

Gateway to Canada

Canada's last active seaport immigration shed closed 50 years ago. A look back at Pier 21

BY **HEATHER GREENWOOD DAVIS**



A sign welcomes arrivals at the Pier 21 dockside in 1950.

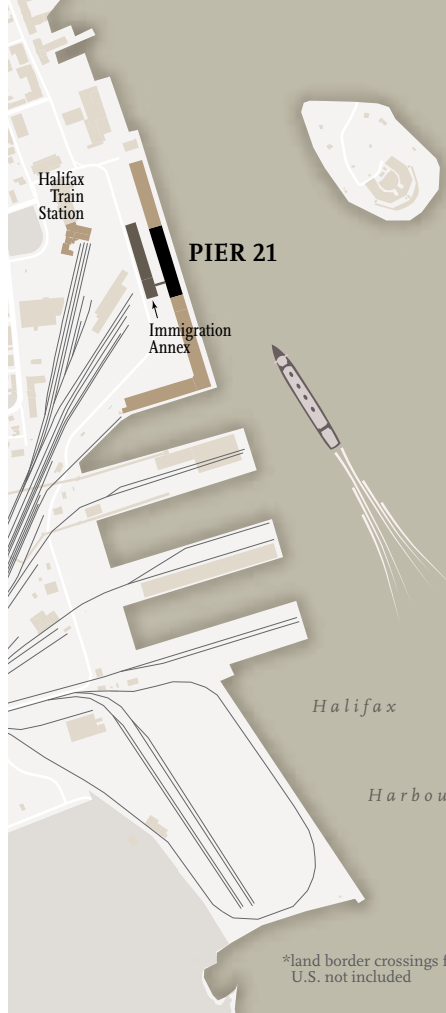
FOR CLOSE TO HALF A CENTURY, the immigration administration centre at Pier 21 was the first stop on Canadian soil for almost one million new international arrivals. In the decade following the Second World War, around 500,000 people entered Canada here on the Halifax shore. One-fifth of the new arrivals had been displaced by the war or were political refugees fleeing oppressive regimes.

"The hope in Europe was far less than the hope in Canada, and so

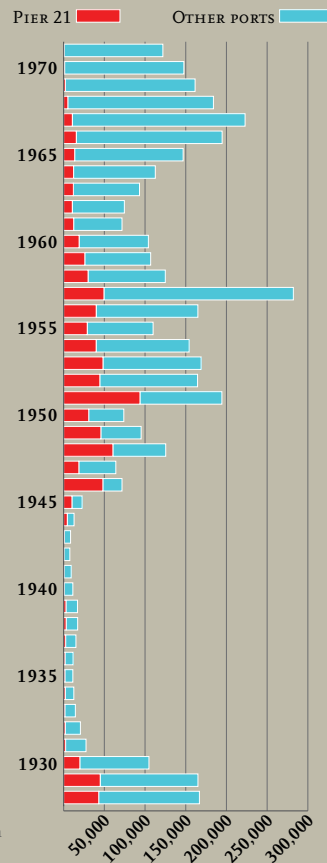
people came here to stake their claim to make a new life," says Marie Chapman, CEO of the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, now housed at the former administration site.

This March will mark 50 years since the facility closed in 1971. At the time, the closing drew little fanfare. Pier 21 was an administration building first and foremost. With faster air travel options replacing five- to 10-day ship travel, the centre was no longer the

essential immigration hub it had once been. For the next few decades, the building was used intermittently as a site for census counting, as office space for immigration officials, as classrooms and as rentable artist studio space. But J.P. LeBlanc, a Second World War veteran who had left from and returned to the pier during the war, had a different vision for the site. He formed the Pier 21 Society, and when Ruth Goldbloom took over in 1993, she began the movement that



Number of overseas landed immigrants to Canada 1928 to 1971*



*land border crossings from U.S. not included



Passengers from SS *Walnut*, 1948. The mostly Baltic refugees had arrived from Sweden, fleeing the threat of Soviet repatriation to find refuge in Canada.

“Joe Schlesinger said that Pier 21 is the neck of an hourglass, and all these people are the sands,” says Chapman. “They come to this one moment, and when they leave here, they scatter again, and their lives go in different directions, but that moment is never forgotten because it’s the moment when your lives changed directions.”

Today, the museum’s mission includes telling the stories and lessons not only of those who physically walked through these doors many years ago but also of those who continue to seek out this country as a place of refuge and promise — even when that isn’t what they find.

“Often, we were welcoming some people and not welcoming others,” says Chapman. “Now, we get to tell all those stories, including the new ones, like the Vietnamese boat people, many of whom turned around and sponsored Syrian refugees.”

With immigrant arrivals still a huge part of the Canadian story, the museum has no shortage of new tales to tell. This spring, it will complete a two-year renovation of the permanent exhibition *Canadian Immigration Story*. Specifically, the “contributions” section of the exhibition will feature more than 100 immigrants to Canada who have found success in fields ranging from sports to culture to economics in a 10-minute multimedia showcase on an impressive new 180-degree screen. Chapman hopes it will encourage even more people to visit. “Even if they can’t trace their footsteps,” Chapman says, “they might actually find themselves.”

would lobby to have the building designated as a national historic site.

The rundown site was renovated and renewed — and is now a stunning showpiece on the Halifax Harbour. It opened as an interpretive centre in 1999 and the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in 2010.

“No two individuals, no two families, who come through the pier have the exact same experience because there are so many factors involved,” says historian Jan Raska, co-author of the 2020 book *Pier 21: A History*, which uses archival information, along with immigration documents, oral histories, digital images and memories collected through the museum to tell the site’s storied

history. “It is a sort of representation of the state, but it’s also very much a site of commemoration of immigration.”

The museum has become a beacon for those who can trace their history to Europe — the records of everybody who immigrated to Canada from 1865 to 1935 now live here — and visitors often use it as a starting point for ancestral research. Among the notable names who can trace their Canadian start to the Pier: Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella, media mogul Moses Znaimer and the late CBC reporter Joe Schlesinger. All of them came through Pier 21 as children and have spoken of the site’s importance.

PHOTOGRAPH OF A GROUP OF BALTIC WOMEN AND CHILDREN: PASSENGERS FROM SS WALNUT, 1948. CANADIAN MUSEUM OF IMMIGRATION AT PIER 21 (ID2014.443.17); MAP: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN GEO. DATA COMPILED FROM VARIOUS YEARS OF: CANADA, DOMINION BUREAU OF STATISTICS, CANADA YEAR BOOK; LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION “STATEMENT OF ARRIVALS”; AND CANADA, MANPOWER AND IMMIGRATION, IMMIGRATION STATISTICS.