Washington D.C., where he taught at the National Cathedral School for Boys. He later became an exchange teacher at *Sachsenhauser Oberrealschuls* in Frankfurt-on-the-Main, Germany.

Harry's career in the State Department began on January 17, 1916, when he was appointed Vice Consul in Frankfurt-on-the-Main. On June 11, 1917, he was assigned to Christiania (present-day Oslo), Norway, as Vice Consul. On October 2, 1920, he was married to Laura Reynert at the Church of the Transfiguration in Flushing, Long Island by Reverend George Houghton.

After his marriage, Harry's diplomatic career took him to the Baltic States. In January 1924, the Department of State promoted Harry to the rank of Consul and assigned him to Kovno (present day Kaunas), Lithuania. On July 3, 1926, Harry transferred to the U.S. Consulate in Tallinn, Estonia, where he would serve for more than a decade. Shortly after the U.S. Department of State formally established the U.S. Legation to Estonia in Tallinn on June 30, 1930, Carlson became the Legation's First Secretary and its Chargé d'Affaires whenever the U.S. Minister resident in Riga was not in Estonia.

Following the custom of the time, the Carlsons lived in the same building which housed the U.S. Consulate, usually in an adjoining apartment. During the Carlsons' long tenure in Tallinn, they lived at three different locations starting at Viru 5. In December 1927, the U.S. Consulate – and the Carlsons – moved to their new quarters at Uus 2. At that time, the U.S. Consulate's staff included a Vice Consul, and Foreign Service Clerk, as well as six locally employed staff: clerks Alexandra Landsberg, Eduard Hunt, Johannes Reintam, Alide Sauka, and Eric Pärn, and messenger Adolf Liiver. On April 1, 1930, the U.S. Consulate moved to its current location on Kentmanni 20. Back then the U.S. Consulate – and the Carlsons' apartment – occupied only the second floor of the building.

In addition to George F. Kennan (a future U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union and to Yugoslavia), Harry worked with a total of eight other Vice Consuls during his long tenure: Cyrus B. Folmer, who was here when he arrived in 1926; William M. Gwynn from August to October 1929; Norris B. Chipman starting in September 1929; Ellis A. Johnson as of May 1930; Frederick P. Latimer, Jr. beginning in January 1932, Bertel E. Kuniholm from September 1933 to February 1934; James Everett Henderson as of February 1934; and finally William C. Trimble starting in June 1936 (a future U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia).

After completing his extended tour in Tallinn, Carlson went on to serve a long career as a U.S. Consul in several European posts. After Tallinn he was assigned to London and then as Consul General to Vienna from 1939-1941. He served as the U.S. Consul General in Stockholm during World War II before assignments in Reykjavik and Budapest. In 1948, he returned to Washington D.C. for a brief assignment at the Department of State before his retirement on November 20, 1948. Henry eventually retired to Sheffield, Massachusetts where he died on October 21, 1960. At the time, Harry was survived by wife Laura, son Henry Jr., and daughter Margaret Carlson.