

Interstate 75 and Crimea

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, April 2014

"Drive to Florida? Again? I hate that drive. And I hate the heat. And you guys all know that! The drive is so long," I groaned. "Besides, I thought we were considering a cruise this March break. Weren't we?" I added hopefully. "I liked that cruise we were on once." "But I like Florida," my 17 year old chimed in. "And this is my last March break until I go off to university," she concluded. "Listen here," you've been to Florida at least 20 times in your life," I plead. I don't know how many more times you need to go there," I moaned. "Well, we are going on a cruise down the east coast, leaving from New York City," my sister-in-law Judy tells me. I remind everyone, including Judy, a nurse, that cruise ships are breeding beds for E-coli and the Norwalk virus, and that they sometimes have toilet troubles. "How about that that guy Laurence Davis from Calgary that we met at that conference once. Remember him? He was on that cruise ship that tipped in the Mediterranean a few years ago. They had to swim to shore! He and his wife were all over the news. Remember?" Regardless, several weeks later, Judy leaves on her cruise with one of our aunts, also a nurse, and we, once again, drive 45 minutes to the Detroit border where we hit I-75 south, which will take us all the way to Florida.

There is a steady flow of traffic on the 4 lane highway, which is packed with snowbirds, as evidenced by loaded vans, trucks and RV's, many towing bikes, boats, and other recreational toys. My daughter is nestled in the back seat with all the comforts of home. Feather pillows, blankets, her coveted phone, headphones, and a DVD player with the latest movies. The electric cooler is within reach with drinks and an assortment of snacks. There are several cases of water. The rest stops all have modern conveniences and amenities, including Wi-Fi, as I remind my husband that we need to stop every so many hours so we all can get out and stretch our legs to help avoid blood clots. The industrial landscape of Ohio gives way to the majestic Smokey Mountains, as I vividly recall the first time I laid eyes on them in 1978. The irritating automated female voice on the GPS interrupts my sleep as I again ask why we have to have it on when we are travelling on the same highway from start to finish. My organized husband has already called ahead for a room for the night in Georgia. Being in the insurance business, he again has taken out extra health insurance for all of us and carefully taken care of all the cell phone packages for any "out of country" charges we might acquire.

As he does all the driving, I again have lots of time to scan the ever changing landscape, as I reflect on the toil countless others before us must have endured as they paved the way for those to come. I marvel at the highways blasted through the limestone and slate of the Smokey's, which makes modern travel in North America a breeze. I think of many who came to the New World holding on to a promise of land and work, with only limited dollars and an address tucked into their pocket. Often travelling unknown distances to unknown places, they forged ahead with all their earthly goods having been lovingly packed in a country left far behind. I am sure that there were periods of uncertainty, doubt and discouragement, as the hope tucked in their hearts sometimes dimmed. Animals and people often succumbed to illness before the coveted destination was reached. There were no walk-in clinics. Fresh water was scarce. Intolerable weather conditions sometimes arose. Yet they forged westward, yearning for an emotional reunion with loved ones.

As we enter Georgia, I again admire the lush moss hanging on the trees, and the palm trees which herald that "we are getting closer." Cyprus trees, orange stands, strip malls and redundant advertising billboards bid us welcome. Toll roads, bogs and lakes, dot the landscape. My daughter is itching to put on her shorts. German-Russians began to immigrate to the plains of North America in the 1800's, seeking a better future for their families. Invitations and advertising in newspapers in Europe regularly sought new recruits. Some had job offers. Many borrowed money for the journey, and some were never able to repay their loans. Some became discouraged and returned to Europe. After the steamship crossing, there was dusty dirty travel by horse and wagon as they prepared to homestead. In the midst of homesickness, sweat and tears many asked themselves "did we make the right decision?" There were disappointments as visions gave way to reality. "Is it worth putting my family through this?" They often left many family members behind which they would never see again.

A dog eared paper map and a compass guided early settlers to their loved ones, with limited communication along the way, as they persevered.

The euphoria of the 2014 winter games in Sochi had not yet passed when President Putin enacted his calculated move on the world chess board. Russian troops begin to filter into Crimea. There is pressure from the European Union for Putin to withdraw. The assets and foreign investments of 21 of Russian's wealthiest are frozen. There are doubts that sanctions will work. The TV is tuned in to CNN as my husband asks, "Where is the Crimea? Do you know?" as my eyes pop out of my head and I wished I knew where the fly swatter was. "The Crimea?!. You know, the Ukraine, where your grandparents came from!" I say to try to refresh his memory. Remember your aunts and uncles went on one of those tours. They gave us photos of the Wiens homestead and the outbuilding ruins. The barns. Remember?" "No, not really..." he replies.

In 1926, my husband's Oma Wiens left the town of Alexanderkrone, in the Molotschna Colony in the Ukraine, with her husband and infant son in tow, to join relatives in the Canadian prairies. As a young girl Oma had developed appendicitis as her parents took her to a small hospital in the town of Muntau. Since antibiotics were not yet available, a renowned surgeon at the hospital from 1900-1927, Dr. Tavonius, removed her appendix and then sent her home with her parents. The next day he returned to work and asked the staff if the young girl had died at the hospital or on the way home with her parents. Unbeknownst to Dr. Tavonius, Oma Wiens would go on to have 8 children and die at the age of 103 in Canada. Several years ago the extended Wiens family raised money to repair a broken ambulance which the local hospital had.

In the 1920's, my grandparents were also attempting to immigrate to the New World. A contagious eye infection called trachoma had become rampant in the Mennonite settlements, and one of the children had contacted it. Passports were quickly denied.

With integrity and honesty our forefathers worked hard to become established in their new homeland. Most, but not all, integrated into North American culture while preserving and cherishing their rich German-Russian identity and culture. They are scattered across the Americas in towns and cities.

"Maybe we could study history together when we retire," I tell my husband. "Not interested," he responds. "But...it is so interesting," I persist. "Well, but then so is the stock market," he adds.

We are driving home after my daughter's 20th+ trip to Florida as we pass the exit to Cookeville, Tennessee. "I don't know why we can never go visit your Aunt Anne," I plead. "She always tells us she is only an hour off the interstate. I love your Aunt Anne. Every year when she comes to Leamington she asks why we have never

stopped in." "No time," he once gain tells me, as I longingly look at the exit. Yes, we have people here by us in the mountains and they speak German. They sell bread," Aunt Anne, a transplanted Canadian once told me. "And they are just lovely folks."

We arrive home from Florida as my sister-in-law, a veteran cruiser, arrives home from her trip. "Yes, they have really spiffed up the hand washing techniques on the ships," she tells me. "There are staff everywhere with hand sanitizer, especially in the dining rooms."

And the rest, as we say, is history...