

Roots in Rotterdam: How this port city opened the door to my family history

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Facade of the Hotel New York in Rotterdam with the Holland Amerika Lijn inscription. This former head office of the Holland Amerika Line stands at the Wilhelmina Harbor where the ships started their journey to the USA with new immigrants.

FRANKVANDENBERGH / ISTOCKPHOTO / GETTY IMAGES

On the final day of just over a week of sailing around Norway and the Netherlands, the ship I was on, Holland America Line's Rotterdam, docked in the place for which it was named. With its massive shipping ports and cruise piers, the city has a long history of greeting and bidding bon voyage to the people who sail in and out of its harbour.

Some of them, like me, visit to marvel at the Markthal, an architectural wonder housing a farmers' market and food stalls, or to wander around Katendrecht, the city's rejuvenated riverside neighbourhood that, in previous lives, has been home to dock workers, sex workers and newly arrived Chinese immigrants who established the Dutch metropolis's first Chinatown. For others, like my grandmother, Rotterdam was a gateway to somewhere else, a place far removed from the home she'd known in the tiny Baltic country of Latvia.

In 1944, my grandmother, Valija Kirsons, then 17 years old, decided to visit Latvia's capital, Riga, some 100 kilometres southwest from her grandparents' farm in Rauna. It was the final months of the Second World War, and while she was away, the Soviet front line advanced, retaking Latvia from the Germans and cutting her off from her family. After spending a year as a displaced person in Germany, she passed through Rotterdam on her way to a job at a wool mill in Bradford, England, before nursing college and a health care career in Canada. My Latvian grandfather, Harry Laimons Grauds, had arrived in Montreal a few years earlier, sailing to North America from Sweden. They met in London, Ont., in their small community of Baltic immigrants.

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While I was in Rotterdam, it was impossible not to think about the paths their lives had taken. Along with our own ship, Holland America's Volendam was also docked in the city's port and had been since April. Instead of cruise passengers, it housed 1,500 Ukrainian refugees as well as crew members, on board to provide meals, laundry and cleaning services for the families who will live there until the end of September.



Optimist on Tour in de Leuvehaven bij het Maritiem Museum in Rotterdam.

MARCO DE SWART/HANDOUT

The municipal government has chartered the ship from the cruise line as a stop-gap solution while permanent housing is arranged for the 50,000 refugees in total the Netherlands has agreed to take in. Until then, this harbour would be their gateway to somewhere else, too.

Rotterdam's history as a port city of significance is almost immediately obvious to casual tourists and visitors. "The terminal that's still used by modern cruise ships is in fact the original terminal that was used in the forties and fifties," says Bill Miller, an author and historian who specializes in transatlantic ocean liner travel. "When you walk through that terminal, you're walking through history."

Miller also points to the Maritime Museum Rotterdam, a 10-minute walk from the port, which has its own harbour for exhibiting historical ships and shipping equipment. “And of course the Hotel New York right next to the terminal,” he adds, referring to the building that once housed Holland America’s offices. “That in itself is a mini museum. You would go in there to purchase your ticket or do some documentation in the early days up until they moved out in the 1970s.” Following the sale of Holland America to a U.S. company, its records and documents were donated to the Rotterdam City Archives where they were digitized and can now be accessed freely, allowing the families of those who passed through the port to trace the journeys of their ancestors.





In 2024, the Fenix Museum, a cultural centre dedicated to migration, will open its doors.

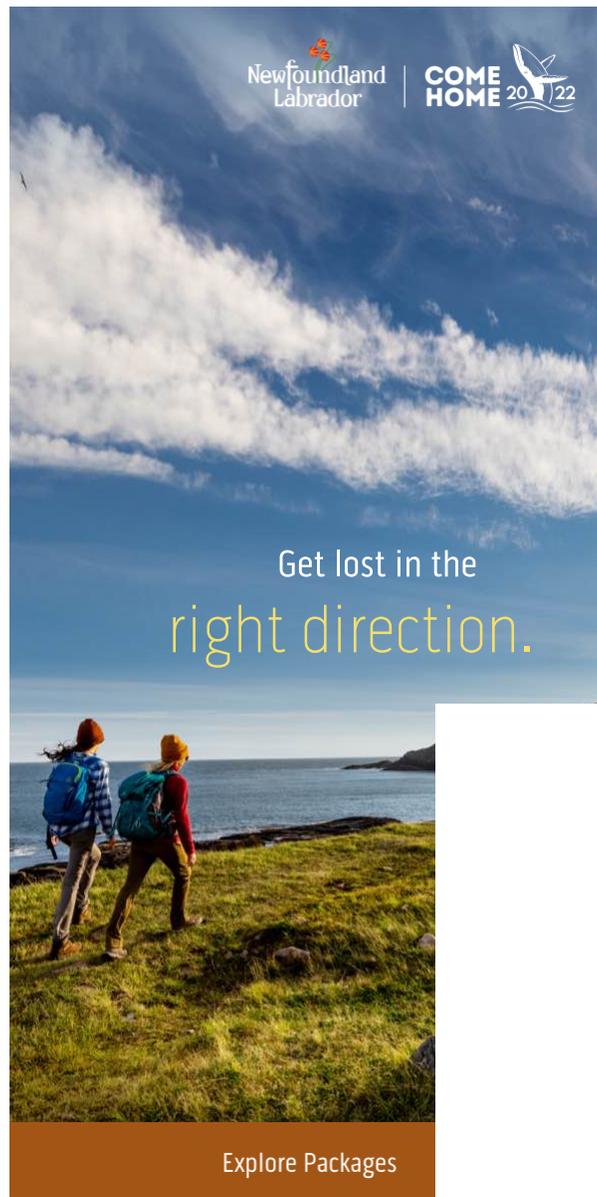
MAD ARCHITECTS

Look into any corner of the city and you'll find a story about the migration of goods and people at its roots. In 2014, a census by the Washington-based Migration Policy Institute found that almost half of Rotterdam's population was from abroad or had at least one parent who was. That number is even higher in Afrikaanderwijk, a neighbourhood in the borough of Feijenoord, which was developed to house migrant dockworkers when the city's port expanded in the late 19th century.

Here Rotterdam residents with Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese backgrounds continue to build a vibrant and evolving community on the south shore of the Maas River while city planners work successfully to replace defunct industrial facilities with green spaces. The area is now the site of the city's first sustainable and ecologically conscious "floating homes," built in the unused harbour of Nassauhaven – an effort with the two-pronged goal of preserving wildlife and expanding the housing supply.

And Rotterdam isn't done telling its story as a hub for the movement of people and their belongings. In 2024, the Fenix Museum, a cultural centre dedicated to migration, will open its doors. The museum's home will be inside what was once the largest warehouse in the world and located, not coincidentally, in Katendrecht.

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As a nod to the neighbourhood's history as Rotterdam's first Chinatown, the project's founders have hired Beijing-based firm MAD Architects to execute the double helix staircase and viewing platform central to the redesign. The goal of the project is to tell the stories of some of the three million people for whom Rotterdam was a departure point to a new life in Canada or the U.S. – among them Albert Einstein, the artist Willem de Kooning, and the pioneering physician and women's suffrage activist Aletta Jacobs, founder of one of the world's first birth-control clinics.

The collection will include photographs, commissioned artwork and historical artifacts. The curation team is also designing a luggage labyrinth built from 2,000 donated suitcases, both vintage and contemporary, a metaphor for the experience of travel itself and another reason for future visitors to make a stop in Rotterdam

The writer travelled as a guest of Holland America Line, which did not review or approve this article.

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