WORLD REFUGEE YEAR: THE CANADIAN RESPONSE

MARLENE EPP, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF HISTORY AND PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES,
CONRAD GREBEL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Marlene Epp is a Canadian historian whose scholarship focuses on Mennonites, immigrants and refugees, women and gender, and the history of food and culture.

In late 1958 the United Nations General Assembly declared that 1959-60 would be recognized as World Refugee Year (WRY). While this came a decade after the height of the 'influx' of the post-Second World War movement of refugees and displaced persons, it was initiated to deal with a lingering population of refugees in Europe, and new crises of displacement emerging in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. During the years 1947 through 1962, Canada admitted a quarter of a million refugees and displaced persons, half of which arrived between 1946 and 1951.[1] Yet, Canada's responsibility to contribute to a global crisis was not over.

The Canadian Committee for World Refugee Year (CCWRY) was established in 1959 and directed by Muriel Jacobson, a woman with extensive international experience related to refugees and displaced persons.[2] The objectives of the Committee were public education—"to focus attention on the refugee problem and to promote among the people of Canada a sympathetic interest in the plight of refugees throughout the world"—and to raise funds to support the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to clear the remaining refugee camps of Europe, and to support the integration or resettlement of those refugees as well as many more in other parts of the world.

There is limited public awareness of the special Year, other than Canada's decision to admit 300 refugees with tuberculosis, an illness that at the time prohibited admission, as well as 526 family members.[3] The conversation among Canadians about World Refugee Year reveals a reluctant federal government, a broadly democratic national endeavor directed, in essence, by one woman, and a grassroots movement of civil society actors committed to improve the lot of the world's stateless and homeless.

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The CCWRY consisted of forty-five sponsoring organizations, including faith groups, ethnic associations, a diverse array of women’s groups, student groups, labour unions, and a range of NGOs. These groups cut across ideological lines and represented a notable collective of actors coming together in a common cause. What is remarkable about World Refugee Year in Canada is its role as a forerunner for civil society engagement in refugee issues, including private sponsorship, a phenomenon that tends to be highlighted for the late 1970s and beyond.

As part of its publicity efforts, the CCWRY called on people to “Remember” that there remained homeless and desperate refugees in Europe. Its appeal was poetic and emotional, as was much of the rhetoric around World Refugee Year generally. The effort appealed to the charitable guilt—or to induce that guilt—of Canadians who were beginning to experience a postwar prosperity that allowed for the purchase of homes, modern household appliances, and vacations. Indeed, an editorial in the *Globe and Mail* proposed that “As one of the wealthiest and most respected nations in the world, Canada has a heavy obligation to take a leading part in this great humanitarian enterprise.”[4]

The educational component of WRY in Canada also included material demonstrating that “New Citizens are New Assets”[5] and offered stories of famous Canadians who were refugees.

In the spirit of identifying with the plight of refugees and to generate empathy, the CCWRY declared April 24-30, 1960 as “Austerity Week.” Canadians were encouraged to “Deny yourself something this week, and give what you save to WORLD REFUGEE YEAR… We can all do a LOT if we all do a LITTLE.”[6] Citizens were encouraged to put a collection box in “a prominent position” in their home during Austerity Week for all “positive acts of self-denial,” suggesting that “cigarettes, liquor, cinema and theatre tickets, dances and other entertainments, hairdresser and barbers, cream, sugar, chocolate” would provide the “principal opportunities for self-denial.”[7]

Along with education, fundraising was a significant aspect of WRY. One success that received international attention—called “Operation Eskimo”—was an auction of Inuit clothing, a harpoon, and soapstone carvings in Toronto on May 5, 1960 that generated 5,000 dollars. Peter Casson, the UNHCR representative in Canada, visited the “Eskimos” of Frobisher Bay Rehabilitation Centre in April 1960. Casson, who posed for photos with Inuit artists and children in traditional dress, said he was “sick of begging across Canada” and felt that “An Arctic setting…would give a sense of colour and urgency to the plight of thousands of men, women, and children still rotting in camps.” Representing the Inuit, Abe Okpik said that the Eskimos “knew what it was to be in need of food and shelter for they had lacked them many times in the past.”[8]

The irony that First Nations also struggled with inadequate housing, healthcare, and education, and lacked food security, while being asked to help refugees, was not part of the news stories. Media coverage concluded that, "If the Eskimos, who live in a region devoid of any comforts as we know them, can take of their potential meager income to help the refugees, surely all Canadians in the south cannot afford to do less!"[9] The Inuit were described with condescension yet lauded for empathizing with refugees when other Canadians were falling short.

Other fundraising initiatives included 'Border Crossing Pennies,' whereby donation boxes were placed at Canada-US borders during the tourist season, so that travelers could understand the privilege of free borders. The sale of jar opening devices, as well as theatre productions and dinners—organized mainly by women—generated small amounts of money for the cause. Many Canadians sent in one to five dollars in order to "do something" to help the homeless in the world. The donation of meal sales by Chinese restaurants in Toronto was another initiative that echoes present-day localized efforts on behalf of Ukrainian refugees.

A third important outcome, along with education and fundraising, though not initially part of the CCWRY's mandate, was the private sponsorship of refugees, representing a fundamental willingness on the part of some citizens, to open Canada's doors. Residents of the Orchard Heights neighbourhood of Port Credit, Ontario became the first private sponsor of a European refugee family of five from Yugoslavia. Led by TV personality Fred Davis and his wife Jo Davis, Orchard Heights was willing to sponsor a refugee family regardless of "occupation, religion, or nationality," and stepped up with school children collecting vitamins and kitchen gadgets, a local physician and dentist offering free services, and food donated by the neighbourhood grocery store. There were many bureaucratic delays in the process, prompting writer Pierre Berton to point out that the Orchard Heights group would take "any family" but that restrictive government regulations forced them to make choices about family size, occupation, and religious affiliation. In the end, the Orchard Heights example of community action spread until thirteen groups across Canada had sponsored seventeen families comprising seventy persons.[10]

Although critique of government policy was not an expressed purpose of WYR, this did emerge. For example, the *Globe and Mail* offered a strong statement as WYR neared its end, saying, "As a nation, we are not accustomed to basing our national policies on humanitarian principles. Canada's immigration policy, like nearly all immigration policies, is heavy on discrimination and light on considerations for social justice. It was formed solely to serve Canada's immediate benefit. It was certainly not designed to help solve the refugee problem." The admission of a large number of Hungarian refugees in 1956, it was argued, was done mainly to capitalize on a wave of anti-Communist feeling rather than genuine interest in helping refugees. What was needed, the writer suggested, was "a completely new policy based upon humanitarian values."[11]

Was World Refugee Year a success in Canada? The financial impact was not substantial.[12] Yet, while opinion polls of the late 1950s showed 64 percent of Canadians were against increased immigration,

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by March 1960, 61 percent approved the admission of certain 'hard core' refugees. Educational initiatives around WRY may have begun to drive a wedge into the racism that existed amongst Canadians towards non-white immigrants. Our understanding of the points system introduced to Canadian immigration regulations in the early 1960s—often lauded as a progressive end to race-based approaches—should be nuanced by our understanding of these years just prior. 1960 was described as "the year Canada opened heart," while less than two years later the press announced Canada's large scale postwar immigration as officially over.

In her final report, Jacobson said "The first objective of the CCWRY—to create a favourable climate of public opinion on behalf of refugees—has been fulfilled in generous measure."[13] While the small deeds of individuals in remote Canadian locales might seem as paltry as the government's efforts on behalf of refugees, one shouldn't underestimate the power, over the long term, of collective enthusiasm and action for a cause. Much of the collective good that emerged during WRY paved the way for broader civil society engagement in years to come. We can't quite measure the direct impact of WRY in Canada's future response to refugees, but it does provide a glimpse into a highly concentrated moment when Canadians were galvanized to think and act locally to support a global need.

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10. "Report on Private, Voluntary Action in Canada during World Refugee Year." In CCWRY Fonds, Series 2, Box 4, File 10, Final Report, 1960-1961.

11. R. Val Scott, "Canada and the Refugees," *Globe and Mail*, January 6, 1960, p.6. ProQuest Historical Newspapers, online.

12. In its final report, the CCWRY reported that 2.5 million dollars had been raised by individuals, sponsoring organizations, and local committees. Government contributions through various programs raised the total to 4.2 million dollars raised in Canada for WRY.

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