

The Meinema Family
by Daughter Hette
Meinema
Dutch Immigrants
Sibajac
May of 1952



Sibajak Story
by Hette Meinema

May 21, 1952 was a major milestone in the life of the Meinema family. We were immigrating to Canada.

We almost missed the boat!

The taxi that drove us to the harbour in Rotterdam ran out of gas - right in the middle of the tunnel under the Maas River. Somehow, we managed to get on board the Sibajak before she left the harbour.

We stood at the railing waving to our uncles on shore. My younger sister excitedly shouted and promptly lost the braces she'd obtained just two weeks earlier. We watched them drop into the water between the boat and the dock. Perhaps there's a large fish with very straight teeth in the Rotterdam harbour.

I soon found a friend my own age (10) on board and we set about exploring the ship. Several of the decks had ping-pong tables set up. We were anxious to give that a try. We didn't have a chance. Everywhere we went there were teenagers and young adults who had games in progress. Others were standing around awaiting their turn.

The next morning we found some empty tables. Maybe we could get a game or two in before the teenagers got up. There were bats but no ping-pong balls. We made the rounds but it was the same everywhere. We asked the purser if we could have some balls. He informed us that there were none left. All balls had apparently bounced or blown overboard the previous afternoon and evening.

The first full day on the ocean I felt a little nauseated. It grew worse until, finally, I leaned over the railing and 'fed the fish'. After that I had my sea legs and was fine. Not so my mother! She was sick from the time we lost sight of land (Ireland) until we saw the coast of Nova Scotia a

week later. In fact, she was so bad that she was locked in the cabin when no one was able to be with her.

The Sibajac had a supervised play and crafts area for the young. For several hours each morning and again each afternoon, parents would bring their children to the back of the ship. Here they could play, colour, read and do crafts - all behind a tall fence with a lock. My friend and I were also brought there. But, we were 10 years old! This kindergarten stuff was not for us. Fortunately, there was a ventilation hole covered by a funnel a few feet inside the fence. We looked in and saw what turned out to be the upper walkway of the engine room. It would be a bit of a drop but here was our escape route. Half an hour later, we were back on the playground deck - this time on the other side of the locked fence. For the rest of the trip we had the run of the ship.

Big as the ship was, it does not take a week to explore all aspects of it. Seeing an iceberg and another immigrant ship, the Waterman, heading back to Holland, created some diversion. We were shooed from the engine room when we went down for another look. We were also told we weren't allowed on the upper deck where the swimming pool was. That was no loss since neither of us could swim anyway. What was there still to do? The ship had two main dining rooms to serve the 1031 passengers - one fore and one aft. We decided to explore the one that was not assigned to us. It was mid-afternoon. The place was empty. There was nothing on the tables except salt and pepper shakers and sugar bowls. We looked at each other. A smile turned into a grin on each of our faces. We sat down at the table and began to put sugar in the salt shakers and salt in the sugar bowls. We went from table to table. About half way two of the kitchen staff noticed us. We left the dining room considerably faster than we had entered it. That evening we snuck back to witness the results of our handiwork. Everyone was enjoying their cup of tea or coffee. Maybe we missed the show earlier or the kitchen staff, having caught only us, had done double duty before mealtime.

Dutch people had a habit of polishing their shoes on Saturday night. We went to church on Sunday mornings with freshly polished shoes. A Saturday morning notice, slipped under the cabin door, gave us the news that if we put our shoes outside our door, the crew would polish them for us. Most people took full advantage of this offer.

Seeing all those shoes neatly lined up throughout the halls was too great a temptation for us. Soon shoes were stacked beside different doors. When we were satisfied with the task on our floor, we moved to the next. We even managed to move shoes from one floor to another. You should have heard the fuss and commotion early next morning!

Church was to be held in the dining room. Reverend Hoytema , the ship's Chaplain, was seasick. An elder took over and led a reading service. Years later I learned that the elder had been my future father-in-law.

One day we ran into a storm. After another practice run with the use of life jackets, the ship began bucking into some mighty waves. Our dining room was mostly empty. Many of the passengers were too sick to leave their cabins. Those of us who were brave enough to come for our meal, had our work cut out for us. Any loose utensils, cups and plates would slide right off the table if we didn't hold them down. If we times it right, we could bring food to our mouths with a temporarily free hand. Most of the time, however, we had trouble holding things down. A few of the passengers, including my sisters, even had trouble keeping their food down. My sisters spent the rest of the day in their cabin with my mother. Dad and I were delegated for clean-up duty.

Finally, after seven days on the open sea, we were told we would be in Halifax that night. It was exciting to see the lights of Halifax as we came to shore. We were too excited to sleep much that night. Embarkation would begin at 9:30 A.M.

Embarkation started for only the first 250 passengers. With over 1000, there would be shifts. We were gathered on deck with our carry-off luggage and waited our turn. Mom and Dad didn't want us to stray lest our name and number was called and we couldn't leave ship as a family. This was the most boring portion of the entire trip. A young man, also waiting near us, took out his guitar and began to sing. That relieved the drudgery for a while. The young guitar player switched trains with us in Montreal and Toronto and got off with us in Alliston, Ontario. He was one of the Dekker boys who was joining his brothers already settled in the area.

And that would be my Sibajak story except for one additional fact. Ten years later, in September 1962 I moved to Oshawa, Ontario. There I met and married my wife. During one of our dates we discussed our roots in Holland as well as how and when we came to Canada. It was a real coincidence to learn that my wife's family, the Westermans, crossed the ocean on the same trip of the Sibajak as we had done. Had we met each other on board? No. My wife remembers making crafts on board. However, I wasn't there long enough to get to know anyone.

Might it have been possible? You'll have to ask my younger sister. She married my wife's younger brother. Who knows what happened in the nursery?

Hette Meinema