PART I

THE JOURNEY

Prologue

> Our century has sometimes been called the "Century of the Refugee." . . . never have so many remained so long in the kind of suspended animation that refugee status now all too often has come to mean. —*W.R. Smyser,* Refugees

> And just beyond the frontier between "us" and the "outsiders" is the perilous territory of not-belonging.
>
> —*Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile"*

No declaration of war marked the beginning of that chain of events known as the Vietnam War. Yet a historical moment marked the opening of the floodgates that brought to the United States a lasting consequence of that war: the country's first refugee influx as large, concentrated, and visible as the Indochinese.

The images of U.S. helicopters taking off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon in April 1975 as Vietnamese tried to scramble on board appear frozen in time, etched onto the memory and replayed in written and stage accounts. If the significance of those images was somehow missed or denied, images of boat people soon followed to underscore the ubiquity of refugees on the modern international scene.

Two sets of accounts emerge from such scenes of human tragedy crammed into terms such as *refugee* and *forced migration.* One emanates from ground level, where the refugees stand. The other is pieced together from reports, memoranda, legislation, and other official documents from governments, international agencies, and the United Nations.

These accounts converge at certain points. Frequently, however, they diverge; constantly, there is tension between them. One is couched in the language of nonrefugee officialdom, dispassionate, and generalizing. The other throbs with the emotional nature of refugee phenomena, which are often matters of life and death. In this bifurcated view of people and events that make up the refugee scene lies great potential for distortion: those strong emotions excised or tempered in one are the defining elements of the other as a population is transformed from people who lived ordinary, everyday lives in a country they call home to forced migrants unable to claim, at a crucial period in their lives, the protection of citizenship.

The view from the ground begins with this: Refugee movements are triggered by cataclysmic events that result in an eruption of emotion-driven behavior. Particularly at its inception, the overwhelming impression that a refugee flow gives is one of chaos, of instinctual rather than premeditated or carefully considered action.

For the Vietnamese, beginning in 1975, flight was not a matter of a few miles but a long, perilous journey. For those who became "boat people," the distance was reckoned in terms of oceans and seas, and the chances of getting there, wherever "there" was, depended on the trustworthiness of overcrowded boats and the skill of whoever piloted them. Many boats were piloted by people who had never been in international waters, did not know how to navigate in total darkness, and were not sure what destination they should aim for given the load they were carrying and their limited food, water, and fuel supplies. Much depended too on the cooperation of tides, and the mercy or the cruelty of pirates or of other ships at sea who were in a position to assist and of people on foreign beaches, who could either push escapees back to sea or give them asylum.

For those who chose to flee by land, success or failure depended on making it across geopolitical borders and mine fields—actual and metaphorical—on the bounty or treachery of jungles, and on unexpectedly encountered strangers.

Many who tried to flee died in the attempt. Family members were separated and lost track of each other permanently or for years.[1] The vast majority of escapees would end up in overcrowded camps run by local authorities in Southeast Asian countries, nongovernmental organizations

(NGOs), and United Nations personnel from other parts of the world. Many would arrive with nothing but the clothes on their backs, haunted by experiences of piracy, rape, and even cannibalism at sea or by guilt at having survived and having left others behind. And while the urgency and intensity of feelings tend to ebb as refugee movements mature, affect powerful enough to persist through years of rebuilding a life in resettlement plays a central role in refugee affairs.[2]

Regarding the view from outside the refugees' world, the scale of the Indochinese exodus triggered by the fall of Saigon in 1975, and the growing number of deaths among those attempting escape (about 60 percent, according to Hitchcox [1990:11]), brought the United Nations to Geneva in 1979 to see what could be done to ameliorate the situation. At that conference, a number of Southeast Asian nations agreed to grant temporary asylum to Indochinese refugees. They were to be housed in camps administered in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The camps were to have two principal objectives: the security and protection of those seeking asylum from Indochina, and their preparation for resettlement in third countries, mostly in the West.

Eventually, camps came to differ from each other in their emphasis: camps of first asylum sheltered both escapees and refugees, and processing camps received mainly those whose claim to refugee status had already been established. Most of the processing camp populations were bound for resettlement in the United States.

Other differences quickly surfaced. Host countries varied in the resources they could make available to camps. Domestic policies pertaining to migration and local attitudes toward hosting refugees differed from region to region. Partly, differences resulted from the pressure put on individual camps by the number of incoming refugees; some camps became severely overcrowded, their facilities strained beyond capacity. Other differences were created by the rate at which third countries resettled refugees. When proceeding apace, resettlement not only relieved the pressures of overcrowding and opened up spaces for new arrivals but, more important, reassured asylum countries that their role as host was indeed temporary and that refugees would not be a long-term responsibility. When resettlement slowed, as it did in the early 1980s, asylum countries responded with various policies of deterrence. To discourage escapees

from coming, some countries tightened restrictions in camps, others converted open camps to closed camps, and still others pushed incoming boats back to sea. (Open camps allowed asylees to freely come and go and sometimes, as in Hong Kong, to work outside camp; closed camps confined asylees to camp grounds.)

Individual camps—their administration, their population, and hence, the flavors of camp life—changed over a relatively short period of time. In the course of a few months, for instance, an open camp run by Caritas (a voluntary agency) became a closed camp run by the Corrections Service, which in Hong Kong is part of the Prisons Department. Political changes in host countries might change administrative personnel in charge of camps, resulting in changes as basic as food suppliers and the quality of food distributed to refugees. The asylee and refugee populations themselves changed, in number as well as in nationality and general social composition. North and South Vietnamese in Hong Kong proved to be a volatile combination at one point and had to be segregated in separate camps. In the late 1980s, the Bataan camp population began to have an increasing proportion of Vietnamese whose refugee status came not from having fled the country but from having been permitted to leave in accordance with the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), set up by Vietnam and Western resettlement countries to help families reunite. In the late 1980s, an increase in the number of Amerasians changed the camp population to such a degree that the camp adjusted the number and nature of the programs it offered.

Flux and transiency are defining features of camp life. Data on camp life—qualitative as well as quantitative—can often seem erratic and inconsistent as a consequence. Populations are meant to come and go. What kinds of people come, the state they are in when they arrive, how long they stay, how well they will get along with each other and with camp personnel, and what kind of camp life different groups of actors will create are impossible to predict. The descriptions that follow are of people and events only in a small slice of time. The situation brings Heraclitus very much to mind: one does not step twice into the same river. The flux becomes identifiable only through contrast with the relatively stable phenomena around it.

Despite the difficulties, however, an attempt to describe the refugee experience at every stage is essential: for the great majority of Vietnamese