

Canada Customs Officer
First Line Protector
Of the Revenue

AN ACCOUNT OF ONE OFFICER'S
EXPERIENCES IN CONDUCTING BAGGAGE
EXAMINATIONS OF IMMIGRANTS TO CANADA
DURING THE YEARS 1945 TO 1965

By Arthur Vaughn



A huge influx of immigrants came to Canada in a steady stream for about fifteen years after the termination of the 1929-1945 War. Young women who had succumbed to the charms and married Canadian armed forces personnel were among the first arrivals. Refugees from war-torn countries and other persons seeking a new and hopefully better way of life looked upon Canada to achieve their goals. The steamships bringing the settlers docked, most frequently at the Ocean Terminal comprised of Pier 20, 21, 22 and 23.



Pier 22 has an upper level and this was utilized to land passengers who would then be directed to the Immigration Offices on the same level at Pier 21 for processing. When the immigration status of these persons had been determined and documentation completed they were directed to an overhead walkway spanning the railway tracks connecting Pier 21 to the baggage annex. A long counter was located on one side of the corridor (referred to as the Ramp) where Customs Officers conducted examinations of hand baggage and other effects. The new arrivals then proceeded to the sloping walkway leading to the lower level where the baggage was located. After clearance by Customs, the baggage turned over to railway checkers for furtherance and the newcomers boarded railway cars to continue their journey into Canada.

The previous paragraph describes the ideal conditions for the processing of passengers but there were other situations that were much less comfortable. Halifax Harbour is a year-round port but our busiest season was the winter months when the Ports of Quebec and Montreal were inaccessible due to ice conditions in the St. Lawrence River and, on many occasions, baggage examination were conducted in the cargo sheds. These were huge cavernous structures where winds blew through the open doors on both sides. The

conditions were unpleasant for the Customs officers but even more so for the travelers who were not equipped to cope with our cold winters.

On one occasion a Cunard Steamship, possibly the "Scythia" docked at Pier 20 and examinations were conducted at that site. It was a bitterly cold evening and it was shocking to see the little girls and boys with bare legs and quite inadequate clothing as they milled around their parents. (This must not be taken as criticism of anyone; the clothing was their normal attire for this time of year at home.) I will not confess that there were few pieces of baggage examined that night. There was a heated room at the North end of the shed and Phil Boyle approached one family and offered to take the children there until baggage formalities were completed. It was like a scene from -The Pied Piper- as other Customs officers gathered the children and escorted them to this haven from whence they were collected by their grateful parents to board the heated railway coaches. Baggage examinations were conducted at many piers along the waterfront when the sheer number of arriving vessels demanded the use of every available space.

There were no problems encountered with the examination of baggage accompanying the War Brides. Most of these young ladies were arriving from Great Britain and their effects consisted of personal clothing, some bedclothes and table linens, and private mementoes.

The shortages created by the war conditions carried over after the peace, as most goods manufactured in Great Britain were not available for local consumption but were exported to bolster the economy. In addition, the brides were fully aware that they were going to homes that were equipped with the necessities for living. The same conditions affected the brides from European countries. With children accompanying some of the brides it was almost a picnic atmosphere as they sought out their effects. There was laughing and good-natured bantering among these pleasant arrivals. The Custom staff acted more as expeditors than examiners as they helped the passengers to locate their goods and direct them to the railway baggage checkers.

The arrival of the Displaced Persons brought scenes in stark contrast to those of the cheerful, chattering war brides. It is difficult to comprehend what those desperate souls had endured through man's inhumanity to man. They came with almost no items of value.; their few belongings were carried in sacks of various kinds and a few battered cardboard suitcases, these people came from many walks in life; farming, industrial trades, merchandising and, in many cases, professional fields. The ravages of war had taken away their homes, their livelihood and, in too many instances, their loved ones. They brought their skills with them and a burning hope for a new life devoid of oppression and deprivation. As may be imagined, there was very little work for the customs staff and we knew that we would be working merely as aides to help them through the required procedures.

A United States troop transport ship had docked at Pier 21 with a large number of the Displaced Persons. This was not a luxury liner but the accommodations were clean and

bright, the food was excellent and the crew was a very pleasant group. Laurie Power (another officer), decided to have a walk on the deck while waiting for our work to commence. A group of passengers preparing to land were lined up along the side of the deck away from the railing and they seemed to be pressing themselves close to the side of the ship as we approached. The deck was about 10 or 12 feet wide, providing plenty of room for all. When we saw one young woman reaching out to pull a small child toward her, we realized that they were in fear of us. We knew we were harmless but the sight of two uniformed officers seemed to terrify them. Neither Sebastian Coe or Donovan Bailey could have reached the gangway faster than we did. We spoke to our fellow officers and asked them to smile, even if it hurt, to assure these people that we would do them no harm.

Although some Customs officer had a limited knowledge of French language and knew a few expressions in a few others, we were at a complete loss when dealing with persons of Slavic origin. Fortunately, there were a number of people who assisted us in communicating with them and, most notably, the Sisters of Service who seemed to know all languages. These kind servants of God worked tirelessly for long hours and in all conditions to help ease the fears of the arrivals and speed them on the way to their new lives. Father Deslaurier was a Catholic Chaplain for the Port and was always in attendance. Rev. McKinnon was frequent visitor as were members of the local Italian, Greek and Jewish communities and their help was invaluable. Members of the Salvation Army and the Red Cross Society were in attendance, providing comfort and solace.

As previously mentioned, many passenger vessels used the facilities in Quebec City and Montreal when the St. Lawrence River was open to navigation but other vessels were year-round callers at the Port of Halifax. The steamships *Vulcania* and *Saturnia* were operated by an Italian company and sailed from Genoa to Halifax and on to New York. The arrival of these ships and others from the Mediterranean area brought a considerable amount of work for the Customs staff. Regulations require that all persons entering Canada must declare what goods accompany them and of other goods that would be arriving by other means. In addition, there are limitations of the quantities of spirituous liquors and tobacco products that may be brought in free of duty and taxes. Tobacco was a luxury that few could afford but many immigrants had large quantities of alcoholic beverages, however, there was another commodity that became the focus of our examinations.

Foot-and-mouth disease is a highly contagious viral disease of cattle, sheep and other animals with cloven (divided) hoofs. It occurs - in many regions of the world particularly in Africa, Asia and South America. The disease is rare in Australia, much of Europe and North America. (Foot Note: Max Brugh, Foot-and mouth disease, World Book Online America Edition, <http://www.aolsvc.worldbook.aol.com>.)

The Departments of Agriculture in Canada and the United States have an excellent record in preventing the spread of foot and mouth disease in our countries and we, the Customs officers, played a major role in ensuring this record would not be disturbed. The examination of baggage and effects of persons arriving from Italy was very thorough; we

were seeking out un-inspected meat and meat products, a most unglamorous occupation. When such material was located, it was confiscated and turned over to representatives of the Department of Agriculture for incineration on their premises. On one occasion I had found a tin containing some sort of animal fat and called the DAG man who placed it in a container (a forty-five gallon drum). The owner of the goods seemed extremely distressed over his loss and returned a few minutes later with an interpreter. This gentleman explained that the tin contained something of great value and asked if such could be returned. I arranged for the retrieval of the tin and took the two people into our office. I then dug into the lard and extracted a small roll, wrapped in a kind of plastic. When this was removed I found a total of six thousand US dollars had been concealed in this goey mess. Who wouldn't be upset at such a loss? I passed the money to the owner who still seemed concerned. The interpreter asked what action we would take for this smuggling attempt but assured him that United States dollars were not in our list of prohibited goods. The taking of money out of his country was illegal under their laws but we had no intention of pursuing the matter.

As an aside I would mention that I told the previous story on a daytime television show in Halifax a few years later and was ribbed by some fellow officers for not being more explicit when describing the wrapping material. I didn't know if you could say the word condom on live TV at that time!

Before proceeding with more episodes about Italian immigrants it should be understood that this was not ethnic profiling. The vast majority of these fine people were not aware of our laws and rules about meat or liquor and there was seldom, if ever, any disagreement when the materials were taken from them. There were some others who made elaborate efforts to conceal these restricted goods and we shall describe a few of them.

Large cans, purportedly containing olive oil, were examined with the use of metal probes after the caps were unscrewed or a hole made on the top when the tins were completely sealed. On many occasions the probe reached only half the depth of the container. In these instances the oil was discarded and the bottom half cut open to reveal a quantity of alcohol; this was also discarded. When the probes were used on trunks or other large baggage items, false bottoms were detected and found to contain liquor or meat, sometimes both. As may be expected, all these goods were taken from the offender and, unlike liquor displayed openly, the person was not permitted to retain any.

One immigrant was wearing a heavy overcoat as he came through the examining area in spite of the comfortable weather. When Tom Leblanc asked him to unbutton we saw a walking delicatessen; there were about twelve lengths of salami sewn to the lining. The meat was seized and, in retrospect, perhaps the coat should have been taken also. If the salami had carried the foot-and-mouth virus it could have infected the garment.

I was checking a can and although the probe reached the bottom I had felt an obstruction about halfway down. It wasn't large but somewhat suspicious. The contents were dumped and the tin cut open. We saw a small metal box soldered on one side and, when

it was removed, a lush covered ring box was revealed. We can only surmise that the owner had plans to be married and was bringing an engagement ring with him. I lifted the lid and it was quite a shock to this would-be smuggler to see that the box was empty and his ring had been stolen. His tinsmith had, most likely, pocketed the bauble before he performed his soldering duties. Ironically, the victim could have carried the ring in his hand as he was processed through Customs without intervention. (The Customs Tariff Item covering Settlers Effects required that any such goods must be in the possession of the importer for six months prior to arrival in Canada. However, as most nations restricted the amount of currency that could be taken out of their territory, the rules were eased to permit settlers to bring any non-prohibited goods they wished regardless of the dates of acquisition.)

The work of grubbing through pieces of baggage was tiring and, at times, somewhat dangerous. Glass or ceramic containers could be broken as the baggage was transported and the hands of the officers suffered many cuts and slashes as they performed their duties. I have a small scar on my left arm as a reminder to not attempt to open metal containers with a knife. The steamship companies had people to assist us with baggage operations but we often performed the tasks ourselves. The knife I was using slipped from the top of the tin and entered my arm. I proceeded to the Immigration Medical facility at the Pier where Dr. Sullivan examined the wound and bound it for me. (I recall the doctor as a very kind and pleasant gentleman.)

A Customs Officer had peeled metal from the top of a small can and, after probing the ripe olive contents, located a small automatic pistol; it appeared to be about .25 calibre., His knowledge of handguns was limited so I told him to slide back the top part of the weapon. There was a round in breech and a full clip on the gun. Reminding him to keep it pointed at the floor, I told him to slide the part forward, very slowly, and took the item from his hands. I removed the clip, ejected the bullet and gave the lot to the RCMP officers. (Their presence will be explained later). We asked them if any action would be taken against this transporter of a prohibited weapon and were told that there would be none. No harm had been done and they wouldn't want this hapless soul to lose his status as a landed immigrant.

The immigrants of whom we have written to this point had few items of value to declare. The War Brides didn't need to bring anything the Displaced Persons had little or nothing to bring and many of the Italian arrivals had suffered the loss of their property and livelihood because of the battles that were fought in their land. However, there were a number of more affluent persons arriving on the Saturnia and the Vulcania whose effects required closer scrutiny and, in some instances, documentation was prepared to allow free entry of valuable items.

Before closing this narrative of our New Canadians from Italy, I must report that, in general, the Customs Officers enjoyed the job of attending to these passengers. The episodes we have related were isolated ones when we consider the vast number of immigrants that had passed through the Customs system.

The Greek steamships Queen Frederika, Nea Hellas and other vessels brought many immigrants to Canada from Greece, Lebanon, Syria, and other countries in the area. In general, there was little difference between these arrivals and those from Italy except for the lack of meat and meat products in their baggage but there was no lack of alcoholic beverages. A few Customs Officers were able to use some simple phrases in the Italian language to communicate with people from Italy but we found the Greek language to be beyond our scope and we were fortunate in having the local residents to help us. I cannot recall any special events that would warrant comment; we examined baggage, documented if necessary, and assisted the travelers on their way to their new homes.

The liquor that was taken from the immigrants was held for thirty days and then, unless claimed, were destroyed under the direction of our Customs Inspectors; these officers were actually operational auditors and had many facets to their work. The passenger could obtain their property by applying to the liquor control authority in their new Province of residence. This was a costly procedure, as they were required to pay for packing, transportation, Customs duties and taxis as well as a fee to the provincial authorities. There were very few requests for this privilege.

A shipment of one hundred thousand tulip bulbs arrived in Ottawa at the end of 1945, a gift from Princess Juliana of The Netherlands. This was a token of appreciation to Canada for having the royal family as guests during the time their country was occupied by German forces during World War II and for the liberation of their lands by Canadian troops. Twenty thousand bulbs have arrived each year since that time and the Tulip Festival in Ottawa is world-renowned.

The gifts of tulip bulbs were, and are, welcomed by Canadians and we also welcomed the arrival of thousands of immigrants from The Netherlands. There were many farmers among them and were overwhelmed by the vastness of our country, and the possibilities of making a new life for themselves. The Holland-America steamships, Leerdam and Veendam were regular visitors to Halifax and, most frequently, baggage was examined in the Pier 21 cargo shed rather than the Baggage Annex.. This was due to the number of large crates and boxes utilized by the immigrants to transport farm equipment and their household effects.

The Dutch people were quite familiar with the Canada Customs Regulations that permitted the importation of their goods free of duties and taxes, with the proviso that they would not sell or dispose of them within one year, and they took full advantage of this boon.

Tables were set up at the foot of the gangway for the examination of hand-baggage when passengers were processed through the Immigration system on board the ship as would happen in situations described above. Harold Bayley and I were stationed at these tables on one occasion and a rather amusing event ensued.

An attractive, well-proportioned lady was descending the gangway accompanied with about six children. Harold, knowing I was a member of the Catholic Church and it's

stands on birth control, remarked, "Now this looks like a nice Catholic family". We were startled to hear an immediate reply from the lady as she said, "Not Catholic, passionate Protestants". My friend's discomfiture was eased quickly as we spoke to this pleasant woman.

Another officer, Owen Ritcey, had joined us at the examining tables and, as he looked up at the passengers disembarking, he appeared to be astonished. There was a group of three people, possibly mother and father and a daughter of about fifteen years of age. Owen approached the gangway and called out a name. The young lady looked at him and Owen ran to meet the threesome; there was a lot of hugging between them. That is not standard Customs procedure!!! By some strange quirk of fate, Owen was re-united with the family with whom he had been billeted as a Canadian soldier during the liberation of Holland.

Owen had spoken of those people a number of times and told us that he was treated as one of the family. Now he was able to have these friends meet his lovely wife, Vera, and their children.

The effects brought by the Dutch immigrants required Settlers Effects Entries and more tables were set up to meet this need. Customs officers would speak with the owners when they had located their goods and checked the receipts and other papers identifying their property. These New Canadians had done their homework and were well prepared. The official documents were completed and railway baggage checkers were called to arrange for the forwarding of the crates and boxes. I don't know if these packages were considered as baggage or cargo but all items disappeared into the Baggage cars.

The members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Customs staff worked very closely in administering the Customs Act as it applied to illegal importations. The Mounties would be provided with a copy of the passenger list when a vessel arrived and they would scan this manifest for names that might match those on their list of persons who might be engaged in smuggling operations. After one of their review, Sergeant Ken Parkin informed me that they had identified a gentleman who had been employed in the diamond industry and requested that we do an intensive examination of his effects. When the passenger placed his hand-baggage on the counter I asked him if he had anything to declare. I repeated the question two more times in the hearing of the Mounties. I should mention that the suspect did not speak English but was fluent in French and German. For some inexplicable reason I had retained a fair amount of my high-school French and could conduct simple conversations in that language. The gentleman replied "Non" each time I asked, "Avz vous quelque chose a declare?" I informed Sgt. Ken of the response and the examination started.

The hand-baggage was examined and a doctor in the Immigration Hospital conducted a personal examination, reporting that no extraneous material had been identified. For the next six hours, between four in the afternoon and ten o'clock, Harold Bayley and I sifted through this person's effects. I use the word "sifted" advisedly and will explain that further.

During the visit to the doctor, the passenger's clothing was examined and a gold ring with thirteen diamonds was discovered in a trouser pocket and I asked him why he had not mentioned it when I had questioned him earlier. He replied that he didn't think it was any more important than his shoes, socks and other items. I must translate what I hear from French to English and the reverse when I speak. It was difficult to answer his repeated question, "Pourquoi ma bande est perdu". (I hope that translates as "Why is my ring lost"). It was not long before we were reasonably sure that this mild person was an innocent man. He told that his employer had given him permission to make the ring as a gift for his wife and it would not have taken an expert to see that the stones were not worth very much. The train on which the gentleman was scheduled had now departed and he asked if he could speak to his wife in Montreal who would be expecting him. The Mounties had no objection but said that he must speak French and I should listen to his conversation. I took him to the train station, made the connection and listened.

We took a short break from our labours and purchased our supper of coffee and doughnuts in the baggage annex and resumed our examination.

A number of biscuits had been found in the baggage and we crushed them to powder, revealing no diamonds. It became obvious as we examined his effects that he was of limited means and there was little likelihood of finding contraband materials. Sergeant Parkin said that they would recommend that the ring be returned and no action taken against his hapless soul.

Passenger vessels sailing from port in Germany usually brought many immigrants from contiguous and other northern countries as well as German nationals. The Customs Officers were usually able to inform the passengers of the need to open their cases mostly with hand signals and, if there were any difficulties, the tireless interpreters would come to our assistance. For the most part, the examinations were routine but from time to time we would find rather expensive electronic or photographic equipment in the baggage and free entry documents would be prepared.

A very tall, sturdy man, about thirty years of age, came striding down the slope from the immigration area and greeted us in a strong "Canadian" accent. He was dressed in Lederhosen (leather trousers) and I thought it rather strange that this returning resident had adopted this form of attire during his visit to Germany. It was even more surprising when I noticed the card that identified him as a Landed Immigrant. I complimented him on his command of the English language and asked where he had acquired it. He informed us, in a booming voice, that he had spent several years in Canada as a prisoner of war and wanted to return as soon as possible after his repatriation. I assured him that we were delighted with his decision and welcomed him as a New Canadian.

Free advice is said to be worth what it cost but I venture to offer a suggestion to all travelers; when questioned by officials, reply truthfully and briefly. Do not offer additional information. Talking more than necessary could indicate nervousness and a guilty conscience. A young man, accompanied by an attractive young lady, entered the

Ramp and placed a suitcase on the counter. The man said that he was not with the lady but was helping her because she did not speak or understand the English language. Bob Burbridge turned his head and looked at me with no comment.

The suitcase was opened and Bob drew out two paper wrapped packets and proceeded to open them. The young man repeated his story of not being with her but only helping with the language. One packet contained thirty-five watch movements and the other the other contained thirty four. At that point I suggested that the man continue with his own affairs and should leave. We called the two female officers, Marg Day and Jean MacKenzie and asked them to conduct a personal search of the passenger in our office. They returned in due time with two more packets each containing thirty-five watches. I escorted the woman to Jack O'Neill, our Superintendent, and told him the details and suggested that the watches were stolen property. My remark elicited an immediate reply from the lady who didn't understand or speak our language. "I didn't steal anything", she said in a sharp tone and in perfect English. The goods were seized and later sold at a Customs Auction. We were informed that the street value was over twelve thousand dollars. There was no action taken against the immigrant and she was permitted to continue her journey.

A small steamship had arrived from Germany and docked at Pier 23 about six in the evening with four or five passengers. I boarded the vessel in the company of an Immigration Inspector and, after he conducted his examinations and granted Landed Immigrant status, I spoke to the group and was informed that they had a considerable quantity of effects to declare. Their goods were classed as cargo rather than baggage and included an automobile, a truck machinery for mixing paint, and a quantity of products to establish a painting manufactory. These items would be allowed free entry but formal Settlers Effects Entries would have to be processed through the Customs system at the main office before being released.

On the morning following after the arrival of the vessel, I arranged to meet one of the gentlemen at the Customs House where the entries were duly completed. The good could now be released to the railway company for furtherance and, when the owners reached their destination (I believe it was Waterloo, Ontario) the vehicles could be registered with the provincial authorities. The gentleman spoke excellent English and, as I walked with him to return to the dock area, I asked how he had become so fluent. He said that he had learned it in Canada as a Prisoner of War. (Another one?) In reply to my question as to which service he had belonged and when he had been taken, he replied, "My submarine was captured in the Bay of Biscay during the month of September, 1939. "Weren't you fortunate?" I said. His smile was almost beatific as he answered, "Yes, wasn't I?"

Germany had commissioned 1153 U-Boats of which 784 were lost, 154 captured, and others scuttled. 27,000 submariners were killed of a compliment of 40,000 and 5,000 captured.

There were very few, if any, ships with large numbers of immigrants from France arriving in Halifax. Possibly these French nationals preferred to arrive in the ports of

Quebec when such were open and where their language would be more readily understood. We did process a number of French immigrants but I do not recall having dealt with large groups at any one time.

Processing immigrants from Great Britain was, with no disrespect to the people, a duller occupation than attending to those from other parts of Europe. The hand baggage contained the same sort of items that we would carry on a vacation or business trip and heavier baggage revealed only household goods and keepsakes. The sight of older ladies traveling alone became a noticeable from about 1950. In almost every instance they were coming to live with daughters who had married Canadian troops. I approached one lady who was holding a finely polished chest in her lap. She seemed to be a little confused at the hubbub around her and, to set her at ease, I asked, "What do you have there, the Crown Jewels"? I was very embarrassed to hear her reply, "no, my daughter." After I had apologized for my gauche remark she told me that she was going to live with her other daughter and wanted to have the memory of their loss with her. After expediting the processing of her baggage I resolved to be more careful when questioning passengers about their effects.

The disembarkation of returning troops was a military movement and there was no need for our examinations; our only responsibility was to check any goods being landed by crewmembers or visitors. After one troopship had docked at Pier 20 and discharged its passengers, I was assigned to "cover the gangway" from midnight to eight A.M. At about two o'clock I was surprised to see several senior army officers descending the gangway with a man of small stature in their midst. I noticed that the man was wearing a soldier's battle dress uniform with no insignia of any type. I was about fifty feet from the landing and, decided this was military business, I maintained the distance. The group left in several army vehicles and I resumed my patrol. Several months later we learned that the German General, Kurt Meyer, who had been tried and found guilty as a Criminal of War by a Canadian Military Court in Germany on December 27th, 1945, would be starting to serve his life sentence at the penitentiary in Dorchester, New Brunswick. Sir Anthony Eden (later Lord Avon) was the only famous person I had encountered and, perhaps, General Meyer was the lone infamous one.

A much needed expansion of the baggage annex was completed in 1955 and provided ample room for the Customs examinations over the next few years. However, the great flow of immigrants we had experienced in the early fifties began to abate from 1955 onward. There were fewer ships and the passenger lists were becoming smaller. There were more Canadian residents, visitors from other countries, businessmen and women rather than immigrants. This trend continued until the closure of Pier 21 in 1971 when the last passenger ship sailed into history.

As I look back at the years of my service as a Customs Officer, I get a feeling of satisfaction, of having made a small contribution in welcoming newcomers to our land. I met and spoke to many people from different countries and varied backgrounds and this experience provided me with a better understanding and appreciation for those who had chosen to come here. They brought their heritage, their customs, their skills and talents.