Letters

To the Editor:

I was happy to receive the October 1983 issue of Refuge in the mail. I am reading it with great interest. Please pass along my best wishes to Howard Adelman, whom I had the pleasure to meet at the Manitoba conference in August. He mentioned his son's experiences in Central America; I thought Jeremy Adelman's article, "The Insecurity of El Salvadoran Refugees," was excellent.

Shelly Pitterman
Northwestern University

I'm writing now because I've just seen your review of Refugee Issues: Current Status and Directions for the Future, that you did in your October 1983 Refuge newsletter. As you may have noticed in the introduction, I wrote the manuscript for this pamphlet. It's a fine review and I thank you for it.

On your one point of disagreement, I of course concur that the presence of economic motives for flight does not preclude the possibility that someone could be a refugee. What I meant to say is that the intermixture of economics and political motivations generally makes it very hard to decide in any single case why a person left a country. Haitians in the U.S. now, for example, flee both oppression and poverty. To the degree they flee oppression, no other fact should figure in their case. But some may be fleeing only poverty and it is hard to separate them out from the others, but this is necessary if we are to maintain the integrity of the refugee definition. This is all I meant to say.

Gary E. Rubin, Director,
AJC Center on Immigration
and Acculturation, New York

Quebec's Unaccompanied Minors Programmes

L'article paru dans votre publication d'avril 83, Vol.2 No.4 "Quebec's unaccompanied minors programs" signé par M. John Forrester m'a beaucoup intéressée. Il décrit bien la réalité vécue par les jeunes réfugiés, leur adaptation, celle des familles d'accueil, mais permettez que je vous parle de l'application de ce programme comme il se vit encore aujourd'hui à l'A.M.I.E. (Aide Médicale Internationale à l'Enfance). Notre approche a été différente et nous continuons de fonctionner d'une façon particulière, très proche des foyers d'accueil.

Dès juillet 79 l'A.M.I.E. recevait huit adolescents âgés de 15 à 17 ans, mais ce n'est qu'à l'automne qu'un véritable programme structuré fut mis en place. Les intervenants étaient les ministères de l'Immigration et des Affaires Sociales et quatre organisations (dont TDH et l'A.M.I.E) qui jeunes, de les placer en famille, d'assurer un accompagnement aux familles et aux enfants. Les Affaires sociales n'incluant pas ces jeunes dans le réseau des enfants aidés ici au Québec, les familles que nous retenions pour accueillir des jeunes devaient cependant être visitées et acceptées par les CSS.

Il est vrai que plusieurs réunions furent appelées où tous les intervenants se retrouvèrent ensemble les bases d'une aventure humanitaire dans une orientation nouvelle provoquée par une guerre particulièrement cruelle. Le fonctionnariat bien encadré par des lois, surtout à l'immigration, acceptait de s'ouvrir, d'adopter les règles pour collaborer à une action humanitaire plus engageante que tout ce qui avait déjà été fait.

Il fut bien convenu au départ que les jeunes n'étaient pas éligibles à l'adoption à moins d'être officiellement orphelins. Ils sont arrivés en grand nombre en 80 mais chacun'était confié à une famille dès son arrivée: nous n'avions pas de centre ou de "group-home" et jamais cela ne nous a paru une lacune. Quand l'immigration nous prévenait, soit environ 8 jours avant l'arrivée des enfants,
les foyers se voyaient confié un nom avec une date de naissance et une nationalité. Le jour venu ils accueillaient l'enfant porteur de ce nom et personne n'a exprimé le désir de "changer d'enfant". Nous avons vu évoluer ce programme dans le respect des enfants, dans la générosité et dans l'amour. Il y a eu des difficultés, c'était normal. Le choc de deux cultures si différentes, la cellule familiale que dirige la mère, l'alimentation, les coutumes d'ici ont bousculé les jeunes alors que les lacunes des enfants concernant la discipline, l'obéissance, le sens de la valeur des choses de même que leur attitude obstinée par moment ont ébranlé la patience et la compréhension de certains parents. L'accompagnement que des personnes bénévoles ont voulu assurer et continuer de donner aux parents et aux enfants fut et demeure indispensable et bénéfique. Avec un interprète, le responsable rencontre l'enfant, visite les parents, il fait le lien entre les accueillants et l'accueilli. La compréhension revient et l'attachement grandit.

Nous ne pouvons pas dire que le programme nous ait paru lourd après un an plus qu'aujourd'hui, il est exigeant bien sûr mais extra-ordinaire aussi. Nous n'avons pas encore exprimé le désir de nous retirer, au contraire, de nombreuses familles d'accueil toujours disponibles nous pressent de demander plus d'enfants; leur désir vont maintenant vers des enfants plus jeunes, moins de 12 ans. L'Immigration provinciale a toujours été favorable au programme d'accueil des mineurs et l'attitude des personnes en charge nous a beaucoup aidé; leur collaboration fut un véritable appui. En décembre 80, quatre-vingt jeunes étaient arrivés au pays en passant par l'A.M.I.E., (2 en Ontario, les autres au Québec. Depuis ils continuent d'arriver et l'équipe d'accompagnement est toujours en place, toujours utile et efficace. En 1981, 20 jeunes en 1982, 18 jeunes en 1983, 10 nov. 28 jeunes. La plupart des jeunes reçus en 82-83 sont Cambodgiens et ils ont entre 10 et 14 ans. Les premiers arrivés sont maintenant adultes et seulement quelques-uns ont laissé leur foyer d'accueil pour aller vivre seul et travailler. Le grand nombre ont préféré compléter des études et sont encouragés à le faire par leur famille même si ils ont 19 ou 20 ans. Le sentiment d'appartenance est maintenant

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English Translation

I was very much interested in the article which appeared in your publication of April '83, (Vol.2, No.4) "Quebec's Unaccompanied Minors Programs", by Mr. John Forrester. He describes very well the living realities of young refugees: their adaptation and those of their sponsor families; but allow me to speak to you about the application of this programme as it exists today for the organization A.M.I.E. (Aide Médicale Internationale à l'Enfance). We have taken a different approach, and we continue to operate in a special way that keeps close touch with the sponsoring households.

In July 1979, A.M.I.E. received eight adolescents ages 15-17, but it was only in the autumn of that year that a structured programme took form. The parties to this undertaking were the Ministries of Immigration and Social Affairs (of Québec) and four organizations (two of which were Terre des Hommes and A.M.I.E.) which were responsible for receiving the young persons, arranging for sponsor families, and for providing services both for families and children. Even though Social Affairs did not include minor refugees in their assistance programme here in Québec, the families that we had designated to receive these young people had to be interviewed and accepted by the Council of Social Services (a division of Social Affairs.)

It is true that several meetings were called where all the interested parties pooled together the elements of a human adventure in a new mission brought about by a particularly cruel war. A civil service well protected by laws, especially in Immigration, agreed to extend itself and to soften the strict application of these rules to collaborate in a humanitarian action more involving than anything before.

It was agreed at the outset that these minors were not eligible for adoption unless they were officially orphans. They arrived in large numbers in 1980; nevertheless, each one was entrusted to a family upon arrival. We did not have any centre or group home, nor did that ever appear to be a particular shortcoming. When advised by Immigration, about eight days prior to the arrival of the children, the households were provided with a name, date of birth and nationality. On the appointed day, they received the child bearing that name; not one expressed a desire to "change this child for another". We have seen this programme evolve in respect for children, in generosity and in love. There have been difficulties; that is normal: the shock of two different cultures, a family unit where the mother is in charge of (activities), different foods, disciplinary customs here have upset young people not trained in them as children; standards of obedience and respect, and a sense of values about things as well as momentary obstinate attitudes, have all tested the patience and understanding of certain parents. The assistance which volunteers wish to provide and continue to give to parents and children has been, and remains, indispensable and beneficial. With an interpreter, this volunteer meets the child, visits with the parents and brings together the receiver and the received. Understanding reappears, and the attachment grows.

We cannot say that the programme appeared burdensome to us a year afterward any more than today. Surely, it is demanding, but also extraordinary. We have not yet expressed our wish to withdraw from the programme; on the contrary, a number of receiving families are still available and continue to press us for more children. Their wishes lean now more towards younger children, under 12 years old. The provincial ministry of immigration has always been favourable to the programme of receiving minor refugees, and the receptivity of those directing the programme has assisted us very much; their collaboration was a real boost. In December 1980, 80 minors arrived in the province while passing through the services of A.M.I.E. (two for Ontario, the rest for Québec). Since then, they continue to arrive, and the reception team is still in place, still useful and effective. In 1981, there were twenty minors; in 1982, eighteen minors; in 1983 (at 10 November), twenty-eight. Most of the arrivals in 1983 are Cambodian, between 10 and 14 years old. The first arrivals (1980) are now adults; only a few have left their sponsoring households to live alone and to work. The majority preferred to complete their studies and have been encouraged by their family to do so, even if they are now 19 or 20 years old. The sense of

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To the Editor

A review of my work on South East Asian refugees which appeared in Refuge (Vol. 3, No.1) though rightly pointing to some of the serious difficulties faced by the refugees in Britain contains several factual errors and some serious misinterpretations of the British refugee programme. Since the review will, for many Canadians, be the only insight they have of the British refugee situation I would be grateful for an opportunity to correct some of the false impressions which it might create.

The review appears to voice some scepticism over the assertion that the Vietnamese refugees in Britain did not have a large established ethnic community which would provide support (as did, for example, the Ugandan Asians). The Chinese community in Britain numbers only 90,000 and is, with a few exceptions, very spatially dispersed.

It is an error to suggest that in Britain refugees 'were not kept in reception centres until they had mastered a basic understanding of the language but were resettled wherever and when housing became available'. A fundamental aspect of Britain's reception centre policy was the provision of a basic grounding in English. For this reason a minimum period of 3 months was established for refugee stays in these centres (though the average stay was 6 months) and a target of 20+ hours language tuition per week was set. Thus, the reception centre policy did not of itself result in 'a second resettlement without adequate linguistic tools'. Though the resettled refugees do have a poor level of English proficiency, this is more a consequence of the time available to learn (less than 18 months for most refugees in the sample) and the inadequacy of ESL provision during resettlement than of the reception policy.

Inaccuracies concerning ESL emerge again with the assertion that 'a sizable majority of the refugees have regressed in English proficiency since reception'. The actual proportion reported in the publication is 7 per cent. A further error concerns employment rates, the 18 percent in the 20-29 age group reported as unemployed in the review actually being the proportion who are employed.

The review stated that Canada has a 'two-track system of strong federal and provincial support complemented by strong commitments of local support'. This contrasts markedly with Britain where there are virtually no local or central government staff involved in the organisation and running of the refugee programme. Given such disparities, comparisons of staffing levels in the non-government sector alone are dangerously misleading. Furthermore, the inaccuracy of such comparisons is exacerbated when estimates of voluntary staff in
Dear Dr Adelman,

We were astounded to read the centre-page article in your October issue entitled "Britain's Southeast Asian Refugees", based on the brief research papers of Peter Jones. From this useful but limited data some very inaccurate conclusions have been drawn.

First, some general points: we do not claim that the resettlement programme for Vietnamese in the United Kingdom has been a resounding success, nor that the agencies' programmes do not merit criticism. The agencies' own report (ICRV Report 1982), which has been available for a year, makes this clear. What we must point out is that the refugees who came to Britain started out with unprecedented disadvantages. The 11,500 admitted under the quotas had virtually all been rejected by the countries of their choice (USA, Canada, Australia, France). Britain imposed no selection criteria (Canada's were notoriously strict). The refugees therefore arrived with no usable educational or employment qualifications. Between 60% and 70% had come to Hong Kong from North Vietnam and had had no previous contact with a westernised society. They arrived in a country with a rapidly growing unemployment problem where there was no existing Vietnamese community and no natural bond developed with the indigenous Chinese population. Moreover, Britain's social security system effectively discourages unskilled people with 5 or 6 children from working, since they are never likely to earn more than their entitlement under State benefit. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that satisfactory settlement has been slow for a great many of these people.

That said, can we address some of the points in the article:

We would not agree that "the main problem in Britain is housing". Good local authority housing has generally been available. The problem has been the non-availability of jobs in most resettlement areas and the consequent lack of incentive and opportunity to learn English in a natural way.

The reference in your article to "reception areas" is perhaps at the root of the extraordinary statements about the staff employed by the three voluntary agencies. In Britain the refugees move from reception centres to resettlement areas. The staffing ratios you refer to only apply in the reception centres, which required all the administrative support characteristic of any hostel. Some Ockenden Venture and British Refugee Council reception centres catered for several hundred people. The staff therefore included administrators, teachers, cooks, cleaners, interpreters etc. If Britain had 25 staff to settle 27,000 refugees, are we to assume that Ontario has ceased educating refugee children, or does not use interpreters to help the process? Many of the staff employed by the British agencies were themselves Vietnamese refugees who now form the majority of the total of 50 people still involved in resettlement work. These refugees have received intensive training in social skills.

The comments that Ockenden Venture "grew from a very small agency" to have one staff member for 25 refugees and one reception area for 200 refugees, and that the "Save The Children Fund operated in the far north and north-east of Great Britain" are typical of cavalier writing which is wide of the mark. The Ockenden Venture, though comparatively small, had, before the Vietnamese started coming to the UK, twelve residential centres and a regular staff of 65 for its refugee work in the United Kingdom and overseas. It also had a strong constituency of voluntary support. Save The Children Fund operated in the East Midlands and East Anglia as well as Scotland, Northeast England and Northern Ireland.

The article takes selective information from Peter Jones' reports and distorts it. If we were similarly to select a few facts from your accompanying article on Indochinese refugees in Canada, we discover that 80% found English/French language training inadequate, most refugees in Canada feel "isolated and lonely" and 85% feel out of place living in Canada. Does that constitute and "excellent report card"?

Finally, we would be interested to know which "British representatives at international conferences argue that resettlement of refugees is no longer a viable alternative"? We have never heard this. What some of us do say is that resettlement cannot be the only solution to any refugee problem and is not appropriate for many individual refugees.

We are in good company. Last month the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said in Geneva that it was now clear that resettlement could not be the only solution to the problem of Indochinese refugees in Southeast Asia.

Martin Barber - Director: British Refugee Council
Joyce Pearce - Executive Chairman: Ockenden Venture
Julia Meiklejohn - Director: Refugee Action (ex-SCF)

Editor's note:

We are grateful to Messrs. Jones, Barber et al. for writing to clarify matters on our review article. We found the British Refugee Council's (BRC's) clarifications about the background of the refugees particularly helpful. We are also grateful to Jones for pointing out that the phrase "sizeable minority" in reference to regression in language proficiency is incorrect. In fact, our original manuscript had the term "sizeable minority" extracted from p.25 of the report and "minority" somehow became transposed in the typescript to 'majority'. A similar error occurred in the alteration of 'employed' to 'unemployed'. We are most apologetic for the two errors.

However, we would like to clarify that no scepticism was stated, implied or intended about the absence of a large established ethnic community. We quoted Jones's statement about "the almost complete absence of an established ethnic community". What we did imply was surprise (not doubt) that this was the case given that Hong Kong is a Crown colony. Our surprise was somewhat diminished when we learn from Jones's letter that there were 90,000 ethnic Chinese. Evidently, "absence" referred to a concentrated community and not to the Chinese themselves.

We see no conflict between Jones's assertion that refugees were provided with a basic grounding in English and our interpretation of his report that refugees were not, as in continental Europe, kept in reception centres until they had mastered a basic understanding of a language. Jones, in his report writes (p.27), "The discussion has highlighted the low levels of English ability amongst the refugees and the relative paucity of E.S.L. provision following reception".

The BRC's disagreement with the assertion that the main problem was not housing but jobs in the resettlement areas seems to be a distinction without a difference. If refugees are not settled in areas where there are jobs because there is no housing, but are settled in areas where there is housing but no jobs, from our perspective the problem seems to be a lack of housing in areas of employment.

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since this is more easily corrected than lack of jobs in areas where housing was available.

The BRC's new information that many of the refugees were employed in the reception centres makes the unemployment figures quoted even more staggering, but it does not detract from our surprise as Canadians at the high ratio of employees to assisted refugees. With respect to the assertion of cavalier writing re our comment that the Ockenden Venture "grew from a very small agency", we can only quote from the report published by the British Home Office from which the comment was drawn: "The subsequent months saw Ockenden expand rapidly in size from what had been a very small organization...". It is not cavalier to accurately represent a British government report. Similarly, it may be much more accurate to detail the specific north, north-eastern and eastern areas of Great Britain, but the use of a more general geographical terminology is not cavalier.

Concerning British representatives at international conferences who argue that resettlement of refugees is no longer a viable alternative, I assure you that it was not Mr. Jones nor the other writers, though it was stated in my presence by two British representatives at an international conference that both Mr. Barber and I attended.

Finally, we invite any of the British correspondents to write a review article on any Canadian reports or on our settlement policy and we would be pleased to publish it.

The Editor.