

# Leo's Story

## Prologue.

This has been an incredibly special journey. Even more than that, it has been a privilege and an honor to help my father recount a story that is uniquely his. Celebrating fifty years of business for A. Leo Pelds Engineering may have sparked this narrative, but the company history is only part of something much bigger.

The more I learn, the more I see that the stories that have been told over the years all fit together with the new ones with one accord. It is nothing short of amazing to see how God has orchestrated things to work together for good in my father's life, just as Romans 8:28 says. War, refugee camps, poverty, hardships, misunderstandings, even seemingly insignificant things have all come together in a beautiful way that can only point upward, giving glory to God, the ultimate Author of every life story.

### ***I. Steinblums***

I have lived under two of the worst dictators of the 20th century. One year under Stalin and three years under Hitler. By the grace of God, I have survived under both.

I was eight years old when Stalin and his thugs brought terror to Latvia. As Russia occupied the country in 1940, so many Latvians suffered horrific atrocities and unimaginable cruelty. It was a terrible time of fear and pain.

*Two mass deportations to Siberia and slave labor camps in June of 1941 and again in March of 1949 scarred the country and its people forever. If that happened to the same degree in America today, it would be as though twelve million would be taken. Twelve million of today's smartest, most capable leaders, educators, land and business owners, clergy, entrepreneurs and military personnel would be gone. Many of them never to return.*

In the summer of 1940, danger was imminent. My father had somehow found out that our family was on the deportation list. We fled quickly and quietly. I remember boarding a freight train and arriving at nighttime in Alūksne, about 15 km from my grandparents' farm. Under the cover of darkness, my dad led my mother, my little sister and me on foot into the woods. We stayed in a dried-up well that, for reasons I do not know, had been nicknamed "Hell's Well." I was only a kid, but even at eight years of age, I could see the fear on my parents' faces. I thought it was sort of like camping. I suppose that for my parents it was a type of hell. For three weeks, we stayed out of sight and had contact with no one. Not even our relatives. It was important not to compromise their safety.

News came that the Germans had liberated Latvia from communism. We were now under Hitler, but strangely, we were relieved. Things actually seemed better for us because the Germans were much kinder than the Russians to those who were not Jewish. We were able to return to Riga and live what seemed to me a somewhat normal life. I even attended school until one day, when we got word that my school had been bombed. I was happy. After all, what boy ever really wants to go to school? But the happiness did not last. It was unmistakably wartime.

My sister and I were at my grandparents' farm in eastern Latvia when my mother and father came to pick us up. Once again, we were on the run. The Russians were advancing. You could hear the artillery in the distance. Like a constant, distant thunder, it drew ever closer, pushing us to move with haste.

We stopped to say goodbye to my grandfather as he was working a potato field with a one-horse plow. He must have had a premonition that we would never see each other again. "Son," he said, "Come and plow at least one furrow in the land of your fathers." I did. The plow was too much for me to handle at age 11, and the furrow was not straight, but that didn't matter. I did not appreciate the significance of that occasion then, but that moment has stayed with me over the years.

*During a recent trip to Latvia, I was able to return to my grandparents' farm. My eldest son and I found the very field where my grandfather had spoken those words, and where I had held the plow. The memories were overwhelming.*

Facing certain deportation, we fled. This time we headed west toward the Baltic Sea. On October 25, 1944, at the seaport city of Liepāja, we boarded a ship bound for Gotenhafen, Poland. There must have been 500 souls on board, including some German soldiers. The danger of boarding that ship was uncomfortably real, and the fear was obvious. The previous night, in the very same waters that we would be traveling, a transport ship had been sunk by a Russian submarine.

I think I must have understood the gravity of that moment to some degree. As the ship began to move, it was time to bid Latvia a final farewell. Someone began to sing. Soon every Latvian was singing the anthem, crying out to God, “Dievs, svētī Latviju!” which means “God, bless Latvia!” That was the first time the national anthem made me cry.

We reached our destination safely. We were transported from Poland by train to a refugee distribution center in Dachau, Germany, where we were deloused, processed and divided into labor units. At that time, we were unaware of the other evils nearby. My dad was sent to Salzburg. My mother, sister and I were sent to Wengen, a small village in the foothills of the Alps, about 19 miles from the Swiss border. We had planned to flee to Switzerland if it looked like the Russians would occupy the area. Deportation would still be certain if they caught us.

In Wengen, we were designated to stay with a German couple, the Hertzes. This kindhearted couple had lost their only son on the eastern front. They gave me the cross-country skis that had belonged to their late son, and I used them often to ski into town to get meals for myself, my mother and sister. I didn’t have to go to school for those five or six months. I was not a “Hitler jungen.”

A few weeks before the war ended, an Allied, French-Moroccan unit occupied the area. This brought a new kind of amazement, because prior to that time, I had only seen a person of color in the circus, but this unit was made up entirely of black soldiers who would be our liberators! It was May 8, 1945. The war was over, and we were alive!

I will never forget the sound of the peace horn that announced the arrival of peace. Sound carries and echoes in the hills and the sound of that horn echoes with me even today.

Within three weeks we, along with other refugees, were gathered into Displaced Person, or DP camps. Ours was in Kempten, Germany. For the next five months, we lived in tight quarters with 24 people to one small classroom. Food was in short supply. I was smaller and I had the agility of youth, so I snuck into bombed-out warehouses to look for canned foods. Sometimes I was successful. Later, we ate a lot of powdered peas. My mother tried so hard to make the powdered substance into something other than just a porridge. We ate green cakes and green soups and green everything! It wasn’t long before we were calling this “the green calamity!”

In October we moved to Esslingen, Germany, where there was a larger Latvian refugee camp. There we lived in a two-room apartment with another family of five. We had one bedroom for my parents, my sister, me, and my older cousin, who the Germans drafted. We shared a kitchen and a bathroom with the other family. The building was part of old military barracks where families of officers had stayed. Esslingen was a temporary home to more than 12,000 Latvians, complete with schools and even cultural events. I finished grade school and started high school there.

My father was an orphan who had lost his parents to the brutal Russian winter when they had fled

from the Germans during WWI. By sheer necessity, he had learned to be self-sufficient. He was a dairy industry graduate, but after the war he worked as a mechanic. Right after the war ended, there were abandoned vehicles everywhere, and my dad saw an opportunity. For a fifth of whiskey, he obtained five brand new truck engines. He picked up one abandoned truck after another and mounted the engines in them. There was no gasoline at the end of the war, so he set up the trucks to run on wood.

At one point, my dad had five of these trucks. He provided transportation for tourists wanting to visit castles and traveling theater groups to other Latvian camps. When not in school, I helped him. I needed to be 17 to legally obtain a German driver's license. For 2 lbs. of butter, someone was happy to change my birth date, so at age 16, I had a driver's license.

The Displaced Persons Act was signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1948. This law authorized the admission of 200,000 select European refugees to immigrate and become US citizens. You had to have a sponsor who guaranteed work for two years and guaranteed that you would not be a burden to the United States.

Our family had been chosen to come to Birmingham, Alabama, where my dad was to be the manager of a creamery. It was an excellent job offer: \$250.00/month with free housing, free dairy products, servants, a car and a driver! We departed Germany for America on March 1, 1949.

Having arrived safely in New Orleans on March 14, we were greeted by a Lutheran Welfare representative, who, much to our dismay, advised us that we were too late. We were told that our sponsor could not wait for us any longer and had hired someone else!

Health and background screening for immigrants was extensive. They might have turned us down if we had not been healthy. I knew of a family where the parents were rejected for having tested positive for tuberculosis. Only the children could come. (I was recently reminded that they might also have turned us down had they known my father had been in trouble with the Germans for selling smoked fish.)

Nevertheless, we had arrived together, and we were on American soil! We were free to go anywhere we wanted to, but it was an overwhelming freedom, because we had absolutely no idea where to go! We had no sponsor, no job, and we did not speak the language. A minister suggested that we go to Iowa. Being further north, he reasoned, Iowa would have a climate that would be closer to Latvia's, thereby making things a bit more comfortable. Iowa it was!

We were not allowed to have any money when we came into the country, but each of us were given a ticket and \$10 for the train trip to Des Moines. Wanting to buy a newspaper, my father went into a crowded bar to buy one. They had difficulty understanding what my he wanted, and when they had finally understood, he reached for his billfold in his vest pocket, only to realize it was not there. The billfold was gone! - The train tickets! Our permits too! My dad had been robbed on his first day in America.

He glanced at the floor only a few steps away, and there, on the floor, was the billfold! The money was gone, but the train tickets were still there! We borrowed \$10 from another Latvian family on the train. They were a family of four and had also been given \$40 for the trip. We stepped off the train in Des Moines 70 years ago, on March 17th of 1949.

In Des Moines, my father set out to find someone who spoke German because his English was

very limited. We wound up at First Lutheran Church on East 5th & Des Moines Street, where the pastor knew German and the congregation was very sympathetic. For the first three weeks, we stayed with a kindhearted lady on East 14th Street, just north of University Ave. We called her Mrs. Freska. It wasn't long before we were offered a job and a place to live on a farm near Polk City. My dad was to be paid \$150/month. We were to be provided free milk if I milked the cow, all the eggs we wanted, and a small, 16' x 24' house with an outhouse and a garden. Finally! A bit of stability! We were happy. We had been hungry for so long, that the four of us ate 300 eggs in the first month! That must have scared the farmer, because after that, we did not get any more eggs.

*I remember that when I arrived in Des Moines, I was 5'7" tall and weighed 170 lbs. Six months later I weighed 230 lbs.!*

And we were hot! That summer it got up to 105° Fahrenheit. The heat was especially unwelcoming to a family who had traveled here with thick, warm clothing that was better suited for a northern climate. I remember I had a new suit, probably made of wool, that my dad had purchased with the money he had made in Germany. I couldn't wear it at all.

Eventually things became too difficult on that farm in Polk City, and it was time to leave. My father was paid just half of the promised amount, and we consumed every nickel just to survive. We had proven to be very hard workers, and the farmer now offered to pay \$250/month for us to stay on, but we did not stay. Through the help of some friends, we moved to Des Moines, where my father got a job at Co-op Dairy in the fall.

There used to be a Scandinavian hour on KCBC radio. The program was hosted by a member of First Lutheran Church who wanted to interview me because I had the best English. I was shy, and when he asked me if I was glad to be here, I did not want to admit that I did not know the word "glad," so I said "Maybe yes, maybe no." I suppose there was some truth to that answer.

We lived at 635 ½ East Grand, and I resumed schooling at East High. When I started there, I did not know enough English to tell them I had already taken Algebra, so they put me in the class. The teacher had us do every other problem in the book, and we could ask for help when needed. Those who got farthest in the book at the end of the semester would get an A. It took me about four weeks to figure out the word problems, and then one weekend I took the book home and finished off the whole book. After that, they called me the "math genius."

At East they also asked me if I played football. Thinking they meant soccer, I said yes. You see, that is what soccer is called in Europe. On the first day of practice, they gave me strange paddings and a helmet, and I thought maybe they played soccer a little differently here. We were told to line up in two lines. One guy was given the elongated ball, and the other guy had to tackle him. This, of course, was in the day of no face guards on the helmets. I watched a guy ahead of me really take it in the nose, and when I saw that, I said, "No. That is not for me!"

Our apartment was just a couple of blocks from three movie houses: The Grand, The Varsity and The Iowa. They changed features every third day, and the charge was just 10 cents before 6 pm. If you wanted to, you could stay and watch the same features over and over until midnight. That is how I learned English. By the third time through, I understood the plot, and the words began to make sense. I had not seen Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, or the Lone Ranger before, and I enjoyed the shows as I learned.

I may have been learning some English, but that didn't mean I knew everything. There was a whole new culture before me!

Take mistletoe. I was shy around girls back then, and you can imagine my surprise when out of the blue, as I walked into Home Room one day, an older, well-developed girl planted a big one on me! The teacher laughed so hard he fell off his chair! Oh, the embarrassment for a teenage, foreign kid!

I got a job at The Des Moines Register on Saturday evenings to help put together the Sunday paper. We were paid \$13/night. I also cleaned houses for \$0.35/ hour. In the spring of 1951, after school was out, I worked at the Armstrong Rubber tire company for \$1.75 hour. That summer my father quit the Co-op because of a disagreement with the union, and worked as a carpenter's assistant at \$1.00/hr. In the fall, I took the evening shift at Armstrong. I attended East High from 8:00 am until 3:30 pm and worked at Armstrong from 4:00 pm till midnight. I was going to school and making more than my dad!

In February of 1952, I graduated from East among the top of the class, and, along with two of my classmates, decided to go to Iowa State College. About that time, my father set out as a subcontractor applying siding. I quit at Armstrong to help my dad until I started at Iowa State.

Then the road before me turned. On my 21st birthday I received just one card in the mail. I will never forget it. "You have been selected," it read. "Signed - President Eisenhower." I had been in the Airforce ROTC for the first two years, but when they did not accept me as a possible pilot, I did not proceed with advanced ROTC. I forgot to file for an exemption to postpone my service so that I could finish my studies. I tried, but was unable to reach Governor Loveless, who could have authorized deferment, but was on a fishing trip. I was drafted and served two years. I now thank God for that.

I did my basic training in Camp Chaffee, Arkansas. Because there was a shortage of training personnel, and because I had two years of ROTC, I was appointed acting sergeant with all the privileges of that rank, except pay. I did my advanced training in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, after which I found out that the 532nd Field Artillery Observations Battalion was to be sent to Germany. I requested a transfer, which was granted. Again, because I had been drafted 30 days earlier than the other personnel, I was appointed acting sergeant and enjoyed a private cabin in the train to Brooklyn, and a private cabin on board the ship.

The 15 months I served in Germany were not bad at all. I spent most of the time doing land surveying. One assignment was to provide latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates wherever portable rockets were to be fired. Another was to verify survey control points that had been last surveyed in 1927. My five years in the German Displaced Persons camps had left me with enough German to understand some of the notes on the existing monuments, so I was put in charge.

*Thinking back now, I can't help but wonder about the significance of those survey control points. Very often those points were the crosses on top of church steeples. Little did I know, as I peered at those steeple crosses, that 28 years later, God would have me focus in on the cross again. God was moving in my life even then.*

In so many ways, you could say I was in the right place at the right time, especially in the Army. Still, none was so right as the night I met my wife now of 60 years.

There happened to be another Latvian serving in my platoon in Germany. He had told me about a Latvian youth gathering in Augustdorf, Germany, and he wanted me to go with him. Truthfully, I didn't want to go at all. We had only just arrived in Germany, and I wanted to get my bearings. But my friend persuaded me, so we set off to Augustdorf.

There was something special about that gathering from the onset. - The kinship amongst the Latvians was something else! We had so much in common, as we had all been through so very much. Yet we were young, and it was time to live! That first night I noticed the attractive young lady sitting at the other end of the table. I remember her long, blonde hair, and I'm telling you, you couldn't not notice her! For me, it was love at first sight. At the first opportunity, I made my move. She must have liked me too, because after that, we spent every possible minute together.

We even stayed up all night the last night of the gathering so that we could watch the sunrise together. Later that morning, we arranged to gather our things quickly and meet one more time. She was headed back to her family in Sweden and I back Karlsruhe, Germany. As it was, we never got to say goodbye. We accidentally took different paths, and we missed each other entirely!

I had to do something, so I began to write immediately. On the train ride back to Karlsruhe, I wrote to my mother, telling her I had met the girl I would marry. I also wrote my first letter to Irma. I ended up penning at least one, sometimes two, letters a day for two years. She still has those letters. She also told me later that her father sometimes held back the letters one at a time just for fun, or spite, or who knows what.

Ultimately, we got engaged, but that's a peculiar story too. Honestly, I never really popped the question! It was New Year's Eve, and we had just attended a dance. We were hurrying home to greet the midnight hour together with her parents. As we walked, I asked her how she would feel about living in America. When she said that it might be interesting, I heard "Yes," and I figured that I had proposed and that she had accepted. Wanting to be respectful to her parents, I decided I would ask for her hand. That night, over coffee, I informed her parents of our engagement, and asked her father for her hand. (Little did I know I was informing Irma as well!)

A deafening silence filled the room. As though it couldn't get more awkward, the sound that finally broke the silence came from the cup of coffee rattling upon the little saucer in my terribly shaky hand! Irma's mother began to cry. Then Irma began to cry! After what seemed like an eternity, her father finally said, "Kids, if you still feel this way in six months, you can get engaged."

We did. With a ring in my pocket, I traveled back to Sweden in June to make the engagement official. A year passed before we did get married because obtaining a visa for her was not that easy. I didn't have the money to pay for a private bill to obtain a visa. I had even spoken to U.S. Senator Cunningham about it. So, I went back to Sweden to marry her there. With a marriage certificate, the visa became automatic.

Irma's family had lived very modestly in Sweden. She had only three dresses in her closet: two for every day, and one for Sundays and special occasions. She made her own wedding dress, and I will never forget my lovely bride on our beautiful wedding day. Her parents sacrificed so much to make the day special for us.

Irma left behind everything she knew, all that was familiar to start a life with me in the U.S. She was and is remarkable. We recently celebrated our 60th wedding anniversary.



As in every marriage, there have been good times, bad times, easy times and hard times. Eight years into our marriage the doctors told us we would never have children of our own. This was devastating, and it demanded a change of plans. We even initiated adoption proceedings, but it was God's plan to give us our first child in His time. As only God could arrange it, our first child was born on Thanksgiving Day. Not knowing the meaning of the name at the time, we named him Teodors, which, we later found out, means God's Gift.

God later gave us three more gifts, Voldemars, Ingrida and Edmunds. All four of our kids were raised with a full complement of grandparents who helped to raise them. Now we are enjoying being grandparents to 10 grandchildren ourselves.

It is hard to believe, but good to remember the cornerstones, steppingstones and milestones along the way. I graduated from Iowa State College with a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering 60 years ago. I then worked for four years in the City of Des Moines Engineering Department before serving four years as the first City Engineer for the City of Urbandale. I spent the next two years working for private developers, and finally, 50 years ago, I stepped out on my own to start A. Leo Pelds Engineering Co.

The first contract for engineering services was for a mobile home park on the south side of Des Moines. The scope of services and the size of the company has changed over time, and things are changing again, as they should.

The passing years have also produced great stories, such as that of a sunken pickup truck in Missouri, where the crew was fine, but the truck was not. I also vividly remember bringing little Teodors to help me do some field work in Carlisle. He must have been only seven or eight years old, because holding one end of the tape measure was a big job for him. Little did he know that some years later I would leave him in charge of construction staking as a 17-year-old as I went off to pursue theological studies during a summer intensive in Canada.


I felt completely confident in his abilities, but one particular contractor questioned the 17-year-old's competence. We reached an agreement that I would travel back to check the work, but if everything was correct, the contractor would pay for my travel and time. Let's just say Ted was right and the contractor was out several hundred dollars.

I have had many wonderful employees, including our other three children. Still, my favorite family employee has to be my wife, who worked for free doing everything from secretarial, bookkeeping, janitorial, rodsman and probably countless other duties. We logged thousands of hours and thousands of miles together traveling throughout Iowa to do survey work.

I do not mean to boast of my works, but, rather, of the opportunity afforded here. I say with absolute certainty that there is no other country in the world where I could have accomplished what I have accomplished here. Higher education in Europe was very exclusive. It would not have been possible for me. But here, in this land, and only by God's provision, there was open door after open door.

For all of this, and so much more, I give glory to God. His hand is in all of this. November of this year will mark 35 years since my ordination as a pastor in the Latvian Lutheran Church. That, in itself, is a story of grace. Who would ever have thought that God would call a proud, middle-aged engineer with a fear of public speaking to the pulpit to proclaim the good news of Jesus? But He did, and I am humbled.



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Finally, these days there are two national anthems that can bring me to tears. I have truly loved both. Yet, no matter the country, anthem, or circumstance, it was God's hand that protected, blessed and guided me. His hand is in every moment of my life, and it is His anthem that I want to sing forever.