

Elderly Refugees In the Netherlands

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1 Introduction

1.1. Background

According to recent estimates there are more than eleven million refugees in the world. The largest part of them live in the Middle East and South East Asia [7.617.400]. The total number of refugees, in Europe, originating from all parts of the world, in comparison is the smallest part, less than 1% [70.640] of those who are hosted; stranded and locked up in refugee camps in Asia and the Middle East [See: U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1987]. In 1982 the number of elderly refugee population in the world according to UHNCR was estimated to be only 3% of the whole refugee population. Little research has been done on the elderly refugees and very little is known about their condition. In general reports about refugees they attract the least attention and would be justified to say they are, " a forgotten group". This point is perhaps best illustrated by how the Dutch government handled the issue only recently. In a report lately published on elderly people of various ethnic background; the elderly refugees were not even mentioned [See: Voortgangsrapportage Ouderbeleid, 1987-1988, 20539, nrs.1-2].

Refugees are here defined as people who are invited to the country and granted on arrival the "A Status" which embodies almost all the rights and duties of the Dutch inhabitant. The Dutch government annually invites 500 refugees of this category. The asylum seekers are those who come to the country on their own initiative and ask for political asylum. Some of which are recognized by the government and are granted the "A Status" and others are rejected and some others are granted asylum on humanitarian grounds and are granted what is entitled the "B Status". This "B Status" provides less rights and entails more restrictions than the "A Status".

2. Elderly Refugees

2.1 Third World Refugees.

Up to the 70's with the exception of Moluccans who were uprooted in the decolonization process of Indonesia (technically not refugees) almost all other refugees in Holland were of European origin mainly composed of Jews, Poles, Hungarians and Czechoslovaks at present account for the largest groups of the middle aged and elderly refugees. However our focus on this paper will be not the European refugees but the Third World refugees for Europe has seized to be the main source of refugees, on the other hand, the Third World countries are breeding refugees at an alarming rate. Those who manage to trickle to Europe are a small fraction of this burgeoning population. Most are hosted and some confined in the refugee

camps of the adjoining countries. Out of these some have settled in Holland; of which a few are elderly. Out of the elderly refugees some have family others are single and some other come to join their children or close relatives. Their nationalities and social background is diverse ranging from semi-peasants to aristocrats, from illiterates to academics, workers and owners, rich and those who were once rich and from among the poor. Their political affiliation sometimes even of those who come from the same country is variegated and with some national groups more than with others. Most of the Third World refugees are young with the exception of few communities the number of elderly is relatively very small [See: Voets Alex, Een Situatieschets van Oudere Vluchtelingen in Nederland, Amsterdam, 1982.]

2.2 Challenges elderly refugees encounter.

2.2.1 Language barrier.

The first hurdle any refugee encounters is language. The elderly refugees who have no background of formal education face extra difficulty to learn the language. Teaching to an unlettered a foreign language is obviously not an easy task. For the less literate learning an alien language is even a more difficult undertaking. In spite of these difficulties there are no specialized courses for the elderly nor courses that take into account the specific predicament of the elders language lessons are given to the academics and illiterates, to the young and old together. Such unspecialized and untargeted courses do undermine the confidence of the elderly rather than help in learning the language. The less literate elderly often drop out from such courses. Elderly women tend to be left out from this venture all together. Besides to learn a language as to be able to use it in every day life is more than knowing the grammar or understanding the written text. One has to be engrossed into it as to spontaneously express oneself in a comprehensive manner. To attain this level of competence in the language requires greater integration than what the elder refugees manage.

Many elderly find the hurdle insurmountable and depend perpetually on interpreters, sign language and prime instinct. Not to speak or understand the language of a country where one lives as a refugee is not only inconvenient, but has grave consequences, especially when one does not speak any other European language: one can not develop contact and foster friendship with the nationals. One has no access to news and views even concerning ones country. Besides failure to learn the language could generate a sense of incompetence and undermine self esteem.

2.2.2. Loneliness.

In most refugee communities the elderly make up a very tiny proportion. This constitutes a problem to the scattered elderly population. They do not have enough age peers, within their national group, to form a circle of friends or company to talk to. This has to be found outside their age peer group. Due to language barrier contact with elderly local people is minimal or sometime non existent. Fraternization between sharply different peer groups entails difficulties to both parties and out of the frustration that ensues contacts are reduced and the elderly find themselves further isolated. Consequently those who have no supportive family network face even harsher isolation.

In their loneliness they are confronted with free time they can not utilize. Even out of those who have children some find it difficult to fill their free time. As the pieces that make the life of an elderly complete in his/her natural habitat can not be filled by one family unit. This leads sometimes to abuses, misunderstanding and friction within the family. There are a happy lot due to solidity of their family and strength of character that overcome their ordeal and pursue a meaningful life.

2.2.3. Problems that arise from disparity in development.

The gap in development level between Holland and developing countries is obviously huge. The gap is still greater especially to those refugees who come from small towns and the country side. Utilization of transport facilities, trains, trams, metros and busses with push button doors, the complex network that feed each other; escalators, elevators, and vending machines can be a confusing and threatening experience, especially to the elderly. For those who never had the privilege of formal education the problem is further compounded as they can not read say the tram number or the description of their destination. Those who live in rows of flats initially are threatened with being lost if they leave their apartment unaccompanied. The elderly necessarily for along time have to be accompanied. They start with being dependants in their children relatives and acquaintances. Some adjust easily but others have always to be accompanied and their scope of activity and possibility is reduced.

2.2.4. Decline in social status and esteem.

Besides the cultural shock, the harsh climatic condition and alien language elders are confronted with sharp decline in their social position and social esteem. Elders in traditional societies control available resources and cater for large families. They are regarded as source of wisdom history and mantra. The elders besides economic power control social reproduction. Marriage of young couples is conducted through complicated negotiations between heads of families, challenge to their authority could lead to ostracization.

Many African and Asian beliefs and religions are interwoven with ancestry worship. The ghost of an offended elderly is damning, or so it is thought. As people advance in age they believe that they are granted with the blessing of the deity. They assume air of spiritual superiority and radiate confidence.

When the elderly as refugees set their feet in Europe are often penniless and are reduced to welfare or to the beneficence of their offspring and with it their social position irreversibly declines. The likelihood of their finding employment is diminished or becomes impossible as there is hardly any demand for the aged in the labor market. To be in pension schemes and to be recipient of welfare benefit towards which they had never contributed undermines their pride. The familiar deference for the elderly in Western society is by gone and the younger ones within their community tend to take up Dutch norms. This process of sudden inversion from family leadership to subordinate position is not an easy one. Mr. Thakrar an Asian Ugandan refugee describes the fate of his mother which is very telling of many elderly refugees and sums up their situation:

"An old tree you should never transplant. When we came here our roles were reversed. We were used to listen to our parents but here we have to help them in everything. My mother has never learnt any Dutch. For she is all the time thinking about Uganda. She can not bear why she had to give up such a nice life. Since the death of my father there is not a single person of her lifetime to talk to" (See: VON, Het beste van twee werelden, 1988).

2.2.5. Psychic and psycho-somatic problems.

Refugees in general are a traumatized lot. They have gone through war and terror. Some have been physically tortured and some others maimed. Many had to live in hiding before they managed to flee. It is not a few refugees who try to flee their countries and end up in the prisons of the adjacent countries. Often they are when aging revisited by the traumas that they had overcome. In state of senility some forget the language that they had last learned and because of communication difficulties with those involved in their case their situation is further aggravated.

Some figures in England of Second World War refugee show mental illness to have been almost three times higher than the natural average of parallel age group (see: Seminar on Elderly Refugees, London, 1979). This phenomenon was not confined to those who had survived the concentration camps but as well of other types of displaced persons. The psychological consequence of displacement especially where the cultural gap is sharp calls for further study. There are other indications that suggest that refugees become hardened like children who had survived disasters and feel that "they have reached rock bottom and nothing that they may have encountered afterwards could baffle them" and their sense of invulnerability is strengthened as a result (see: G. Kibreab African refugees, Trenton New York, 1985).

Most refugees young and old alike who seek on their own political asylum on arrival here are threatened with forced repatriation, thus a direct inter-connection with the violence of the country of origin unfolds. When they are lucky the threat of immediate repatriation or expulsion to a third country is often followed by a long waiting, till a definitive decision is taken on their application. The stress of a long period of uncertainty about their permission to stay only adds to their already difficult situation. The problem here is aggravated because many are not psychologically prepared for this unpleasant snag. As a result a few their loose their balance, become apathetic and depressive and some are afflicted by psycho-somatic disorders.

These series of negative experiences are such a load that it affects their personality negatively and the damage inflicted on their personality does not easily disappear. Symptoms of fear, persecution-mania and mistrust tend to persist.

Their capacity to adjust and cope with the new environment is hampered. Professor Stein who undertook research on African refugees locked up in waiting camps points:

"The limbo and handouts generate inertia, helplessness and loss of will power. The refugee loses structure, the ability to coordinate, predict, expect ... Once drive and self respect decline it becomes hard to get

refugees to help themselves and participate in activities in the future" (See: B. Stein, Refugees and Economic Activities in Africa, 1981).

The phenomenon cited by professor Stein above appears to be not dissimilar to the situation of asylum seekers here in Holland.

2.2.6 Nostalgia

Elderly refugees tend to be nostalgic in a double sense. First like most elders they tend to be drawn to the past, to their best days, be it in the sphere of health or achievement. As their scope of activity is unnaturally limited – in the host country – arising from language and other limitations, in compensation, they gravitate and lapse further into the past than is normal for people of the same age. Some plainly live in the past. Secondly as all refugees they tend to think frequently about their home and the people they have left behind. This is accentuated by the fact that refugees cannot pack and return to their respective countries at will and choice with the sad implication that they cannot partake in the joys and sorrows of their relatives and friends and the fear that they may never live to see their dear ones!

The new environment of the host country further provokes contrast with the familiar environment of country of origin. Defensive sense of cultural separateness and sense of distinct identity is sharpened at times exaggerated; cultural relics, dishes, etc. are valued and over valued. Nostalgia is constantly triggered by trivialities: like someone in the street of Amsterdam who looks like somebody at his/her country of origin. A simple conventional query of the curious (inquest to the refugee) that keep up cropping in casual encounter like: "from where, by what means and why did you come and when are you going back? Do you have children and where are they?" send the mind of the refugee reeling to his country and could be a cause of unpleasant sensation.

Refugees are neither spared by TV and radio reports on wars and famines about their respective countries – often evocatively and irregularly presented – propaganda of this or the other camp, tendentious leaflets and fantasy gossips, or objective accounts; nor are they unwilling victims. When refugees meet often the first thing they ask each other is, "what is the latest news? and have you heard from home?" etc., etc. In short refugees mind is locked far away in his or her country of origin.

There are refugees who say they have no affiliation with their country because of the terrible things that happened to their people and are not at all home sick. But one finds out soon that they are also obsessed of what they would not want to remember.

Emersed in nostalgia most elderly political refugees wish earnestly to go back to their countries. In spite of this burning desire there are obviously situations where repatriation can not be contemplated. But most refugees see their stay in the host country as transitory. This is not a mere illusion as we can observe it from the examples of many Latin Americans, who with the collapse of military dictatorships went back to their countries that have been democratized. Biafrans on the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war and Zimbabweans on independence, in hundreds, returned to their countries. It has to be understood that

political refugees, at least many of them, are deeply involved in the affairs of their respective countries and it is logical they return to their countries, when and if acceptable regimes to the refugees take power.

2.4. Prospects and conclusion.

The number of the elderly refugees from the Third World, as previously mentioned, is a small part of the total refugees. It appears that a visible number of the elderly refugees (50 (+) years old) live within the frame-work of family structures and communities. The older refugees, independent of their family positions, have their specific needs and problems which need to be separately addressed. The lonely single elderly especially those who do not speak Dutch or any other major European language have the most difficult situation which calls for apart consideration.

What holds the future for the elderly? Would they avail themselves of the homes of the elderly? Among the ethnic immigrant communities with similar social back ground there seems to be a divided opinion. Some are in favor of this institution and others are indifferent and some even deride it. [See: C. Meneses, *The Older Migrant*, The Hague, 1987]. It could be expected that single elderly refugees may end up in homes of the elderly, but even those who have children will find missing many supportive components of an extended family system. Beside the elderly are ound to live relatively longer than they would in their home countries in view of the existence in Holland of one of the best public health services in the world. If on the other hand the reality of the ethnic migrant community is reflective on the life expectancy of the refugees, they would have a shorter life expectancy than the Dutch [See: C. Meneses, *Migrant*].

The elderly who belong to a given family structure with the passing of everyday they take lasting roots here in their host country. Their children and grand-children born in Holland or those who came very young start to speak better Dutch than their parents and grand-parents. The elderly become pupil of their children. Their children play the role of language instructors and interpreters. The parents who had such difficulty in coping with the Dutch language are confronted with exactly the reverse problem of their children, who speak better Dutch than their mother language and have difficulties in mastering their mother language. The role of the elderly in verging their children and grand-children in their respective language and culture is invaluable as it contributes towards a multi-cultural education of their children.

In general when we speak of the elderly refugees we should not over look the position of the young members of the refugee communities. The elderly, as we have repeatedly mentioned, more often than not constitute part of family structures where the young ones are emerging as the dominant elements. But the lot of the young refugees in areas of employment and education is far from favorable. Most of the young refugees are becoming marginalized group: untrained and unemployed with subsequent demoralization and a risk of criminalization. This prospect undermines not only the self confidence of the young refugees but as well of the elders. The difficulties are not without solutions but the central role in resolving these problems will have to be played by the refugee communities, the individual members and their organizations when ever they exist. The supportive and encouraging disposition of the government can be of great benefit, but this can not be easily counted.

CASES

The Case of the Family Avakian

The family Avakian is made up of a grandmother (80), a father (55), mother (53) and seven children ranging from the age of twelve to twenty six. They are Armenians Christians. They left their birth place, a small village in South-East Turkey 7,5 years ago to flee to the Netherlands. They live in a three room apartment in x. The oldest son is married and lives with his wife and daughter in a separate apartment 90 km further. We talked to the family. We directed our questions to the elders, the young ones who spoke the language better translated and elaborated the views of the elders, mostly of the father as follows:

"We are very glad with this apartment. During the first four years of our stay in Netherlands we were lodged by the authorities in an attic of a pension in two rooms, the ten of us. We are happy that the family has stayed together. In the beginning our two sons and myself were told to leave the country. Grandmother and my wife were allowed to stay and we were faced with the possibility of the break up of the family. Later the decision was revised. Now we have all taken up the Dutch nationality, except grandma. For us going back to Turkey is unrealistic. The best thing is to forget the horrible things we had gone through."

"We have decided to stay here for good and build a new life. Unfortunately I am unemployed. At the labor office they are not encouraging: they tell me people of my age take up early retirement scheme. In place of working I spend my time going to all the markets to find the best bargain. This is important for us because our income is limited: only two of our sons have work."

"In the evenings I go to the Dutch buurthuis (community center). In the center there come many people of Armenian origin- and we talk amongst each other. I don't talk very much to Dutch people, my Dutch is not that good. Fortunately for us our children learnt the language fast and very well. Grandmother and my wife do not speak any Dutch. I am glad that I can read the newspaper a little bit. The TV is too quick for me and that boy switches constantly from one channel to the other... I am following the news of Russian Armenia with great interest.

"We find it useful that many of us live in this neighborhood. We help each other with all kind of things. The neighbors call us when they need help so that our sons can translate for them, for example when a doctor comes for a sick child. Grandma has no need of a doctor: she is never sick, she is a happy old woman."

"Grandma stays indoors, she does not travel, but people come to visit her; my sister who lives in Belgium, comes to see her some times. Grandma is most thankful that the family stayed together and because in this country we can be Christians in freedom. In this house you find a cross hanging on the wall. In Turkey such things are not possible. One had to hide his religion."

"Grandma lives with us, because it is our cherished tradition to take care of our parents. We do not understand why Dutch people like to have their parents in old- peoples home. We have always done everything to stay together. The family and our freedom is the most important thing for us."

The case of Mr. Gebre

Mr. Gebre is an Ethiopian refugee, 55 years old. In Ethiopia he worked as a clerk in a government office for many years. He had climbed a high ladder in the bureaucracy when the Ethiopian revolution broke. He joined the opposition camp. The opposition collapsed and he came to Holland. He has lived for the last ten years in Holland. On arrival he lived with relatives. For a few years he lives now on his own in an apartment in Utrecht.

"In my country I went to the primary school. I really never spoke foreign languages beyond the recognition of the Latin alphabet. When I came here from the very beginning I tried to learn the language. The young ones were amused that I joined them. I am still following Dutch lessons. This year in addition I am attending English evening classes. My problem with Dutch language is that I keep on forgetting it. I learn new things but then I forget the old ones. Nevertheless now I do not need an interpreter. Some how I manage. I find it important that people take the initiative to learn the language. It does not matter how old they are."

"My asylum procedure lasted too long. For a long time I was unsure about my future. Frankly I find it inhuman for the procedure to take up to 5 years. People end up hating the country. Like with a child or with a house what you do in the early phase is important. It is better if the decision one way or the other is fast."

"I have lived here ten years and I have not found work for a single day. I tried to find work several times. But I have never succeeded. They think I am too old or that I do not speak enough their language. I even tried to find a voluntary work. I was outside town and they wanted me to cover the cost of transport! What is worst is what they do with young boys of 17 and 18. Like pensioners they give them money instead of sending them to school or provide them with work. The amount that I get from welfare office is not a problem. One can always live with less. I would really prefer to work and earn that amount. I could not start business here on my own. They require all kinds of papers and diploma's."

"My wife is in Ethiopia and she does not want to join me. She thinks it is improper to close our house for good and join me here. She hopes on the other hand very much I join her. May be the right time will come and if God wills we will live together again. I have three daughters and two sons. My two daughters are married and the youngest one stays with her mother. My two sons have ended up in the U.S.A. They visit me, at least one of the two, during summer holidays. Those are the happiest moments for me."

"I am glad to be healthy. I will go on struggling. The problems I face do not defeat me. One has to remember what would happen to us if we were to stay at home. You have to think of the situation of other people of my age in some other countries."

"There are many habits of the people I do not like such as sexual norms and style of dressing. In this society people rush too much. They are tied to the clocks and agendas. I have been to America, it is there even worse. But there are many more things that I like here. Here a yes is a yes and a no is a no. I am not aware of color discrimination. There are always bad and good people in any country. I am not saying every one is good."

The case of Mr. Mengstu 50 years old, Ethiopian.

"Five years ago I came here in Rotterdam illegally. First I rented a room from someone and now I live in an apartment. It is very expensive. After I pay the telephone bill I am mostly with no money. My wife died before I came and God did not give us any children. I was involved in politics and when the police looked for me I left suddenly, I have worked as a driver for over twenty years. Here I have not found work. I do not understand why the government does not find work for me. There are so many cars and I don't find work! I do not speak Dutch. I find it a strange language. But I know many of our people who work in Greece, Germany and many other countries, without speaking foreign language. When you work you learn the foreign language. I have never been to school in my life.

"The only thing I like here is peace. Sometime when I sit in my room I feel like I am in a prison. Actually the difference is here they do not beat you. I go once a week to church to pray, that is where I meet Dutch people and after exchanging smiles I go to my house."

How do I spend my time? I just talk, talk and talk. What else? The t.v. does not interest me. I go to the doctor but he does not understand what is wrong with me. People used to interpret for me, but now I am tired of begging for interpreters. I talk with sign-language to the doctor. The doctors here are not good. I think those in our country are better. But there I have never been to a doctor. Maybe it is the climate here I have pain every day. I wish so much to learn the Dutch language and talk to the doctor and talk to everyone. But this language, I do not think I ever learn it."