

Jack (Johannes
Mattheys) Devries (de
Vries)
Dutch Immigrant
Rotterdam
March 1952



At 15 years of age, somehow I knew I would not always stay in my home country. That was about one year after a 5-year occupation of 'Holland' by Germans. They had left the country severely crippled and damaged. The idea to emigrate did not seem strange to me, or my family. We had already moved three times by the time I was nine. Once we moved to a larger home for the growing family. Then we moved downtown where Dad set up a store. In the early 1940's, six weeks before the war began we moved again. This time because of a recession, and Dad could find work in a factory town, 40 km from my birthplace Apeldoorn- one of the queen's residences.

It was not until my older brother who returned from Indonesia, where he had served in the Dutch army, our thoughts turned to Canada. Our country had become too small for him. After all, when 15 million people live together in an area the size of Lake Erie, it is a bit crowded. Why did we choose Canada? We liked the Canadians for liberating us in 1945. My older married sister had already immigrated and settled in Ottawa with her husband and his family. Our family consisted of Mom and Dad with eight children, whose ages ranged from eight to 24. My oldest married sister lived in Amsterdam and had no interest in leaving the country. Some of us wanted to leave and some wanted to stay. My parents settled it by taking a vote.

The emigration process was set in motion. I was in the army training, something I did not appreciate, because I liked my job. Because the whole family was leaving, this became my opportunity to exit the army. I was engaged to a preacher's kid, who fortunately also had emigration on her mind, although not to Canada. She wanted to answer an add from New Guinea, or work on cruise ships in charge of food, in line with her profession.

She had learned English, which became very useful to me where as I knew few words in English.

In the early fifties, we knew very little about Canada, except that it was a very big, far away, cold wintery country. We did get letters from my brother and that gave us some idea about rural life, but somehow it was not enough to form a picture in our minds. Just after the war there was

little foreign news, television was in its infant stage. However, many Dutch people wanted to make a new start and that may as well be in Canada. Canadians had liberated us. Our Queen was there during the war. We had a large measure of trust.

Immigrating takes a lot of preparation, and there were uncertainties. Changing citizenship and leaving a country involved a lot of checks and declarations. Being of good health and debt free were just some of them. Thank God, the whole family qualified. Then there was a time schedule. Depending on the family size, and in order to transport the maximum number each trip, you were on stand by so to speak. We had about 12 days notice to board ship. Only 12 days to complete the necessary paperwork, get our immunization injection and select from our possessions, what to take or leave. We packed and stowed our possessions in crates. A lot went to my mom's side of the family who lived in town. There were hurried farewells. In those years, we did not expect to see each other ever again.

I had little to do with all that preparatory work. I did not get near my hometown during my time in the army. While stationed in the south of Holland and my fiance living in the north of Holland. I spent my weekends with her family.

The day we left my future father in law brought us to Rotterdam. It was a very sad day for him and very trying for all of us. The poor man was to have his birthday celebration the next day. As we tried to check in we discovered not all paperwork was in good order. Dad had to travel to the capital city The Hague to have it corrected. The wait seemed endless. When he finally returned everybody else had boarded and we passed supper. However, we were glad to be on board. As we left shore with the playing of our national anthem, it sure gave us a melancholy feeling. We did not expect to see this shore ever again.

The tension of leaving, the effect of recent injections and our empty stomachs began to take their toll. As we left the harbor in choppy early March waves, seasickness began to affect some of us. On board ship, families split up to maximize capacity. Men occupied cabins in one section, women, children and babies in another section. Cabins were crowded. Soon we ran into a storm. Few people made it to the dining room.

The ship was heaving and rolling day and night. Now eight of the ten in our party were seasick and did not leave their rooms. For one entire day, the ship did not make headway. A deserted steel stairway led to the top deck. One of my brothers and I watched the water spray over our heads as the ship rocked and rolled. We timed it and decided to make a dash

for the chimney between sprays. From there we had a tremendous view looking across the entire deck towards the back. One moment we saw nothing but a green/black wall of water, the next nothing but a dark sky. Except for a rope strung across the middle, the entire deck was empty. We knew then why the ship was nicknamed : the "Rocking Goat". Later I learned that she went to the scrap yard only 17 years later.

The storm receded some and we felt some relief, only to run into another storm worse than the first. I think the captain tried to maneuver away from the first storm only to land in a worse storm. Young men carrying piping hot tea in large kettles got spills and burns and climbed up on the steel trellis that separated rooms. People found themselves thrown against the walls. Children got tied to their bed with belts. My brother and I ventured to a near empty waiting room. We held on to a round table mounted to the floor. We saw a woman holding a baby in her lap as she sat in a very large chair. With one heave of the ship the chair slid across the room, then turned upside down, and with the next heave it would upright itself and slid right back. You could not get near it and not be crushed. Someone broke an arm. People began to panic somewhat. Rumor spread that the captain took chances to keep his schedule. Two o'clock that night the captain called a meeting with all the men folk. The First Mate told us that their lives were just as much at stake. They were not taking chances. Prayer meetings were held and people cried out to God. There was real fear that the ocean would become our grave. Suddenly one night there was a big bang. The ship sprang a leak. Pumps were going day and night. Progress was slow. Each day we watched a chart on the wall indicating the progress made. The mood was somber.

Then one day someone spotted seagulls. Everyone got excited. Land could not be far off. Until late that evening, people stood looking at the railing for land. The following morning we saw a beautiful sunray light up a snow capped mountain. What a sight. I am sure many thanked God. Well, we chucked into the Halifax harbor late Thursday evening. It was too late to leave ship. Friday morning, we passed through customs. We shopped for food, and boarded a train.

It was a dirty old train with the smell of soot. We began to get a taste of the landscape. At first, we saw wild uninhabited territory. What a change from the old country, where every square km, is densely populated. This, I thought is the country I have come to. When we traveled through Quebec City, with its impressive structures, I was pleased to see there were historic buildings. A surprise was in store for us when we stopped a few minutes in Brockville. My sister and husband were there to greet us. He wore a red cap, likely because he worked in the forest and had to be visible. Bright colours were taboo in Holland where no one wanted to stand out, and colours were generally blah. When the train started to

move again, I got a tense moment. My Dad was holding my sisters' hand as the train picked up speed. He had affection, but it was scary.

We rounded Lake Ontario and Toronto came in sight. We had to transfer trains. Dad came back from using a public washroom located on the platform. He could not get over the idea there was a two-seater. That was something against all privacy. Years later he discovered that men's dressing rooms had no privacy either. Something else he had to get used to.

Eventually we arrived in Strathroy. By now it was Sunday 12:30 pm. It was March 15. It was chilly and some snow was flying. My brother and the sponsor were there. We took a quick picture of the group and hopped in two vehicles. This was my first Canadian country driving experience with little visibility as we chased moderate hills. A warm welcome awaited us in a comfortable home. We really enjoyed the good Canadian baked goods.

We had more or less arrived. That is, the old house we were to occupy needed more cleaning from the previous aboriginal occupants. Unfortunately, for the next week we had no more than our hand luggage. The address on our family crate was incomplete and therefore ended up in a wrong location in Ontario. I had little to do with those details.

The following day, (Monday) we left for London where I got work clothing and a work permit. That night we drove to Chatham where we would join an 'extra' gang. Their job was to replace railroad tracks. We started Tuesday 7:00 a.m. Worked six, ten hour days and walked about four miles a day. Snow had melted and grass was greening. Close to London, we transferred to Orangeville. There we encountered a foot of snow. We continued replacing rail all the way to Owen Sound. I saw a lot of country in ten weeks, learned some English, and was ready to find work in the city.

I had four jobs that summer. First, I worked the shovel for three weeks. Next I welded boilers for three months, and after that found factory employment fitting and assembling. I had lost two working days total between jobs, and had doubled my wage in half a year. We worked the weekends in tobacco along with the rest of the family and traveled daily to London.

October 1952. We are moving to London. We bought a house big enough for all of us. The younger siblings went to day school. The older ones worked days and went to night school evenings. It meant a lot for some of us who had a driver's license. Mom even went to school, driven by her teacher. She got her grade six in English. She would read the

newspapers. She was quite someone. Dad never did much with English. I learned on the job. It meant I was getting a Scottish accent. After several years, I took grade 12 English.

January 1, 1953. Our agreed time to work and save as a family was up. I began saving for my wedding. Early March we married. We rented a small apartment and could not afford a car. We biked and bussed. Two years later we did buy a car. 1957. We bought our first house, and we have become Canadian citizens. 1959. We have our four children. 1968. We took a trip to the old country with the whole family for one month. We discovered people could see that we were "American".

Looking back I remember the several underlying reasons for leaving Holland. Taxes were extremely high. The government had many layers of bureaucracy, and just too much red tape. There was no housing available for those who wanted to get married. You could place your name on a list and wait 5-7 years. The dense population made for close scrutiny and neighbors knew too much about each other. There was need for room and a bit of fresh air. Deep down there was also a fear of communism. Small wonder we looked to the land of our liberators, the land of opportunity.

Cutting ties and seeking new ones caused a lot of feelings. Once we decided as family to immigrate, keeping the family intact, we sent a little shock wave through the community and distant family. They questioned us. Some felt uncomfortable because our decision forced them somewhat to consider the immigration option. Some disliked our leaving and felt we should help rebuild our ravished country. Some admired our fortitude and self worth to take such a big step. Friends and family felt the separation and pain caused by it. This was especially the case for my fiance, as she left behind parents and her only brother. We did not expect to see each other again. As for me, I was proud of my fiance and felt close and responsible for her. I felt great. Canada, here we come.