

Cornelia and Arie
Versluys Family by
Son Gerrit Versluys
Dutch Immigrants
Ryndam
April 21, 1957



Our Family's arrival in Canada, 21 April 1957

Soon after the end of the Second World War our parents, Arie and Corrie Versluys, turned their thoughts towards emigrating from Holland and starting a new life elsewhere. Our mother first suggested the idea and our father very quickly embraced the idea completely to the point where he talked of little else. Mom and dad had an eventful life up until our family finally left Holland.

First they endured the Great Depression as young teenagers. Both were taken from school to start work at an early age. Mom went to work as a domestic in an accountant's home and dad as a labourer for a construction company at the age of fourteen.

Next mom and dad endured more than five years of Nazi occupation during the Second World War. Mom and dad were married in the middle of the occupation on 12 February 1943. Rita was born on 21 September of the same year. I think the hardship and deprivation of the Second World War and the resulting devastation of the country started a longing for a new start and a better future for our family.

Australia and New Zealand were briefly considered but mom and dad soon decided that Canada was the place to go. Already some of our neighbours in Bodegraven and Nieuwebrug had left several years before us. I remember dad studying English through correspondence in the living room on Sundays. The Canadian criteria for emigration changed constantly in the early and mid-fifties. There were requirements for single people, young couples, and farm workers early on. We never quite fit the criteria until 1956, early 1957 when non farming families were accepted. However, no emigration ships were scheduled to sail until the fall of 1957. It was suggested that because of our large family we could be put on a luxury liner of the Holland America Line but we would get a call and have to be ready to leave in a week to ten days. Mom and dad discussed this and decided it could be done. Flying was out of the question as dad would not go up in an airplane. It was simply too dangerous. Mom was getting tired of the wait. On Friday 5 April an urgent message arrived at the house that there was an opening on the Ryndam, a luxury liner that

had been built in 1951 and was geared for tourism rather than immigrants. We had to reply by 5pm whether we would accept. The ship was due to set sail the following Saturday 13 April. I went to dad's place of work at the sawmill in Nieuwebrug to deliver the message. When dad came home he looked at mom and she said, "Let's go". In one week we were rushed through paperwork and medical exams by a Canadian doctor in the Hague. Household goods were sold to neighbours and friends and the remainder was packed in a large crate by a moving company. We stayed with family the last few nights as we had nothing left in the house. There was a difficult moment at our leaving as we assumed we would not likely see our family again. The cost of travel across the Atlantic for a visit was considered totally out of reach back in those days. We believed this to be a one way trip. On Saturday morning 13 April, our father's older brother Piet rented a car and drove our family to the Rotterdam shipyards. With Piet was his wife Aag and dad's younger brother Henk.

We were one of, I believe, only two families aboard the ship that were emigrating. This was really a very beautiful luxury liner with many well to do people on board. The ship would drop us off in Halifax and then proceed to New York as its final destination before returning back to Europe. After picking up more passengers in Le Havre, Southampton and Ireland we started over the open Atlantic. On board were mom and dad, Rita 13, Hennie 10 (11 after only a week in Canada), myself (Gerrit) 9, Corrie 6, and Albert 11 weeks. Tom was born in Canada six years later. Our trip across the Atlantic was uneventful as we encountered no storms. However all of us except mom and Albert were seasick until the last few days before we reached Halifax. For mom this trip was great because for once she did not have to cook and clean for the whole family. The food was wonderful in the fancy dining room but near the end I just longed for mom's excellent home cooking.

It was foggy when we approached the harbour in Halifax but then the sun came through and it became a beautiful day. The sea was flat as we watched the tugboats manoeuvre our liner into the quay. Our ship docked at Pier 21 in Halifax on Sunday 21 April 1957 at about 1pm. I looked over the buildings on shore to see if I could see the Canadian Rockies in the distance as I had never seen mountains before. As a nine year old I had no concept of how truly huge this country was. We were not scheduled to be processed through the immigration sheds until around nine pm and therefore we were not allowed to leave the ship until well into the evening. The moment the immigration officials realized we had a baby with us we were rushed to the front of the line. None of our suitcases were checked and within a short time we were in a lounging area where we were offered some cookies and drinks by some kind Red Cross volunteers. Dad, never having a shy bone in his body, was having

a conversation with some uniformed (I think they were railway people) in his broken English. He never seemed to fail to attract peoples' interest. The train left Halifax quite late at night and it was not very full. We had complete seats to stretch out on and sleep. We were able to turn the seats to face one another. The next morning we were either in New Brunswick or just in Quebec. There was still a lot of snow along the railway track once we were away from the coast. I recall seeing all these buildings with strange roof coverings (asphalt shingles) and no houses with roof tiles like in Europe. I asked what those poles on the roofs were and I was told TV antennas. I asked, "What is television?" I had never seen a television set before. We arrived in Montreal late at night and changed trains for Hamilton, Ontario. This train was very crowded and I remember sleeping on my knees on the floor with my head on the seat. Mom, Rita and Albert stayed in the bathroom and did not get much sleep. Exhausted, we arrived in Hamilton early in the morning and were picked up by former neighbours, the Erkelens family, who now lived in Winona. By this time the weather was warm and sunny with no snow.

After staying with our former neighbors one or two nights we went to an old immigration house on the escarpment above Grimsby near Wolverson Road. that was run by the church. I believe this house is still there. In this house were several other immigrant families who would stay only until they could find a more permanent home. We were in this house for three weeks where we lived in two bedrooms until more immigrants arrived and then shared one bedroom.

Dad very quickly got a job at the Thorold Concrete Block Co. on Highway 20 in Stoney Creek, loading and unloading concrete blocks from the ovens, a job that a father and son together had quit just before. He stayed for about a year until he was employed by Stelco at the ore docks, a job he kept until his retirement 25 years later at the age of 66.

After our three week stay at the immigration house we moved into an abandoned old tar paper farmhouse in the middle of a 54 acre fruit farm in Fruitland. The rent was \$30 per month. We had no hydro or running water or bathroom and dad had to replace the glass in over 40 windows that had been broken. Dad got two woodstoves, one for the kitchen and one for the living room and that was our single source of heat. Two propane bottles were installed to supply light in mom and dad's bedroom, the living room and the kitchen as well as a twin burner in the kitchen to do the cooking. We needed flashlights to see our way to the bedrooms. An icebox fridge was placed in the kitchen. The pantry had a hand pump that supplied water from a rainwater cistern which first had to be cleaned out and often had to be topped up with a water tank truck during dry spells. Dad made a toilet from our moving crate and a metal pail that had to be frequently emptied. We got a battery operated radio

that was only used occasionally. We did a lot of reading. Our house was at the end of a long dirt laneway not visible from the highway. The laneway was quite a challenge during snowy or wet weather and dad more than once got the car stuck. (Our large family was always available to push him out). We were surrounded by apple, pear, plum, and cherry orchards, grape vines, open fields and a small forest a small distance behind us. The house had one large veranda on the front and a smaller one on the side. Even though we had few amenities we had our privacy and freedom to roam the property at will. We had a good time there.

Our crate with our belongings did not arrive until we had lived in Fruitland for some weeks. We had borrowed beds and borrowed dishes. We were dressed in long winter clothes that became more uncomfortable as the weather got warmer. We had no furniture. We slept on mattresses on the floor. Our dining room table was a door stretched across two empty suitcases and we found some benches for seats.

One of dad's early tasks was to start a garden to grow vegetables. The red clay was either like stiff glue when it was wet or like rock when it was dry and loose dust the rest of the time. He persisted in working the soil with some limited success.

Rita continued her high school in Stoney Creek. She already had learned English in high school in Holland. Hennie and I went to Memorial Public School in Stoney Creek where we quickly started to learn English. Corrie started her first year in school in the fall. We lived in the old farmhouse for four years until it was torn down to make way for a large box store called the Banner Store. We moved to a brand new eleven hundred square foot split level in Grimsby Beach in 1961 with thermostatic controlled heating, hot and cold running water and a complete indoor bathroom. It had hardwood floors and tiles in the entrance. Unbelievable luxury beyond our greatest expectations!

After about a year in Canada and depending on earlier immigrants' help in transportation for rides to work, trips for groceries, etc. dad purchased a 1947 Dodge. After getting stuck many times in the long snowy and muddy laneway and the family always on hand to push him out, dad finally mastered the fine art of shifting gears without grinding and stalling. He then managed to get his drivers license after the third try. In subsequent years dad made up for lost time by traveling all across North America in his quest to explore every corner of this continent. We went from daytrips to tenting to tent trailer to house trailer.

After our arrival in Canada our family immediately attended the Ebenezer Reformed Church in Fruitland. This church was started some years earlier by Dutch immigrants who had arrived soon after the Second

World War. This church provided social and spiritual support for us Dutch immigrants in that we all shared the transition of adjusting to the Canadian way of life as a common experience. As children we shared with other immigrant children the experience of first attending a Canadian School, of learning to speak English, to play baseball and hockey for the first time, and to make friends outside of our own culture.

In spite of our early, primitive beginnings dad never ceased to be enthusiastic about being in Canada. This was the promise-land. Our Canaan. For mom Canada is where the family was, therefore this was home. The fact that you could own a car and buy a house and that you could go to the corner variety store and buy a half gallon of ice cream for ninety-nine cents whenever you wanted and eat the whole thing (our large family did this often) was all wonderful stuff that we had never experienced before. This was an adventure. Life was good. Every year we prospered more. Unlike in Europe after the war we actually got ahead.

We had our humorous moments too. We quickly learned what those black night creatures were with the white stripe down the back (skunks) and how terrible they smelled. We also learned to our relief that all snakes (milk and garter) were not deadly poisonous. Dad quickly learned that having a cold beer at lunch on the edge of a fruit orchard beside the busy Queen Elizabeth Highway was not a good thing to do back in 1957. (He could not understand what all the fuss and honking was all about. Luckily he was not arrested). We were not aware of the restrictive drinking laws in Ontario at that time.

We also had a lot of fun. We played in the orchards and explored the woods. We had countless picnics on the beach. We went for many afternoon drives and walks in conservation areas. We skated in winter and played in the snow. We always came home to mom's excellent home cooked meals.

We have lived and traveled in this country for fifty years this last April. Dad passed away six years ago and mom is in her ninety-second year. The six children in our family have married and produced children and grandchildren of their own. As we, the children, have matured and reflect on some of our parents' hard times in Europe we have come to better understand and appreciate what it means to live in a beautiful, rich and free country. Any regrets? Not even for a second. The adventure that our parents started fifty years ago continues.

At Pier 21 the Sobey Wall of Honour now proudly displays 'Arie and Cornelia Versluys Family'.

Gerrit Versluys 31 August 2007.

