

Reverend J.P.C.
Fraser
Pier 21 Volunteer
with the United
Church



Our special concern was the immigrants. First, we scanned the passenger list. Then the workers had a little gift ready when the passengers came to our booth. Each one received a little bag (we called it a ditty bag) which contained eight or ten articles such as soap, face-cloth, towel, tooth-brush, Kleenex, pens, life-savers, colouring books for children, and other selections from an unpredictable variety of donations. These donations came from all parts of Canada. The donors also sent us the little ditty bags. We often had a lot of fun with these. When a lady passenger arrived at our booth wearing a definite colour ensemble, we took care to select for her a ditty bag of matching colour. Her gallant young male fellow immigrants were eagerly helpful in selecting the most appropriate colours.

The Greek children were evidently trained to kiss your hand if you gave them a gift. Some of the chivalrous young men were equally appreciative. My wife's hand received many such expressions of appreciation everyday we had Greek passengers.

It saddened us to see how Canada spoiled these children. Occasionally we had a family returning from a trip to the Old Land. While the children were not now immigrants, we made no distinction giving them also a ditty bag. The newly arrived Greek child kissed your hand in appreciation. The Canadian-trained child just took the little bag and immediately examined the contents. Then he returned demanding another bag. So soon was our affluent country destroying a child's capacity for appreciation.

When we came to the Port, we received very few donations for gifts. When a box came in, I wrote a thank you letter, commenting on anything special in the box, and telling the sender how much they were welcomed by the strangers. These letters could be read at the next meeting of the organization. This meant a very great increase in the number of cartons and boxes received. The busiest months, November and December, brought in approximately 90 cartons each. It was not a small undertaking to open and list the contents of these containers. Then all this collection of material had to be systemically piled on our storeroom shelves. Then began the work of filling the ditty bags.

Who did all this work? It was only after I went on full-time in 1963 that the increase in donations began. 1960-61 Margaret Fulton was substituting for Miss Ratz who was on Sabbatical. When Miss Ratz retired in 1963 my wife Anna went to Port with me on a voluntary basis. As the work increased other helpers came in occasionally notably the Fisher girls. Often Anna and I went down to the Port after supper, when a liner was unloading passengers at night, getting back home at 2a.m. Sometimes a ship would dock at midnight. Five or six hours later, the boat train would pull out for Montreal. The Frasers very tired, and very grateful for the privilege of helping so many people, finally staggered into bed. More than once another ship would be docking at 8a.m. Recalling all this now, we wonder how we managed.

As time went on, our work among the detainees in the accommodation upstairs became very important and demanding. These men jumped from their Communist ships to seek asylum in Canada. They were clad only in their working clothes. Immigration provided only food and shelter. The United Church Social Workers provided most of the clothing, etc., these men needed especially in the winter. Toronto, many groups and churches, and individuals were very generous in providing us with the money this work demanded. Our efforts on behalf of the nine Poles whom the Immigration Department was determined to send back to Poland was exhausting and expensive. Mr. Walter Goodfellow, a prominent lawyer, was so concerned for these men that he took on their case with no guarantee of any remuneration. Eventually he won for these men the privilege of staying in Canada under a Minister's Permit.

By 1971 practically all the European ships had ceased coming to Halifax. It was air-travel now.

The Presbytery of Halifax gave Anna and myself a very gracious and well-organized surprise, a sumptuous dinner attended by many of the Immigration and the Social Workers Staff, and a generous purse provided by individual members of Presbytery and friends. Thus ended eleven years for whose opportunities we shall be forever grateful.

