

**The Pier 21 Story
Halifax 1924-1971**

Prepared by
Public Affairs
Nova Scotia Region
Canada Employment and
Immigration Commission

Preface

For fifty years the people who staffed Pier 21 played a vital role in Canada's immigration history. During that time over 1.5 million new Canadians joined our country through the portals of Pier 21 to start a new life.

Through the long hours, the heartaches, the frustrations, a group of people represented Canada. They exemplify the best ideals of dedicated public service.

This group was made up of volunteers from churches and other service organizations, and staff from various federal agencies, including, of course, our own immigration officials.

They played host to strangers for annual special events such as Christmas. They communicated with hundreds of thousands of people including many whose language they did not understand.

They had to reassure, to encourage, to supply information, to help literally thousands of special cases.

An era has ended. For the time being the number of new Canadians to arrive on our shores has lessened. The great ocean liners that used to transport hundreds of thousands of people who spoke strange languages are part of our past.

Today's new immigrants usually arrive by plane at any one of 31 immigration centres across Canada.

This short history of Pier 21 is dedicated to the volunteers and officials who greeted the newcomers to Pier 21.

J.P. LeBlanc
Director General
Nova Scotia Region
Employment and Immigration Canada

Acknowledgements

Nova Scotia Region Public Affairs takes pleasure in producing the Pier 21 Story that honours the people who acted as true humanitarians in welcoming thousands of new Canadians through the Halifax port of entry. Undoubtedly there are other stories in the history of Pier 21 that remain untold.

First, our special thanks to Mollie Gallagher who did the original research and writing.

Our appreciation is also extended to Father J.R. Brown and Rev. J.P.C. Fraser who outlined their own people experiences associated with Pier 21 activity as did Immigration staff John Hood, Gordon Low, Frank Wright, Gordon Thomas and Bill Marks.

The photographs that appear are from our own records as well as those of Rev. J.P.C. Fraser and the National Harbours Board collections.

Finally, we would like to thank our Information Services Officer Les Gallagher for the final completion of the document.

W.C. Boyle
Regional Manager Public Affairs
Nova Scotia Region
Employment and Immigration Canada

Halifax, in 1924, was a city resolutely looking forward. In the past were the war years: the disastrous explosion of 1917; the disheartening riot of 1918. In 1924, Halifax may still have been licking its wounds, but the signs of revitalization were all around.

The census of 1921, for example, showed that the population of the city had jumped by a full quarter from 1911 to over 58,000 in 1921. Dartmouth now added almost 8,000 more people to the metropolitan area. A temporary wooden railway terminal had been completed in the south end of the city to replace the old North Depot heavily damaged in the 1917 Explosion. An experimental broadcasting station situated in the Marble Building for the past four years would soon be replaced by the city's first permanent radio station, CHNS. Even more amazing was the fact that shortly after the war Alcock and Brown had successfully completed the first transatlantic flight to the Old Country, as many Haligonians still referred to it, from the island of Newfoundland.

More important than all these new-fangled innovations, however, to both the city and the country was the encouraging regrowth in the tide of immigrants entering Canada through the port of Halifax. Immigration, which had dropped from over 400,000 in 1913 to a mere 42,000 in the last year of the war, was again on the upswing. It rose to nearly 134,000 in 1923 and would stay near that average for the rest of the decade.

Immigration was a vital factor in Canada's growth, accounting for almost the entire population increase between 1901 and 1931; and, since the vast majority of immigrants were from Europe, most of them were bound to go through Halifax in their search for a better future. Consequently, Halifax already had a long and colourful record of greeting immigrant starting with the first Canada Immigration Act of 1869 which established an Immigration Office at Halifax along with others at Saint John, Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, Toronto and Hamilton.

Although Canadian immigrant records have been kept since the arrival of the S.S. PERUVIAN in Quebec on 1 May, 1865, records from Halifax were only officially recognized and maintained in Ottawa after Halifax was declared a port of entry in January, 1881. By the start of World War I, the city had already processed hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the new country of their hopes.

Prior to the 1920s, immigrant arrivals were handled at Pier 21 in the north end of the city, near the North Depot or North Street Railway Station. The officers at Pier 2 worked closely with the quarantine station at Lawlors Island in Eastern Passage and the Rock Head quarantine hospital in Northend Halifax. The Rock Head Hospital maintained operations until the 1960's, and in 1957 its staff was raised to a high of thirty-eight when it was temporarily transformed into a hostel for Hungarians refugees.

The facilities of Pier 2 were, unfortunately, largely destroyed in the Explosion of 1917, and for the next seven years the processing of immigrants was a makeshift process at best. The early 1920s, with their flood of Europeans escaping the aftermath of war, proved especially difficult. Halifax was at this time the major port of entry for immigrants and their first impression of their adoptive country was received as they wended their way through the processes of being officially landed. The desolate landscape of the devastated Northend cannot have left the happiest of impressions.

In 1924, however, the situation was finally rectified. Facilities were opened adjoining the temporary southend railway station in a large, airy building that for more than forty years would bear the name, familiar to hundreds of thousands of immigrants, of "Pier 21".

"Pier 21" was really a complex of buildings, connected by ramp to the railway station, and containing such facilities as Immigration Services, Customs, Health and Welfare, Agriculture, the Red Cross, a waiting room, a restaurant-dining room, a canteen where one could purchase supplies for the impending train journey, a nursery, a hospital complete with operating room, a detention centre, a kitchen, dormitories, and a promenade overlooking the harbour. Descriptions of Pier 21 have varied over the years, perhaps inevitably becoming less favourable as the facility aged.

“To the casual passerby at the Halifax Ocean Terminals, Transit Shed 21 is simply a two-storey building and has nothing in its outward appearance to show that it is different from any of the other transit sheds. It is different, however, for on the second floor of this shed is housed the Halifax branch of the Canadian Immigration Department. It is here that every immigrant who enters Canada by way of Halifax first sets foot on Canadian soil. It is here that first and perhaps lasting impressions of the new country are made, and it is safe to say that the newcomer is never disappointed with the land which he has chosen to make his new home.

Almost the whole floor of this large shed is devoted to the Immigration Department. Its many windows make it nearly as bright indoors as out, and at night it is so well lighted that one can read without difficulty in almost any part of the room. The polished floors and benches add to the appearance of light and cleanliness.

Into this well-heated, lighted and perfectly ventilated building the immigrants are conducted immediately on leaving the boat, and they are at once taken to the general assembly room by the Immigration guards. A large Union Jack hangs on the nearest wall. This emblem probably does more than anything else could to impress on them that they are in a British country; that to many of them customs, habits and even the language is new.” (1)

“An immense throng of men, women and children crowds an interior starkly illuminated by overhead lamps. The multitude may easily surpass the number of a thousand. A certain cheerful restlessness prevails; everywhere there is movement.

People are leaving the restaurant dining-room at the far end; others are on their way with children to the Red Cross room or Social Services; still others stand grouped about their baggage in conversation or in queues at the ticket windows or foreign exchange bureau.

The floor lies ankle deep with orange peel and paper, and above the perpetual babble of children’s voices rises the strident tones of the loudspeaker announcing heavy baggage ready for inspection.

Intended as a place of rest and supposedly occupied by persons merely waiting to go aboard their trains, the hall is in reality a maze where some mothers are anxiously tracking down wandering infants and others exhibit concern for that next most important commodity, the family possession of bags and boxes; or, to use another metaphor, the hall is a turbulent pool where people pass and re-pass, eddy in little vortices, and are borne about as on currents which pour in from all sides like tributary brooks in flood.

Lost tickets, hurried canteen purchases, vehement debates as to supposed destinations – these are spontaneous and local disturbances within the welter of this whole.” (2)

“By the thousands they came flooding through the doors of Pier 21, eyes bright with hope but apprehension in their hearts. One wonders what passed through the immigrants’ minds as they saw the rather forbidding grey building with a brick centre feature and barred windows. Can anyone, who has not experienced the trauma of being uprooted and transplanted, describe with any degree of accuracy the feelings of these new Canadians.” (3)

From 1924 to 1930 immigration from Europe was brisk and steady, averaging 130,000 people a year. Passengers were sorted into families, women and children travelling alone, and single men, before being examined by immigration officials. Every step in the process, from initial examination to boarding the pre-arranged trains, could be done under one roof with assistance from the Red Cross and a number of other service organizations.

Potential immigrants who failed to meet the required criteria at the first interview, either for substantial or technical reasons, were sent to the Dominion Immigration Agent's office for further examination. If this were not concluded satisfactorily they would be likely to spend the night in the detention quarters awaiting either the satisfactory resolution of their dilemmas or else deportation.

Dormitories were provided for immigrants spending the night in Halifax before moving on and special accommodations were provided for families who wished to stay together. True to tradition, a contemporary report noted that "the English and foreign women are quartered in separate dormitories, as are the English and foreign men".

The Red Cross, with up to twenty-two volunteer workers, provided special services to the immigrants, and especially to the women and children. A large sunny nursery held twelve cribs and seven cots for the travel-weary infants and their mothers. There was also a special area with baths in which the Red Cross workers could wash the fretting babies, while tired mothers refreshed themselves in tubs and with washbasins. All Red Cross services were provided free of charge with remuneration left entirely to the means and dispositions of the recipient.

Besides the Red Cross, various religious and social organizations participated in welcoming the new immigrants, often guided by the religious affiliation found in the ship's passenger manifest. Clergymen were on hand to attend to spiritual needs.

The immigrant trains on tracks adjacent to the Southend station in the 1920's, were called colonist trains and were primitive in nature. Coal burning stoves at each end of the cars provided heat, and the dining facilities left much to be desired. The trains, moreover, showed little improvement over the next twenty years. Immigrants generally purchased supplies for the journey at the Pier 21 canteen, and the most popular items were bread, butter, cheese, sardines, canned meat, and fruits.

Because many women and children crossed the Atlantic alone to join husbands who had gone before, the Immigration service had special facilities for assisting them. Miss A.S.M. Bullock was principal woman officer of the Women's Division of the Halifax branch of the Department of Immigration in the 20s and 30s, to assist wives and children in their brief stay in Halifax. She handed them over to the good offices of the train conductresses, also in the service of the Immigration Department. Every train that left Halifax carrying immigrants was accompanied by a conductress to supervise the needs of the women and children.

In the 1930-39, immigration to Canada, and through Halifax, slowed to a trickle because of high unemployment and world-wide economic conditions. Between 1930 and the end of the second World War, immigration to Canada never rose higher than 15,000 – a sorry total when contrasted with the 400,000 of 1913.

It was an unhappy time at Pier 21. Thousands of immigrants were returning home, either voluntarily or by force of law. Many had become public charges and were being returned unwillingly to a situation even worse than that they were leaving. Others had become disenchanted with their adoptive land, and were returning to their native homeland hopeful of a better reception.

"What a country!" said one disgruntled British immigrant, "Paper money and wooden houses."

By 1939, the world was ripe for change. In Halifax, the depression and the impending warclouds were lightened by the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. Their blue and silver train pulled into Union Station at midday on the 16th of June and they departed that night from Pier 21.

"When the visitors departed at the end of the day, Premier Angus L. Macdonald of Nova Scotia bade farewell to his Queen in the old courtly Highland way by bending a knee and kissing her hand, a gesture that delighted every bluenose with a drop of Highland blood.

The squadron left the harbour just as the sun was going down, with the SKEENA and SAGUENAY leading, then EMPRESS OF BRITAIN with the flush of the sunset on her fresh white hull and golden-tinted funnels, and finally SOUTHAMPTON and GLASGOW, all in line. They steamed slowly down to Chebucto Head and turned towards the east in the last of the afterglow, in a sea smooth and shimmering like mother-of-pearl, a departure almost theatrical in its perfection.

The sun was indeed going down on them and on the world; for within nine weeks the Russo German pact was announced. Hitler followed quickly with his infamous demands on Poland, Britain gave her solemn warning, and the long night fell." (4)

During the war that followed, Pier 21 filled many functions not normally associated with the Immigration Service. It became a vital component of the "East Coast Canadian Port" made famous by newsreels and broadcasts. This contribution was officially recognized when two Officers-in-Charge received British Empire medals for their part in the war effort.

From 1939 to 1945 the Pier was involved in the embarkation of troops bound for the European theatre, the control of merchant seamen, the reception of prisoners of war, the reception of evacuee children from Britain, the reception of "duration of war" aliens, the processing of hospitalized servicemen, the reception of survivors of torpedoed merchant ships, the arrivals of VIPs such as Winston Churchill, and the welcome of returning servicemen. At one point the Assembly and Examination Rooms were turned into an army barracks. An entire regiment was quartered there, using downstairs as a drill area.

A variety of regiments left from Halifax through Pier 21, although wartime security blanketed such affairs so far as the media was concerned. Equally anonymous was the processing of sailors from countries forcibly allied with the Nazis, or from our own allied countries. Many seamen from such countries as Norway or France jumped ship in Halifax with the intention of joining the Allied when it became evident what was happening in their home countries. Throughout the war there was the constant problem of reprocessing men whose ships had been sunk beneath them.

One of the more infamous prisoners of war to enter Nova Scotia through Pier 21 was U-Boat Captain Kurt Meyer, who was unpopular for his treatment of Canadian prisoners of war.

Earlier, in 1940, the prisoners from the scuttled GRAF SPEE entered Canada through Pier 21, before travelling under guard to a prison camp in Central Canada.

After the end of the War, immigration immediately picked up, jumping from 13,000 in 1944 to 72,000 in 1946. Pier 21 suffered a serious fire in 1944 and the quarters were rebuilt and reoccupied in December 1, 1946. In the intermediate period, detention quarters had been in hastily constructed army huts to the rear of the annex kitchen. The new quarters, however, were just in time to deal with the flood of army brides and refugees.

Immigration officially reopened in 1947, and immediately faced a heavy flow of war brides, both Allied and German. Many of the British brides came over on the AQUITANIA from Southampton or the FRANCONIA from Liverpool. Even then the trip was not necessarily easy as one war bride remembers:

"We boarded the FRANCONIA at Liverpool and hit unusually heavy gales on the way over. At one point we were stopped for twenty-four hours before they restarted the engines, and then again for twelve hours.

The ships had been used during the war and were only recently converted so they were not very comfortable for passengers. When we finally arrived in Halifax, we went straight onto the trains although I do remember that the church groups were very well organized and most passengers were met by ministers of their faith.

There were a number of war brides on the boat and the train, and Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were very frightening to us. We travelled through snow-covered wilderness with only the occasional wooden house throughout all the daylight hours, and I remember that many of us were wondering by the time we reached Quebec if we should be worrying about Indians still."

The wheel of the AQUITANIA can still be seen on Citadel Hill in recognition of the role she played in Halifax history.

The main aids to the immigrant in those days, besides the official representatives, were the ladies of the Traveller's Aid, the YWCA, the Roman Catholic Sisters of Service, and representatives of various churches together with the omnipresent volunteers of the Red Cross.

For the war brides, this was a strange and unsettled land they came to. The newness of the country had a strange ambivalence about it. At one point, an Indian medicine man in full regalia was situated on the Mezzanine floor as a welcoming gesture. Concurrently, "it was facetiously suggested among the welcoming committees that a gentleman having a full head of hair should stand nearest the gangway as being the most reassuring indication of the discontinuance of tribal warfare."

Together with the war brides and the traditional British immigrants came the refugees, both official and unofficial, from war-torn Europe.

"To observers at Halifax, from the day in April 1947 when S.S. AQUITANIA drew into dock carrying a pioneer contingent, it was obvious that Canada had opened the door well in advance of the United States and other western countries ... that obstacles to resettlement early in 1948 in the States were such that even the immensely powerful philanthropic societies there, while active in Europe in the distribution of relief, could not defeat the exclusive laws of their own country and make it a haven for all their proteges. This is why the needy people of Europe could not be left entirely to the generosity of the larger communions of Canada's powerful and internationally prominent neighbour.

Neither could the rescue be left to other possibilities of resettlement. Australian passages, for example, did not begin in a substantial way until 1949 and until, some months later, chartered vessels used for immigrants on the outward voyage brought back Dutch troops from Indonesia. South America rivalled Canada in an early start in refugee reception, but the ocean travel required twice the time, and other conditions operated to slow down the movement there.

The United Kingdom had played its part already, the settlement in Britain of much of the Polish Army had taken place. In 1947 the British nation was itself facing an economic crisis, yet undertook the "Balt Cygnet" and "Westward Ho" operations, whereby eighty-four thousand were received. Nevertheless, when vessels first became available in 1946 after the return of the fighting men, the short haul of six days across the Atlantic to Halifax helped to give to Canada a natural lead over all other countries. These important factors in the general situation became apparent to workers on the Pier.

Thus it was that, as the clouds of hardship deepened over central Europe in 1947, a narrow but distinct band of brightness showed for the homeless people over the north-western horizon where Canada lay awaiting its new inhabitants. Canada offered at this time the most promising means of resettlement to the stateless migrant, in effective legislation, and in the hope of early and satisfactory transportation." (2)

This was a unique opportunity in Canadian immigration history. People were coming to Canada not merely because of the hope it offered, but because they were fleeing their war-torn and famine-ridden countries. The most notable waves of the period were the Baltic refugees of 1948-49 and the Displaced Persons movement from 1948-52. There was also, however, heavy Dutch immigration from 1947-49, and Italian immigration from 1948 onward.

The Dutch immigrants were particularly remembered by Pier 21 officials because of their habit of bringing their household goods in huge wooden boxes that appeared to be a forerunner of the modern shipping container. Pier 21 officials used to joke that these boxes contained everything but the kitchen sink, until the day that Customs opened one container and actually discovered a kitchen sink among the other items.

German immigration commenced in 1950 after the lifting of the Enemy Alien Prohibition.

The most memorable of the refugees were those from the Baltic countries in 1948-50, notably the Estonians. The Baltic refugees joined forces to purchase ships that were frequently unseaworthy in nature and left the occupants exposed to the elements. Among the ships that they used were the WALNUT and SARABANDE, both converted trawlers, the PARNU, a converted minesweeper, and the GLADSTONE, an old fishing schooner.

In the summer of 1949 the AMANDA, a converted fish packer, arrived from Sweden. It was the smallest ship to have successfully crossed the Atlantic and interest among the news media was high. Skipped by three Latvian sea captains, it brought over twenty Baltic refugees who had fled to Sweden early in the war. Later in the year, the GLADSTONE would challenge the AMANDA's title of smallest ship to arrive.

Stationed at Pier 21 in those days was an officer of the I.R.O. (International Refugee Organization) who played many roles with hardly a pause for breath between. Together with immigration services and the volunteer agencies he did his best to assure that the newcomers received a humane welcome and were sent on their way with the best aids available.

“It was the long overtime hours voluntarily spent by seniors and clerks at the ticket windows, and in personal services to the passengers at the baggage-room, in the dining-room and the money exchange bureau, and by the railway police, by the ‘red-caps’ and men of the yards, that most of the difficulties were smoothed out. These men and women formed an amateur reception bureau; they watched over the needs of the passengers with such care that in all the tumult of moving vehicles and lengthy vistas of the open tracks of a great sea-port, in the passage of half a million people, not a child received an injury.” (2)

The Churches, the YWCA, the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides were all involved in meeting and helping refugees. The YWCA for several years provided a meeting place where refugees could get together and discuss common problems and possible job opportunities. They also helped the refugees to look for jobs and held social evenings where they could practise their English.

The International Refugee Officer during these years is well-remembered by the many people he assisted. One Latvian refugee remembers his kindness when she arrived with her husband and two-year old daughter: “We came in February with no winter clothes or rubbers, and our little girl looked very hungry and miserable. He took us into his office and sent out for cocoa and fig newton cookies. As long as I live, I'll never forget how good those cookies tasted to us.”

1946-50 were difficult but exhilarating years for Pier 21. Dealing with refugees had its unique challenges, frustrations, and successes.

“Derelict in the hall as the trains prepare to depart, like spars left upon a beach by the receding tide, appeared here and there a number of individuals not clearly provided for by the official movements. These, ineligible for the free passage, had converted all their small assets into steamer tickets and landing money, in a private venture. They had been accepted for visaing in the generous hope that the so-called sponsor might be able to claim and maintain them.

One may take as an example a woman in middle life who, as it turned out, had lost her relatives in the Resistance movement of her native land. She stood there hesitant, fearful of every step forward, isolated by her peculiar dialect, without funds, distraught and alone in the new world. An observer might guess how dangerous to the spirit and even to life itself the perils of such solitary

reflections might be. There were also the children committed to foster-parents for the voyage; these children now found themselves assigned to trains with different destinations from those of their former escorts, and it was usually only an exhausting search on the part of the I.R.O. officer which produced substitute guardians, with only minutes to spare.

There were also travellers, again, of maturer age, but unnerved by past experience, for whom the crises of decisions upon disembarkation produced a bewilderment and even a species of fright which even the kindness of train officials was unable to allay. Fearful of greater mischance were the group who sat in trepidation awaiting the second examination. They were dimly aware of the number transported back to Europe from Canada. The authority, issued with the visa, in Europe, was only provisional; and the persons passed there, according to the Canadian code, were merely 'deemed' able to comply with the regulations, admissibility being finally fixed only at the port of entry.

All alike were the survivors of the holocaust of the times and had barely escaped with their lives from the shattering climax of the war, the last days of Hitler and the Russian advance. These events had scattered and decimated the households, and the remnants then endured the famine which as a consequence of the war afflicted the western countries. Next came the heart-breaking delays in waiting for opportunities for settlement overseas, and the gnawing anxieties of separation when, in the exacting process of selection, certain members of the family were rejected." (2)

"Some of the afflictions the immigrants endured were the product of their own errors. They had run the gamut of all hazards in their successful attempt at escape over the border, and their survival at that time had required the exercise of every faculty, legitimate and illegitimate. They employed against the I.R.O. and the receiving governments the same ingenuity which had served them so well in meeting the intense scrutiny of frontier guards and in passing dangerous obstacles. They continued to lay false information, even though they risked thereby an interrogation which, if it exposed them, would condemn them to perpetual Internment in the lands of starvation and unemployment. The deception practised was not always selfish in its objective; more often than not it was due to an excess of fervour on behalf of dependents. They invented street addresses of sponsors in Canada which proved to be a fiction and led to many a wild-goose chase later in the effort to locate such immigrants. They obtained black market funds in American and Canadian dollars, but tossed them overboard on the idle rumour that those who possessed such contraband might not be permitted to sail. They were ill-advised by casual acquaintances who gave them a misleading idea of the most favourable conditions for entrance, and consequently made statements as to places of birth and family origin in detention and behind barred windows and with which did not correspond with the lists. So it was guards at the door that many spent their first night in Canada. Multitudes experienced this upset through no fault of their own, but simply because the sponsor failed them. But for the offence of real misrepresentation there might be 'refusal of permission to land;' and the imminent prospect of deportation.

For other ills they bare, the immigrants were not responsible. For some, the emergency of their situation was beyond the reach of human aid. With ailments that the eye could not detect, death himself followed them across the water and decreed for them a pauper's burial." (2)

In the years following the war, nearly five hundred thousand immigrants passed through Pier 21, and a full hundred thousand of these were displaced persons. Large in heart, the workers of Pier 21 were only accused of being technical in detail. "One change in nomenclature would have been desirable in all this colour and confusion," the observer might reflect; as in the United States, the name 'private household workers', might have been entered in the manifest instead of 'domestic'; and, as in Britain, 'European Volunteer Worker', might have been used instead of the term 'D.P.' (2)

The work was hard; the days were long; but the results were ultimately rewarding for those involved with Pier 21 in the late 40's. Immigrants were landed, the country was growing, and human tragedy resulting from the war was being ameliorated.

On February 23, 1949, the front page of the Halifax Mail Star recorded that Canada had just received her 50,000th refugee.

"Eight-year-old Ausma Nevalds got the biggest reception of her life this morning when she arrived in the Port of Halifax on the SAMARIA - the 50,000th displaced person to come to Canada under the International Refugee Organization plan.

The slight blonde Latvian girl was greeted in Immigration centre by the flash and pop of camera flash bulbs, by swarming reporters and radio men, and her arrival was covered by newsreel men.

Ausma was one of the 1,200 displaced persons from Cuxhaven to come ashore in Halifax en route to new homes in Canada. Accompanied by her mother Karlina and sister Rasma, the little D.P. is en route to join her father, a farmer's helper in New Hamburg, Ontario. Their home in Latvia was the countryside of Liepaja."

As Ausma was being interviewed, the Ames Brothers' record "To Think You've Chosen Me" was playing in the background. Today she lives in Peterborough with a son of her own. She shares a house with her mother and father, now retired, and she still has the locket and doll given to her by Halifax Mayor J.E. Ahern.

"At length the long day which we have attempted thus to describe, typical of many over four years, draws to a close. Upstairs in the forbidden area where the security officers make their inspection of all immigrants, peace finally descends upon the scene. A few held for a second examination must await decision and be housed in hospitable detention rooms under the Matron's care. It would be impossible to enumerate all the sections of this Immigration Department and to master the orders from Ottawa, changing every month. Nevertheless, it was the business of the Inspector-in-Charge and his staff to see that the regulations were followed and in this the public opinion of Canada was behind them.

At a late hour the employees of the five other departments sharing the responsibility of admitting immigrants have gathered up their paraphernalia, shut off lights and closed up office doors; Health and Welfare, with hospital on the premises staffed by nurses; Justice, with plain-clothes Mounties behind the scenes; Agriculture commissioned to confiscate all vegetable and animal material that might carry germs; the National Railway and its officers; the Customs Department, which at Halifax had the genius to place four of its charming lady staff in Canada's front window. These all, with the guards, dining-room staff, shipping agents, and others, were willing to call it a day until the Camperdown Signals should report on the morrow: '09:00 hrs: AQUITANIA picked up pilot, now passing inner Automatic on her way up!'

The last of the chartered ships to Halifax was the ANNA SALEM on 19th December 1951. Already the polyglot uproar that had accompanied disembarkation from the first vessels had given place to more commonplace procedure; the scramble and hysteria associated with all processes in the 'pipe-line' overseas had been reduced: and from the general temper of the passengers, those on the receiving dock knew that life was returning once more to normal ways. Halifax became Canada's winter port again in the more old-fashioned manner. The master of ceremonies through it all the single I.R.O. officer, surrendered his appointment, the I.R.O. safe was sold, the telephone disconnected, and this extraordinary chapter in the fortunes of Canada came to an end." (2)

With the end of the war-bride and refugee wave, 1950-61 brought its own problems and triumphs for Pier 21. Immigration jumped from 74,000 in 1950 to an average of almost 160,000 during the next decade.

Pier 21 processed 16,000 immigrants in December, 1961, and 17,000 the following March. Among other highlights was the arrival of the first Russian defector, Petrovich, who was a stowaway on an Italian ship. He stayed in Immigration quarters for almost a year while the details of his case were being sorted out.

One of the first memorable events was the arrival of two ships, the ARGENTINA and the VULCANIA with over 1,800 passengers on Christmas Eve. The passengers were fed a traditional dinner of turkey and trimmings before boarding the trains for further travel, but the kitchen facilities were strained to the utmost.

Around the same time the passenger Liner AROSA KLUM made a dash to the Pier and docked ahead of an arriving Cunard ship. It was therefore saved the problems of anchoring and waiting for a berth, but the race to dock must have brought its own strains for within minutes of pulling out to return to Germany the Captain suffered a heart attack on the bridge and died.

During her visit to Canada in 1957, the Queen's train was on the west track of the railway station during the three days she spent in Halifax. The official car was stored in the baggage room at Pier 21, and the guards had the pleasant task of opening the door for Her Majesty each time the royal party required its use.

In the mid-50s, United States dockworkers went on strike and Halifax received an extra consignment of passenger liners. In one day, when five large passenger ships including the QUEEN ELIZABETH were in port, immigration officials processed a total of 3,800 passengers with the assistance of U.S. Immigration authorities. You could hardly move in Pier 21 that day.

The 50s were the days of the passenger liners, bringing immigrants to Canada by the thousands. The staff of the Immigration offices were occasionally invited to lunch and, without exception, the menu consisted of salad (with octopus), spaghetti, sauce, steak, french fried potatoes, and fruit, cheese or ice cream and, of course, liquid refreshment - continental style.

When not invited on board a liner, immigration staff would generally join incoming passengers in the Pier 21 dining room where a full course meal could be had in the late 40s for 55 cents. In the 50s it jumped to 75 cents, still among the best bargains in town. The Canteen also had a "Special", a cardboard box containing the essentials for the long train journey for \$2.00.

The foodstuffs that many immigrants brought with them was a continuing problem as it had a tendency to suffer through the delays of travelling. Southern Italy created a particular dilemma to Customs as immigrants were inclined to bring containers of wines, pepperoni, salami, and cheeses of all kinds. Goat's milk cheese particularly suffered from the variety of temperatures to which it was subjected on the voyage and tended to be highly malodorous when presented to Customs officials in Halifax. Perhaps the most unpleasant smelling, package was one consisting of dried octopus that had been carried carefully all the way from Sicily by an elderly woman.

Sometimes the food brought over was a problem to the immigrants themselves as well as Immigration staff. With a large passenger liner, the practice was to bring off 250 people at a time as this was the maximum the Assembly room could hold. As each group of 250 moved past the medical officers into the Examination room, another group would enter the Assembly room. Such a system, however, meant that the benches in the Assembly room were fully occupied and any unnecessary spaces between passengers could leave some people standing. This left the guards in something of a dilemma on one occasion when the rest of the passengers refused to sit directly next to a little man with a rolled up towel in his lap. The mystery was solved when it was discovered that the towel contained dried octopus in an advanced state of decay, carefully carried all the way from his native Greek island, and the dilemma resolved when the octopus was taken into temporary custody by officials.

To add to the problems of officials, several companies began the practice of giving out free samples of their products to all arriving immigrants. Imperial Tobacco's donations of Ogden's tobacco and papers for the men and Turret cigarettes for the women were generally welcomed and closely guarded by the

recipients. Small boxes of cornflakes from Kellogg's turned out to be more of a problem. Not recognizing the cornflakes as a breakfast food, the immigrants tended to dispose of them after an initial examination, and often the floor from Pier 21 to the train station was strewn with discarded cornflake boxes.

A more serious difficulty, especially with immigrants from countries where graft was common among government officials, was discovering whether the immigrants had sufficient funds to take them to their destination. The question, "Do you have any money?" coming from anyone in uniform was greeted with great alarm and the answer was often an emphatic shake of the head and a definite "No!". It could take some considerable time working through an interpreter to reassure the anxious immigrant that the officer in charge merely wanted to see his funds, not to confiscate them for his personal use. Eventually, however, a small rolled-up bundle of money would appear from some hiding-place as the immigrant hesitantly accepted the fact that maybe things were different in this new country.

Cooking oil was another item that Pier 21 officials learned to have great reservations about. Many families arrived with a five-litre tin carefully soldered at the top. This seemed harmless enough until the day the Customs opened one at random and found a handgun inside. From then on all oil tins were opened and checked with disastrous results for the floors of pier 21.

The Medical Clinic received more than the average shock when one day U.S. carrier FORRESTAL swung too quickly away from the dock and struck the Pier near the medical facilities with her overhanging flight deck. The resulting hole was large enough to drive a car through, but fortunately no one was hurt by the freak accident.

Since the Pier was occasionally infested with cockroaches, as is only normal in such an establishment, patented cockroach killing devices were installed to solve the problem. Unfortunately, the cockroaches grew larger and the staff grew increasingly nauseated so the new-fangled inventions were dispensed with and cockroaches were attacked again by more conventional means.

On one occasion Alan Ladd was among the numerous celebrities to be viewed in the corridor leading from the CNR station to the embarkation deck. Immigration guards, working overtime, were paid \$3.50 an hour by the steamship company to escort him to the waiting train. None the less, by the time he boarded Alan had lost both his hat and his belt to aggressive female admirers.

When a passenger died in harbour aboard ship on her way to Canada, Immigration accepted the task of looking after her personal effects and, in consultation with the family, determining the interment site. Officials were somewhat nonplused when over a hundred thousand dollars worth of notes was found among her personal effects, but the problem was soon worked out and the money forwarded to her legal executor.

Hundreds of young women came to Canada as domestics and early fifties. Many of them were in the late forties qualified for far better jobs, but this was the only way they could enter the country. Twenty or thirty of them at a time would stay overnight at Pier 21 until the train left the following day.

In the late fifties, Halifax Immigration authorities were called upon to deal with the first arrivals from the Hungarian revolution. The first refugee appeared in early December of 1956 and of the 35,000 Hungarians admitted to Canada, approximately half passed through the port of Halifax. The old Rockhead Hospital, originally a quarantine site, was temporarily transformed into an accommodation centre and separate dormitories were maintained for men and women. Among the problems encountered was a young boy who continually attempted to gain admittance to the women's quarters, but this was soon resolved when "he" explained that she had only been able to escape in her brother's clothing. Together with her short hair, this had led Immigration officials to classify her as a male until translation facilities were available.

As the sixties began, it was evident that the days of crossing the Atlantic by ship were drawing to a close. Pier 21 had processed up to 50,000 immigrants a year during the fifties, but the passenger liners were

inexorably giving way to the faster and increasingly cheaper airplane. The promise first suggested by the flight of Alcock and Brown more than forty years before was finally coming true.

In fact, the last large-scale group of refugees to be processed at Pier 21 arrived largely by plane and not by the port at all. From 1961 to 1963, large numbers of Cuban exiles left their planes at Gander, Newfoundland, and sought access to the United States. Since the wait for a U.S. visa could be up to six months, they were temporarily housed at Pier 21.

Coming from all walks of life, from land-owners to doctors and from aircraft pilots to farmers, the refugees set up their own committees and appointed spokesmen to deal with the everyday problems of adjusting to strange surroundings and a new culture. Language training of a basic sort was begun, and negotiations carried out on everything from the provision of a bed and board for a refugee with back trouble to the preparation of an all-Cuban meal in the Pier kitchen. To the bemusement of Immigration staff, the two spokesmen in such everyday negotiations were a criminal lawyer and a commercial lawyer, both very adept at achieving their ends. At one point there were over one hundred Cubans in residence at the Pier, the largest population since the Baltic refugees of the later forties.

Salt cod was considered a particular treat by the refugees and they were delighted to find it so cheap in Halifax. They would prepare it by soaking it in hot water, and then covering it with chopped up onions, hard boiled eggs, and an egg sauce. A more special treat occurred when one of the guards answered the Pier 21 phone and was informed by an enthusiastic voice that he had just won \$25.00 in a random-dial contest. After conferring with the officer-in-charge, the guard accepted the cheque and took it, accompanied by two of the women chosen by the group, to the nearest supermarket. Keeping the purchases down to \$25.00 turned out to be a minor problem, but the children certainly appreciated the massive quantities of cake and ice cream.

Father J.R. Brown, the Roman Catholic representative at Pier 21 during the sixties, recalls one particularly memorable refugee. After eluding his guard at Gander on a flight to Cuba, he had been flown to Halifax for processing. Father Brown asked if there was anything he needed, thinking of such usual items as shaving gear or cigarettes.

"Yes," replied the refugee, "A piano."

"I was so surprised," says Father Brown, "that I actually asked 'what colour?'".

The Cuban then explained that he was a professional pianist and that he missed playing more than anything else. With the permission of Immigration officers, Father Brown took him to Mount Saint Vincent University where there were two large pianos.

"He played beautifully for hours," smiles Father Brown, "and it was a pleasure to listen to."

Christmas was a particularly memorable time for both the refugees and the Immigration officials who, with the help of volunteer agencies, went out of their way to ensure that the children had as close to the traditional holiday as was possible. The Cubans carefully built an altar of egg crates in Room 33 and covered it with the usual white altarpiece, in this case a tablecloth borrowed especially for the purpose from the kitchen. A Christmas party was arranged for the group, consisting at that time of about 14 children and 24 wives, and together with the beautifully-decorated tree there was a special Christmas dinner and gifts for all.

The various service groups could always be counted on to contribute something to the children's Christmas party. Santa Claus was traditionally played by one of the immigrants so that the children could understand him easily.

Another memorable event was the day in 1965 when the old Canadian Ensign was lowered and the new Canadian flag was unfurled as the noonday gun from Citadel Hill was fired. As one guard remembers,

"Not one of the staff applauded when the Canadian Ensign came down, but every one of the immigrants who had come out to watch the ceremony cheered the raising of the new Canadian flag."

Pier 21 still had its flow of regular immigrants during the sixties, however, with the largest groups being the Italalins and Greeks. The various churches at this time had a well-organized national network, so that immigrants would be met individually whatever their ultimate destination. Church representatives in Halifax would receive copies of the ship's passenger manifest shortly before it arrived, and would write to their counterparts across the country telling them who was scheduled to arrive at their railway station and when.

The United Church had a particularly interesting role to play as few, if any, immigrants from Europe were affiliated with it directly. "We were therefore free to help those who needed it most," remembers the Rev. J.P.C. Fraser who, together with his wife, spent long hours at Pier 21 during the sixties.

Mrs. Fraser passed out thousands of "ditty bags" provided by church groups across the country. These pretty little cloth bags were filled with such necessities as airmail forms, soap, combs, kleenex, toothpaste and toothbrush, facecloth, sweets for the children, notebook and pencil, stamps and a gospel in the appropriate language. They were often made up on the spot to fit a special need, whether it was an immigrant in need of a warm scarf and mittens, or a newly-wed couple for whom something special was usually found.

Up to 200 ditty bags a day were passed out, and it could be a long night indeed if a ship docked late. "There were many mornings we arrived home as the sun was rising," recalls Mrs. Fraser.

Many people arrived worried about money that was supposed to be waiting for them in Halifax, and was sometimes delayed or mislaid,

Sometimes a family had booked a train passage for a "red" or cheap day, and then arrived on a "blue" or "white" day, both more expensive. More tragically, it sometimes occurred that a travel agent had falsely assured immigrants that everything was paid for, and the victims would arrive at Pier 21 penniless and without the means to travel further. The United Church had made available to Rev. Fraser a fund for dealing with these emergencies and many a train ticket was purchased by the Church. The money was normally returned at a later date from towns and cities all over the country, recalls Rev. Fraser, although there was the odd occasion when an immigrant either could not or did not repay the money.

Nor were the churches and service organizations the only ones to welcome the refugees with gifts. Some immigration officers and guards were in the habit of handing out pennies or other tokens to the children in particular, and this was remembered by the immigrants.

Shortly before Pier 21 closed a woman appeared at the guard office. She was looking for a particular guard, she said, and although she could describe him, she did not know his name. Just then Frank Wright walked into the office. "That's him," the woman cried, pointing.

To the accompaniment of smiles from the other guards, she asked Frank if he remembered her and he had to confess he did not. "Well, I certainly remember you," she replied, and called in her son, a boy of seventeen with a chain around his neck from which hung a Canadian penny.

Frank had given the penny to her son many years ago, she explained, saying it was his first "Canadian money" The little boy had become so attached to the penny that his mother finally had it put on a chain so that he could constantly carry it with him. She had come back to Halifax especially to say "thank you" to Frank.

In the late sixties, the Czech refugees started to arrive and many of them stayed at Pier 21 until they had found accommodation elsewhere in the city. Father J.R. Brown remembers speaking to one of the first group and asking if there was anything he could do for them.

"The first couple that came up were all smiles, and holding out papers in their hands. As my interpreter listened to them, he started smiling as well. It turned out that the papers were wedding invitations; the couple had planned to be married in Prague the morning of the Russian invasion, and that was still the first thing on their minds."

Father Brown received special permission to marry them without the usual waiting period. Meanwhile, the bride-to-be had moved out of Pier 21 and into a boarding house. When her Greek landlady discovered the situation, she took her under her wing. By the time of the wedding, all the necessary items had been borrowed, including a white dress and a veil. All of the Czech refugees came to the wedding and it was quite an occasion.

"One Halifax couple very kindly hosted a reception," remembers Father Brown, "and another provided a honeymoon."

Around the same time as the Czech crisis, a number of Polish refugees left their ships in Halifax. Many were not true sailors at all, but rather people who as the result of long planning had decided that this was their best chance to reach a new country safely. At the first chance, they would report to immigration officers and ask for refugee status.

Polish communities across Canada quickly learned of the situation and wrote asking if there was anything they could do to help. The first group of Poles won their appeal in Ottawa, with the assistance of Father J. R. Brown. A second group, however, was turned down. With the assistance of other churchmen and a Halifax lawyer, an emergency debate in Parliament was arranged and the deportation of the Poles, who by this time numbered nine, was delayed. Eventually, a new appeal was heard and the refugees were all granted landed immigrant status for humanitarian reasons. The result pleased everyone, including the immigration officers who had first encouraged Father Brown to act for the refugees.

By the late sixties, however, it was becoming increasingly clear that the usefulness of Pier 21 was over. On 4 December 1967, the local newspaper recorded that the Cunard liner CARINTHIA had just paid her last visit to Halifax and was to be sold when she returned to Southampton. That week the SYLVANIA and CARMANIA were also due to make their last calls to Halifax for Cunard was abandoning the once lucrative Atlantic run. The CARINTHIA, which, in the heyday of liner travel had been filled to capacity with 800 passengers, carried only 240 on her last voyage - together with 70,000 bags of Christmas mail.

At the end of March, 1971, the Immigration service officially left Pier 21. In its peak years the maintenance of the Pier facilities and of the 221,000 square feet of space involved had required a staff of almost 30 over and above the immigration officers and other departmental staff. There were 22 guards, a caterer, and assistant caterer, two cooks, four kitchen helpers, two general service men to carry out janitorial duties, two matrons and two cleaning ladies. The Pier had included two kitchens, two canteens, a nursery, facilities for the voluntary agencies assisting immigrants, railway ticket booths, a currency exchange, sleeping accommodations for approximately 120 people, seating arrangements for nearly 600 people awaiting examination, a hospital and medical clinic, and detention quarters capable of full security for ten people.

During peak periods as many as ten immigration officers were involved in examining incoming passengers. Two more would be busy with settlement and placement or in-depth counselling, and an additional two would be aboard the vessel granting shore leave. Two guards would be required at the gangway, and another six would be on duty at strategic points throughout the complex.

At times, the simultaneous arrival of two or three ships would require that officers be brought in from the field to assist with the examinations. Several ships lying alongside the dock could well mean a total immigrant count of almost 2,000 people, all requiring fast and efficient processing. The examinations could continue well into the small hours of the morning before the last immigrant was successfully cleared for landing and moved on to catch his train, but the Immigration officers were still expected to present

themselves the next morning at the usual hour. Some nights it must have seemed easier just to stay at the Pier than to make the long trip home and back.

By 1971, all that lay in the past. Pier 21 was no longer needed and the days of the large passenger liner had gone forever. Air flights were more regular, smaller and easier to process so there were some advantages from an immigration officer's point of view. Nevertheless, despite all the benefits of air travel, many people would say that with the closing of Pier 21 a chapter of Canadian life was finished. Gone, apparently forever, was the excitement, the challenge, the exhilaration, of dealing with hundreds or even thousands of immigrants at once - people who had travelled for a week or more to reach Canada and who still had a train journey of days before them; people receiving their first impression of a vast, new country; people with special needs and unique problems; people who at Pier 21 were for almost 50 years met, examined, fed, nursed, sometimes housed, assisted with loans, married, even occasionally buried. Pier 21 was in many ways a bustling self-sufficient village hidden Within the vast anonymous-looking transit shed and the people who worked there will never forget it.

Bibliography

1. *The Open Gateway*. vol. 1, no. 2 (1932), p. 12., published by Halifax Harbour Commissioners. Halifax, Nova Scotia.
2. *Canada dn the Minority Churches of Eastern Europe 1946-50*, Mackinnon, Ian Forbes. Bookroom, Halifax, Nova Scotia (1958).
3. Unpublished notes by J. Hood.
4. *Halifax: Warden of the North*, Raddall, Thomas. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto/Montreal 1971.