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German Immigrant  
Castel Bianco  
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Canadian Museum of  
Immigration at Pier 21  
Musée canadien de  
l'immigration du Quai 21

IMMIGRATION 1951

The absurdity of the Immigration Officer's questioning, as it pertained to my geographic direction into the country, did not occur to me at the time. To his inquiry of "Where do you want to go?" I hinted at Montreal, Toronto, even Hamilton. He told me that these were overrun by new immigrants, and that I should instead choose another place. Following my request for guidance, he referred me to the huge map on his office wall and suggested that I select a destination on my own.

The city of Regina appeared sufficiently distant from where he had discouraged me to settle. It was somewhere in the middle of the country, and it had a nice-sounding name. Unknown to me at the time, it was also in Saskatchewan, the Wheat Province. Yet—to my later great amazement—he accepted this as the chosen destination for Canada's newest prospective lumberjack.

I don't know where this chap was from or how much of a liquid lunch he had imbibed that day. Perhaps he merely demonstrated his peculiar sense of humour to an unsuspecting Kraut. Or could it really be that he had never discovered that there were no trees to be harvested in the Regina area?

Crucial was that I obtained my visa as an immigrant; to a country where even native-born Canadians—every single one—are descendants of immigrants.

Despite some claims to the contrary, this most certainly includes our Indians and Eskimos or, as they prefer to be called today, our First Nation or Inuit communities.

In the opinion of professed experts, these are the progeny of roving bands arriving over the then existing land-bridge from Asia.

My origins were in Europe. Those ancestors that I was able to authenticate in many years of research came primarily from Germany; with only minor embellishments to the mélange by infiltrators from France and Switzerland. Yet, since the area where I grew up had for centuries been overrun by ethnic groups from throughout Europe and

occasionally from Asia, there might well have been other, although undocumented, contributions as well.

My hopes and aspirations were no different, when I decided to leave Germany for Canada in 1951. I, too, sought peace and the possibility of a better life, just like the many thousands who emigrated from post-war Europe during those years.

Conflicts between France and Germany had been going on forever. I felt then that, at some future date, Germans and French would again be at each other's throat. My grandparents' generation had suffered through three major wars (1870–71, 1914–18 and 1939–45). I had enough with just the one clash and did not wish to endure another. I wanted to get out of Europe.

The Canadian Government Immigration Mission in Karlsruhe had an elaborate screening process. They tried to verify that I was politically untarnished by a Nazi past, attested completely healthy, and had no criminal record. Documents submitted with my original application, issued by the authorities of the day following their own investigations, confirmed that I qualified on all three counts.

Then followed the personal interview. Since I did not have a specific trade skill, I was informed that I could only be granted a visa in either the "General Labourer" or the "Lumberjack" categories. I elected to come with the more romantic designation. Albeit—misdirected by the immigration counsellor's ignorance, inebriation or malicious intent—to the wrong part of the country for such employment.

My parents had offered to finance the return passage to Germany, should my Canadian venture not be up to expectations. But they refused to facilitate this audacious undertaking of their only son by funding my initial departure. I therefore had to obtain an Assisted Passage Loan from the Canadian government.

I sailed from Bremerhaven aboard the Castelbianco of the Italian SITMAR Line. We were told that she was a Victory Ship, built as a troop carrier during the war. There were two hundred of us in the one sleeping area, so I was lucky that my bunk was near the fresh air intake. I was more fortunate still, to have two interesting neighbours, one of whom to become a life-long friend.

Meals aboard were plentiful and nourishing. But rough seas reduced the number of participants for each subsequent meal, during part of what—with stops to take on additional passengers in France and England—may have been a ten-day voyage.

We docked in Quebec City on October 24th. Immigration and Customs screening was aboard ship. In antiquated railcars, we traversed northern Ontario on our way to the Prairie Provinces. Occasionally, the train would halt long enough for us to disembark and buy provisions from food outlets near a railway station. There were always much hooting and hollering to get us back aboard when the engineer was ready to leave. For most of the journey, the first—perhaps the only—memorable impression was that there was an immense wilderness area yet to be settled.

Conversations with my newly found buddies revealed that one of them knew a very influential and, hopefully, helpful person in Winnipeg. Yet, my documents destined me to Regina. But why would I want to leave these friends, whose own immigration papers directed them to Winnipeg? I decided, therefore, to disembark at the earlier stop and that harvesting of trees in Regina would have to wait.

My apprehension about possible enforcement of my “lumberjack in Regina” status by the authorities was of short duration. No one seemed to care where I went or what I did. There was no residence registration with police either. This, I surmised, was really a free country, where everyone did his own thing and was left to flourish or famish according to his personal devices, a combination of his skill, effort and, not least, luck.

Temporary accommodation for those newly arrived was provided at the railway facilities in the station area off Winnipeg’s Main Street.

Every day and all day, the three of us marched from one company to the other, in search of employment. Since my English was more fluent than the nearly non-existent version of my pals, I became the spokesman. Where we received any encouragement about possible prospects, we reappeared again and again. Canada Packers was one of these firms where we became well known to the Personnel Department. They eventually named us “The Three Musketeers”.

My very first and extremely short-lived employment in Canada was as a plumber’s helper. One of my chums had the gall to persuade the project manager on a construction site that he was a qualified plumber. He—and I as his accredited helper—spent all day moving water pipes this way and that, without making any of the required installations. Our lack of talent and experience had become obvious when, by the end of the day, we were fired—with pay for our eight hours of “work”. It was probably the last time for this contractor to employ any one of “them there bloody DPs”.

DP, which stood for Displaced Person, was a term the locals applied in a somewhat derogatory fashion to recent immigrants from the war-torn Europe of the time. Explanations that a DP was someone without a country, who could not or did not want to return to his native soil—usually in Eastern Europe—were of no interest. Although we still had a homeland and were “real” immigrants—not refugees—DPs we were labelled. All of us!

With a German family name, and most certainly a German accent, our designation from some might even have been “Nazi”. But never to our faces!

My buddies and I finally succeeded in locating the “influential” contact.

While he did not turn out as a Mr. Winnipeg—the allegedly well-established mover and shaker—he certainly proved very considerate. He spent the good part of a day driving us around to a number of his mates. And it was at Litz the Mover that one of his acquaintances from Winnipeg’s German Club employed the three of us immediately.

For 90 cents an hour we worked during the daytime at levelling huge oil tanks in a refinery storage yard. I operated a pneumatic drill to break the frozen ground in the coldest temperatures that I had ever experienced. For these outdoor assignments, I wore various layers of much of the clothing that I possessed.

Still working until late at night after regular hours, we earned overtime pay and, at \$1.35 per hour, moved heavy factory and office equipment, including bank safes. A weekend project was the transfer of an entire residential building from one site to another.

To move into our own quarters, my friends and I rented a furnished place at 720 Broadway Avenue. This was a rather magnificent name for a street with not very glamorous rooming houses. We had one bedroom with an adjoining kitchen. The bathroom was shared with a group of young ladies, who occupied similar facilities across the hall from ours, and regularly used up the hot water just ahead of our turn to take a shower. Fortunately, considering our other priorities at that time, we never got to know them really well during the few weeks of our joint residence.

My roommates and I took turns with various household chores. Since I was the first to arrive home in the evening, I usually did the cooking. The other chaps washed the dishes or swept and dusted the place. Shopping for groceries we undertook jointly once each week.

We lived frugally. The evening meal was our main repast for the day and consisted alternately of fried potatoes or noodles, which we served either with scrambled eggs, or pork chops, or sausages. Then the cycle started all over again. Not too much variety with these culinary delights, but easily prepared.

My lunch to take to work usually provided sardines on white bread and an apple. No comments ever from my colleagues about the obvious fishy smell. For breakfast I do not recall what we had, or, indeed, if we ate any. The three of us were already tall enough and didn't need that much food to make us grow, especially not if it cost money.

The employment with Litz had to be of short duration. From December onwards, they retained only their regular staff for the winter months. So, again, we were out seeking a new source of income.

I quickly ended up with another temporary assignment, this one at the T. Eaton Company for the remainder of their Christmas rush. In their mail-order warehouse, I searched for and usually located parcels addressed to customers from coast to coast. All of us were quite busy for a couple of weeks. As the pace slackened off close to the holidays, the trick to retain continuing employment—at least for a few days—was to appear busy. We accomplished this through one of our colleague's intentional misplacement of a few packages, while the rest of our crew went hunting for them throughout the storage area.

Again, I needed a job. And my next assignment turned out to be the most difficult work I ever had to do, since—despite my brief home-cooking interlude—I lacked both the experience and any talent for the task. I became a Second Cook on CN Railways' dining cars. An attraction was, of course, that it provided all the delicious food that I could eat and a bunk to sleep during the journey.

Not once, during those early years of my Canadian working life, did a potential employer view any documentation on my previous assignments; nor did I ever have to present certificates or diplomas about my educational background.

The routine seemed to be that you sold yourself as the one best qualified to do the job. If this proved correct, then you continued working; if it did not, you were out on your ear. Of course, should it ever be discovered that you had claimed credits you did not possess, you might be fired as well.

Upon my return to Winnipeg from a business trip—a cooking journey, I should say, this one to Churchill/Manitoba—I was elated to find a letter from the manager of the local branch of a national transportation company. He had responded to one of my written applications to several advertisers in the Help Wanted section of the Winnipeg Free Press. He asked me for an interview, I went, he hired me. Now I was an Invoice Typist at \$135 per month.

Things were picking up! I had—so I hoped—a permanent job in an office; a boss who was happy with what I was doing and left me to do it; and some really swell fellow workers. I was able to pay off my Assisted Passage Loan to the government and actually save some money. Not bad for a start!

My monthly share of the cost for accommodation was fifteen dollars, and to eat, drink, smoke (at that time I still suffered from this disgusting addiction), and be merry, I allowed an average of one dollar per day. This allocation also covered a movie ticket on each Saturday, as well as a 5-cent ice-cream bar for consumption during the screening. Depending on the type of theatre, the day's admission was between 25 and 35 cents with usually two, sometimes even three, films running in a show. The lengthy walk toward the movie district near Portage and Main, the centre of town, and the eventual return home, also on foot, saved ten cents each way in streetcar fare.

At that time, in the opinion of the local populace, someone who spoke with an accent (I did then, and still do somewhat now, and who doesn't in the Toronto area, anyway?) could not possibly have any useful educational background.

Explaining my Abitur as a senior matriculation high school graduation, and relating it convincingly to something Canadian, was an impossible task. I decided, therefore, to acquire a North American education, and enrolled for the American School's correspondence courses.

I quickly discovered that the material I had to study was much below the level of my earlier education in Germany. So I promptly terminated the course with the intention of getting into evening classes at a College instead. I eventually did this in Montreal, where, over a four-year period at considerable expenditure in time and effort and also—in relative terms, compared to my income at the time—in money, I obtained my first Canadian University degree.

My employment with this firm at their Winnipeg branch and—following a transfer at my request—in Montreal continued over twelve years. I gradually progressed into a series of managerial responsibilities. I even

survived in my career and continued to thrive professionally following our take-over by another firm that had previously been a major competitor. By the time I left for totally different assignments in Ontario—to start a new career, indeed, a new life—the last position I held was that of Assistant General Manager of a major division.

I hesitate to describe my experiences in my country of choice during those early years as “A Canadian Success Story”. But never once since my arrival did I regret my decision to emigrate from Germany, lament my lot, or deplore the difference in local customs from those to which I had previously been accustomed. I tried to fit in as best I could and become Canadian. Not only in citizenship on the first possible date, but more importantly in outlook and conduct and lifestyle.

It seems to have worked for me!