

A Canadian's Story

I liken Canada to a garden . . . a garden into which have been transplanted the hardiest and brightest flowers from many lands, each retaining in its new environment the best of the qualities for which it was loved and prized in its native land.

Former Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker

One day when I was seventeen my best friend Shelley invited me to her home after school to meet her Grandmother. When we arrived, a slim, fragile looking, elderly lady with white hair, and many wrinkles greeted us warmly. In a thick accent she invited us to help ourselves to freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

While we ate she asked many questions about our personal lives, and listened intently to our answers. We both felt her genuine interest and, in spite of her accent, understood her very clearly. Her piercing deep blue eyes sparkled as we talked, and her smile radiated a lifetime of inner strength and integrity. I was captivated by her.

She noted how fortunate we were to have such beautiful clothes, nice furniture and time to spend with our friends. When she excused herself for a moment, Shelley and I stared at each other in astonishment at her Grandmother's appreciation of all the little things that we took for granted. In a whisper, Shelley explained that her grandmother had grown up in the Ukraine where life had been very difficult. When she returned to the room, Grandma expressed her great pleasure in seeing all her children and grandchildren able to go to school and learn. When the conversation turned to my approaching eighteenth birthday, Grandma was thrilled and exclaimed how excited I must be at the thought of voting for the first time. Frankly, I had thought of all sorts of good things I would be able to do when I was eighteen, but voting wasn't one of them.

A little saddened at my cynicism, Shelly's Grandma asked in her broken English if I would like to hear the story of her journey to Canada. Much to Shelley's dismay, I agreed and she began.

"Grandpa, myself and our six children lived in extremely modest conditions in the Ukraine. Everyone in the family who was old enough had to work. Our two eldest children were eight and ten, and did odd jobs for people who paid them with food rather than money. The other four children were too young to work so they helped me with the household chores. The government did not want the people to be independent and think for themselves and, to ensure this they prevented us from attending any religious services and forced us to worship the government. They also banned reading and writing, closed all the schools and destroyed all the books that disagreed with their oppressive philosophy. Anyone caught not complying with the new, closed-minded edict was put in prison. In spite of these severe consequences, those who knew how to read and write secretly taught those who did not. Many people managed to hide some of their beloved classic books before they could be destroyed.

Many villagers dreamed of immigrating to Canada where they believed people were allowed to make choices and work hard to make a life for themselves. Although we were prevented from leaving with threats of imprisonment, many people attempted to flee because we

were starving in the homeland. Grandpa and I and our six children were among those who made their plans to escape.

Our village was twenty miles from the border. We would have to walk to it and sneak past the border guards. There we would be met by people to whom we paid our life's savings to help us travel across the land to the ocean, and then across the ocean to Canada.

Crossing the border was extremely dangerous, for the guards were ordered to shoot anyone caught trying to pass illegally. For this part of the journey, we were on our own.

Late at night, taking only what we could carry, we left our home and quietly stole out of the village. Because three of our children were still quite small, it took us five days to reach the border. When we arrived, we hid in the trees on the edge of a mile-wide open area that ran along it. We planned to wait until dark before trying to cross.

As the sun began to set my husband and I carried the three smallest children while our other three joined hands. We could see the border and began to run across that mile-wide open area towards freedom. Just as we reached the borderline a bright spotlight flashed on and caught, in its glare, the two older boys running with their younger brother, who was literally suspended in mid air between them. A loud voice boomed over a bullhorn ordering, "HALT IMMEDIATELY!" but my sons paid no attention and continued to run.

Gunshots rang out and continued even after we had crossed into the neutral country on the other side. The light still followed us and suddenly found me as I ran carrying the baby. When our eldest son John saw this, he let go of his two brothers and yelled for them to "RUN!!!" Then, John began to draw the guards' attention by jumping, yelling and waving his hands. The bright light settled on him as the rest of us finally reached the protective barrier of the trees on the other side of the border. As we turned back to look, several shots rang out. As we watched, John, my ten-year-old son, fell to the ground and lay still.

Thankfully the guards left without checking because our son lay outside their jurisdiction. Your grandpa then crawled out and dragged John back to where we were huddled in the trees. My child had been hit by one of the bullets, and died there in my arms. We wept in agony but our hearts were filled with pride for his heroism. If not for his selfless actions, the baby and I would have certainly been shot. He gave his life that night, so the rest of us might live.

After we buried John, with heavy hearts we continued on and eventually found our way to Canada, and so to freedom."

When Shelly's Grandma finished her story, I had tears in my eyes.

"Since arriving in Canada I have enjoyed my freedom immensely," she continued. "I take great pleasure in every single choice I make - including the time I took an evening job scrubbing floors, so that Shelley's father could go to University." As she clutched at her heart, the dear lady then expressed great pride in her second oldest son, who was eight during the family's flight to freedom. Out of gratitude for their new life in Canada, and the horror of seeing his brother shot down so long ago, he had enlisted in order to defend his new country with his life.

Grandma confided that she valued her right to vote as very dear to her heart and had never missed her chance to have "her say". She told me then she viewed voting as not only a right and a privilege, but also a responsibility. By voting she believed she could ensure that

Canada would be run by good people, who would never have someone shot and killed for making a choice.

My life changed profoundly that day, as I looked through the window that this special woman had opened into a different world. I made my own commitment on the spot to seize every opportunity I was ever given to vote. And, I began to understand in some small way, the passion that motivates our Canadian soldiers, who volunteer to defend our country.

When Grandma finished her story, Shelley, who had become very quiet, softly asked, "Who was the baby you were carrying when you ran across the border, Grandma?" As Grandma caressed her cheek, she replied, "The baby was your father, my dear."

*Pat Fowler
Sherwood Park, Alberta*

Originally published in *Chicken Soup for the Canadian Soul*, 2002, © Pat Fowler