

Rudi Aksim
Box 86
Carp ON K0A1L0
rudi@aksim.org

Boat people, then and now

At New Years my father would play a little prognostication game. Around the lip of a big bowl we would place little slips of paper with wishes written on them. We'd fill the bowl with water and float tiny boats made of walnut shells with small bits of candle in them. They were the same small candles that we used on the Christmas tree. The currents – caused by our hand stirring the water, of course – directed the little walnut boats and the candle flames towards the wishes stuck to the edge of the bowl. The idea was that when the walnut boat ignited your slip of paper, your wish would come true in the new year.

I thought of this game this week as Minister Toews made some rather inflammatory comments about stopping boat loads of illegal migrants coming to Canada. And then I thought of the voyage of the SS Walnut. In 1948 the SS Walnut brought some 345 people from my father's homeland to Canada. Although the question, then, as now, was whether these were "genuine refugees" or whether they were "just" people wishing for a better life in Canada. In 1948 it was these people, perhaps my cousins, whom the Canadian government hoped it might not take in: they were illegal migrants.

My father had come to Canada in 1931 from the islands in the Baltic off the coast of Estonia. He had just completed high school, and a YMCA conference in New York gave him the chance to come to North America. In the next years, Canada gave him huge



opportunities: Waterloo College, Western University and University of Toronto (after the war); a commission in the Canadian Army. He made his way in Canada by “doing his bit” in the Second World War.

He had a great facility with languages. He came to Canada with English so poor that when he asked for directions in Toronto on the person he asked said, “Sorry I don’t speak French.” But he went on to complete university degrees in English within 6 years. He learned to play rugby, another of his strategies for fitting in to Canadian society. During the war his languages brought him to the newly formed Canadian Intelligence Corps and that gave him a career: first doing analyses, interrogating prisoners and, later, ahead of the front lines, seeking out Germans who could possibly be the basis for a new civil government after the Nazis. Like many in his generation he married before going off to war, a girl from Simcoe County whom he had met at Western: my mother. After the war he worked on the Soviet desk until he retired. He had the skills, for Estonians are experts in both Germans and Russians, the two large nations that have dominated tiny Estonia for centuries.

When I retrieved his army records from the National Archives last year, I was surprised to find that his Canadian superiors didn’t like him much. But the British and the Americans did. After his war service, much of it with the British, he was posted to both Washington and London. This is how he came to be in London in 1948 at the time the SS Walnut sailed.

My parents loved London: dressing up in uniforms and tuxedos, diplomatic parties, and on a famous occasion to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. The party was memorable because my mother mixed up some white socks for the long gloves she



was supposed to wear, but brazened it out as she was presented with a pair of socks in her hand.. There were show, like *Oklahoma!* And travel to the continent: Brussels, Paris, Italy. The small Gate Cottage they rented in Camden Hill is still there: it's the headmaster's house for a new school. My parents lunched in the Houses of Parliament once, thanks to the connections of an elderly lady who befriended them. She had been



Captain R.E. Aksim in 1948

a well-known opera singer in her day and still had swains among the House of Commons crowd. Those contacts, or perhaps my father's European manners had him named a Canadian representative at the Trooping of the Colour, and they sat in the Royal Box. Or perhaps it was because his name began with "A".

Things were different for the Estonians who were planning to escape Europe on the SS Walnut, a converted British minesweeper 164 feet long. With 347 people crammed on board, the oldest 80 years old and the youngest just nine months, the Walnut sailed from Sweden into the North Sea in November 1948 and made its slow way across



*SS. Walnut on the North Atlantic,
1948*

the stormy North Atlantic to the new world. The passengers were people who had fled to Sweden as the Soviet Union took over Estonia from the retreating Germans or to escape Soviet rule after the end of the war. Like many Latvians and Lithuanians, these people had fled secretly, by boat, at night, across the Baltic. They



were fleeing Soviet political repression, social engineering; the collectivization of farms. Certainly they feared transportation to the gulag in the Soviet Far East to which thousands of Estonians had already been sent.

In 1947 some 140 Estonian boat people had been sent back to the Soviets by the Swedes, so the Walnut passengers felt that their exile in Sweden was not secure. Opinion in the west was not on their side: the Soviets were still seen as our allies, the feelings from the war were still strong and Estonians seemed to fear the Russians more than the Germans.

The Walnut put in to Sligo, Ireland to pick up coal and it was there that news stories started. The Irish allowed the passengers off the cramped little boat. Three local priests conducted services to bless their departure four days later for days of rolling sea sickness crossing the Atlantic. By the time of their arrival off Sydney, on December 13th, there were stories in the British press and speculation about what the Canadian authorities would do.

It's easy to understand how upset and concerned my father was at the news speculation about the progress of this dangerous voyage: a trip that he had made much more comfortably only a few years before. At some cocktail party in London a British officer – one pictures a long lanky uniform and a Noel Coward voice – made a condescending remark about it: “What are these silly asses trying to do?” And, despite his elegant manners, my father punched him in the face and knocked him down.

In the end, the Canadian authorities, after processing the Walnut's passengers at Pier 21 in Halifax, allowed all but two to remain in Canada. Perhaps more importantly,



they sent a special immigration officer to Sweden to open the way for legal immigration of Estonians to this country.

And, as I think of the voyage of the Walnut more than sixty years later, I hope Minister Toews takes a similar approach with the Tamil refugees off our coast. We all recall the Vietnamese boat people in the 1980s and the fact that our country has been built by people coming here in pursuit of a better life, yesterday and today, just like the people on the Walnut in 1948. I've not looked up the shipping records, although one could for they are all on the Internet now, but I know that Mr. Toews ancestors were, in some sense, boat people as well.

-- Rudi Aksim

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