

Danish Immigrant  
Castel Bianco  
November of 1951



Flugen Til Amerika

I chose a Danish title for this chapter. Translated to English it means 'The Escape to America'. It is taken from a well-known, cute Danish poem about a little boy who decides to flee to America, i.e. North America.

Getting Ready

My reason for 'fleeing' to Canada is explained in the chapter, 'The Pharmacist'. Before my departure for Canada there were of course many preparations. First of all, I had to study for and pass the exams leading to my pharmaceutical degree. This would give me something to fall back on in case I regretted my immigration to Canada and wanted to return to my homeland. More about this can be found in the chapter 'The Pharmacist'. Then there was some extensive dental work, including one gold filling. And there were several 'Club' meetings with my friends Erik Morch, Ib Jorgensen, and Ib Norel. To allow me to immigrate to Canada I had to apply to the Canadian Consulate in Copenhagen (a villa on Vestagervej in Hellerup) and pass a medical. And, of course, there were tickets to buy. For the transatlantic passage I bought a ticket from I.R.O., the International Refugee Organization. Since I was not a refugee I had to pay the modest sum of 1000 Danish kroners (about Can. \$150). Refugees traveled for free. A train ticket for Halifax to Toronto was also required. Since I had heard that tourist class was not too comfortable, I was talked into buying a first class ticket at 332 kroners (about Can. \$50).

The Departure

After a number of delays the departure of my ship, S.S. Castel Bianco was finally set for November 5th, 1951. To say farewell at the harbour were my parents, my brother, and my friend Erik Morch and his mother. Nobody knew at this time if they would ever see me again. Little did they know that I would be making numerous visits to Denmark, the first one five and a half years later, in the spring of 1957. Including a trip in 2003, 15 more Atlantic crossings followed, all by air, the one in 1994 was to Portugal with Susan.

S.S. Castel Bianco

This was a Second World War standard Victory type cargo ship, built by Bethlehem-Fairfield in Baltimore. It was completed May 28, 1945, so was only six and a half years old at the time of this trip. Its dimensions were length 455 feet, beam 62 feet, gross tonnage 7604. It was powered by double reduction turbines, and propelled by a single screw. The service speed was 15 knots.

In 1947 S.S. Castelbianco was purchased by the Italian Sitmar Line and refitted to carry 480 passengers. In 1953 it was totally rebuilt to 10139 gross tons and accommodation for 1200 passengers, renamed Castel Bianco (now two words) and saw service to the Caribbean, South America, and Australia. In 1957 it was sold to Cia Transatlantica in Barcelona, renamed 'Begona' and again refitted, this time to carry 830 tourist class passengers. On September 27 1974 Begona left for the West Indies with 800 passengers. On the way it had engine trouble and put into Teneriffe. The next day, October 4 1974, it broke down and drifted in the Atlantic for several days. 'My' ship was then towed to Barbados and on December 24 arrived back in Spain for scrapping after almost 30 years of service and three rebuilds. See pictures of Castel Bianco at the end of this chapter in the 1951 configuration.

### Life on Board

Accommodation was very much like you would expect on a troop transport ship. I was assigned a bunk in the stern part of the ship, below the water line with no view to the outside. This particular room had bunks for about 100 male passengers. In the rough seas that we encountered, the screw often came partly out of the water causing strong vibrations and noise in our hold. The floor was bare steel which also contributed to the noise level as empty bottles rolled back and forth due to the pitching and rolling motions of the vessel.

To avoid seasickness I spent as much as possible of my time on deck in the cold, fresh air, and only went below deck to sleep at night, attend the meals, and to go to the bathroom. In addition I swallowed a seasickness pill every eight hours. November can be pretty rough in the North Atlantic and many passengers were sick. I managed to avoid that. It was sometimes very difficult when going to the bathroom to avoid stepping in the blend of seawater and vomit that was slushing around. I walked a lot on the deck protected against the cold by my old military overcoat. I don't recall talking to many passengers. The majority of them were East Europeans and many of them sick and not in the mood to strike up a conversation. In my case I felt fine, I had something, or even better somebody, to look forward to at my final destination.

Meals were served at long tables and benches and consisted mainly of spaghetti. The ship's crew was primarily Italian. Many passengers didn't show up at meal time due to their sickness. In addition to the food being offered, I had brought along some Danish rye bread to sustain me.

Some of you would be astounded to hear that we went for ten days on the ship without a bath, that simply wasn't available. I guess most of us at that time were used to that from the war years when hot water was a rare luxury.

A couple of events during the ten days at sea stand out:

The route from Copenhagen took us through the Kieler canal and then through the English Channel. Near Dover a young male, Danish passenger decided to quit it all and suddenly jumped overboard. The ship stopped and in the darkness played the searchlights over the water. We didn't spot the guy and after a fairly lengthy search we continued our voyage.

Another event, less dramatic, happened, but was not discovered until arrival in Halifax. Before leaving Denmark I had bought a new suit. So it wouldn't get wrinkled I hung it on the end of my bunk. This turned out to be a bad move. Due to the rolling of the ship, the suit was swinging back and forth like a pendulum. The back of the jacket was rubbing against some part of the bunk and by the end of the trip this had caused a hole in the cloth. Fortunately a tailor in Toronto was able to repair it nicely.

Arrival in Halifax

The ship docked at Pier 21 in Halifax harbour on November 15, 1951. This historic pier was opened in March 1928 for the purpose of processing a stream of newcomers from many parts of the world. It was closed 43 years later, in March 1971, when more and more immigrants started to arrive by air. Pier 21 became known as the gateway to Canada. During the Second World War and for a while after, it also served as the departure and arrival point for Canadian troops and the point of destination for thousands of war brides. The Pier 21 building was a two storey structure, 584 feet long, and connected by covered ramps to an annex and to the nearby railway station. The second floor was almost entirely dedicated to the immigration process.

Passengers were not unloaded until the ship had been medically cleared and the heavy baggage, e.g, my wooden chest, had been unloaded and inspected. This chest is now at least 100 years old. It was used by my uncle Ejnar who used it to store all his belongings when as a young man

he worked as a hired hand on farms in Bornholm. It still exists, now in Sandra's house in Stratford. From the dock the passengers walked to the Pier 21 reception room where they were sorted into identifiable groups. At one end of the large room were a series of foreboding wire cages stretching from floor to ceiling. In there, we had to leave our hand baggage. For me that was the old suitcase that has been on permanent display at the Pier 21 museum since July 1 1999 when this excellent museum was opened. The suitcase is clearly marked with my name and that of the ship in white, painted letters. While waiting for processing by health and immigration officials we sat on long, wooden benches. Those of us who received official approval were then issued Landed Immigrant cards. Others who were not so lucky were detained and temporarily housed in dormitories until they could be cleared. Considering the number of people entering their new country the processing appeared very efficient and friendly.

After being declared a Landed Immigrant I proceeded to the CNR railway station to begin the train ride to Toronto with a stop-over in Montreal. I was traveling first class complete with a very nice dining car. This was quite a change from the more primitive conditions on the ship. At supper I shared a table with a friendly, elderly Canadian lady. On my plate I saw something that looked like small black plums. I asked the lady what they were. She answered: 'Olives'. This was a new discovery for me, I had not been confronted with olives in Denmark. I am not sure I ate them, I have yet to develop a taste for them.