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German Immigrant
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At 24 years old and wanting
desperately to leave

Germany, I spotted a small story in a German newspaper stating that Canada was looking for plasterers. I boarded the S.S. Washington in La Havre, France on May 10th, 1951, and the ship then stopped at Southhampton and Cork to pick up some Scots and Irish before heading for Halifax. The following story about my arrival in Canada is an excerpt from my just published book, YES:

"We docked in Halifax. My first view of Canada was dismal, a vacant harbor with empty brick buildings. In one of them, on Pier 21, I was checked through, one amongst the hundreds debarking from the ship, sifted through the same pier as thousands of immigrants who had preceded us.

I hadn't brought much with me: a suitcase, the rubber raincoat and straw hat that had gone with me to Africa-the latter for good luck. My two freight items had been checked through to Toronto-a huge army tent plus an old typewriter that I'd packed in a used ammunition crate.

I hoisted the suitcase onto my shoulder and set off, eager to see something of Canada immediately. I had to see it. The train didn't leave for hours, so I headed for the city that spread out along the shore.

The harbor was mostly abandoned, rusty, and barnacled, as if waiting to die. A feeling of panic swept over me when I realized I was totally alone on the other side of the world in a place that had given up. I knew this place had been a busy hub during the war, but it now seemed almost dead. But I also knew Canada was big enough to carry a deserted harbor. Its time would come; people would make it new again. I was sure of it.

With enough spoken English to buy a piece of bread and get directions to the train station, I went on looking, shifting my suitcase to the other shoulder. I came to a black neighborhood, the first I'd seen. People sat in rocking chairs doing nothing, just watching those who went by, which happened to be me at that point. Tired from the heavy suitcase, I sat down to rest, becoming like them, watching others passing by, and observed their curiosity, which mirrored my own.

First View of Canada

In the distant harbor,
the sky and the ocean were the only things alive.
The rolling countryside seemed wild and desolate.
I couldn't believe I was actually in Canada,
and my life would finally begin here.
I could sense how big this new land was,
and felt it was a place
I could grow up in.
It would be all up to me.
No more bubbling along anymore.

I could barely make out the train.
It looked a mile long,
waiting for the mass of immigrants
it would take to Toronto.
Wanting to see it from closer up,
I picked up my suitcase
and started towards it.

It was made of thick steel plates,
solid and rugged,
built to last forever.
Just what I'd expected
in this new country of mine,
everything built solid and rugged,
to last forever.

On board,
the inside looked the same,
solid and rugged,
with rows of wooden benches,
and an old cast-iron stove
to keep us warm.
There were tables between the benches
and wooden bunks that pulled down from the ceiling.
When the train had taken in all the immigrants,
Scots and Irish and the others and me,
Someone fired up the stove,
bunks were pulled down and taken,
and the tables filled with men,
happily shuffling cards.
They came from different lands
but with the same hunger: Canada.

We were ready!

Our car filled with talk and laughter,
sudden outbursts from jokes,
and songs remembered from each one's past.
I watched and listened,
enjoying the shared feeling of excitement
in a totally new world.
The clatter and rattle of the cars
moving along the rails
was occasionally drowned out
by a deafening high-pitched whistle,
as we sped through empty crossings,
no one in sight.
The whistle got to me
the very first time I heard it,
right down to my spine,
as if making promises
of what lay ahead for me.

The clatter and rattle and whistles
cut through the barren land.
Swamps and beaver ponds
gradually gave way
to waving green fields dotted with farms.
It took two whole exciting days
to get to Toronto.

* * *

Toronto was the complete opposite of what I'd seen in Halifax. It was a bustling metropolis of stone and steel and streetcars-lots of streetcars-and cars and crowds of people, all gathered into one huge moving mass. I wasn't there long before I was sent on to Guelph, along with some of the card-playing, singing Scots and Irish, and a few Englishmen.

We arrived at a cute Victorian railroad station and got off. I watched the train disappear down the track, and when it had become a mere point on the tracks, it said good-bye with its whistle knifing the air one last time. I stood at attention, stiff, as the familiar shiver ran down my spine. It had become a symbol of my personal freedom. But I didn't know why.

The station was silent. A newspaper flew past, blown about by the wind. I realized I was alone; my new friends had already gone. And I had somewhere I was supposed to be, somewhere my future boss was waiting for me to show up. I wondered how I'd make out as a plasterer, wondered

if they'd tolerate crooked walls in this country. Hoisting my suitcase up once again, I set out to find the address I'd been given in Toronto.

I was immediately taken in by the family who had gathered in the living room-the boss, his wife, the grandmother, and the kids-even some friends who'd come especially to meet me. They looked me over. Eventually I began to feel their approval by the way they talked, so I began to relax. Mostly, they wanted to see if I was healthy and smart enough to do what they expected of me. They asked where I was from-not the first time I'd been asked that since I had arrived in Canada. It touched me. It was as if people here took an interest in me, not like back home where no one cared. After dinner-a huge steak-we continued to talk until quite late, and I ended up sleeping in an oversized crib. It was all they had. Tomorrow they'd said they'd take me to a rooming house they'd found.

At breakfast we all laughed about how I'd climbed into the crib. I ate bacon and eggs and potatoes, learning what a Canadian workingman ate for breakfast. My boss had plans for me early that first day. I caught him looking at my slightly built hand, free of calluses, and wondered what he was thinking.

We drove back to the station to load up the tent and wooden crate containing the typewriter, and then went to meet my new landlady at the rooming house and to drop off my stuff. My room was on the second floor, over a restaurant, a handy location for a new guy in town.

My boss was especially cheerful on the way to my first job. He seemed delighted to finally have a hard-to-get, but urgently needed, plasterer. He put me to work, on the public sidewalk of a busy street, of all places, to plaster a wall around a store window. He left all the tools and materials and told me he'd be back after lunch.

While I got everything ready, the sand and water and so on, I saw him talking to the store owner, promising the job would be finished this morning. Both watched for a while. I heard my boss boast that he'd hit the jackpot getting me from Germany where all the good tradesmen were from. I even heard them talk about how strong and healthy I looked. They were kind of jolly with each other. I shuffled my things around to gain time while I figured out how to best tackle the job. Finally, they both left.

Alone now, except for strangers stopping to watch, I couldn't delay any longer. I had to get started. I mixed the goo carefully and slowly, watered the old wall, and hit it with my mix, almost closing my eyes, not wanting to see what I inwardly feared. Sure enough, the goo wouldn't stick. It ran

down the wall and onto the sidewalk. Up I pushed it and down it went, faster down than up. The wall and the goo were too wet to stick to each other. There was no way to keep going. I had to scrape it off and start over with a drier mix.

By then a crowd had gathered, watching, staring, trying to figure out what I was doing. Unseen by me-but as fate had arranged it-my boss had joined the crowd. Suddenly he stepped forward and stood in front of me-bewildered-gesturing, pointing here and there at the wall and at my goo. I gave him excuses: materials and tools I wasn't used to. He didn't listen. He didn't even look at me. He just wheeled around and walked away.

A short time later he returned with a small manila envelope and gave it to me without a word, swinging his arms around, gesturing. I mumbled more excuses he couldn't hear because he was already on his way to find the storeowner he'd boasted to earlier. I knew what it meant. I would do no more of what I had come to this wonderful country to do."