The other refugee children

By Beth Shalom Hessel
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It's a humanitarian crisis that has riveted the international community: refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, and elsewhere seeking asylum from civil war and violence. Images of the small, drowned body of Aylan Kurdi ignited our consciences and challenged world leaders to begin addressing the needs of these refugees.

The surge of unaccompanied minors into countries like Sweden mirrors the marked increase of Central American children entering the United States in 2014, fleeing violence at home. In both cases, refugees are caught between carnage in their home countries and treacherous journeys to nations that claim to be unequipped to care for them. Politicians and pundits decry the inrush of refugees, characterizing them as illegal immigrants who will threaten the sanctity of our borders, overload our public service system, and bring crime and disorder to our neighborhoods.

The majority of these Central American families are in fact led by single mothers traveling with dependent children. They yearn for safer lives, education, and hope. And unlike the refugees in Europe, most have extended family with whom they plan to live.

Prior to June 2014, the long-standing policy of Customs and Border Protection officers was to hold these asylum seekers for several hours until they could locate family members. Since then, however, the federal government has detained the migrants indefinitely in one of three detention centers built by private prison corporations. Families speak of the horrors of these centers, as well as of the Immigration and Border Control *hieleras*—ice boxes—where parents and children sleep standing up in crowded cells with open toilets and floors littered with trash. Children spend formative months steeped in the cold of detention-center life and the angst of helpless parents.

Their experience differs markedly from that of Afghan and Syrian children who reach Sweden, where they are provided a breadth of services including stipends, counseling, tutoring, and language classes. As one Swedish politician notes, it is

important to provide a “good reception” to these children who have already suffered so much.

The children who survive the long journey from El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala to the United States lack a significant political voice to counter the charges that they are criminals. A recent film by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) draws connections between these young people and the 70,000 Japanese American youths considered potentially subversive during World War II and placed with their families in desolate federal incarceration camps. Satsuki Ina, a psychologist who spent part of her childhood in one of these camps, has interviewed families currently in government detention centers. She recognizes the anxiety of not knowing how long they will be detained and the stigma of labels foisted upon them.

In the film, Ina notes how her own mother wrote this in her camp diary: “Everyday, fearful.”

The Immigration and Nationality Act declares that any person “who is physically present in the United States . . . irrespective of such alien’s status, may apply for asylum.” Litigation and pressure from the faith community have made progress toward ending this new form of family incarceration. This July, a judge ordered the release of asylum-seeking families, finding that their detention violated a previous settlement agreement. She excoriated the government for the appalling conditions of the centers in which tens of thousands of children reside.

The government, however, indicated that it will appeal the decision—and hold fast to plans to maintain the vast new family detention infrastructure.

This humanitarian crisis lacks a galvanizing image like the heartrending photo of the drowned toddler. Yet these children and their families arrive here, often with nothing more than the clothing on their backs and hearts full of hope for lives freed from violence, coercion, and dead-ends. Their first experience of our country is a jail cell—something that is no less real because it is kept out of sight.

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