

Refuge Canada a heartwrenching, heartwarming exhibit at Pier 21

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Published: Oct 22, 2018 at 6 a.m.

Updated: Oct 22, 2018 at 8:10 a.m.



Two of the three fear doors that are part of the Refuge Canada exhibit. - Sandra Phinney

No one wants to be a refugee. Anyone can become one.

Refuge Canada at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 and is one of the most compelling exhibits staged to date. From the moment you step into the exhibit, the core theme hits home.

Refuge Canada explores several themes throughout the exhibit: Life before, fear, displacement, refuge and life in Canada. Visitors are exposed to case studies from major waves of people coming to Canada from around the world, including German Jewish and Hungarian, to Southeast Asian, Tamil and Rwandan refugees (and more.)

Canada's record in responding to waves of refugees from the start of the 20th century until the present isn't without its share of shame. For example, Canada turned away huge numbers of Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler in the late 1930s.

Dan Conlin, Curator at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 explains that this exhibit explores grim examples such as this, adding that those terrible decisions re-emerged in a surprising way in 1979 when Canada's immigration minister, Ron Atkey, had to grapple with accepting a wave of Vietnamese refugees in the wake of fierce resistance coupled with high unemployment.

"Atkey was sent new research about how Canada's immigration decision makers were so hostile to Jews fleeing Nazi persecution," Conlin says, "many of whom died in the Holocaust. Atkey used the deadly consequence of that past decision to convince cabinet to dramatically increase Canada's refugee targets from 8,000 to 55,000."

This resulted in a very successful response embraced by thousands of Canadians to sponsor refugees from Southeast Asia.

Conlin adds, "It is not always easy to learn from history, but sometimes you can."

Visitors are impressed with some unusual techniques that are used to engage them. For example, approaching one of three fear doors a motion detector prompts visitors to open a door to some disturbing images of persecution. For a moment, it's easy (albeit safe) to step in someone else's shoes and sense the ensuing fear.

Throughout the exhibit are myth balloons, which present common myths and stereotypes about refugees, balanced with factual myth-busting. For example, Myth: Refugees get gold-plated health care. Fact: The average refugee has an annual health care bill one tenth that of an average Canadian. Refugees receive temporary basic health care, similar to plans available to Canadians on social assistance.

Many visitors have taken photos of these or asked staff for the text with the intention of challenging those myths when they come up in their own communities.



The exterior of a UN tent where some families spend more than 18 years. - Sandra Phinney

Bedford resident, Mario DeMello, had to leave his home in Uganda in 1972 when Ugandan president Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of the country's Asian population.

DeMello appears in two audio clips in the exhibit: Flight by Air (where he talks about flying over Halifax and being welcomed into Canada) and Policy and Practice: A Ugandan Asian Case Study section (where he explains the point system and how Canada was selective about who was accepted from Uganda).

When DeMello arrived in November, holiday season was in full swing. "It was my first Christmas away from home with no family around and quite depressing. You realize then that family is more important than the gifts you may receive!"

Things that stand out from those early days include the friendly people and help that was extended to him.

"A priest drove me around the city; an employee of Manpower and Immigration helped me find accommodation; my manager and fellow employees at Maritime Life made me feel very comfortable, invited me to their place for Christmas dinner, and introduced me to hockey, bowling, and softball."

Now DeMello is a banking adviser with the Royal Bank of Canada. He's visited the Refuge Canada exhibit more than once.

"My story seems insignificant compared to others," he says, adding, "So many have had to walk through jungles, deserts for days and days."

DeMello thinks that although this exhibit really brings home the big picture of the refugee experience, visitors may want to consider going one step further: "Go without food for awhile or walk 20 miles." Imagine doing this day after day, or living in a tent with your entire family for years.

There was lots of excitement when Michele Gervais, curatorial projects co-ordinator at Pier 21 tracked down a refugee tent from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The tent still had dirt and dust from being set up in the field and is typical of a tent where families have to make do, find work, do their schooling, try and provide a safe home for everyone on average for 18 years.

Mary K. King visited the exhibit this past July. A resident of Miramichi, N.B., King was drawn to Refuge Canada at Pier 21 when she saw an ad on television showing an open sea with dark rolling waves; a voice said: "If this looks like safety, imagine what danger looks like."

Many things stand out in her mind, including the UN refuge tent. "There were pots and pans on the floor, and everything around so neatly stacked—but desperation still shone through." King says.

"The exhibit of the plane and the airplane seats in blue, with the dreary rain on the window... everything looked and felt authentic. A great deal of time and thought went into how best to depict various refugee situations."

The most shocking part of the exhibit for King was the three doors. "I almost didn't want to open them. The first one presented quite a shock: There was a dark cut-out cardboard figure on the doorway in dark clothes. He was pointing a gun."

The retired schoolteacher adds, "I think the exhibit deliberately challenges anyone's self-righteous elitism about being Canadian and not wanting to take in refugees. A visitor can't help but be moved by the stories, the sights and sounds of the desperation and suffering of the refugees. The various waves of refugees were depicted as well, from Syria to South America, so it was showcasing world events coming to our doorstep."

On a personal note, this year marks the 200th anniversary of King's family being in Canada. She is a fifth generation Canadian with ancestors who emigrated from Ireland in the early 1800's.

King says, "I look around and trace my relatives all over Canada, and think what a good life we have and how lucky we are to be here. Now it's our turn to step up to help others — in big ways or small — when they come. We have to make social justice with our own intelligent use of compassion and resolve."

The Refuge Canada Exhibit at Pier 21 will close on Nov. 11, then it will go on tour across Canada from June 2019 until 2024.



The myth-busting wall where visitors are challenged to check their beliefs about refugees.
- Sandra Phinney