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EDITORIALS

CANADA, THROUGH AN IMMIGRANT'S EYES

Escaping Sri Lanka's civil war, and finding a new home

In an occasional series, new Canadians explain how coming to this country has changed their lives. Send your submission to letters@nationalpost.com.

ROY RATNAVEL

It was on April 19, 1988, when I was 18 years old, that I landed at Toronto Pearson International Airport. The first thing I noticed was the uniformed officers staffing the airport's security and customs desks. Arriving from Sri Lanka, a country where members of my Tamil community are routinely abused by the country's police and army, I had learned to associate such uniforms with terror. When I saw two well-built Canadian police officers walking toward me, I tensed reflexively. But as we passed by in the corridor, they merely looked at me and said, "Good

afternoon" with big smiles. It was at that moment that I decided to become a Canadian.

Next month marks my 25th year in Canada. Every time I think of my not-so-new home, I am reminded of the Irish proverb: "When I count my blessings, I count you twice." Many Tamils of Sri Lankan origin who live in Canada feel exactly the same way.

We were a whole generation of men, women and helpless children who'd found themselves on the wrong side of Sri Lanka's racial order, dominated as it is by the country's Sinhalese majority. Amid the brutality of a long civil war, we made our way to Canada, leaving behind the country of our

birth, soaked with the blood of siblings, parents and large extended families. The only collateral we had was a strong back and a hope of a better life.

When we arrived, English was not our first language, but our hopes and dreams were

our ancestral homeland. We gained the gift of freedom and safety in Canada. It helped heal our broken souls.

Many Tamil Canadians who immigrate to Canada in this way have made prosperous lives for themselves. And

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recognizably Canadian. Like immigrants from everywhere else, we were determined to overcome our tortured past, and build new lives, so the next generation would never have to endure the sense of terror that we associated with

Tamils now are well-represented as entrepreneurs and academics. I'm proud to say that we've become one of the more successful immigrant groups in Canada.

I still suffer from anxiety and survivor's guilt inherited

from Sri Lanka. Some of my family members never escaped. But in time, I was able to build a new life. In my late teens, I was a new immigrant scrambling to make a living. By day, I worked to pay the rent; by night, I studied at business school. Friends, coworkers and bosses all helped me with my homework, with furniture for my apartment, with the entrance to university as a mature student — they were all part of what made my experience in this country a success.

Geographically, the biggest difference between Canada and Sri Lanka is the climate. But even that pales compared to the difference in the way different groups interact with one another. I wasn't shocked by the snow or by the lung-numbing cold in the winter.

What bowled me over was the kindness of Canadians.

Who knows how things might have turned out? Twenty-five years ago, death was always close in Sri Lanka, which is why my family sent me away to Canada. Maybe I would have been dead had I stayed. But Canadian kindness nudged my life in a better direction.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Canada. Now in my 40s — as a husband and father — I realize this more than ever. Canada gave me a second lease on life. My loyalty is narrow deep.

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