

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## REFUGEES: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### Life Stories Amplify Voices of Refugees (Part Four)

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



Image source [here](#)

In July 2018, I spoke with a recently arrived refugee originally from Ethiopia whose journey to seek refuge took him from Ethiopia to Kenya and then to Erie,

Pennsylvania. We spent more than 75 minutes together in a wide-ranging conversation about how he became stateless, and the ways in which he perceived the institutions, administrations, and agencies he had to work with as barriers to his seeking asylum and resettlement.

As he was pursuing asylum, while living in the urban center of Nairobi, Kenya, he had an additional concern in being the parent of a child diagnosed with autism and needing medical assistance that was exceptionally hard to get. From the time he made an application for asylum to the time he left for Erie, five years had elapsed.

The man, who was interviewed alone, had just arrived in Erie and has a complex personal history split between the countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Indeed one could say it is as complex as – it mirrors – the history between the two countries. He was born to an Eritrean mother and Ethiopian father at a time when Eritrea was not yet an independent country separate from Ethiopia. Both of his parents had taken part in political groups and formations opposing the Ethiopian government; for his father, the Oromo Liberation Front, and for his mother, the Eritrean Liberation Front.

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

The man's mother was jailed as a result of her oppositional political involvement, as was he, and when she emerged, she had been paralyzed in the legs as a result of beatings and torture. His father was also jailed and released, and then re-jailed, "It was just like this, on and off," he says. Eventually, when the Ethiopian-Eritrean war broke out in 1998, most of his family was deported to Eritrea, though his mother did not make it, as she died during the border crossing. He, however, hid and fled alone to Kenya.

From 1999 to 2012, the interviewee lived in Nairobi, Kenya in the Ethiopian community there [see this [working paper](#) that dates to the timeframe discussed in the interview for more on Ethiopian refugees living in Nairobi, Kenya], renewing his Ethiopian passport on a yearly basis so that he had legal status in Kenya, which constituted having both a valid passport as well as a visa to be in Kenya as an Ethiopian. But to have the latter, he had to have the former.

In 2012, the man was informed that he could no longer renew his passport at the Ethiopian Embassy in Nairobi and was unable to return to Ethiopia to do so, at which point he essentially became a stateless person and resolved to declare himself as such to a UNHCR office, first registering as a refugee with the Kenyan government.

#### [\[Audio clip 2\]](#)

In our exchange, the interviewee carefully recounted every step along the way of his process in applying for asylum as well as the many times he and his family had to start part of the process over, for instance because a medical exam's validity had expired as they waited to get an interview with USCIS [United States Citizenship and Immigration Services], or when his family was not booked as planned on a flight to the United States because their fingerprints had not been sent in on time by the agency responsible.

A straightforward, chronological telling of the process of applying for asylum, obtaining refugee status, and beginning the resettlement process was not possible. It is well-known that an asylum interview requires that asylum statements be made without error and with consistency, with the appropriate amount of emotion and attention to detail, and with compelling justification and proof of persecution. About this, the interviewee says: "If you are qualified through UNHCR, UNHCR sends you there [USCIS] and they say what you are saying, you have to repeat what you say. If you make a mistake, you can be rejected. Because you say something here and here. Because mine is not fabricated. It is there with me, it is inside my mind. It's even inside my blood the things that happened to me."

Though recounting many of the same facts and situations, the oral history interview differs from an asylum interview in marked ways, namely that it allows for divergence and retelling, looping back to clarify, and repetition. In that back-and-forth movement, an interviewee conveys the complications of the process and also the accompanying emotions that go with it. Though less "polished," the oral history interview rings truer to the human and psychological dimensions of seeking asylum.

A poignant moment in the interview comes about when the Ethiopian-Eritrean refugee insists that refugees have no choice, that he had had no choice, which connects back to the Bhutanese refugee in Part II of this series who said he wished he had never become a refugee and that he had been able to return to Bhutan. The Ethiopian-Eritrean refugee says, "You know, to be a refugee is an incomplete human being for me. I was not a complete human. To be a refugee is not kind ... It is not my choice. Things made me be a refugee. I don't have a choice to be a refugee."

Meanwhile, as we also saw in Part II, upon arrival in Erie, hope is vested in children and, in his case, also in helping members of his new local community. If the American Dream is alive today in the United States, this is surely one expression of it.

[\[Audio clip, 3\]](#)



*Maitham and Zamin both fled Iraq as young children.  
(Photo by Maitham Basha-Agha)*



*Elijah Monga and his mother fled from the Democratic Republic of Congo.  
(Photo by Maitham Basha-Agha)*

## **Conclusion**

A farmer, a businessman, a businesswoman, an NGO worker; another Congolese refugee I spoke with was a high school philosophy teacher; a Pakistani refugee I spoke with had been a Christian bishop – all living and working in their home countries when conflict forced them to flee.

Others were young children who cannot remember their lives before they sought refuge with their families, spending much of their childhood in refugee camps. In many cases, families were separated in resettlement, though some families have also been reunited in Erie, Pennsylvania. None of them would have chosen to become a refugee, but all are grateful for the opportunity to begin anew in a context without the forms of persecution, bias, and violence that they faced in their home countries.

When students who had participated in the oral history interviews were asked to reflect on them and also on other interactions and exchanges they had had with newly arrived refugees in Erie, they expressed fundamental realizations and shifts in their thinking. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2016), Kwame Anthony Appiah says the following about “conversing”: “Conversations across boundaries of identity ... begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word ‘conversation’ not

only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and ideas of others.” (85) Following from that, interviewee and interviewer can be said to engage in a “conversation,” one based on interpersonal and intercultural exchange.

Erin Zehr: “I came to a deeper understanding, that I must remember that many refugees have gone through a great loss. Even though many people frame the United States as a place many aspire towards, people do not want to leave their homes. Many had no desire to ever come here. I knew that on some level, but hearing that X would be willing to die just to be in his home for one more month really made me realize how deeply that sense of home and the feelings of displacement sat.”

Sherrell Daley: “When we did the home visit, I asked what the family’s hopes were for the future. The husband said that he hopes to work as a janitor in a college to get his master’s degree and to support his family. His wife just wants to get her daughter back and hopefully get back to school. The husband hopes that by coming to America, that he and his daughter can get medical treatment for their conditions. I think the value of hope in America is important because the American Dream is the hope that all the hard work that you do pays off and you can support your family. Even though refugees come from all over the world, they still have the same values and hopes of Americans.”

Taken together, the above reflections recall the complex feelings and emotions that we have heard across these oral history interviews when people are forced to flee – the sense of irreparable loss coupled with a perspective of hope, one coexisting with the other. Time and time again, it is obvious that hope has been placed in the next generation, as recently arrived refugee children and young adults had already enrolled in Erie schools, in GED programs, and in training programs in a matter of months since arriving. Despite, in some cases, not having had education or work in the second country where they had lived before resettlement, work is a priority and necessity upon arrival in Erie for all.

We hope that these life stories, which are intimately connected to seeking refuge, have served to amplify the voices of refugees and also understanding about what being a refugee means. After five years of living in the United States, refugees can apply to become United States citizens – New Americans – at which point a certain permanency takes hold. But security in this new citizenship does not efface the many experiences and emotions that make up a life story. We carry our pasts with us; we are what we carry, but, at the same time, our past does not define the future, which is precisely what the refugees featured in this series convey.

Such new beginnings connect to long-held American rights and values – freedom, work, family, social mobility, etc., at the same time as New Americans contribute

in deep ways to the social fabric of the United States, just as they have done in Erie, Pennsylvania.

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## 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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