

An Immigrant Journey

Brief Intro—

In 2008, the Province of British Columbia celebrated its 150th anniversary of the establishment of the BC colony under the British flag. The Vancouver Sun participated in the celebration by inviting immigrants to share their stories. It is in this context that I submitted the following article. The Sun published it in April, 2008.

My first Canadian experience was as a seven-year old in Lutjegast, my Dutch birth village, when Canadian tanks rumbled through the town, chasing after German soldiers. It was all chocolates, candy and oranges for us as they rode past. The otherwise sober town celebrated and danced for two weeks, with my two oldest sisters relishing the attention Canadian soldiers foisted on them. After two weeks, I thought life was one grand party!

The Netherlands was severely wounded and, thousands thought, destroyed for good. There was poverty. The Russians were in near-by Berlin. Dad foresaw his barber business of shaving becoming obsolete. He also wanted his sons –never mind the daughters--to have a chance at education. These kinds of situations created a general restlessness that led thousands of Dutch to immigrate to Canada and other countries in the early 1950s.

Imagine this 1951 scene. A family of 9 kids and an son-in-law-to-be, with one more son born two years later in Port Alberni, BC. After nine days on the Dutch immigration ship, *The Volendam*, and five days on the train from Halifax, it dropped us off at 1 am in Pitt Meadows. Floris, Dad's friend and official sponsor, was there to meet us. He had found us a slanting rental on stilts on Harris Road. No money. No English or education beyond grade six. No wanted skills to offer, since the BC barber establishment had virtually closed the door to foreigners. After some weeks of hunting for jobs by bicycle, Dad found a job digging peat with bare hands. You ought to have seen them with their holes and festering sores! In the early morning and late afternoon he would strip the cows for a local farmer. We lived there for one year,

after which Dad took us to Port Alberni, where work was aplenty in the lumber industry. He hated the work but stayed on for over 20 years at the Alberni Pacific Division (APD), a sawmill of MacMillan and Bloedel, to retire at 65. Now he received pension from the company and both he and Mom from the government—the *only* occasion they ever received money from the government. They settled into a comfortable retirement till they both passed away in their 80s.

=====

I was 13 at immigration. My first teacher, who was also our landlady, Mrs. McDermott, paid much individual attention to me to teach me English. Since I was ahead of my Canadian classmates in Math, I was asked to help some struggling math students. I understood their problems but lacked the English to help them! In grade nine, I had enrolled in the commerce prep course, but the school soon transferred me to the more academic track of pre-university. Though I did fine in most courses, I did poorly in science due to poor English and an unsympathetic teacher. At the end of the course, he told me he would give me a pass, if I promised never to take an elective in his department! An easy promise. Didn't like him or his course anyway!

Socially, it was rough. When a teenager looks and acts differently, his classmates can be very cruel. So I tried to avoid recess time by chewing gum. The routine penalty was lunch-time detention. Day after day. No teacher ever checked on why an almost model student would end up with so many detentions! In the meantime, at home we switched to using English within two years. We were that eager to blend in. The motto was: Leave your wooden shoes at home!

As per agreement made with Dad earlier, shortly after I turned 16, he came home from the mill at midnight to tell me I had a job! Bang. Just like that. So, up and at it, swing shift. One month, day; next month, afternoon. The intent was to help the folks pay their mortgage and get them settled so they could raise the younger kids in their new country. Most of my pay was handed over for this purpose. Till this day I am glad I was able to help them get over their initial difficulties. Two of my sisters also worked in the plywood plant with similar arrangements. Those days, Port Alberni enjoyed the highest per capita income in Canada. It was a good place for new immigrants. It was the multicultural capital of BC before Trudeau invented it.

I went to the Principal and told him I was going to work, but that I would do grades 10-12 in my spare time by correspondence course from the BC High School Correspondence School. He laughed me to scorn, dismissing me with a sneer, "That's what everybody says and nobody ever does." I felt challenged by that and four and a half years later graduated. I thankfully remember, Mr. Lawson, a teacher who supported me throughout.

The last six months I no longer donated to the family but saved all my money in preparation for university. In 1958, at age 20, I bought a Greyhound ticket all the way to Grand Rapids, MI, to enter Calvin College, my denomination's college, with a full \$1500 in my pocket! While there, my mother insisted on writing me letters in English! Utterly amazing! 7 years earlier she scarcely knew "yes" from "no!"

At age 70, I can look back upon an exciting history of living, studying and working in the USA, Europe and Nigeria. I eventually obtained a Ph. D. from a Dutch university, published about 20 books, taught at three tertiary institutions and became Director of the Institute of Church and Society in Jos, Nigeria.

In the meantime, I found Frances, also from NL, in Michigan and have been married to her for nearly 46 years. She's been my co-adventurer for all these years. She has served as teacher in many situations, structured and unstructured, including literate and illiterate adults and even taught the Hausa language to Nigerians! Three children, two of whom graduated from Yale University.

Now retired in West End, Vancouver, Frances and I are about to complete a huge project: an 8-volume series *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations*. Website: www.SocialTheology.com. Come and visit us some time.

John H. Boer

Postscript: Since the above article was written and published, the series mentioned in the last paragraph was published as an ebook on < www.lulu.com >.

Since then, my wife, Frances A. Prins-Boer, and I co-authored our memoirs in five volumes, also published as ebooks on

< www.lulu.com >.

Both these and other publications of ours are available as ebooks on that lulu website, all free of charge. You punch in the name <jan h boer > and you will see the books. Then proceed to as if you are buying. At the end you can download them for the grand total of \$00.00 each! Our gifts to you.