The fruits of generosity

Strangers at the gate:
the 'boat people's' first ten years in Canada
Morton Beiser
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The arrival this past summer of successive groups of destitute Chinese in dilapidated boats off the coast of British Columbia helped reactivate recurrent public debate about Canada's refugee policy. As usual, the battlelines were drawn between compassion and fear: compassion for victims of tragedy and persecution, fear of undue burden on our social services and of the abuse of Canada's legendary generosity by unscrupulous traffickers. Morton Beiser's *Strangers at the Gate* is a welcome corrective to much of the ill-informed rhetoric that has dominated public discussion.

Beiser reviews the history and progress of the so-called "boat people" who escaped to Canada from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia between 1979 and 1981. The backbone of the work is the author's longitudinal study of 1348 refugees who settled in Vancouver. Participants were interviewed in 1981, and again in 1983 and 1991, to track their adjustment to their new country.

This book is, however, more than simply a formal research presentation. Beiser's statistical findings are enriched and humanized by case histories. These personal stories are valuable reminders that many refugees who now subsist in Canada through often menial jobs were once successful professionals or wealthy businessmen before their home countries were torn apart by war or revolutionary politics. Take, for example, Li Wuchin, a janitor in a Vancouver church. Once a rich industrialist, he was divested of his factories, house and servants when the Communists took over Saigon in 1975. After a spell in a "re-education" camp he fled for his life through the jungles of Laos. At the Mekong River, which separates Laos from Thailand, he drew the gunfire of border guards so that his family might swim across the river unobserved.

Beiser falls squarely on the side of compassion in his recommendations for refugee policy. He argues that "privileged countries should go on admitting refugees because their kindness to strangers at the gate is an affirmation of humanitarianism." Moreover, the "moral and legal obligation [flows] one way — from Canada to the people we agreed to protect. Since they were admitted as refugees, Canada [has] no right to expect the Southeast Asians to contribute to the economy."

Nonetheless, much of *Strangers at the Gate* provides compelling evidence that the "cost of compassion may be less than many alarmists fear." After ten years in Canada, 86% of the refugees followed in Beiser's study had "successfully" integrated into Canadian society: that is, they had jobs, spoke some English and rated themselves as being in good or better health. They also boasted lower rates of unemployment, depression, substance abuse and use of social services compared with national averages.

Fred Sebastian

Popular perceptions of the boat people's fate, however, fall considerably short of the refugees' actual accomplishments. A 1994 Gallup poll found that roughly half of all Canadians doubted the refugees were as likely to be working as other Canadians. Almost 40% thought the boat people were using more than their share of health and social services and that, in the long run, the decision to accept the Southeast Asian refugees had cost Canadian taxpayers too much.

Certainly, the refugees' achievements came not without struggle or cost. Two years after arrival, a mere 15% were considered "successful." Some, particularly men in the first year after their arrival, battled depression. Others grappled with the frustrations of underemployment, language barriers, discrimination and separation from family members who remained in Southeast Asia. Beiser depends largely on anecdotal evidence to illustrate the difficulties encountered by refugees and to buttress his entreaty that we do more to ease their way into our society. This raises an apparent contradiction, since his own research suggests that, as a group, the refugees are doing remarkably well. His recommendations are nonetheless eminently reasonable: he advocates more language training, easing of the restrictions on family reunification, and greater facilitation of appropriate employment.

Beiser also reminds us that good intentions can occasionally cause unintended harm. The Canadian government sponsored only a third of the 60 000 Southeast Asian refugees, while individuals and community groups sponsored the rest. It was tacitly assumed that the personal attention and often lavish generosity showered upon newcomers by private sponsors would help them integrate into Canadian soci-

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ety more rapidly than their government-sponsored compatriots. Beiser's study revealed otherwise. No difference in well-being was apparent between the two groups of refugees at any time after arrival. Indeed, the prevailing opinion among refugees was that government sponsorship was preferable. Non-Christians sponsored by Christian groups, actually had an *increased* risk of depression. One young woman explained that she became a Christian to please her church-based sponsors, despite their sincere disavowal of any intention to convert her. Ironically, the very altruism of sponsors became a source of frustration for the refugees, who felt unable to repay a substantial debt.

The encouraging record of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada stands as a dual testimony to those who rebuilt their lives after facing enormous adversity and to the nation that welcomed them. *Strangers at the Gate* reassures us that our generosity has been rewarded. Beiser's demonstration that it has cost so little to do so much good should bolster our willingness to welcome more refugees and to make their transition into Canadian society as painless as possible.

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Room for a view

Going to America

What if one were to raise a child, but conceal from him the fact of his mortality? Would the child, secure in his kinship with eternity and free of the terrible knowledge that shackles the rest of us, become an *Übermensch* of sorts? Or would he, devoid of the discipline imposed by the weighty sands of time, fail to identify the things that really matter, fail to make choices, and ultimately fail to endow life with meaning?

These were the questions that troubled Adolfo de Nocte, an obscure professor of philosophy who, despite the originality of his research, will not be found in the annals of academe. De Nocte had misgivings about the ethics of pursuing his inquiry, but in the end persuaded himself that the benefits outweighed the risks. And so he concealed from his own son, Giovanni, any evidence, mention of, or reference to death.

There were few places so well suited to his experiment as Nocera Terinese, the Calabrian town where de Nocte lived. Nestled in one of the most remote regions of southern Italy, this little town with a population of barely 5000 afforded him uncommon control over the flow of death-related information to his son.

Of course, there were a few close calls over the years, the closest being when the professor lost his beloved wife. She died suddenly, without any anticipatory illness, and Giovanni, then eight years old, was simply told that his mother had gone to America.

"When will she come back?" he asked.

"Soon," his father answered, not knowing how else to answer without giving up the experiment.

The boy spent long hours on the doorstep of their house, waiting for his mother to return and repeating his question. After two years he stopped asking the question and no longer waited. De Nocte continued the experiment.

And yet, for all the effort he put into it, de Nocte's experiment was something of a disappointment to him. He loved his son and thought him special, but he knew that Giovanni was special only because he was his son. To the objective observer he was no more special than the boy next door. He was, in short, no *Übermensch*.


Art Explosion

Was it possible, de Nocte wondered, that we humans are indifferent to our own mortality? Or perhaps the experiment simply needed more time. Perhaps Giovanni would show signs of greatness once he reached manhood.

Alas, destiny put an end to the experiment in Giovanni's eighteenth year, on a rainy afternoon in Nardotti's hardware store. There, as Giovanni played cards with his father, Nardotti and Dottore Cotrolào, Nardotti dropped his cards, clutched his chest and fell to the floor.

"Come on Nardotti, your hand can't be all that bad," the professor said, convinced they were being treated to slapstick by the practical joker, Nardotti. A trickle of blood appearing from under Nardotti's forehead announced that this was not the case.

Dottore Cotrolào got down on the floor. He checked for evidence of respiration and for a pulse. Finding neither, he struck a match and held it close to Nardotti's right eye, which he held open.

Nothing.

The doctor blew out the match. Aware of the experiment and mindful that Giovanni was present, he simply shook his head.

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