

**2005 Refugee Day Address to Baha'i Community
at Baha'i Temple, Ingleside, Sydney
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“It Takes Courage to be a Refugee – The Story of Elizabeth”

**by
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As noted in its publicity material for World Refugee Day 2005, the UNHCR records that World Refugee Day is a salute to the indomitable spirit and courage of the world's refugees, not just in enduring the dangers and violence of the crises that made them refugees, but also in the courage they show in rebuilding their lives and contributing to society in difficult or unfamiliar circumstances.

As ordinary people living peaceful lives, we rarely have to put our courage to the test. Refugees are ordinary people, too, except that through no fault of their own they find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. They must dig deep into their inner source of strength to overcome fear and to survive.

Today, although there has been a fall in the number of refugees and internally displaced people in the world, there are still tens of millions of both around the world, victims of conflicts over which as individuals they have no control. Persecuted by governments, or people or groups and protected by their governments, they have a fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. Refugees exist in every continent, and many would be amongst us here today.

All have their own story to tell of the hardship and distress they experienced, of their escape and search for sanctuary. Of the horrors and nightmares of their experiences. Of their vulnerability, and whilst most would not admit it, of the courage with which they addressed their problems to get on with life.

Most refugees today are women and children. Let me share with you the story of one refugee which highlights the universality of the experience of the refugee.

Elizabeth Freeman, Betsy as she was known to her family, was born in 1873 in Zashnoff, a small village outside Kiev in what is now the Ukraine, but was then part of Tsarist Russia, ten years after the abolition of serfdom! She was the youngest of 12 children, born to a poor Jewish family. Anti-Semitism dominated their life experiences. Laws prevented the Jews from working except in permitted trades and jobs, limited their freedom of movement and required them to live in prescribed areas. The village was regularly the subject of attack from Kossaks and pogroms, officially sanctioned, helped keep the numbers of Jews down. Illiterate priests told illiterate peasants lies about Jewish religious practices which ensured the fires of hatred toward Jews were continually stoked.

In 1888 the village was again attacked. Betsy and two brothers were out of the village that day. The soldiers with the help of local non-Jews herded those Jews they could find into the local synagogue, locked the doors and windows, and then set it alight. All inside perished, including Betsy's parents and all her other brothers and sisters. We can only but wonder what the survivors felt on returning. Betsy was 15. Her oldest brother then decided, as was the custom in those days, and indeed in some parts of the world today is still the custom, that it was time for Betsy to marry. She protested but to no avail. She promised her brother that if forced to marry someone she did not love, she would not live with the man. Her pleas were ignored and the marriage was arranged and took place. But then an event occurred which must have sent extraordinary shock waves through this small community.

After the ceremony was over and before the marriage could be consummated, Betsy true to her promise, fled her village and her family and the man she had just married. With nothing except the clothes she was wearing, she wandered seeking food and shelter until she came to another Jewish *stadt* or village many miles away, where she found work as a maid in the home of another Jewish family.

She continued to live there for some years, till in her early 20s, when she met and fell in love with the man she wanted to marry, Moses Raingold. Or perhaps I should say live with, as she had not obtained a Jewish divorce to her knowledge. They considered their

future. There was none in Russia. Persecution of Jews was intensifying in the 1890s. They heard stories of the safety and freedom in far-off countries - England, and America. They were penniless however, although some relatives of Moses had made the flight already to England. They saved and sought help from agents – people we now demonise as “people smugglers” – and with three children, in 1897 made the trip by boat from Russia to England, landing in London – one family amongst hundreds of thousands who arrived with hope and courage for a new and happy life. Remember the words of Emma Lazarus –

“Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”.

But Betsy’s dream was not yet fulfilled. She escaped persecution to abject poverty. Over the next 15 years, five more children were born, and three of the eight died.

Betsy was illiterate. She had had no education in Russia – spoke Yiddish and a bit of Russian – and found herself in a strange land where the language and lifestyle was completely alien. Moses found employment as an itinerant salesman earning just enough to feed the family and pay rent in one of the squalid slums which then existed in the East end of London. The oldest son found it all too hard to bear and ran away from home. In 1912 the youngest child was born. In 1914 Moses died of pneumonia, leaving Betsy to raise four children under the age of 12. She got herself a job as a washerwoman and the family survived. Only the youngest completed schooling.

As you may have guessed, Betsy was my grandmother, my mother the youngest of the eight.

There is a postscript to the story I wish to tell. Betsy survived to the age of 83, dying in 1956 in London. She saw in her old age her five children have happy and successful unions and the family of course prized education. But she never learned English – when would she have time? She faced her adversity and got on with the job of living. As we Jews say, “L’chaim” – “To Life” – for life is the most precious gift.

I never met my grandmother as my parents had decided to leave Europe for good after the horrors of the Second World War. They too came as boat people, but legally, to this great

land in 1947. However, the family has one tape taken in 1954 of my grandmother's voice. The family in England are huddled around a phone which rings. The conversation was recorded on a cassette tape. There is conversation in English as the call comes through from my mother from here in Sydney – in fact we then lived just around the corner from this Temple, in Mona Vale! My grandmother is called to the phone “to talk to Attal” (my mother) and she replies in a quivering tone, displaying her age and ignorance, in Yiddish: “But how can I talk to Attal, she is in Australia” – then there is silence, and then she starts to cry ...

My grandmother died with her only identity document being her British Alien's Registration Certificate issued in 1930 giving her addresses and where in the place marked “Signature of Holder” there appears a thumb print.

Sixty years ago the world witnessed the liberation of the concentration camps. Events moved quickly and in 1951 the UN recognised the importance of providing protection to refugees by the adoption of the Refugee Convention. The UNHCR was mandated to provide international protection to refugees. Its workers work with commitment and courage to help today's refugees, for unfortunately, the saga of conflict continues, with new crises creating new refugees. Betsy's story is repeated endlessly – but it is unique to Betsy and to my family, just as the stories of terror and courage are unique to each traumatised individual now experiencing them.

Let us work together to try to create a world where refugees are not created. But also let us remember always that “There but for the grace of God go I”. All religions teach the importance of caring for foreigners. It is certainly one of the essential teachings of my own faith, Judaism. Let us treat refugees with dignity and respect and let morality and compassion guide the policies with which we respond to refugee crises and influxes.

As Australians we have had a proud record of receiving large numbers of refugees from overseas – people who have made an enormous contribution to our country. We can also be proud that World Refugee Day was also an initiative first envisaged by the Refugee Council of Australia under my predecessor, the eminent Jewish Australian Major General Paul Cullen. After many years of lobbying, the UN finally adopted 20 June as World Refugee Day in 2000.

As we celebrate World Refugee Day, let us recall Betsy's story, the story of all refugees past, present and to come, and let us renew our commitment to work for world peace and to eliminate the root causes of the problems which lead to the creation of the refugee predicament.

Australians are a generous people. Witness the outpouring of help late last year and earlier this year to the Tsunami victims of Asia. But we must all struggle against the development of compassion fatigue.

I conclude by reading a small poem by Edward Yashinsky:

“Fear not your enemies,
for they can only kill you.

Fear not your friends
for they can only betray you.

Fear only the indifferent
who permit the killers and betrayers
to walk safely on earth.”

Thank you.

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