

Reet Marley nee Vanaselja  
Estonian Displaced  
Person  
Gripsholm  
May 5, 1952



I arrived at Pier 21 on May 5, 1952 at the age of four together with my parents and 6 months old brother, Tiit. We came from Gothenburg, Sweden on the Gripsholm.

My parents escaped from Hiiumaa, Estonia in 1944 on small boats.

My father is Hartvig Vanaselja born on the Estonian island of Hiiumaa on February 4th, 1924. In January 1944, he was conscripted into the German army. Estonia was under German occupation. Because of the ice conditions at the time, it was not possible to travel to the mainland and thus he was able to postpone joining the army. That winter, there were small boats traveling between Sweden and Estonia transporting Swedes who lived in Estonia back to the home of their ancestors, away from the war. One such small boat suffered a broken down motor and was washed ashore close to my father's farm on the west coast of Hiiumaa. A group of young men hid the boat in the woods and replaced the boat motor with a car motor. On February 17th, 1944 at 4:45 a.m., a group of 30 men left. Five minutes later, machine guns and flares were shot towards them from shore. My grandfather, who had come to the beach to send off his eldest son, was arrested. Only one bullet hit the boat. The ice was thick in spots and the boat was in danger of capsizing. Despite problems with the motor, two small explosions, loss of oars and trouble steering, the boat reached a small fishing village on the coast of Sweden on February 19th, and they were picked up by a Swedish warship and taken to Stockholm. My father initially worked at a lumber camp, later in restaurants and then he was accepted to a welding school in Uppsala.

My mother, Milda Piil, was also born on Hiiumaa, on December 2, 1919. In 1944, her parents were dead, youngest brother had died in the war and one brother was fighting in the German army and one in Russian army. In September, when the Russians were advancing into Estonia, she escaped on a larger boat to Sweden. In Sweden she worked as a housemaid.

In 1946 my parents married in Enköping, Sweden. Only his grandparents remained behind to care for the family farm and animals.

I, Reet Vanaselya, was born on April 5, 1948 and my brother, Tiit, on October 14, 1951. My father had a good job as a welder. He had built a boat where we spent our summers. Life in Sweden was good. However, his mother, two sisters and brother had emigrated to Canada. His father died in Sweden. His mother was insistent that the family be together, and thus we left Sweden on the Gripsholm in April, 1952.

Because there were four of us, we could take a lot of baggage. My parents sold the boat to pay for passage. Other than furniture, everything else was brought along in huge wooden containers. We still have a Swedish sled and my doll with the coat and hat that my mother sewed her for the trip. Also, we carried cash for others as the amount each person could bring was limited and we, ourselves, did not have the limit for four people.

All that I can recall of the trip was the playroom with wooden trains and tracks. My mother became seasick because the laundry room was on a very rocky part of the ship and the smell of dirty diapers added to the unpleasantness. After my mother became seasick, my father had to take over the diaper duty. He admits that the soiled ones were tossed into the sea through our porthole. Onboard, my father played Ping-Pong and won the trophy, which is still a treasured possession. He also participated in trap shooting and recalls that the winner was a Texan.

On arrival in Halifax, we children were taken away from our parents, probably to allow the formalities to go smoothly. However, as my mother spoke no English, she was very worried when she didn't know where we were. My grandmother had warned my parents about the state of Canadian trains and my parents had bought first class tickets for the overnight trip to Montreal, which went smoothly. The Montreal to Toronto trip was in a car that was filled with soldiers who had set up a barbershop and were cutting each other's hair.

Our life in Canada has been good. My father worked as a welder and later foreman, my mother cleaned houses. Initially we lived in one room on the third floor of my father's uncle's house. By 1954, my parents bought their own three story house in Toronto and my grandmother, aunt and uncle lived with us as well as many other tenants. Gradually the number of people in the house dwindled until 2001, after my mother's death, my father sold his big old Beaches house and bought a condo. We also had a beautiful family cottage on Georgian Bay built by my parents.

I became a family doctor and my brother an engineer. My parents' five grandchildren are all proud Estonian-Canadians, all speak Estonian.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, my father's farm was returned to the family and we have all spent some wonderful vacations there.

My oldest daughter, Karin Marley, works as a researcher for the CBC and worked on the Jowi Taylor Canadian Guitar Documentary that was shown on July 1 and which had a part about Pier 21.