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Dutch Immigrant
Volendam
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Canadian Museum of
Immigration at Pier 21
Musée canadien de
l'immigration du Quai 21

The Long Journey - Memories of a 10 year old Dutch boy.

In 1951 as a 10 year old echt Hollands jongen (real Dutch boy) living on Cauwael Straat in Rotterdam life was good. I was quite happy to have my neighbourhood friends and cousins who I could play with. We had a great time playing street marbles, board games, go-carting and hide and go-seek on our



street. There was also a neighborhood playground where we played and slid on a carpet down a very tall 25 foot slide. For a day trip my whole family - Moeder (Mom), Vader (Dad), Broer (Brother) Bob went to the Bljidorp

Dierentuin (Zoo), Rotterdam. We saw huge African elephants and roaring Indian tigers in their smelly indoor cages. What a great education and wonderful time! In the winter I skated on my wooden skates with my cousins Jopie, Corrie and Shilee behind my Opa's (Grandfather) house on his canal. For entertainment I went with my older brother Bob to the bioscoop (movie theater) and saw American Western movies. Life was fun. Life was good.

Then one day in early 1951 my Vader (Dad) decided to move to Canada. Why move to an unknown country with a different culture and language we could not speak? My Moeder (Mother) certainly did not want to move. She came from a large family of brothers and sisters, whom she did not want to leave. Her

Vader (Father) told her “you'll be back”. My Dad on the other hand thought otherwise. He owned and operated a medium-sized Delfts Blue business that manufactured table lamps with painted Dutch windmills. Dad had served in the Dutch army at the outbreak of the War May 5, 1940 and was deported to Nazi Germany soon after. After he came back from Germany in May 1945, Dad struggled to support his wife and two school-age children with the meagre salary he earned from his business. The German bombardment during the occupation had left parts of Rotterdam a major world seaport in ruins which in turn crippled the Dutch economy. My dad had had enough of Holland and the War and wanted to move to a place where he could provide a decent living for his family.

My Dad chose Canada as our new home as it was a land of opportunity. The decision was made easier as he already had a sister Semie and family living in Montreal. To prepare for the move he enrolled in English classes, and then one day in the Spring of 1951 he boarded a plane and left Holland for Canada. My mother, brother and I were to follow by ship after he had found a house for us stay; he did and we booked tickets to leave Rotterdam for Canada on September 5, 1951.

Moving to Canada meant I had to leave family, friends, and a pet behind. A few days before we were to leave I told my friend Ton I was moving to a new country. I was talking to him one minute, then turned around briefly once, then back, and then he was gone. He never said a word. I also had to leave my black and white cat Mepee as we weren't allowed to take him on the ship. I was sad to leave my cat behind. He had been given to me as a birthday present. At the



time I had never seen a cat before and thought my parents had given me a dog instead.

Before our departure, our many relatives – grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins in Rotterdam gave us a big send-off. The night before we left we slept overnight at my Opa Wismeijer 2 storey house in Rotterdam. We said our goodbyes on departure day at Tante (Aunt)Bep and Oom (Uncle) Dik Van Alphen's house in Hillegersberg close by Opa's house. Oom (Uncle) Jan Wismeijer picked us up at my Aunts and Uncle's house in Hillegersberg and drove us in his new shiny black Ford automobile to the shipping docks, Rotterdam.

We boarded the immigrant ship Volendam on Sept 5, 1951. It was a Dutch 2 funnel steam ship and carried 1134 passengers. The ship, originally built in 1922 (575 ft length by 67 ft beam), was to be on her last voyage across the Atlantic and was to be scrapped the following year in 1952. Oom (Uncle) Jan Wismeijer (my Mother's brother) boarded the ship with us to have a look for himself where we bunked. We did not have our own separate one room cabin. We stayed in a large cabin that had bunk beds with a small number of other families. Seeing where the other passengers were staying in other parts of the ship was a luxury to us. At least 500 beds were lined up in a huge one room cabin below our deck where other passengers were staying. This had a profound effect on me. So many people on this huge immigrant ship. We said goodbyes to our Oom Jan and the ship sounded a loud horn and we were on our way. I was 11 years old and had just completed grade 5, and my brother Bob was 15 years old and had just completed grade 9. We were now on a new and long adventure.

Life on board ship was very different than living in a apartment flat back in Holland. The ship had very large lounges with comfortable padded lounge chairs where the adults could sit and chat , smoke, drink and play cards; however, entertainment on a very large immigrant ship for children it seemed was nonexistent. My brother Bob and I

spent our days exploring the ship. One day we had a very bad storm while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. I went outside on top deck when the storm was already in progress. Very large waves started to roll in and the ship started to toss and plunge into the heaving and mountainous sea. I went back inside the ship and saw chaos. Hundreds of people went running up the stairwell to the main deck outside. I think these people were getting sea sick and told to go outside to throw up. The waiter in the dining hall told us to eat regular meals so we had something to throw up if we had motion sickness. We were lucky as neither I or my family got sea sick.

While on another day of our journey my brother Bob wanted to check out his brand new bicycle crated in the cargo hold far below deck. This was given to him on his birthday. We were quite relieved when we found his bicycle. We could not take any furniture, belongings and household items like pots, pans etc. we had to leave behind. The only things we took were our suitcases filled with clothes and personal stuff and the precious brand new bicycle.

Then one day towards the end of our eight day journey I was on the main deck outside and I saw huge towering rocky cliffs coming towards us along our ship. This was our new country, Canada where we were to live. Soon afterwards we docked in Halifax, Nova Scotia. My mother, brother or I could not speak English, but some how my brother managed to secure our luggage and the bike from an immigration official and registered with Canadian Customs. We then walked across the railways tracks towards the train which was to take us on an other distant journey to Montreal, Quebec. We had no separate cabin on the train. We slept and sat in booths with the other passengers. I was quite impressed by the Canadian scenery along the tracks. Huge wooden trestle bridges across very deep ravines the train crossed. The sheer immensity of this huge country Canada compared to Holland, which is very small in comparison. That was mind boggling. Holland is about three-quarters the size of Nova Scotia and about one

percent the total size of Canada. My mother commented how old this land looked which struck me kind of odd.

We arrived in Montreal and my Dad was waiting for us at the train station. All four of us were very happy to be together again and to look forward to our new home and bright new future. Someone drove us from the train station to a main floor apartment flat on Upper Lachine Road running along a large train maintenance yard. This is where we were staying with an Italian named Casimo whose father owned the apartment building. The apartment consisted of a kitchen with a gas stove, one bedroom, a bathroom and a living room. One day the snow started to fall on the ground and my Mother, Bob and me were going to do some sledding. The apartment building were we were living was close to a ravine. We headed towards that hill and not having a real snow sled we used a blanket. This proved to be kind of cumbersome but somehow seemed to work as the hill was steep enough and we had great fun.



Soon afterwards I started going to school in the 5th grade in Montreal because I could not speak the language and they put

me back a year. The only language I could speak, read and write was Dutch, yet I was expected to learn both English and French. Learning two languages at the same time was very difficult. I had an easier time learning English and struggled with French. The teacher understanding my predicament, kept me after school and tutored me in English so that I could at least be proficient in one language. I am very grateful to the teacher who took the time to tutor me.

My Dad had had enough of living in a small apartment with a growing family. He knew a Dutch immigrant named Henk, a chauffeur, who worked for a rich landowner who lived on a castle estate and large farm Ile Perrot close to Montreal. My Dad and the chauffeur had a talk and he told my Dad he would talk with his employer the French Colonel about us living in the castle estate. The Colonel had served with the Canadian Army during World War II in Europe. The Colonel gave his approval and we moved to Ile Perrot. My Dad who had a job as a painter at Westeel Industries in Montreal commuted back and forth to work.

Living in a large castle estate on a very large acreage close to a major river the Saint Lawrence, Quebec was quite an adventure. One day in early spring 1952 Bob and me found this wooden river raft in a grove of partly submerged trees underwater close to the river. We had to try out, so we hopped on board and started to float into deeper water. Then to our amazement the raft started to sink to the bottom. We both found ourselves in deep water and big trouble. Bob who could swim headed towards shore. I could not swim and was afraid of water. I could barely touch the bottom of the pond and started to cry out to my brother Bob for help. He reassured me to stay calm and swim for shore. I actually tippy toed across the bottom of the pond toward the edge of the pond. Afraid but trying to keep my attention on my brother and head above water. Bob who was already on the bank reached out and pulled me out. My brother Bob saved me from drowning and I owe him a debt of gratitude to this day. We headed home to

our Mother and she was very upset with us seeing all the dripping wet clothes we were wearing.



While living on the estate I also became fascinated with large painted turtles that the fishermen found in their fish traps. I told the fisherman I wanted to keep them as pets. Soon

afterwards a farmhand built me a round metal wire enclosure with a sunken water pail in the middle to house my new pets. Soon I had at least a dozen of these large painted turtles. I was sad to leave my pet turtles behind when my Dad thought it was time to move on again.

Our next move was to Calgary in the middle of Stampede week in July 1952. My Dad had seen pictures of the Canadian Rockies and was struck by the majesty and beauty of the landscape and told us that is the place where he would like to move to. There I stayed for over 40 years, until my most recent move to Edmonton.



I am thankful to my parents for immigrating to rich and bountiful land called Canada - my home.