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British Evacuee Child
Nova Scotia
October 10, 1940



A GUEST CHILD IN CANADA
1940-1944
By Richard Thomas
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How would you like to go to Canada?

The question was thrown at me out of the blue in August 1940. I was 15, impulsive and reckless. After giving the question perhaps one minute thought I said "yes". So important decisions are made.

It is only now, after some 55 years and after Ruth Goldbloom asked me to think about it, that I have thought about it.

In August 1940 France had fallen and our troops, or most of them had been evacuated from the beaches. The Battle of Britain was being fought in the sky, and the Battle of the Atlantic was under way. Stalin was attempting to deal with Hitler. Mussolini was about to join Germany to form the Axis and Spain was suspect. Nearly all of Europe was under German domination, and our Armed Forces were stretched beyond usefulness.

My parents were separated and I lived with my mother who was an author, journalist and former editor of the Needlewoman magazine. She had seen it all before. Only 25 years before she had been in France with Womens Nursing Corps working on the shattered minds and bodies of those who survived the horrors of that dreadful war. She saw the writing on the wall, and like so many others she was wrong. Britain survived.

But this is hindsight. The decision to send me to Canada was made and in a short time I was interviewed by the Childrens Overseas Reception Board, and accepted for export.

September 1940 was a memorable month. The air was filled with aircraft every day and the Battle of Britain was fought before an audience of millions who watched spellbound. It was a terrible time but not for boys who were young and knew no better.

I cannot remember exactly when I left, but I do remember going to Liverpool on a train with my mother where I stayed for a few days in a Salvation Army Hostel. I do not remember embarking nor do I have any recollection of saying goodbye. It is strange that such a part of my life is so blank.

We must have sailed on or about the 24th September on the RMS Nova Scotia, which was a small Furness Witny Liner. There were some 20 children aboard, most of whom were girls.

The voyage took about 12 to 14 days. We had fine weather and the sea was rough. Most people were ill, save for a group of Dutch sailors who were on board and spent their time making wooden clogs from pieces of wood which they sold or gave away. Although it was a dangerous voyage there was no feeling of fear. We were in a convoy of perhaps a hundred ships or more and we were attacked in mid Atlantic by submarines. Four ships were sunk and one of them was only about a mile away. Her bow came up and she slid down stern first, all within about four minutes. I don't think it ever occurred to us that it might happen to us but I remember we were all very sorry about that ship and her crew.

The convoy dispersed after being attacked and we went full speed to Newfoundland and some time during the first 10 days of October we sailed into St. John's and there in the harbour was an extraordinary sight. Some 40 or more old U.S. destroyers which had been in mothballs since the first World War were moored in lines, waiting to go into service in the Atlantic. They all had four funnels, and even then they looked as if they came out of the last century. But they worked and it was the beginning of the U.S. Lease Lend under which fiction the restocking of the British armoury began.

Newfoundland to us children seemed to be covered in blueberries which we had not seen before. It was wild and rugged and smelled of fish, which was a smell I was to live with for several years. Soon after our arrival we all went up to Government House where we had tea with the Governor. Newfoundland had not by then joined Canada and was a Crown Colony.

But we were soon on the move, and on or about the 10th October we sailed into Halifax and tied up at Pier 21. That is the day I think we did but I can remember very little about it until we arrived at Truro where we were taken by bus.

Indeed it is strange how little I do remember of these important events. I am left with the overwhelming impression of the trees when sailing into Halifax, the colours of the trees in Truro and the ever present smell of

apples. After 60 years the smell of apples takes me straight back to Nova Scotia. Of course we had apple juice for breakfast which we had not seen before. Not that it did not exist before of course, but it would all have gone into the cider press.

I had not been in Truro more than 2 or 3 days when a man came to see me. He was a Judge. He looked at me. Said a few words and I never saw him again. He must have passed judgement because within a day or so a lady came and without further adieu took me to Lunenburg where I spent four years and have never lost touch with it.

I suppose going to Lunenburg was one of the most important things to have happened to me. It was not all good, but it was all important. We were called guest children and I became the guest of the Kinley family. J.J. Kinley at that time was the Federal Member of Parliament for Lunenburg/Queens, as it then was, and later became a Senator. And eventually was Senior Senator.

From London to Lunenburg was a very big step. In London I went to the City of London School which was one of the big London schools and was financed by the City. Others were financed by Livery Companies or private trusts. The school had a large Jewish element and comprised about 750 worldly, traffic wise, self assertive and I suppose slightly arrogant boys aged 8 to 18. The choir boys of Westminster and the Chapel Royal all had scholarships to the school and it probably had the best boys choir in the world. It was a meritocracy and all were being groomed for the cut and thrust of commercial life in the City. Brokers, bankers, agents and a large proportion went into the professions.

Lunenburg was thriving fishing community comprising about 3500 people. It built and serviced its own ships, fished its own fish, and farmed its own land. It was a wealthy town and the people were industrious. There are many such towns in the world but until then I had never met one. There are an air of independence and self reliance. There was no master servant relationship. Everybody had a car, or seemed to, and heavy goods were hauled by teams of oxen. I do not remember seeing a horse. It was an exceptional town and I came into the care and under the umbrella of the Kinley family.

Curiously I was not the only new arrival at this time because a fleet of Norwegian whalers arrived in port and were converted to wartime use. Lunenburg became the Norwegian Naval Base and they came to play a leading part in the affairs of the town. Many married, and are still here and some took Lunenburg wives back to Norway after the war.

But it was all a change for me. I knew nothing of the fishing industry, nor of small town life, and certainly nothing of the non-conformist work ethic into which I was suddenly plunged. People who did not work in those days were misfits and, what's more, probably drank. I soon learned that was a very serious sin. There was no society, no class, no side. There was no ambivalence and life was played with a straight bat...

There was no question of which school I should go to. There was only one, in a large wooden building on top of a hill --- Blockhouse Hill. Here was another new world. Until then my schooling had been a succession of soft options. As little work as it was possible to get away with and as much fun and skylarking as could be had. But even so I found myself a little ahead of the work being done and I thus had the great advantage of doing it again and this added to the environment of work and discipline at home into which I was suddenly plunged meant that school was not really a problem. The class had about 45 pupils in it and the most remarkable thing about it to me was that half of them were girls. I had not known girls at school since primary school and it was an agreeable surprise to find that the two sexes could actually co-exist.

Games were another thing. English schools at that time were pre-occupied with games. It was a philosophy of cold showers and plenty of outdoor activity. In the summer we played cricket, and in the winter we played rugby. Many schools played hockey in the Spring. In addition I swam 6 lengths of the pool every day before lunch and one was expected to take an interest in fives and boxing. Colours and half colours were awarded for proficiency at games and the holders of these colours had the privilege of wearing a colours cap and blazer and the hierarchy of the school was based on this. The school was divided into houses, with its own colours or insignia and each house had its own team for games. Our houses were named after the Lord Mayors of London.

At my new school there were no games. There was an ice hockey team but this only catered for some 15 or 20 of the best players. There a skating rink, which formed part of the town furniture and a cinder track. Of course this did not mean that we did not play games. But organized games as such did not exist and the culture in this regard was quite different.

Further there was no school uniform. But it was a good school and a happy one with a complete absence of that form of elitism which was the vogue of the schools at home at the time.

The first person I met on my arrival was Jim Kinley and we formed a lifelong friendship. The atmosphere of the house was of course very political and very Liberal. We took to arguing the issues of the day and to

oil the wheels of debate I was cast as the Tory. In this capacity I was called on to defend whatever I was deemed to know about. Thus debate would rage over the English class system, the House of Lords, hereditary titles, English cars and trains and so on. We never lacked a subject. Soon after my arrival a great political event was to happen for which I was quite unprepared, but I can now remember it well, because it was the year that Wendell Wilkie ran against Roosevelt. We followed it every inch of the way and Roosevelt came home for the third time. My geography of the United States improved in no time. If you could not reel off the 48 States of the United States you were indeed a bohunk.

The two years, 1940 and 1941, was a difficult time. The news from England got worse and it was becoming clear that the war could not be won without the United States coming in. Public opinion in the United States would not permit this and the war was drifting in to a stalemate. Neither side could undertake a channel invasion and we were drifting into compromise. An this would have happened but for two amazing miscalculations which changed history. Germany invaded Russia and the Japanese struck Pearl Harbour. The tide turned. Needless to say this state of affairs gave plenty of fuel for our junior debating society.

I had to learn a new approach to money. Although my family had enough money and we lived reasonably well, money was always a factor to be considered when doing most things. My mothers' income came from book royalties and her journalism and it arrived in irregular lumps. There was always some element of doubt and I know it was a great worry for her. In my new family, money was not a consideration. We did not live extravagantly but what action was taken or decision made was not dictated by money. Without thinking about it, they had the secret of spending a penny less than they earned.

This was a very important way of life and to some extent has stayed with me. Whatever was necessary was obtained and I never remember the cost of anything being challenged or counted. An air of Presbyterian discipline ruled. We had an allowance of \$1 per month and I soon learned not to spend it.

This streak of Puritanism ran through rural Nova Scotia and in those days, some 60 years ago, it was the way of life. Lunenburg was settled by German immigrants and they were joined by Scottish and English migrants. The ethnic mix has not changed much and the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican churches all have prominent position in the town. They lived within themselves and they were a long lived healthy and Godfearing people.

Sunday in my new home was an important day. In all the time I was in Lunenburg I don't suppose I missed church on Sunday which was a complete reversal of my former life. I had been confirmed by the Bishop of London in St. Pauls Cathedral and my conviction to this faith was assumed.

Arrangements were made for me to attend morning service with the leader of the Anglican community who lived nearby and every Sunday morning I was picked up by them in a large new Oldsmobile which floated like a mobile settee to the church where we sang and were harangued by the Rector until 12:20 pm. The Anglican service always lasted 10 minutes longer than the others and then home for lunch.

Food in Lunenburg was always a treat and on Sunday it was lamb of beef and sometimes a loin of pork or a goose. Winter vegetables were new to me. Whereas at home we had winter cabbage, brussels sprouts leeks and other green things, in Canada these could not survive the winter temperatures and we had sauerkraut and squash. Milk was always on the table and we drank at least a pint a day. Cholesterol was not a known word. On Monday we paid for Sundays overindulgence with salt fish. We used to have a lot of scallops and occasionally a sack of lobsters would be delivered. Within a week or two I had learned how to kill and cook a lobster. We used to have one each and the rest were boiled.

My new life was certainly different and I have to admit it was better. The way the old man, as we called him, thought and worked was an education. He was a member of the Federal House and he ran a foundry, a small chain of drug stores, a hotel, a farm and a newspaper. It was not possible to live in such an environment without some of it rubbing off. I owe much to those few years I spent in Lunenburg.

The school year ended in July 1941, and Jim and I got our first job. It was a fairly humble one which was to pick Colorado Beetles off the potato field which had been planted next door. We were paid 10 cents an hour for this. We were then moved out to the farm provided with paint and brushes and told to paint the farm house. The house was of wooden shingle construction which I had not seen before and we made a good job of it.

At the end of the next year work became more important because I was to go to Acadia University and would need some money. So I went to Ontario where I got a job at a drug manufacturing company. I think I got L 15 a week for this but I was fired after a short time for taking the grating off the hopper chute thus allowing nails and splinters to go down into the filling machines and out into the Epsom salts. There was a big row about that, but it was summer time and I met a chum and we went

to Simcoe and picked tobacco. The other pickers were Indian and this was my introduction to the law which then existed prohibiting the sale of alcohol to Indians. This of course did not stop them from drinking. It just made drinking more expensive and we all used to go down to the local bootlegger and buy beer at fancy prices. So I returned to Lunenburg in September with \$142 and a leather coat which I could not resist. They were pleased with me about this and I went off to Acadia and enrolled as an engineer, and later switched to pure math. Whilst at Acadia, like many others, I got a job as laboratory assistant and it all helped. The idea of working your way through university did not develop at home until well after the war, and even today it is not that common.

So I became a Canadian, graduated from Acadia and then it was time to go home. I should have stayed in Canada and joined the Canadian forces. But like E.T. I had to go home.

Going home was not much easier than going to Canada. The whole Nation had turned into a war machine. Everything worked, but it was tired.

I was late on the scene, but joined the Royal Artillery and spent three years in India. They called me the Canadian!