The Gentle Art of Being a Foreigner.

My title needs an explanation. It is not my intention to discuss Canadian immigration policy. Indeed it would be an impertinence for me to do so. What I have to say this afternoon will deal ~~only~~ chiefly with my own experience in working ~~with~~ in countries not my own where both the language and social customs ~~were~~ are strange to me. Inevitably under such circumstances one thought of one's earlier experiences with the "foreign" groups and realized what a profound difference it makes when, one might as it were, one becomes a foreigner oneself!

THE GENTLE ART OF BEING A FOREIGNER

I was employed by a body which, while essentially American is nevertheless truly international in its scope, - the Rockefeller Foundation.

In two only of the countries in which I worked was English the official language. In the others my complete ignorance of Hungarian, Roumanian, Croat and Polish was decidedly embarrassing. In France, Belgium and Austria my slender stock of French and German, by grace of my courteous and patient listeners, tided me over. In the Irish Free State, though the official language is Erse there are still plenty of kindly folk who speak English - with an Irish accent of course.

It was borne in upon me with considerable force what it feels like to be a foreigner, ignorant of the language, of the customs, of the character and temperament of the people with whom one must nevertheless work and live for a time. Believe me it is a salutary if somewhat painful experience. If I may venture to say so it is an experience which any official who has to do with immigrants in any country should undergo before he or she is considered fit for his job.

Before I went overseas, during the time that I was superintendent of the Children's Hospital in Winnipeg, I had had to deal with the strangers within our gates. You have only to walk into your own hospital here in Regina any busy morning to see just such a group. The foreigners, you know. All kinds of them, but mostly from Central Europe brought their youngsters not only to the hospital but to the out patients' and social service departments.

What a good thing it would have been for me and for those strangers if only that chastening experience of "being a foreigner" had come to me before instead of after. It was my job to deal with those men women and children few of whom had been in the country very long or spoke English fluently, though they might and often did, speak three other languages.

As it was, all our medical and nursing staff leaned rather heavily on a Polish fireman down in the basement who had the gift of tongues and who was dragged away from his fire-box far too often to suit our stern Yorkshire engineer. Even the fireman's linguistic resources were not always adequate to the occasion. I well remember his vain efforts, made in several dialects to assure a highly temperamental lady of doubtful national origin that we had no intention of cutting off her little boy's broken leg because we had neatly encased it in a plaster cast. He tried all he had without effect. Finally I said to him "Is she a Hungarian do you think?" Whereupon the harassed man wiped the perspiration from his brow and said - "No,ma'am, I think she is a damfool" - and went back to his fire shovel in despair.

Since then I have changed places. I have been that temperamental lady - not it is true under the strain of personal grief and anxiety that she was - but I know how she felt. When, for example, one has to change trains in the middle of the night on the Polish-Czecho Slovakian frontier at a place called Deczidza, run the gauntlet of custom officers, frontier police with clashing swords, and tall feathers in their hats, porters with mustaches which would do credit to bandits. To find oneself helpless, armed only with a few stock phrases written out in three languages which I could not read,

explaining that I was a pilgrim and a stranger and, though probably a "damfool", really quite harmless.

I would like to acknowledge here my deep appreciation of the kindness, patience and courtesy with which I was treated. Nobody tried to make me understand a foreign language by shouting it at me. If, in Central Europe, there are equivalents for our atrocious terms "wop", "dago" and "hunkie" I did not hear them. In peasant homes in Hungary, in Roumania and in YugoSlavia I have been welcomed with native dignity and courtesy because I was a foreigner, not in spite of it.

In short I have been made to blush for my earlier failure to understand the psychology of people who must adjust themselves to a new environment, a foreign language, a different climate, strange food and stranger manners and customs. Yet any country which accepts and even encourages immigration on a large scale exacts just that. That the foreigner adjust and adjust quickly. That on the face of it is a reasonable and just demand. In practice however it is sometimes well to temper justice with mercy.

The process of adjustment is not easy. There may be some in this room who know how hard it can be, either from their own experience or from that of others with whom their work brings them in contact. Nationality, love of one's own soil are subtle things. Their roots go deep. "Old, very old are we men" even when we live in a new country.

Speaking of new countries, Canadians travelling in Central Europe are always a little surprised to hear Poles, Yugoslavs and Roumanians speak of their land as "new countries". Yet that is just what they are. The changes resulting from the war, the sense of victory, have brought about a renaissance, a re-birth of national

pride and energy which has sent a flood of new sap circulating through every branch of those old trees, Poland, Serbia, Roumania. They feel close in spirit to Canada and the Canadians. They are new countries, young nations.

What about the defeated countries? We know well enough in Canada how strong the bond was which held the Empire together during the dark days of the war. Such ties do not loosen even in defeat. For a good part of the time I was overseas I worked and lived in a fair sized country town, Debrecen in Hungary, not far from the Roumanian border. It has a University and there is a good deal of interest in outdoor sport.

One day in October I happened to be walking near the war memorial statue. A memorial to defeated men. Two figures - one showing the Hungarian soldier of Kossuth's time, - the other the Hungarian soldier of the Great war. Here they stand with bowed heads, on a little square of grass shadowed by great trees. On the pedestal there is no inscription - simply the dates 1914 - 1918. All of a sudden I heard military music and along came the regimental band - a fat pony gay with garlands, drawing the drum. A procession followed. Everybody grouped around the statue. A row of slim lads shivering a little in their running shorts drew up smartly in line before an officer. A speech was made, a silver trophy cup was handed to one of the young athletes. He took it and gravely raised it high towards the stone soldiers, defeated men, looking down at him. As he did so his companions laid a great wreath of autumn flowers at the foot of the statue. A band of crepe stretched across the wreath had the word Trianon on it. You will remember that it was the treaty of Trianon which took away from Hungary more than a third of her former territory. Land which had been hers for a thousand years. After a moment or two of silence the band

struck up a wild gay Hungarian march and everybody marched briskly away. The boys very proud with their silver trophy.

Nothing was left in the green square but the soldiers in stone, looking down at the mourning wreath. Did I say nothing? Yes there was something. The spirit of an old nation proud in defeat, renewing itself in an unconquerable youth.

Why am I telling you these things? To re-open old war wounds now healing fast? No - but because people are coming to Canada from all these countries. From the victors, from the vanquished. They all look upon this country as a land of promise - and it is that. They do not understand our ways but neither do we always take the trouble to understand theirs. There is the bar of language, there is the difference in religion, there is the failure to comprehend, on both sides. They bring us their art, their music, the very things we need but it is only lately that we have been willing to look at what they have to offer. It is a rich gift - that peasant culture. Just as honorable is their pride in and love of their own land.

Nothing so heartened me overseas as when I read of the national festivals now being held from time to time in the Canadian West. A splendid beginning has been made. That is real Canadianization. There is no danger that such things will Balkanize Canada. No thinking man or woman wants to perpetuate old feuds or to encourage a Babel of languages in this country. Two official languages in any country are enough - although Switzerland has three and gets along very nicely in spite of it.

Canadians are not upset by native costume when it takes the form of a Scotch kilt nor affronted by a homesick Welshman who sings Ar hyd y nos. They are no worse Canadians becuase they hark back to their

beginnings once in a while. Neither is a Pole, a Roumanian, a German, when he sings of "old, far off, unhappy things and battles long ago". It does not mean that he is not a good peaceable Canadian citizen and it certainly does not mean that he doesn't know that he is better off in the country of his adoption than he was at home. If a few common sense third generation Canadians are stimulated by these strange lyrics to struggle with a foreign tongue and to go oversees and look at the places young Canada is coming from so much the better. Not as a condescending tourist, but as someone who must do his daily job and at the same time cultivate the gentle art of being a foreigner.

If I dared I would ask you to deal patiently even with those strangest foreigners of all - we English.

One of my American colleagues oversees always groaned when his job took him to England. His usual stamping ground was Macedonia where he really felt himself at home. He liked the Macedonians very much. One day I found him plunged in gloom, getting ready to cross the English Channel. Fresh from a horrid struggle with French irregular verbs I tried to comfort him by saying - "well - anyway - you can speak your own language in England". "No I can't", he said gloomily, "they speak nothing but English". "You expect them to understand you and they don't, - I'm an American you know".

Just at that time the disastrous experiment of bringing over large numbers of harvesters to this country was getting a good deal of publicity in the English press. It made anyone who, like myself, is English by birth and Canadian by adoption, feel a bit sick. One wonders whether there may not be a bar of the common tongue. It is not always a bond. "You expect them to understand you and they don't". Perhaps both Canadian and English have to learn the gentle art of being a foreigner - and in a hard school too. Perhaps they have to

learn to speak each other's language with mutual forbearance and understanding.

What can Canadian women do to foster this mutual understanding between the various national groups? A very great deal. They can encourage their children to learn and to speak at least one foreign language, preferably French or German since these are commonly the "second language" of most European countries. When I say speak a language I mean talk coherently in it, understand what people round about you are saying. A different thing to the usual "pen of my aunt" and "dog of the garden".

Most people plan to go to Europe sooner or later. Why not leave the beaten path and take a look at the countries young Canada is coming from? Travel in Poland, in Yugoslavia, in Austria, is pleasant and, if you speak a little German, not unduly expensive. You will not feel lonely. There are parts of Poland so much like the Saskatchewan prairie that one expects to see a grain elevator or a Ford car at any moment. The Hungarian Puzta, some of it, is very like the Brandon hills except that men and women have been born, have lived and have died there for a thousand years. Does that fact affect the quality of a landscape? I venture to say that is does. But go and see for yourselves.

Canadian women take an active part in politics. They might do worse than study immigration policy. Indeed they are doing so already. For all I know you may have a study group in Regina like that in Winnipeg which has done some clear constructive thinking along these lines. May I make a suggestion - invite a few foreigners to join such a group. You can't study people from the outside.

Continue above all with the good work of encouraging the foreign groups to self expression in their native arts, in music and in dancing.

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not wish to sentimentalize over nor to exalt any one foreign group at the expense of others. My contention is that all of them could same it's special contribution to our life if we accept and understand it.

Still less do I wish to minimize the delicacy and difficulty of this many sided problem of immigration. No one could spend upwards of three years in Central Europe and the Balkans without realizing the immensely difficult task with which Canada is confronted with respect to the selection and absorption of so many differing racial strains. In periods of economic depression when unemployment is high, as it is now, the situation becomes acute.

Nevertheless the issue must be faced. Canada has already a large foreign born population. She is still accepting every year a more or less limited number of citizens from overseas.

Is it not the part of wisdom for the native born Canadian to try to understand and to sympathize with the point of view of these newcomers? Would it not be well for Canadians to know something of the sources from which the stream of national life is being drawn?

After all women are more concerned than men with the weaving of the social fabric in any country. This fact was made abundantly clear during the pioneer days in Canada when life was far less complex than it is now. It is your privilege, the high privilege of the women of this western country to do your part in weaving the seamless web of a true national life. Many threads, strange bright colours, must go into the warp and the woof, and the pattern of it whether we will or no. There will be snarls and tangles, knots and broken threads. But in spite of that we can say, and say truly of Canada "They shall bring the honour and the glory of the nations into it".