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Italian Immigrant
and Europa Crew
April 1951



According to an old Italian proverb a degree in law can open any door, towards getting a career. That is probably why, in April 1951, with WWII just behind me and with a few years of apprenticeship at the local ships' chandlers' firm in Genoa, I left Italy to join the S/S Europa in Le Havre as a junior purser. The S/S Europa was an old P&O vessel, built for their trade from London to the Orient, and was originally named Mongolia. Later under a different company she became S/S Rimutaka, plying the same waters.

The new owner, Ingres Steamship Company of Panama, named her Europa and with a capacity of about 650 passengers on a one class only basis, with an all Italian crew, she was employed under the auspices of an international agency to carry stateless individuals, created by the war, as immigrants to Halifax and New York. Our other port of call was Plymouth, where we were anchoring for just a few hours to embark Britons who were immigrating to Canada and the United States.

By the time I joined the Europa, she was already a sort of a veteran in this type of service, having started the previous year transporting the same stateless immigrants to Canada and the United States from Antwerp in Belgium. The switch from the aforementioned city to Le Havre was solely due to logistical reasons.

The round trip voyage practically took a month and the Europa remained in that operation until the end of September 1951, when she went to a shipyard in Genoa to undergo radical renovation works. At the end of the conversion she was renamed the cruise ship Nassau, starting in late December of the same year in a weekly service from New York to Nassau, the first ship ever scheduled to sail year-round on a full cruising schedule. Years later, in 1960, she was sold to Natumex, a Mexican government agency created to pioneer cruising from Los Angeles, California to Acapulco, Mexico, and aptly renamed S/S Acapulco. She retired in the spring of 1963.

But let us return to the faraway April of 1951.

Of course, I was very excited about my new job. I remember, just a few hours out of Le Havre the first view of the white cliffs of the English

Channel, the curiosity of the tender in Plymouth, bringing passengers from shore to the ship, my first crossing of the Atlantic Ocean (and the relevant seasickness), my first encounter with the American Continent, my surprise upon arriving at Halifax to find that at the beginning of May it was still snowing. But more than anything else I remember the daunting task of preparing the passenger manifest as required by the Immigration authorities, in Halifax and New York.

The preparation of the passengers' manifest had become a nightmare to us junior pursers, and it practically was our only job on board. But it was a full time job, often requiring us to work overtime.

The passengers carried by the Europa, apart from the British, were all stateless persons from Eastern European countries, many from Poland. Their names as well as all related data were very difficult, sometimes forbidding for us Italians, made as they were of the most incredible grouping sequence of keys, zed and other alien consonants, with very few vowels here and there in between. It was therefore very difficult to collect all the information required by the Immigration authorities.

And, sometimes it was even funny: I remember one instance later in the season, when we needed some additional information from one passenger. We called him over the public address system, but no one showed up. We kept calling him several times during the day, with no success. Finally, we asked the cabin steward to look for him. The steward did not have to look far. As he left the Purser's office he spotted the passenger sitting in an armchair in front of the office and we all remembered having seen him sitting comfortably there all day long.

If gathering the information was hard, even harder, burdensome and time consuming was typing the data on the immigration forms. Most of the aggravation was certainly due to the ink we had to type with and to the copying machine we had to use.

Typewriters, at the time, were only manual, stencil was unknown, Xerox machines were light years away, computers sounded like a dirty word.

The result was that we had to type the manifest using a horrible purple tape, which made our fingers look like overripe California plums and which, even more frustrating, made corrections impossible to make once the text was typed.

When all the papers were finally completed (25 names per sheet, for 650 passengers, equals 26 sheets) a special gelatin roll was taken out of the ship's refrigerated storeroom and deployed (spread out) on a table in the Purser's office. The gelatin was moistened and each sheet, one at a time,

was religiously pressed, face down for a few minutes against the gelatin. A reverse image of the prints remained on the surface and, by carefully and quickly pressing black sheets firmly against that image we could obtain, if everything worked out well, six legible copies. But if something went wrong we had no choice but to retype the entire page and go through the same copying operation once more.

To add to the aggravation and anxiety we already felt, the Senior Purser was continuously warning us about the strict scrutiny of these lists by the Immigration authorities and, in particular, the absolute accuracy of the manifest required by the Chief of Immigration Officers in Halifax, who was nicknamed "il Cines" because of his oriental origin.

And I remember the big day, when I had my first experience of the Canadian Immigration procedure.

The immigrants were assembled in large, bare rooms with huge heating units by the windows and with roofs of corrugated metal. Several inspectors were seated at a long, wooden table and immigrants were asked to sit in front of one of them for questioning and verification of their papers. Once the examination was satisfactorily over, they were admitted and could proceed to their destination.

The odyssey and the fate of these people always impressed me with mixed feelings of compassion and admiration. When we required them to give us their final destination address, in order to complete the passenger's manifest, they invariably showed us the return address on an envelope of a letter received from whomever sponsored their immigration application. They did not know anything more.

I looked at them in amazement. There are people, I would think, who have gone through terrible experiences, who suffered hunger and humiliations, who lost not only their loved ones, their homes and country, but their identity as well. And now here they are, sailing towards an unknown country, whose language they did not speak, without knowledge of where they would eventually settle, in a city, village, or in the mountains.

And yet, they laughed and joked. More than anything else they looked forward to starting a new life. I was stunned by the human ability to rise from the ashes and to start all over again.

Almost fifty years have passed since those voyages. By now the children and grandchildren of the immigrants we carried on the S/S Europa are fully integrated into their new world. Many may occupy posts of prestige and responsibility. Fantastic, this is the miracle of immigration.

Has the new generation ever heard of the S/S Europa and of the journey taken by their elders? Does anyone who traveled on the S/S Europa still remember the ship, which served as a bridge from their lost country to their new one? I hope so. I also hope that somewhere the memory of the Europa is still kept alive.

The S/S Europa called at Halifax for the last time towards the end of September 1951. It was sad to say goodbye to a place, which by then had become familiar and friendly.

And once more I was surprised to see that it was already snowing in Halifax at the end of September.