

Angelo Vella
Maltese Immigrant
Caronia
June 18, 1920

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM
PIER 21



The following was written by
Angelo Vella in February

2000, a few weeks before his 89th birthday. It describes his journey from Malta to Toronto with his brother Joe, sister Victoria, and mother Rosalea, in the summer of 1920. The ship that he arrived in docked at Halifax Harbour's Pier 2; the building that predates Pier 21.



After attending Mass we left Malta by ship in late May at about two in the afternoon. Our first stop was to be Tunis in North Africa, which was really in the opposite direction of our eventual destination. We travelled third class and were supposed to sleep on deck. However, a big storm hit and we were sent below. The storm was so bad that they threw cargo and even animals overboard to lighten the ship. We arrived in Tunis the next day and spent a day and half there.

We then sailed north to Marseille. I have a vivid memory of our arrival. There

were soldiers taking prisoners that were chained together onto ships bound for other countries. We thought even Devil's Island.

From Marseille we travelled by train to Bordeaux, and then by ship across the English Channel to London. When we arrived at Victoria Station we were told that we had missed our sailing out of Liverpool, and would have to spend four days in London. Eventually we made our way to Liverpool, and the Cunard vessel named the Caronia.

While in line to board the ship, all passengers received a quick medical inspection. The family ahead of us was pulled aside to return to Malta.

Thinking that we [were] part of that same family, the doctor also pulled us from the line. A Maltese man that was travelling with us convinced the doctor that we were a separate family and finally we were allowed to board. Our mother nearly died of fear from that experience alone.

While on the Caronia we experienced the “Milk of Human Kindness” that you read about. Our mother was confined to her bed with seasickness from the moment we stepped onto the ship. As we were travelling in third class we had our meals at the final setting, and being without adult supervision we were not getting our share of the food. One steward serving our table noticed our situation and asked where our mother was. We explained to him that she was sick in bed. He told us (and about seven other children) not to eat with the adults, but to wait until they were finished and he would set up a separate table for us. We did this for the rest of the voyage. Also after each meal he gave us a packed lunch to take back to our mother. That act of kindness stayed with me all of my life.

After six days of beautiful and calm weather we arrived at Halifax Harbour on the evening of June 18th, 1920. Due to fog, the ship was not allowed to enter the actual harbour. I suppose that after the 1917 disaster they were not taking any chances.

It was on the morning of June 19th then, that we actually docked and entered Canada. We boarded a train that was beside the pier, and started on our last leg to Toronto.

I do not remember much of the train ride, other than arriving at Toronto’s Union Station at about eleven p.m. on June 20th.

Our father had arrived in Canada seven years earlier. The idea was that he would come here first, set up a home and send for us. The advent of the World War One had greatly delayed this plan. He was to meet us at Union Station. He owned a car and everything should have been fine, but somehow we missed each other. So we started out towards our new home on one of Toronto’s old (wooden) streetcars. It was a one-hour ride, and even when it ended we were still a mile away from our destination. So there we were, walking with our luggage at about midnight. Somehow my father found us though, and took us home.

So that was the introduction to Canada for a family of three young children (Ages 12, 9, 7) and their mother, who until a month before had never travelled more than eight miles at one time, and had just completed a journey of about eight thousand miles. It was a very hard and eventful twenty-four day voyage to the unknown. But after living in Canada for eighty years, I can honestly say it was worth it.

Canada has been good to us, and I think it is the greatest country to live in. Let's all enjoy it in harmony with each other.

I visited Halifax in September of 1999, and the Good Lord willing, I hope to visit again soon.