

“We Are in the Middle of Two Great Powers”: Refugees, Activists, and Government during the Plattsburgh Border Crisis of 1987

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Abstract

In early 1987 the Canadian government closed its border to hundreds of would-be refugees streaming north from the United States. Forced to flee the newly passed Immigration Reform and Control Act, refugees from Central America, Southeast Asia, and eastern Africa found themselves trapped between the two countries. This article examines the reasons for the Canadian government’s policy shift, the temporary refugee camp it created in upstate New York, and the camp’s effect on the border town of Plattsburgh, NY.

Résumé

En début 1987, le gouvernement canadien décida de fermer sa frontière, précédemment ouverte, à des centaines de réfugiés potentiels en provenance des États-Unis, obligés de fuir vers le nord en raison de l’adoption récente d’une loi sur la réforme et le contrôle de l’immigration (Immigration Reform and Control Act). Des réfugiés de l’Amérique centrale, de l’Asie du Sud-Est, et de l’Afrique orientale se sont ainsi trouvés pris dans une position incertaine entre ces deux pays. Cet article étudie les raisons pour ce changement de politique de la part du gouvernement canadien, le camp de réfugiés temporaire qui en résulta dans le nord de l’État de New York et l’impact du camp sur la ville frontalière de Plattsburgh, NY.

We are in the middle of two great powers, the U.S. and Canada. The U.S. doesn’t want us here. Canada doesn’t want us – now anyway. I can’t go back to Salvador. So we wait here.

—“Carlos,” March 1, 1987¹

I truly believe that was Plattsburgh’s finest hour.

—Rose M. Pandozy,

Clinton County Social Services Commissioner,

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Confused and often penniless, hundreds of would-be refugees like Carlos found themselves unexpectedly trapped between Canada and the United States. On February 20, 1987, Canadian immigration officials barred hundreds of prospective refugees from entering Canada until after their asylum applications had been processed, effectively stranding them in small communities just south of the U.S.-Canada border. This refusal took most refugee claimants from the sixteen war-torn countries on Canada’s B-1 list by surprise. Prior to February 20, nationals from countries on the B-1 list who applied for asylum at a Canadian port of entry were automatically accepted into Canada while immigration reviewed their asylum applications. The list reflected the Canadian government’s belief that most of those nationals had deserving claims for asylum.

Canada’s suddenly closed gates shocked refugees and activists who knew of Canada’s previous reputation as a welcoming country for refugees. Just a few months prior to Canada’s revocation of the B-1 list, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees awarded the Canadian people the Fridjof Nansen Medal for outstanding service

to refugees, marking the first time the award was given to a people or government.³ This article examines why, with such a sterling record in refugee rights, the Canadian government reversed course, what happened to the refugees it rejected, and how the arrival of hundreds of refugees transformed the communities they were stranded in.

Canada's change in policy stemmed from a shifting refugee and immigration climate in Canada brought on by shifts in global refugee flows, administrative inefficiencies in Canada's immigration office, and a public fearful of an "overwhelming" tide of refugees. One of the most notable consequences of this policy was the creation of refugee shelters along the U.S.-Canada border. Particularly interesting is what I call the "Plattsburgh Border Crisis" in Plattsburgh, NY. This small town of fewer than 30,000 people suddenly found itself, in the spring of 1987, hosting hundreds of refugees trapped between a border newly sealed by the Canadian government, and a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) threatening to deport them. During the course of four months, refugees, activists, and local government officials built and maintained a temporary refugee camp, caring for up to 200 refugees while also providing legal and educational services. I argue that though the Plattsburgh Border Crisis grew out of transnational changes in immigration and refugee policy, the local response demonstrates the ways that refugees, public services, private charities, and citizens can cooperate to provide temporary refuge in spite of state disregard and active national hostility. In Plattsburgh, this experience transformed both the participants and the region.

A few scholars have examined the ways that U.S. and Canadian refugee policy shaped each other during the 1980s. Most notable among them is María Cristina García's *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada*. Some studies of U.S. and Canadian asylum policy briefly mention Canada's closing of the border in February 1987. In *Transnational Ruptures*, Catherine Nolin discusses how changes in U.S. immigration legislation in 1986 created "asylum demand" across the U.S.-Canada border. Julie Young's "Seeking Sanctuary in a Border City: Sanctuary Movement(s) across the Canada-US Border" pays particular attention to the collaboration between Sanctuary Movement groups in Detroit and Windsor during the 1980s and early 1990s, briefly discussing the Canadian government's decision to close the border to asylum-seekers in 1987. None of these examinations detail the effects of that decision on border communities, like Plattsburgh. The only book written specifically on Plattsburgh's experience is a self-published memoir by Fran Ford, a local activist highly involved in refugee care.⁴

This article draws on newspaper reports, oral histories taken during two trips to the region, government archives, and secondary literature. The interviews cited here, as well as off-the-record conversations with activists and government officials, added extra context to my research. Collectively, they demonstrate how a series of legislative and policy decisions in Canada and the United States created the crisis, how a small community banded together with its resident refugees to meet a rapidly developing humanitarian crisis, and how the experience had lasting effects on its participants and the community.

The Canadian government's decision to close its border in February 1987 emanated from changes in the ways that the country and its citizens perceived and interacted with refugees from around the world. During the 1970s and 1980s Canada resettled a significant number of refugees from countries like Chile and Uganda, most of whom were screened and selected by Canadian officials at their respective embassies. Seemingly geographically isolated from refugee-generating countries, policy-makers did not expect significant numbers of refugees to arrive on Canada's shores or ports of entry. The few refugees who entered Canada unbidden were mostly welcomed, and deportation was relatively scarce. Throughout most of the 1980s, Canada deserved its reputation as a refugee-welcoming country, making its 1987 change in policy so surprising to many refugees.⁵

In reality, the Canadian government's decision had been building throughout the decade. In their sweeping history of Canadian immigration policy, Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock argue, "The Immigration Department's inability to handle the inland-refugee claim backlog is the dominant theme in Canada's immigration history in the 1980s."⁶ The backlog they refer to came from pending asylum applications by prospective refugees in Canada. Many applications remained in limbo for months, if not years, waiting for the claim to be adjudicated. This led, in large part, to the closing of the border in 1987. Three factors exacerbated the backlog in late 1986 and made it into a domestic crisis that required action: an ineffective and time-consuming adjudication system, well-publicized perceived "abuses" of the system, and the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) by the United States.

The first factor, administrative inefficiencies, came from an overwhelmed refugee determination system that was never prepared for the high volume of claimants who arrived during the 1980s. In 1976 the Canadian government modernized its immigration system in an attempt to meet its changing workforce needs and humanitarian obligations. The government included a refugee measure that created a highly detailed and arduous two-step adjudication. A 1985

Canadian Supreme Court ruling, *Singh v Canada*, added another step by granting each prospective refugee the right to oral hearings. This quickly overwhelmed the system, creating an extensive backlog that granted any immigrant who claimed refugee status de facto landed status for the months, if not years, it took to adjudicate the claim.

In 1985 the backlog was at 3,710 applications.⁷ In spite of a partial amnesty granted to over 20,000 applicants in May 1986, the backlog remained at over 3,500 applications at the end of 1986. Canadian government officials and the media worried about the development and persistence of the backlog, as it reinforced the image of an overwhelmed and incompetent immigration system. Most importantly, in the minds of many policy-makers, the backlog prompted what many in the Canadian press and government called an abuse of the system.⁸

This concern was the second factor in the closing of the border. In 1986, nearly 2,000 Turkish immigrants arrived in Canada, claiming refugee status due to economic persecution. Over the period of six months, 1,000 Portuguese Jehovah's Witnesses asked for protection in Canada from religious persecution.⁹ The press, in conjunction with the Canadian government, labelled these refugees as "abusers" of the system, contrasting claimants fleeing peaceful but "under-developed" European countries with refugees from war-torn nations in Central America and Africa.¹⁰ The majority of these immigrants arrived in Canada by air. In response, the Canadian government started warning airline carriers that they bore the burden of carrying unaccepted asylum applicants back to their countries of birth. The arrival of 155 Tamils from war-torn Sri Lanka on August 11, 1986, proved to be the most publicized "abuse" of the system. A number of fishermen found the Tamils off the coast of Newfoundland in the lifeboats that they had been forced into by freighter captain Wolfgang Blindel.

The government gave "minister permits" to the Sri Lankans to stay in the country for one year to wait for the violence to settle in Sri Lanka.¹¹ This ignited a media firestorm with charges of "queue jumping" over other immigrants and worries that others would imitate the Tamil refugees. This intensified after the papers learned that the Sri Lankans had unsuccessfully claimed refugee status in West Germany before proceeding to Canada. For the rest of the year the press obsessed over the story, first focusing on the dramatic rescue of 155 people huddled in lifeboats by picturesque fishermen and then whether the Tamils should be allowed to stay in the country or not. Finally, the media closely followed the government's attempt to prosecute Blindel.¹² The arrival of refugees continued to loom large in the public eye for most of 1986 and into 1987. While many Canadians remained concerned about refugees slowly arriving by sea

and by air, these could be construed as isolated events that improved airline policies and the Canadian Coast Guard could control. It took one final event to prompt the Canadian government to close its land border with the United States to incoming refugees.

The third factor in the Canadian government's closure of its border came from U.S. legislation. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was the first major overhaul to the U.S. immigration system since the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The product of a growing anti-immigrant groundswell within the country, the IRCA outlined strict penalties to those who employed undocumented immigrants and a road to amnesty to those who entered the country illegally but could prove to the government that they had maintained a continuous residence in the United States since 1982.¹³ In 1986 most undocumented immigrants did not believe that they met the criteria for amnesty, particularly those who had fled from the horrific civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador but were unable to obtain refugee status from the United States. Their employers, fearing the new employment penalties, fired many of the potential refugees. As a result, undocumented refugees in the United States faced a vexing issue. Unwilling and unable to return to their countries of birth, they still needed to support themselves and their families. Thousands turned to Canada as a potential safe haven after hearing of Canada's more liberal asylum policies. Between December 1986, one month after the passage of the IRCA, and February 1987, when Canada closed its borders, over 10,000 would-be refugees crossed the border into Canada.¹⁴

For refugees the three main routes from the United States to Canada were Seattle to Vancouver, Detroit or Buffalo to Toronto, and New York, via Plattsburgh, to Montreal. Montreal acutely felt the influx of refugees. Its airport was already a primary destination for Turkish and Portuguese refugee applicants. Local and national newspapers ran headlines such as "Central Americans Pour into Canada Seeking New Homes," and "Quebec Feels Budget Pinch as Refugees Keep Arriving."¹⁵ The *Globe and Mail* cited a government estimate that over 1,100 new refugees had arrived during a ten-day span in late December and early January.¹⁶ The *Toronto Star* added another government estimate: over 600 of the year's recent arrivals were Central Americans who had crossed the border by bus from the United States to Quebec.¹⁷ This only added to the widespread fears of an overwhelmed refugee-determination system already established by the Tamil, Turkish, and Portuguese controversies.

The government listened. On January 15, Benoit Bouchard, the minister for employment and immigration, told reporters, "The law allows the minister, while waiting to find the personnel necessary to deal with these cases quickly, to

leave those people on the other side of the border. Are we going to use this method? It is too soon to say.”¹⁸ A month later Gerry Weiner, the minister of state for immigration, promised changes to immigration policy that would guarantee “the orderly control of refugee claimants through the country.”¹⁹ On February 20 the government released its changes in refugee policy. The government established new visa transit requirements, ended the “minister’s permits” system and abolished the B-1 list.²⁰

A combination of an overwhelmed refugee-determination system, media coverage of “foreign refugees” arriving on Canadian shores, and a sudden influx of refugees brought on by U.S. immigration policy ended Canada’s B-1 policy of allowing Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Sri Lankans, and nationals from thirteen other countries immediate entrance into Canada. Instead, the hundreds of refugees streaming weekly from the United States to Canada found themselves halted at the line between the two countries. At crossing stations along the border, Canadian officials interviewed, processed, and then sent prospective refugees back to the United States to wait for a hearing date four to six weeks in the future. For those living in the United States without legal permission, this meant being sent back into the arms of the U.S. Border Patrol that was legally bound to deport them. Plattsburgh, twenty miles south of the main border crossing to Montreal, was on the verge of transforming from a sleepy community near the border to a makeshift refugee camp.

In late February 1987, at the Champlain border crossing, just twenty miles north of Plattsburgh and thirty-eight miles south of Montreal, Greg Ledges, supervisor and immigration inspector for the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, heard Canada was about to close the border. He was unsure of the consequences. Multiple Greyhound buses that passed through the border checkpoint every day on their way to Montreal were carrying prospective refugees to apply for asylum in Canada. Going north, the buses never concerned him or his colleagues, who monitored those who entered the United States, not those leaving. Most people crossing the Champlain border passed through quickly, as they were either Canadian or U.S. citizens.²¹

Following Minister Bouchard’s announcement on Friday, February 20, Canadian immigration officials began to process and send potential refugees back across the border. Though the exact number of refugees turned away by Canadian officials at the Champlain border crossing over the weekend is unknown, one refugee relief activist in Plattsburgh (where most of those turned away at the Champlain border crossing went) estimated it at over 200.²² At the border, refugees met with U.S. immigration officers. If refugees still had documents such as a visa or temporary permit

authorizing them to remain in the United States, INS officers immediately released them. Those without legal status were processed for deportation and were assigned either voluntary or involuntary departure. Migrants usually received involuntary departure if they had a criminal record or an outstanding deportation order.

Canadian activists charged that refugees forced to wait in the United States by Canada’s policy change were in danger of deportation back to their home country. When first announcing the change in policy, Bouchard told the press and members of the opposition party that migrants were safe from deportation, but a few days later, after newspapers published a letter from the head of the INS contradicting Bouchard’s claim, he retracted his comments.²³

The U.S. Border Patrol sent involuntary deportees to prison to await transit back to their home countries, while those eligible for voluntary deportation received papers and were told to leave the United States by a certain date. As Mr. Ledges remembered it, the entire process from crossing the border into Canada through Canadian processing and U.S. processing, to either release or imprisonment, could take longer than ten hours.²⁴ Following processing, churches, non-profits, and government agencies could legally assist migrants. For a variety of organizations in Plattsburgh who offered prospective refugees protection, this was an important distinction. IRCA, which most of the refugees were fleeing, made it a penalty to “conceal, harbor, or shield from protection” undocumented and unprocessed immigrants.²⁵ Processing by the Border Patrol legally shielded Plattsburgh organizations.

The village of Champlain, a small cluster of houses and businesses just south of the Canadian/U.S. border, had no place for rejected refugees to stay, so those who did not go to jail received a bus ride back to Plattsburgh, the nearest U.S. town.²⁶ Though larger than Champlain, Plattsburgh claimed fewer than 30,000 residents. Its economic mainstays came from a U.S. Air Force base and a branch of the State University of New York (SUNY Plattsburgh). In addition, it remains the closest U.S. city of any size to Montreal. Canadians in search of U.S. goods or services often shopped in Plattsburgh. In turn, Plattsburgh residents often took trips north to Montreal to watch Major League Baseball’s Montreal Expos. Plattsburgh was, in many ways, a quintessential border town. Yet, because traffic across the border was relatively unrestricted, the border did not loom large in the city’s imagination. The residents prided themselves in their community’s hospitality, a virtue that the border crisis tested tremendously in early 1987.

For the first few months following IRCA’s passage, a growing stream of immigrants and refugees passed through Plattsburgh, but the numbers remained small and their stay

short. On February 21, refugees turned back at the U.S.-Canada border began to arrive in Plattsburgh in numbers the town had never seen before. The Plattsburgh Border Crisis had begun.

The Plattsburgh Community Crisis Center (PCCC) responded first. Founded in 1970, the PCCC, headed by Brian Smith, offered assistance to homeless, impoverished, and mentally ill Plattsburgh residents. It proved to be a crucial part of Plattsburgh's refugee relief effort. During first few days of the crisis, the PCCC took the lead. After learning that refugees were stranded at the local bus station, Brian Smith and the centre swung into action, housing refugees at local motel rooms and providing them with food. On Monday, February 23, the local *Plattsburgh Press-Republican* printed a front-page story about the refugees' arrival, announcing the onset of the crisis and the actions taken up to that point. It was quickly becoming clear that the centre did not have the resources for the emerging crisis. Most importantly, it did not have the space to house, nor the money to support, incoming refugees. As the border crisis evolved, other involved organizations included the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, Clinton County Social Services, Catholic Charities, and the Ecumenical Food Shelf. Within the first week Rose Pandozy, the Clinton County social services commissioner, formed a committee with the department heads of the various services. As Pandozy remembers it, the cooperation between local service organizations was seamless. Throughout the refugee relief effort, "If we knew we needed another agency, we just called them up and they came."²⁷ Plattsburgh community leaders decided to set up an emergency shelter at the Salvation Army to provide more space for refugees and to conserve fast-dwindling resources.²⁸

The new shelter at the Salvation Army had the capacity to house approximately 100 refugees. While enough for the first few days of the crisis, it soon reached capacity. Brian Smith, Rose Pandozy, and other leaders of the refugee relief effort began looking for other options. On February 27 they found a temporary solution at a local building called "The Office" that housed 90 more. While the building provided a place for people to sleep, it lacked beds, showers, and a kitchen. Thus, volunteers had to transport sheltered refugees back and forth for showers and bring food. Clearly, this was not a permanent solution. Smith and Pandozy kept looking.²⁹

Volunteers and local government officials began to publicly express anger over the lack of state and federal support. One unnamed charity head complained in the local newspaper, "It's a sad thing. The government created this problem, but they're dumping all the responsibility on the poor people of a small community."³⁰ That very day a local National Guard unit offered to temporarily house refugees

in its armoury. Refugees could stay in the armoury only while the unit could guarantee the site's security. Therefore, when the unit left for military manoeuvres in two weeks, the community had to find alternative housing. Though grateful for help from the state, the refugee relief leaders were desperate to secure permanent assistance. To make matters worse, the leaders had no way of ascertaining the scope of the crisis. As William Donnell, the coordinator of Plattsburgh's Office of Emergency Preparedness, explained, "Weeks from now we could have 200 or even 300 [refugees]. We have to stay prepared."³¹

Three days later the National Guard at Saranac Lake, a village over fifty miles away in Franklin County, extended an invitation for refugees to stay at its armoury. After long deliberation, the relief leaders rejected its offer. Upon investigating the location, they found its facilities and location unsuitable. Too far away from social services and without sufficient facilities to safely house refugees, the armoury would be a logistical nightmare.³²

On March 4 leaders finally secured a solution that lasted through May. The Association for Retarded Children (ARC) offered its new building just west of the city. The 30,000-square-foot building could house over 150 refugees and had facilities for showers and cooking. Yet it was little more than an empty shell. The cavernous main room offered little privacy for families. Activists set up "privacy cubicles" throughout the main room. Three walls with a sheet in the front, they offered a measure of seclusion. In addition, the refugee relief effort needed to build showers and provide additional toilets, washers, and dryers. While imperfect, the ARC meant an end to the shuttling of refugees back and forth. The improvements came to approximately \$60,000. Rose Pandozy, who by this time had taken the lead in the refugee relief effort, believed that she could secure assistance from the state.³³

Pandozy travelled to Albany on March 5 to meet with New York's Department of Social Services and ask for help. The commissioner told her there was no assistance available. Pandozy asked for the decision in writing so she could share it with the local, state, and international reporters who were already starting to come to Plattsburgh. Though Pandozy never released a statement to the media, this threat had the desired effect. On March 6 New York Governor Mario Cuomo released \$177,000 in emergency funds to Clinton County to help provide for the refugees.³⁴

Two days later the refugees moved into the ARC shelter. For the next three months the ARC building served as the sole shelter for refugees in Plattsburgh awaiting their hearing. On June 10 the housing situation for the refugee relief effort went full circle. The ARC moved into its new building, and most refugees returned to local motels. A few

temporarily moved in with host families who housed the refugees while awaiting their hearing.

During the three months in the ARC, local government officials, refugees, and volunteers interacted in fascinating ways. Each of the three groups had varying, though overlapping, views of how the community should respond to the Plattsburgh Border Crisis. The three leading government/semi-government officials, Pandozy, Brian Smith, and Captain Jack Holcomb of the Salvation Army, saw the shelter as the answer to a humanitarian crisis that needed support. Largely bereft of assistance from state or federal authorities, Pandozy and Smith took the lead in determining how to pay for shelter, food, and medical assistance for an unknown number of refugees. It was not an easy task, as the number of refugees fluctuated wildly over the first few months, as did their medical needs. At one point Holcomb predicted over 500 refugees.³⁵ Nonetheless, Smith and Pandozy found the funds through a skilful use of political persuasion (see Pandozy's trip to Albany) and cooperation with local charities and fundraising.

As the leader of the local Salvation Army chapter, Holcomb took charge of the day-to-day operations of the shelter. One of the most quoted figures in the media reports on the relief effort, some volunteers expressed unhappiness with Holcomb's brusque demeanour and perceived tendency to spend more time with reporters than at the shelter.³⁶ Holcomb was, without a doubt, a formidable presence. A number of interviewees recalled an incident at the shelter in late May when Holcomb called the entire building for a meeting. He sternly excoriated unnamed individuals for keeping alcohol in the shelter, general rowdiness, and invasions of privacy. The most memorable part came when he halted his address to search a young man's cubicle. Holcomb found a quart of liquor. In stony silence he marched across the main room into the men's bathroom and poured the alcohol down the drain, then re-emerged to hurl the empty bottle into the trash.³⁷ Following the closure of the shelter in June 1987, Holcomb's role in the refugee relief effort shrank, as he was no longer responsible for the day-to-day care of the refugees.

While government and closely allied officials oversaw the setup and overall operation of the shelter, its residents made it work.³⁸ During the shelter's three months, the plurality of refugees came from Central America. Individuals from around the globe joined them. Refugees arrived in varying socio-economic circumstances, some able to provide for themselves, while others came with little more than the clothes on their backs.³⁹ Language skills varied widely. While many of the refugees were fluent in English, others only spoke Spanish, French, Arabic, Tamil, Amharic, or other languages. Similarly, many refugees entered the shelter in desperate need of medical attention.⁴⁰

The one thing in common for refugees arriving in the first few weeks was that they did not expect to be in Plattsburgh. An invisible line, manned by Canadian immigration officials, kept them in the United States. Waiting at the shelter for their applications to be adjudicated, they negotiated and created a safe space on a shoestring budget. Frustrated, confused, and desperate, refugees worked with volunteers and government officials at the shelter to create a space that provided temporary routines in their new lives.

These new routines included volunteering around the shelter. Some refugees offered to cook. Though it presented a unique challenge due to varying dietary restrictions and preferences, cooking provided a diversion from the monotony of waiting for adjudication. Others cleaned, babysat, helped with paperwork, and volunteered to conduct security patrols. As the shelter population grew to over 150, security became a concern. Initially, volunteers from the Salvation Army and local community conducted patrols through the shelter, but the refugees quickly took control themselves.⁴¹ One Salvadoran, "Oscar," led in the organization of security patrols. Well respected by the other refugees, Oscar came from a middle-class background and had extensive business experience, as well as a master's from Michigan State. For the month that he lived in the shelter Oscar drafted the lists for the work crews and helped set up security patrols.⁴²

Refugees also organized special events and classes, which included talent shows, picnics, and a Mother's Day celebration. At the conclusion of a talent show on March 19 the refugees sang "God Bless America," an interesting choice, given that most were fleeing U.S. immigration laws.⁴³ Though most of the refugees in Plattsburgh wanted to settle in francophone Quebec, few knew how to speak French. Walid Hourri, a Lebanese refugee, conducted free introductory French classes to all who needed them.⁴⁴

In addition to doing volunteer work, many refugees gave individual and group interviews to the press. Newspaper reporters and television crews from across the United States, Canada, and the rest of the world discovered Plattsburgh's charm and found themselves fascinated by its residents and the refugees who were forced to temporarily call it home. Immediately after the crisis began, the *Montreal Gazette* published a front-page story called "Dreams of New Life Shattered at Border," with a picture of two young Salvadorans and the caption "My life is in danger and I can't go back."⁴⁵ The *Gazette* continued its coverage and was joined by other national and international outlets including the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *New York Times*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, as well as distributors like the Associated Press and United Press International. Refugees used these interviews as opportunities to make a political statement, highlighting the reasons for their flight and the injustices

of the U.S. and Canadian refugee systems. Through chores, talent shows, and interviews, refugees transformed the shelter from a space born out of necessity into a sanctuary and site of political action.

While refugees provided stirring images and heart-breaking quotes, reporters also took interest in the plain-speaking volunteers who staffed the refugee relief effort. They had good reason to. One of the most fascinating parts of the Plattsburgh Border Crisis was the way that members of a relatively conservative rural community responded to an unforeseen, and, for many, unwelcome, emergency. At first, the unknown aspects of the crisis intimidated many Plattsburgh and Clinton County residents, even those who agreed to volunteer. Fran Ford, who went on to become one of the shelter's most prolific volunteers, remembers taking two refugees to the doctor's office on her first day: "I took a seat across the room, the farthest chair I could find. Why? Was I embarrassed to be seen with these women that were different in language and appearance? Yes I was!"⁴⁶ Within a few weeks Mrs. Ford went from answering phones to serving as a jack of all trades, running errands with refugees, counselling deeply scarred women, inviting refugees over for dinner, and serving as a go-between for volunteers and government officials.⁴⁷

Margot Zeglis, who went on to become the relief effort's volunteer coordinator, moved to Plattsburgh into the midst of the crisis. She recalls that she and her husband "drove into town in a big snowstorm, stayed in a hotel and I heard about the need for volunteers and that's how I got involved." A veteran of a variety of non-profits, Zeglis used her experience to organize the effort's volunteers. She describes recruiting, training and placing volunteers as a series of questions: "Well, start with their names: what do you like to do? And then ... putting out a range of what are the immediate needs, and trying to fit people who want to do those. A volunteer is a pretty valuable asset, and you only asked of them what they want to do." The range of volunteers surprised her: "All ages, financial backgrounds. Religions. I was amazed by how many men there were. Usually you don't get a lot of men but we had a lot of men as volunteers. And husbands and wives."⁴⁸ Local Plattsburgh businesses answered the call as well. The owner of a muffler shop donated his time and money, while other local businesses donated food and clothing.⁴⁹

The academic community got involved as well. Professors from SUNY Plattsburgh offered translation and paralegal services. A variety of Plattsburgh undergraduates, members of the Alpha Phi Omega fraternity, as well as high school Model UN students raised money for the refugees. For some Plattsburgh undergraduates this represented a unique opportunity, as they were participating in a Model

Organization of the American States (OAS) and had just been chosen to represent El Salvador. The faculty leader of the Model OAS, Stuart Voss, worked as a paralegal for many refugees. At the shelter, students met and interacted with refugees to supplement their learning.⁵⁰

In addition, volunteers from outside the immediate community responded. During the first weekend of the crisis, residents of Hemmingford, a village less than five miles north of the border, drove a Volkswagen bus stuffed with food and clothing down to the Crisis Center. Disagreeing with their government's policy, they returned the following weekend, providing entertainment and religious services.⁵¹ The interviews and media coverage of the refugees and volunteers and Plattsburgh touched concerned citizens across the United States, who took to the media, writing letters to the editor and publishing articles in an attempt to raise money and awareness for the Plattsburgh volunteer groups. Nancy Murray, president of the Syracuse Interreligious Council, issued an explicitly religious appeal for financial support, asserting that, like the Israelites wandering in the desert after fleeing Egypt, "today's strangers in a foreign land need our manna to survive."⁵² Donations began streaming in, first from around the region and then the country.

Of course not everyone in the community responded positively to the crisis. There were concerns similar to those in Canada that had led to the closing of the border. Some Plattsburgh residents questioned the wisdom of expending so many resources on refugees while Plattsburgh residents went hungry and homeless. One letter to the editor claimed, "The refugee problem could easily be solved by taking the money for one day's maintenance and buying each refugee who can't afford one a one-way ticket to Albany along with a map [to the] State Campus and the South Mall."⁵³ Other letters echoed the sentiment. Nonetheless, future events proved that, though the refugee relief effort came with some initial costs, it generated several unexpected benefits.

The most tangible benefit came a little more than seven months after the letter to the editor quoted above. Tiny Clinton County secured a \$1 million grant from New York State's Homeless and Housing Assistance Program. It was the third-largest grant for the program, only behind the much more populated regions of New York City and Westchester County. Brian Smith and Rose Pandozy, the authors of the grant proposal, credited Plattsburgh's response to the refugee crisis to their luck with the proposal.⁵⁴ Three years later Smith, Pandozy and other community leaders dedicated the Evergreen Townhouse Community, an innovative grant-funded low-income housing complex. The grant increased by \$700,000 to \$1.7 million to make, in the words of State Social Services Commissioner Cesar A. Perales, "a little community of its own."⁵⁵ The Evergreen Townhouse

Community remains a crucial part of Clinton County's and Plattsburgh's social services.

Other, less tangible effects on the community included a broadening of horizons by area churches and residents who had raised funds, clothing, and food during the relief effort. Prior to the border crisis, people of the community thought of themselves as friendly and neighbourly, but the refugee relief effort was demonstrable proof of those virtues to themselves and the world. Today the First Presbyterian Church in Plattsburgh has extensive outreach programs at home and abroad. Mission of Hope, a charity centred in Plattsburgh, makes yearly visits to Nicaragua for humanitarian and missionary work.⁵⁶

In this article's second opening quotation, Rose Pandozy calls the response to the Plattsburgh Border Crisis the community's "finest hour." Various members of the community, when interviewed, echoed her sentiment. They believed that the willingness of the town's and county's social service organizations to band together to meet a crisis proved the area's hospitality. Volunteer coordinator Margot Zeglis lauded Plattsburgh's response, "Plattsburgh has a lot to be very proud of. They really, really rose above it all."⁵⁷

The crisis also formed lasting friendships among Plattsburgh residents while spending long hours at the shelter, grieving the fate of family members, laughing over the inanities of everyday life, and inviting refugees over for dinner. While conducting interviews in Plattsburgh, many of the activists referred me to their fellow volunteers, indicating that nearly thirty years after the crisis, they remained in touch. They mentioned recent dinners or coffee meetings between fellow activists who are now old friends.⁵⁸

A little over a year after the shelter's closing, many of the refugees, volunteers, and local government officials reunited in Montreal for a picnic. Organized by Fran Ford, Margot Zeglis, and the Kiwanis Clubs of Plattsburgh and Montreal, the August 21, 1988, picnic was, for many refugees and volunteers, the first they had seen of each other after refugees left the shelter. Refugees, activists, and government officials filled the day with song, laughter, good food, and a special visit from Santa Claus. Even though it was in the middle of the summer, Ron Wood, a Plattsburgh volunteer, reprised his role as St. Nicholas, which he had played at a party for the refugees last Christmas.⁵⁹

That picnic in August of 1988 did not end Plattsburgh's interactions with refugees. To this day, Plattsburgh remains a way station for prospective refugees intent on applying for asylum in Canada. Yet the picnic is a powerful reminder that the crisis was, in many ways, overcome by the generosity of and cooperation between refugees, volunteers, and local government officials. While they did not end the refugee flow or change Canadian policy, these three groups found a

way to transform a desperate situation into a negotiable one. None of the refugees who came knocking at Plattsburgh's door starved or went homeless. The "tide of refugees" never overwhelmed Plattsburgh's social services. Rather, it led to the construction of top-of-the-line low-income housing. And while some citizens expressed discomfort over the aid given to refugees, in the end the experience became one of civic pride that the community still remembers fondly.

The Plattsburgh Border Crisis also temporarily transformed Plattsburgh, as a space, into a hub of global networks. Civil wars in Central America, Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, and Africa pushed refugees out of local camps and into Western countries. Policy and legislation in Canada and the United States forced refugees from their homes across the United States and into a collection of border zones in Seattle, Detroit, Buffalo, and Plattsburgh, where they waited for the Canadian government to decide their fate. As these border zones struggled to deal with the ramifications of these changes brought on by an ineffective refugee adjudication system, a panicked Canadian media, and the IRCA, the Canadian government tabled its new proposal for refugee adjudication, C-55, supplemented by an anti-smuggling bill (C-84) in early summer of 1987.

Noteworthy among Bill C-55's statutes was the "safe third country" provision, which denied asylum applicants if they had already passed through what was deemed a safe third country. Refugee advocates feared that for foreign policy reasons the government would deem the United States a "safe country," thereby making the vast majority of Central American applicants ineligible. Though Bills C-55 and C-84 passed in July 1988, the Canadian government never compiled the safe third country list, sparing Canadian officials the embarrassment of excluding the United States.⁶⁰ This further proved that Canada's government needed to take a global, rather than domestic approach to its immigration, refugee, and asylum policy. The local and international forces that caused the Plattsburgh Border Crisis continued, just like the friendships and goodwill that it created.

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NOTES

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- 6 Ninette Kelley and Michael Trebilcock, *Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 412.
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