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by Daughter Mirja S.
Bishop
Finnish Immigrant
Gripsholm
September 14, 1929



She was only 27 years old when she set sail for the new world. She had \$25 in her pocket. She had a small trunk with her life's possessions because she could not know if she could not know if she would ever return to her homeland again. She said goodbye to her father and her 3 brothers. Her mother, sister, and 4 brothers had died at young ages from the ravages of civil war, strife and hunger. She wanted a new life, a better life, a life with opportunity. She was a modern woman but this was 1929. With only her cousin as a companion and with a heart full of hope and courage she left Finland for Canada. She traveled from Finland to Gothenburg, Sweden and there boarded the "Gripsholm" as it was called then. The T.M.S. or Twinscrew Motor Ship was build in 1925. It weighed 23,600 tons, was 574 feet long, and carried 1600 passengers and 330 crew. The ship was divided into First, Second and Tourist classes. The trip from Gothenburg to Halifax, Nova Scotia was 2852 nautical miles and probably took better than one week. The accommodations in Third class were cramped and many suffered the indignities of sea sickness. On September 15, 1929, the ship reached Halifax. This was where Ma first set foot on Canadian soil. Pier 21 reached out and greeted all who disembarked.

Halifax was a major port of entry for immigrants from Europe. Canada's entire population increase between 1901 and 1931 was due to immigration and most of that from European nations. From 1924 to 1930, 130,000 immigrants arrived every year. Prior to the 1920's, arrivals were handled at Pier 2 in the north end of the city, but Pier 3 was largely destroyed in the Explosion of 1917 and new facilities had to be opened to handle the influx of hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Pier 21 opened in 1928 as a complex of buildings connected by an overhead ramp to Halifax's railway station. It housed the Immigration Services, Customs, Health and Welfare, Agriculture, the Red Cross, a waiting room, dining room, canteen, nursery, hospital, detention centre, kitchen, dormitories, and a promenade overlooking the harbour. To the casual passerby at the Halifax Ocean Terminals, Transit Shed 21 was simply a two-story building that looked like all the other transit sheds. To the thousands who came flooding through the doors of Pier 21, eyes bright with hope but apprehension in their hearts, one wonders what

passed through their minds as they saw the foreboding grey building with a brick centre feature and barred windows.

The day of arrival began in much the same way for all the arriving immigrants. The Gripsholm docked on the evening of September 14, 1929. As the darkness of night slowly lifted revealing a thick, grey blanket of misty fog, port workers began to arrive to take up their stations. Cafeteria personnel, nearly attired in white, began the formidable task of preparing breakfast for several hundred people. Ma was about to receive her first taste of Canadian food. The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the hallways and the large clocks on the walls indicated that it was nearly 7:00 am. A guard arrived with the passenger list or manifest. The parade of government officials led by the physician proceeded up the gangplank. The ship had to be medically cleared before the passengers could disembark. Guards were posted to ensure that only authorized personnel would board and leave the ship. Soon the passengers would begin to disembark. Ma waited on the dock until her trunk was unloaded and inspected. From there she was directed into Pier 21's reception area where families, women with children, and single men and women were sorted into identifiable groups. At one end of the room there were a series of foreboding wire cages that stretched from floor to ceiling. This was where hand luggage was placed for inspection by health and immigration officials. After inspection the baggage was stored under lock and key. All of Ma's worldly possessions were safe. The reception area was filled with cacophonous confusion. Staff tried to make themselves understood. Following the initial examination, the arrivals were divided into two groups - those who would be temporarily detained because of incomplete paper or illness and those to be issued the status of "Landed Immigrant". This whole process as stressful as it must have been probably did not take more than a few hours. It was then time to retrieve the hand luggage and proceed to the mezzanine level of the Annex building to purchase a meal and food supplies for the long train trip to Montreal. The most popular items purchased were bread, butter, cheese, sardines, canned meat, and fruit. Pier 21 was connected by a ramp with the train station and tickets could be purchased at CNR (Canadian National Railway) ticket office located right there. A CNR Redcap helped Ma retrieve her trunk and loaded it onto the train destined for Montreal.

Special Immigrant trains were waiting on spur lines on either side of the Annex. Immigrants would travel to points throughout Canada as the final leg of their long journey. For Ma, her final destination was Montreal. The immigrant trains or colonist trains as they were called in primitive nature. Coal burning stoves at each end of the cars provided the only heat. Dining facilities left much to be desired and most people brought their own food. The seats were made of wood and a platform

was located above the seat where a brave soul could climb up and attempt to sleep. Babies cried, the odor of dirty diapers and unwashed bodies permeated the cars. This was an end to a long journey and the discomfort would be endured. Anticipation was great! The train jerked and clanged its way through cities, towns, and miles of wilderness, whistling at every train crossing. It must have been difficult if not impossible to sleep. What lay ahead? Had she made the wrong decision? No time to think about that for now. This was a new beginning for many thousands of immigrants looking for a new and better home. Ma was just one of them. Her new life was about to begin.

This past July I had an opportunity to visit Halifax, Nova Scotia. I visited Pier 21 which stands in all its grandeur. It is mostly unoccupied now but there is movement underway to establish it as a memorial to Canada's immigrants. The train station stands next door and is still in use. I rode the train from Halifax to Montreal on the same route that Ma traveled almost 70 years ago. As I watched the countryside pass by, I closed my eyes and wondered what Ma must have been thinking as she sat there savouring her first hours in a new land. I felt very close to her and think that she was sitting on my shoulder reliving those moments with me.