

Ursula Findeisen nee
Soper
German Immigrant
Ryndam
April 28, 1955



Ursula Findeisen (Soper)

April - May 1955

I arrived in Halifax on Pier 21, April 28, 1955. I was 24 years old and hoped that Canada would give me a chance to realize the dreams of a good future for myself. My widowed mother was heartbroken, I was her only girl, she and my two older brothers stayed in Germany, but nothing would stop me from trying this adventure.



I knew only a colleague who worked with me in the American library, and her husband. They had come to Canada the year before. As they were in Hamilton, that is where I went. My friend, Liz, greeted me with the news that this was the most awful country she had ever seen. She would go home today if she only had some money. But for me it was such a beautiful country, it was an early spring, the trees were just coming out in leaf, and there were blooming bushes everywhere. So I didn't share Liz'

opinion. Also – I found a job in a fruit wholesale office in Hamilton on Tuesday, four days after arriving, and started work on Thursday. It was walking distance from the street where I immediately found a room to rent and I felt so lucky.

Even luckier, but more daring was my agreement to start university that same fall, on September 15, '55. I only earned \$32 every week, and the tuition was \$320. But I managed to save just enough to pay. With help from the university and Liz, and my brother in Germany who sent me \$12.00 every month, I managed to succeed at university. Having lived in East Germany until Dec. 1948, with practically nothing (food, clothing etc.), and starting over in West Germany, I was so used to "make do", that it was no hardship at all to go through university on the barest

minimum of a budget, but without having any debt at the end. In 1959, four years after arriving in Canada, I graduated from university, and that fall I started teaching high school.

The dreams I had, to make a good life for myself, have come true in so many ways. My mother got over her heartbreak and she came to visit me and my Canadian husband and children many, many times, and we visited her until she died at age 93.

So this day, April 28, 1955, when I arrived on Pier 21 to fulfill my dreams will stay in my memory forever and I thank my intuition that I found such a wonderful country, Canada is the best country in the world as far as I am concerned.



Excerpts from letters to my family in Germany

April 20, 1955

I just finished a large supper and now I will tell you about the first hours on board Ryndam. As soon as I couldn't see you any more, I went down to my cabin to unpack. There is not much room, but just enough, because I didn't bring very many things. There are three other women in my cabin and they are all going to New York.

I spent most of the afternoon in the Palm Court. When we were out in the open sea one could notice that the ship was moving up and down, but it didn't bother me. The library was already closed when I got there, so I have to go tomorrow morning to get a book. Toward evening I was very hungry and waited longingly for supper. The second sitting begins at 7:30. For an appetizer we had Russian eggs, then chicken soup, then chicken (lots) and young carrots, peas, cauliflower and French fries and green salad. For desert apricot compote, ice cream and a piece of English cake and coffee and fresh fruit. There are ten people at my table,

six women and 4 men. Eight of the ten are Germans, and one Austrian and one Swiss. They, too, are all going to New York.

Tomorrow morning we will reach Le Havre and we will stop there until noon. Then it's on to Southampton.

The whole ship is full of old people, and most of them look as if they are on the way to a neighboring village for a visit. It is so funny to watch them. It's like being on a commuter train rather than on a transatlantic ocean liner.

Please, Mutti, don't cry any more, you have seen all those people, most of them are going over to America to visit someone. You can do that too and it won't take very long until you will get a visitors' visa.

1000 greetings and kisses, your Ursel.

April 22, '55

We are on the way to Cobh, Ireland. By now a stiff wind, but the sun was wonderful. In the afternoon I wrote several cards in the Palmcourt and listened to music, first records and then an orchestra. After a while we were served small pastries and tea. Later I went up to the sports deck. We were just getting into Southampton and there was much to see, the English coast and other ships, coming and going.

After a while I met one of my cabin-mates, Dorothy, and we went to the smoking salon and drank a coke. The steward put salt bretzels and almonds on the table. These are free. And salty things are supposed to be good against sea-sickness, but I feel wonderfully well. After supper last night we went to see a movie. I started at 9:30 and ended at 11:30.

I slept very well until 8:30 this morning. Now I can tell that we are out in the open ocean, because the boat is moving up and down. Went up to the Palm Court and wrote some more cards.

The food here is very good and plenty of it. I have already taken some fruits to my room, so I have something to eat on the long train trip ahead, 36 hours!

By now I already spent 11.20 Guilders. Twice for lemonade and coke. 4 for cigarettes, 20 for fruit drops, and the rest for stamps. Now I have to be more careful with my money.

The people at my table are quite interesting. And it also is much fun to watch the people on the ship.

This afternoon I am planning to play Scrabble with Dorothy and then I will study some shorthand.

April 24, '55

The fourth day at sea and now we really are out in the high seas. It finally caught up with me and now I am seasick, just like about everybody else on board. The ship is rocking like crazy, you can hardly believe it. I already brought up in the evening day before yesterday, but the sea was still relatively calm. Yesterday was not too bad, I went for every meal and spent a long time up on the sports deck. In the evening I watched a movie, and then, just as I was getting ready to go to bed, I had to run to the toilet again, and I lost my supper. But eventually I slept well until 6 in the morning and it started all over again. I just made it to the sink in the cabin and felt very sorry for my cabin mates, but that's the best I could do. I took my clothes up to my bunk bed and got dressed up there, which made it a little easier. As soon as I was dressed I rushed up to the deck and stood in the open air and it did make me feel better. On the way to breakfast, I fed the fish over the railing. I only ate very little and had a few sips of tea and until now, cross your fingers, it stayed down. It is all very funny, the few people who manage to be up on their feet are wandering around clutching paper bags, and most of them have a slightly green complexion. Will write more later, the paper is gone and I don't dare go down to the cabin to get more.

April 27, '55

A few more days have gone and tomorrow we will be in Halifax. The time has flown, I feel as if we only left Rotterdam yesterday.

My last letter I wrote when I was seasick. By now I am very well again. It really only took one whole day, the other times when I brought up, I was still able to eat and feel more or less all right. That one day was really bad, you feel so weak and apathetic, and just have to concentrate on keeping the bit of tea down. Even on that evening I went to the movie, to be distracted. Besides, the other three cabin mates were all lying in their beds as if they were half dead. I found that with this ailment, one can give in to it and lie in bed all the time and then it takes longer to get up on ones feet again. Or one can keep going and one feels just as lousy as the ones in bed, but one gets over it much more quickly.

Yesterday they had a children's festival in the afternoon, and it was so cute. They all had colourful balloons, and hats and there were prizes for games. In the evening we played Bingo. Each card cost \$1.00, but I didn't know this before, so I just stayed and played. The purser told me

that there is an office where one can exchange money on the Pier. And he also said that I have to look after my luggage once I am off the boat. I am anxious to see what comes next!

Yesterday I met a young couple. The husband had already lived and worked in Montreal for 8 months. He said that life is good in Canada, if one has a job. It took him 10 days to find one. Rooms cost \$20.00 per week with meals. Well, we'll see.

The ship will arrive between 10 and 11 in the morning and I will have to find out on the Pier when the trains go, they can't tell me on board.

1,000 greetings and kisses from your Ursel

P.S. We are just arriving in Halifax and it is pouring, but otherwise everything is fine.

April 28, '55

Have arrived safely in Halifax and am sitting in the train which will leave soon.

I'll tell you exactly how my arrival went. Last night, after packing my stuff, I went to the movie, which finished after 12. Then to bed and I slept like a log.

He train just started, it's 4:10).

At six I woke up and packed the few last things, and put the luggage out for the steward who looked after everything. I only kept my typewriter and my green handbag. Then I lay down again and slept till 8:30. Got dressed and went upstairs to the purser to change a little bit more money for tips. Bought some fruit drops and little chocolate bars for the trip. At 9 I went up for breakfast. I am the only one at my table who is getting off. They all wondered how I can be so calm, but I don't see any reason to be agitated.

We were told to come to the lounge after breakfast and there it took only twenty minutes before we had to show our passport and tickets and then we could leave. I went down to my cabin again to get the typewriter and bag, and found your dear letters, so I sat down and read them before I left the ship.

When you said that the sun had disappeared from your life, some tears were rolling down my cheeks (luckily nobody was there to see me). It sounds as if I have already died, but I have no intention of doing that very soon.

I spent 14.50 guilders for tips. The room steward got 7, because was so nice, the stewardess who made the beds got 3 and 4:50 for the dining room steward because he was not very nice and one had to beg him for everything.

So I had 3:50 guilders left. I did not throw around my money, but it just goes. I think most of it went for stamps. I wrote about 10 letters to friends and 40 post cards.

Finally I went down the gang plank with my typewriter and hand bag and on the shore there were two nice Canadians in uniform to welcome me and told me where to go. I came into a big hall with benches, where some people were already sitting. After a few minutes I was told to go to the doctor, who just took some blood and five minutes later I came into another big hall with a long table. There I had to show my passport and they sent me to a man at the end of the hall who works for NES (National Employment Service). He was nice and funny and gave me a form-letter, which he had filled in. I was to take it to NES in Hamilton. I asked him if it was possible for me to get a job in an office and he said "with your English, you should be able to get one", but I would have to see what happens in Hamilton. Then I went to the ticket window of the railway. The man there wrote me a real ticket, and took the piece of paper that I had from Germany. There I checked on the train connection and this is how it is: 4:10 lv. Halifax, 6:30 tomorrow night arr. In Montreal, there a train leaves at 8:30 but I chose the later train at 11 from Montreal, arr. In Toronto at 7:15, from Toronto I leave at 8:30, but I chose the later train at 11 from Montreal, arr. In Toronto at 7:15, from Toronto I leave at 8:30 and arr. In Hamilton at 9:25 (Saturday).

I checked how much it would cost to take a sleeper and he said about \$12 or \$14. I said that it probably was too much, I had to see how much money I would get for my 70 Marks. The money exchange was next door, so I changed my 70 Marks, and also the 3:50 guilders I had left. I got \$15.60 and then I had the \$2 Liz had sent me, so I had \$17.50. Then I talked to the railway man again and he said, he could give me an upper berth for \$7.50, where I could stay until tomorrow morning at 10:30. There is a station where the train stops but I have forgotten the name. That's when I have to change to another car. So I decided to do that. I still have \$10, that must be enough. And I get a good night's sleep for one night. Tomorrow it won't be so bad to sit up, because I will get to Liz the next morning. I sent her a telegram, and I didn't send one to you, but only a letter that will reach you in three days or so too.

After all this I went into another great hall, which was the customs' shed. All the boxes and luggage was already there, and by my things stood a

lady, a Miss Lehmann. She had a sign on her sleeve that said World-Church-Organization. She came from Germany three years ago. She stayed with me until my train left.

The customs people had all gone for lunch, because it was 12 noon. So Miss Lehmann went with me to the train. I had a wagon number and three cars standing outside the shed just for the passengers from the Ryndam. I could get into my sleeping car, and that was nicer than the other ones. It had clean carpets on the floor, and right and left of the aisle were the seats, which make into beds at night. Opposite my big seat (big enough for two) was a man, who hardly said anything. I think he was English. After I got all my bags stowed away I left with Miss Lehmann and bought myself some crackers for the trip (35 cents). Then I bought myself a sandwich and a cup of coffee for lunch. Then I went back to get my luggage through customs. They were very nice to me and didn't open anything. The two big boxes were just as solid as when I left Bamberg. Those and the green suitcase I will send by express. It goes on the same train and does not cost anything (up to 250 pounds).

Then Miss Lehmann bought me some magazines. We still had two hours before the train left so she showed me the railway station in detail. She even bought me a little chocolate bar, so I would know which kind is best. She told me how she started in Canada. I think she is about 45 – 50 years old. She gave me all kinds of good advice, said that I definitely would not have to work as a domestic, because I paid for my trip over. Every immigrant gets an envelope with a little booklet full of advice. Miss Lehmann said that of course it would be possible for me to go home in two years for a visit. She, herself, is going home this year, although she would rather travel in Canada, but her sisters want her to come home.

So - as you can see, so far so good.

Then we went to the lunch room, where we had an ice cream and then she walked me back to the train where I said good bye to her and thanked her for her help. After making myself at home on the train, I started writing this letter to you, and now we have been rolling along already for one and a half hours. It is almost 6 and it is pouring outside.

The countryside looks nice, the houses are all kinds of colours, mostly made of wood. There are cars everywhere, quite familiar from the Americans in Germany. In my sleeping car they have a room to wash with large mirrors everywhere, and small stools in front. The basins are very clean. There is soap and clean hand towels and there is running hot and cold water!

A while ago I went to another car to look for a young man I met on the boat. I knew that he was also going to Montreal. His name is C. Heesterman and he is Dutch, about 26 years old. He just finished his studies as engineer and is also emigrating to Canada. He is very nice and educated. I found him and we planned that I would come to his car and continue the trip to Montreal together.

I am sort of glad, after all, to be off the boat. It was lovely and comfortable, but after a week of being shook up, it is nice to be on a solid ground again.

Now I have told you everything about my first day in Canada, more soon.

Love, Ursel

29 April, '55

Now we are almost in Montreal, only one hour to go and I will try to mail the letter from there. The train ride so far has not seemed as long as I thought, but I still have a whole night ahead of me. The bed last night was very comfortable and had very clean sheets, a pillow and two blankets. There was also a clothes-hanger and a curtain in front of my berth. When I woke up in the morning it was a beautiful sunny day. In the train there is a water container with ice water and little paper cups beside it, so you are never thirsty. Every so often a man comes through with sandwiches and coffee. The cup of coffee is 15 cents. A few hours ago we were in Quebec City. Whenever the train stops I get out and walk up and down on the platform. By the way, the staff in Halifax were all very friendly and everybody seems to be very easy going. Oh, I was going to tell you that, from the first day on, I saved some fruit on the ship, I had a big bag of apples, oranges, pears and bananas. They were my main food yesterday and today, but also, Cornelis had some bread and cheese and a man gave us some butter he didn't need, so we had some sandwiches. That's all for today, more soon.

Your Ursel

