

Oakville Historical
Society
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Historical Society News

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Escaping Communist Czechoslovakia

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Escaping Communist Czechoslovakia

Henry Jelinek

Our family first stepped on Canadian soil in March, 1949 after a 10 day voyage onboard the SS France. We docked at Pier 21 in Halifax, were processed and discharged into, for us, the great unknown. Five kids ranging in age from 5 to 17, I was the youngest. Eventually we boarded a train to Montreal and some months later found our way to Oakville where most of us still remain. To this day I marvel at how our parents coped with coming to a foreign land with little money in pocket, no English, and five kids in tow! Those early years in Canada for European refugees were not easy, but somehow we managed.

Our family settled in Bronte, population 700 or so with the big town of Oakville, population 5,000 down Lakeshore Road toward the east.

The traffic along Lakeshore was so light we used to play street hockey on it and only moved our makeshift goal posts whenever a car happened to drive by.

There were wonderful people in the village of Bronte who helped us take root. Allan's Drug Store and Lakeside Marketeria both came to our parents and offered the family credit to make whatever purchases necessary until we could get established. "Pay when you are able", they told us. What a relief it must have been for our parents to know there would be sufficient food and medication until the family business could be reestablished.



Jelinek children disembarking the
SS France at Pier 21

Escaping Communism

(Continued)

Luckily our father had anticipated that such a thing could happen and had been able to move a small amount of funds to a bank in Britain earlier. It was not a lot but at least provided much needed initial financial help.

Our cork suppliers, located in Portugal, were another saving grace. They had been supplying our company in Czechoslovakia for many years and knew our company was built on honour and trust. They stepped forward and shipped products to us in Canada with open terms of payment. They too said “pay when you are able”. In 1950 the headquarters of Jelinek



The first Jelinek home

Cork was our home at 2220 Lakeshore Road East. The attic of the house became the warehouse and our living room served as the assembly room where the whole family spent evenings attaching corks to wooden tops to make stoppers. These were shipped to various Canadian distilleries

such as Hiram Walker and Seagrams. The kitchen served as the office. Those were the early years of the rebirth of Jelinek Cork and to this day, the company headquarters remain in the Bronte area along Speers Road, with satellite facilities in five other countries.

A couple of kilometres to the west of our home was the Twelve Mile Creek, known as the Bronte Creek. Just north of Lakeshore Road, where the Bronte Bridge crosses the river, is an area we got to know as the Bronte Marsh. This marsh would freeze up early every winter and stay solidly frozen until springtime.

Escaping Communism

(continued)

During the 1950's this marsh became the center of ice skating and hockey playing for all the locals, including the Jelinek kids. After school on most days we would rush home, grab our skates and head to the marsh where we would skate until well into darkness. Clearing the marsh of snow was a shared task for everyone so there was always open ice.

My brother Otto and sister Maria learned much of their early skating on the marsh and I believe it played a large role in inspiring them to pursue their skating careers, which ultimately led them to become the 1962 world figure skating champions.



Maria and Otto

Our family was always very sporty. Our home was located across the street from a large unkempt field overgrown with grasses and shrubs. My oldest brother Frank, along with a number of other new arrivals escaping the ravages of war torn Europe, decided that this field would be perfect to turn into a soccer pitch. They dug out the shrubs, leveled the bumps, cut the grass, built the goals and lined the field....together they formed the first soccer team in town. There were at least half a dozen countries represented in their group so they named it the Bronte United Soccer Club.

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Today that field is known as the Bronte Athletic Field and the team was the early precursor that led to today's successful Oakville Soccer Club, the largest amateur community sports organization in North America.

Between practice sessions we would often walk to downtown Oakville to meet up and play with friends. Coming from Bronte to the “big” city of Oakville brought many adventures. One in particular stands out. Prior to the 1967 Centennial Square construction of the Oakville pool, library and theatre, the area along Sixteen Mile Creek behind these facilities was the main garbage dump for the town. Garbage trucks would pull up as close to the river as possible and dump their loads onto the banks of the Creek. The mounds of garbage were high, partially floating in the water. We kids would climb on top of the piles and jump up and down causing the rats to scurry and swim in all directions. What fun!

The early years in Canada were particularly difficult for our parents. It was a major cultural shock for them. Before WW2, Prague was a city full of life ... music, dancing, restaurants, pubs. In particular, coffee shops were gathering spots where friends and family met nearly on a daily basis discussing everything from world affairs to the latest sporting feats. During the 1950's and 60's there were no coffee shops in Bronte or Oakville, and outside of churches, very few places to meet and relax with friends or neighbours. My parents would be very pleasantly surprised to see how things have changed.

Canada and Oakville have been good to us, and for that we are forever grateful. We have travelled the world and I can't think of a better place to live than right here in Oakville.



Thomas House

Shona Rochefort



Can you wield an axe or talk the hind legs off a donkey?

If so, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas would like your help.

Spring is here, buds are out, the sun is shining (sometimes) and it is time to open the Thomas House for the 2026 season. The Thomas House was owned by one of the first families of Oakville (Merrick Thomas and his wife, Esther) and was run as a farm. Our volunteers act as interpreters to members of the public and explain some of the history. Many of you will have visited the Thomas House, but have you ever considered acting as an interpreter yourself? If so, we are looking for volunteers. We provide training and always schedule new interpreters with more experienced members of the Society. Students can also earn volunteer hours.

Many of the questions we are asked revolve around the maintenance of the Thomas House. We are proud to respond that much of the upkeep is done by Society members. Being an old house (remember, it was built in 1829....), there are always odd jobs to do in and around the house, e.g. painting, minor repairs and, of course, axe-wielding, to chop logs for the fire. We would love to involve more people in these jobs as well.

Please reply to historyoakville@gmail.com to sign up!



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Fundraising

Brenda Chisholm

Our Burns' Supper on January 16 was a sold out success! The pipes skirled, kilts swirled, dancers leapt and the haggis was well and truly addressed. After a traditional plated dinner, toasts, poetry and music, we all joined in a circle to sing Auld Lang Syne and parted til next year. If you missed it, mark your calendar for January 15, 2027!



The Spring Tea was held in the fireplace room of the office on Sunday May 5. Ladies and Gentlemen feasted on a homemade curated menu of five sweets and five savouries, plus warm scones, clotted cream and strawberry jam. Thank you to everyone who attended, the fundraising team and George and Mark.

Save the date!

The Yard Sale will be held on **July 18** from 9 am to 2 pm. Donations welcome Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 1-4:30 **beginning June 2** as well as **Sunday July 5 & 12**. We need volunteers for the day, please email us at historyoakville@gmail.com for more information.

Do You Know.....



where this was taken? Stay tuned....more
to follow in the summer issue!

We are open:

Tuesday, Thursday and third Sunday of the month 1:00 -4:30

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