

In the Stream

Spring 2005

Looking back on my Canadian experience: A German consumer's perspective

by Petra Jonsson

I dreamed about going far away to foreign countries my whole life, but apart from a few vacation trips abroad I hadn't really managed to travel far. In 2002, however, my dream came true when my common-law partner and I decided to settle in Canada for at least two years. At that time, I was working as a general lawyer in a small town in southern Germany, my boss offered me a partnership, and my boyfriend had recently finished his PhD in Sweden. We had a long-distance relationship for 1-2 years and really wanted to move together, but suddenly I wasn't so sure anymore whether I as a woman with a disability could afford to throw away everything that I achieved so far just to follow a crazy dream. Wouldn't it be better to continue dreaming instead of quitting a safe job and cancelling the rental contract for the lovely house with a big garden that I shared with two other women, two cats and a dog?

In the end, however, I had to admit that I was working way too much and couldn't continue that way forever. Our landlady was a pain in the butt and it was raining through the roof of our house, so in fact there wasn't too much to be sad about. After figuring that out, I started organizing the big move.

The first thing I had to do was to obtain a visa and a Canadian work permit. My partner got a job at University of Toronto (U of T), and I therefore didn't need to worry about finding a job for myself. For me, things were a bit more complicated. There are several ways to obtain a visa and/or a work permit, but there appears to be one golden rule that is valid world wide: preferably no alien (that's the legal term, no joke) should be able to work out for him or herself how to get a visa in the easiest possible way. With my legal background, I was almost able to figure it out, but in the end I gave up and simply contacted the Canadian Embassy in Germany. I wrote to them in English to demonstrate that I have profound knowledge in one of the two official Canadian languages. They replied back in German, however, perhaps to show that they have profound knowledge in the language of the country they are working in.

I initially thought that everything would work out fine. As a common-law partner of somebody allowed to live and work in Canada, I was entitled to a work permit, at least in theory. In my letter to the Embassy, I wrote that I was disabled, but they didn't seem to notice. It was only after I filled out the application form, where I was specifically asked for such information, that the troubles began. Because I am disabled (born with spina bifida and mild cerebral palsy), I was required to

prove that I was able to work. It didn't seem to matter to the immigration officials that I had worked full-time for the last five years prior to filling out my application. I ended up having to undergo and pay for a medical exam, as if a family doctor was able to judge my ability to work. I learnt that anti-discrimination laws do not apply to persons in the immigration procedure. This forced me to end up spending a lot of money and time on my work permit, but two months later I managed to get one.

At that time, I was already living in Toronto as a visitor who is not allowed to work. It was perfectly fine with me because I really needed a long vacation. I enjoyed this beautiful summer mostly at and on the lake, learning sailing, reading and canoeing with my partner. I was never much into sports before, but when I came to North America I discovered what great possibilities they can have for people with disabilities. I even went skiing once in the U.S. and I loved it.

When I finally got my work permit I was in no great hurry to find a job. I was busy enjoying my life together with my boyfriend and my new friend Yan (a former CILT volunteer), whose husband also worked at U of T. Eventually I started volunteering at CILT to get some Canadian work experience. I chose to work at CILT because I felt I needed to connect with other people with disabilities. Life is simply too unbalanced if you are together with only one social group. As woman, I sometimes need to meet and exchange experiences and opinions with other women, and as a person with a disability I need to be in contact with other persons with disabilities. I discovered that CILT is a good place to be and was really happy when I was offered a job there. I even turned down a job offer from another organization to accept it. I was sad to leave CILT and Toronto for Switzerland in June 2004.

I was and still am frequently asked which country I preferred: Canada or Germany. I still cannot answer this question. Both countries have their own character, and even if you restrict your answer to the perspective of a person with a disability there are reasons to like or dislike both of them.

What I loved most about Toronto was that people are much friendlier than in Germany, even though Canadians kept telling me how rude people in Toronto were, compared to other areas of Canada. It's also great that there are many more accessible restaurants and apartments in Toronto than in any German city. The older and more beautiful a city in Germany is, the more stairs and terribly uneven pavements you find. Another major difference between Canada and Germany is that people in Canada do not stare much when they see a person with a disability, and even more important, they generally ask before they start helping you. They don't come up with the idea of grabbing your arm without any warning and half-dragging you in or out of a bus; this happened to me in Germany a few times, and it drove me nuts! Worst of all, those guys didn't understand if you tried to explain that this is inappropriate behaviour. In Toronto, I also appreciated that no strangers on the street tried to force small change on

me. This happened to me occasionally in Germany, even as a grown woman. However, a German consumer friend of mine who visited me in Toronto told me the story that a street beggar once offered to share his day's income with him.

The advantage that Germany offers is a good social net, even though its holes are getting bigger and bigger. It is still much better than the Canadian system, and of course much more expensive. Taxes in Germany are higher and everybody has to contribute to a health insurance that might cost the equivalent of a few hundred dollars a month, depending on income. But then you have a health insurance you can rely on. Apart from medical treatments, the German government will also pay for your assistive devices and medication, dental costs, your ambulance ride, and so on. Certainly, you have to contribute to those costs, but the amount of what YOU have to spend is limited. There is no maximum amount for your health insurance. They have to pay for your medical expenses as long as you have a prescription for them. Of course, there are some restrictions but I won't go into them now, otherwise this will turn into an essay about the German health system!

It is also important to mention, that it is possible to live a decent life in Germany if you are on a disability pension or on welfare. Public transportation, especially the train system is much more advanced in Germany than in Canada, and slowly you can see progress regarding accessibility. Even though the accessibility of the subway in Toronto and in a comparable city in Germany is pretty much the same, the standard of Toronto buses reminded me rather of Turkey or India. Many of Germany's trains and some of its buses are wheelchair accessible; the next stop is usually announced in advance over loudspeaker and sometimes even displayed. The German system for personal support is also a bit better, but it is difficult to compare both systems. At least you do not have to wait for years to receive services, and it is possible to get up to 24 hours of personal support while living on your own, if necessary. The disadvantage, however, is that the high level of support is connected to the welfare system. That means if you have a working income you will have to pay a lot of it yourself. And you also have to fight very hard to get enough money to hire your own attendants.

To cut a long story short, it comes down to one main difference: if you have a disability and a good income you enjoy a lot more freedom and equality in Canada. If you happen to have only a disability and are otherwise among the majority who do not have lots of money, but rather have to survive on a disability pension and/or on welfare, you are much better off if you live in Germany.

Petra Jonsson (formerly Heinzelmann) was CILT's Project Information Centre (PIC) coordinator from Sept. 2003 to June 2004. She has since married her common-law partner, and is now living in Zurich, Switzerland. She presently does volunteer work at Zurich's independent living resource centre.

Million-dollar slap in the face

by Diane Coleman

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Many people have told me they don't think they could "stand to live" if they needed a wheelchair as I do. That's why I felt a little queasy about going to see *Million Dollar Baby*. But helping plan the first disability protest of the movie, in Chicago, I had a duty to see it.

I thought I was emotionally well prepared. I already knew many details about the last half-hour - the injury, hospital, nursing home and killing scenes - from disabled colleagues.

But my preparation was more than that.

When I grew up, through braces and surgeries, my elementary-school teachers called me "Mary Sunshine." When I completed UCLA law school from a motorized wheelchair, I was called "inspirational." I took it as the highest compliment to be told by some non-disabled person they "didn't think of me as handicapped." When I was excluded or rejected in my work or social life, I could always understand the other's perspective.

Even the few times someone would actually say they would rather be dead than be like me, I would just politely forge on.

In my early 30s, sharing experiences with disabled friends, I finally learned how to recognize and constructively resist discrimination.

The connection and insights we shared gave me a new lens through which to view my life. Most importantly, I learned to look more clearly at the ways I had internalized the stigma and shame of disability, and began the lifelong struggle to undo the damage done by growing up in isolation from a true sense of community and mutual respect.

In short, a "Jerry's Kid" became a "telethon protester." Over my last two decades of involvement in the disability rights movement, I have faced arrest many times in nonviolent protest to help win the right to ride the bus, and the right to not be forced into a nursing home because of the need for assistance to live.

During Jack Kevorkian's heyday in assisting the suicides of disabled women, I founded a U.S. disability rights group called Not Dead Yet. Using a ventilator at night since 2002, has made it even more personal.

I came into the theatre, wanting to flee quickly when *Million Dollar Baby* was

over. I sat through the whole movie without removing my coat, scarf, hat or gloves.

Queasy stomach, wish to flee - not typical for me anymore. Moreover, the threat of assisted suicide and euthanasia are daily fare for Not Dead Yet.

We fight to be heard over the loud voices of players on both sides whose interests should be readily seen as, at best, secondary to the organized voice of those society says are "better off dead." So many of us have died too young, never getting a real chance to live.

In the midst of all that reality, what makes a fictional movie like *Million Dollar Baby* so disturbing that I want to flee?

As the movie unfolded to its star-powered conclusion, audience members sniffled in pitiful admiration of Maggie's determination to die rather than move on and leave her non-disabled life behind.

They were deeply moved by Frankie's redemption through fatherly love, his wish to help her live and his profound sacrifice in giving up everything he had to free her from her "frozen" body. This is the bittersweet ending that inspires so much acclaim.

As I watched, I thought about the impact the movie would have on severely disabled people surrounded only by doctors, nurses and mixed up, grieving family and friends. Swept along in the emotion, could any audience member imagine a happy and meaningful life for Maggie as a quad? For him or herself as a quad?

It took me another week to get in touch with my deeper personal discomfort.

Could people imagine a happy and meaningful life for me? Could they see that I am not living a fate worse than death?

I've always felt a tension between how others see me and how I see myself. By now, those tensions, and my coping mechanisms, are way below the surface. Denial, the fantasy of acceptance, I have used whatever I could to endure and manage more than 50 years of those looks, and looks away, to be who I am out in the world everyday

But now I am forced to see how critics and audiences love this movie, resent our anger, and extol the virtues of open public discussion of euthanasia based on disability. My fantasy is ripped away.

If I'd been truly prepared, I'd have brought a sign to hold up, saying, "I am not better off dead." I would have looked into every face exiting the theatre, insisting

they see my simple, yet apparently incomprehensible message, and me.

Split Decision

"Because *Million Dollar Baby* is a certified boxing movie, its heart is never far from its sweat-stained sleeve." - John Griffin, *The Montreal Gazette*

"Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* is a masterpiece, pure and simple, deep and true." - Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"This movie is a corny, melodramatic assault on people with disabilities. It plays out killing as a romantic fantasy and gives emotional life to the "better dead than disabled" mindset lurking in the heart of the typical (read: non-disabled) audience member." - Stephen Drake, Not Dead Yet

Diane Coleman is the founder of Not Dead Yet, a national grassroots disability rights organization in the U.S. that opposes the legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia. The organization's Web site is www.notdeadyet.org. -- Ed.

Ride rip-off

by Eli Shupak

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It's not so easy to call a cab and get home after a night out if what you need is a wheelchair-accessible taxi. Not only do these vehicles require advance notice (up to 24 hours for most bookings), they charge, apparently unbeknownst to the city, exorbitant rates.

Three companies with wheelchair-accessible cabs in their fleet respond to calls outside their Wheel-Trans gigs: Toronto Para Transit (TPT), Celebrity and Royal. Of the 75 licensed accessible vans, fewer than 10 are available on a moment's notice due to their contractual obligations to Wheel-Trans.

So unless you've pre-booked for one of those few precious vehicles not doing Wheel-Trans calls, forget about being spontaneous -- or leaving the club at 2 or 3 in the morning.

TPT bill themselves as the leaders in wheelchair-accessible transportation and their Web site says the company's goal is to eliminate any barriers facing the disabled and aging community.

But manager Raj Takhar says the majority of their trips have to be pre-arranged. "We wouldn't do an order at 2 am because there would be no one in the office."

Charging a \$45 flat rate also seems like a pretty significant barrier, as does the fact TPT raised its rates by 25 per cent over the summer.

"It benefits a lot of people if you're going really far within the city," Takhar maintains. But "if you're going two blocks away, it's still \$45."

Celebrity charges by the kilometre for their trips, but their prices aren't much better. Anything under 4 km costs \$25, up to 25 km \$40, and travelling as far as 35 km will set you back \$55.

Celebrity Taxi manager Ross Yates says it's "ludicrous" to compare the rates of a regular cab to those for a wheelchair-accessible van. "One costs \$20,000, one \$50,000," he says.

Takhar adds that the costs incurred for the vans and the insurance policies make them much more expensive to operate and maintain than regular cabs, so it wouldn't be fair to charge the same rates.

At Royal Taxi, general manager and director of operations Spiros Bastas says they charge by the cab's meter -- but when I call the office later in the day for confirmation, a dispatcher there seems confused as to whether they charge a meter fare or a flat rate.

I recently rode in a Royal Taxi van that was booked through Wheel-Trans. The driver told me the company charges a flat rate of \$32.50 for all of its non-Wheel-Trans trips to make it advantageous to drivers who may have had to travel a distance to get to the call.

It's all news to Bruce Robertson, the city's director of licensing, who tells me the companies shouldn't be charging flat rates, period.

"I wasn't aware of this and I appreciate you letting me know," he says. "I don't want to say the fares they're charging are out of line, but they shouldn't be flat rate. If it's not Wheel-Trans-related, it's a taxi fare. They're allowed to charge what they call waiting time if they have to load and unload the passenger, but even that's recorded on the meter."

Councillor Joe Mihevc, the city's disabilities advocate, says he was not up to speed on the issue but hoped to follow up on it after receiving my call.

"It's something we should check into," he says.

He adds that the billing structure for accessible cabs is something being looked at in a more general way. He says it would be a losing proposition for these vans to operate without the work they get from Wheel-Trans since there is not as

much demand for them as for regular taxis.

In the meantime, don't expect to be able to call on one when needed.

2004 Tax Tips and Resources for People with Disabilities

by John Mossa

The Important Date & Getting Your Income Tax Forms

Generally, your tax return for 2004 has to be filed on or before April 30, 2005 (especially if you will owe taxes). You can pick up the 2004 General income tax and benefit package in the following ways:

1. at any postal outlet,
2. online at: www.cra-arc.gc.ca/formspubs/t1general/ontario-e.html,
3. By telephone at 1-800-959-2221 or TTY (teletypewriter) service, call 1-800-665-0354 and/or
4. alternate format publications call 1-800-267-1267.

ARCH's Twelve Tax Tips for Your 2004 Tax Return

ARCH: A Legal Resource Centre for Persons with Disabilities publishes a newsletter called ARCH Alert. In their March 1, 2005 edition, Heidi Lazar-Meyn, Staff Lawyer and Cara Wilkie, Student-at-Law, have written an article called "Twelve Tax Tips for Your 2004 Return." It has useful information for people with disabilities filing their 2004 tax return. You can get a copy by calling 416-482-8255 or TTY 416-482-1254 or online at: www.archlegalclinic.ca/publications/archAlert/index.asp.

The Federal Government's Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) Services & Tax Filing Methods for People with Disabilities

This information comes from the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) Web site, www.cra-arc.gc.ca:

Community Volunteer Income Tax Program

If you need help to complete your personal income tax and benefit return, if your income is low, and if your tax situation is simple, CRA has volunteers who are specially trained to help you. For more information about this free program, or if you would like to become a volunteer, call **1-800-959-8281**.

Internet Access

CRA's Web site at www.cra.gc.ca/disability gives you topics, easy access to their forms and publications, links to government partners, and information about services for people with disabilities. You can also find forms and publications at: www.cra.gc.ca/forms **on their Web site.**

Help for people who have a hearing or speech impairment

If you have a hearing or speech impairment, you can use an operator-assisted relay service to contact CRA through the regular enquiry lines. If you give CRA 48 hours notice, they can arrange to have a sign language interpreter available at an interview or meeting. If you use a TTY, an agent at CRA's bilingual enquiry service can help you at **1-800-665-0354**. Agents are available Monday to Friday (except holidays) from 8:15 AM to 5 PM (local time). From February 17 to April 30, the hours are extended to 10 PM weekdays, and from 9 AM to 1 PM on weekends.

Help for people who are visually impaired

If you are visually impaired, you can get publications and forms related to the filing of your return in an alternate format.

The alternate formats available are Braille, large print, audiocassette, and e-text (computer diskette). Publications are available all year, but to receive your alternate format publications in time for the tax-filing period, CRA needs your request as early as possible.

Also, if you have difficulty completing a regular print return, you can file your return in Braille, large print, or on computer diskette. To get alternate format publications, visit CRA's Web site at www.cra.gc.ca/alternate or call **1-800-267-1267**, Monday to Friday, from 8:15 AM to 5 PM (Eastern Time).

Tax-Filing Methods

As an alternate to mailing in your tax return, CRA offers a number of electronic tax-filing methods that you can use to file. They are EFILE, NETFILE, and TELEFILE. You will need an access code that enables you to use NETFILE or TELEFILE. The access code is printed on the label sheet of your T1 personal income tax return package. If you didn't receive an access code, you can use CRA's access code on-line service (www.netfile.gc.ca/disclaimer-e.html), or you can call the E-Service Helpdesk at 1-800-714-7257.

Note: EFILE, NETFILE, TELEFILE are available to most Canadians, however, there are some types of tax returns that cannot be submitted electronically. See each respective **Restrictions** Web page that explains the exceptions.

What is EFILE?

EFILE is a service where authorized service providers send individual income tax return information to CRA by Internet. You take your documents to registered tax professionals (e.g. H&R Block) who can prepare your electronic return and send it to CRA using EFILE. For more info, see www.cra-arc.gc.ca/eservices/tax/individuals/efile-ind/menu-e.html#efile.

What is NETFILE?

NETFILE service allows you to file your personal income tax and benefit return directly to the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) using the Internet. For more info, see www.netfile.gc.ca/about-e.html.

The NETFILE service is open from February 14 until September 30, 2005, for the electronic filing of your 2004 personal income tax and benefit return. Tax returns filed via NETFILE must first be prepared using one of the following certified commercial tax preparation software packages or Web applications at www.netfile.gc.ca/software-e.html

1. Windows: GenuTax, myTaxExpress, QuickTax, TAXcel, TaxTron, TAXWIZ DELUXE, Ufile
2. Web: CuteTax Online, QuickTaxWeb, T1Filer, UFile.ca or
3. Macintosh: TaxTron for Mac

Important Note: If your income is low, you may qualify for FREE tax preparation software. Visit the above software developers' Web sites for further details.

What is TELEFILE?

TELEFILE is an interactive computer program that allows you, if you are eligible, to electronically file your tax return for **FREE** using a touch-tone telephone. All you need to use the service is a touch-tone telephone, your social insurance number (SIN), your personalized access code and your completed tax return.

If you want to use the TELEFILE service, but because of a disability you cannot use a touch-tone telephone pad, please call **1-800-714-7257** for assistance. For more info, see: www.cra-arc.gc.ca/eservices/tax/individuals/telefile/about-e.html.

CILT remembers one of Canada's leading activists

The Canadian disability community has experienced another major loss, as one of its leading activists died under tragic circumstances.

Joanne Nother, the chair of the Sudbury-based Northeastern Ontario Regional Alliance for the Disabled (NEORAD), and a member of the Ontario Advisory Council on Disability Issues, died February 27 in a house fire. She was 48.

Colleagues describe Nother as an outspoken advocate of disability rights, demanding more accessibility and opportunities to blend into the mainstream. One of her achievements was ensuring that transportation for the consumers was available to residents in outlying communities. It was through her persistence that the Sudbury accessible taxi program began in 1990. Before that, taxis weren't accessible to Northern Ontarians with disabilities.

Nother, originally from Hamilton, told The Sudbury Star in March 2000 that she began focusing attention on the disability community following her MS diagnosis at age 25.

"I have always been involved in humanitarian issues, [and] I will probably continue to do so until I take my last breath," she said.

Recently she helped establish the Sudbury ILRC with Norma Shaw, its Executive Director.

"Her contribution was instrumental to the growth and development of the Centre," Shaw said. Nother would become part of the centre's inaugural Board of Directors.

CILT pays its respects and sends condolences to Nother's family and friends. She is going to be missed by many colleagues and allies in Canada's disability community.

This is only the main section of *In The Stream*, our quarterly newsletter. If you would like to read more of our articles, why not become a member? For more information, or to request a membership info pack, please call 416-599-2458 x22, or email info@cilt.ca.