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The Children in Exile: Struggle in Assisting Persecuted Children

Sabine Lübben

During the last decade, UNICEF reports in "The State of the World's Children 1996," war and political upheaval in the world have killed approximately two million children, disabled four to five million children, left twelve million children homeless and an estimated additional ten million children psychologically traumatized.¹ Few of the surviving children ever make it to a safe country like Canada and even then they are not beyond trauma.

It was the Dutch psychoanalyst Hans Keilson who introduced the idea of sequential traumatization to the field of mental health and provided us with a new way to conceptualize resettlement policies and their influences on the wellbeing of child survivors. In a follow-up study of Jewish war orphans in the Netherlands, he not only documented the impact of massive trauma due to political persecution but he also took an interest in the postwar lives of the surviving children and examined the consequences of decisions that were made for them and the influences of different recovery environ-

ments on their development. For this purpose, Keilson distinguished three traumatic sequences: first, the occupation of the Netherlands, the beginning of the terror waged on the Jewish population, and the onslaughts on the social and mental integrity of Jewish families; secondly, the period of direct persecution—deportation of parents

and children, separation of mother and child, going into hiding, detention in concentration camps; and thirdly, the postwar period during which the main issue was that of appointing guardians.

Keilson showed that "not only the period during which the actual disaster takes place (second traumatic

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sequence) but also the subsequent period (third traumatic sequence) is essential to an adequate understanding and evaluation of events in the traumatized development of children." He demonstrated that a 'favourable' second traumatic sequence and a less favourable third traumatic sequence will lead to more severe psychopathologic reactions than an adverse second but favourable third sequence. "If," Keilson writes, "the post persecution environment is unable to break the chain of traumatizing factors it will further intensify the traumatic events for the child."² With this pioneer study, Keilson was the first researcher who documented that traumatization can go on even though the original persecution has already stopped.

It is surprising to see that while there has been more than fifty years of clinical research on persecuted children and an even longer tradition of investigating childhood trauma, there is still so much more to learn. Meeting a refu-

A Farewell Note From the Managing Editor:

With this issue of *Refuge* on child refugees, I am moving on to pursue other interests. It has been a wonderful experience and a real pleasure for me to manage a rich blend of books and reports, and a variety of special issues in *Refuge*, published by the Centre for Refugee Studies since 1992. I have had the privilege of working with a number of professors, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff associated with the Centre, and I thank everyone of them for their assistance and co-operation in bringing out these publications. More specifically, I wish to express my sincere thanks to Professor Howard Adelman, founding editor of this periodical, and the founding director of the Centre, for nurturing a strong sense of commitment to the dissemination of analytical information on refugee issues, and to the present editor, Professor Michael Lanphier who continues that tradition of excellence.

Arul S. Aruliah

gee child, one is often startled to realize how guarded and controlled such a child can be. As a result of the multitude of harms they have had to experience, they have learned that life is fragile, and worse, their trust in adults is severely diminished. Often they have witnessed victimized, persecuted adults whose function it was to protect them, rendered helpless, and in some instances, they have been lied to by their families about the reasons why they had to go into exile and about the amount of time they would spend there. They not only feel alienated from the new environment; they also feel alienated from the adults in their own families who, more often than not, have had to struggle with their own problems and precarious emotional balance. Frequently, these children try to be independent and self-sufficient in every way, they seem to be precociously mature for their age and usually work hard in school and in jobs. They have goals and hopes but one has the impression that their wishes reflect their expectations rather than childlike dreams about the future.

These struggles put refugee children squarely into the centre of trauma research. Is this observed maturity of refugee children an indicator of genuine resilience of young children towards extreme trauma or is it an indicator of reactive pathology? What does extreme trauma really mean in respect to refugee children? In adults, we assume that trauma has the effect of disrupting their lives, causing breakdown of psychosocial functioning or even generating a collapse of the structure of the self. Children, however, are still in the process of developing and building a self and trauma not only has the effect of disrupting their lives or destabilizing their psychological equilibrium but also that of inhibiting growth. Traumatized children do not merely decline in functioning. Because of war and forced subsequent migration, children lose valuable time and opportunities to develop their capacities and acquire new skills. In the host country, they have to make up for this lost time and there may still be

incalculable costs in the extraordinary efforts they make to catch up with their contemporaries. How does this influence an unfolding personality? And what can society do to strengthen the young ego?

The opportunities to re-traumatize and add to the burden of refugee children in the host society are numerous. The authors of this special issue of *Refuge* have gathered examples from refugee camps, court rooms and schools to show how the special needs of refugee

and insecure negatively influencing their adjustment in school, observes Maria Yau in her study on "Refugee Students in Toronto Schools." She documents that schools and teachers are not prepared to adequately assist refugee students in their adjustment and that the few available resources are not sufficiently coordinated. Basic strategies need to be discussed: Do teachers need to know which student is a refugee and which is an immigrant? Does a child need to be intro-

programs focusing on preventive intervention.

Guatemalan refugee families in Mexican refugee camps face even more precarious conflicts, report Ina Sàenz-Romero and Juan José Sánchez-Sosa from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Almost 50 percent of the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico have already been born in the camps and are Mexicans by birth. Many of these families are seriously divided over the issue of whether to return to Guatemala or to assimilate to the host country. It is the adolescents especially who remember terror and massacres and who experience the repatriation initiatives as serious threats to their wellbeing. The authors present the wide range of psychosocial and educational programs that have been developed for refugee children and their parents and acquaint us with very powerful and original examples of how to support the personal development and cultural identity of refugees in general.

The authors of this issue argue that most of the painful experiences of refugee children in the resettlement countries are preventable. There is nothing inevitable in court proceedings, school programs or family disruptions and the authors have accumulated a myriad of suggestions as to how one can help improve the situation of refugee children so that disregarding these children's best interests and needs will no longer be an option. ■

Notes

1. "The State of the World's Children 1996," UNICEF, Internet Homepage.
2. *Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern*, Hans Keilson, Ferdinand Enke Verlag, Stuttgart, 1979.
3. Last year (1996) the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University made a first attempt and compiled a book containing addresses and a short program description of resettlement agencies that are serving refugee children in the Toronto area. □

Sabine Lübben was a visiting research associate at the Centre for Refugee Studies, and is presently at University of Frankfurt, Germany.

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children are overlooked or underestimated in the public sphere and how families struggle to simply maintain some vestige of emotional equilibrium.

Geraldine Sadaway asks if there are really fundamental differences in the way adults and children are persecuted in their home countries, in her article on "Refugee Children before the IRB," or is it that there are rather implicit philosophical assumptions about the meaning of childhood and the personhood of children that are responsible for the classification of refugee claims into "direct" (parents) and "indirect" (children) persecution?

That the best interests of the child should prevail in all legal and administrative decisions—as evidenced by the recent *IRB Guidelines* on child refugees, and acknowledged by the Canadian Government by its ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Tom Clark explores this in his account of "The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and Refugees: One NGO's Experience with the Reporting Process." Then, why are family reunifications not speeded up and children not heard or directly represented in deportation matters?

Long bureaucratic processes and legal procedures leave children worried

duced as a refugee child in class? If schools pay special attention to refugee students, do they label a child as "special" when what the child wants is to be "normal"? How can schools reach their parents and involve them in their children's schooling process? What kind of training is necessary so that teachers can become allies of traumatized children and receive the necessary guidance to enable them to make well-informed decisions on when and where to get help for a particular child?

Ilene Hyman, Morton Beiser, and Nhi Vu, a team from the South-East Asian Refugee Youth Project of the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry and the University of Toronto Department of Psychiatry, analyze the personal and social resources refugee youth use to cope with adversity. One of the most important resources, they demonstrate, lies within the refugee child's family. It is extremely important that the parents demonstrate an interest in their children's activities, that they are able to discuss competing intrafamilial and host country values and help their offspring to become proud of their ethnic backgrounds, young people told the researchers. Frequently, families need help in identifying and addressing conflicting issues, the authors write, and they underline the need for