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More on the Origin of Refuge

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I stand on the beach
and the country I left behind is there
in front of me.

– Thuong Vuong-Riddick, "For My Father"

I am grateful to Dagmar Soennecken for inviting me to contribute to the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Refuge*. I learned about the celebration in a surprise phone call from Howard Adelman one morning this spring; and it was a pleasure not only to catch up and reminisce with him, but also to discover what a superb scholarly journal *Refuge* had become, and even to find all forty years' worth of issues here in the library of UC Berkeley, where I am now an English professor. Never would I have expected that the little eight-page newsletter first published in May 1981 would grow up in such a way. In his contribution to the June (2022) issue, Howard Adelman has told the basic story of its origin, with me as its first editor. Here, I would like to add a more personal memory of the same events, sharing my amazement at how naive I was, yet how well it all turned out.

As Howard (Adelman, 2022) has described, *Refuge* grew out of Operation Lifeline, so my memories of its origin are bound up with those of its parent organization. At

the beginning of 1979, I was studying in London. Having grown up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., with its ambient illusion that its activities were the center of the world, I had mistaken my own interests in math and foreign languages, arts and cultures for interests in economics and international affairs. Soon after my Canadian parents packed me off to the University of Toronto, however, I dropped economics in favor of English. Under the combined influences of Northrop Frye's lectures on cultural universals, and friends' accounts of Noam Chomsky's hypotheses of linguistic universals, I managed to retain some delusion that I might eventually do something involving international affairs, while never studying anything in that area at all; and, abetted by every colonial English student's longing to see England, I meandered off to study Linguistics at University College London.

London in 1978–79 turned out to be not the London of Stephen Spender, however, so much as that of *The Clash*. After dinner in my residence, I'd sit in the common room reading the newspapers. Truckers were on strike; London was claimed to be threatened with starvation because of unions, and James Callaghan's Labor Party was defeated by

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the Conservatives under their new leader, Margaret Thatcher. The Shah left Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini returned, and there was revolution in the streets. And in the South China Sea, hundreds of thousands of refugees were fleeing Vietnam, drowning while the rest of the world debated whether to help. I remember letters and editorials fretting about implications U.S. help for the refugees might have for understanding the U.S. role in the history that had brought the crisis about, and a crisp response from Joan Baez that when people are drowning you rescue them first and sort the politics later. I knew immediately that she spoke for me.

When exams were finished, I went back to Toronto for what was left of the summer. I found the stories of drowning Vietnamese refugees in the papers there too; but also, alongside continued frustration at slow governmental responses, I found encouragement of other ways to help. As Howard (Adelman, 2022) recounted, I read a column in the *Globe and Mail* (Beddoes, 1979) describing how any group of ordinary Canadians could join together and sponsor refugees, enabling them to resettle in Canada irrespective of government quotas, and listing his phone number for anyone who wanted to know more. There was too little time before the start of the academic year for me to get a job (tuition would be about \$735, rent for my studio in the Annex about \$40 a week, and student loans could make getting by possible), so I picked up the phone and asked how I could help. I said I didn't have money, but I did have some time, and Howard told me to come on over.

Unsurprisingly, the help that was needed most was answering the phone, which was ringing off the hook with calls from other people also asking how they could help. I had no answers to anyone's questions, but on the wall, there was another phone

number, for the Ministry of Employment and Immigration. In what seems a fairy tale memory of good old days, or perhaps just of another country, that number was always answered promptly by an actual person, knowledgeable and helpful, who would explain what the rules were, and how they might pertain to whatever specific situation potential sponsors were asking about. It is those phone calls that I think of as the origin of *Refuge*: a simple response to a widespread desire to help refugees, and to a need for just a little more information and connection for that desire to be put into action.

Once the academic year started, I didn't have time to be much help myself, but I pitched in enough to see Operation Lifeline become an organization with a name, a place, a grant, a small staff led by Wendy Schelew, a board of directors led by Howard, and a host of volunteers offering support for private sponsorship groups across the country. And I could see a bit of what sponsorship involved, because my boyfriend, who had an actual job with an actual salary, was part of a group. He had phoned some number to ask how he could help — Operation Lifeline? he can't remember — and been put in touch with someone at the University of Toronto who was organizing friends of friends and willing strangers into a group that would eventually piece together enough money to sponsor a mother, her three children and an older male relative. They rented a modest apartment for them near Sorauren and Dundas (which would now probably cost upwards of \$3,000 a month) and tried to learn as much about Vietnamese culture as they could, to make it as welcoming as possible. In their excitement at the family's arrival, though, they neglected to notice that it was happening on October 31, and to prepare them for what they would see when they first answered the door in their

new home: children dressed as witches and goblins and ghosts, demanding candy.

When the academic year ended, I had a B.A. in English, a Diploma in Linguistics, enough money for one more week's rent, and no plan; but out of the blue I got a call from Wendy saying Operation Lifeline's beloved office manager, Nancy Curleigh, was leaving, and inviting me to apply for the job. I knew I wasn't Nancy and couldn't organize people like she could; but of course, I still leapt at the chance. I loved the office, which was a big open space in an old low building at the bottom of York St. where it meets Lake Ontario. The building has now been demolished and replaced by a 37-story luxury-condominium tower, but then it housed an eclectic assortment of impecunious non-profits, like an employment office for the refugees, and the graphic artists who designed *Refuge's* original logo. Its neighbor was another old low building, which still houses the post office to which we would soon be hauling big burlap sacks full of the first issues of *Refuge*. Every day, passing out of Union Station and under the Gardiner felt like leaving downtown's world of power and money behind, and emerging into a world of different possibilities.

Fortunately, what I enjoyed most, which was trying to answer people's questions, still seemed needed; but by then the kinds of questions being asked were very different from those of a year before. Private sponsorship had become an established practice; government sponsorship had increased significantly; refugees had been resettled across Canada; and institutional support had been put in place. Yet everything was so much more complex than had been anticipated. Social and economic integration was often taking longer than the year for which support was guaranteed, and what followed was varying greatly depending on what form of

sponsorship was involved. Refugees' talents and training were going to waste because their credentials didn't translate into the Canadian context. The refugees themselves were turning out to be coming not just from Vietnam, but also from Laos and Cambodia; among those from Vietnam, some were ethnically Chinese and others Vietnamese, while among those from Laos some were Lao and others Hmong; and people from all these different groups often had different needs. It is embarrassing to think that that had to be learned, but it did. These complexities brought new problems to be solved: individual questions had become policy questions and answering them required information about common experiences. I think of this as the next stage in the origin of *Refuge*.

As Howard ([Adelman, 2022](#)) recounts, he and Wendy hatched the idea of a newsletter that would do some of that work and asked me to take on the project and serve as its editor. It would be impossible to overemphasize how clueless I was about what that would involve. In Washington I had had summer jobs in the research and publications departments of the International Monetary Fund, where one particularly wonderful supervisor had taught me the basics of proofreading copy; and Howard and Wendy had probably noticed that I was a fussy writer. But that was no more a qualification for the job than knowing how to set a table would have been for running a restaurant.

Nonetheless, we got it rolling the way we did most things, with a brainstorming session in Wendy's office, where she walked me through how to write a grant proposal requesting funding for the project from the federal government — rationale, audience, plan, timetable, budget, etc. I wish I could have found a copy of that proposal, because it's hard to square what I imagine it would have said with what came of it. As far as I can

remember, the intended audience was not so much individual sponsors, though of course we hoped some would be interested, and some were, so much as those in the myriad institutions — federal and provincial governments, religious and secular agencies — who worked with and for refugees in Canada and around the world. At Operation Lifeline we received newsletters from many other such institutions and agencies — one from the U.S. stands out in my mind — perhaps from the U.S. Committee for Refugees? — which had a wealth of information of the kind that seemed wanted. Little of it, though, was tailored to the Canadian situation, where laws, institutions, languages, cultures, and foreign relations were all different. In the early 1980s, that distinctiveness would have been a big selling point with the federal government to which we were applying, and my guess is that it was central to the rationale we submitted for what would become *Refuge*.

If the official rationale for *Refuge* centered on the Canadian response to the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, however, the unofficial rationale was certainly an irrepressible desire shared by everyone at Operation Lifeline to better understand the broader context to which that experience belonged. Those newsletters from other institutions and agencies contained information about other groups of refugees, and about very different responses to their situations—at the time, the situation of those from El Salvador seeking entry to the U.S. particularly stood out to me. Again, it is embarrassing to remember how eye-opening it was to discover that the Southeast Asian refugees were only one group among many, or how many legal distinctions affected policy—Convention refugees v. those fleeing war and other disasters, designated groups v. individual claimants, repatriation v. resettlement. etc., never mind the political contexts in which

it all unfolded. We took it for granted that this broader context, and the lessons it could offer as well as the challenges it would reveal, would be of interest to a broad Canadian audience newly sensitized to refugee issues.

Of course, I was thrilled when our application was successful, but only then did I realize that I had not thought through one important question, which was where the articles were going to come from. Practical information like press releases from the government, and announcements from private organizations, were easy; but the challenge was the deep stories. In an early version of the problem that it is now recognized as a crisis for journalism—support for distribution but not for creation of content—I had neglected to include any budget for research and writing. My guess is that with basic needs of refugees in mind I might have felt it somehow immoral. (As I've said, I was unfit for the job—what I wouldn't give now to live in a world where not just scholarly research, but also investigative journalism, was publicly funded!) We had put together a splendid editorial board—lawyers, scholars, journalists, and others who might have had ideas for contributors—but I was so grateful to them for having agreed to be on it that I felt shy about asking them for anything more. I remember a conversation with one member of it, a supportive publisher who was interested in sending a reporter to investigate the situation of refugees from Mozambique; but the idea of spending money on travel costs when sponsors were finding themselves desperate for money to cover dental emergencies seemed so unthinkable that I couldn't bring myself even to ask what she might have had in mind.

Yet miraculously, articles seemed somehow to appear. I guess we were right that a forum for discussion had been needed. Howard has already mentioned some of the

ones I remember best, sometimes because of controversy I was unprepared for. There was the boilerplate welcome message from Prime Minister [Trudeau \(1981\)](#) whose government had provided the funding, a message which a colleague from Québec told me should have come from the politically neutral Governor General, a suggestion which rattled me at the time but in retrospect I find hilarious. There was also Linda [Durno's \(1981\)](#) inaugural article on Somali refugees from Ethiopia, which I was proud to publish but dismayed to find greeted by a complaint that it perpetuated stereotypes of Africans as abject; [James Hathaway and Michael Schelew's "La persécution par la proscription économique," \(1981\)](#) which opened my mind to new possibilities of not only legal interpretations, but also forms of harm; and Howard's own on UNRWA ([Adelman, 1982](#)), which provoked our first critical letter to the editor. I think I especially remember these because the ideas and information in them were so new to me — they came out of that unofficial rationale of trying to understand the larger context in which our work had been unfolding. But there were also much appreciated contributions more tethered to *Refuge's* official, more practical rationale: [Maureen Johnson's](#) description ([1981](#)) of an innovative refugee camp facilitated and funded by CUSO but built and run jointly by the Thai villagers it neighbored and the Khmer refugees it sheltered; Carolyne Dowdell's account of Baha'i spiritual assemblies' system of collectively guaranteeing individual sponsorships ([Hanson, 1982a](#)); Vera Arkell, Carole Paré and Tien Hoang, and Roni Chaleff's short articles on the role of "Friendship Families" ([Arkell, 1981](#); [Chaleff, 1981](#); [Johnson, 1981](#); [Paré & Hoang, 1981](#)), the then-innovative program of integrating private personal support into government sponsorships, the success of which, I gather, came to play a crucial role in

subsequent Canadian refugee resettlement policies ([Spiegel, 2000](#)). I was surprised to discover that I even wrote some articles myself, on topics like the use of secret security certificates in the refugee determination process ([Hanson, 1982b](#)), which I remember nothing about and can't imagine I would have known anything about then, either, apart from what I'd read coming across my desk; most likely they were topics I'd felt had to be addressed, but that I hadn't known who to ask to write about.

I also remember vividly Firdaus [Kharas' \(1982\)](#) piece on classifying refugee source countries, because it was while I was editing it that I suddenly realized how much I would like to be not just editing other people's research, but doing research of my own; and in the very next moment realized that if I were doing research of my own it would not be about anything having to do with refugee policy. If there was one thing that *Refuge* had taught me it was that the need for refugee policy at all was a symptom of failed policies—of war and injustice; of persecution, deprivation, and destruction—and I had no reason to think that any research I could do would ever contribute anything useful to ending any of that. As it happened, at that same time we were winding Operation Lifeline down, as its specific job was done and none of us wished to see it become a charity dependent on perpetuation of a need. Of course, I didn't want *Refuge* to end, too; so, I was thrilled by Howard's suggestion that Operation Lifeline's archives, including the library that Caroline Stephens had been helping build up around *Refuge*, could move to York University to become the core of a Center for Refugee Studies, where *Refuge* would continue under his editorship. Together with Caroline and Howard, and Shirra Freeman who was just beginning to work with us, I helped move *Refuge* to its

new home. Then I moved away myself and left the little newsletter to become a journal. After a few of the diversions life is prone to, I began a Ph.D. program in Linguistics, wrote a dissertation on meter, and got a faculty position in English.

Of course, the experience of working on *Refuge* left me with an abiding interest in refugees and refugee policy in its own right. Living in California, it is impossible not to be aware and ashamed of the U.S.' flouting of its legal and moral responsibilities towards refugees along its border with Mexico, or towards refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, especially while I hear how friends and family back in Canada are calmly putting into practice lessons learned from sponsoring Southeast Asian Refugees and helping refugees from those countries to resettle. Certainly, it is harder to resettle refugees in a country that does not provide adequately for the health, education, and welfare even of its own residents, never mind has a hand in creating refugees in the first place. In 2007, shortly after seventy people were killed when Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad was bombed, I heard an account from a Canadian journalist of Iraqi refugee students living in Damascus, having abandoned their university educations to flee to Syria with their families. I began to form an idea that UC Berkeley could bring some of them here—in a sympathetic and affluent community with lots of empty bedrooms, all that would be needed would be tuition waivers and transitional language instruction, while something like the Canadian private sponsorships could do the rest. Then the financial crisis hit, and the university's reduction of places for California students to make way for its new "high tuition high aid" funding model made helping anyone else too hard a sell.

This persistence of my interest in refugees, even if has not led to anything particularly helpful, brings me, finally, to the question Howard posed, of what my study of English poetry, or his of Hegel's philosophy, might have had to do with refugees? He suggests not much, but I am not fully convinced. Of course, he is right that there is a large measure of circumstance in these things—as Gil [Scott Heron \(1994\)](#) put it, "nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something"—and who knows what something might present itself as feasible at a particular point in time. Still, always, only some things are chosen for attention. Every time I find myself trying to talk some young person out of shortchanging their opportunity for a general education because of too anxious a search for a vocation, I can't help but ponder what through-line there might have been for me.

The particular conception of language that caught my imagination was [Chomsky's \(1968\)](#) conception of it as individual knowledge of a grammar, shaped by an innate capacity to develop such knowledge; and what held my imagination was my adviser Paul Kiparsky's conception of literary forms' relationship to such innately shaped knowledge ([Kiparsky, 1987](#)). Together these conceptions cast not only language, but also art, as human rights, affirming the persistence and vitality of capacities for them even in isolation from the societies and cultures and connections that ordinarily would sustain them. Within literature, an isolated yet expressive mind is what lyric poetry is often taken to represent; and it is also, perhaps, what a refugee experiences. At some point in that first year of *Refuge*, I recall seeing a beautiful short documentary film about a Vietnamese refugee resettled in Toronto who is suffering terribly, until one day she is invited to the home of her sponsors, who

have a piano, which they notice her attention is drawn to. They invite her to play, and as she does, slowly the film shows her becoming herself again. I remember that scene more vividly than any policy analysis I ever edited, yet I suspect the interest came from the same place.

Or perhaps it is just easy for an ordinary person to empathize with the situation of a refugee. It may take a saint to imagine being someone else entirely, living a life full of hardship they themselves haven't experienced; but it is not so hard to imagine being exactly who one is, yet suddenly being forced from one's home. One person I got to know a bit through Operation Lifeline was a young woman named Kai, who was about my age, and had been studying medicine at university in Saigon when she had to flee. Another was Peter Tran, who gave me my first taste of the grown-up feeling of being charmingly greeted by name and offered complimentary aperitifs by a restaurant's proprietor, when I took my mother to his *Saigon Star*, the first Vietnamese restaurant in Toronto. If I remember correctly, in Saigon, Peter had been an English professor.

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