

Finn Sander
Danish Immigrant
Stavangerfjord
1953



Soon it was March 11, 1953,
a warm and bright spring
day and also the day we steamed out of Copenhagen harbour bound for
an uncertain, but, hopefully, promising future. The entire family had
gathered on the waterfront to bid us bon voyage. It was a tearful event,
and Uncle Kurt ran the length of the pier to wave us a finally farewell.
Once out in the Oeresund, the ship headed north towards Norway. It
was a large vessel, named the SS Stavangerfjord, and was one of the two
flagships of the Norwegian America Line. The other, the SS Bergenfjord,
was the newer and bigger ship, but lacked character, I felt, compared to
our ship. That was my rationale for reconciling the fact that the SS
Stavangerfjord was smaller, older (built in 1917), and creakier. But it
was still a magnificent ship, and it did have character, I maintained, for
it had served as a troop-carrier during the Second World War,
transporting thousands of Allied troops to theatres of war around the
globe. In my mind, I pictured it ice-encrusted, heavily laden with war
material and homesick young men in uniform, and struggling against
mountainous waves of the North Atlantic, while desperately dodging
torpedoes of Admiral Doenitz's U-boat wolfgangs.

The next day we arrived in Stavanger, a city in southwestern Norway
after which the ship had obviously been named. It was a pleasant city,
and we enjoyed playing the part of tourists. The following day, we sailed
north until we reached Norway's second largest port, Bergen. Again, we
had the opportunity to spend a day on land and waste little time
exploring this old Hanseatic port and its spectacular mountainous
environs. Finally, that evening, we sailed from mainland Europe. There
was a sense of excitement in the air, for most passengers were fellow
emigrants heading for Canada and U.S.A., and the realization must have
come to a lot of folks, as the Norwegian coast slipped below the horizon,
that they were burning their bridges and the anticipated difficulties of
adjustment to a new life lay ahead. It certainly must have occurred to
my parents, although they had the comfort of knowing that a relative, my
Uncle Erik, would presumably be there to greet us and give us the
benefit of his experience in Canada. This was not the case for one of our
fellow passengers - a streetcar conductor from Copenhagen. He was
travelling all the way to Vancouver with his wife and five young children.
He admitted to my father that he knew no one there and being a
conductor was his only working experience in life. I've always wondered

how he and his not insignificant family managed to survive the initial period, not least since none of them spoke one word of English.

Leaving Europe was celebrated with a big buffet, the first such feast that I ever experienced. I was totally overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of food and lost all control when I arrive at the large table with my empty plate. The very first item on the table I took a fancy to was an impressive pile of sweet green peas. With great gusto, I dug in and promptly filled most of my plate with a huge mound of these little delicacies. It didn't leave much room for anything else, but this didn't overly worry me, as I had been told that I could make more than one trip to the buffet table. Of course, I soon tired of the peas and was prepared to return to the buffet table, while letting the waiter handle my excess peas the way I had observed him remove other people's leftovers. This maneuver, however, ran afoul of my mother's sense of propriety, for she insisted that I first clean my plate before I could venture forth for a refill. I dutifully did so, but by the time that I had consumed these hundreds of green morsels, I felt rather queasy and unprepared to partake further in the many other delicacies. It didn't help that, by this time, the ship was on the high seas and the motion of the ship seemingly made the many peas come alive in my stomach. A quick exit to the railing accommodated the little beasts, as I offered them their freedom in the Norwegian Sea. I soon gained my sea legs, but my father, who is so prone to car sickness that he cannot even ride on a bus, began to feel distinctly unwell as the evening wore on. Soon, he, too, succumbed to the motion of the vessel. My mother, on the other hand, must have benefited from her father's stint in the Danish navy, since she felt fine during the entire voyage.

By the time we reached the northern tip of the Shetland Island, storm conditions prevailed. They made the ship shudder each time it impacted against a wave. Imposed on this repetitive pounding was a continuous creaking of, what seemed, every structural joint of the vessel. The turbulence remained constant across the great expanse of the Atlantic, and my poor father suffered greatly. I can count on one hand the occasions he ventured out of the cabin once we cleared the passage between the Shetland and Faroe Islands. On hindsight, I feel he missed a great adventure, for I found the meals much to my liking and the thrill of standing on the top deck on a ship challenging the mountainous seas very exhilarating – perhaps because I had never heard of metal fatigue in old ships.

The excitement was not lessened by the fact that, once we passed below Greenland and neared Newfoundland, we encountered conditions comparable to those the Titanic had met in that same general area some forty odd years prior. Fog patches, pack ice, and small icebergs abounded, but the ship appeared to pay scant attention to these

inconveniences, no doubt because its radar signaled clear passage. Be that as it may, but we did experience a collision, when the ship encountered a large whale in its path. The impact of the collision was felt throughout the ship, I was told. For me, it was a fortuitous event, as I happened to be on the foredeck at the time and clearly observed the incident. It certainly thrilled me, for I was quick to realize that it provided excellent material for the great adventure story, that I would be writing about to the class back home in Bagsvaerd. For the record, the captain's version of the event, communicated to the passengers over the ship loud speaker system, was that the vessel had hit a dead whale. He could have been right, I suppose.

Eleven days after leaving Copenhagen, I got my first sight of Canada, when the SS Stavangerfjord steamed into Halifax harbour. You cannot imagine how excited I was on the occasion. To fully appreciate this, you should know that this was before the world really began to shrink through satellite communications and frequent and affordable trans-Atlantic flights for common folk materialized. It was before the Americanization of the world's cuisine, music, attire, architecture, etc., when young people, particularly, around the globe didn't all wear jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers and lived in cities filled with high-rise buildings. So many things would be new or different to my parents and me. How different, we were soon to find out.

We had left behind us a clean and handsome city, enveloped in warm spring air and blessed with the fragrance of fresh grass and blooming crocuses and daffodils. We were greeted by dreary, damp, rainy, windswept day in a city, which, by European standards, could only be describes as dirty and architecturally ugly (it has improved since then). Our moods were soon as gloomy as the city, and we were not unhappy to make our escape by mid-day in a CNR passenger train bound for Montreal. Surely, we rationalized, Halifax was an aberration, and the countryside would be spectacular, for who hadn't heard of the Canadian Rockies. Of course, we knew the Rockies were not anywhere near the Maritimes, but they nevertheless served to raise our expectations.

To say that our expectations were met would be stretching the truth. Of course, it should be said that the end of March in eastern Canada is not the most opportune time to sightsee. We had left behind in Denmark a landscape of small, tidy farms, against which rested the owners' bicycles. In Canada, we observed from the train numerous dilapidated farms decorated with TV antennae and big Buicks parked next to unpainted barns - different countries, different priorities. That Canadian farmers appeared wasteful, neglectful, and extravagant to us should be considered in light of the fact that land was plentiful and distances between farms and towns were often great. In Denmark, by contrast,

each farm was small and, by necessity, efficient, and each square foot of earth was cherished and carefully utilized. The small distances between farms and towns in Denmark could more readily be negotiated by bicycles than the great distances in rural Canada, not least in the winter.

There were, of course, other things to see and notice. For example, the porters in Halifax and the canteen staff on board the train were nearly all black, and the fact was that I had never seen a black person in my life. I recall experiencing a child's curiosity in wanting to touch their woolly hair. What I did expect to find, but didn't, were Indians. On hindsight, that is not surprising for I fully expected them to be highly visible in native costumes, if not actually wearing feathers. I also recall being very intrigued with the food and beverages sold on the train. There was a variety of soft drinks, which were totally foreign to me. Pineapple juice? Whoever heard of that? And, equally amazing, there were water coolers with little paper cups. Paper cups? Was this "Amerika" or what? The sandwiches were a great disappointment, however. The bread was so soft, that my mother named it cotton bread. And the cheese and ham sandwiches seem very insipid, compared to the real thing a slice of solid, black bread with liver paste and pickled beets.

We passed through Moncton, which was hardly an improvement on Halifax, and, after an uncomfortable night trying to sleep sitting up, we were greeted by the Quebec countryside. I don't recall much of Quebec City, other than seeing the prominent Chateau Frontenac dominating the cityscape. Soon, we were crossing the St. Lawrence River, via the Jacques Cartier Bridge, and taking in the impressive skyline of Montreal from a distance. And from a distance, it certainly looked impressive to us. There were three skyscrapers on the horizon, the tallest being the Sun Life Building with its 25 storeys. At the time, the tallest office or apartment building in Copenhagen was probably no higher than 6 or 7 levels, so this was definitely big league. Regrettably, it all looked good from far, but was far from good in the slums of Point St. Charles and St. Henry, where the train passed through on its way to Central Station in downtown Montreal. That it was March and the view, typically, was of messy back yards and alleys didn't enhance our first images of the city, and, I recall, that we were all very disappointed and, frankly, equally concerned that this was what all of the city looked like.

My "rich Uncle in America", Erik, was a bubble of hot air, which burst in our faces the minute he greeted us at the station. His boasts that he had secured my father a job, found a lovely apartment for us, and acquired a car for our use were all boasts without substance. In fact, practically his first words were to the effect that he needed \$50, and could my father extend him a small loan to tide him over his temporary cash flow problem. So much for my rich Uncle in America! We then proceeded to

our 'apartment', which turned out to be a room in a boarding house across the street from CNR train tracks in a run-down part of town. The view, out of our window, was over a decayed back alley, and the furniture was limited to a small dresser, a double bed, a fold-out cot, a sink and a kerosene burner. All this was simply too much for my mother, who began to shed some of the many tears to come over the next four weeks, that it took us to relocate in the suburbs.

We shared the floor (and solitary bathroom) with two other couples. One comprised of a retired gentleman, who appeared to have led an exciting life in the military, albeit without much monetary compensation, it seemed. His companion was an elderly, chain-smoking Native Indian lady, whom he jokingly referred to as his 'squaw'. They were a sad sight, I'm afraid. The other couple were recently-arrived immigrants from Germany. The husband was a former Luftwaffe fighter pilot, who appeared to be shell-shocked, for he was very jumpy and had a nervous twitch in his face. His young wife was very attractive and received my Uncle's admiration - which did not escape her attention!!

The day after we arrived, we faced the necessities of life. The first was clearly to procure victuals, and, to that end, my mother, father, and I went to the nearest supermarket, a large Steinberg store on the corner of St. Catherine and Guy Street. To us, that place was truly mind-boggling. Everything you needed was under one roof. It was the first positive experience in Canada for my depressed mother, and she delighted in filling up a cart full of food items. Not knowing any English or French, we had some difficulty identifying some of the products, such as flour, sugar, baking soda, gravy thickener, etc., but most things seemed rather obvious. My mother decided that our first meal would simply be wieners and mashed potatoes, since, indeed, we had problems locating ingredients for a fancier meal. The wieners seemed rather short, and when we got home and boiled them, we also discovered that they were neither as tasty nor as firm as Danish wieners. However, our greatest disappointment was with the mustard, which looked exactly like European mustard, but which was probably the worst brand of mustard that we had ever encountered. In fact, we were totally baffled by its taste and consistency, and the beastly stuff certainly didn't go very well with the wieners either. As we were later to discover, that was our first introduction to peanut butter.

The good news was that, within a few days, my father was offered a job with a large automotive repair shop near McGill University in downtown Montreal. The company was named Peterson and Traynor Inc., and the former was himself an immigrant, who had left Denmark back in the thirties. Admittedly, that didn't hurt my father's chances. However, he was first put on probation, for, as he was told by the bosses, Canadian

mechanics worked fast and efficiently, and if he couldn't maintain the brisk tempo in the shop, he was history. Besides, they reasoned, he couldn't speak a word of English and was not familiar with post-war American model cars, so his days were probably numbered anyways. But, at least, they were willing to give him a chance. For the record, my father was promoted to shop foreman within a few months, notwithstanding his linguistic deficiencies, and later became vice-president of the company.