



OUR STORY

NAŠA ZGODOVINA



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Coming to Canada Pier 21 - Revisited

Article by Marta Demšar

On May 19, 1948, the carrier SS Marine Jumper docked at Pier 21 in Halifax. For 10 days it had travelled from Bremerhaven, Germany to New York, USA with 900 passengers across the exceptionally stormy waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Four hundred passenger disembarked in New York. The cargo and former troop carrier then proceeded to Halifax, Canada. Among the 900 passengers were many Slovenians who had spent three years, from 1945-1948, in the numerous refugee camps located in Austria.

On May 19, 2023, exactly 75 years later, Halifax again welcomed two of the original Slovenian passengers on the SS Marine Jumper: ninety-six-year-old Henrik (Riko) Ziernfeld (DOB 30.06.1926) and ninety-four-year-old Matija Sedej (DOB 07.11.1928).

Carrie-Ann Smith of the Canadian Immigration Museum of Pier 21 hosted our group of nine with a private tour. Her passion, charm, enthusiasm, gift for storytelling, and attention to detail, exceeded our expectations. Carrie-Ann showed us the statue of a middle-aged woman, sitting on a bench, with three suitcases and a pair of tap shoes at her feet. It is a depiction of philanthropist Ruth Goldbloom. In 1990, Ruth, a daughter of immigrants, and the co-founder of the Pier 21 Society, received permission from the government of Canada to commemorate Pier 21 from being a "shed" on Halifax's waterfront to a museum honouring the landing site for almost one and one half million immigrants to Canada between 1928-1971. Canada's National Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 is a complex containing 400 years of history, a travelling exhibition gallery, and the immigration annex which is located across the street from the Pier 21 building. *(Since 1971, Pier 21 no longer provides immigration services to newcomers as most immigrants now arrive by plane).*

Upon entry into the Pier 21 building, one will notice walls full of plaques inscribed with the names of persons who have come through Pier 21, *(you can order one also!)*. There is also a larger plaque from the Canadian Slovenian Community and the Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia commemorating the Slovenian women and men who brought their Slovenian culture to Canada and took their first steps on Canadian soil.

Each member of our group received a Canada Immigration bag containing personalized information about ourselves and/or family member(s) who had come through Pier 21, oversized photocopies of the Displaced Persons Statistical

Card, Specific International Refugee Organization documents, a Pier 21 mug, a Pier 21 poster, and a framed photo of the ship they personally or their family member had disembarked from. Carrie-Ann then personally pinned Henrik (Riko) Ziernfeld and Matija Sedej with a boutonniere and an Alumni Pier 21 Pin and presented 75th Anniversary Certificates congratulating Henrik and Matija for making Canada "a better place" ... plus a bouquet of flowers and maple syrup cookies. Carrie-Ann exclaimed "It sounds like May 19 was a big day for Canada and everybody on that ship."

Our group had brought several poticas (*the national dessert of Slovenia*) and several dozen red carnations (*the national flower of Slovenia*) to leave with Carrie-Ann. Matija, who had brought very little with him to Canada in 1948, had one precious item to show Carrie-Ann: a repurposed metal bowl, complete with handles, that he had personally molded then hammered from a fallen piece of an airplane gas tank, one of the few items that he owned in the camps.

For over three hours, we walked through the museum including the original doors that Henrik and Matija had gone through in 1948. For Henrik and Matija, Mani Sirk and Ana Kranjec Plosinjak, who had arrived in Canada via Pier 21 retracing these steps was especially nostalgic, and many a tear was shed by each of us.

The train tracks are no longer present, but a small section of tracks was re-installed in the 1990s at the original location, in front of the entrance to the building between the Pier and the Annex buildings. Most of refugees and immigrants had boarded trains that took them west of Halifax.



COMING TO CANADA ~ *continued*

As we walked through a replica train, Carrie-Ann explained that immigrants' perception of the trains is varied and "depends entirely on your history." Most immigrants have stated that the train cars had coal stoves, and thus were covered in coal dust, and that the leather-covered "church pews" were uncomfortable. This was certainly not Henrik and Matija's experience for they had only travelled in dilapidated cattle cars and thought of their coaches as luxurious.

The National Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 has a collection of personal immigrant stories. We were very much surprised when Carrie-Ann read stories written by two well-known members of the Slovenian community in Toronto - Valentin Lavriša and Frank Kraljič. The following is an excerpt from the diary of another immigrant: *"Once on the train, the Maritime landscape, so full of woods and fields and lakes and streams, had the passengers glued to the windows. After spending time in the unfortunes of Europe post war, only those who lived this can fully understand the meaning of being free in Canada."*

The museum has displays of: original luggage (*crates, trunks, chests, suitcases, small single bags*); replica dining rooms - a typical ship's dining table with four place settings; an old wooden radio; various dictionaries; an antique cash register; sleeping quarters and bunk beds of various ships (*some obviously more classy than others*); many photographs and posters of famous immigrants; the wooden desk and chair of the Canadian National Telegraph and Cable Office (*complete with the typewriter and dial phone*); posters from the 1940's warning young women travelling alone not to accept information, advice or directions except from women wearing a special "Traveller's Aid" badge; and, foods common to the Canadian kitchen of the 1940-1955 era are displayed (*the red and white cans of Chef Boy-Ar-Dee, the tall cans of Mitchell's apple juice, the Original Bazooka bubble gum and wrappers, the round can of Humpty Dumpty potato chips, the squarish cans of SPAM, "cardboard" tasteless toast bread, the red can of Blue Ribbon baking powder*).

OUR STAY IN HALIFAX IN 2023

A visit to Pier 21 and the Museum is an awesome experience, especially for those who walked through the

doors of Pier 21 or those whose family members made the brave crossing of the Atlantic Ocean arriving in Halifax. Plan for one full day to view the exhibits.

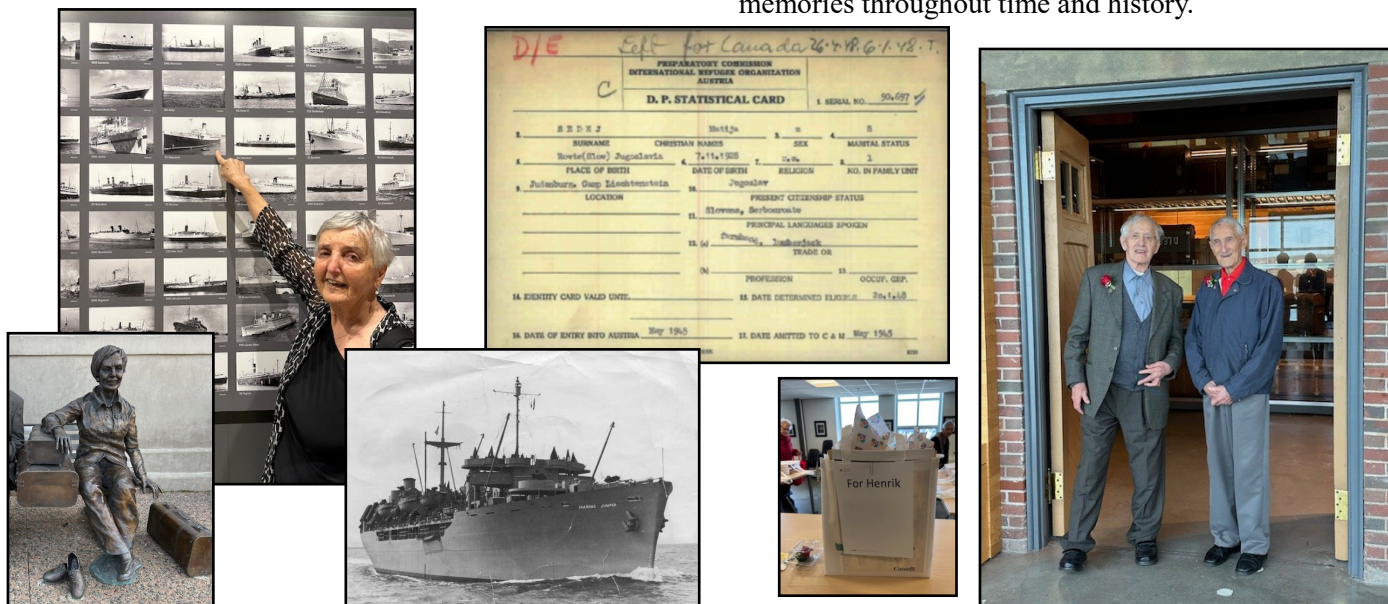
While in Halifax, we stayed at The Westin Hotel, Nova Scotian Halifax built by Canadian National Railways, located steps from Pier 21. During our 4 days in Halifax, we visited several of the local historical sites and feasted on delicious seafood. A priest graciously welcomed Henrik and Matija at St. Michael's Cathedral Basilica and said a Mass of Thanksgiving for their 75th anniversary in Canada.

Thanks to reporter and camera person Megan King of Global News Halifax for spending the day with us. Reporter King asked Henrik what his best and favourite memory is of coming to Canada: *"Freedom in Canada, because we were not afraid like in Europe, where we were always afraid that we might be sent back to Communist Yugoslavia, and you know what happens, ...we were badly treated, massacred. So, in Canada, we started a new life, a big opportunity for everybody... to start again, a new beginning, a new life."*

To view the link from Global News: <https://globalnews.ca/news/9711944/european-immigrants-return-pier-21-halifax-world-war-two/>

Today, about 40,000 persons of Slovenian heritage have made Canada their home. Even though they were not always treated well or fairly and were often called Displaced Persons and other degrading names, and despite some setbacks, many achieved success. We continue to contribute to the Canadian mosaic.

Neither Henrik nor Matija have regretted coming to Canada. Their proud family members and friends accepted the new way of life. Thank you, Canada, for giving Slovenian men and women a new start, a new joy to work hard, a new adventure, a new land, freedom of speech and religion, the opportunity to work and establish new homes and community in Canada, including several Slovenian churches (Hamilton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal), a Slovenian Home for the Aged, several facilities, recreational areas, and more. To all the immigrants who came through the doors of Pier 21 and made Canada their new home: your lives are a great inspiration to all, your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Our hearts will continue to glow and carry your story and memories throughout time and history.



MEMORIES ~ Henrik, Matija and many others ...

POST WWII ~ The roots of many Slovenians into



Canada originate from the great political uncertainty and massacres during WWII, and post WWII. Historians estimate that more than 1 million, people fled Yugoslavia fearing the Communist regime established by Josip Tito in 1945. Thousand of Europeans, spent from 2 to 8 years in various refugee camps in

IMMIGRATION PROCESS IN EUROPE ~

People in refugee camps could apply to various international travelling immigration commissions (USA, Argentina, Australia, Canada). In 1947, Canada opened its borders to able bodied single persons under the age of 45. The Preparatory Commission International Refugee Organization - Austria Form requested one's name, sex, marital status, date of birth, place of birth, religion, number in family unit, location in Austria, citizen status, principal languages spoken, trade/profession, date determined eligible, and date of entry into Austria. In desperation not to be returned to Yugoslavia, some of the refugees were erroneously identified as either younger/older or single/divorced. Cene Kokelj, who was married with four children, was documented to be four years younger, and of single status although married. My father with one child and Pavel Kokelj with three children were documented as divorced. Imagine my surprise! Having passed the preliminaries, successful candidates were then interviewed by officials from companies such as Canadian Pacific Railway. The SS Marine Jumper carried 70-75 individuals who were assigned for a one-year contract with CPR. These men included Henrik, Matija, Šušteršič, Anton Skubic, Simon Sedej, Frank Kokelj, Ivan Zakrajšek, Janko Demšar, Janez Zonta, and my father Franc Demšar. Others were allocated to work on construction or as farm hands, and domestic or hospital help.

LIFE ON THE SHIP ~ Henrik and Matija remember that the voyage across the Atlantic was challenging. Most passengers had difficulty sleeping due to the banging noises from the engine room. In the refugee camps, food was mostly limited to dandelion greens, bread, butter, corn meal, beets, and potatoes. Although food was plentiful on the ship, many, including Mani Sirk, did not tolerate food due to the extraordinary turbulent seas: *"I don't know how my mother coped thinking she could lose her three children."* Henrik as well as Šušteršič's mother recall their first experience with a "sour large orange", only to be told that it was a grapefruit. Having had limited access to sugar during the war, some passengers filled their pockets with sugar packets! Matija was one of the lucky ones who did not experience nausea and vomiting. *"Many mornings, another gentleman and I were the only ones at the dining room table."* They passed time by playing chess.

THE STORM AT SEA ~ Henrik recalls the 10-day ocean voyage as *"quite adventurous ... Initially, the weather was favourable, but by the middle of the Atlantic, the waves seemed to me to be two stories high, everywhere we*

looked, waves up there, then down, and up there, ... some of the waves went up over the bow of the ship and the whole ship started to vibrate just like a bell because of all the metal... we stayed in the ocean anchored for one day, then we continued to Halifax." According to Henrik and Matija, dishes rattled and broke, barrels rolled back and forth, and items scattered over the floors. Both men concur that the bow of the ship, where the washrooms were located, was not a pretty sight. The toilets were separated by partitions but there were no doors, *"a lot of people were sick, and the next moment, they were knocked out of their seats."*

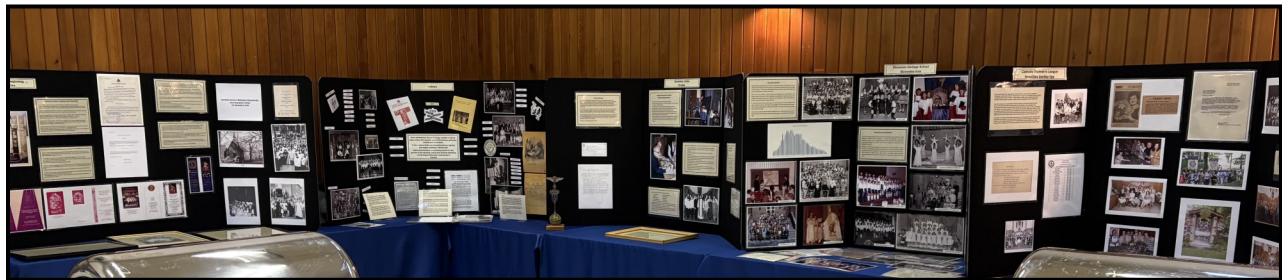
ARRIVAL IN HALIFAX: PIER 21 ~ On May 18, 1948, the local Halifax newspaper reported that a thick blanket of fog hung over Halifax Harbour. For a second if not a third time, the SS Marine Jumper dropped anchor at sea, this time just outside Halifax, for one day! John Hood, former immigration staff member eloquently said, *"By the thousands they came flooding through the doors of Pier 21, eyes bright with hope but apprehension in their hearts."* Pier 21 was an immigration facility for 43 years, from 1928-1971, comprised of an assembly hall, accommodation, detention, and dining areas. Matija elaborates that upon disembarking, all the passengers walked on a light mobile "gangway" crossing directly from the ship to a large assembly room on the upper floor where they waited for civil examination. Passenger Janko Demšar wrote, *"one after another, we walked off the boat and all in a row, we formed a line to the immigration office"*. Pier 21 newcomer services included social services from staff and volunteers including translation and processing to travel/transportation, nursery, large baggage exam centre and some dining facilities. Some immigrants had their first taste of Kellogg's Corn Flakes or ice-cold Coca Cola in the cafeteria of Pier 21! New immigrants were given a quick medical examination in the north end of the building, then proceeded from the upper floor to the Annex building through an overhead pedway called "the ramp" where customs officers checked hand baggage. Passengers with larger luggage would claim their belongings on this lower floor of the Annex building. Then, Canada Immigration completed the necessary documentation. Screening had already occurred overseas; thus, the immigration process was rather quick, sometimes lasting one to three minutes. What a feeling it was when Henrik and Matija received their immigration stamp! Matija remembers being excited and grateful that Canada offered "a new life" and "freedom" and "a chance for a better future". Then, "ditty bags" containing some essential items were distributed to the immigrants.

THE TRAIN TO WESTERN CANADA ~ Now accepted into Canada, Henrik and Matija remember that they and the other Slovenian immigrants from the SS Marine Jumper proceeded to the waiting trains. Matija recalls that, *"We each got a bunk bed on the railway car, then we travelled 10 days across Canada."* According to Henrik, the entire journey from Halifax to Winnipeg was exciting, *"Everything was new. I remember passing by some railway stops, where the piles of fruit on the fruit stands were exceptionally high."* Matija recalled his shopping experience in Winnipeg, *"We stopped in the Eaton's store, so I bought my overalls there, but all that I remember so well is the old wooden escalator making 'click click' sounds...and I can still hear it today."* Both men continue to have sharp memories of the doors of a department store in Montreal that automatically opened.



Želimo vam vesele božične praznike in srečno novo leto 2025

The 70th anniversary of Marija Pomagaj, Our Lady Help of Christians Church display by the CSHS



UPCOMING EVENTS

On going display for the 70th anniversary of Marija Pomagaj
on Manning Avenue -Toronto

March 1, 2025

Annual General Meeting of the CSHS
location to be determined.

April 6, 2025

Luncheon and video #4 - "Settling in Canada"
at Brezmadežna Hall

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52 Neilson Drive
Toronto, ON M9C 1V7
For information contact:
Miriam Čekuta
ourstorymcek@gmail.com

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