

The Matuscin Family's First Year in Canada
by John Matuscin

The following is an account of how I spent my first year in Canada as a 13 year old boy. Our whole family arrived in Canada May 21, 1935. The family members included both my parents, Alex and Hermina, my brother Steve, 15 years old; my sisters Helen, 11 years old; Christina, 9 years old and Donna, 4 years old.

Through the Canadian National Land Settlement Association, our family came to Canada to farm. We were required to provide a \$1000 deposit and had to be able to purchase the farm where we were going to settle within one year of arriving in Canada or we would have had to return to Czechoslovakia. When we gave in our deposit in Montreal, we had to give our intentions of where in Canada we wanted to settle. We had to have a sponsor in the area we chose to settle. My father had knew a man named Andy Lucan from Alvinston, Ontario so that is the area we first went to settle and gave his name as our sponsor. We travelled to Watford, Ontario by train and arrived in the town at midnight. Waiting there for us was Mr. Lucan, John Behro with his car and a young Slovak from the Watford area with his pick-up truck. They took us to Mr. Behro's place near Alvinston where we stayed for three days. The next morning, Mr. Behro took my parents to look at farms. They bought a 50 acre farm near Inwood, Ontario. The house was an old, dark, shabby, wooden structure. The siding was coming off in places and the side seen from the road had imitation brick. Some of the windows in the house were broken. The barn was also old with most of the doors and windows broken.

We had no furniture when we moved in so father made a table and benches from barn board that he took off from the barn. Mr. Behro took father to town to buy groceries and an old stove. From an area farmer we bought Bathwood which did not burn well. The first few nights we slept on the floor but by the time winter came we all had beds and blankets. At that time, there were many auction sales in the area. Father was able to buy horses, one cow, one sow and a few chickens.

The day after we moved in, one of our neighbours came over and introduced himself. His name was Ivan Kazman. He spoke Russian and some English. He asked us if we needed anything and then inquired if any of the children belonged in school. At that time, there were two schools in the area, located beside each other - one for grades 1 to 8 and one for grades 9 and 10. Mr. Kazman said he would take us to school the next morning but before he left he told us not to be afraid if anybody hit us - to hit him right back - but not to start a fight ourselves.

On my second day at school, I was playing in the schoolyard at lunchtime carrying around a boy on my back. Another boy came up to us and wanted me to carry him on my back. I said I would carry him later. He kicked me twice so I put down the other boy. When I turned to face him he tried to hit me with his hand but I stopped him and hit him in the chest. He fell down and then went crying to the teacher and said that I hit him. The other kids told the teacher that the other boy started the fight. After lunch, all the children were standing around waiting to see what would happen. When I got inside the school, I found Mr. Kazman with the teacher.

In Russian, he told me not to be afraid and just tell him how the fight started. He explained to the teacher what I said. The school kids also told the teacher that the boy was after me all morning. He was younger than me but taller (I was short for my age) and he liked to push the other kids around. The teacher had us shake hands and told us not to fight anymore. After we shook hands, we became best friends.

After, Mr. Kazman told me that it was good that I defended myself, otherwise the kids would have been after me all the time. I did not get into anymore fights at school but I did wrestle for fun. Mr. Kazman was more important to me during my first year at school than my father because my father did not know the English language.

One day a few weeks later, when I got back to school after lunch, I found the three teachers and most of the kids from the two schools as well as Mr. Kazman there waiting for me. The teacher told me to go up to the blackboard. She wrote an arithmetic question on the board. As soon as she was done, I wrote the answer down. Another teacher gave me two numbers to multiply and I was able to reply right away without using the blackboard. Finally one teacher wrote ten, five digit numbers on the board and told me I would have to add them up. As soon as she was finished writing down the last number, I wrote the answer on the board. It took the teachers a few minutes to see if I had the right answer. They asked me how I could add up the numbers so fast. Through Mr. Kazman, I told them that in the Old Country we learned to do all arithmetic in our head by the fourth grade. From then on, all the kids called

me the adding machine.

When school ended for summer holidays, Mr. Kazman came to our place to ask my father if I would be able to help him on his farm. My job was to bring water from the well in his field to the barn which was 30 yards away. This was done pulling 100 gallon barrels of water on a stoneboat by horse. He was going to pay me 25 cents a day. When I came on the first morning, he showed me how to harness the horse and hook it up to the stoneboat. From the 100 gallon barrels, we half filled 45 gallon barrels that sat raised up on cement blocks so that a fire could be lit under them in order to boil water. This was done whenever he was butchering cattle, pigs or horses. On butchering days, sometimes up to three trips had to be made to the well to refill the 100 gallon barrels. The water was used for cleaning the butchered meat, equipment and floors. My job was to make sure there was enough hot water, as well as helping inside the barn with the knives and saws. After the butchering was done, I had to clean the animal organs by washing and then boiling them. I did not like cleaning up and boiling the organs after the butchering was done but I eventually got used to it. The organs from the cows and horses and the meat from old cows and horses which was not suitable for human consumption was used to feed the pigs. Mr. Kazman bought old cows and horses to butcher for their hides. The hides were salted and put into four foot deep pits. Every two months they were loaded on a truck and taken to Toronto to sell. Butchering for meat was done on Fridays and the truck loaded before midnight so that it would be ready to take to the Windsor, Ontario market by 5 AM. Before the market opened, some

meat was sold to other butchers wholesale.

The heart, liver, tongues and tails from cows and pigs as well as the head and intestines from pigs was given to us to take home. We shared this with other Slovaks in the area who were able to come over to pick up what they wanted since we did not have a car or truck.

On butchering day, my brother Steve also helped. Because he was bigger and stronger, he worked more closely with the butcher helping to kill, skin and hang the meat and load the truck. My other job on the farm was feeding the pigs twice a day. I usually did this before and after school on school days. At the start he had four sows but eventually he had up to 40 pigs. In the winter I had to build a fire to defrost the food that was kept in barrels. After school I had to hitch the horse and go to the well for water so it would be ready for use the next day. In the winter, Mr. Kazman gave me a leather coat with sheep lining to wear. The wind was usually blowing so hard, that when pumping water the front of my coat became wet and frozen and the horse had icicles from its nose to the ground.

For the work I did on Mr. Kazman's farm I got paid 25 cents on butchering day, 75 cents a week for feeding the pigs and bringing in the water from the well, and 50 cents on the days we worked with the hides. My brother Steve was paid 50 cents on butchering day and 50 to 75 cents on the days he worked with the hides which was from 5 PM to midnight and sometimes until 2 AM. We were not allowed to keep the money we earned. It was given to our father to help pay for groceries.

Besides working for Mr. Kazman, I also helped neighbouring farmers harvest corn, wheat and helped take hay off the fields. For this I got 25 cents a day. Later in October, my mother and I went to husk corn for 3 cents a bushel, shuck it back and help load the corn cobs into the crib.

I worked on Mr. Kazman's farm for about one year until we bought another farm that was two and half miles away. Because it was too far to walk twice a day and because we now had an 100 acre farm of our own, I no longer went to work for Mr. Kazman.

Mr. Ivan Kazman was a good man. He was a Russian Jew that came to Canada from Russia after the First World War. He was not rich but he was training to go into his own business. He put in a good word for our family in the town stores and area businesses - the grocery store, hardware store, butcher and machinery dealers. He told them that when we harvest our wheat, they will then get paid. Until then we were on credit. When we sold our wheat in the fall, Mr. Kazman took off the money we owed him for feed and we were then able to pay off the grocery and hardware store what we owed them.

One day I was in the grocery store and I bought \$3.65 of groceries on credit. The store keeper didn't ask any questions even though I was only 13 years old. In line ahead of me was a farmer about 45 years old. He had bought some groceries that came to just over \$3.00 but he was 25 cents short. The store keeper would not give him credit and so took back a package of rice. That farmer had an 100 acre farm and owned a threshing machine. I got to know him in later years. A little later when I was able to better speak English, I asked the store keeper why he didn't give that farmer

credit. He said that he had given that farmer credit before but he never paid off his debts.

Later that first fall in Canada, we had to make a payment on a wagon we bought from the machinery dealer in town, Mr. McNally. We didn't have enough money to pay off the wagon. Mr. McNally didn't need the wagon back so he asked our father how much money he had. Father had only \$2.00 in his wallet. Mr. McNally said that if father would give him the \$2.00 then the rest could be paid whenever we had an extra \$1.00 or \$2.00 to spare. He did not give us a time limit of when we had to have it paid off. In later years, we bought more of our machinery on credit from Mr. McNally because of his trust in us. Because of our good credit record, it was made easier for other Slovaks to buy their goods on credit also.

That was our first year in Canada. We did not have any time or money to engage in any sports or leisure activities.

John Matuscin
Son of Alex and Hermina Matuscin
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