

Oh Canada

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, September 2013

As I sit at the nurse's station documenting my work load for the day at the start of my shift, I notice, once again, on the kardex, the entry of "language barrier" written on the top of the patient's care plan. "Here we go again," I silently think to myself as I turn the page. I enter the patient's room to find him frantically waving his arms in the air trying to get some abstract point across, as he anxiously rambles on and on in his native tongue. "Same scene, different day," I chuckle to myself, as a short while later his apologetic offspring, now visiting at the bedside, bluntly state to me, "Well, he doesn't speak English very well. He arrived from Europe after the war you see, and my parents were already older and it was very hard for them when they started out in Canada." I smile again as together we decipher what the exasperated patient really needs, and as I leave the room to answer another ringing call bell I mutter to myself under my breath, "Yeah, well, if you only knew my story..."

My brother and I were two of only a handful of "English Second Language" students in our public school in our town of 10,000. It was difficult and awkward at times to fit in with the main stream, but we quickly picked up the language and I would eagerly rush home with my Dick and Jane readers as my parents and I read together. They had been told, and whole heartedly agreed, that it is important for them to also learn the language of their new nation, so together we would read about Dick and Jane, their red wagon, baby sister Sally and their dog Spot. My parents also soon became fluent in reading and writing this new language, and remain fluent to this day.

We lived in an area of town known as the "war time housing" section which still exists, and consists of several blocks of identical appearing bungalows built for returning soldiers from WW 2. Children abounded everywhere and we were never at a loss for playmates. I easily made friends and was happy to be accepted by a group which loved to ride bikes and hang out at the library, and, not having a television at home, I brought novels home by the armload and soon became an avid reader. With my worn clothes and ever improving English, I loved to play on the school swings, as I cackled and chimed in with rest, as we would twist the chains around and around until our heads began to spin. We would drag our polished penny loafers through the dusty gravel spinning around in circles with our dresses flying above our knees, shrieking loudly with excitement. It was there on those same swings which still stand today, where my friends and I would bare our souls to one another and discuss the important issues in the lives of 10 year old girls and dream about our futures. I, for one, vowed that I would someday write a book about a family and all of their adventures, and the adventures would be all so perfect. This was also about the same time frame in my life when I began asking my mother many inquisitive questions about our family, and that was when my daily history lessons began.

"What kind of car is that?" I asked my husband one day as I stood at the kitchen sink and watched his cousin get into her big white vehicle and exit our driveway. "Why that's a Cadillac," he responded, as I nonchalantly shrugged my shoulders and continued doing the dishes. My dad was always a Ford guy and bought his first car at the ripe old age of 38. After having been in Canada for 6 years, he one day rode his bike up to the local dealership, pulled cash out of his pocket, and paid for a new 1967 navy blue Ford Custom. He shook the owner's

hand, put the bike in the trunk and then proudly drove home. He had a license, but no insurance. My dad worked hard, had seemingly boundless energy and never complained about his redundant job. With two young children, a wife and an elderly mother at home, he knew he was responsible for them, as my parents had vowed to each other, on that day that they landed in Montreal, Canada, that they would always be self-sufficient and never have to rely on anyone else.

In the late 1970's, I worked briefly in a long term care facility where I met one of my most memorable patients. Isobel was 100 years old at the time and hailed from the east coast of Canada, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia to be exact. She had some memory problems, but regularly spoke about "Sir John A." To most of the staff this meant little, and they would smile politely as Isobel would recant over and over again about how he had visited her public school. I always listened with intent, fascinated that she had met him personally, because I knew that the person she was referring to was Sir John A. MacDonald (1815-1891), the first Prime Minister of Canada, also known as "the Father of Confederation." A lawyer, he had a long political career, and although it was not devoid of scandal and controversy, he is credited with the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, but most importantly, he was the leading figure in discussions to unite the political parties of Canada, which resulted in the British North America Act and the birth of Canada as a nation in 1867.

In 1967, Canada celebrated its centennial, each school planning festivities. Culminating in, as I recall, with a parade, and students asked to dress in pioneer attire. We were also asked to bring in memorabilia for an open house display, and I remember going home from school that day despondent, knowing that I had nothing to bring. But my mother, always the resourceful one, immediately had an answer to my great dilemma as she quickly approached one of her employers who kindly supplied me with some beautiful antique cards and personal treasures, which I proudly took to school.

In 1971, my father drove us to Windsor, Ontario in his 1967 Ford to the Canada building. My mother had sewn me a dark green two piece suit, and on the way there I rehearsed with them the "Pledge of Allegiance" and "God Save the Queen" because, you see, on this day we were going to become Canadian citizens. There was no citizenship test or literacy test as required today, and the proceedings were short as we gathered in the appointed room with a handful of others at the appointed time. We were called up individually, placed our hand on a Bible and recited an oath. We were then given the Bible, and as I recently came across it, I noted that it was signed by the judge who had presided over the ceremony. I do not have a commemorative photo of that day, nor did we go out to dinner to celebrate. We had entered the room as landed immigrants, then proudly left as Canadian citizens and drove home.

Last July 1st as we were in Ottawa, we gathered on the grounds of the Legislature for the evening fireworks with several hundred thousand others. My daughter and her cousins were covered in Canada tattoos as we waved our flags and screamed and hollered with the assembled masses. As Canadians, I know that we all have personal concerns about certain elected officials, perceived wasteful spending, education cuts, health care cuts, etc. But on July 1st, as we celebrated the fact that we live in this great democracy called Canada, I proudly watched, as my daughter, a first generation Canadian, waved her flag.