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REFUGEES: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Son, Mom Fled Congo, Moved through Uganda (Part Three)

By Laura Reeck
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Editor's note: Following is the third of a four-part series on refugees and how they made a new home in Erie, Pennsylvania.



*'No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
... No one leaves home until home
is a sweaty voice in your ear
Saying – leave,
run away from me now
I don't know what I've become
but I know that anywhere
is safer than here.'*

– Warsan Shire, *Teaching my
Mother how to Give Birth*

Image source [here](#)

Over the previous two days, interviews with ethnic-Nepali Bhutanese refugees who had lived in camps in Nepal for 20 years or more have been featured. For them, the experience of living in a camp in a second country from the time they were children remains definitional.

In subsequent parts, we will hear from refugees who participated in oral history interviews in July 2018, when then-President Donald Trump's "[Muslim ban](#)" had taken hold. One distinguishing characteristic of the refugees interviewed is that they are all Christians. Previous to the "Muslim ban," Syrian refugees fleeing the violence of the Syrian Civil War had been arriving in Erie, Pennsylvania for resettlement, but all of that stopped with the "Muslim ban."

Another distinguishing feature of the subsequent interviews is that the people interviewed did not spend time in a refugee camp, but rather lived as asylum-seekers in large urban centers in a second country.

In the following interview, a male refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), who does most of the talking, is interviewed with his mother. Both transited through Uganda before being granted asylum, never living in a refugee camp, and only benefiting from occasional UNHCR medical assistance as they lived in Uganda's capital of Kampala (population 3.65 million).

Though he claims "sometimes being in the refugee camp is more hard than being in the city," the refugee said the trials of living in an urban center are nonetheless real and present, particularly in terms of finding housing and work as well as paying rent. Meanwhile, one advantage to not living in a camp is having a greater chance at finding work, which was a challenge expressed by all the Bhutanese refugees who lived in camps, and a primary reason they sought resettlement.

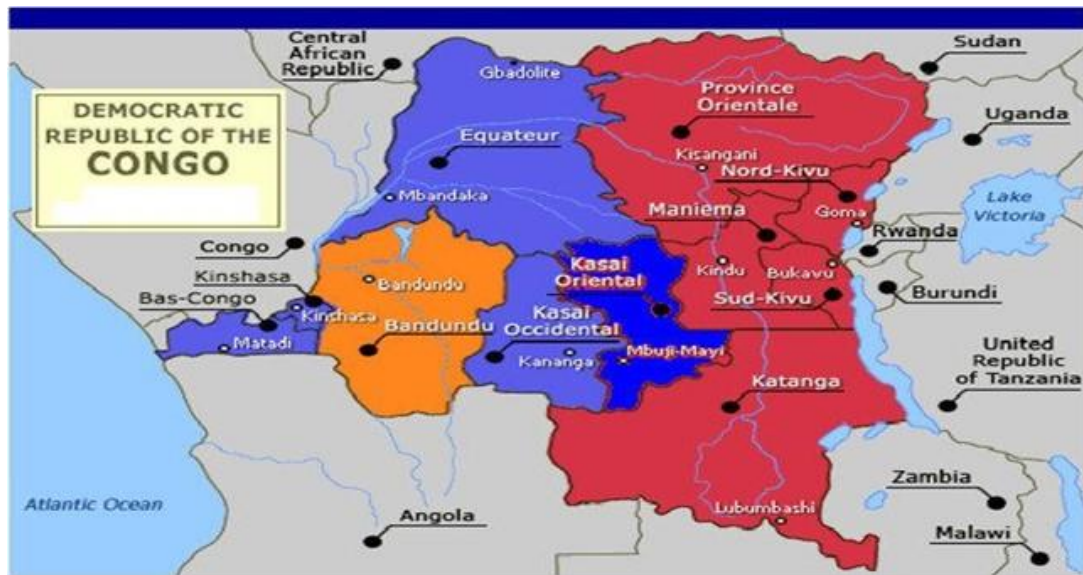


Image source [here](#)

The circumstances surrounding the son and mother's flight from the DRC are particularly violent and chaotic. The eastern part of the DRC has been embroiled in conflict between government troops and a range of rebel groups for more than 20 years. Today, an estimated [467,000 Congolese](#) have fled to Uganda and remain unable to return for fear of retribution or persecution, living in protracted expatriation with no end in sight. The nature of the conflict and the groups involved has changed over time, but as recently as [April 2022](#), a new wave of Congolese arrived in Uganda seeking refuge from March 23 rebels.

While at school in South Kivu as a 12-year-old, the man was forced to flee a rebel attack on his school. He headed into the surrounding forest and arrived in Rutshuru, North Kiva, ultimately meeting up with his aunt but leaving his mother behind. Later, he would cross the border into Uganda with no passport or identity papers. He was separated from his mother for one and a half years before being reunited with her in Uganda (after hearing that she had appeared on a Ugandan television program on International Women's Day devoted to refugee women, he was able to locate her in Uganda). He left a brother and sister with whom he had had no contact for nine years, describing his flight as "survival of the fittest," leaving and not looking back.

[\[Audio clip 1, fleeing\]](#)

While living in an urban center with Ugandans, cultural and language differences were obvious, and discrimination against Congolese refugees was significant. Intergroup relations were sometimes strained as misperceptions among Ugandans characterized Congolese refugees falsely, while at the same time calling

attention to their differences, with their Swahili language being one marker for this. So while in some cases living outside a refugee camp can lead to greater freedoms and more access to economic advancement, living in an urban center among a local population can also lead to tensions and forms of discrimination, as the interviewee describes here:

[\[Audio clip 2, relations with Ugandans\]](#)

According to the male interviewee, he and his mother held refugee cards while living in Kampala and were registered with UNHCR as soon as they applied for asylum; ultimately, they were resettled because of his mother's deteriorating medical condition and were assigned without choice to Erie. As mentioned in Part I, financial assistance, at least in the case of Catholic Charities in Erie, lasts for either three or six months depending on family situation. From that point forward, refugees must find work to support themselves and pay rent. The son and mother had been in Erie for two months when they were interviewed and had a few impressions of Erie and also some thoughts on finding work upon arrival in Erie:

[\[Audio clip 3, Impressions of Erie\]](#)

A recent documentary film [This is Home: A refugee story](#) (directed by Alexandra Shiva, 2018) portrays the immediacy and the urgency for refugees in finding work, but also in learning enough English to meet employer demands and expectations or even to be able to read through a job ad. All of this is taking place simultaneously to feelings of loss and residual feelings of fear.

Released the same year, a documentary short featuring Maitham Basha-Agha as narrator, [Rust Belt New Americans](#) (directed by Jessica Yochim, 2018), takes the example of Erie to show New Americans well into or on the other side of the cultural adaptation process – as success stories in resettlement. This is to say that the challenges are real, just as the success stories are, as refugees fleeing persecution arrive in a new country that will become their new home.

At one point in the interview, the Congolese refugee states he does not believe that the Ugandans he encountered during his seven years of living in Uganda knew what it means and entails to be a refugee. That is certainly also true in the United States. The interviews over this week beginning with World Refugee Day on Monday (June 20) are meant to help raise awareness and understanding about the reality of refugees and also to debunk some of the negative stereotypes that are held about them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Reeck is Professor of French and International Studies at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. She co-founded the Global Citizen Scholars Program with Professor of Community and Justice Studies Dave Roncolato. Through that program, and in partnership with Catholic Charities, they completed a series of oral history interviews with recently arrived refugees in Erie, Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on immigrant communities and cultural production in contemporary France. Dr. Reeck's publications include *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond* (2011) and she co-edited *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (2018).

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