Canadian identity as seen through images of Estonian refugees: from photo albums to museum exhibit

On the 18th of November 1948, 347 people undertook a dangerous journey from Sweden to Canada in a British minesweeper, the SS Walnut, which was originally designed to sleep 18 men. They survived several winter storms and severe seasickness during this 3½-week passage, which finally brought them to Pier 21, in Halifax on December 13th. The majority of the passengers were Estonian refugees. Many took photographs in Göteborg and Lysekil harbours just prior to leaving, while on the boat and afterwards in detention centers in Halifax. These photographs were circulated amongst them and remained in personal photo albums until 1999. At that point CBC film producer, Holly Preston, acquired a collection of these photographs and used them to make a video for the newly opened Pier 21 Museum. In this paper, I will discuss marked relationships to ideas about refugee identity, belonging, multiculturalism and Canadian nationalism that are manipulated through these photographs. Following a discussion of the Pier 21 exhibit and viewing of the video, conclusions will center on the reactions of these Canadian/Estonians to their representation at what has been recently crowned “One of Canada’s Seven Wonders.” Their response both challenges and embraces this museum’s use of nostalgia and emotionality.

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