

**Speech by David Bitel to Emanuel School, Randwick NSW
In Honour of World Refugee Day**

18 June 2003

Let me start this speech by acknowledging the traditional indigenous owners of the land on which we sit. I always think it is important for us as migrants, most of whom have come in fact as refugees, to recognize that when we or our forebears came to Australia, they were welcomed to this country by its indigenous owners. How different is this story today for asylum seekers seeking Australia's protection! Rather than welcoming such people, those who have the misfortune not to have been able to obtain visas are detained in detention centers, often for extended periods of time. The freedom and liberty that we all take for granted and enjoy is denied to these people.

As Jews, I think we have a special responsibility to refugees. My own grandparents were refugees from the pogroms of Tsarist Russia. I am sure many of your parents or grandparents were refugees from the Shoah. We Jews have known the refugee experience and were fortunate enough to have received a welcome and sanctuary in this great country. We must always remember the plight of others. Never forget the words of John Bradford on watching others being led to their execution: "There but for the grace of God go I".

Jewish theology teaches us the special importance of caring for foreigners. On many occasions in the Torah, we are reminded to treat strangers fairly and properly because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. This most important religious teaching should guide us in our daily life.

Refugees are entitled to protection and in fact, Australia is one of the countries in the world which does grant protection to refugees. The international Refugee Convention which Australia has signed and which grew out of the ashes of the Holocaust as a means of ensuring that the victims of such genocides would not in future be prejudiced,

recognizes that refugees are people who have a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group.

Refugees are amongst the most vulnerable in the community. They are people like you and I whose lives and experiences have been shattered, usually through events beyond their control. They have been forced to embark on the refugee journey and are most deserving of our compassion and support.

Many refugees are in fact children. This brings me to one of the most insidious aspects of Australia's current refugee policies, namely the detention of children. This policy has been widely condemned by the international community, as well as by large numbers of organizations and prominent people in Australia. Nevertheless, the governments continue with this inhumane policy. Later this year, you will hear of a very important report which will be published by Australia's human rights watchdog, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, which has been undertaking an investigation into the issue of the detention of children. I ask you when this report comes out to consider it carefully and to place yourself in the position of those unfortunate children who have been the victim of this inhumane policy. Let me tell you just one story. An 8-year-old Afghan child, the victim of the excesses of the Taliban, was secreted out of Afghanistan by his parents in the hope that he would have a better life. Somehow, he found his way to Australia and was immediately placed by our authorities into the Woomera Detention Centre. There, alone and without family, he wandered for some 6 months crying out for help but ignored, before he was finally given proper attention. How on earth could this happen in civilized Australia. Whilst you and I are here today, there are children in detention centers like that 8-year-old child. This is a policy that we as Australians are all responsible for.

On the 20th June, we celebrate World Refugee Day. As Australians, we can be proud that this United Nations day was in fact started as an Australian initiative. Indeed, as Jews we can be particularly proud as it was the brainchild of that eminent Jewish Australian, Major General Paul Cullen, a founder of the Refugee Council of Australia, the organization of which I have the current honour to be the President. Jews have played an important role in the refugee story in Australia and in building our country. It is important that you as the next generation continue to play this role. On World

Refugee Day, I want you in particular to think of other children like yourselves who have the misfortune to be asylum seekers and refugees whether here in Australia or in other countries around the world. I want you to extend to them your hearts and thoughts and to commit yourselves to making this a better world for us all.

I thank you for the honour of being asked to present this address. I congratulate those in the school who have had the foresight of initiating this program. I would urge that it be an annual event so that we all can be reminded of our special obligations as Jews, as Australians and as human beings to those strangers, foreigners who are most deserving of our support.

*"First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out-
because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for the communists.

*Then they came for the trade unionist and I did not speak out-
because I was not a trade unionist.*

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak out for me."

-- Attributed to Pastor Niemoeller (victim of the Nazis).

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