

Kurt Maurer  
German Immigrant  
Leerdam  
May 1, 1952



My brother, Rolf, and I left from Antwerp on April 20, 1952 in the SS Leerdam, 8,854 GRT, her last port of call in Europe, and after a rather stormy voyage of 11 days arrived in Halifax May 1, 1952. We were told that it was the last voyage for this ship. Some joked and said the one before was probably its last completed voyage.

The passage was \$125 each and while this was certainly a bargain basement fare, it had to be paid in US Dollars, the possession of which was illegal in Germany at the time and it could only be gotten on the Black Market. I had a friend who worked at the Frankfurt Railway Station in an office for American Personnel so it was fairly easy for me to get the necessary dollars; since I worked for the Holland-America Line immediately before my emigration, payment of the fare by illegal dollars could be covered. For pocket money, 40 German marks could be legally exchanged into dollars, 4 Marks to the dollar, and \$10 was what we had officially on arrival.

On landing in Halifax on May 1st, we had some time between Immigration formalities and the evening departure of a CNR Train going West. There were not enough passengers getting off to set up a Colonist Class train, so we travelled quite comfortably in regular coach.

The first thing in Halifax that caught our eyes was a picture of Adolf Hitler on the cover of a magazine at a news stand near the railway station, with the bold caption, "Hitler is still alive". The magazine was the Police Gazette which to us sounded rather official and we were kind of shocked, believing that we left all that behind us to make a new start in Canada. However, we soon found out what type of information was usually found in that magazine and our worries were quickly put to rest.

The train left in the evening and kept rolling and rolling through, for us anyways, endless forests, with snow still on the ground in many areas. We had a Russian family from the same ship on our train and they kept muttering, somewhat in despair, "Just like Siberia, just like Siberia. I don't know whether they had notions of Florida or California. We lost track of them when we got to Montreal on the morning of May 3, a Saturday.

My brother, whose financial situation had not made it possible to buy a railway ticket further than Montreal, left me there to try and earn money for the onward journey to join me later in Vancouver, and I proceeded westward, this time in CPR and Colonist Class. The bench seats had hardwood frames with well-worn upholstery in the center. At night, two of these benches on opposite sides could be pulled together to make a sort of sleeping berth, good at least for two people at a time. The compartment seated 6 but it was not fully occupied. The windows were not very tight, the soot from the coal-fired locomotive seeped in freely and my light-colored European-style raincoat, which I used to stop the draft, was in no time more like black, with some beige showing.

By the time I arrived in Winnipeg, after two endless days and night, all alone, I just could not take it any longer. Counting my money, I decided to get a night's real rest and got off the train, walked across the street and into the first hotel I found, Hotel Winnipeg. It was 5 dollars a night and I took a room, which had running water. On a recent visit to Winnipeg, I actually found the hotel still standing amidst more modern buildings, and dropped in just to look. The price had gone up since 1952 to \$25 - sharing a bathroom, and for \$5 extra plus a \$20 deposit you could now get a TV.

In the evening, I stood at the Corner of Portage and Main, not a soul in sight but a howling wind with dust and bits of newspapers dancing in the air like whirling dervishes. Not much to do, it seemed and in my low-budget state, it was just as well. Before turning in, I put my only pair of shoes outside the door, the way it is customary in Europe for the house boy to shine them. Well I was lucky, so I was made to understand later, as the shoes were still there next morning, not shined, but at least I had shoes. They could have been considered discarded and picked up by someone, and it would not even have been a theft.

Twenty-four hours later, I re-boarded the daily trans-continental CPR Train and - surprise, surprise: No more Colonist cars. My ticket, however, was good for Coach Class in the absence of Colonist cars, so I found myself upgraded, as you would call it now: Soft seats, air conditioning, tight windows you could not open - my off-color raincoat felt kind of out of place. Past Regina and Calgary and then the breathtaking sight of the Rockies, and a Mountie in scarlet uniform on the platform in Revelstoke. Things were starting to look up. Down the Fraser Valley, along the shore of Burrard inlet with the many squatters finally into Vancouver, my destination, and all by myself, Wednesday morning, May 7, 1952, a beautiful Spring day.

My first stop was to report to Immigration, a red brick building by the Waterfront, near the CPR station. I was given an address of a rooming

house on Beach Avenue, one room with cooking facilities in the hallway. My baggage had arrived the day before, not having thrown in the towel at Winnipeg, and I retrieved my bicycle along with basic overnight stuff. That afternoon I studied the Yellow Pages for suitable employment. My training was that of a Travel and Steamship Agent, with a diploma after a 3-year apprenticeship with the American Express Company in Frankfurt, Germany. I had heard rumours that the company planned to open an office in Vancouver. This did not happen until about 20 years later. I made a list of all Shipping and Railway Offices and Travel Agencies (four at that time, now about 400) and made a plan for the next day.

Thursday, 8th of May, I first went to the white collar Unemployment Office on Robson Street and after registering there I called on about 30 companies, which was only possible with my bicycle. The Marine Building alone had about a dozen prospective employers but by the end of the day, I was still without a job.

Friday, 9th of May, I went to the blue collar Unemployment Office on Beatty Street where I immediately got a job offer, as a Laborer, with West Coast Woolen Mills at Clark Drive, to start right away, and to report to the manager 12th of May at noon. While I was sitting on the scaffolding of a huge billboard waiting for the manager to return from lunch, a man started talking to me and invited me for a cup of coffee in a little coffee shop close by. He did not pitch anything, or ask questions, he was just nice to a newcomer to his country. A good first impression for me. The manager of the Woolen Mill informed me that my pay was 95 cents an hour for the regular shift and 1.05 for the late (swing) shift. My job was feeding old rags into a kind of shredder for recycling.

Over the weekend, being sure of my job, I had looked for a place to sleep in the vicinity and found room and board at 1753 Parker Street. A Mrs. Morrison with her daughter Mickey ran this rooming house for up to five young men, full board, lunch packed, \$12 a week, right within my budget and leaving enough to save up to bring my wife and two children here in a year or so. Within 2 weeks, I was offered the job of Office Boy at Thos. Cook and Son, the leading Travel Agency in town and I have never looked back.

I built and ran a well-respected multi-branch travel agency in Greater Vancouver, with close to a hundred permanent jobs and am retired now.

