**The Rotary Keokuk Peace Letters**

**The Tallinn Estonia Story**

By Tony Conn, RC Keokuk, Iowa

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Here is the reply from the Rotary Club of Tallinn, Estonia, signed by its president, Professor Ants Piip. RC Tallinn was organized December 13, 1929, when American Herbert S Gott brought together six other men, including Piip, to draft an application for a Rotary Club charter.

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Herbert Gott was born 1884, Gloucester, Massachusetts. He graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1910), earning a degree in Engineering. He went to work for the New York City Metropolitan Street Railway Company, and then for a manufacturer of greenhouse buildings, but soon decided he was interested in some other kind of work. He found his life’s calling in 1913, when he took a job running programs for young men at the famous 86th Street New York YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association).

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When the Great War broke out, Gott volunteered to help German prisoners of war held in Russian camps. He was in Russia and witnessed the Bolshevik revolution, at one point, fleeing to Manchuria with his family to escape the violence. Not missing a chance for advancing his cause, he managed to set up a local YMCA there.

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After the war, Gott returned to New York for a short period, till he volunteered for duty in Estonia, which had just ended its war of independence with Russia. Gott arrived in March 1920 and began working with the 20,000 Russian refugees, displaced in Estonia. He would spend the next 12 years in Estonia, but was at a great detriment to his health. After failing health, he moved his family to La Jolla, California, in hopes that the mild weather would help with his health issues.

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In 1940, the Red Army had moved into Estonia as an occupying force, and began shutting down the YMCA, claiming it an “anti-Soviet” organization. Herbert Gott died in January 1941. Included in his great contributions to Estonia, is he introduced basketball and volleyball to the country.

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As mentioned earlier, Gott was one of seven men who founded Estonia’s first Rotary Club in 1929. His partners included:

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Juhan Kukk, who served in several state executive positions from 1918 – 1923, including Prime Minister (1922-23). He was a university lecturer and director at a local cotton factory. He served as representative to from Baltic States to Rotary International.

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Joakim Puhk, owner of the largest Estonian trade company, J. Puhk and Sons. He also serverd as Chairman of the Association of Wholesalers, Chairman of the Board of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and Consul General of Finland in Estonia.

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Claus Scheel, director of C. Scheel & Co., Tallinn’s largest private bank.

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Harry E. Carlson, US Consul in Estonia

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General Johan Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of Estonia armed forces, 1918-20 and 1934-40. He represented Estonia at the plenary sessions of the League of Nations in Geneva

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And finally, Ants Piip, Professor of International Law at the University of Tartu.

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Professor Piip was club President in 1931-32, and it was he who wrote the response to Rotarian Fulton, 26 February 1932.

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In his letter, Professor Piip makes light that his last name , which in Estonian means “pipe.” He writes further that he was part of the delegation which signed the Treaty of Peace with Russia (1920), ending the civil war in Estonia. Piip’s letter is beautifully written with a high command of English language.

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Professor Ants Piip was born 28 February, 1884 in Tuhalaane, Russian Empire. His education included studies Latvia, Saint Petersburg, and Berlin. He was a lawyer, diplomat, and politician, beloved by his fellow countrymen. He was the first Head of State of Estonia (1920-21), and the Fifth Prime Minister. He served as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1919-1940) and Ambassador to the United States (1923-25).

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Piip was member of the Estonian Foreign Mission in Saint Petersburg and London, participating in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, which set the terms for peace for the defeated Central Powers. In 1919-20, he was a member of the Estonian delegation in the Tartu Peace Negotiations, mentioned in his letter. In this treaty, an agreement between Estonia and the Federal Russian Republic of the Soviets, the Soviets recognized the sovereignty and independence of the state of Estonia.

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When the Soviets signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany, 1939, terms of the Tartu Treaty were essentially cancelled. By June 1940, the Soviets had invaded the Baltic states and annexed this territory as part of the Soviet Union as constituent republics. The tragic consequences that followed includes the elimination of prior leadership in Estonian government, military, and industries.

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On 30 June 1940, Professor Piip was arrested by the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and sent to the Ussolski labor camp. Later he was transferred to a camp in Klepja, and then to Nyrop where he was put in an isolation cell and died.

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Of the founding members, Professor Piip was not the only one who fell victim to the NKVD. Juhan Kukk was arrested on 16 October 1940, sentenced to 8 years. He died in captivity.

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Joakim Puhk was arrested on 31 August 1940. He was sentenced to death by special conference, and immediately executed.

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Johan Laidoner was arrested on 28 June 1941, sentenced to 25 years. He spent time at prisons of Pensa, Kirov, Ivanovo, Moscow, Butyrka, and Vladmir. He died in captivity.

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As mentioned earlier, Herbert Gott returned to the United States due to health issues, and died in 1940

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Harry Carlson and his family left Estonia in January 1937, and went on to serve at posts throughout Europe and the United States. He died 21 October 1960, Sheffield, Massachusetts.

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This brings us to the last founding member, Claus Scheel. While Scheel was born in Kadrina, Estonia (1890), he was of German descent. His Tallinn bank fared well in the years up to the year of independence, catering to senior military officials from Estonia. Following the Russian Revolution, however, he found a new best customer…..that being the Soviets. As the bank director, Claus Scheel was involved in brokering the sale of valuables stolen from nobles in Russia. Bribe and blackmail money flowed into his office, taken by the Bolshevicks from churches and wealthy individuals in the Russian empire. With his new found fortune, Scheel was able to purchase, in part and/or whole, several Estonian companies. He was also able to fund a shale oil production company.

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In 1939, Germans outside of the homeland were invited to come back to Germany. More than 12,000 Baltic Germans left Estonia during the years 1939-1940. Scheel, however, was not one of them. In January 1940, Hitler’s financial advisor, Dr. Wilhelm Keppler, personally offered Scheel German citizenship. The reason Scheel did not relocate earlier was two-fold; it took time to liquidate his businesses, AND he also had some Jewish blood in his lineage.

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By June 1940, however, Scheel either had to face the occupying Soviets or chance relocating to Germany. He chose to relocate. On June 25, 1940, he stepped on German soil. In Autumn 1944, Scheel could sense the direction of the war for Germany, and using his Swedish connections, left Germany for Stockholm, then on to a new life in Brazil. He stayed in Brazil till 1954, when he came back to Hamburg. He died there in 1961.