



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

REFUGE

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INDOCHINESE UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

The Canadian Response

This issue of *Refuge* is devoted to the topic of Canadian assistance to refugees who are unaccompanied refugee minors from Indochina. It is a tale of suffering and desperation on the part of the refugees, commitment and compassion on the part of the private sector in Canada, and concern and bureaucratic conscientiousness — sometimes to the point of exasperation — on the part of government officials.

Unaccompanied minors occupy a unique place in refugee settlement. These children are under the age of 18 and have become separated from their parents. They are not in the care of a legally recognized adult who has primary responsibility for them. In the nineteenth century, many such Irish and Scottish minors made their own way to Canada. My late stepfather left Russia at the age of 11 on his own and made his way across Europe while it was undergoing the agonies of the First World War. He arrived in Canada by himself at the age

of 15. These nineteenth and early twentieth century unaccompanied minors were not unique. Yet their contemporary equivalents from Asia or Central America are a particular problem to modern society. Why?

The answer has more to do with the barriers we construct to entry to our country, the self-protective provincial/federal relations we have developed, our extensive protectionist welfare policies and our complex legal systems.

In other words, the uniqueness resides not so much in the situation of these teenaged refugees as much as in the complexities and institutionalized caring of our society.

Thus, this issue is an examination of Canada more than of the refugees, of its compassion and the political, social and legal structures which at one and the same time facilitate and handicap the expression of that compassion.

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