

A Personal Journey by Issy Nochomovitz

In 1976 my wife, Sonya and I emigrated to Canada.

It was not easy to get accepted as an immigrant into the country. We applied 4 times and if my sister, who was already living in Canada, had not sponsored us, we would not have been given a visa to enter the country. We would have been more successful arriving on a plane and claiming refugee status based on religious persecution!

1976 was a highlight year in my life as besides leaving South Africa at the tender age of 26, I also spent 3 months in the Angolan Civil War, courtesy of the South African Defense Force! Our mission was to set up a defensive line to protect the South African troops who were moving south from outside Luanda to their bases in South Africa. This, because of a change in the political climate.

At this time, Sonya and I had already received our Canadian papers but I could not leave the country because of my army commitment.

On January 5th, 1976, the Cape Town Highlander regiment, of whom I was a member, assembled at Cape Town Castle.

From there we were marched to Cape Town station where we boarded a train for Bloemfontein. On arrival in Bloemfontein, we were given brand new kit, taken to the airport and flew with South African Airways to Windhoek and onto the Grootfontein bush for training.

In Windhoek, we were given a form to sign that indicated that we were volunteering for service in Angola. There were those who would not sign and they remained in Windhoek to load trains as “punishment”

I didn't hesitate to sign as I knew that I was emigrating to Canada and this would be my “gift” to the country of my birth.

I made the decision, knowing that my life would be put in danger and decided to let the chips fall as they would! No one was going to label me one who “ran away”! Smart, Stupid or Sincere, I'm not sure. All I know is that I signed and this was the start of an adventure that would be the imprint of a life-long memory. This memory included singing the Sea Point Boy's High school song with Mervyn Shabason at the top of our voices while driving through the Angolan bush!!

After completing our training, we were all assigned to a Unimog, a left-hand drive truck which was to become our home for the next 2 plus months

All badges of rank for officers and NCO's were removed and we crossed the border into Angola, but that's a story for another day!!

Let me now go back to 1967 where my journey to Canada started.

On April 4th 1967 I started my national service army training at the infantry base in Oudtshoorn which is located in the Cape Province.

I was to be trained there for 3 months before being shipped out to the Walvis Bay army camp for the remainder of my time in the SADF.

One day, during the first few weeks of camp, we were all marched, or should I say run, to the “Rec Hall” and seated inside. We were there to listen to a talk by Dominee Vorster, the head of the Dutch Reformed Church and the brother of then Prime Minister John Vorster

His theme was that South Africa’s enemies were all Communists, a very broad statement and one that was not entirely accurate as there were those who were and others who were not.

He then went on to say that the founder of Communism was Karl Marx and “HE WAS A JEW”!

On hearing this, my blood ran cold and in that moment, my young brain understood that “if not for the blacks, those racists would have come after me and my family” – a racist is a racist and has no favourites!!

My fellow Jewish peers in the audience felt the same and like me wanted to shoot the bugger with our Uzi machine guns – a fitting action considering the Uzi is an Israeli manufactured weapon.

This event left a very deep impression on my mind and has never left my memory. To this day, 57 years later, I still tell people of the occurrence and how it affected me and was the motivation to get “the hell out of Dodge”!!

When I related the incident to my dad, he mentioned that when the South African parliament had to discuss and vote whom to support during the 2nd World War, the vote was very close on the side of the British and the debate took the entire day before the ballots were cast.

I have to say that there was one positive from my time in the Oudtshoorn army camp.

It was 1967 and the June 6-Day War was in progress. We Jewish rookies were glued to our radios listening for updates on the war.

The local Rabbi in town had a fundraising service to which we were given permission to attend. In his speech Rabbi Klurs made the impassioned plea” to give like you have never given before”.

This the same Rabbi Klurs who told us when asked, that we had to eat to survive and if it meant eating pork, we shouldn’t lick the bones to show the non-Jews that we were enjoying the food.

One morning, during the conflict, the whole company was lined up when the PF corporal shouts out “who of you are Jewish”? Naturally we all shrunk into our boots as these “army types” were greater and had more power than a God over us, but we did put up our hands to identify ourselves.

With a smile on his face, he said “you boys are fucking them up over there”!! After that, you could just hear this huge sigh of relief and this resulted in new attitude of respect for us.

However, that did not delete my “dominee memory” and 9 years later I left SA for Canada, the best life changing decision I have ever made!

+++++

A Word about Me:

I am 73 years and was born in Cape Town

I was quite shy and sensitive and used to cry at the drop of a hat!

I started real school in Sub A but after a week, I was bumped up to Sub B.

The start of a brilliant scholastic career – said with tongue in cheek!

By high school I was in a rock band, the Beethoven 5 where playing my guitar was more important to me than studying – the result, I scraped through every grade by the skin of my teeth

One positive was that we won the Cape Town “Battle of the Bands” in 1965.

Another issue was and I learnt this later in life, my learning style was not audio/visual but rather I assessed information by doing, thinking and asking questions, definitely not the model that was practiced during my time in high school.

I graduated in 1966 and a few months later started my national service, part of which is related at the beginning of my story.

A year later I was back in “civvy street” and started looking for work.

University at that time was just not in my plans nor budget.

My first and only job in South Africa was with Shoprite. I started my career working in the store aisles serving customers and packing shelves. Nine years later when I left the company to move to Canada, I was the head food buyer for the chain.

We arrived in Canada in 1976 and settled in Moncton, New Brunswick with not a South African in sight.

So, we embraced the Canadian lifestyle which laid a positive foundation for living in our new country.

I was able to find employment with a McDonald’s Restaurant licencee. After a year I was promoted to restaurant manager and was responsible for a staff of 120, 6 managers and sales of \$2 million.

Four years later we moved to Toronto where I started working for my brother-in-law who owned a small footwear wholesale.

This was the start of my career in the footwear industry. Over the next decades I worked as a commissioned sales agent, national sales manager and lastly VP Sales for Puma Canada.

The company was sold in 2000 and I decided to follow a self-employment path.

This included selling apparel and working with a friend as a corporate trainer. I had developed two inter-active business games in my time in management and these we used in our training sessions.

Today, I still work as a commissioned agent selling Caterpillar work apparel to independent retailers and major accounts. I also sell FORD branded merchandise to their dealerships in Ontario.

In my personal life, I am married to Sonya nee Berelowitz.

We have a daughter and married son along with 3 grand cats, a grand dog and a grand horse.

Over the years I volunteered with several non-profit groups mainly helping kids where I assisted with school projects, homework and supplying food for breakfast programs.

I was inspired to help kids by an example that my late dad set. He collected pennies and every three months would place them in 50 cent rolls, take these rolls to the bank where he received a cheque for the full amount. He would then donate the money to a breakfast program in one of the local elementary schools.

Thirty plus years ago we decided to leave Toronto and landed in Guelph, a small university city one hour north west of Toronto. This is where we have spent the majority of our married life and now find ourselves in our senior years.

A Personal Journey-Issy Nochomovitz

Written in 2023

Posted on the CHOL Share Your Stories site in 2/2023