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Reviewed work(s):
Source: Signs, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring 2007), pp. 580-584
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/510157
Accessed: 30/07/2012 12:44

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Comparative Perspectives Symposium: Women in Refugee Camps

Journey of the Abandoned: Endless Refugee Camp and Incurable Traumas

Waves of black sea seemed to swallow a tiny boat adrift in the dark night as a horrible storm tossed it mercilessly. A five-year-old girl with an empty stomach on an empty boat was there alone, looking for her father. She found nothing but her own frozen heart, loneliness, and feelings of being betrayed and abandoned. She screamed so hard for help, harder than any real sound in this universe. But no one responded. Only the waves resounded as they repeatedly hit the side of the boat, breaking it into pieces. The girl’s voice echoed and sank into the emptiness of the sea.

This is a typical nightmare that has haunted me since childhood, recreating aspects of the horrifying experiences in my journey after the fall of Saigon. The boat was not destroyed by the storm. It landed on one of the Malaysian islands. Like many of the “lucky” boat people, I survived the thirst, the starvation, the pirates, and the seasickness and started the life of a refugee.

When I arrived in Pulau Bidong in 1989, my dad and I were sent to a school building nearby with the rest of the newly arrived boat people.¹ There we had blood tests and immunizations and had photo IDs made.

¹ Pulau Bidong, a scenic and uninhabited island located off Kuala Terengganu, provided a temporary home for Vietnamese boat people who fled their war-torn country in the 1970s and 1980s. Out of the estimated 800,000 Vietnamese who left their country during this period, the biggest proportion, more than a quarter of a million, landed on these shores. Sponsored by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Malaysia’s main refugee camp, the island of Pulau Bidong, opened in 1975. It was originally built to accommodate 12,000 people. By November 1978, Pulau Bidong was housing more than twice that number. And in early July 1979, there were 42,000 refugees crushed between its shores. Some 252,452 refugees passed through this little 260-hectare island before the camp was closed in 1991.
Then we waited for shelter arrangements. Two days later, we moved to the last house in a row on the east side of the island. There were many long rows of two-story houses built with wood from the nearby forest. We shared the second floor with three other families. The first night in this house was strange but much better than any night in the school or on the boat. We did not have electricity or candles. The room was lit by a little oil table lamp. We had nothing other than some clothes, not even a roll of bathroom tissue. My dad borrowed one from another family and took me down to the common restroom, which scared me. I ran straight up and went to bed.

When I woke up in the morning, I saw at least one rat in each trap. One roommate said, “Welcome to Rat Island!” There were no cats on this island, so rats were numerous and bigger in size than cats at home. When the first boat people landed at Pulau Bidong, they caught the rats for food. Now with the help from the International Red Cross (IRC) and the UNHCR, they caught rats and exchanged them for milk, eggs, and instant noodles.

When I finished brushing my teeth, I found that my slippers were gone. Someone had stolen them the night before in the school building. Later that day, my dad had to make a new pair of slippers for me by cutting some down from an adult size. There were few provisions for children on the island. I started to realize that we, along with everyone on the island, were living in conditions of severe scarcity. Everything was precious. I began to look after my stuff and use resources sparingly and efficiently. I initially assumed that food supplies and basic amenities came from the Malaysian government, but later I learned that they were from the UNHCR and the IRC. Our lives depended completely on them. Sometimes we were starving because the supply ship could not get to the island on time due to storms.

People soon resettled themselves within the camp, turning the area into a mini-Saigon. 2 I too made the most out of my childhood during these two years in Pulau Bidong. I enjoyed the beautiful beach. I learned to become an excellent swimmer. I went to school to study math and English. The boat people organized schools, using temples and churches to house students. I learned many things there, including cooking. I soon could help my dad prepare meals. My life had a semblance of stability.

2 To make the camp more like home, the occupants recreated a bustling mini-Saigon, with all the trappings of a township, including a post office, church, temple, schools, tailors, hair salons, sundry shops, and even a disco and a bar. One part of the beach was named Pantai Cina (China Beach) after its more famous counterpart in Vietnam.
Like many other children in the camp, however, I was missing the rest of my family. I wished I could have my mom and my younger sister and brother there. I dreamed of doing everything with them. My recurrent question when awake: When would my dream come true?

When Pilau Bidong closed in 1991, my dad and I moved to another “little Saigon,” this time within the Sungei Besi Refugee Camp. At first, things were much like Pilau Bidong. I was going to school for English, and my dad took vocational training to prepare for repatriation to another country. We waited for the UNHCR to approve our application for asylum in the United States. We received one rejection letter but then reapplied. For four years, we waited as conditions at Sungei Besi worsened. Seeking to close the camp, the Malaysian government started to force people to go back to Vietnam. Many people grew hopeless in this deadlock. Some committed suicide in front of government officials. As 1995 drew to a close, the government began evicting people from housing. Those whose asylum applications were rejected had two choices—either return to Viet-

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2 In 1989, after a twenty-year involvement with Indo-Chinese refugees, UNHCR devised the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), one of the most elaborate and expensive refugee programs in history, to close all Vietnamese and Laotian refugee camps in Southeast Asia by December 31, 1995. The CPA involved tripartite agreements arranging an orderly repatriation of refugees from Malaysia and Indonesia. Those asylum seekers whose status as “refugees fleeing persecution” was recognized by UNHCR were repatriated to Australia, Canada, the United States, and several European nations. Those who were denied refugee status were required to return to Vietnam. Sungei Besi was scheduled to close in August 1995. Conditions in the camp grew increasingly harsh as the Malaysian government tried to “encourage” repatriation to Vietnam. Only one canteen was open at any time. Cash flow for camp residents was tightened: financial remittances from overseas were limited to US$50 per month; the remainder had to be banked pending repatriation. Grocery stores closed. Access to sewing machines—a major source of livelihood—was cut. The few remaining training and income-generating activities were limited to those whose application for refugee status had not been turned down. For additional information, see Marshall (1995).

4 Repatriation to Vietnam met with strong resistance. From refugee camps across Southeast Asia only 19,000 Vietnamese voluntarily repatriated in 1993, and only 12,500 in 1994. Many remaining in the camps refused to volunteer. Barely fifty people chose to repatriate from Sungei Besi in November 1994, for example. According to UNHCR staff, Indo-Chinese asylum seekers “say they would rather fight and die than go back.” Faced with this reluctance, several of the first-asylum countries drafted agreements providing for nonvoluntary return to Vietnam. Hong Kong’s “orderly return” arrangement (see Marshall [1995] for an overview), which did not exclude the use of force, e.g., sent home more than 1,000 detainees by August 1995. Indonesia’s agreement stated that return need not be voluntary but stipulated that it should take place without using violence. Agreements signed by Malaysia and the Philippines did not refer specifically to use or nonuse of force in repatriating people who had not volunteered (Marshall 1995).
nam or refuse. We decided to refuse, hoping that by staying we could attain recognition as refugees.

Without adequate housing or means to live, people started to protest. As the protests grew in intensity, the government fenced in the protest area with barbed wire. There was little in this fenced-in area to shelter people from the sun or rain, just a few abandoned buildings, some small huts, and tents. The protests continued. My dad and a few other people were arrested for leading the protests. They were put in a little hut called the “monkey house.” They started a hunger strike.

Having no way of seeing my dad, I was so scared I did not know what to do. People presumed that those arrested would never come back. Without any relatives, I started to live on my own, trying to survive with the crowd. The protest became more intense and violent. When people came close to the fence, police started to throw tear gas grenades. I was with the crowd, running from one end of the field to the other. The tear gas was horrible. I could not breathe. I felt as if my eyes and throat were burned and detached. It was just too much for an eleven-year-old girl to handle.

The camp officials provided minimal supplies and food, enough for us to survive, but they made life difficult so people would give up and go back to Vietnam. After three days in blistering heat, people in the “monkey house” passed out. My dad was taken to the hospital. Eventually, the police took me to see him. I was crying when I saw him again. I had feared that I would not have that chance. My dad was like a mummy, his skin stretched taut across bare bones. After one week, they released my dad back to the fenced-in field.

Seeing that the protest produced no effective results, hundreds of people gave up and agreed to go back to Vietnam. Sensing that we had nothing more to lose, we decided to stay until the Malaysian government offered a better solution. For three months, we survived on that field living hand to mouth. We caught rainwater and stored it for drinking. All daily activities took place in the open air on this public field. For three months, the most common thing to do was to stand in line—for food, for the bathroom, and for everything else. Under the intense exposure to the sun, my skin grew five times darker than usual. Life was at its extreme of hardship.

When all people have to do is stand in line, all they can think about is whether to return to Vietnam. All had lived under the Communists. All had risked their lives to leave. All had lived for prolonged periods in the refugee camp, hoping to be able to change their lives for the better. Most, including my dad and me, did not want to waste these efforts. We
reckoned that if our corpses had not sunk in the ocean, then fate would not let them die here in this camp. We had shown the world that our boats were not as big as the Titanic, yet we crossed the ocean. We continued to present our courage, confidence, and dignity as an act of resistance against the Communist regime in our country. Eventually, the U.S. government stepped in. With the help of UNHCR, it established an agreement with the government in Hanoi to resolve this problem. The U.S. government agreed to grant qualified boat people admission to the United States, but their point of embarkation would be Vietnam, not Sungei Besi. Once this official policy was announced, the remaining people in the camp started the process of returning to Vietnam in order to emigrate to America. My dad and I had been waiting so long for this moment. In 1996—seven years after leaving Vietnam—we waved good-bye to the remaining boat people, the UNHCR, and especially to the life in the field.

Over a decade has passed. I have tried to forget the past, particularly the horrific memories of the journey, but I have not succeeded. I remain haunted by the experience of being with 149 people on a boat designed perhaps for forty. My childhood memories revolve around abandonment—the American abandonment of Saigon, my abandonment on a field in Sungei Besi as my father was placed under arrest, the recurrent sense of abandonment as applications for asylum were turned down. Like that of many Vietnamese boat people, my journey from abandonment took over a decade. My family and I now live in the United States.

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**References**