Sikh Soldier Prabhnoor Singh Sidhu’s Journey to Canada.

By: Prabhnoor Kaur Sidhu

Once upon a time, the British Monarchy ruled over both India and Canada. During the Nineteenth Century, Punjab, now a state in Northern India, joined the British Empire and the Sikh Army came under the British Command.

In 1887, after celebrating the Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in London, England, the Punjabi Sikh Soldiers from the Hong Kong Regiment became the first Sikhs to visit Canada. The Sikh Soldiers were impressed by the warm climate and beautiful landscape of British Columbia which was all quite like their homeland in Punjab.

One of first Sikh Soldiers to visit Canada in 1887 was the Sikh Soldier Prabhnoor Singh Sidhu. When Prabhnoor arrived back home in Punjab, his family was very excited to hear about the beautiful landscape of Canada. Soon, the Sidhu family started making plans to settle in Canada where they would have more rights, freedoms, and better opportunities for education, healthcare, and jobs, so, that they could enjoy a happy, healthy, and prosperous life.

The Sidhu family soon found out that to travel and settle in Canada, they would have to borrow a lot of money or sell their ancestral land. The family decided to keep their property which had been handed down from generation to generation and decided to borrow money from their relatives to send just Prabhnoor to Canada at first. Prabhnoor would go to Canada by boat because back then going by boat was the only way to get to Canada. Prabhnoor was sad to leave his home in Punjab, but, the family was happy and excited that Prabhnoor was going to Canada where one day they would join him and start a better life with more opportunities.

In 1905, Prabhnoor took a boat to Canada. Soon his boat journey became very unpleasant because some of the people were getting seasick as this was their first time in a boat. It was freezing and dirty, and they were running out of food. The ship took several months to arrive in Vancouver, BC.

Prabhnoor took a train ride to Surrey and started living there with his soldier friend from the Hong Kong Regiment. He noticed that everything in Canada was much bigger and better built than in India. Prabhnoor was now a retired Sikh Soldier, a veteran of the British Army. He started looking for a job so that he could earn money and bring his family to Canada. He finally found a job in a bush camp. He had never worked in the bush before but knew he could do it. He and another worker would cut down trees all day along. They lived in a small trailer, cooked their food, and hauled their water from the nearby creek for drinking and cooking. Once a month Prabhnoor took a ride with his boss to the nearest town and got
groceries, took a shower, and did his laundry. Prabhnoor had never seen the snow before, but now he had to work in -50-degree Celsius temperatures. He had to wear three layers of clothes to keep warm. He and his co-worker lived in the bush in a small trailer. Occasionally, the furnace in the trailer would stop working, so, they would spend the night wearing lots of clothes to keep warm, but all their food would freeze including the milk, pop, and water they used for drinking and cooking.

Occasionally, Prabhnoor’s friend came for a visit and brought food supplies and mail. Once Prabhnoor tried cooking what he thought were the big chicken legs. He thought this would be his first butter chicken dinner in a very long time. He continued to boil the meat for several hours, but it did not cook very well. Prabhnoor and his friend were hungry. There was not anything else to eat at the time, so, they ate the meat after adding more spices. Later Prabhnoor’s boss told him that Prabhnoor was cooking turkey legs not the chicken legs.

Prabhnoor felt very lonely. He had left behind his family and friends in India. Sometimes he would dream that he was in hot India but woke up to a cold freezing morning. One day he opened a can of Pepsi which froze after their furnace had stopped working. He was in pain when his tongue got stuck to the frozen beverage. Prabhnoor soon moved to a nearby city and worked on three jobs. Soon he made enough money to buy a house, furniture, and an old car.

In 1908, the Canadian Government passed two exclusion laws aimed to prevent the Sikh migrants from coming to Canada. The Sikhs were required to arrive in Canada by a continuous journey, and they were to have $200 in savings. However, in comparison, the European migrants only needed $25 in savings. This law applied to Prabhnoor’s family and his relatives and other friends who had wished to settle in Canada as there was no continuous journey from India to Canada at the time.

In 1914, Prabhnoor heard that a Sikh, Gurdit Singh Sandhu from Singapore, had purchased a ship called the Komagata Maru, to help the Sikhs who had been blocked to enter Canada due to the exclusion laws. Prabhnoor told his relatives and friends about the Komagata Maru ship coming to Canada.

As soon as Prabhnoor could afford the travel, he visited his family in India. He told his family and friends about the good life in Canada. Many of their friends and relatives said that they wanted to go to Canada and live there the same way Prabhnoor lived. Prabhnoor helped many relatives and friends with the $200 they needed in savings for the journey.
Soon many of Prabhnoor’s friends and his family were on their way to Canada on board the Komagata Maru. When the ship arrived in Vancouver, Canada with 376 passengers, the police did not let the passengers get off the boat. Prabhnoor did not understand why he and his family were not allowed to land in Vancouver as he was a very loyal, noble, and dedicated Sikh Soldier to the British Empire and had been living in Canada before this. Months went by, but no one could get off the boat except the people who had visited Canada previously. Prabhnoor and his family could get off the ship, but many others were forced to go back to India where the police killed many of them.

Prabhnoor and his family worked hard, saved money and decided to fight for the rights of all Asians. In 1943, Prabhnoor joined a delegation led by Dr. Pandia to win back their voting rights which had been denied to them in 1907 by the BC Government. Prabhnoor helped create a case which the delegation presented to BC’s Premier Hart and then to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa in a hope to earn the voting and the citizenship rights for Asians. On April 2, 1947, after 40 years of denial, the voting rights were granted to all Asians including the Sikhs.

Prabhnoor and his family lived in Canada happily ever after. His three daughters became doctors and served the communities where Prabhnoor worked as a migrant worker.