

From Denmark to Canada in 1955: A Story of Immigration

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Immigration to Canada increased significantly in the decades immediately following the Second World War. From 1946 until 1962, over 2.1 million newcomers came to Canada, primarily arriving from war-ravaged Europe.¹ These immigrants held diverse reasons for coming to Canada, made their own particular impressions of the new land and its peoples on arrival, and went about the complex process of re-establishing themselves and integrating within the host society. It is likely that many of Canada's new immigrants experienced hardships and discrimination, but one could speculate that many also brought with them a spirit of enthusiasm for this change and the expectation that they would have a better life in their new country. This paper will explore the story of one of these immigrants, my grandmother, a German of Jewish origin who came to Canada from Denmark with her husband and three children in 1955.

Käthe Therese Peschel was born in Germany on March 14th, 1910. She was the third of four daughters born to Eva Pollock, a German Jew, and Fritz Peschel, a Prussian gentleman. Käthe Therese, affectionately called "Resel" by her mother, was sent to a domestic science school for her education because she did not marry early.² After graduating,

Resel worked as a teacher in a village school in Germany, but this was not to last for long. In 1933, when she was only 23 years old, she "unexpectedly lost her job for no apparent reason."³ It was the year of Hitler's rise to power, so Resel's sudden loss of employment may have been connected to her Jewish heritage. Uncomfortable with the changes in Germany during that time, Resel decided to leave Europe and moved to South Africa that same year.

Resel's move to South Africa in 1933 was not a short sojourn; she would not return to Europe until after the Second World War. Her re-location protected her from the horrific persecutions of European Jews during the Holocaust. It was also a move that would change her life forever. After ten years of working first as a nanny for a wealthy family, and then as a domestic science teacher in an Indian girls' school, Resel, who by that time had anglicized her name to "Tess", met Poul Benedikt Fenger, (Paul) in the Drakensberg Mountain Club near Durban.⁴ Paul had moved to South Africa from Denmark after witnessing the rise of Fascism at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Paul and Tess married three weeks after they met, on December 31st, 1943.

Following the war, Paul's parents persuaded him and Tess to return to Denmark. The understanding

¹ Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006), p. 10.

² Rosanna Hille, *Resel's Story*, Vancouver, 2008, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

was that Paul would one day inherit the large farm owned by his parents.⁵ Paul and Tess returned to Denmark with their infant daughter, Sonia, in 1946. They had two more children, Peter, in 1947 and Michael, in 1949. Their daughter later wrote that those years were “a hard time for my mother. She was not accepted by his [Paul’s] parents for being German and a non-practicing Christian.”⁶ She recalls that Paul and Tess “scandalized the family by not baptizing their children.”⁷ Danish historian, Inga Dahlsgård writes of that period in Denmark that “industrialism had changed the family in a number of crucial respects: the family had become small, comprising as a rule two or three children”⁸ and lived differently from the older generation who typically had had “as many as seven children.”⁹ Paul was from such a family, being one of seven siblings, and it seems that his parents were more traditional in their outlook and not so understanding of the different choices that Paul and Tess made for their own comparatively small family. After eight years during which Paul worked for his father managing the forests on the large family estate, it became apparent that he would not inherit the farm.¹⁰ Not wanting to quarrel with his siblings over the family’s land, Paul and Tess decided to leave Denmark, and chose Canada as the future home for their family.

Being accepted by the Canadian authorities as a new immigrant was not so difficult in the nineteen fifties – if you were a ‘white’ European. Although immigration to Canada reached “mass proportions” after the Second World War, Canadian immigration laws were still influenced by Canada’s “long-standing ‘White Canada’ policy.”¹¹ In a speech given in 1947, then Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King stated:

The government will seek ... to ensure the careful selection and permanent settlement of such numbers of immigrants as can advantageously be absorbed in our national economy... I wish to make it quite clear that Canada is perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. It is not a ‘fundamental

human right’ of any alien to enter Canada. It is a privilege. It is a matter of domestic policy. The people of Canada do not wish, as a result of mass immigration, to make a fundamental alteration in the character of our population...¹²

Until 1945, the “admissible classes” of immigrants to Canada were a narrowly defined group, restricted to: British subjects; U.S. citizens; wives, unmarried children and fiancés of legal residents of Canada; and agriculturalists with sufficient means to farm in Canada.¹³ When, in 1950, the Canadian government created the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, “the admissible classes were further widened to include any European who could ‘satisfy the Minister that he is suitable, having regard to the climatic, social, educational, labour and other conditions or requirements of Canada.’”¹⁴

A closer look at the immigration application that Paul Fenger filled out in March of 1955 reflects these Canadian policies concerning the desirable immigrant. Paul was required to complete an ‘occupational profile’ for the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, detailing his age, citizenship, religion, number of dependents, education, languages spoken and written, practical training and employment history.¹⁵ The form also asked applicants to indicate their intended occupation in Canada, and their preferred placement area. It was this kind of information that was used to determine whether an applicant was a ‘suitable’ immigrant for Canada. With seven years work experience as an office clerk in South Africa and 8 years as a farmer in Denmark, being Protestant in religion and fluent in English, Danish and German, the immigration officer approved Paul Fenger’s application for immigration to Canada. The officer noted on the form: “Proceeding with family. Good business and farming background. Several acquaintances to assist in establishing subject in the light of his experience.”¹⁶

It is interesting to note that there was no place on the application form to record Tess’ qualifications, namely her education and experience as a domestic sciences teacher. She was simply included as one of the dependents. This may have reflected the expectation of the time with regard to male and female roles in the family. As Franca Iacovetta explains:

5 Ibid, p. 3.

6 Ibid, p. 3.

7 Ibid, p. 2.

8 Inga Dahlsgård, *Women in Denmark: Yesterday and Today* (Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Information about Denmark and Cultural Cooperation With Other Nations, 1980), p. 187.

9 Ibid, p. 160.

10 Rosanna Hille, *Resel’s Story*, p. 3.

11 Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada*, pp. 9-10.

12 Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p.312.

13 Ibid, p. 320.

14 Ibid, p. 323.

15 Canadian Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Immigration Branch, Occupational Profile of Poul Benedikt Hauch Fenger, Copenhagen, 9 March 1955.

16 Ibid.

“The construction of the family that underlined the dominant rhetoric assumed a gendered arrangement in which husbands supported a wage-dependent wife and children, and women took on the task of running an efficient household and cultivating a moral environment for their children.”¹⁷ Tess’ Danish passport did have a place to indicate her profession, but instead of “teacher”, it simply said “mistress”, meaning “housewife”.¹⁸ It seems that Tess left Denmark with the expectation that in her new life in Canada she would be supported by her husband, and did not consider that she might be required to work outside the home. For the generation who had lived through the war and the depression, “security and the search for it”¹⁹ were important themes in the postwar decades, and many women would have felt that being supported by their husband would give them that sense of security and a return to a ‘normal’ life.

After receiving permission on March 9, 1955 to immigrate to Canada, Paul and Tess left Denmark in April of the same year with their three young children. They travelled across the Atlantic aboard the *Saxonia*, a seven day journey from Liverpool, England to Montreal, Canada. Before the boat arrived in Montreal, the youngest of the Fenger children contracted the German measles. As a result, the family disembarked at Quebec City and entered quarantine.²⁰ When everyone was well again, the Fenger family found its way to Montreal where Paul and Tess bought a 1949 Ford Panel truck in which they would make their way across the country to the province of their choice – British Columbia.

The Fenger family’s journey across Canada was well documented by Paul in a journal he wrote along the way using a little Danish typewriter. It was certainly not the easiest way to travel. The journal notes the number of Canadian roads that remained unpaved. There were many times when their car was stuck in the mud, delaying their trip for hours at a time. In the evenings the family would camp at the side of the road, or in an abandoned log cabin, or a farmer’s field. As Paul wrote one evening at the beginning of June:

The children are sleeping in the van on a home-

made hay mattress, two lengthwise on top of a lot of suitcases and one across on the floor. It is perhaps a little primitive, but they are dead tired in the evening and could sleep on a stone. We parents sleep in a big tent on camping beds, well organized with a canvas floor, sleeping bags and blankets.²¹

At times the conditions were cold and rainy; the tenting gear would have to be packed up, dripping wet. Mosquitoes made frequent appearances on the trip and as a result in the journal, too. They drove “only short distances each day out of consideration for the children who get very tired if we drive more than five or six hours”²² and Paul added that they “didn’t get too much time to reflect or play tourist when tenting with three small children, and at the same time attempt to drive 350km per day in order to be able to see if we have moved on the map at all.”²³

Despite these challenges, the overall tone of the journal is optimistic and excited about a new life in Canada. It has been noted that in the postwar decades of mass immigration in Canada many of the newcomers “proved immensely resourceful, exhibiting a tremendous capacity for hard work and a talent for enjoying life, and each other’s company, even in adversity.”²⁴ Every time the Fenger family drove across the border into a new province, they shouted “hurrah!” in unison, undoubtedly enthusiastic about nearing their destination. To entertain the children, Paul and Tess introduced “candy time” at hourly intervals and invented games like “beaver” where anyone who saw a man with a checkered shirt would shout ‘beaver’ and get a point.²⁵

An appreciation of Canada as their new home comes across in Paul’s journal as he described the beauty of the Canadian landscape in every region. In Saskatchewan, he wrote that there was “a delightful peace that reigns over this huge flat and fertile land”²⁶. On many occasions they spotted wildlife and met other people along the way:

It is great to take it easy because we get much more out of the trip that way and it is especially nice to stop in with people to see how they live and to speak with them about their lives. Everyone we

17 Franca Iacovetta, “Making ‘New Canadians’: Social Workers, Women, and the Reshaping of Immigrant Families,” in Franca Iacovetta, Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, ed., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s – 1960s*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) p. 484.

18 Personal Papers of Tess Fenger, Danish Passport, issued in Copenhagen, 27 July 1951.

19 Douglas Owsram, “Safe in the Hands of Mother Suburbia,” in *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 61.

20 Interview with Rosanna Hille, Vancouver, March 2010, p. 1.

21 Personal Papers of Poul Fenger: Road Trip Across Canada: May and June 1955, p. 2.

22 Ibid, p. 6.

23 Ibid, p. 6.

24 Franca Iacovetta, “Such Hardworking People” in *The Land Newly Found: Eyewitness Accounts of the Canadian Immigrant Experience* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2006), pp. 276-277.

25 Personal Papers of Poul Fenger: Road Trip Across Canada: May and June 1955, p. 3.

26 Ibid, p. 7.

have met has been remarkably helpful and friendly, and we have been so lucky with the weather.²⁷

The enthusiasm of this new immigrant family was expressed again when they finally crossed into British Columbia, and shouted “a really resounding hurrah, both because the landscape was unbelievably beautiful in the Crow’s Nest Pass but also because this was the last province we entered and hopefully the one where we were going to stay.”²⁸ After exactly three weeks of travel, they ended their road trip across Canada in Penticton on June 14th, 1955.

We have now driven 3016 miles from Montreal; our transportation costs have been \$79.71 and other costs have been about \$53. A train ticket for one adult would cost \$100 without meals, so we have arrived here the cheapest way possible and we have had a wonderful trip.²⁹

After renting a little furnished house, the next step for the new immigrant family from Denmark was to find employment. At variance with the family ideal of the husband as the breadwinner and the wife as the homemaker, both Paul and Tess initially worked in the Okanagan orchards.³⁰ Working below one’s qualifications seems to have been the reality for many new immigrant families upon arriving in Canada, as “at least in the short-term... the overall needs of the immigrant family – whatever was needed to ensure a more smooth economic adjustment – took temporary precedence over the concern that men and women be encouraged to fulfill their prescribed roles.”³¹ Paul and Tess’ daughter remembers writing a letter to her Danish grandmother about the work her parents had found, and not being allowed by Tess to post it because “she didn’t want the family in Denmark to see that they had such menial jobs”.³² The reality in Canada was that “the late 1940s, the 1950s, and early 1960s were a time when... newcomers to this land performed the dangerous or low-paying jobs that others shunned.”³³

Fortunately for Tess and Paul, their employment situation improved within a few months, although not in a way that they would have expected. While

up a ladder picking fruit in the orchards, a man approached Tess explaining that he had learned that she was a qualified teacher. He worked for the school district in Penticton, and in that first encounter offered Tess a job teaching home economics in the local high school.³⁴ By September she started her new job, and, around the same time, Paul also found better work with a local advertising company.

Instead of Paul being the breadwinner whose employment would stabilize their economic situation, it was Tess whose qualifications enabled them to settle into their new life in Canada more comfortably. During the 1950s, “immigrant women accounted for a significant share of the growing numbers of married women who entered the Canadian workforce in the two decades after the Second World War.”³⁵ The role of women in Canada was changing, and the “high proportion of married immigrant women in the workforce or seeking paid work reflected, above all, economic need related to the inability of the husband to earn a wage sufficient to support a wife and children.”³⁶ Many new immigrants to Canada during that time “arrived with false expectations based partly on the reluctance of Canadian overseas immigration officers to tell them the hard cold truth about housing shortages, living costs, unemployment, and language problems.”³⁷

Although Tess joined the workforce, as opposed to remaining the stay-at-home housewife, the Fenger family adapted well to their new situation. The family reorganized themselves to share the housework, as described by Paul in a script he wrote and recorded for Danish Radio about their life in Canada one year after immigrating:

Paul: It does have an impact on our home life when you [Tess] are away all day, but thankfully we have found a little house that is easy to look after. It has all the modern conveniences like an oil furnace, electric stove, fridge, hot and cold running water and so on...

Tess: There is a lot to do in the morning, and once the system gets going, it goes quite quickly. Father makes breakfast, I [Tess] tidy up and make the beds, Peter vacuums and toasts bread, Michael sweeps and polishes shoes and Sonia tidies her own room and dusts. I wouldn’t say the house is perfect when we leave, but it is nice enough to come home

27 Ibid, p. 6.

28 Ibid, p. 8.

29 Ibid, p. 9.

30 Interview with Rosanna Hille, Vancouver, March 2010, p. 1.

31 Iacovetta, *Making ‘New Canadians’: Social Workers, Women, and the Reshaping of Immigrant Families*, p. 506.

32 Interview with Rosanna Hille, Vancouver, March 2010, p. 1.

33 Franca Iacovetta, “Such Hardworking People” in Norman Hillmer and J.L. Granatstein, *The Land Newly Found: Eyewitness Accounts of the Canadian Immigrant Experience* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2006), pp. 276-277.

34 Interview with Rosanna Hille, Vancouver, March 2010, p. 1.

35 Iacovetta, *Making ‘New Canadians’: Social Workers, Women, and the Reshaping of Immigrant Families*, p. 504.

36 Ibid, p. 504.

37 Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada*, p. 49.

to.³⁸

This kind of family life would have been very different from the one the Fengers had known in Denmark, in which Paul worked and Tess managed the household with the help of live-in servants.³⁹ Nevertheless, the tone of the above description is not one of complaint, but of appreciation for their new home, with all of its ‘modern conveniences’, and of a family in support of the mother being out in the workforce.

It appears that in addition to providing financial stability for the family, Tess’ work also enabled her to integrate more fully into Canadian society: “I am very glad to have my job at the school where I am a home economics teacher. I am in touch with many people and have already learned a lot about life in Canada that I would have never learned if I was only at home looking after the house.”⁴⁰ Around the time she began teaching, she appeared in a local newspaper article along with nine other new teachers on the occasion of their induction into the B.C. Teachers’ Federation. At the event, the vice-president of the BCTF addressed the group of teachers and assured them that ‘theirs was a position to be envied.’⁴¹ Tess gained respect for her work, and was also featured in the newspaper of Penticton High where she taught. The article described Tess as a “great asset” to the school, and mentioned her “five years of specialized training in the field of Home Economics,”⁴² her travels throughout Europe, and her teaching career in South Africa.

It is interesting to note that in the short news article about Tess, there is no mention of her being German. It reads: “she hails from Langeland, Denmark,” which was true in the sense that she moved to Canada from Denmark and had a Danish passport, but it seems that she preferred not to identify herself as being German. Her daughter affirms that Tess “never corrected people when they assumed that she was Danish.”⁴³ Perhaps she felt that it would be easier for people to accept her as a Dane than as a German, and did not want to be associated with the negative image of Germans that lived on in the minds of many people after the war.

Integrating ‘new Canadians’ was a social concern

during the post-war period in which such large numbers of immigrants were settling in Canada. In the political climate of the nuclear age and the Cold War, there was “considerable discussion regarding the need to ensure the social and political integration of the postwar European arrivals”⁴⁴ and projects were created to “encourage social and cultural mingling between them [the newcomers] and the old Canadians”.⁴⁵ As a result, many Canadians “welcomed the new arrivals and saw them as a necessary, vibrant addition to a growing country.”⁴⁶ This warm reception by Canadians was a part of the experience of the Fengers who had often felt the “immense friendliness” of their Canadian neighbours.⁴⁷ In terms of the ‘social and cultural’ interaction with Canadians, Tess and Paul quickly found people and causes to associate with, and attributed their successful integration in part to their ability to speak fluent English when they arrived.⁴⁸ Tess took painting lessons with Toni Onley, who later became a well-known BC artist. In November 1956, Paul and Tess, together with Toni Onley, were members of a self-appointed committee of eight people who decided to explore the possibility of forming the first Unitarian Fellowship in Penticton.⁴⁹ After succeeding, the friendships formed with this group lasted for many years.

Although it seemed as though the Fenger family had established themselves in their new life in Canada, Paul was not satisfied with his own employment in Penticton. In those days, many women had become part of the workforce but men in general still felt that it was their responsibility to provide for their families as the primary earner. When Tess finished her second year of teaching high school in Penticton, in June of 1957, the family moved to Terrace in Northern British Columbia. Both Paul and Tess loved the area for its beautiful mountains, and built their own house in Terrace. Tess wrote to a friend in Penticton:

We are well and happy and in spite of all its handicaps, we love this spot. Our house is progressing slowly and looks more and more promising. I am still teaching, but only half-time, Thank God. Paul started a new job (more promising!) in June as

38 Personal Papers of Poul Fenger: Kitchen Table Conversation Recorded for Danish Radio, 1956, pp. 1-2.

39 Rosanna Hille, *Resel’s Story*, Vancouver, 2008, p. 3.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

41 Personal Papers of Tess Fenger: newspaper clipping, Penticton, 1955.

42 Personal Papers of Tess Fenger: newspaper clipping, Barbara Stogre, “Know Your Teachers” in *Pen Hi Weekly Review*, 1956.

43 Interview with Rosanna Hille, Vancouver, March 2010, p. 1.

44 Iacovetta, *Making ‘New Canadians’: Social Workers, Women, and the Reshaping of Immigrant Families*, p. 483.

45 Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada*, p. 10.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

48 Personal Papers of Poul Fenger: Kitchen Table Conversation Recorded for Danish Radio, 1956, p.1.

49 Personal Papers of Tess Fenger: letter dated November 3, 1956.

the accountant in the biggest and newest sawmill here ... So you see things are looking up.⁵⁰

Since Paul had found better employment, Tess happily reduced her teaching hours and then retired altogether in 1965. The children attended high school and, one by one, left their home in Terrace to study at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Only fourteen years after arriving in Canada, Paul passed away in Terrace on May 25th, 1969. Tess had looked after him in their home for several months after doctors had discovered that Paul had a brain tumor. Shortly after his passing, Tess traveled back to South Africa and Europe, not wanting to be alone in the house they had built together. She eventually moved to White Rock to be closer to her children and their young families who had begun to settle in and around Vancouver. On October 11th, 1981, Tess Fenger died suddenly in a car accident a short distance from her home. She was seventy-one years old.

Although the story of my grandmother is unique, it can help one to understand more about the experiences of those who immigrated to Canada in the 1950s. Canada's narrow definition at the time of who could be considered a 'suitable' immigrant meant that the majority of immigrants who came to Canada during that decade were from European nations. The fact that they came from many different cultures and backgrounds did not stop Canadians from welcoming them into their communities and helping them to integrate into society. The immigrant women who came to Canada during that period of history often had to abandon the idea that they could be housewives supported by their husbands, and entered the paid workforce outside the home to help provide for their families. Their contribution to Canadian society, as employed married women, helped to redefine the role of women in the Canadian family. A spirit of optimism enabled many of these 'new' Canadians to meet difficulties with resourcefulness, and to bring into reality their hopes for a better life in Canada.

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