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English Immigrant
Aquitania
June 21, 1948



"Heads or tails" father said as he balanced the coin on his fingertips. "Tails", mother said without hesitation. The coin flipping ceremony was decided upon after many hours of heated discussion, ending in a stalemate. They had agreed to emigrate, the choice was between Australia and Canada. Mother opted for the former because her sister had emigrated to Freemantle in the late thirties. She married an Aussie soon after her arrival; her letters were filled with glowing commentaries of life down under. Father, on the other hand, had relatives in Canada, who also wrote urging him to take advantage of the many opportunities waiting in Canada. They agreed to let the coin decide. The family watched expectantly as it was flipped, caught and slapped onto the back of dad's hand. Heads won!

My sister Peggy, age 21, had served in the Royal Air Force during the war; in peacetime work was hard to find, Canada seemed to hold promise of employment. My brother, age 17, had served an apprenticeship as a joiner (carpenter) and was looking forward to working at his trade in Canada. I was 14 years old and was the only dissident in the group. I was not happy about leaving; I was in-love with a handsome lad from out street. I had only seen him from afar but I knew this was forever. My parents however were not sympathetic to my cause. I suffered in silence.

The process of applying for immigration papers began January 1948. During the next months many steps had to be taken, forms filled out, medicals for everyone, interviews with Canadian Immigration. My parents worried that at fifty-four years old they might be considered to old to qualify for immigrant status. Everything was in limbo until they were notified, one way or the other. Finally, in April the letter arrived. Dad opened it with shaky fingers, he read silently for what seemed an eternity, "Well" mother said with impatience, "what does it say", he smiled widely, "start packing, we're Canada bound."

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of activity of things to do: passports to arrange, house and furniture to sell, passage to book, steamer trunks to buy, etc. Father booked passage on RMS Aquitania sailing from Southampton to Halifax June 12, 1948. This left little time to sell the house and furnishings, but fortunately the house sold within two weeks of our departure. The remaining days were filled with tearful goodbyes to

friends and relations. I could not face seeing boy of my dreams so I stayed in my room in abject misery.

The evening for departure came, dad called a cab and loaded down with suitcases we headed for the railway station. This was a very sad time for me, the railway station held many happy memories of trips to the seaside town of Southport to spend our summer holidays, and day trips to Blackpool. I thought that I would never see those places again.

We boarded the train and found a seat; all aboard was called, carriage doors slammed; the train left the station. There were many stops, wherever there was a station more people came aboard. I slept most of the night, even the stops and starts only momentarily disrupted my dreams. When I awoke dawn was just breaking. Our carriage was behind the dining car and sounds of dishes and cutlery set on tables intermingled with the clickety-clack of the wheels of the train. The conductor said we should be arriving in Southampton at nine am; we couldn't wait to stretch our legs after the confinement of the carriage.

The railway terminal was packed with people; the scene was chaotic, luggage everywhere. We checked in our suitcases and made our way to the dock. The sight of the Aquitania took my breath away, how majestic she looked, her bright red funnels standing out in sharp relief against the brilliant blue of the summer sky. My gloomy mood lifted; I couldn't wait to explore this huge floating palace.

We embarked and were assigned our cabin numbers, mother, Peg and I were together and Dad and Eric shared a cabin. Mother said I could look around the ship while she and Peg unpacked. "Don't be away too long", she said as I hurried out the door. After getting lost in the maze of aisles for awhile, I came across a stairway, luckily it led to the main deck. There were crowds of people here all excitedly discovering the many attractions of this "grand old lady." The main salon with its sweeping staircase, rich carpeting and ornate paneling was exquisite. Tall columns rose to the richly appointed ceiling complete with sparkling chandeliers. Groupings of round tables and plush chairs covered most of the salon; an area for dancing completed the picture. I'm sure my recollections do not do it justice. After exploring other areas of the ship I realized I had been gone a long time. I headed back to the cabin. Mother wasn't too pleased with me for worrying her to death. The steward walked along the aisle rapping on doors announcing the departure time would be in approximately thirty minutes.

The decks were lined with people waving to their relatives and friends on shore. The late afternoon sun was bright turning the ocean into a glittering gold. The engines throbbed and increased in volume. Guided by

the little tug boats the Aquitania slowly edged away from the dock amid blasts of sound from the funnels, the screaming crowds of passengers and the people on shore. Gliding gracefully out to sea, the RMS Aquitania must have been an impressive sight to the people lining the shore. Everyone at the rails seemed to be rooted to the spot as if to fix this moment in time; a memory to draw upon in future years.

Looking back I remember the crossing to be an exciting experience. However, the third day was an exception. The dining room was noticeably absent of passengers, seasick people kept to their cabins. A few brave souls tried to attend meals but quickly departed at the sight of food. Mother was the best sailor in our family, she never missed a meal and enjoyed every one, she would describe in detail the menu, amid groans and protestations from us. Fortunately, this state of affairs passed and we were able to rejoin her at the table. There were many activities, card games, deck games, concerts, etc. The one that stands out most in my mind is the dance. Two days before the end of the voyage it took place, everyone was urged to attend. The ballroom was decked out with balloons, streamers and a band. I accompanied Peg to the dance, much to her chagrin. I am quite certain that she didn't want her pesky little sister tagging along. I stuck to her like glue.

Peggy was and still is very attractive, there was no shortage of dancing partners for her. I envied her popularity. Every time I would see one heading her way I would nudge her and say excitedly "Peg Peg he's coming." With clenched teeth and a fixed smile she would say to me, "shut up, you're embarrassing me." Luckily for her, mother came to take me back to the cabin. It was my bedtime. We can laugh about this now, fifty years later.

As wonderful as the voyage was, sighting land after a week at sea was exciting, we were ready to experience dry land again. The first thing we noticed as we approached Halifax was a huge white banner stretched out across the dock. WELCOME TO CANADA it stated. These three words must have given hope to thousands of refugees from war torn Europe arriving at Pier 21. To our family it meant everything. The customs shed was a beehive of activity, children perched atop mounds of luggage. The luggage was arranged in alphabetical order making it easier to locate; this was a big help.

After being processed we were free to go as we pleased. Peg had accepted an invitation from one of the ship's officers to have her first meal in Canada as his guest. The rest of us headed up a long hill to find a restaurant. I had my first hot-dog experience.

The train stretched as far as the eye could see; it looked like a hungry snake. Passengers started to straggle aboard. We sat on a bench waiting for Peg. The time for departure was drawing near and most everyone had found their seats. Dad was getting very agitated; Peg had not arrived. Just as the conductor was calling "all aboard" she came hurrying along the platform. We boarded the train.

The train journey was long, very hot and uncomfortable. We were allowed off the train at some of the lengthier stopovers. We took advantage of this by stocking up on snacks; the train food was not very appetizing. At one of these stops I decided to pick flowers, this, I discovered later was a big mistake, just as we entered Ontario I started to itch.

I don't remember too much about the arrival at the station, all I remember was the terrible itching, my face and hands were covered in weeping blisters. Mother took me to see the doctor right away, the diagnosis, poison ivy. My first two months in Canada were spent indoors, a thick mask of Calamine lotion covering my face. Over the years, although I have returned to England many times, I am always happy to return home to Canada. From the role of "reluctant emigrant" I am happy to call myself a proud Canadian.