

## BOOK REVIEWS

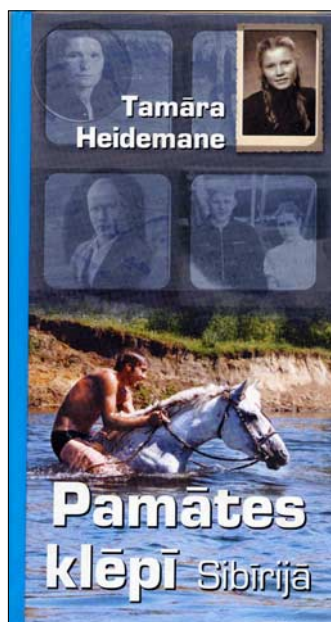
*Tamāra Heidemane*

**Pamātes klēpī Sibīrijā (In the Lap of a Stepmother in Siberia). Lejas Bulaanas un Krasnojarskas latvieši dokumentos, sarunaas, sirdsatmin'aa... Rīga: A. Mellupes SIA BO "Likten'staasti", 2001. 256 pp. In Latvian.**

When I noticed this attractively designed book in one of the bookstores of central Riga in the summer of 2002, I bought it primarily for the sake of my colleagues who study Siberian Estonians. Already on a brief look in the store, I noticed that the book mostly speaks of a Latvian village in Siberia which lies in the neighbourhood of two Estonian villages – Lower and Upper Bulanka. On my way back from Riga I started to read my new find and could not stop. It moved me deeply and I felt that I could not find peace until I have shared my thoughts with someone.

“Pamātes klēpī Sibīrijā” is a small-format book that contains barely two and a quarter hundred text pages and illustrative pictures. It is amazing, however, how much is concentrated between its covers.

The book is presented as diary notes from autumn 1990 to June 2000. Content-wise it apparently speaks of the writer herself, but with the aim to introduce Latvian settlements in Siberia in the past and today. With respect to the latter, the focus is on showing how the Latvian Republic, the Lutheran church and foreign (i.e. Western) Latvians are trying to help their compatriots to learn their mother tongue and serve God. In order to tell about this, the author, who worked as a teacher of Latvian, then as an ambassadress of Latvian culture, and in the end also as a catechist in Siberia, has to tell her own story, which is given as a back-



ground and comparison to Siberian circumstances, but is staggering on its own.

Many other life stories are interspersed in the book, mostly of Siberian Latvians that the author met – residents of the settlements or the deported who for some reason had not returned to their home country. Several times Estonians come up in these stories – not surprising since a number of Estonian and Latvian settlements are in the same neighbourhood, and in deportation destinations many different nations were put together. Against the background of many woeful stories, the author's own story appears more like one of a fairy tale orphan who finds her happiness. True, she did not marry the son of the king, her marriage with a possibly rather regular young Latvian man had actually ended in divorce by the time she moved to Siberia, but instead she found her calling in life – and from the lap of the stepmother she arrived to the lap of her true mother.

Namely, Tamara Heidemane (nee Žilberg(a)), the author and the protagonist of the book, is by birth a Russian Latvian. Her mother had already been raised in the family of Latvian settlers in Bashkria, and her father had a unique background – he came from one of the families that were evacuated from Riga during World War I. Jānis Žilbergs, who was the eldest of the children in his family, had already joined the Society of Young Communists by the time the family finally got a chance to repatriate at the beginning of the 20th century. Ideological differences arose in the family and the young man decided to stay in Moscow, while the others returned to Riga. Tamara, who was born in 1937, could not yet celebrate her first birthday before her father was arrested and disappeared. Later it appeared that he was shot already in 1938. The child lived for years with the knowledge that her father had disappeared amid the tumult of war. Her mother and aunts (mother's sisters) partly knew, partly at least could guess the gloomy truth, but kept this for themselves.

Several episodes in Tamara's childhood show that it was anything but happy. Let us take a look at some of the episodes that Tamara has considered important to present. These inevitably bring to mind the writing style of life stories (of great figures) that J.-P. Sartre has noted: they are written as if from the end towards the beginning.

Most certainly the writer, who was then still in her infant years, could not have remembered how her father took her outside during a thunderstorm and uttered the significant words, “Never she should be scared of a lightning!” And indeed, this small incidence, this short sentence, determined much. There is no doubt that Tamara has been a courageous woman for all of her life and has not let herself be intimidated by anything. And yet ever since childhood she had to endure much. As a child Tamara had to endure abuse and name-calling (‘fascist’) because of her German-sounding family name. When Tamara complained to her mother about this, she was given instructions that were short but effective – “You have hands, don’t you!”

Tamara relates several times the story about an apple that she brought on her first trip to Latvia; a fruit that acquires nearly mythical dimensions in her memories was first drawn by the whole class and then cut into pieces and divided up among everyone. It seems that in a way this apple became the symbol of Latvia, and a tempting one at that.

Tamara Heidemane is definitely an exceptional character in many ways and I can entirely understand those Latvians who were irritated by her articles in the newspapers where she supported Eastern Latvians’ return to their ethnic home country. In this respect the attitudes of common Latvians are similar to those of common Estonians: we already have so many Russians brought here during Soviet times, why persuade those totally Russified descendants of the settlers to move here.

It seems that Tamara Heidemane has helped some younger Siberian Latvians to return to their ancestors’ country – at least she sympathises with their adjustment, and is delighted when someone has quickly found a job, etc. To think of it, it is quite possible that a young woman who had resettled from Lower Bulanka to Latvia in the 1990s repeats the fate of Tamara: she identifies emotionally with the distant land and if she is lucky enough to meet the right people, her children will become much bigger patriots than the average citizens accustomed to the 21st century European Union.

When I mentioned the exceptionality of Tamara, I also meant that she is undoubtedly more than average talented. Consider

the fact that until 10 years old she did not know a word of Latvian, was 12 when she moved to Latvia, and after a few years in Jurmala returned to Russia for several years in order to complete her studies in an agricultural polytechnic near Moscow. Only after she finished the polytechnic, she finally returned to Latvia – first for internship and afterwards to work there. Bearing in mind all that, one can only admire that she was able to obtain her ancestors' language so perfectly. The scope of Tamara Heidemane's interests and diverse talents are also demonstrated by her practicing the arts – in addition to old and newer photos, the book is also illustrated with her own drawings. Her sense of art could originally manifest itself in Latvia, when as a young woman after finishing the polytechnic she was assigned to work in a greening company. In recent years she has been working as a decorator.



*An illustration from the book, by T. Heidemane.*

Another memory from this period surprises in how long a developmental path in mentality a human being can walk. It appears that young Tamara simply knew nothing about the independent Latvian Republic; she even did not know what the Latvian flag is like. Thus an anecdotal incident took place: she designed a flowerbed in the colours of a Latvian flag and furthermore, this

flowerbed happened to lie in front of an ideological institution! Those who remember Soviet times can well imagine what followed: angry reproaches and accusations of provocation from the one side, and complete innocence from the other. But Tamara Heidemane is a person who does not look back once she has grasped the plough. She did not stay on the borderline of the in- and out-group where she found herself when her mother decided – apparently for financial reasons – to settle to Latvia. She became a real Latvian, a Latvian patriot – and went to Siberia to teach the language she had learned in teenage years, hoisted a Latvian flag there, the colours of which she had not even known in youth, and was offended when the leaders of the Latvian Society of Krasnoyarsk did not celebrate properly the anniversary of Latvian Republic in the beginning of the 1990s. The beginning of Tamara Heidemanes Siberian mission fell on the so-called transformation era.

From the descriptions of these pivotal times it becomes obvious that for Tamara the choice of side did not pose a problem: she was a Latvian, Latvia wanted independence. Those – the imperially-minded – that slander and blame “my nation” raise indignation in her. It must have been dejecting for her to see the attack on Riga television tower from TV and learn that A. Slapins, a filmmaker, lost his life there.

In Siberia, Tamara had to hear complaints and reproaches familiar to everyone who had contacts with Russia in those years, “You want to break apart and leave us!” With her presence and work Tamara Heidemane proved that even after restoration of its independence, Latvian Republic does not intend to forget its compatriots.

Tamara Heidemane bears a lot of sympathy for Russian Latvians in her heart. She empathizes with them because of her own experiences, yet she is definitely and unquestionably a Latvian, not a Russian Latvian. We can read that only owing to her evacuated father she was permitted to acquire Latvian citizenship on legal succession – and Tamara Heidemane is happy to know that. She does complain that “I, who I speak Latvian, whose children and grandchildren speak Latvian, have to prove that I am Latvian” – like we have heard and read about some Eastern Estonians to have respectively complained.

At the same time, it is clear that distances have as if grown after Latvia has “broken apart”. In 1997, Tamara Heidemane concedes in her diary that people are not as friendly as in the first years. Obviously great changes had taken place also in Russia, but the ever-emotional Tamara demonstrates analytical sense here and admits that she is also changed.

The childhood of Tamara was a childhood of a Russian-speaking Soviet person, which at the same time implies a Godless childhood. Yet from time to time she encountered believers. The first one was aunt Ksiusha who was employed to baby-sit Tamara and her cousin; an Old Believer also told children about religious matters. Thus it happened that Tamara, with the general exaltation of Stalin and aunt Ksiusha’s stories colliding in her head, asked one day her aunt, “How come aunt Ksiusha’s god is God but our god is Stalin?” Afterwards she also met religious people in Latvia, even made friends with them. This, however, did not change her – she remained the person who she was brought up to be – a person who eliminates everything that could remind of God from her worldview.

Her conversion to religion was at least as sudden and devoted, although less elucidated in the book, as becoming a Latvian. However, we learn little about her religious views, except for her sincere and distinctively ecumenical outlook. And also her even somewhat unexpected knowledge of religious issues. How many masters of philosophy would know, for instance, that Armenian Christians are not Orthodox – but Tamara has noted upon this in a couple of words.

It is significant and characteristic of her that she could not simply remain a passive and indifferent member of a congregation. Over shoes, over boots! Having had herself baptised in Siberia by an old lady, she contacted a congregation after her return to Latvia, educated herself and indeed – partly because of the circumstances – returned to Siberia also as a missionary. She takes care that God’s word would reach Siberia, she prepares the girls of Lower Bulanka for confirmation, etc. As for her attitude towards the archbishop – does this reflect some more general difference between Latvian and Estonian Lutheranism or is it the so-called personal ecumenism of Tamara Heidemane, an Orthodox-Catholic respect towards clergymen? The personality and apparent charm of Jānis Vanags, the

archbishop of Latvian Lutheran church, certainly has its own share in this.

By the way, one of the last diary entries describes how Tamara is in the Dome Church of Riga in a (probably ecumenical) service and how she suddenly feels the need to go to the archbishop and ask for his blessing – and how she thinks afterwards, “Now, after the blessing of the archbishop, I must not be a coward!” Compositionally this is especially interesting – in a way this is a return to the so-called father’s testament.

Having mentioned composition, I would now turn to some issues regarding the author’s vocabulary. Is it the Russian soul, Latvian mentality or the peculiarity of Tamara? It is difficult, if not impossible, for an Estonian reader, not to ask this question. Yet finding an answer is quite a venture, because what would confirm that we have struck home?

The title of the book translates as “In the Lap of a Stepmother in Siberia” and before reaching a certain point in the book I did not understand what she wanted to say with this. Then it appeared that stepmother refers to Russia – to Moscow where Tamara was born, Central Russia, where she spent her childhood, and Siberia, where she was on her mission. She views all of these places from the perspective of her ‘real mother, Latvia’. Expressions, such as *musu Mate Latviya* ‘our mother Latvia’, Mother Latvia, ‘real mother’ come repeatedly up in the book. At the same time, it is clear that these expressions really exist in the Latvian tradition, that they are not merely translations from the Russian expression *Rodina-mat’*. As far as I know – and I must stress that this is my personal knowledge – the oldest author who used this expression in Latvian was Anna Brigadere (1861–1933), a poet and a children’s writer. But let us try saying *Emake Eesti* ‘Mother Estonia’ – although there is a beautiful alliteration, such an expression would probably not be accepted by the so-called Old Estonians. In the same token, at least I cannot imagine that Estonians themselves would denote anyone from their great national figures as a father. But, for instance, Latvian classics, the writer couple J. Rainis and Aspazija start their mutual letter to K. Barons namely with the following address, “Honoured and beloved Barons-father”.

I cannot remember anyone who would have written to Hurtfather. Those of his correspondents who did not address him as 'honoured teacher (doctor)', could indeed use family-related terminology by turning to him as 'kinsman'. However, Hurt did not live even approximately as long as Barons.

The names of her grandchildren occur in Tamara's speech only in diminutives. Again – I can imagine only a Southern Estonian in an especially emotional situation talking like this, but not anyone coming from the region North of Tartu like myself.

By the way, the book leaves an impression that Latvians have done more for their diaspora kinsmen – to use this 19th century expression, bearing in mind also kinswomen – than Estonians. In any case, already in 1989 Lower Bulanka had Latvian teachers and Tamara worked there from 1990 to at least the turn of the millennium.

Estonians – although only by mention – come up repeatedly in the book. One of the first incidents occurs quite at the beginning of the book, in the diary of the first school year, where it is noted that there are weddings in the village: a man from Lower Bulanka weds a young Estonian woman from Upper Bulanka. Estonians also appear in the autobiographical stories of Siberian Latvians that are retold in the book, and Tamara also meets them in Krasnoyarsk.

Although by form the book is a diary, it is obvious that it has not been written on daily basis by writing a respective part every day. Literary aspirations are obvious as well as the consideration that daily and circumstantial matters should be fairly balanced with historical retrospect.

There are issues that the author only hints at and she unquestionably altogether avoids others. We do not find out how long or short was her marriage that ended in divorce. We only get an inkling that at the time she came to Siberia there was someone in her heart that she was waiting to write, and we learn indirectly that one day a message arrived that nullified all her hopes. Once she allows herself a bitter remark that she is a happy teacher, mother and grandmother – but that she is also a woman. Apparently she thinks that as a woman she has not been very lucky. To the eyes of an outsider it seems, however, that her marriage – no matter how happy or unhappy, long or short it was – and the child born from that ulti-



mately positioned Tamara's initially maybe fragile attachment to Latvia and its people.

Tamara appears as cautiously selective in her childhood descriptions. Her relationship with mother has probably not been entirely perfect – but we cannot find any accusations or outbursts of bitterness. Only that much is revealed to us that her elder sister was in some respect more taken care of when she was ill. All in all, this kind of discreetness is nice.

The most memorable in the book is perhaps the very first story, dated to September 13, 1990, which could be titled "Arrival in Siberia". This introduces us to the tractor driver Vilis who came to meet Tamara in Poltavka (Novopoltavsk) – he is wearing a light sport shirt, while Tamara is freezing in her warm jacket and when turning to the 53-year-old elegant lady, he uses the word *vecā* 'granny' – "How is it, granny, shall we go?" Further she tells how Vilis promises to find a man for her and how they cross the river by an inflatable boat that has two holes in it. "Vilis said, "Come and sit down, granny, and put a finger against this hole here!" He jumped also into the boat and pressed the heel of his boot against another hole." This paragraph clearly demonstrates the writer's ability to catch and depict situations and human characters.

Now that we have reached the beginning of the book, it is time for me to finish. *Dixi et animam levavi*.

Kristi Salve