



S **T** IN A **STRANGE**

A **N** **G** **E** **R** **S**

They come for any number of reasons. But what's clear is that Atlantic Canada needs immigrants as never before. What are we doing to make them feel welcome in their new home? Many say, not enough.



LAND

RAE HO PARK whips out a pack of Player's and offers a cigarette before jamming one between his teeth. It's 10-below and snowing. But the temperature on the main floor of what will soon be his new convenience store in the east end of Moncton is closer to 40-above thanks to the industrial heaters he's running to help cure the wall plaster. So we move to the basement, where it's dark and dirty and cool enough to talk without sweating on the filter tips. "When I was in Korea," he grimaces, "I never smoke. I quit there. I start again when I come here, when I come to this place. I guess it's the pressure."

It could well be. Ten months ago, Park was a highly paid civil engineer at Samsung Construction, the top company of its kind in Seoul. For more than two decades, he made a good living working on plans and blueprints for factories, government buildings and apartment complexes. In fact, he was a designer on the colossal Burj Dubai, which will be the tallest office tower in the world when it is completed in that Middle Eastern enclave of conspicuous consumption later this year. But that life is over, and he knows it. "We here now," he says. "And this is where we make our new home. Here, we start over, from scratch."

By "we", Park means he and his wife, Myung Nee Yoo, and his son Jiyuk (who will join them shortly after finishing his studies in photography at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology). Their home is a three-bedroom, semi-detached in Dieppe. Their lives are proscribed by a careful regimen: Park spends full days working on the launch of his business, while his wife splits her effort between the house and English language instruction at the Multicultural Association of Greater Moncton. He would like to join her in these classroom sessions, but he can't afford the time. "I'm here for months with no job," he says. "I have to get things going. You know, to make money."

HOURS LATER that same day, Mohinderjit Singh and his wife Remi sit comfortably in a booth of their downtown Moncton restaurant, the Taj Mahal, talking about their own

immigrant experience. It's been three decades since they walked in Rae Ho Park's shoes, but they sympathize with him. They remember what it was like to be strangers in a strange land during their first, sometimes bleak, years in the Great White North.

"You know, when I arrived in Canada from India, I saw many, many people from other countries who had PhDs," Mohinderjit says. "They were all very well qualified individuals who were driving taxis because there were no other options for them. Their credentials were not accepted here. It was the same thing for me. So many of us coming from another place ask ourselves, 'what are we going to do?'"

For Mohinderjit (who earned an MA in language studies before emigrating) answering that question has been a voyage of personal discovery. "I arrived in Montreal in 1978," he says. "I had cousins on my father's side. I worked with the family dry-cleaning business. After a time, I moved to Toronto and worked for Atlantic Packaging. I became a shift supervisor there, but eventually it became too much for me. The hours were too difficult."

He then started an airport limousine service, and did very well. But it was during one of his occasional stopovers in Moncton (enroute to visit his wife's family in Charlottetown) that he had an epiphany, of sorts. "What touched me very much about this area was the people," he says. "The people here were very friendly everywhere you went. They were very easy to know. This was not an overdeveloped or crowded place. And all of this was crucial for me."

That was five years ago. Since then, the Singhs' restaurant has earned a reputation for superb cuisine and excellent service. It's jammed every night with residents and out-of-towners desperate for authentic Indian fare in the cold of winter and the heat of summer. Their children, who attend university in nearby Sackville, occasionally help out.

"It's a family operation," Remi says. "Everything now finally seems to be working. But it hasn't always been easy."

From a civil engineer with Samsung Construction in Seoul, Korea to the owner/operator of a convenience store in Moncton, New Brunswick, Rae Ho Park is finding that life in Canada is a lot harder than he expected. Photo: Daniel St. Louis



Mohinderjit Singh and wife Remi in their downtown Moncton restaurant, the Taj Mahal. Photo: Daniel St. Louis

INDEED, IT'S ONE of the cruel ironies of life that a country that continues to bill itself as the freest, safest and most solicitous in the world is also one where immigrants often find their new lives as challenging as the ones they left behind. They endure batteries of tests and credit and criminal checks just to gain admittance. They liquidate their holdings and spend money to secure their applications for residency. And once here, many know they'll never again practice their professions in quite the same way because their skills aren't recognized or their credentials aren't accepted.

In fairness, federal and provincial authorities do recognize the problem. "In light of our history and our values, Canada's immigration policy is obviously of key importance," observed former Prime Minister Paul Martin in 2005. "Canada needs more immigrants, plain and simple, and we need them to succeed. Too often, today's new Canadians, despite higher levels of education on average, are not achieving economic success as quickly as in previous generations."

A year later, Prime Minister-in-waiting Stephen Harper sang the same tune when he declared, "Immigrants and their families should be allowed to keep more of their own money in their pockets to start a new life in Canada. The biggest barrier to new Canadians is the frequent failure of Canada to recognize legitimate foreign credentials. Wherever this happens, not only are the dreams of individuals and families shattered, Canada as a whole is deprived of all they have to offer."

For all this fine rhetoric, these splendid sentiments, many wonder what precisely is being done to help new immigrants hurdle the barriers of a system that, on the one hand, helps foreign labourers and professionals in the oil and gas sector integrate seamlessly into society – their benefits secured, their talents

treasured, their contributions exalted – while, on the other, leaves men like Rae Ho Park and (once upon a time) Mohinderjit Singh, to fend for themselves?

LEIGH LAMPERT, an immigration lawyer at the Toronto-based firm Guberman, Carson, Bush (and who was born and raised in Moncton), appears almost incensed by what he terms as "widespread foot-dragging" at almost every level of government, particularly with respect to credentialing. "Sadly," he says, "there are many, many highly-skilled, well-educated people living in Canada whose skills are desperately needed, but who end up working in jobs that require fewer skills and less knowledge. I remember visiting the hospital with a relative who was seen by a gastroenterology resident. This lady has been a gastroenterologist in Europe, but was forced to [redo] her entire medical education and residency in Canada. This seems ridiculous."

Nor does he buy the argument that the nation's stiff policies against many classes of foreign-born professionals are designed to protect the health and welfare of all Canadians. "To hide behind this is silly" he says. "Certainly, there are many ways to ensure a doctor or dentist or any other worker is trained to Canadian standards without making them start from scratch. The [federal] government has done an awful lot of talking about this subject, as it angers many. So where are the results?"

Oddly, it may be the wrong question. A more useful one, perhaps, is: How did this happen, and why does it continue to persist despite the evident wishes of those who should have the power to change the status quo? The answer depends entirely on how far down the rabbit hole you're willing to travel. Says Lampert: "The thing everyone has to remember is that Canada's immigration

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Mohinderjit Singh

system is enormously complex."

In fact, the immovable bedrock of the entire apparatus is something called "the permanent residency application process", which sounds harmless enough until you perceive its nuances. Currently, the federal government maintains several categories through which it checks, judges and processes immigrant candidates. Foreign direct investment is one. Spousal or family petition is another. Two of the more commonly employed categories are the individual worker and business owner/investor designations. In the former, a legally incorporated Canadian business sponsors a prospective immigrant employee. In the latter, a foreign "entrepreneur" typically applies to start or finance a private enterprise in a specific city, town or village. In either case, approved applicants are, in effect, "streamed" into their new roles as permanent residents.

IT IS POSSIBLE to break the stream, as Mohinderjit Singh did many times during his life in Canada – labourer, cab driver, restaurateur, small business owner. But, these days, it's neither easy, nor convenient. Increasingly, the system determines the value of each successful applicant according to a sliding scale of education, skills, financial resources and industrial utility. In this, it takes its cue from the domestic commercial community, which specifies the types of workers it needs, accepts their credentials, guarantees their safe arrival and tends to their post-settlement requirements. The same considerations are rarely, if ever, afforded to business or any other class of immigrants, (an important reason why Rae Ho Park, a duly identified "entrepreneur", is opening a convenience store, and not plying his trade in any of Atlantic Canada's burgeoning engineering firms).

Complicating matters further is the role of

Be yourself. Belong. Be better.

When Ji Li came from China in 2002 to obtain his BBA at the Saint John campus of the University of New Brunswick, he fell in love with the city and with a fellow student, Nan Xin. The two young entrepreneurs shared a passion for business and launched HugoLee International Trade, to import Chinese goods for their Asian market, the Golden Leaf Asian Place.

"New Brunswick is one of the greatest places to live. We love this province. We like the peaceful and clean environment. The community is very nice and New Brunswick offers a great market for our business' development," she says.

The couples' business success was recognized in 2007 when Ji Li received the Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award from the Saint John Board of Trade. Happy to contribute to the economic success of their new community, Ji Li and Nan Xin belong in New Brunswick.



From left to right:
Entrepreneurs **Nan Xin**
and **Ji Li** with brother and
business manager **Chao Li**.

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provincial governments. Until recently, they've been weak sisters, exercising little or no influence over a manifestly federal responsibility. But in 1999, and again in 2005, Ottawa signed deals with most provinces (including all four in Atlantic Canada) giving them authority, in consultation with the nation's foreign visa posts, to manage the upstream work of qualifying immigrant applicants and streaming them appropriately. Their activities certainly facilitate the process, but they also tend to cement the system by injecting another layer of official "preference" over the types and numbers of immigrants approved – and not always consistently.

Application fees vary widely, from hundreds to thousands of dollars depending on the particular stream and destination jurisdiction, and waiting periods are... well, all over the international calendar.

"All streams of permanent residency application have their own processing times," Lampert explains. "And these times vary widely from one visa post to the next. For example, a provincial nominee applicant applying through Buffalo may be processed in as little as five or six months. Similarly, a spousal sponsorship case processed in Beijing may take less than three months. Still, a skilled worker applying through Damascus

can wait five to seven years before being approved.... Here we are saying, 'please come and do business', and yet it takes two, three, five, seven years to get them into the country."

IN RAE HO PARK'S CASE, getting into the country was less problematic than figuring out how to survive once he arrived. As a freshly minted entrepreneur (one whose professional credentials were all but meaningless), owning and managing a convenience store seemed as good a bet as any other. But arranging for financing on everything from the premises to a new van was a nightmare for no other reason than that banks and leasing companies were unwilling to consider his background and track record. Having received no direction from either the federal government or New Brunswick's Provincial Nominee Program, it was as if he had just been born.

The memory of it still rankles Beth Locke, a Moncton real estate agent who, along with her partner David Cormier, has operated as Park's unofficial welcome wagon. "All those who arrive must have cash just to survive," she says. "They may be former teachers or engineers or whatever, but they're spending their savings just to be here. Once they are here, there's not much mentoring in any official capacity beyond certain groups and volunteer organizations. There are very few people with whom they can consult outside their own community. And that's not very useful, because they're all in the same boat."

EVEN AFTER 30 YEARS in Canada, Mohinderjit and Remi nurse their own complaints about the immigration system, albeit from a different perspective. "My husband and I operate this business," Remi says. "We are not chefs. But we understand the importance of providing traditional dishes of the highest quality. So, naturally, we have looked to the home countries for this sort of expertise. And, until quite recently, it's been very difficult to get qualified people into Canada and then keep them."

Mohinderjit rolls up his sleeves and shows his forearms, which are scarred from his frequent encounters with the naan oven. "This is what happens when a businessman tries to make traditional bread," he laughs. "He gets burned.... There have been times when I am running the business and my wife and I, along with our children, have been doing all of the cooking as well. Long hours, with no breaks. The skills we need in the kitchen we simply can't find here, so we need more immigrants with the right talents and qualifications."

Remi jumps in and talks quickly about governments that make life for immigrant employers almost as difficult as it does for

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“I’m here for months with no job. I have to get things going. You know, to make money” *Rae Ho Park.*



foreign employees. Mohinderjit speaks animatedly about two cooks he had once sponsored with his own money to bring in from India, only to endure Ottawa’s bloodless decision to allow them to migrate to other economically promising positions in Canada. Then there was the case of their Nepalese chef whose qualifications and credentials took almost two years to settle simply because provincial and federal authorities couldn’t agree about his official status – a problem that was, it turned out, entirely due to bureaucratic bungling.

AS CUMBERSOME and inflexible as the system can be for legal immigrants, it is virtually paralyzing in rare, but poignant, cases involving people who have fled foreign lands without first applying through proper channels – people like Alexi and Angela Portnoy and their son Alon, who moved from Israel to Canada in 1996. Since then, the family has grown to include three more children and, until recently, a thriving business in Marystown on Newfoundland and Labrador’s Burin Peninsula. In 2006, however, Alexi was deported back to Israel, separating him from his wife and kids (several of whom now suffer from serious medical conditions). They have lived in a church basement under sanctuary ever since. To date, repeated attempts to obtain permanent residency status, on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, have failed. And last October, the Canadian Border Services Agency reinstated an arrest warrant for Angela, though not her children.

The case has outraged many Canadians who can’t understand why a hard-working family of immigrants should be forced to leave their home of more than 10 years because of a legal loophole. “The thought that Canadian children and their parents are being deported to a war-torn country is gut wrenching,” thundered a commentator on a pro-Portnoy web site recently. “How in God’s name could this happen in Canada?”

For those who understand the system, it’s lamentable, but not inexplicable. The larger issue is whether the law should be changed, the existing structures dismantled, new principles applied, new policies adopted, and new programs implemented. “In cases like this, deportation can result, as sad as it is for those who have established roots and built ties to

Canada,” Lampert says. “But, okay, so they came in through the back door. There is an argument for focusing more of our energies on the alleged criminals and terrorists who also live among us.”

STILL, KNOWING the dimensions of the problem – and even how an intransigent and hide-bound system can, and often does, curtail the interests and freedoms of those it’s supposed to encourage and protect – does not magically produce solutions for immigrants who have,



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for lack of a better phrase, come in through the front door. Fortunately, that's not stopping various legislators, especially in Atlantic Canada, from trying to conjure their own shades of new wisdom. After all, there is a certain economic urgency involved.

"By 2026, Canada's population growth is projected to be solely reliant on the arrival of immigrants," a Statistics Canada report concluded recently. "At this time, the number of deaths in Canada will be greater than the number of births, causing the natural population balance to be negative. If Canada wants to continue along a path of demographic growth, this will necessarily be driven by immigration."

No more so than in the Atlantic region, which already endures a disproportionately small share of foreign arrivals relative to the rest of the country. This fact, alone, explains why Newfoundland and Labrador recently lowered some of its Provincial Nominee Program application fees. It's why Prince Edward Island has set aside full-time "instruction seats" at Holland College and Study Abroad Canada (offering English as a Second Language and homestay programs) to help more newcomers learn English more quickly and efficiently. And it's why New Brunswick has established a Population Growth Secretariat, and increased the budget available for immigration and settlement services.

WHAT IMPACT any of this will have on the lives of those who have chosen Atlantic Canada over every other region on earth is impossible to say. Nearly everyone agrees that the arduous work of immigration attraction, integration and retention is only now beginning to reflect the imposing demographic needs of the region and the diverse requirements of people like Mohinderjit and Remi Singh and, of course, Rae Ho Park.

From his basement vantage, the former engineer reflects on his reasons for coming to Moncton. "My son has been living in Canada for nine years," he says a little wistfully, his fingers coated not with nicotine, but dust. "He went to high school in Edmonton, lived with a family there. He was sent to Canada to get good education. Now he's 24. He's a Canadian, and he wants to stay, wants to come to Moncton. So, we here now.... The family must be together, you know? For me, family is everything."

But if his son wanted to leave, would he follow?

"Maybe," he smiles. "Maybe."

ABM



Dawn says: For a story about immigrants who spent 14,000 years preparing for their journey, only to die less than 24 months later, see page 38.