

Ilse Koemer  
German Immigrant  
Conte Biancamano  
June 22, 1954



In 1954 we came for one year,  
in 1999 we are still here.

The first "World Confederation of Physiotherapy" was held in London England in 1953. Sabine Reich, a German Physiotherapist from the University in Goettingen, presented a paper on "Post Operative Treatment of Surgery on Blue Babies." Returning to Goettingen, she asked for a leave of absence from the university in order to observe physiotherapy in English speaking countries. An American, who was living in Goettingen at the same time, was a patient, at the hospital, and I, Ilse Koerner, was his therapist. Sabine and I became acquainted with him and we talked about our wish to obtain a position as physiotherapists in an English speaking country. The American had a friend in Edmonton, Canada, who knew the medical director of a newly opened Workers Compensation Board Rehabilitation Center. Dr. Fowler needed physiotherapists and agreed to hire Sabine and me for the one year that we wanted to work in Canada. On board the Italian ship "Conte Biancamano" we sailed on June the 12th 1954 from Genoa via Naples, Palermo, Gibraltar, over the Atlantic where we entered the harbour of Halifax at noon on the 22nd of June 1954. The memory of Disembarkation, the first step onto a new Continent, the immigration procedures with hundreds of Italian families, has become rather nebulous in my mind. My visual memory of that day begins with entering a huge hall.

Behind long tables immigration personnel directed the newcomers luggage to be put along one wall. Food belonging to the immigrants was confiscated and piled up in a heap in the middle of the hall. Rays of sunshine painted a colourful still life of that mountain of sausages, loaves of bread, wheels of cheeses, fruits and other perishable items. We had only two suitcases and two handbags. We were allotted to the first group to be seated on rows of chairs. While we were waiting, our vivacious fellow immigrants entertained us: Children were running around the food pile in the center, Girls were fetching little ones who were lost, Mothers tried to clam down crying children, while holding babies in their arms. Men were carrying and pushing luggage, calling to each other across the hall. All these men gesticulated with both hands, trying to make themselves understood by the officials.

Finally all immigrants were seated and all was quiet. An immigration officer greeted and welcomed us to Canada. My English was not good enough to understand the exact wording. But the atmosphere of that moment will always be in my mind; everybody was looking up and listening to the speaker, while the rays of the late afternoon sun filled the hall.

With our luggage we walked through the exit of Pier 21. Two ladies in smartly tailored uniforms and chic hats directed us to a boarding house nearby. They informed us that our train to Edmonton would leave the next morning.