

An educator's return to Belgium

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This essay assesses the perspective shifts, struggles, and insights arising in a slowly consolidating immigrant identity. I adopt as a springboard for memory my visit to two public exhibits in Belgium in late 2015. In the form of a series of short numbered reflections, I offer a multiple lens approach to the question of identity formation, emphasizing adult development themes of continuity, discontinuity, and change. What are some of the elusive identifications inherent in such a journey? How is meaning constructed, later in midlife, as earlier immigrant experiences are tested, reframed, and reconsidered? How do I construe the post-war experiences of my immigrant parents? Working directly with Ontario's immigrants as an adult educator assists me in clarifying my own cultural role in the hands-on work of settlement, consolidating the unvoiced meanings of life choices in my own sphere while assisting others in soul-nourishing work. The research journey continues in the wider world of scholarship and writing. New friends and colleagues form part of a community for exploring collective memory for that which is unspoken and undocumented in individual life stories. It is my intention to continue to investigate, despite language barriers, the conditions and circumstances of the Jewish people during and after World War II in Belgium.

Key terms: Immigrant identity; post-WW II immigrant family life; adult education approaches in Ontario settlement work; storytelling as inclusive social practice; Red Star Museum, Antwerp; Dossin Kazerne, Mechelen; Holocaust studies in Belgium.

*There was a great pond between the two, across which ships
plied, without ceasing, back and forth. The waves splashed
between the two worlds and at times just thoughts alone would
pass from the one land to the other.*
Cyriel Buysse, Flemish writer, 1931
(cited in Caremans et al 2013, 3)

1

The Scheldt River. Antwerp. Great gusting blasts of air, huge liners stretched across miles of quays, gulls wheeling and calling in high circles – everything one might expect if one were accustomed to a giant, world famous harbour, the whole stretch of the strategic drama Churchill wanted so much to protect for the Allies in the closing chapters of World War II. Our voices crisscross each other, hoarse and excited, as we shouted to make each other heard on a late September day, sorting out our bearings in the rough weather. It was my second day in Antwerp.

A major bike path lay parallel to the harbour. We had pedaled in the rain to the Red Star Line Museum, a newly designed structure right on the harbour itself. The locals were proud of it, especially the younger people we met here and there, those with an interest in contemporary design; they wanted us to see a whole lot more on our journey of inquiry than Rubens, they told us. It had just opened, they said.

“Go there,” a young architect named Frederick had emphasized in a chance meeting during a train ride to Ghent. He was obviously proud of the building, and had extolled its merits to us, its sweepingly dramatic location abreast of the Scheldt. The immigration themes were huge there, he added; I would find much to be delighted in. It was not about art, but about stories. I had told him that my husband and I were Canadian citizens, and that my husband was a dual Canadian-American, but I had been born in Antwerp in 1950.

“I want to see everything I can,” I explained. “I’m here for two months. The homeland,” I added quickly, in case he was too young to understand. “The return.” He nodded, smiling. Gracious. He was not too young to understand. He was born and raised there too, he said, in Antwerp; he warmly welcomed me to Belgium as we exchanged our last sentences before waving goodbye. Frederick’s brief gesture of hospitality was to be repeated many times in my two-month journey. His phrasing echoed that of the Flemish customs agent in Brussels, who had also surprised me in an oppressively hot August day lineup by unexpectedly pausing, then choosing to weigh aloud a few words in thick Flemish-accented English from my dark blue Canadian passport. “Mortsel, Province of Antwerp,” he said, looking

up to make smiling eye contact. “You were born here. Welcome back to Belgium, Christa Van Daele.”

Intoxicated with the charms of the rugged Blue Bike system – impressively sturdy rented bicycles that we nudged up slowly on a long ramp from the depths of Antwerp’s elegant railway station – we figured the bikes would work well to bring us to the destination of the new Red Star Line Museum. We were glad to take the tip from Frederick despite the wild harbour weather. An immigrant myself, and a person who had spent much of her adult life in Central Ontario gathering satisfying immigrant family and vocational stories from the hundreds of recently arrived new Canadians I had collaborated with or assisted in my life, I was gripped with intense emotion, a buoyant feeling of hyper concentration, as I entered the light filled building.

Everywhere I looked – down the corridors and around the spare corners of the new structure – there were large images and texts of immigrants from all over Europe arriving with valises and bags, preparing to leave the docks for the journey from Antwerp. The Red Star Line had operated since 1872, bringing passengers one way to Canada and America, and cargo back to Antwerp, with passenger destinations to New York, Philadelphia, and Halifax. It had closed in 1934. The Holland America line had picked up the assets of the company. Before 1934, two million people had passed through the three warehouses on the *Rijnkaai* that I was standing in today. I was smitten, not just by the banks of hundreds of oral and videotaped stories available on every keyboard and video installation, but by the generous aesthetic vision that tied all this together in a spirited whole.

There was much thinking to do in the next few months. Thinking, and travelling. There were cousins, nieces and nephews, and an elderly aunt to meet – my father’s only remaining sibling. There were the art treasures of the Low Countries to gaze at and understand, the cathedrals and dozens of beguinages to linger in. After a great many years – over five decades, in fact – I had returned to Belgium in late 2015, a year of determined pilgrimage, energetically focused research interests, and strengthened resolve. The extent to which it was also a time of *Kairos* – an opportune and unlikely time for action in a life – has settled more clearly in my own understanding a few months after my return. My own immigration story, and that of my family’s, came flooding back.



Figure 1. Little refugee girl with cat. Original drawing by Julian van Mossel-Forrester.

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I already knew, because I had enrolled in sociology courses in my early years at university in Canada, that the year we emigrated – 1957 – was a peak immigration year for Europeans coming to North America. For many, including my parents, the distress caused by the Cold War was the precipitating factor that overcame the many human hesitations about emigrating. Hungary had been invaded in 1956; the writing, both my parents felt, was clearly on the wall. Another world war was not to be endured. A girl from East Germany floats like a song in my own child memory in this part of the story. She was a refugee child that I often played with in Antwerp, one of my last friends in Belgium, who was sheltered by the altruistically minded Van Dyck family, our close friends. Then, as now, migrants were crossing borders; then, as now, parents sent their children to safer countries. The Van Dycks pulled out a picture of her immediately when I spoke of these memories in late 2015. Good, I thought; I had not imagined this favourite friend.

So began my journey back in time. Even back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Van Dyck parents were evidently committed to photographs of quality. Handling the precious photographs of two joined family lives in my left hand, and a coffee cup in my right, I was silent, caught in an immense flood of sadness and joy, the rich impressions of our closely linked early days with this nurturing family. The photographs of another life, another time, were overwhelming – so much affection, support, and laughter in those photographs. As a final gesture, without a word, they handed me a postcard with a photograph of the *Groote Beer*, the ship by which we had crossed the Atlantic.

“For you,” the ninety-three year old Jeff Van Dyck said, squinting through thick glasses as he handed it to me. There was my young mother’s handwriting on the back, as she said goodbye in a few lines of ink to this affectionate family for the last time. My own name was written under hers, along with that of my brother Joris and my sister Erna. The card was posted from the Rotterdam docks. I was stunned, unaware that such a picture existed.



Figure 2. Grooten Beer boat. Original drawing by Julian van Mossel-Forrester.

3

Chatham, Ontario. Population: 30,000. Another world. The floors of our apartment swayed under our feet as we entered the simple rental my father had furnished for us in advance of our arrival. A patterned curtain separated the kitchen from the living room. Arriving in late September on the midnight train that had brought my mother Ilse, my sister Erna, my brother Joris, and me from the Holland America docks in Quebec City, I can declare that it was distinctly unsettling for us all to have our first glimpse of Chatham. Windblown, tumbledown, and loosely pieced together in what looked to us like makeshift building materials, the *Can. J. of Netherlandic Studies/Rev. can. d'études néerlandaises* 37.1 (2016): 91-116

first appearance of the assembly of streets and houses was a bit of a mystery as we slowly took it in. We found our footing together in the daylight, walking through the town. We held hands for dear life, slowly inspecting the surroundings.



Figure 3. Family portrait with two parents and three children. Original drawing by Julian van Mossel-Forrester.

“Why Chatham?” we asked our parents, when we were more grown up. It still seems from today’s perspective a somewhat pointless sort of start for our family in the hypothetically fascinating map of a majestically proportioned nation full of land mass, fresh water, and unbelievable distances. The chained up dogs, the shabby back yards, the archaic Protestant-Catholic tensions in the Orange Parades of the 1950s that our Scottish downstairs landlord was a participant in annually – all of this seems to come from a dispiriting and thin memory book, during those first weeks and months of 1957.

It was the usual reason: my parents knew someone there. His name was Van Merbergen. We were not close friends with the Van Merbergen family; they were the casual acquaintance of another acquaintance around Antwerp.

Later, I learned that Chatham had a rich history of its own as an enormously significant site for Black settlement in Ontario. But we knew nothing of this as children. At the time, the official story shared with us was that our parents had received small snippets of information about jobs and wages in Chatham from this former acquaintance. Yet, the mailed envelope of critical labour market information that my father had been patiently waiting for had arrived at a different unit in our townhouse in the Antwerp post-war suburbs. My father stated that he never received the exact hands-on employment information he needed, making the Ontario town and its mixed employment possibilities even more a matter of fate rather than luck.

That's how the story started. The Red Star Line Museum's atmosphere of democratic multimedia stories, a direct invitation on each computer terminal for each visitor to leave behind a narrative at the site of the museum, was irresistible. At least, I found it so.

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Were we actually Flemish? What were we, in fact? My mother, in the family's migration story, was neither French speaking from southern Belgium nor Flemish herself. She was a highly urban person, a German post-war immigrant to Belgium from the bombed city of Hanover. The Belgian government had repatriated all Belgians in Germany in 1946; my father and mother had met in Germany in 1944. She learned Flemish quickly and well, undertaking immediate responsibility as an earnest young eighteen-year-old for learning the literature of a country. I recall that she could quote the poetry of Guido Gezelle to us even years later, in Canada. My older sister was born in 1947, when my mother was only twenty.

My father, born in Antwerp and a clear-minded man today at 94 years of age, was a quietly understated tradesperson, an automobile mechanic who had directly benefitted from the war in ways that I grasped only more recently, while interviewing him in his advanced old age. Before the Depression, his father had worked as a cutter in the diamond business – a trade typical in Antwerp. In the 1930s, when small specks of diamond shards went missing on the linoleum floor during his father's grinding work, my father and his siblings crawled around under the table and around the baseboards to look for them. Diamond cutting and polishing was a trade commonly done by working people from their own home in the Antwerp area, right in the family's kitchen. His brothers, like him, apprenticed and became solid European tradesmen. One was a baker who moved to the Bronx in New York, and the other, the oldest, was an electrician who was openly unhappy with the decision of his two younger brothers to leave.

Although my blue-collar father was a multi-lingual person with exceptional language skills, beautiful musical talents, and a capacity to build and design anything, he was also completely modest about his many gifts. A self-educated person who subscribed diligently each month to small booklets of Pelman self-improvement courses, he considered himself and his destiny completely ordinary. It was my mother's striving background and temperament that hugely dominated family life after our arrival in 1957. Impulsive, intelligent, and physically beautiful, her English was softly nuanced and interesting, shaped with excellent syntax and low tones, carrying the slightly British accent that her private school teachers in Germany had imparted to her. With the ambiguous accent and dark hair, no one in Canada quite knew my mother was German; she looked French, possibly Eastern European.

This ambiguity was a distinct advantage for our family since a number of the Canadians we met in Chatham, I discovered, felt none too friendly about Germans in the 1950s. "DP" (DisplacedPerson) was a common slur. Her capacity to make friends, her driven class aspirations, and a lifelong ambition to live among beautiful things and surroundings set the tone for our family culture in our peculiar little Southwestern Ontario destination. There was not a living soul in our working class Chatham neighbourhood who bought the austere kind of Scandinavian furniture or the tasteful European artwork on the walls that my up-to-date mother favoured. Copper, lace, Delft windmills, and similar sentimental knickknacks from the Low Countries were discouraged in favour of things modern, spare, and international in tone. Other people in the houses around us had televisions on all day; we waited years to get one – a tiny black and white set at that.

"We are a special family," I was told, often and pointedly. "We are not ordinary." The meaning of this loaded wording of pathos and puff was, I understood later, that the other scrabbling, working class families – the immigrants from Italy, Portugal, and Ireland all around us in the 1950s – were certainly quite ordinary. My parents had met in a bomb shelter in Germany, and my technically-trained father – a Belgian who was directed with thousands of others to join the German labour force in 1942 – had become increasingly useful in every practical hardship that faced the bombed and homeless young woman of Hanover who was to become my mother. "The war" became the deeply imprinted phrase that utterly dominated every thread of belief in the emerging mythic fabric of our origin story.

"The war" was the reason, we learned, for many things, including the marriage, when it fell apart. It had, for one thing, thwarted my mother's ambitions to attain a more genteel life with a husband of the more educated classes. "The

war” was the reason that both of my parents prized chocolate and a good cup of coffee. “The war” was, above all, the reason that silences were observed. It was, after all, the reason we had come to Canada. No one discussed politics at home, or history, or Jews, including the Eichmann trials when they were aired on our tiny black and white television in 1964. These were forbidden subjects. Somehow, somewhere, my past was always about Germany – its tragedies and its bombs, its secrets and deep places of shame.

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Nevertheless, the legacy of the German music and literature I was raised on was very fine. In Chatham, and later in London, Ontario, we sang German songs, heard my mother recite German poems, and cite Goethe, Rilke, Schiller, and Morgenstern at the drop of a hat; she would flip through poetry books for quick reference checks when she was inspired by the urge to offer something nourishing in the quotidian course of our lives. As a young girl who loved poetry and literature, they were the German traditions I actually respected. Strauss and Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, waltzing around together on Sunday mornings to the music, in the better times – these were standard expressive fare in our family. And they were certainly not all about snobbery. Far from it. These refinements were indeed my mother’s genuinely revered traditions. As we all grew older and we realized how flat out despairing she often was, I also appreciated that such traditions, along with the upper middle class cultured strivings that came with them, had kept my mother bolted together throughout World War II. These customs secured her when bombs finished off the elite Hanover school she attended. She would come to school finding that classmates had perished, that a favourite teacher was gone forever. I came to understand as I grew older that her passion for poetry and music had emerged as a potent healing force in her life among the many losses.

Decades later, sifting more recently through sources and articles authored by the wave of younger scholars investigating the rich Black history traditions of this town, I was to conclude that the obscure Chatham we had randomly landed within was a place of rich narrative importance that might stimulate any former resident with an interest in ethnic identities. Only superficial scraps of this knowledge were commonly known to European newcomers at the time, since Chatham had not written those stories yet, except for the Underground Railroad legends. We all sensed that there was a clear segregation in our immediate neighbourhood, with Black people living just a few blocks away from us. I knew, for instance, that Sterling Park divided the neighbourhoods and the public swimming pools. For us, a few blocks away, there was merely the economic reality

of immigrant life in a small town rural area. That reality for my parents consisted of mostly shift work and low wages. Our living conditions were basic.

We looked out on meager back yards with sagging, tacked together fences; we listened at night to chained unhappy dogs that were kept outside all winter. There was the search for apartments where three growing children could be marginally tolerated by the inevitable lonely landlord downstairs. A single wage life for a family of five, our parents had learned with chagrin, was not viable. To her credit, my mother gamely learned to work long hours, her hands soaked in hot water in a tomato canning factory in nearby Tilsonberg. She cleaned stained glass windows and polished up the pews of what we called the Protestant Church. She learned to scrub floors of private wealthy homes as a cleaning lady, served grilled cheese sandwiches at a place called Martin's, and eventually became a nurse's aide in a Catholic hospital. Observing her swift skills of observation in the role of an untrained nurse's aide, the nuns of the hospital in Chatham took her aside for a private vocational chat. "Go to a bigger city," they said. "Your children can go to university there."

The nuns were perceptive. She was smart, exceptionally good looking, and in excellent health. In her mid-thirties by then, she was not too old to keep training and learning, even in that time. Her kids were smart. The sisters encouraged her to pursue a year of government-sponsored training in London, Ontario, in practical nursing. Ontario needed nurses, the nuns explained. The dignity of this new achievement, which she prized, boosted her attachments with other dedicated and well trained women, some of whom were disciplined nursing superiors. Respected for her work ethic and fast thinking by these admirable head nurses of Chatham, themselves mostly working class or farm girls who had struggled to get ahead, she learned a great deal. They remained her friends, mentors, and soulmates for the rest of her life. As such, the vocational step she took eventually enhanced all our lives.

Still, given her depressive temperament and her earlier experiences as an orphan in Germany, over time the nursing roles she chose on oncology floors and renal units were especially brutal. Throughout these years, she was often humiliated by the persistent status hierarchy of the medical world, feeling both superior and inferior to most people that she met. She saw herself as a doctor's wife, not the spouse of a shift-working mechanic, a registered nurse with a respected university degree, not a practical nurse with a practical certificate taking orders. This was a special kind of paradoxical anguish throughout her life. It is fair to declare that she also achieved, in the course of her long life, some reasonably perceptive observations about what she was learning through the sometimes chaotic and shifting gamut of her humbling roles in Canada. These she would

sometimes write down, sharing her stories in letters home, or in long earnest talks with us at the kitchen table, marked by lots of pauses and the persistently dark colours of melancholy and loss. I taped some of her stories in 1984, in her last five years of working life, in my own graduate training in vocational counselling at the University of Toronto.

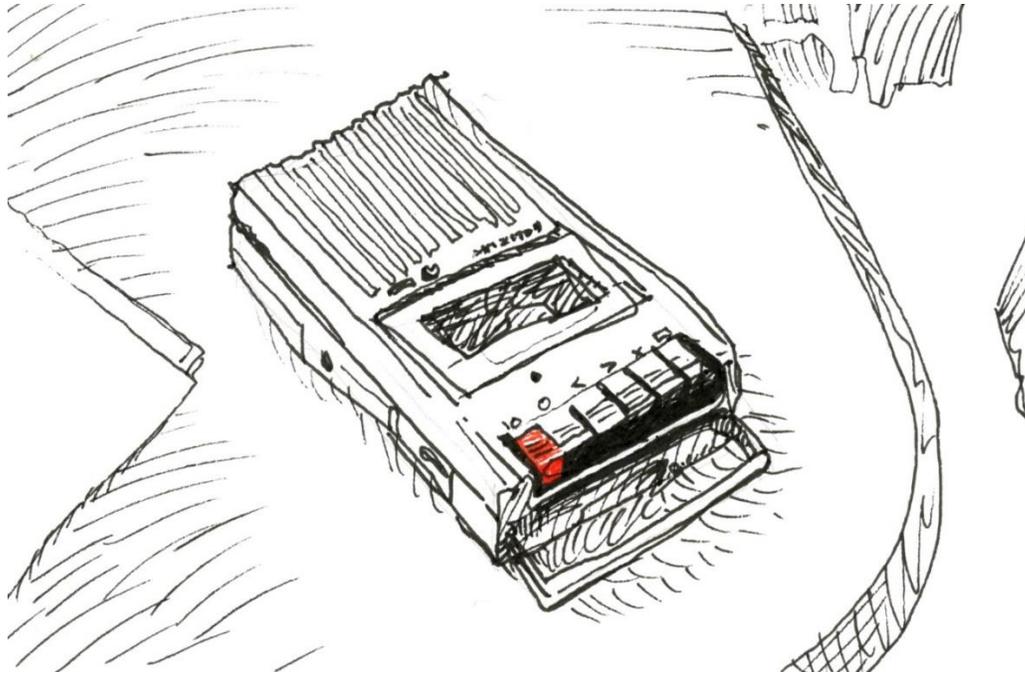


Figure 4. Retro tape recorder with red button. Original drawing by Julian van Mossel-Forrester.

6

On the more buoyant side of the early years, it must be explained that there was a rollicking good and highly forgiving immigrant culture in Chatham, at least for our lucky Catholic children schooled by the nuns. On St. Patrick's Day, our parish staged major celebrations in the church hall. I was beside myself with excitement. I wore a white dress and a Kelly green sash, lined up with twenty other excited kids in grade threes, and fervently sang "Over in Killarney". My father donned a dashing Scottish outfit for playing clarinet with the Kiltie band. We heard bagpipes for the first time, filled with awe as our Belgian father paraded before us on the main street in a skirt, in smartly kilted Scottish company. We were Irish, Scottish, German – Flemish last. Diligently specializing in all things Scottish, I pretended I was Scottish most of my waking hours. This involved a keen memory for Scottish

ballads, Robbie Burns' verses, improvised sidewalk Highland Fling dancing that I longed to study formally, and weepy Irish songs of every kind. Thus equipped with my piercingly romantic Scottish persona, I entered small town cultural life with the rest of my family in a wildly democratic patchwork of eclectic opportunity. The remembered microcosm of Chatham in this account is distilled even more potently in the brightened fishbowl culture of the Catholic parish of St Joseph's Church, where a steady seasonal brew of any of these ingredients could be enacted with other aspiring entertainers in the church hall.

Exposed in these easygoing ways to the inclusive safety net of a small town, we lived a reasonably decent life in the available civic organizations of Chatham. There was a YMCA, a drama club, and a Zonta club that brought in the gifted singer of spirituals, Marian Anderson, from across the Michigan border. But my little brother Joris, the youngest child, wore unusually thick glasses and a perpetually worried, intense expression; he was bullied and beaten in the rougher public school setting that he was placed in as a five year old. He wandered to school by himself, and sometimes got lost in Chatham's back streets without a word of English.

Safe from bullies and commended for our ability to master English quickly, my sister and I lived out those years in the more protected circle of our Catholic school atmosphere. The Ursuline Sisters of Chatham, established in 1847, and later the Sisters of St. Joseph in London, did a good job of educating the children of immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s. When, in 2014, I made a study retreat with a group of alert Benedictine nuns in their eighties and nineties in a monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania, I realized that this group of engaging elderly women was the exact parallel cohort of the teaching nuns who had educated me and my sister so well. We felt guilty, later, about our easy transition into this cohesive Catholic school culture that we had the great fortune to land within, one that bridged logically back to our equally positive experiences in the schools of Belgium. Joris as a small child had no such congenial schooling experience. From the start, he learned to hate school fiercely and chronically, fighting back against small town prejudices from the very beginning.

In all of this mix, there was one truly surprising thing. None of us had actually met many Belgians, not even the tobacco belt Belgians who were reasonably prosperous, and who lived just down the road from us in Delhi, Ontario. These Belgians had their own banquet hall, their own festivities. Their social lives and clubs were solidly established, as I learned while absorbing Joan Magee's study of Belgians in Ontario. But there was one farm family that I had the good fortune to meet through the offices of the local priest at St. Joseph's. They were and are the only Belgians I was ever to meet in Canada, a remarkable fact

itself. The Denys were a Flemish farm family of 12 children who grew beets, tomatoes, and beans around the outskirts of Chatham. For a time, they made me feel that I belonged to a cozy Belgian tribe of my own. I stayed with this farm family every summer for a few years, helping out in the fields, gathering the eggs that were eaten daily, swimming in the Thames with the rest of the youngest children, all of whom had a role in the farm's daily life. These were happy days. Predictably, farming people and enameled blue medals of the Virgin Mary pinned on children's underwear did not go over well with my mother. Raised and schooled in cities, she wondered aloud why the parish priest would bother to introduce us to a Flemish speaking farm family whose daily life consisted of the daily rosary after supper, ten hours of work each day, and piles of ironing and sewing for the oldest girls on top of that.

It was hard to know how to answer such questions. I passionately loved the Denys family. My family's story always dissolved back into a black hole of perplexing questions, bringing perpetual doubt into the endless question of who we were. As I grew older, our discussions about the world around us plunged us into complexity and confusion as we navigated the reality of the social classes, the various trial and error occupations of my parents, and the anxious unstated concerns for our own higher education. At one point, an especially well off Chatham family (a rich family, as we referred to them) commenting on my grasp of Canadian diction, seriously offered to adopt me in a casual conversation with my parents at an outdoor public event. Such were the startling turns of conversation in Chatham in an immigrant family's life in the 1950s. Comfortable identifications with one group or another, one family or another, one place of belief or another, were pushed away. A sturdy footing on any ground was hard to find. There were always more questions than answers, more uneasy juxtapositions than consoling convergences.

7

Where did we belong in the society of Chatham? When we met educated people, my mother's anguish flooded her. "My husband is only a mechanic," she would typically say, glancing painfully down and sideways, when introduced to any established Canadian citizen of the educated classes for the first time. My father's occupation, as long as I can remember, was thus to be publicly offered to whoever we met as a source of family shame. We found this excruciating. My father, wholly at peace with his working class origins, did not complain about work shifts in the Chatham garage, though it took time to earn a reasonable pay check. Not a big man, polite and highly regulated in his work life, he quietly read books by Erich Fromm in his mechanic's uniform in the paid half hour for lunch, ignoring the

taunting that these sissy foreigner habits attracted in the local garage. Throughout his life, he spoke four languages fluently, could sing folk tunes in Russian, and happily learned a fifth, Spanish, when he retired in his sixties to correspond with a family in Central America.

The secular and material world stampeded in on us, as did the whole settlement process. We were teenagers when we completely lost our accents, bought a modest suburban bungalow, and replaced my parents' simple bicycles with an antiquated Morris Oxford car that my father bought for next to nothing. With all this also came the better pay of solid unionized jobs. All this time, so much was changing in the world outside, and we with it. We discussed clearly modern works at home, like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Bertrand Russell's *Why I am Not a Christian*. My mother bought me stacks of books by John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway and Pearl Buck as I grew older. Her Friday night pay check went to groceries and books. We read works in translation and she would speak to me of Mauriac and Somerset Maugham. More than anything – more than most immigrant families I knew – our whole family was encouraged to speak English, all the time, to guarantee our success in school. My mother herself read fiction in three languages, and mastered English well, though her own spelling mistakes in English deeply embarrassed her all her life. She wrote long letters home to both Belgium and Germany, in Flemish and German, at all hours of the night.

For me, sadly, the languages of German and Flemish started to slip away. Getting married at a young age and going to university was the obvious fast exit train out of the house. *Being Canadian* and *being ordinary* was, simply stated, the burning organizing principle in my life – looking and talking exactly like everyone else, going to summer camps, being a student council leader, sewing my own clothes in the styles we could not afford. To win over an acceptable Canadian boyfriend with a neat and tidy WASP last name who I might marry was a kind of stylish finishing package, a necessary culmination, of all this effort. It was a poorly realized instinct, as though I were blindly operating from one quarter of my brain. I may say that it was all I was capable of at the time, in the distressing puzzle of our all our fragmented lives together.

I was nineteen starting university. I married at twenty, the only married scholarship student in a large undergraduate class of students of English language and literature. I changed my last name for several years or so, and then, remorseful about what I had done, changed it back to my Flemish surname in one defiant move. Without particular irony, I took a cleaning lady's job in a Catholic hospital in the summers for the remarkably better than average union pay, financing my first and second year of university. Although a gold medal in English capped off my first degree, the vocational path ahead trailed off in a tight

swaddling of angst and apprehension. There were no women professors in the department of English to take even a sliver of kindly interest in my future – literally no one. The male professors were mostly breaking up marriages of their own or climbing their own career ladders, totally disengaged from student life outside the classroom. The first short story I wrote, *The Dossier*, was an immigrant story published in a national magazine. It drew praise from established writers. I couldn't leave the family story alone.

8

Generally, when people asked me in my own middle age how long it took my family to assimilate, I say “twenty-five years minimally, possibly more.” I am not sure that I can furnish a numbered list of objective criteria for this statement. I have given it plenty of thought over the years, with distinct markers freshly occurring to me, then evaporating just as rapidly through an unsteady vessel upon second thought. The reason is that any attempted answer of this kind, as any thoughtful person knows, is somewhat more complex than it looks, shifting fluidly over time in the dynamic process of living itself, as it is actively revisited and reshaped in memory over a lifetime. I know that even into my own mid-thirties, when I pursued a masters and then a doctorate in education and vocational counselling at the University of Toronto, I would suddenly surprise myself in informal class introductions by describing myself to fellow graduate students as an immigrant.

I would ask – where was my voice, my experience, my life, reflected in what I read? The question was charged with anger, turbulence, even a pit of nameless fear. My everyday dealings in the feminist movement at that time, experienced through publishing circles in Toronto in the late 1970s, certainly fanned such questions in openly charged terms. Mistrust and factional disputes were common in a number of branches of the women's movement. It is a good thing I pursued so many years of schooling and inquiry, discovering the uniquely nurturing greenhouse environment of The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, where a flourishing form of peer mentoring and collaboration was humanely possible in an intellectually stimulating yet far less polemical environment. My fellow students in adult education and vocational psychology in the late 1980s increasingly came from all over the world. They were interested in engaged inquiry and the acquisition of useful practitioner tools around building community bridges, not ideological warfare.

This was as refreshing to me as it was heartening. In this form of peaceful study, life had thrown me something truly remarkable, in both the feeling and thinking dimensions of experience. I had miraculously landed in a generative

incubator of the “three Ds” – diversity, dialogue, decency. A dashing Israeli friend and a veteran teacher and counselling specialist with an Italian immigrant background prepared me for my 1990 thesis defense, a solemn ritual of our own devising that brought to a decisive end our two-year-long thesis-writing group. I was just turning forty. With such sterling allies, I started to grasp more clearly how to cultivate a flourishing garden, sustain my intellectual life with a toddler and husband at home, and prepare to defend at the same time. Questions settled, leading to broader frameworks, perspective shifts, and more imaginatively posed questions. Over time, in this journey of steps, I realized that the *Where is my voice?* concerns I had apprehensively posed with a trapped sense of painful solitude during the 1970s were the utterly familiar questions that every uprooted immigrant asks, although today those asking it are richly posing it from every ethnicity and culture in the world.

My Israeli friend and Italian counsellor mentor soon after wrapped up their respective journeys, scattering with a sense of accomplishment into the communities of the world with their skills. We said our goodbyes. I moved from Toronto to Southwestern Ontario with my husband and child. Over the years, with the humanizing practices and theories of an applied social science knowledge base, I acquired hands-on skills in adult education group work, the design of programs for diverse newcomers, and vocational counselling for those from all walks of life. I also came to accept, as every educated person must, that the dilemmas within were fundamentally existential as well as political and cultural. Recognition would come if I worked hard, but first, as I was painfully learning, I had to find a way to recognize myself. In other words, it was up to me to create that voice and that reflected experience in whatever way I could. A sense of intellectual and personal maturation had finally started to settle, a centre from which I could be practically useful to others.

As I started to work more and more directly with immigrants myself, first with women in Toronto, then with persons of all backgrounds and ethnicities in the Southwestern Ontario community of Kitchener-Waterloo, a desirable and fast growing urban target of secondary settlement trends – satisfactions grew. In time, I was fortunate to land in a community development project that was utterly unique that brought both imaginative and humble angles to the business of welcoming newcomers. It was utterly without resort to bureaucratic thinking and the high handed attitudes of typical officialdom. Instead, the bottom-up practices of The Working Centre relied on integrating ethical concerns with community well-being, relying, as founders Joe and Stephanie Mancini put it, “on the agency of individuals and groups to develop cultural supports”.

There, and elsewhere in the community, was the growing panorama of life stories that resonated, threaded together, and made fascinating interlocking patterns – yet each one remained singular. I heard hundreds and thousands of variations on my parents' stories. They were often people who would never work again in their original profession or trade – people who felt downwardly mobile, with good reason – people rejected by employers for their accents, unclear educational qualifications, and skin colour – people who were close to despair, having brought urgent troubles with them from the old country, whether of an economic or psychological nature.

With others working in the field all over Ontario, we started to investigate at the more macroscopic level structural changes that were needed, changes in the opportunity structures and policies in educational institutions, changes in employer practices and beliefs. Such advocacy challenges are exhilarating and endless in this form of work, as are mature spiritual opportunities to truly meet the Other. Questions of identity – how one is the same, how one changes in time – constitute the common clay that shapes the everyday conversations of linked human interests among interesting colleagues. Such work is steadying. I have found in these encounters with both co-workers and immigrants that human intimacy is never so great as in that first crucial point of contact that a faithful settlement worker can offer in a setting which inspires friendship and respect for the migrant.

And so, in the end, it was a good thing, an enormously gratifying thing, these past 25 years, to find my own story repeated in every fluid variation, language, and cultural background in this world. This common narrative repeated itself in the burgeoning populations of immigrants that poured through the world of Ontario settlement agencies, community college settings, and preparatory bridging programs to universities. Who would have thought, in 1957, that my life purpose would evolve to hearing the immigration stories of others, to pull out the themes of continuity, mourn the losses and witness the triumphs?

Over the years, to consolidate this insight further, I was to meet children of immigrants precisely in my own age cohort who, like me, had similarly flourished in this emerging line of work in community settlement projects across Ontario. These observations, based on interview data with fifty employment and settlement counsellors, were a happy byproduct of a practical research report for the Association of Ontario Help Centres, sharing the best practices that a generation of settlement workers and leaders in settlement work had raced to acquire. The flood of highly skilled internationally-trained professionals coming to Canada at the turn of this century were no longer the bricklayers, mechanics, factory workers, and labourers of my parents' generation. They were highly-

trained professionals with the hopes and dreams of persons who hoped to land similar professional work in Canada. New tools and practices were urgently needed. The report proposed a spectrum of helpful approaches. But one thing was certain in my mind: things had come full circle. It was the children of immigrants who were typically jumping in to help.

9

With the death of my German mother in 2012, and challenged by a serious life illness of my own, an awakened resolve to explore my Belgian roots took hold inside me. An era had ended. There was a freedom in my determined notion to turn up those Flemish stones at last. I knew surprisingly little about the complexities of present day Belgian culture – the politics of Belgium, its struggles, its fine art, its literature, its contradictions. I was caught, as many immigrants must certainly be, in a clumsy time warp, out of step with ordinary realities. My mental constructs about the culture I had left behind were splintered. At nearly ninety-five years of age, my Belgian father, twice widowed, once by my mother and once by his second wife, communicated his openness to reviewing the life and culture of Belgium as he understood it – the facts of his own family life. His sharp memory and his desire to bridge our two worlds served both of us well.

Again, as I was reviewing my own transitions and recovering from illness, life threw me a complicated surprise. Suzanne Vromen's *The Hidden Children of the Holocaust*, published in 2008, had emerged in North America about the situation of Jewish children in the Belgium of World War II. Suzanne Vromen's book, and a second by Marion Schreiber, *The twentieth train*, had turned up on the shelves of my local library, astonishing me to the point where I was literally glued to the library chair on a hot summer's day. These two books would not let go once I read them. No one in my family had breathed a single word about the Jewish people in Belgium, as though they simply had not existed.

Two years later, during my stay in Belgium of 2015, I learned that none of my aunts or uncles living in the Antwerp area had been eager to discuss these subjects with their own children, my adult cousins. The Belgian cousins of my own generation, I found in my two month stay, could discuss these matters frankly. The explosive findings, for me, were personally devastating and politically complex to absorb. According to Holocaust scholar Lieven Saerens, ninety per cent of the Jews of Belgium were waves of recent immigrants themselves, rather than established Belgian citizens the state had an immediate interest to protect. Their vulnerability as non-citizens in a country occupied by the Reich was frightening high, with predictably dark consequences in 1943 and 1944.



Figure 5. Christa seated in the library of her community. Original drawing by Julian van Mossel-Forrester.

The story of that research is another paper. In my own city, I pushed on, with an extended trip to Belgium forming in my mind. In late 2014, I tracked down more specialized, translated works of history, looking widely for suitable material that I could master. Specialists in these areas of Belgian history typically contribute fulltime in French or Dutch. Adding to the linguistic requirements, Dan Michman, editor of the massive 1980s international effort of *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans*, believes that “in order to achieve a really complete picture, a researcher must know six languages: French, Dutch, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew”. In other words, the obstacles to a growing knowledge base for all scholars can be formidable. This reason, along with a host of other political and historical issues traced in Michman’s essay, has created individual islands of effort with limited impact in the literature (Michman 1998, 25). I learned first-hand from archivist Dorien Styven at the Dossin Kazerne that getting out important Holocaust material from the museums and archives of Brussels, Leuven, and Mechelen has involved persistent dissemination barriers for all of the generations of researchers involved. My own native language of Flemish was nearly gone, making the whole quest discouraging at times. I realized how fortunate I had been that my own

Kitchener-Waterloo library system had stocked the original two titles that had originally gripped my attention in my own language.

Lives continue to change. The meanings of experience change, too. My cousins are better acquainted with me now, and me with them, their children too. A cousin, Annemie Van Daele, became directly involved in the research, helping out enthusiastically with the professional introductions I needed when I was stuck. American writer James Deem, author of *The Prisoners of Breendonk*, shared his expertise and research stories extensively, offering commentary on his breakthroughs and occasional research frustrations in the Antwerp area. Flemish-American historian and ethnographer Jan Vansina from the University of Wisconsin shared friendly commentary on my efforts, encouraging more inquiry. And Dorien Styven of the Dossin Kazerne lead me directly to further investigation of the biography of Irene Awret, a painter from Berlin who hid in Brussels, was imprisoned in the Kazerne for close to two years, and survived the war to tell her story after a long productive life.

I offered at the outset of this paper that the trip home to Belgium was exhilarating. It was actually a gift. Although the research material I recently began to draw together in Brussels, Leuven, and Mechelen has indeed been dark, it has proved significant to me and (I believe) to those that I met in friendly circumstances of shared quest. There are paradoxical features of those findings that I plan to build further on from Canada, despite my current language barriers. I am able to say that the circle of inclusion extended to me as a non-Dutch speaker by various archivists in “the old country” has enriched my worldview immeasurably.

What, after all, is more important than a sense of belonging? Or a shared sense of solidarity in constructing meanings from complex, buried material hovering close by, in the landscape of one's own past?

I arrived in Belgium as an eager Van Daele in search of cousins who lived, breathed, and had buried their parents, as I had. At the same time, as a Canadian, I arrived in blind trust (taking a chance) with an emerging reason to talk and write to people I had never met. In meeting fellow researchers and assessing the quality of their life commitments in tentative interactions, these strangers started to feel like the intergenerational friends I had been waiting for, friends with an international outlook where birthplace or ethnicity alone was not the determining factor.

Like me, they had complex identities. A cohort of unseen architects, designers, writers, and curators, persons of all ages and backgrounds, had designed these places of living narrative over a long stretch of years, while I was coming alarmingly close to retirement age in Canada. Their exhibits, their multiple

creative ways of shaping image and story, had in some post-modern way leaped over the clumsy time warp I had chronically fretted about.

Public architectural spaces of this quality are aesthetically and morally compelling. They house stories writ large. As we inhabit them, move through them together, connect them persuasively with our own experiences – they change us. Antwerp's Red Star Line Museum, focusing on world migrations, and the Dossin Kazerne of Mechelen, focusing on the deportments, deaths, and forced migrations of the Jews of Belgium – both are transformative settings of depth and quality for the reflective visitor from any point in the world.

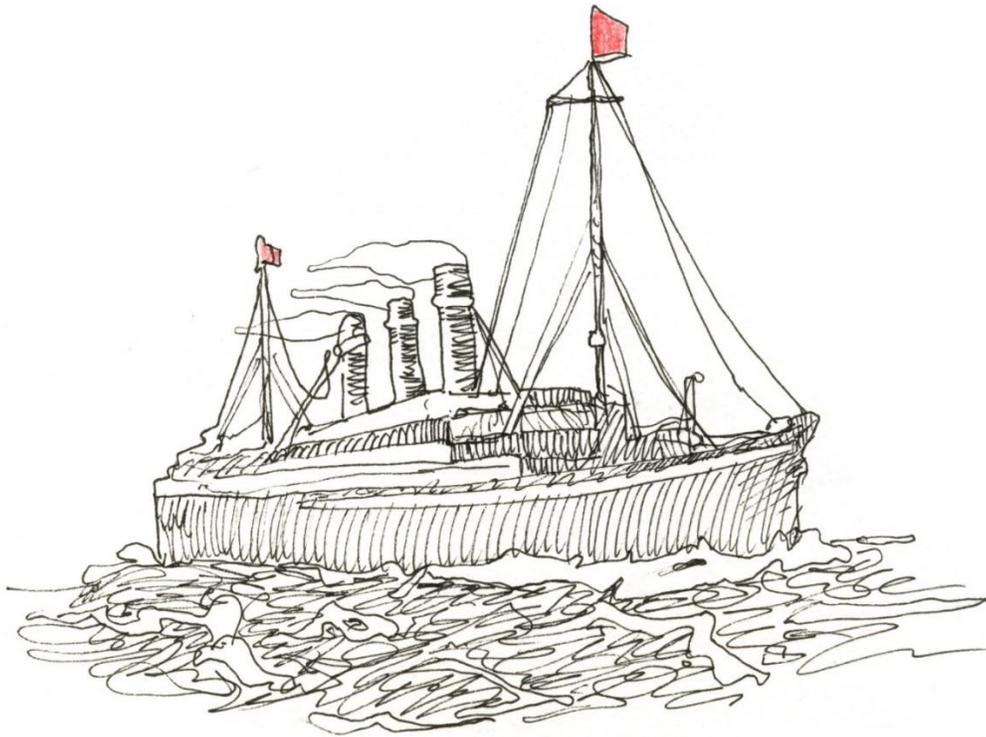


Figure 6. Red star ship. Original drawing by Julian van Mossel-Forrester.

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About the author

Christa Van Daele is an educator, vocational counsellor, and writer. She was actively involved in women's publishing in the 1970's and 1980's, contributing features, book and theatre reviews, and short stories to various Canadian publications. In 1990, Christa completed a Doctorate in Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She became active as an advocate and educator in women's vocational issues, contributing to program design in both community college and agency settings. This work led her, in turn, to intensive support and advocacy work with Ontario's newcomers, especially newcomers seeking to re-establish themselves in the professions, a path that is often fraught with complexity and discouragements. Christa currently divides her time between writing, travelling, and carrying on support work with the Syrian and Rohingya communities. With her friend Julian van Mossel-Forrester and other neighbourhood connections, she collaborates in community projects of all kinds.

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About the artist

Julian van Mossel-Forrester has been practising art in various forms for eighteen years. He studied Fine Art and Environmental Studies at the University of Waterloo. His projects, travels, and passions in art and community life are both local and global. Working primarily with acrylic on canvas, Julian's recent work focuses on themes close to his heart. Julian's family has been highly involved in supporting the immigrant and refugee experience for several generations in Canada. His grandmother, Lorna van Mossel, actively assisted immigrants and refugees for over 50 years in several provinces as a passionate social justice advocate and Citizenship Court Judge. During her lifetime, she received many distinctions for her dedicated service, including the 2012 Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Medal. Lorna's work continues to inspire generations of settlement advocates and activists. The original drawings designed by Julian for Christa Van Daele's essay are part of his body of work exploring the themes of community, immigration, and personal history.

Retour en Belgique d'une éducatrice

Cet essai évalue les changements de perspective, les luttes et les aperçus se produisant dans une identité d'immigré qui se forme lentement. Je prends comme tremplin de mon souvenir ma visite à deux expositions publiques tenues en Belgique vers la fin de 2015. J'offre, sous forme d'une série de courtes réflexions numérotées, une approche « multi-lentilles » à la question de la formation de l'identité, en soulignant des thèmes du développement de l'adulte : continuité, discontinuité et changement. Quelles sont quelques-unes des identifications élusives inhérentes dans un tel parcours? Comment du sens est-il construit, plus tard dans la vie, à mesure que d'anciennes expériences d'immigrant sont testées, redéfinies et reconsidérées? Comment dois-je interpréter les expériences d'après-guerre de mes parents immigrants? Mon travail direct avec des immigrants ontariens comme éducatrice d'adultes m'aide à éclairer mon propre rôle culturel dans le travail pratique de l'accueil, consolidant les sens inexprimés de choix de vie dans ma propre sphère, tout en aidant d'autres dans ce travail qui nourrit l'âme. Puis le parcours de la recherche continue dans le monde plus large de l'érudition et des écrits. De nouveaux amis et collègues font partie d'une communauté qui explore la mémoire collective à la recherche du non-dit, du non-documenté, dans les histoires des vies individuelles. J'ai l'intention de continuer d'enquêter, malgré les difficultés de langue, sur les conditions et circonstances du peuple juif pendant et après la deuxième guerre mondiale en Belgique.

Een leraar keert terug naar België

Dit essay analyseert de perspectiefwisselingen, worstelingen en inzichten die allengs te voorschijn komen uit een zich vormende immigranten-identiteit. Als beginpunt voor mijn beschouwing gebruik ik een bezoek aan twee openbare tentoonstellingen in België in het najaar van 2015. In de vorm van een serie genummerde overpeinzingen behandel ik de kwestie van identiteitsvorming vanuit verschillende gezichtspunten, met nadruk op de thema's continuïteit, discontinuïteit, en verandering. Met wat voor ongrijpbare identificaties gaat een dergelijk proces gepaard? Hoe geven we op latere leeftijd betekenis aan vroege immigrantenervaringen? Hoe

interpreteer ik de na-oorlogse ervaringen van mijn immigrantenouders? Door mijn werk in het volwassenenonderwijs met immigranten in Ontario krijg ik een beter inzicht in mijn eigen culturele rol in het praktische werk van inburgering, en bevestig de onuitgedrukte betekenis van keuzes gemaakt in mijn eigen leven terwijl ik anderen help een nieuw leven te beginnen. De wetenschappelijke reis voert door een bredere wereld van onderzoek en schrijven. Nieuwe vrienden en collega's vormen deel van een gemeenschap waarin plaats is voor de collectieve herinnering aan dat wat ongezegd en ongedocumenteerd blijft in individuele levensverhalen. Ondanks de taalbarrière streef ik ernaar het onderzoek naar de omstandigheden en condities van de Joodse bevolking tijdens en na de Tweede Wereldoorlog in België voort te zetten.