

George Klein and
Katharina Klein nee
Emrich
Austrian Immigrant
Georgic
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Memories of My Entry into Canada Via Pier 21

When I reflect back on my life, especially with regards to my arrival to Canada, it began in Austria in the late 1940's when I decided that I would endeavour to improve the quality of my remaining life, which meant seeking a better life/lifestyle in another country.

You see, up to that point, I was well accustomed of the struggles, trials and tribulations that life provides the less fortunate – like myself. Born in 1928 in Ober Eidisch, Romania, the lifestyle of farming (as a farmhand), which I delved into, was a difficult one and not overly prosperous. Although the village and family in which I grew up in was not very affluent, I knew that this way of life would not change dramatically for me anytime soon. Contrary to my belief, it did change significantly in 1944 with the advance of Stalin's Soviet Army into Romania. As a tiny group of Saxons (of Teutonic origin who inhabited the Transylvanian region; and specifically, this small village since 1228 A.D.) living amongst Romanians, we had closer ties with our German ancestors that we did with the citizens of Romania; and thus, my father made a conscious decision to relocate the entire family to Austria rather than succumb to the hardships associated with Stalin's socialistic/communistic regime. Thus, we gathered whatever we could carry leaving behind our home, some loved ones and friends and traveled to Kirchheim (Ried im Innkreis), Austria. There, as a teenager, I was 'free' to take up the only occupation I had come to know – farming. However, the intrigue and enthusiasm to build a new life there never materialized. I knew in my heart that there was a better life somewhere and I was determined to find that place.

With the conclusion of the war (WWII), there was no secret amongst Europeans that lifestyles were better in North America than in war-torn countries/regions of Europe. In 1949, I reckoned that my quality of life would significantly improved by immigrating to North America. Therefore, I visited the American Consul in Salzburg to inquire on those prerequisites essential in allowing me to emigrate to the United States or Canada for that matter. After a brief discussion with the American Consular staff, they strongly recommended that I make my request for

immigrant status to the Canadian Government/Consul since I divulged that I had relatives in Canada, but none in the United States. With that advice, I proceeded to the Canadian Consul. Consular staff was most helpful and nearly assured me during that initial interview that Canada would accept me as suitable candidate immigrating to Canada. I was considered to be a displaced person residing in Austria since I had previously left my home in Romania near the conclusion of the war (as discussed above) and not become a citizen of the former state.

After successful completion of my Visa (No. LR-4429) and Certificate of Identity for the Purpose of Emigrating to Canada 8 March 1951 (Serial No. 1843), I and my cousin George (who also emigrated to Canada – same final destination), bid farewell to family and friend and boarded the train in Kirchheim (20 March 1951) en route to our port of departure – Le Havre, France. Although somewhat saddened to leave them behind, the enthusiasm to fulfill our quest for a better life far outweighed our sorrows.

Our train ride ended with our arrival in Paris, 21 March where we checked into a hotel in Paris to spend our last remaining night in Europe. There, we indulged in the nightlife of the big city where I enjoyed my first bathe in what I considered luxury. Although peasant farm hands, we were able to indulge in some frivolities courtesy of the Canadian Government who gave each emigrant \$50 (on receipt of a Visa) to cover food and lodgings required throughout the journey. I knew then that I was really going to like this country. My quality of life already improved even without setting foot in the new land.

The following morning, we departed Paris via bus (railway staff on strike at the time) for Le Havre. There, my enthusiasm grew even stronger with the sighting of the liner GEORGIC that we embarked forthwith. I remember crossing that gangway with nothing more than a suitcase that also contained a couple of bottles of 'home-brew', four bottles of French wine gripped tightly in both arms; and of course, my Visa tightly clenched between my lips. Nothing delighted me more to see my Visa stamped 'Sortie, Le Havre, 22 March 1951.' Although embarked as a Third Class passenger, I considered this to be head and shoulders above anything that I experienced in Austria or Romania, especially the breakfast that was served immediately on embarkation. It was simply exquisite!

The elation though was short-lived with the slipping of all lines. No sooner than later the ship steamed outside territorial waters, I fell victim to seasickness even though the seas were relatively calm throughout the entire voyage. Well, so much for the splendid cuisine that I so looked forward to, especially during those hard times when food was not as

bountiful as it is today. Hence, my enthusiasm to seek a better life rapidly waned with every mile steamed across the pond. Throughout the voyage, I spent more time with my head hung over the guardrail or on my back in my cabin. My seasickness was so bad that I had to hold my nose as I passed the galley each day in an attempt to get some fresh air that I thought would help me overcome this malady. I even recall a ship's steward who was fluent in German roust me from my cabin one day to participate in a shipboard drill – lifeboat/abandon ship drill. He indicated that it was essential for all passengers to participate in this drill to provide insight on what one needs to do should the ship start sinking. I replied that I'd be more than happy to accompany the Captain to the bottom of the ocean should we be faced with that dilemma.

Since the rest of the voyage was quite miserable for me, it was uneventful. I recall finally feeling somewhat better when secured alongside the pier (21) in Halifax. After hearing other passengers talking in the passageways and gathering their families and belongings to proceed to the upper decks, I did likewise and figured we had arrived. It was 30 March 1951, and I, George Klein had finally reached the new land – a little worse for wear, but nonetheless made it!

I recall disembarking the ship and spending very little time clearing Customs/Immigration since all documentation was well in order prior to departure from Austria. In all, it took approximately one hour to clear (Customs/Immigration) after which, we proceeded to the train station and continued with our journey that ended in Chatham, Ontario. From that point onwards, my lifestyle improved with each passing year as I had envisaged in 1949.

Now a retiree and a long time Canadian citizen, reflecting back on all that I experienced, I consider Pier 21 to be the 'threshold' to my quest for a better life – one that I only dreamed about at one time, but one that nonetheless came to fruition. I am grateful to the Government of Canada in providing me with the opportunity to meet my goals and dreams; and more specifically, in allowing me to 'belong' to a place that I now call home – Canada.

Proud to be Canadian
George Klein

MY JOURNEY TO A NEW LIFE IN CANADA

My recollection of my journey to Canada remains quite vivid to this day since it was a move that I really did not want to embark on, but did so, out of reverence for my mother and siblings. Having relocated as a

family from Ober Reidisch, Romania in 1944 to Schwanenstadt, Austria as a result of the advancing Soviet Army (into the former region), I grew to know a 'nomadic' type of life and after maturing into a teenager (was 7 years old when I left Romania), I decided that I would seek better opportunities in Germany.

Although Austria allowed us to be 'free' and indulge in a culture more akin to what we were accustomed to, my consideration of where a better life was for me was quite different from that of my mother's. My determination was based on what I had studied and read growing up primarily in Austria. My mother's was based on information about the lifestyle in Canada provided to her by her sister (my Aunt) who had immigrated to Canada prior to the start of the war (WWII). Undoubtedly, my mother's determination of where we were to move to next won over mine. Although not overly thrilled with having to put my aspirations aside, I did not undermine her authority as head of household (father passed away at early age of 39 years old just prior to leaving Romania) and began the process to immigrate to Canada. This began with formal application for citizenship of Austria (8 February 1955) since I/we had been residing in county since leaving Romania. During processing, I still had reservations about going to Canada and initially had indicated to Austrian officials that I only wished to apply for authorization to travel out to country and to Germany. After further enforcement from my mother as to our travel plans i.e. immigration to Canada, my passport was amended to allow me to travel to Canada. After receiving a clean bill of health conducted by Canadian Consular staff at Vienna, we were fully prepared to make our journey to the new world.

On 24 November 1955, I, Katharina Emrich (maiden name), bid farewell to family and friends in Schwanenstadt and embarked the train with my mother, older brother and younger sister for travel to our port of departure – Bremenhaven, Germany. As a seventeen year old, I recall many emotions fleeting throughout my body – sadness, anxiety to great enthusiasm. On arrival at Bremenhaven in the late afternoon, we immediately embarked into our ship – SEVEN SEAS as Third Class passengers. Enthusiasm remained high at this point since I had never before steamed/sailed on board what I considered to be a large ship – one that would take my family and me to a better life. Shortly after settling into our cabins, we went into the dining hall where we enjoyed an exquisite meal and was later followed by dancing. Oh how grand it all was! In the early evening, the ship slipped her berth and she steamed out of harbour, I recall how my sister and I proceeded to the upper decks to view the 'glitter' of the shore lights that diminished as we proceeded out to sea.

After steaming out of range of the lights, my spirits remained high as we danced the night away. What fun we had! However, my fun soon came to a halt as I became stricken with seasickness. I was confined to my cabin for the next three days trying to overcome this malady. During that period, I reflected back on my original intentions to immigrate to Germany and concluded that probably was the better plan. Travel by train was far less stressful to a land lubber as myself. Nonetheless, by day four of the journey, I was on the mend, but never did fully regain my appetite. My siblings were fortunate enough to indulge in all exquisite meals provided throughout the twelve-day voyage while my diet consisted primarily of biscuits, crackers and tea.

Although my enthusiasm decreased somewhat during the crossing, it increased markedly with the sighting of shore lights from Canada. I was particularly excited since I could not wait to disembark and regain my usual appetite. During the next two days sailing in territorial waters (Gulf of St. Lawrence & St. Lawrence River), my enthusiasm once again waned with the sighting of the houses and countryside that I considered to be no better than what I had left. The houses appeared so small and in disrepair – nothing more than shanties. The surrounding landscape seemed so desolate and so cold. I was convinced then that I should have carried on with my original intentions (relocating to Germany). I recall remarking to my mother “we left Europe for this?”

On 7 December 1955, the Seven Seas came alongside her berth in Quebec City where we disembarked to clear Customs/Immigration (as a Landed Immigrant). I recall Customs officials being cordial/sympathetic to us, especially since we were unable to communicate with them in either French or English. Hand gestures and body language were the only means of communication that did get us by. While awaiting clearance into the country, I recall my mother sending my brother to buy a loaf of bread since we did not particularly enjoy the tea and biscuits provided by Immigration staff. On his return, he remarked to my mother that he thought he had purchased a loaf of bread. Up to that point, we were accustomed to purchasing a loaf that required the person wielding the knife to slice it. Also, we were unaccustomed to eating such a ‘spongy’ type of bread since we grew up eating whole grain breads.

In any event, we cleared Customs and embarked the train for a lengthy journey to Windsor, Ontario where we were to meet my Aunt and her family, friends from our home in Romania, Ober Reidisch, who immigrated there prior to us; and my other two brothers who also immigrated a few years prior to our arrival. My enthusiasm was still not overly high even at that point and I would have preferred to be back in Europe (in hindsight, perhaps I suffered from the ‘winter blues’ or just missed what I had grown to know.) Notwithstanding, it was too late to

turn back; and therefore, I concluded that I concluded that I would have to make the best of it.

That I did. With each passing year, my quality of life improved – not without a struggle, but nevertheless improved. Today, as a proud Canadian Citizen, I can honestly say that the move was a good one. It has brought me many opportunities and good fortune that my not have been bestowed on me if I had taken a different path. I am grateful to the Government of Canada in giving me the opportunity to improve my lifestyle and enjoy the place that I now call home – Canada.

Katharina Klein (nee Emrich)