

Michael McCarthy
Pier 21 Volunteer
with the Sisters of
Service



I wonder where they are
now!

Several years ago, during the 1960's I was a student at both Saint Mary's University and Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Those were the days of student involvement in almost everything, from anti-war protests to flower power sit-ins. My level of involvement was doing community development in Mexico and then later working with the Sisters of Service at the 'Port' or Pier 21. Some called it the 'Sea Wall'. When I was volunteering there this place was the main disembarkation point for immigrants after their long sea voyage from Mediterranean Europe or from Germany and England.

At some point I had heard that the Sisters of Service were active in work among newly arrived immigrants. What they did I really did not know. But it was bound to be better than being against something. I do not remember who contacted whom but I eventually spoke with a Sister Liota. She was a short lady, with dark hair and eyes who had her family roots planted in Italy. Sister's work within her religious community was to serve the immigrant population either in transit through Halifax or living in the area. She was most often the first contact Italian immigrants had with the Catholic Church in Canada. Her work was not to convert but she was involved in what we would later call 'Social Justice'. She was present to serve the needs of those who might require a person who could bridge the gap between life in Italy with life as it will be in Canada.

If immigrants, who journeyed through the Port of Halifax, cast their memories back in time they may fondly remember Sister Liota. She always had a smile on her face and in her eyes. I remember that she could switch from one Italian dialect to another with ease. With the warmth of a loving mother she approached people, hugged them, and consoled them. She checked rail tickets and addresses. She showed people how to call relatives in some distant Canadian city. Because she was so tiny, Sister had to look up at almost every one. She rarely became angry, although I remember one rather insolent man who had pushed her to her limit. Those dark eyes flashed and she got up on her toes and stuck a finger in this man's face. Her speech was like a machine gun. Her face became red with anger. In the end all that this

man could mumble was 'Si Sorella, si.' ('Yes, Sister, yes.') And I am sure much, much more.

This lady would act as a champion of the immigrant before anybody at The Port. She knew Italy; she knew people, she had visited many of the cities these people were migrating to. The safe and calm arrival of immigrants was her life. Those who stayed in Halifax could always count her as a friend.

I owe much to this little lady. She patiently corrected me as I learned Italian on the spot. She knew when things were bothering me and took me aside to just talk. For those who arrived at the Port of Halifax during these years, she was a calming, gentle advocate for them. Many would never know her name, but many would remember her small stature in the gray habit with a simple silver cross on her chest.

Sister Liota knew that I had a knowledge of Spanish and French. Italian was an easy leap for me, she reasoned, because it was a Romance language after all. If I agreed to volunteer, the most I would ever do was to offer a smiling face and a willingness to help confused people and to run errands when and where necessary. Language problems would be handled by her and a core group of young men from the Italian community. (I truly wish I could remember their names.) When I had the time, she said, I could accept an invitation to meet an ocean liner and spend one or two hours at the immigration sheds to lend a hand. There would be nothing too complex or nothing demanding a great deal of time. Well Sister, that simple act of saying 'yes' got me hooked. And for the next several years I rarely missed a boat.

The real activity period at The Port was during the late fall to late spring. The summer port was Montreal until the St. Lawrence was closed for the season. Most of the passenger lists throughout the year were destined to Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Niagara Falls and as far west as Edmonton. When I volunteered there, the people were primarily from Italy and Greece with a few from Germany and France. The larger percentage was Italian and Greek. As the year advanced, ocean traffic shifted from Montreal to Halifax. So we knew weeks in advance that such-and-such a ship would be due in, where she was from and a rough estimate of the passenger list. So the other volunteers and I could juggle our timetables and for me, my class attendance, to accommodate the arrivals.

Numbers of people varied. There might be as few as three hundred, but over a couple of years the routine number was often around seven or eight hundred. The bulk of the immigrants were working class Italians and a lesser number of Greeks. Ages were all over the board. Young family groups with elderly relatives were most prominent. It seemed that if one generation decided to migrate to Canada then other generations

followed. And since these cultures valued the extended family, that is what arrived. I often wondered what some of the communities back in the old country looked like after several voyages of people had left. I am sure that migration from Europe bled those countries of the valuable innovators and potential leaders.

Winter months on the North Atlantic were not pleasant. Arrival dates were often put back one or two days because of bad seas. On the agreed date the vessel might arrive in port only to sit in the stream for a number of hours until docking at the Pier was permitted. Sometimes, vessels would be hours steaming from Chebucto Head to the Pier, a distance of possibly ten kilometers, because of sea and wind conditions. Nothing was ever regular. I often remember expecting an arrival in the early afternoon and we were still waiting in the early hours of the morning for the same vessel.

The Sisters had a working area was at the bottom of a long ramp leading from the holding areas on the upper level of the Pier, to the separate building above the baggage area and trains. To the left of our space was the Red Cross unit. They took nursing mothers, mothers with small children and the elderly into a hospitable place where they could relax before boarding the train. Behind us to the left was the ramp down to the baggage area. When these spaces were empty little noises rang out and bounced from all the hard sterile surfaces. When full with eight hundred or more persons of all ages there was a cacophony of sound.

Other Halifax religious communities provided volunteers, but the Sisters of Service were always there and often the only non-functionary face these people had seen since leaving home. Arriving passengers came down the ramp from processing by Canadian Immigration and were meet by us. Regardless of religious tradition, the Sisters and other volunteers offered advice in their own language. If the people were from other traditions, we directed them on to their representative group (Salvation Army or United Church) or continued to answer their questions. The Sisters were not there for converts. The faith position of the newly arrived was second to extending a helping, compassionate hand to confused and often frustrated people.

This in a nutshell was the environment of my volunteering. At least this is the clinical view of it.

No arrival was ever typical. There were too many ships, too many people to ever say this was a typical arrival. But I will try to put some of my volunteering work into perspective.

It is a winter day. Crossing from Piraeous to Genoa and along the Mediterranean was calm. But like a big door the Straits of Gibraltar were

another thing. The North Atlantic crossing of seven days was about to be stretched into ten or eleven. The ship would be tossed so violently that the crew had to rig ropes around and across open spaces so that there was always a handhold when the ship took a plunge into a trough. The elderly and children soon became sick. Some would eat very little during the cruise. Then Halifax.

You see, traveling from place to place in Europe and traveling in Canada were two different worlds. In Europe, cities were minutes or a few short hours from each other. There you could climb on a train early in the morning and be most of the way across your country by nightfall. So now they were in Halifax. They believed that the really difficult part of the trip was over. All of the goods permitted by the shipping line and Canadian officials were about to be reunited with their owners. A short trip and they would be in Toronto. But reality was never as imagined.

We at the bottom of the ramp really never saw too much of what happened in the reception area except when an interpreter was called to go up past the guard and see to a problem. When we did, we were met with the noise of talking, the crying of children and adults, and arguments between passengers and officials. We were met with the smells of Europe of Italy, of Greece and Germany all gathered together in one large hall. We often saw people's luggage in pieces. Officials going through each item, looking for food stuffs and drink. Things that were gifts from the old country to relatives in Toronto, or maybe necessary ingredients to a meal that could never be duplicated in Canada because that spice did not exist here. We saw too where mishandling of luggage resulted in bottles being smashed and the liquid spilled over treasured clothing and linen. Twelve or more day old wine stains just do not come out.

Some people were as white a sheet. The storms made eating impossible. Empty stomachs were made even more empty by vomiting. People were being told that certain goods were not allowed into this country and they were taken out into another room for disposal. Tempers were on edge. Officials who were fluent in English and mispronounced Italian of fifteen words often did not get much cooperation. It was there that I tested my Italian.

With the help of the Italian volunteers and Sister Liota, I acquired a dialect representative of nowhere but everywhere. It was enough for frightened people to see a smiling face, and an understanding voice and words in their own language. To be told that these things were not permitted, in Italian, was better than the same thing in a language you never understood. Sometimes people would remark, that Canadian officials did not behave like those back home. (Draw your own conclusion about that comment.)

Imagine that your seven-day trip has been delayed by storms and your arrival was hours out of schedule? Imagine that you have spent hours in the hall up stairs and were searched. Imagine that you saw people being locked up for something, in a cage. Imagine now that you are being told by a young Canadian that there are a few more hours left before you can finally board the train. Imagine being told that a train trip from Halifax to Toronto is almost as long as the trip from home to Gibraltar. Or if you are going to Edmonton, that is like traveling back and forth across Europe at least two times.

We answered questions, gave directions or took people over to the Red Cross nursery. Everyone was grateful for the Red Cross. Their coffee was always available at the right time, as were their cookies. They had a large area for nursing mothers and the elderly and simply a place to rest away from the confusion.

From time to time we had to run interference between the newly arrived and some level of bureaucrat. 'Why did they take my wine from me?', 'I do not understand that my papers are not in order!' These were the typical of the comments we handled during the slow times at the ramp. We offered our services to people as they first encountered their shipped luggage in the hall on the ground floor. This was the place where another inspection took place of the luggage being brought up from the hold of the ship.

Many times straps had broken, or lengths of cord were strewn all over the floor. All the contents had to be examined. Some of it was confiscated. Many of these people had seen their hand luggage taken apart upstairs and now the same was taking place here again. Important sentimental items were found to be broken or coated with oil or wine. There is no way a person could ever forget the look on people's faces when they saw the contents of their baggage after offloading from the ship.

People had left friends, communities and a way of life. They had left familiar smells of cooking and sounds of business. Now everything was totally unfamiliar. Precious things, remembrances of home were destroyed or partially ruined. Sometimes, people learned that dishonest stevedores or others had gone through their belongings in the old country. Truly, they were starting anew. Most of the old way of life was lost. The very old knew that they might never see Italy or Greece again. Where were they going? Why was it taking so long?

Children on the other hand looked at things as a new adventure. Naïveté told them that Canada was not very different and that for the moment the excitement of new surroundings was almost too much to bear. When

they got to their new home it would be much like the old. Depending on how old they were nothing was about to change. A village in Sicily was imaginatively transported to some new place called Ottawa, or Brampton, or Niagara Falls. But here even their young nerves became frayed. It might have been a long difficult voyage during which children could not really play in confined rolling spaces. Now they saw strangers probing into their belongings. If only you could just lie down in bed for a good sleep so that tomorrow you could head into the street to kick a ball.

Depending on the size of the passenger list, CNR might lay on one complete train for the immigrants. That train often was split into two sections, one on either side of the baggage hall. The train itself was divided into groupings. Some cars remaining together until Montreal, others to Toronto. That prevented confusion on embarkation and debarkation. I do remember moving through the early trains and watching people stow hand luggage in wooden racks above slatted wooded seats. (We called these cars the Colonial Cars or the Immigrant Cars.) Things were falling and getting lost. People were crying because some parts of their baggage never arrived in Halifax at all. Children were crying for lack of a place to sleep. I can only imagine the trip after the train was joined together south of the shed and dragged along Terminal Road to the main line and a new home.

As a volunteer I often put in more than an hour or two here or there. There were long hours waiting for the vessels to dock. Sometimes we would just leave to come back tomorrow. Five or more hours were not atypical. Most of that time for me was on my feet, trying to learn a new language or using my other languages. Hearing new dialects was often more than a challenge. But through the years we were a team. Each and every ship was met by almost the same group of people. I might have considered cutting a class or two for the sheer enjoyment of talking with people who had stories to tell. There is nothing I would have given up to do this work. But I still wonder where some of those children are now. What happened to some of the old people who had tears in their eyes from the very beginning to the very end? What of the newly born? Yes, some children were born in the Red Cross nursery on Pier 21.

This building holds countless stories. People who came here to make a new life, helped create a new definition of this country. Pier 21 undoubtedly was the first welcoming sight for some of Canada's future leaders. New York has its Statue of Liberty. That steel structure was a welcoming sight to the immigrant and was to be a symbol of life in the United States. Pier 21 was Canada's door to the new world for many. It was Canada in the flesh and steel of the structure.

Any time I get back to Halifax, I have to drive along Terminal Road to just take a look. Some of the tracks are gone. The buildings are not the

same anymore. But the Trained historian in me sees back to the time when there were three lengths of passenger coaches around the buildings. Of seeing swarms of people milling about the roadway, undoubtedly saying: 'So this is Canada.' Of seeing the upper bridge work of the passenger liners with steam coming from their stacks and the house flags flying in the yards. I remember seeing these sights each and ever time I visit. I also wonder, where are all these people are now and what kind of a contribution has each made and continues to make to this nation?'