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CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



Welcomed and Welcoming

As I awoke in my upper bunk I immediately noticed the difference. The ship was motionless, the throb of the engine that had accompanied us for the past eight days had ceased. The North Atlantic is not very pacific in the early spring. Mountainous waves had pitched the 20,000 to Samaria of the Cunard White Star Line like a cork. We had seen icebergs not too far away. Now, however, all was tranquil. We had arrived.

Our cabin did not have a porthole, so I quickly dressed and headed up to the deck. What I discovered was a new season. It was sunny but cold and the wooded shoreline was fringed with ice and there was snow on the ground. Our ship lay anchored off shore. Behind us I could see the narrow entrance to the harbour through which we must have passed in the early hours of the morning. In front of our ship St. George's Island seemed to stand like a sentinel. The buildings and church towers of the city of Halifax and of course the citadel made an impressive background for the piers where we would disembark.

My parents and I were part of a group of 30 families who had fled from the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia. Indeed, we had all lived in what was known as the Sudetenland, a predominantly ethnically German part of the country. We had been deprived of our homes the previous October when Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of Britain along with the President of France had signed the Munich Declaration that ceded the vital industrial frontier for "Peace in our time". All of our group, the first to arrive of some 2000 who were to follow, were anti-fascists who had managed to flee from Hitler's Gestapo. 35,000 others didn't and ended in Dachau and other concentration camps. We were the lucky few who were to be settled as farmers in northern Saskatchewan and in the Peace River area of British Columbia. The latter group arrived in Saint John, N.B.

Presently I saw two tugs moving out to our ship. Lines were attached and the Samaria was nudged into Pier 21, a dock familiar to many immigrants before and after the war. My mother and father had joined me at the railing to watch the procedure and to take in the scene. But now it was time to go back to our cabin and get ready for

disembarkation. By midmorning after our last breakfast on board we trudged down the gangplank and were once more on terra firma. We gathered in a large hall filled with wooden benches and awaited our turn to present travel documents. The procedure seemed simple, the officials were brief and polite. Customs inspection was to follow.

We marched down a long passage and filed past a number of people who thrust literature into our already full hands. They turned out to be bible tracts to bring us comfort and solace as we undertook the next part of the journey. Did they know something we didn't?

In the customs hall we discovered that one of the suitcases was missing. Father and the baggage master went on board once more to search for our case among the New York bound baggage but returned empty handed. This was a grave loss for us, after all we had so little and had lost so much. We were reassured that the case would be located and indeed, a month later it arrived at our farm. It had sprung open at Liverpool and was put aside to be properly sealed and forwarded on the next crossing. While my parents were engaged in the search for the missing baggage I was discovered by a reporter for a Halifax newspaper who had come to record the arrival of the first refugees from Hitler. I was one of the few Sudetens who spoke English thanks to my three months at Dollar Academy in Scotland where I had undergone total immersion in the language. I was therefore a good source of stories and information about this group. He plied me with questions and plied me with goodies. When my parents returned I was carrying several paper bags of edibles for our ongoing journey.

I was ten years old when we landed at Pier 21 and had no idea that 20 years later I would return to this very building. This time I would not be welcomed but welcoming new arrivals. In the fall of 1957 after completing my studies for the ministry I was assigned by the United Church of Canada to work with representatives of other churches in welcoming and helping immigrants. It was not unfamiliar work, during my summer holidays I had worked in the same capacity on the St. Lawrence river at the ports of Quebec and Montreal. Indeed, one of the first ships that I met in Quebec was the Samaria who had brought me to Halifax. It was like meeting an old friend. Along with Eileen Raatz, a worker for the Women's Missionary Society of the United Church, Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic workers, as well as the I.O.D.E. I helped arrivals with a great variety of needs. Yes, you guessed it, I helped locate lost baggage and from first hand experience reassured the grieving owners that it would be found. Our port staff worked closely together distributing "ditty bags", small bags prepared by congregations containing travel necessities such as toiletries, sweets and toys for the children. We looked after babies, interpreted when we could

and spent much time talking, welcoming and reassuring worried immigrants.

In the fall of 1956 the Hungarian revolution took place. Many fled their country and found temporary refuge in camps in Austria. Over the following years Hungarians came to Canada. One day a ship arrived with a large contingent of Hungarians. I recall standing on the dock seeing them arrive. After immigration clearance they proudly marched down the ramp carrying the Hungarian flag. Most of them had been in Austrian camps and had learned sufficient German so that I was able to converse with them. They told me grim stories of running ahead of tanks and soldiers. One beautiful, young woman recounted the night she was sent down to the grocery store by her mother to buy some bread. On her way home all of the sudden she was engulfed by people running down the street. She ran with them out of the town in the direction of the border. It would take another few days until she and several others would make it across no mans land and finally be found by refugee workers. She never saw her parents again.

If Pier 21 could talk it could tell many stories. I am indeed glad that now that the docks are often lined with cruise boats rather than immigrant ships. Our country recognizes the important role in history that it played over many decades. Certainly Pier 21 is an important marker in my life's journey.