

Welcoming Refugees

by Ernie Bies Nov. 29, 2015

The recent discussions in the media and the spate of fear-mongering emails that are flooding my in basket caused me to sit back and reflect on my own experiences with immigrants, refugees and people simply looking for a better life,

In about 1974, a Vietnamese pharmacist and friend of my sister in law in Toronto moved to Ottawa to manage a Shoppers Drug Mart. He looked me up and we became friends. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, more than 5,600 Vietnamese refugees were welcomed to Canada and many came to Ottawa. This was before the 100,000 “Boat People” came to Canada in the late 70s and early 80s when Mayor Marion Dewar of Ottawa opened the doors to the refugees. My friend, Nghia, began organizing transitional programs for the first wave of newcomers in 1975. This included classes in conversational English at night and on weekends. They took formal English and other training during the day and at night they were eager to learn informally. Nghia asked me to help and I recruited my wife and several friends from my work to undertake these classes which were held at the University of Ottawa. (If you hear a Vietnamese guy speaking English with a stutter, might be my fault).

We collected old menus from restaurants and we'd role play a night in a



restaurant showing them how to order. I gave them slide shows about my experiences in Canada's Arctic and they were so impressed that the Inuit looked like them. We took them on outings along Bank and Rideau Streets on weekends and we discussed what they saw in

shop windows and on the street. One Saturday I took a group to the Ottawa Exhibition where I approached the Manager of the Conklin Shows and asked if he could help out. He gave me a whole roll of free tickets and the kids hit every ride and game on the grounds, picking up a few stuffed animals on the way. We kept in touch with them for a couple of years before we moved to Edmonton and then lost track of them. In the photo, the older fellow was a professional back home but working as a security guard in Ottawa. The operative word is he was working.

My parents came from Slovakia before the Depression and they survived by hard work and perseverance, raising seven children on a subsistence farm in Northern Ontario. They received their share of negative comments from people who, in truth, were sons of immigrants themselves. People often did not bother to try to understand my parents were not “Displaced Persons”. They had responded to the Canadian Government’s promotion of opportunities for hard working immigrants to open up Canada’s West and North. Their legacy and contribution to Canada are evidenced by their descendants, numbering more than 60 who are all contributing Canadian citizens today.



For the record, the term “Displaced Persons” was a post World War II creation of Western governments who opened their arms to millions of people who were left without a country to call home because of politics and war, not unlike what is happening today.

When we lived in Alberta, I worked at a government building on 109th street in Edmonton, which I later learned contained the Department of

Immigration offices. One April day in 1978, (which in Edmonton meant winter time), I was leaving work and found four young adults in summer clothes holding a street map and obviously trying to figure out which way to go. My Slovak ears picked up their Eastern European conversation and I offered to help. They were astounded that there was someone they could talk to. One man was Polish, one a Czech and the other two a Romanian couple who spoke French, (my third broken language). Their story was that they were refugees who had just arrived in Canada the day before from Athens, Greece. Independently, they had taken holidays from their home countries to Greece as part of a desperate plan to defect and seek a new life in Canada. They all knew that they were putting their families in jeopardy back home, but it was a decision they had to make to get free of Communist rule. I called my wife and said I was bringing guests home for dinner and she didn't hesitate to make room for four more people at the table.

We were able to communicate with them in French and Slovak and learned that they were all professionals, engineers and doctors. They had chosen Alberta because the Canadian Consulate had told them of the booming economy and also because it was very remote from the bigger centres where they feared retribution from the Communists. The young couple from Romania had left their five year old son in the care of their parents and could not talk about it without breaking down in tears.

They enjoyed the food but would not touch the pound of butter that Sandy had put on the table though they all looked at it and commented on it. Finally I asked why they did not take any butter and they said they were honoured that we would put out our butter but they would not dream of taking such a luxury. Apparently butter was heavily rationed in their countries and they had never seen a whole pound served at a sitting before. We were able to convince them that it was not scarce here and

they could enjoy it. For us, it was a reality check that some things we take for granted can have a huge impact on people less fortunate. We kept in touch with our new refugee friends who also took crash courses in English and were able to obtain certification to work in their fields, though perhaps not at the level for which they were originally trained. On a happy note we found that after a few years of pressuring the Canadian Government the Romanian couple were able to sponsor their son to immigrate to Canada to join them.

I had a very different experience with reaction to newcomers by an existing population a few years later while still in Alberta. Ralph Klein was the Mayor of Calgary and was vocal in his opposition to the National Energy Program. He did not want easterners who were looking for work coming to Alberta. He is often quoted as being the originator of the slogan: “Let the Eastern Bastards Freeze in the Dark” which was emblazoned on the bumpers of every pick-up truck in Alberta. The press and the media were filled with anti-eastern rhetoric. Some of us countered with “That Eastern Bastard is my Brother.” These good old boys had short memories forgetting that most of their parents and grandparents were immigrants who opened up the west. I imagine Ralph is spinning in his grave today knowing that the Mayor of Calgary is a Muslim.



If we open our hearts to refugees, acknowledge that we are different but willing to work together, who knows what good Canadians they can produce?