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## Book Review:

# A LENS ON THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

## The Northern Route: An Ethnography of Refugee Experience

Lisa Gilad

*Institute of Social and Economic Research,  
Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland, (1990)*

In 1990, Canada will likely receive about 30,000 asylum seekers. The overwhelming number of these refugee claimants will arrive by plane at Pearson Airport in Toronto, Dorval in Montreal or by car at the Windsor, Fort Erie or Niagara Falls land routes. But there are other routes to Canada as the arrival by sea of 155 Tamils off the coast of Newfoundland in 1986 and 174 Sikhs off the coast of Nova Scotia in 1987 dramatized. It was these obscure entry points that became a worldwide story and led to the summer recall of Parliament for only the second time in this century to introduce new legislation to control and even deter the intake of refugees into Canada.

This review is being written the day after a Boeing 727 with 16 Peruvian crew members flew off course and missed its refuelling stop at Gander airport in Newfoundland, Canada. It disappeared into the dark waters of the North Atlantic. All aboard are presumed lost.

For years, Gander has been a lifeline for planes en route to North America which need to stop for refuelling. But Gander has also been a lifeline for those fleeing totalitarian regimes. It has been dubbed the "Northern Route" by refugees. Gilad begins her book like a movie. We see Gander through the eyes of a sweaty, nervous asylum seeker lining up for his Pepsi and looking for an authority figure to whom s/he can run and blurt out, "I want political asylum." In 1988, 203 individuals arrived in Canada via that route. In 1989, there were 499. A number of others jump ship when boats stop in St. John's for fuel and supplies. The book uses Newfoundland as a window to explore the experience of the refugee as s/he goes through various stages in seeking to remain in Canada. These experiences are compared to those

who come as humanitarian refugees selected abroad by the Canadian government. Approximately 80 a year are sent by Ottawa to Torbay Airport in St. John's for resettlement in that maritime province.

Though Newfoundland - the name is so appropriate - is the ultimate destination for those seeking refuge, the experience begins in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in Iran, in Cuba, in Vietnam and even in El Salvador. And the asylum seekers pass through many lands - Italy, Austria, Pakistan, Thailand,

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Malaysia, Indonesia, Mexico, the United States. Thus an island in the North Atlantic is used as a lens through which the reader is taken into the experience of refugees worldwide.

There are a number of books about the experiences of a particular group of refugees. There are others about the policies of government who admit or limit the admission of refugee claims. There are none that I am aware of that explore the interface between the experience and self-perception of the refugees and the experiences of those who receive them - the settlement workers, the language teachers, the volunteers and the gatekeepers, those

who implement the policies of states who view refugees as both an uncontrollable threat to proper management as well as people with humanitarian needs. Perhaps this book, looking at the world from such a personal perspective, could only be written in a province of only slightly more than half a million people with an unemployment rate that is the highest in Canada and often exceeds 20%. Why would refugees go to an island in the windswept north Atlantic? Why would people with the lowest incomes and the highest unemployment rates receive these people with such hospitality? Though 80% of the arrivals will undertake a secondary migration to other parts of Canada, nevertheless, the unique angle of vision not only gives us a view of the world, but serves as a comment for those wealthy cities like Toronto which serve as reception centres for 25% of the arrivals in Canada and powerful cities like Ottawa where the decisions on refugee policy are made.

Bills C-55 and C-84 were passed in an environment of emergency, catalyzed by the arrival of a few hundred refugees on the maritime coast, and set the foundation for Canadian policy in the 90's. They also directly impacted on local opinion and the refugees' self-perception. The period chosen for the study thus is as unique as the angle of vision.

Lisa Gilad became personally involved with everyone involved in the process in Newfoundland. Those parts of the book, propelled by a combination of compassion and analytic skill, make for the most compelling reading. They are in Part II. Part I begins with an imaginative reenactment of the refugees' experience in his/her country of origin and continues en route based on Gilad's interviews but without Gilad's personality and involvement.

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Refuge, Vol. 10, No. 1 (October 1990)

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Following an introduction centred on a discussion of methodology, Chapter 2 focuses on the motives of the refugees fleeing - both those who were victims of active and direct persecution and those who were victims of more generalized oppression by the state. Though not overtly intended to test the thesis, widely believed by policy makers and controllers, that generous refugee policies are an inducement to flight, the chapter provides overwhelming personal evidence to refute the belief. There is not one shred of personal testimony to indicate that generous refugee policies have any role in determining the decision to leave. For a

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Cuban suffering from general state oppression, "About the decision to leave, you begin to think that you cannot live like this forever." Persecution, a general atmosphere of fear and deception, government hypocrisy, religious intolerance, lack of economic fairness rooted in merit, each may contribute to motivating flight. The conditions in the state from which a refugee flees, not the policies of receptor states for processing the refugee claims, determine the decision to flee.

Safety, Gilad concludes in Chapter 3, is the prime factor in determining the first destination. Geo-political considerations, exit control mechanisms and economic resources of the refugees are other factors dictating the escape route. The available transportation may be another important factor which Gilad does not explore. Generous refugee policies have a significant role in determining the route to be taken in the

flight after arrival at the first destination, but not the flight itself.

In the period of waiting, explored in Chapter 4, the refugees are not passive. They form deep and special, if only temporary, special friendships. It also an excellent opportunity which the refugees use to acquire skills - language skills, for example - that the refugees will need for resettlement. There is relatively little effort made by resettlement countries to take advantage of this opportunity of waiting to provide the refugees with skills and knowledge about the culture, history and politics of the country where the refugee hopes to resettle.

Gilad's repetition of old criticisms about the bias in favour of refugees fleeing communist regimes in Eastern Europe in chapter 5 is somewhat obsolete since 1989 - *annus mirabilis* - the year in which Eastern European communism imploded and September of 1990 when the Minister, Barbara McDougall, announced the elimination of the self-exiled designated class for Eastern Europeans fleeing communism, thus ending provision and the automatic preference for those fleeing eastern Europe. Further, in interpreting Hathaway, Gilad concludes (p. 126) that refugee determination under the Refugee Status Advisory Committee (RSAC), prior to the introduction of the new legislation and the processing by the Refugee Board, had a much higher threshold for assessing persecution and, therefore, a far less generous admissions practice. It only becomes clear in reading the footnotes (fn. 57) that this was probably only true of those who were not part of the oral hearing pilot project and the subsequent general practice of required oral hearings (following a Supreme Court ruling). The generalized judgement is, I believe, unwarranted, though the issue requires further research and analysis. Gilad's claim certainly runs contrary to a widespread and equally unwarranted expectation and even belief among some refugee support groups that because the new refugee legislation was intended to deter spontaneous arrivals, the new refugee determination process subjected arrivals to harsher criteria of judgement by the Refugee Board.

Gilad makes another claim - that refugee determination in Canada (as distinct from refugee selection abroad) reflects our national priorities (p. 127). This judgement seems to run counter to her own claim that a lower threshold for determining persecution is used by the Refugee Board. Given the evidence presented, Gilad probably meant to say that access via visas, etc. to arrival in Canada in order to make a claim (not the processing of the claim itself) reflects our national priorities as does the selection of refugees abroad. In this judgement, Gilad is more concerned with assessing this basis as discriminatory from the perspective of some universal standard rather than in explicating and analyzing the role of national interests in refugee selection.

The richest (and most moving) part of the book emerges in the interviews with refugees and settlement officers

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describing the Newfoundland experience in Part II. The sense of excitement, improvisation and initiative of bureaucrats, usually viewed as staid and rule bound, comes across. So does the initiative, integrity and ambitions of the refugees and the support of the citizens of Newfoundland. It was a delight to read that the lady from Marystown, Newfoundland, who had phoned me long distance in late June of 1979 and who I "appointed" on the phone as the Operation Lifeline coordinator in her area, set the precedent for the 20 other sponsorship groups around the province who helped 355 "Boat People" settle in Newfoundland; five years later, 85 were still there. There were of course the usual communication and program problems over language training and the exclusion of women refugees at the time from

training and language programs unless they were heads of households. As well, there were the usual complaints of committed church workers that the government was trying to dump its responsibilities onto the private sector.

What is remarkable is not how atypical but how typical Newfoundland was, in spite of many variations. It was even typical in thrusting up its own version of a one-person settlement agency, in the Newfoundland case, Fred Gibbons who alone was responsible for assisting forty or fifty people. Reading of Fred's role is an inspiration in itself and well worth the cost of the book.

Gilad documents the changes the refugee arrivals brought to the process for resettling refugees and the mistakes made in providing "segregated" housing, the frustrations the refugees had with language (if they did not know English) and their social sense of isolation. The social, ethnic, religious and other networks so vital to the resettlement process are depicted in all their variations but where age is the one constant that crosses all ethnic groups. The older you are, the harder to resettle.

The motives and dilemmas of defining proper settlement for instead of by the refugees are made very clear as are the "improvisational" responses of the refugees through fiddling, etc. Gilad also depicts the very different situation of refugee claimants whose future is uncertain and whose support is rooted in the provincial welfare system rather than the refugee assistance programs of Canada Employment and Immigration. Gilad makes a good case for supporting refugee claimants on the same basis as sponsored refugees. But, of course, that would not be consistent with the principle of humane deterrence.

The Northern Route is a valuable addition to the body of refugee literature, useful both as an introductory text to the refugee experience in Canada as well as an exemplification of the general experience without belying the varied experiences of different groups arriving through different gateways. □

*Reviewed by Howard Adelman*

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