

Ernests Kraulis
Latvian Refugee
Baltic Refugee Out of
Sweden on One of the
'Little Boats'
Capry
August 20, 1948



The Voyage to Canada in the good ship Capry

On July 6, 1948, at 9:00 pm, we left Sweden from Göteborg harbour. There were 25 of us, including 3 children. Our family included Ernests Kraulis, his wife, Rute (Ruth) Kraulis, their two children, Olaf, aged 5 and John, aged 5 months, and Elizabete (Elizabeth) Henning, Ruth's mother. Capry had been a German coastal military boat (17 meters long, wooden) which had been sunk in one of the Swedish fjords. It had been retrieved, dried out, renovated, and equipped with a 50 horse power diesel engine. It also had a mast and sails, but they were not used during the voyage. Before we set out the boat was tested with a full load under sailing conditions by staff of the Göteborg University's Seafaring Laboratories. They advised that the boat really needed an engine of 200 to 300 horse power. We were setting out in too small a boat with too small an engine. We reached Falmouth harbour in Great Britain on July 15th after nine days of wrestling with a storm. For 3 days and 2 nights of that time the wind was 7 to 8 Bufford Balls {a measure of wind strength}. It was common knowledge that large oil tankers from the Near East, which used diesel fuel, stopped in Falmouth harbour. We pulled our boat beside one of the tankers and the tanker captain generously gave us as much diesel fuel as we could hold. "Maybe tomorrow we too might be war refugees", the tanker crew said as they wished us well on our voyage.

We left Falmouth harbour on July 21st, at 11:00 pm. We reached Flores Island in the Azores on August 3rd, 1948. We spent 2 days in Flores meeting the friendly people and touring the whale oil factory and left on August 5th. The last part of the journey was the most frightening. In the beginning the ocean was comparatively calm. We enjoyed the company of dolphins who swam and jumped playfully ahead of the boat for long periods of time. After about 3 days we encountered heavy wind with waves as high as the roof of a two story building. We couldn't see the horizon which normally marked the boundary between the water and the sky. It seemed the ocean would swallow our boat and everything in it.

Early one morning after the storm subsided we had to stop to perform maintenance on the engine. This procedure was risky. The engine could only be started with a "shot" of compressed air and we had only one cylinder of compressed air left, sufficient for one start. To make the situation more interesting 11 large whales came to visit. They took up position about 30 meters from the boat and appeared to be watching us while we were stopped. They didn't move much at all. Perhaps they were sizing up the probability of a meal! We were afraid of disturbing them because a bang or push of their tail might have capsized our boat. The depth of the ocean at this point might have been about 4 kms. During the voyage we also saw large sea turtles and schools of flying fish. Some of the flying fish landed on our boat so we were able to take a close look at them. Seagulls accompanied us during the whole crossing. We experienced yet another fierce storm. This time there was torrential rain that came down in sheets. We all went as low in the boat as possible. We also moved the fuel drums to the lowest possible places in the boat to lower the boat's centre of gravity as much as possible in an effort to improve the boat's stability. Finally, after 46 days on the ocean, at 4:00 pm on August 20th, we arrived in Halifax harbour. We were greeted as heroes. Many reporters interviewed and photographed us. We were taken to Pier 21, the facility at which immigrants were processed. We were there until October 18th, at which time we were granted "landed immigrant" status. We then went by train to Ajax where we lived in army barracks for a couple of weeks until more immigration related formalities were taken care of. We subsequently moved to an apartment in Toronto.

A couple of footnotes are in order:

The boat's crew (captain, navigator and mechanic) deserve the highest praise. They were very knowledgeable and proficient professionals who did an outstanding job of managing the voyage under sometimes harrowing circumstances.

It would be understandable that the reader might wonder why we were in such a hurry to undertake such a dangerous journey without the benefit of knowing that we would be allowed into Canada (we had no entry visas). Civilian war refugees in Sweden were afraid that the Swedish government might hand them over to the Russians as they had handed over soldiers who had sought refuge in Sweden. There were also fears that Sweden could be easily invaded by air. Many of us wanted to get away from the risk of living under communism. We had escaped from our countries of origin to Sweden and we viewed it as a rather dangerous way station on our way to safety.

We thank God for his guidance and protection throughout the voyage.

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This is a summary of a more extensive account written by Ernests Kraulis which was translated from Latvian by Ruth L. Kraulis.