

Celebrating 40 Years: The Origins of Refuge

Howard Adelman

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I was asked by the current editor of *Refuge*, Professor Dagmar Soennecken, to write a short piece on the origins of *Refuge* on the occasion of the journal's fortieth anniversary. There were only two problems. First, I have little memory of the beginnings — or of many other things for that matter. Second, I was NOT the first editor; Kristin Hanson was.

Kristin Hanson is currently a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. Her specialization is poetic meter. For an illustration of her research, see her contribution on “Linguistics and poetics,” in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (2012) as well as her ongoing book project, *An Art that Nature Makes: A Linguistic Perspective on Meter in English*.

What has the study of poetry to do with refugees? I suspect just serendipity. I doubt if anyone in the nascent refugee field at the time read about “stylization of the phonology of rhythm in natural language.” No more than any of them read Hegel's *Phenomenology* (my own specialty at the time). What had either field to do with refugees? Intellectual skills and the ability to analyze and communicate did.

In 1979 and the early 1980s, Kristin arrived at Operation Lifeline, the organization being formed to promote and assist in the private sponsorship of refugees, then specifically, Indochinese refugees, as a volunteer. She had returned from a year of study in London to continue her study of English at the University of Toronto. She read [Beddoes \(1979\)](#) column in the *Globe and Mail* in June of that year where he named *Operation Lifeline* and published my phone number. Kristin called, got through and showed up at my house as a volunteer. Over the next year, Operation Lifeline became a formal organization supported by government grants to help the tens of thousands of private citizens who had undertaken to sponsor refugees. When she finished her studies, she began working at Operation Lifeline full time.

What had become obvious at the time was the need for a publication that would connect sponsors and communicate information about how to go about sponsorship and deal with the many problems that arose. *Refuge* was initially created to serve that very practical purpose. From her work at the office, Kristin knew firsthand a lot of

CONTACT

^a howarda72@gmail.com

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada

those questions – and their answers. And she was an English specialist. I asked her if she would edit the publication that I and Wendy Schelew, the administrator of Operation Lifeline, envisioned. We obtained a government grant for the publication, formed a volunteer editorial board and put out our first issue in 1981.

It quickly became evident that sponsors, refugees and others not only needed information, but also wanted a deeper knowledge of the reasoning behind certain policies and the basic premises behind them. However, as I recalled, a controversy emerged when *Refuge* published a positive take on the 1980 announcement that Lloyd Axworthy, the Liberal Minister of Employment and Immigration (as the position was then called) in Pierre Elliot Trudeau's government, that the government would increase the intake of Indochinese refugees from 50,000 to 60,000 (Johnson, 1981; Trudeau, 1981).

In my reconstruction of that event, I surmised that letters had arrived lambasting *Refuge* and Operation Lifeline for publishing hagiography instead of information and critical analysis, for the article did not give appropriate attention to the innovative role of Ron Atkey as the previous Conservative Minister and his government's imaginative initiative in the policy of bringing 50,000 Indochinese refugees to Canada through a government/private sponsorship matching program.¹

But that was not what happened as Kristin reminded me. Rather, it had to do with the constant in the Canadian polity – federal-provincial relations, and, more particularly, the relations between the federal and Quebec governments. Refugee advocates in Quebec objected to our showcasing cooperation

with a federal government whose authority they rejected. Thus, even universal humanitarian issues can become quickly embroiled in the issues endemic to any nation. Controversies over refugees have often more to do with local politics than refugees themselves.

With future academics involved, *Refuge* soon strayed into publishing academic articles, particularly on policy questions and on theory as well. James C. Hathaway eventually became the James E. and Sarah A. Degan Professor of Law and a leading authority on international refugee law and the founder of the University of Michigan's program in refugee and asylum law. In the beginning of the 1980s, he was a graduate student writing his pioneering thesis attempting to place refugee law within a human rights frame. If I am correct, his first published and very memorable academic article (written in French and co-authored with Michael Schelew from Amnesty International) appeared in *Refuge*: "Persecution by Economic Prescription: New Dilemmas for Refugees" (Hathaway & Schelew, 1981). It was an initial intellectual effort in the attempt to fit the 1951 Refugee Convention within the latest developments on human rights law. As Francesco Maiani almost thirty years later wrote (2010):

UNHCR has long advocated for the inclusion of this class of persons [access to refugee status for genuine conscientious objectors to military service], and the "Hathaway approach," strictly identifying persecution with breaches of universally recognized human rights has long stood in the way [...] The evolution of human rights law on this point [...] has however reversed the situation. Hathaway's approach is now, arguably, of considerable assistance for the recognition of genuine conscientious objectors as refugees.

(footnote 31)

¹ Atkey contributed the foreword to a 2017 volume on Canada and the Indochinese Refugees edited by Molloy et al.. Molloy, together with James Simeon, also guest edited a 2016 special issue of *Refuge* on the same topic, based on a conference held at York University in 2013.

Intellectual innovation quickly became a hallmark of *Refuge*. But so did controversy over academic issues. Were Hathaway's innovative claims justified? Did another early article's account of African refugees perpetuate a stereotype of Africans living in an abject region off the earth (Adelman, 1985)? I myself published an early essay on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) that became a focus of controversy (Adelman, 1982).

Operation Lifeline was committed to not outliving its founding purpose by taking on another mission. As the resettlement of Indochinese refugees stabilized, Wendy stepped down and other staff members moved on as well. Professor Irving Abella, from his own experience in writing about Jewish refugees coming to Canada in the thirties and forties (e.g., Abella, 1985), recognized the importance of preserving archives. He helped arrange a grant to preserve the records of Operation Lifeline. The Refugee Documentary Project at York University was initiated in 1982 for that purpose. The archives of Operation Lifeline and its small library of refugee volumes were transferred to York University. So was *Refuge* and as part of that, it became an academic journal. As the Director of the Refugee Documentation Project, I then became the second editor of *Refuge*. It is that step that brought about my change in roles. I would like to close by celebrating Professor Kristin Hanson as the first editor of *Refuge* — she deserves that honour.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard Adelman retired as Professor Emeritus of Philosophy York University in 2003. He was the founder and director of York's Centre for Refugee Studies and also the editor of *Refuge* for 10 years.

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