How did we gain admission to Canada when others found all doors locked?

I fear that the one person who deserves credit for our entry, my Aunt Anny, has gone to her grave with nary a thank you. The day of her funeral, I went to the market and bought all the yellow roses I could find and threw them on her casket. A small cluster of mourners stood by the grave on that cold and rainy day. There were a few neighbours and acquaintances, but no one who knew her well. Her only sister did not attend.

Family histories are complex, and none more so than for those whose wounds have not healed. My Aunt Anny died childless, but for years she let people think that I was her daughter. She loved it when others would say, “It’s okay. We Canadians are modern. These days it’s no shame to have had a child out of wedlock. We know that you only pretend Helen is your sister’s child. Helen is so like you. And look, Ludwig now loves her just as much as you do.”

It would not have been a far stretch to imagine my aunt breaking that social taboo. My mother had always been the good girl in the family while
her sister played the role of the wild one. An early photo shows Anny astride a motorcycle. Although two years younger than my mother, it was always Anny who dared, Anny who defied authority, and Anny who ventured into forbidden territory.

Both Anny and my mother loved to tell tales of their childhood. I remember the story of Papa Max who enjoyed the occasional stein of beer, fresh from the barrel at the local pub. Because he preferred to sip it at home in the comfort of his armchair, he often sent the girls out to fetch him a beer in the evening. Anny always slurped off the white foam, never flinching when Max complained that the publican was becoming stingy with his liquid measurements.
Later, there were more serious clashes with parental authority. On a holiday visit to relatives, Anny brazenly cut her long tresses and returned home sporting a flapper bob. Next, she demanded the right to move to Regensburg, where she apprenticed as a technician on Roentgen’s new X-ray device. There, she fell in love with a doctor.

The affair was passionate, but it did not end happily. It was the early 1930s and Hitler was already chancellor of Germany. Anny was a Jew; the doctor was Aryan. He chose safety.
Heartbroken, Anny watched as her sister garnered all the accolades. Gretl, the blushing bride in virginal white splendour. Gretl, the mother-to-be, proudly patting her visible badge of womanhood. Gretl, the mother of a healthy child, little Helen born in 1936.

Anny was nobody’s fool. Her sister and her parents might well be totally focused upon this new infant, but Anny saw what was happening in Germany. Anny knew that she had to do something. Getting herself and her parents out of Germany had to be the priority. She would make it her priority.

Czechoslovakia was the obvious place to go. Much of the country was German speaking, so it would be an easy transition in terms of language. It was a democracy created and backed by the League of Nations. Thanks to a midnight blue ball gown and a fortuitous invitation to a New Year’s Eve dance, Gretl was already there, living in the tiny village of Strobnitz.

All Anny needed was a Czech husband. She whispered her request to a relative who whispered it to another woman and soon, the matchmaking was done. Ludwig Ekstein agreed to marry Anny Grünhut.

Ludwig was a slightly older man with the best of references and connections. He was a prosperous landowner with an excellent reputation as a cattle-dealer. This line of work attracted many a scoundrel, but Ludwig was the rare exception: a man who honoured his word.

Anny had tried the route of love and found it wanting. She agreed to follow the path of reason. Hastily, she and Ludwig were wed, Anny in a suit and matching hat and carrying a simple bouquet of yellow roses. She moved into his house in Bischofteinitz near Pilsen and promptly did what she had set out to do. She got her parents out of Germany. It was 1937.

By 1938, Czechoslovakia no longer seemed like such a safe place. When Hitler annexed Austria in March of that year, several of Ludwig’s cousins said, “We’re next. Hitler will take Czechoslovakia.”

In the face of hundreds of thousands of Jews clamouring to flee Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, Canada closed its doors. A memorandum to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, prepared jointly by the Departments of External Affairs and Mines and Resources on November
Gretl as a new mother,
elegantly attired for her afternoon walk in Strobnitz
29, 1938, stated the blunt reality: “We do not want to take in too many Jews, but in the present circumstances, we do not want to say so.” In major centres like Prague, the only sources of information for would-be immigrants to Canada were agents from the Canadian National Railway and the Canadian Pacific Railway (cpr, known colloquially as “The Canadian”) who were seeking to attract settlers to the lands granted to them by the Canadian government for having completed the Canadian railway.

Ludwig’s cattle-dealer cousins invited a representative of the Canadian Pacific Railway to visit their rural holdings near Pilsen in Czechoslovakia. Impressed by their industriousness, the cpr representative agreed to put forward a special recommendation to the Canadian authorities. Shortly thereafter, Ludwig’s cousins were granted permission to buy land in Canada and to immigrate as Czech farmers.

Did no one in Ottawa realize that Ludwig and Ludwig’s cousins were Jews? Was F. C. Blair, Director of the Immigration Branch of the Department
of Mines and Resources sick or on holidays when the application was sent to Ottawa?

I have directed my questions to numerous history professors whose specialty is Canada in the 1930s. They all say the same thing: "Someone was asleep at the switch." Immigration officials likely did not realize that the leader of the Czech group was a Jew. Ludwig’s cousin Karl Abeles was far from the stereotypical Jew that Canadian newspapers of the day portrayed as dark, hunched, and hook-nosed. Karl Abeles was a big, blond man with a handlebar moustache. From his occasional visits to our farm, I remember him as robust and outgoing, with a jovial manner that would fit right into a contemporary beer commercial.

In November of 1938, Anny and Ludwig joined his cousins in Ontario at the Ridge Farm near what was then the small village of Mount Hope, south of Hamilton. Anny and Ludwig immediately sponsored my mother, father, and me to immigrate to Canada.

An ID card issued by the CPR to Edmund Waldstein
And so, on April 16, 1939, we stepped off the old S. S. Montcalm in Saint John, New Brunswick. From there we travelled by train to Montreal where Mimi greeted us. This dear friend, now in her nineties, was then a beautiful young woman whose parents had sent her to Canada with an aunt and uncle related by marriage to the Czech cousins that included my Uncle Ludwig.

Mimi was in Montreal to see Mr. James Colley of the CPR. She had been told that Mr. Colley held the candle of life and the sword of death over the head of each family member now trapped in Europe. Mimi hoped that by making a personal appeal, she could break through the wall of red tape and bring her parents to Canada.

When I asked how she recognized us, Mimi laughed. “It was easy,” she said. “You were obviously foreigners. A skinny man in a too large suit, and an elegant woman in a heavy wool dress with matching cape and feathered hat who was holding the hand of a little girl in a beige velveteen coat with a brown collar. You looked so out of place, so benebbicht.”

Although the Yiddish expression—an adjective for a person who has become an object of pity after failing so often and so miserably—is difficult to translate, I can easily picture the scene. Indeed, the feel of that scratchy collar, so drab and drearily brown, remains etched in my memory, as does the texture and drama of my mother’s bottle-green ensemble.

Because their documents labelled them as Czech farmers, my parents put aside their fine clothes and prepared for a new way of life. They had promised the Canadian government that they would farm for a minimum of five years.

It was a big leap. My mother needed to go from being the belle of the village ball to plucking and disembowelling chickens, milking large, ungainly cows, and feeding slop to pigs that disgusted her. My father needed to say farewell to a life that was all he’d ever wanted, and step into a life that he hated. He was completely unsuited to farming. His thin body never filled out and his hands remained clumsy. Worse, he was ashamed. He lived in daily humiliation at what he had done. He had reduced to a life of drudgery his Gretl, the beautiful bride to whom he had promised the world.

At first, my parents and I lived communally on the Ridge farm, crowded
together with the entire clan of Ludwig’s cousins. As soon as possible, my father and Ludwig pooled their resources and purchased their own farm several miles south of Mount Hope. Their overriding hope was that someday my mother’s parents and all the members of my father’s family would join us there.

They chose the Wren farm because it was cheap, as were many farms in the 1930s. Canadians had fled to the cities in the wake of the Depression, preferring to seek well-paying work in the factories rather than till the land.

The Wren farm was doubly cheap because it consisted of 180 acres that no one wanted. The land was uneven and planting was difficult. Parts were swampy and never seemed to dry out. The fields contained more rocks than fertile soil. Where fences existed, their posts leaned at odd angles. The barn and outbuildings threatened to collapse in the next strong wind.

Still, a beginning was made. Ludwig and my father bought a neighbour’s cow that was dead by morning. They bought another cow and my mother heated its milk on the wood-burning stove in the kitchen. To this day, the smell of warm milk lingers in my memory along with the skin it formed as it cooled in the cup. To this day, I drink my coffee black and the very smell of hot cocoa makes me gag.

More cows were added to the stable, and the barn became a favourite place for me. It was my mother’s job to do the milking. I still picture her perched fearfully on the little milking stool, pulling the teats until the warm milk squirted into the tin pail. Whenever she got up to empty it into the big milk can in the cooling shed, she’d sigh as she tucked a stray lock of hair under the red bandanna she always wore in the barn.

Meanwhile Ludwig and my father cultivated the fields. They had purchased a workhorse to pull the rusty old plough, and they trudged along behind it. Ludwig gradually repaired a few farm implements, often tying them together with bits of binder twine. I spent many hours watching him patiently figure out how things worked. I also loved to walk with my father as he inserted single kernels of corn into the ground, rhythmically depressing the planter handle until it gave a satisfying click.

Aunt Anny took on the outside world. Armed with her dictionary, her ready smile, and her willingness to use gestures, Anny learned English. In
Helen wandering alone by the lift that became the henhouse

Europe, people had frowned upon her refusal to bow to convention. Now her traits were seen as entrepreneurial. She decided to raise chickens. Each week she stood on the highway to hitchhike her way into Hamilton where she trudged door to door with a basket of eggs.
There were many setbacks, but gradually the farm began to produce a better yield. Anny added fresh-killed chickens to her load, and I was allowed to help clean them. First, they had to be eyed for plumpness and caught. This involved much squawking and ruffling of feathers with chickens darting madly about the henhouse. Ludwig did the actual killing by inserting a very sharp knife into their open beak. He explained that this was faster and more humane than cutting off their heads, which often resulted in headless chickens running about in crazed circles.

Next, the chickens were dipped into very hot water. It needed to be just the right temperature to soften the feathers without burning the skin. Then the chickens were hung by their legs from a long pole, and I was allowed to help pluck them, taking great care to not tear the delicate skin in the process. When even the most stubborn of pinfeathers had been removed, my mother would take the chickens to the stove where the iron lid would be lifted and the last small, almost invisible hairs would be singed over the open flame. Finally, my mother would slice open the hen’s bum and insert her hand deep into the cavity, pulling out guts, stomach, and liver all in a single quivering mass. Sometimes there would be eggs without a shell, and these would be scooped into a bowl for our meals as would stray bits of fat that could be scraped from the intestines. Any lumps of good fat along with the stomach, heart, and liver would be returned to the washed cavity as a treasure for the lucky purchaser.

The fields too began to produce increasingly respectable crops. Some fields grew wheat that had to be cut and bundled with twine into bunches that were propped against each other to form stooks, the little tent-like structures that many an artist has romanticized in paint. To me, the bundling and propping took forever, and I spent endless days sitting at the edge of the field under a tree that gave minimal shelter from the relentless sun. I watched as Anny and my mother, wearing high rubber boots to shield their legs from snakes as well as from the rough stubble, joined the men in this nerve-racking task. Rain at this point would ruin the harvest, and haste was of the essence.

Only when the wheat was dry could it be loaded upon a wagon and brought to the threshing machine, a gigantic contraption that needed to be
Ready for work in the fields, mother in rubber boots to protect her legs from snakes
booked far in advance along with its owner-operator. This in itself was a problem. Book too early and the grain might not yet be dry; book too late and a sudden rain meant disaster. Moreover, not only the thresher but also all the neighbouring farmers had to be available on that date, for threshing was very much a communal activity.

There was always much excitement on threshing day. Once the neighbours had been recruited to help, it was time for the women to start planning the food. This invariably threw my mother and Anny into a state bordering on panic. In their first year of threshing, the two women had prepared European food for the big midday meal. It was the best meal they had to offer: Kraut, Knödel, Schweinfleisch, and Kuchen. The farmers had taken one look, pushed away their plates, and walked out. They expected roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, and two boiled vegetables. Worst of all for Gretl and Anny, they wanted pie for dessert.

Although they eventually learned to “cook Canadian,” the art of pie making remained a mystery to both women. Their cookbooks were stuffed with loose bits of paper on which they had copied recipes from Robin Hood and Five Roses flour, from the backs of blocks of Crisco and lard, and even from bottles of cooking oil. Still their crusts remained rock hard. Neither woman ever succeeded in making the flaky mixture that seemed to be the innate gift of every Canadian farm wife. Finally, Mrs. Bates, our kindly neighbour took pity on them and offered to prepare the pies oven-ready for threshing day.

Mrs. Bates really was a dear, sweet woman. I spent many days tagging behind her as she worked her magic in the kitchen. Unlike my family, she never seemed too busy to let me watch, and my questions did not bother her. I don’t know how we communicated, for in those days, I spoke no English.

So that I could learn English as soon as possible, my parents sent me to First Grade at the one-room schoolhouse at Glanford Station when I turned five rather than wait until I was six as was the norm.

Before I was allowed to attend school, my parents made me promise never to say that I was Jewish. If a teacher asked for my religion, I was to answer, “I am Czech.” There had been several long debates at home about
whether people would believe that there was a Czech church. In the end, my parents decided that Canadians knew so little about Czechoslovakia that no statement about the country and its people would sound too far-fetched.

I do not remember my first day of school. I suspect that I have blocked it from memory. Children who have not been taught kindness can be cruel. These children of Ontario farmers who had never encountered a non-English speaker must have viewed me as a rare bird indeed.

I do remember the years of being taunted at every opportunity. My very name gave rise to great hilarity, especially after my parents were overheard using its affectionate form. “Helly” works fine in German, but not in English. Put this together with Waldstein, so close in sound to Holstein (the black and white cows that many of my classmates milked before and after school as part of their daily chores), and you have the makings of endless mockery.

My lunches were another source of daily amusement. I dreaded opening the little red pail that my mother so proudly packed with leftover treats. While others removed crisp new waxed paper from their coveted lily-white sandwiches, I’d have meat on thick slices of rye. To make matters worse, my meat was not thinly sliced roast beef or ham, but slabs of tongue and other cheap cuts. I never got used to the fake barfing of my classmates as they watched me open the brown butcher-paper wrapping so carefully saved to last out the week.

Except in unusually warm weather, lunches were eaten at our desks. There was nowhere else in the school, except that one room and a little cloakroom where, in winter, we hung our sodden coats and lined up our boots. All winter long, our lessons were accompanied by the smell of drying woollens. The wood stove adjacent to the cloakroom always seemed to be lit. Many a morning, I welcomed its glow after ploughing my way through ever-shifting snowdrifts. How early those poor teachers must have arrived to ensure us of this cozy welcome!

The teacher I remember most fondly is Miss Martindale. I picture her as having glasses perched upon a small nose, fluffy brown hair, and a very warm smile. Somehow, despite the clamouring of a roomful of students of
Helen sets off for her first day at school, September 1941
all different grades and abilities, she managed to find time for me. Once I had learned to read, Miss Martindale just kept giving me more books and skipping me ahead until I was more than two years younger than were the others in my grade. While my interest in books has never waned, skipping two years unfortunately increased my social isolation even further.

After school, I would rush home in search of Ludwig. At least I did until my mother told me how much I hurt my father by not seeking him out first. Hurting my father was the last thing I intended.

Still, Ludwig was so much more fun. Ludwig took me by the hand and introduced me to each of the cows by name as he made the rounds, doling out the pre-measured quantity of food to each. Ludwig allowed me to scramble up the ladder and sit on a bale while he pitched straw through the chute. Sometimes he’d manage to catch one of the cats we kept in the barn and hold it gently while I buried my face in the soft fur. Some afternoons when he had harnessed old Dolly to the stone sledge to fetch the empty milk cans from the highway, he’d lift me way, way up, onto her broad white back and let me ride. But this only happened if my mother wasn’t around because she’d start screaming, “Careful, she’s going to fall” until he’d lift me off and deposit me far from the menacing horse.

In the evening, I loved to sit and watch Ludwig peel apples, the paper-thin peel curling unbroken in long spirals onto the plate. Neighbours with an orchard let us take all we wanted of the apples that had fallen to the ground, and we collected enough to last through the long winter evenings. Ludwig knew endless jokes and riddles and he never seemed too busy or too preoccupied to talk to me. Sometimes he’d teach me Czech tongue twisters: “Strc prst skrz krk,” the classic all-consonant line that means roughly, “Stick finger through neck,” and my all-time favourite “Trsta trstetz tria tribernek,” which involves three thousand three hundred and thirty-three red fire engines. Ludwig would laugh and laugh until I joined him.

As he sat peeling, I’d often count freckles on the back of his hands until the dots blurred. To me, Ludwig was so handsome. A head of tight red curls framed large green eyes, and a huge dimple sat squarely in the middle of his chin.
Both Anny and Ludwig had more patience than my parents did. They also seemed to be more cheerful, and certainly, they knew how to cheer me up. I still remember the little ditty Anny used to sing whenever tears gathered in my eyes:

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\begin{align*}
Doodle-oodle-ei, & \quad Doodle-oodle-life \\
Sagt my Wei’ & \quad Says my wife \\
Das Heferl ist zerbrochen & \quad The bowl, it got broken \\
Hab’ kein Salz, & \quad I’ve got no salt \\
Hab kein Schmalz & \quad I’ve got no fat \\
Wie soll ich da kochen? & \quad How can I be cookin’?
\end{align*}
\]

Neither of my parents could have coped without the help of these two amazing people. Ludwig the fixer was the real glue that held everything together. Whatever was broken, eventually he’d figure out how to repair it. To this day, I keep every bit of string that comes my way, partly as a frugal habit that does not die easily, partly in memory of the way Ludwig could tie things together. The same knack that he brought to broken machinery, he also brought to human relationships.

Ludwig and my father got along beautifully, but the friction between my mother and my aunt was constant. Old rivalries from their childhood surfaced repeatedly, and usually Ludwig poured soothing oil on troubled waters.

I often wonder at the source of Ludwig’s inner calm. He was not a very learned man, yet he had a wisdom that I find all the more admirable as I struggle to find my own perspective. There were frequent rumours that Anny had flagrant affairs. Did she? Or were the rumours just envy on the part of straitlaced outsiders who secretly admired her uninhibited social interactions? New acquaintances, both women and men, instantly felt they were her best friend. Anny knew how to reach out.

Ludwig, in turn, knew how to hold his tongue. After his death, Anny complained that it was the one piece of his advice that she had failed to master. Ludwig also knew how to recognize and foster the good in others. Just as he had encouraged me to sit unafraid on the back of a huge horse, so
he helped others in later years. Long before “Native rights” became prevalent in Canadian consciousness, Ludwig began hiring men from a nearby reserve. Frequently, there were accidents and problems, but Ludwig never lost sight of what was right. He continued to support the men, and their families, who often became his friends.

At Ludwig’s funeral, there were all sorts of people. Absent were a handful of people that Ludwig had been unable to forgive, those who had turned their back when Jews had clamoured for entry to Canada. Some had been fellow Jewish immigrants more concerned with getting ahead in the new world than with reaching out to those stranded in Europe.

Anny had always been a woman of action, the one who grabbed life by the scruff of the neck and shook it until change happened. Just as she had taken the lead in learning English and in selling eggs, she had stepped forward in other ways. Ironically, the more Anny did, the more my mother’s resentment of her grew. Petty complaints, all voiced behind closed doors. Although her food tasted great to me and largely came from the same cookbook that my mother used, I grew up hearing that Anny was a terrible cook. Today, I still make her red current cake. The tart berries are covered with a sugared meringue, the two extremes evocative of Anny’s own sweet-topped turbulence.

Even though I knew my aunt as a lively, outgoing woman who talked to everyone and had many friends, my mother claimed that nobody liked Anny. My admiration of my aunt was another of those dark secrets I hid from my mother.

Sadly, the lifelong rivalry between the two sisters grew worse as they aged. After Ludwig died, Anny retreated into a shell from which she emerged only briefly. She threw up walls and rarely deviated from the rigid daily routine that became her life. It was her way of creating a semblance of control.

There was always a reason why Anny could not make the short trip to Hamilton. Monday was laundry, Tuesday was ironing, Wednesday was hairdresser, Thursday was banking, Friday was shopping, and weekends were unsuitable. Although my mother routinely smuggled her little white
lap dog into stores, restaurants, and local buses, my mother claimed that because of the dog, she could not board the bus to Brantford.

Three days before she died, I visited Anny for the last time. She was lucid but ready to rejoin her beloved Ludwig in the next life. She had no desire to see her sister again. After Anny’s death, the letters that Max and Resl had sent to both sisters before the war were nowhere to be found.