

## “A REFUGEE WOULD LOVE TO HAVE YOUR PROBLEMS”<sup>1</sup>

In 1980 I began to work as a part-time volunteer in the Refugee Resettlement office of Catholic Charities of San Francisco, CA. At the time I was assigned to process the paperwork for any refugee who was not coming from Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos) through the camps set up in the United States to process the applicants for Refugee status. So I was seeing paperwork for people from Albania, Afghanistan, Soviet Union, China - through Hong Kong - Cuba (coming through Spain or elsewhere) Southeast Asians coming through other countries, Ethiopians and many others in the Family Reunification Program. In addition to verifying the correctness and completion of the paperwork, I often was asked to verify the sponsorship of this person, either through a parish or immediate family member. The main reason I was assigned that job was very simple: I did not have the languages required to work directly with the Southeast Asian refugees. The common language in the office among the staff, both Anglo and Asian, was Mandarin Chinese. I usually chose to eat my lunch in the nearby park to allow the staff to be at ease in their common language and not have to try to include me.

I remember two cases in particular that resulted in the satisfaction of seeing either a family reunited or refugees well settled through an interested friend. One was the family (mother, sister and brother) of a member of our staff. She was a lovely young Vietnamese woman who had been rescued at sea by an American ship and so, ended up in the United States. Her mother and siblings had somehow ended up in France. As soon as she acquired her U. S. Citizenship, she made formal application to bring her mother and minor siblings from France. It all took several years, but I remember the joy on her face when she came to my office and presented me with gifts her mother had brought from France for me as a way of expressing her gratitude.

The second was somewhat more complex as it was the case of two young Albanian men in their early twenties who had managed to escape from their country and ended up in a refugee camp. They had no relatives in the United States, but had a chance for resettlement if they had a reliable sponsor. It turned out that the uncle of one of them had a very close friend in San Francisco, so they put his name on the forms they filled out with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) in the camp. They also indicated that they were Catholic, so the case was assigned to the USCC and through them to the San Francisco office. When I received the paperwork I called the man named as the sponsor to “check him out.” I was skeptical as he was not a relative, did not really know these young men and said he would give them work in his restaurant. It was not promising of success and had too many overtones of “a bad deal” for them. He invited me to come to his restaurant to meet him. I gladly agreed, especially as he kept insisting he owned and operated the best Italian restaurant in San Francisco. We agreed on a date and time and I went into the Mission District – the Latino, not the Italian part of the city – to meet this stranger who was not Italian at all, but Albanian. Over a glass of red wine, he explained his involvement and commitment to help these two young men get settled in this country. He would bring them in to his business, train them in every level of restaurant work, from cleaning and serving to cooking and planning menus as well as the finances of

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<sup>1</sup> Poster of the USCC/MRS (United States Catholic Conference/Migration & Refugee Services).

running a business. Once they had enough English and basic skills to get by, he would set them up in their own little place where they would be responsible for the running of the restaurant – always under his supervision and advice. He convinced me and I decided to approve his sponsorship while keeping close tabs on him and “the boys.” With a small family gathering coming up, I decided to have us gather for dinner in this restaurant in order to see it in action. It was the start of many years of business entertaining that I would do in *La Traviata*, in truth one of the best Italian restaurants I have found anywhere. Soon the boys arrived and he set about executing his plan of resettlement. Once they had learned the basics, he bought the café attached to a motel near Civic Center and turned it over to them. It was grueling work as they had to provide three meals a day, with lunch drawing on the lawyers and office workers from the courts, public library and other civic buildings, while the dinner hour served the Symphony and Opera-Ballet crowds. Joan McKenna (RSCJ), after meeting them over lunch one day, took one of them on for English classes “in her copious free time.”

Every few months I would check with their sponsor to see how things were going, always at the restaurant. One day, he sat me down, handed me a glass of wine and asked me to celebrate with him. The boys – as he always referred to them – had phoned one day and asked for an appointment with him. He sat them at the same back table where we were seated, poured the red wine and then they handed him a brown paper bag. When he opened it, he found it filled with cash. It was, they explained, the return of the loan he had made them to buy the café. It was two years to the date from when he had made the loan. They brought it in a paper bag because, “this is the way we do things in Albania” among friends or family. They were now on their own, but would always have the advice and support of their “uncle” to guide them in the years to come.

One day at the office, the Director, Diane Philipps, walked over to my desk that was located in a hallway as there was no free office, put a letter on my desk and said “This is now for you to handle.” I read it and found that all Catholic Charities offices were now being asked to take on the resettlement of the Mariel Cubans<sup>2</sup> under the auspices of the USCC/MRS (United States Catholic Conference/Migration and Refugee Services). I was the only person in the office who spoke Spanish. Very shortly I found myself plunged into the chaos of the Mariel Boatlift, speaking directly by phone several times a week with my contact at the refugee camp set up at Fort Smith, AK and several times a day with the leaders of the Cuban community in the San Francisco Bay Area, as we tried to find parishes to act as sponsors and places to house the mostly single men who were pouring in. Some of our “sponsors” and Cuban leaders turned out to have their own interests at heart as they found ways to profit from this “human bonanza.” I became quite close to the directors of the other church-sponsored groups (akin to USCC for the Catholics) as we struggled with the tasks at hand and the increasing problems that became inherent to the Mariel Boatlift. One evening I received a call at home from my good friend, Pat, director of the Presbyterian-associated Church World Services. When I asked how she had gotten my home phone, she simply said “don’t ask!” She was calling to warn me that our phones were probably being tapped by the FBI who were trying to get to the bottom of several drug and trafficking gangs that were infiltrating the Cuban resettlement and were probably trying to get

<sup>2</sup> The Cubans leaving Cuba from the port of Mariel to come to the United States between 15 April and 31 October, 1980. Fidel Castro had decided to “let” them leave – many were simply taken out of jails and mental hospitals and put on boats. Approximately 125,000 Cubans arrived in Florida.

information about our contacts in the Cuban community. This suddenly raised the ante for all of us involved in this work as we were brought face-to-face with some of the uglier realities of what can befall those who are trying to begin their lives again in a new land. From my present perspective of living in Europe for the past 13 years, with the ever-increasing surge of migrants and refugees arriving on our shores, having already been trafficked, exploited and facing the refusal of most countries to offer them humane processing and resettlement, I can only see how history repeats itself, especially when those most vulnerable are involved.

All the while that I was working with refugees I had also become involved in assisting migrants, both documented and not. With training in Immigration Law received by the staff of the USCC/MRS office in San Francisco, I was soon qualified and certified as a Legal Representative before the then Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Immigration Court. Twice a week I joined other such certified representatives and pro-bono attorneys in representing people at what was usually their first hearing before an Immigration judge for a deportation hearing. Most of our “clients” were farm workers from the valleys of Central California and Napa County who had been picked up by the Immigration Service in raids and found to be without proper documents. I found that most of the judges were very grateful for our presence since most of us spoke Spanish – which they did not – and could offer free assistance and sound legal advice to people who had no idea what they needed or what rights they had. We could then refer our clients to the nearest Catholic Charities office where we knew there was further assistance available.

In mid-1984 I accepted a position in Los Angeles with the office of Catholic Charities – Migration and Refugee Services. After several years of being “a one-woman show” in San Francisco, I was soon immersed in a large staff of 25 men and women responsible for migrants and refugees in the three counties that comprised the archdiocese of Los Angeles that soon surpassed Chicago as the largest archdiocese in the country. I was quickly re-certified as a legal representative and resumed my work before the courts. However, I had been hired to develop the Immigration Education Program in the parishes of the Archdiocese. The purpose of the program was to educate the largely undocumented Hispanic population to their rights and responsibilities as persons residing in this country. What began as a relatively manageable, though very extensive project quickly became overwhelming with the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act – “IRCA” (“The Simpson-Mazzoli Bill) and the subsequent registration of thousands of undocumented persons who might be eligible for some form of amnesty. Catholic Charities USA had ratified the draft proposal for this law brought to the national meeting by the California Catholic Conference – Immigration Committee. I had been the chair of this committee of the Immigration directors of Catholic Charities of California all through the year in which we prepared the document that was presented and approved by the National Conference. It had been a very hard and long process and the overwhelming approval by the national conference was very gratifying. Many of the more positive elements of the IRCA were taken from the proposal we drew up. While Congress added many less positive and even damaging elements, we were very proud of the work accomplished together that year.

Now that the law was passed, we had to live with the implementation and find ways to assist both those who were eligible for amnesty and those who would never be. Education was key to this work.

Unfortunately, as was the case all over the country, we were unprepared, understaffed and unable to meet the needs as tens of thousands of persons began to line up to find out if they were eligible for benefits under the law.. Government funding was slow in coming and I several of us on staff soon found ourselves working too long hours and falling prey to exhaustion. One key person suffered a massive stroke, another had to resign from ulcers and I suffered a nervous breakdown and retired permanently from this line of work.