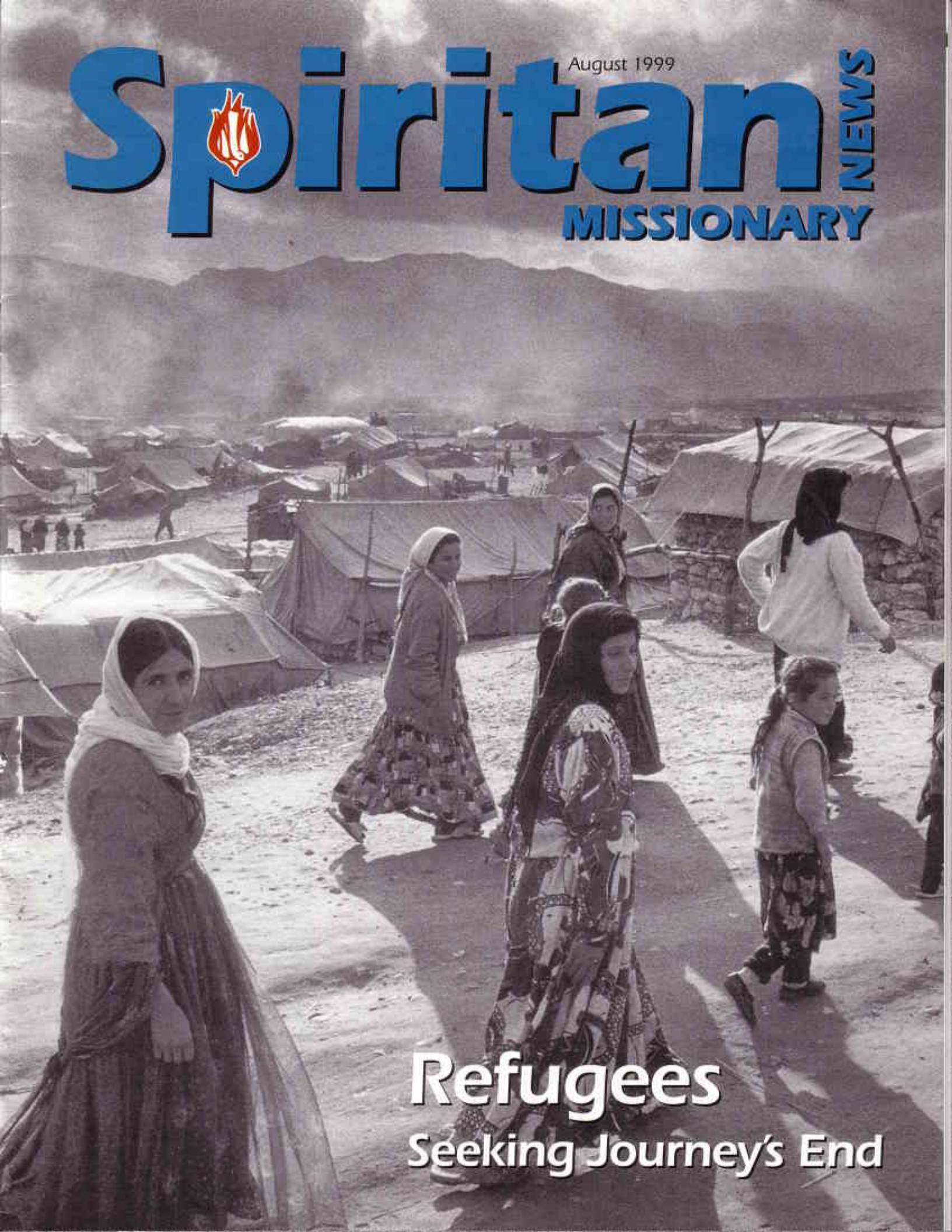


August 1999

Spiritana NEWS MISSIONARY



Refugees
Seeking Journey's End

Refugees: Our New Neighbours

The past forty years have produced their litany of horror, pain and persecution. From Africa: Sierra Leone, Rwanda, South Africa, Ethiopia; from Asia: Vietnam, Cambodia, Iran, Iraq; from Europe: Hungary, Albania, Kosovo; from Central and South America: Chile, El Salvador, Haiti and Argentina, and from many others countries throughout the world, endless streams of human misery look at us from the television set each evening as we digest our hearty dinners and settle in comfort to enjoy the declining hours of the day.

The scene of the frantic mother from Kosovo in a barren muddy refugee camp in Macedonia stays on our retina for a few seconds, and in our consciousness not much longer. Why did they kill her husband in his own kitchen? Why did they take her eldest boy away? Why was she given thirty minutes to gather her other four children and start out on the long trek to the border? Will she ever find her aging parents who could not keep up? Will her children ever again enjoy a normal childhood? Will they grow up Macedonian or German or English or Albanian or maybe even Canadian? Will they play soccer or cricket or bocce or basketball? Quiet there, the sports section of the news has started. You gotta love those Blue Jays. Go Leafs Go!

And to think that these refugees are not fleeing natural calamities, drought, floods, earthquakes, overpopulation. They are not fleeing their homes for a better life elsewhere. All they would wish for is to live free from oppression in their own homeland, among their own people.

The uprooting of people and the creation of refugees is no longer a byproduct of war, but a deliberate act of political policy. Refugees are a commodity, a valuable asset, to the warring factions. They are deliberately produced by the participants for their own political ends. These regimes do so calculatingly, do so with no concern for the pain, the suffering, the trauma they cause. Refugees have become just another weapon with which to harass the enemy, to be used as human shields or another card to be played when the warring partners finally meet at the bargaining table. Our consciousness has been dulled by the constant visions of their horror. The sheer magnitude of the problem paralyses us.

Let us always remember in our prayers the fifty million people, mainly mothers, children and seniors, persons "who owing to a well founded fear of persecution, are outside the country of their nationality and are unable to live there safely" (U.N. Refugee Convention). Included in this issue of the *Spiritan Missionary News* are some wonderful psalm-prayers written by the Jewish people when they were refugees, far from their beloved Jerusalem. By praying them we add our voice to the cry of all helpless victims.

The many agencies which shepherd the new arrivals during their first months and years in Canada are always in need of volunteers and of material help. It is the editors' hope that the articles in this magazine will enlighten you, will help you take ownership of the problem, will stir you to action. Why not contact a parish, a religious order, a humanitarian organization which sponsors refugees to Canada? The article on pages 14 and 15 describes the work of Mary Jo Leddy and her volunteers at Romero House (416) 763-1303. Pages 16 - 19 tell of Brottier House, the Spiritan-sponsored VICS home for refugees (416) 690-6155. Page 19 also offers some very practical suggestions about how you might help. The struggle and pain and loneliness do not disappear when the refugees arrive in our country.

Gerald FitzGerald CSSy

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Back Cover: Painting by Bill Bolger

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Walking the Extra Mile

Joy Warner, Lay Spiritan

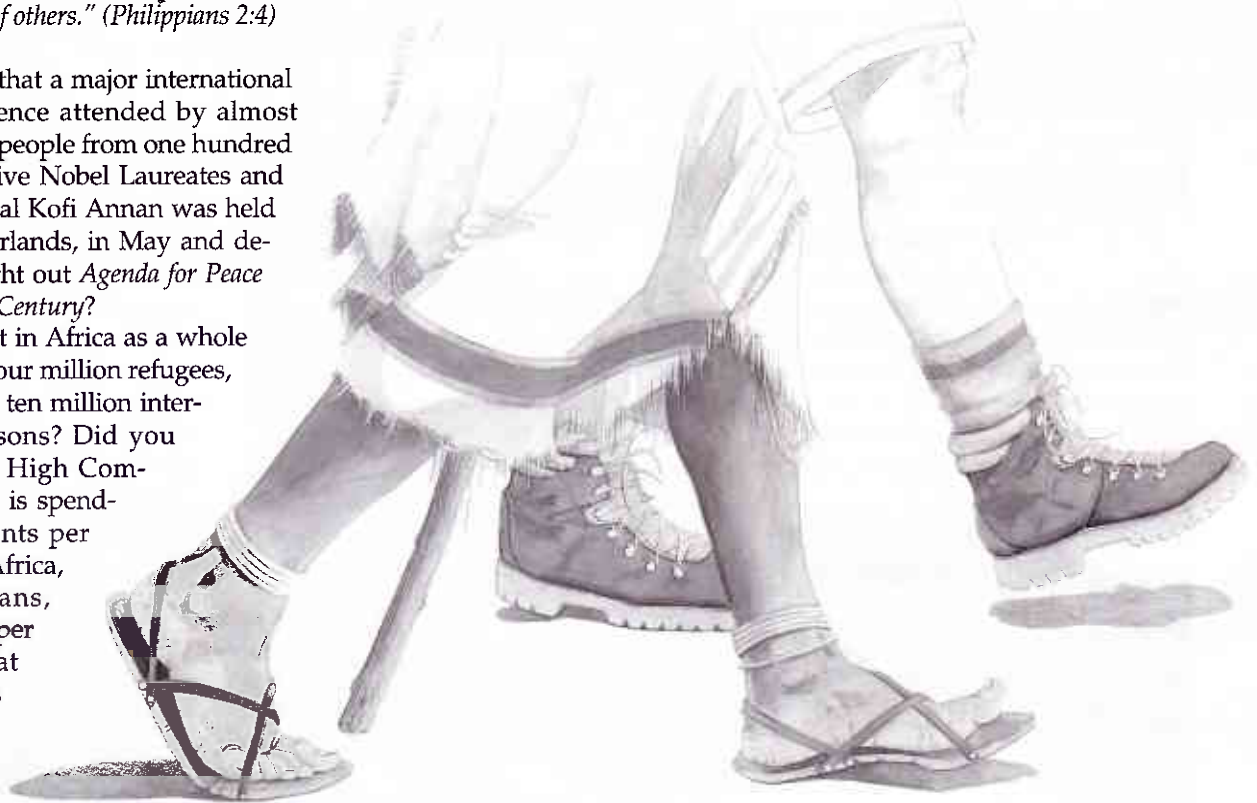
"Let each of you look not only to his/her own interest, but also to the interest of others." (Philippians 2:4)

Did you know that a major international peace conference attended by almost ten thousand people from one hundred countries including five Nobel Laureates and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan was held at The Hague, Netherlands, in May and developed a well thought out *Agenda for Peace and Justice for the 21st Century*?

Did you know that in Africa as a whole there are now some four million refugees, and probably at least ten million internally displaced persons? Did you know that the U.N. High Commission for Refugees is spending about eleven cents per day per refugee in Africa, while in the Balkans, the figure was \$1.23 per refugee per day; that some refugee camps in Africa have one doctor for every one hundred thousand refugees, while in Macedonia, camps had as many as one doctor per seven hundred refugees; that refugees at most camps in Albania had clean, readily available water, while in Eritrea families as large as ten are given about three and a half gallons of water to last three days; that the camps in Africa hold as many as five hundred thousand people, and up to six thousand a day die from cholera and other public health diseases, while in Macedonia, the largest camp held thirty-three thousand people and there were no deaths from public health emergencies?

If you answered "No" to these questions, don't feel guilty — our mainstream media reflect the North American/Eurocentric world view. We receive very selective messages about which human rights abuses merit our attention and intervention. We have to be vigilant that our attitudes towards refugees and immigrants are not influenced by the blinkered vision of the media, but are informed by an inclusive world view which recognizes our responsibility to all people regardless of race, religion or economic class.

Canadians by and large have a good record in responding to the needs of refugees and have opened their hearts and homes generously to those fleeing persecution and war. But we need to remain vigilant as our governments become pre-



occupied with deficit reduction and global competitiveness and begin to close the doors and erect barriers. We need to address the root causes which compel people to flee from their homes, namely war and conflict fuelled by an arms trade from which we benefit, and global trade agreements which favour our consumer lifestyle.

We also have to be risk-takers, ready to walk the extra mile. I well remember our family agonizing over whether to open our home to Rinaldo, from El Salvador. He had fled the army and made his way to California where he ended up living in a park and being arrested and jailed for possession of a small quantity of marijuana which he was desperately trying to sell in order to buy food. Many friends warned us about the risks of allowing a drug peddler into our home with four young children present. We prayed about it and decided to take the risk. He only stayed for a couple of weeks but our kids still remember the bullet wound in his leg, and the card games he taught them. I still have the rosary he left behind.

Sometimes we are overwhelmed by the enormity of human suffering and like the crowds described in Luke 3:10-11 we ask, "What then shall we do?" John the Baptist answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." ❖

Illustration by Dawid Wysocki

A Refugee Among Refugees

Kevin Doheny, CSSp

I was privileged to be a refugee when the Nigerian civil war forced me out of my mission station in 1967. One evening my parish became a battlefield and I was obliged to evacuate with twenty-three thousand parishioners. We travelled by night and when finally exhausted we slept on the side of the road.

Never will I forget that fearful trek — children screaming, trying to keep

up with their mothers, women terrified of losing their little ones. It was a time of panic and confusion as we lost everything. In the course of the next two and a half years when the trek was over and we had settled in “the bush” many lost their lives to starvation and sickness. Many others never saw home again.

I got very close to the people in exile — sharing their life, suffering, and deprivation. “The greatest thing

you missionaries did for us,” they said, “was to remain with us, when all other Europeans abandoned us.” We were bombed from the air, harassed at checkpoints, but we refused to leave each other.

Before that civil war I had been a teacher, but I could no longer go back to the blackboard. I wanted to spend my life helping refugees and displaced persons.



Photo: Peter Soljergahaj, CICRC

Kevin Doheny in Biafra, 1967 — “We refused to leave each other”