THE MEANING OF RESETTLEMENT:

BURMESE POLITICAL REFUGEES IN VANCOUVER

by

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of political refugees to Canada has raised questions regarding their resettlement, adaptation, and mental well-being. Nurses and other health care and social service professionals do not know enough about the psychological adaptation of this refugee type. This may result in nurses and other health care and social service professionals planning and providing care that is not relevant to their specific needs, thereby increasing political refugees' risk of adaptation problems and poor mental health. Recognizing that refugee adaptation and mental health is affected by multiple interrelated factors including the way in which one perceives experience, the purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of the resettlement experience from the perspective of Burmese political refugees in Vancouver.

Phenomenology, a qualitative research methodology, was used in this study. Data were derived through a series of in-depth interviews with five Burmese refugees and three key informants. Participants shared information of their past and present realities which provided a contextual basis for understanding their experiences. Participant observation data and reflection of the researcher's personal experiences working with Burmese refugees in exile reinforced the formal interview findings and provided a broader context for interpretation.

Analysis of interview data reveal an experience that can be conceived of as one of both loss and reconstruction, challenges and opportunities. The participants mourn the loss of their identity, their culture, and the social, economic, and political status that they once commanded. They grieve the loss of family support. Factors such as past traumatic experiences involving violence and persecution, their identity as educated revolutionaries, occupational hardship, language difficulties, and isolation from a well-established ethnic community are seen as important influences on the participants' sense of loss. These factors are, in turn, influenced by international and national policies.

While the refugees grieve for the multitudinal losses that their resettlement represents, they also rejoice in the opportunities that living in Canada is giving them. Resettlement to Canada means their future holds some form of hope. Resettlement is viewed as an opportunity to

learn, to develop new skills, and, most importantly, to reestablish themselves as revolutionaries who will, one day, return to their homeland. This sense of opportunity provides the refugees with the strength to cope with the stresses of living in a foreign environment and allows them to rationalize the losses of the past. The participants' identity as political refugees is an important variable influencing this sense of opportunity and the larger meaning of resettlement. Understanding these meanings and the factors affecting them have implications for public health policy, nursing practice, research and education.

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FOREWARD

For my mother, Shirley Jeffery, whose love and strength will remain with me forever.

(1936 - 1994)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Approximately 215,000 immigrants arrive in Canada each year. Of this number, approximately 20% are refugees (Statistics Canada, 1997). Unlike immigrants who usually have a certain amount of preparation before voluntarily leaving their homeland, most refugees leave their native land involuntarily, often without any preparation or choice of destination. Refugees are accepted by Canada because of well-founded fears of persecution for their beliefs, politics, or ethnicity based on the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (United Nations, 1967). Many have endured years of continuous warfare, political turmoil, and/or famine. Some may have been imprisoned or forced to work as slave labor. Still others experienced conditions which included deaths of friends and family members, and/or the total destruction of a traditional way of life. Most went through a period of flight filled with grave personal risks only to face an uncertain future in overcrowded, unsanitary refugee camps.

Against the background of such experiences, refugees new to Canada continue to face massive psychological, social, cultural, economic and political challenges as they attempt to adapt to a new social and physical environment. Linguistic and cultural differences are the primary reasons for stress, but negative public attitudes may also play a role. Economic and occupation difficulties are also significant. The insecurity of having been a refugee and the mental stress caused by the process of adaptation creates great suffering for refugees and places them at risk for depression, anxiety and other health problems (Barankin, Konstantareas & Farideh de Bosset, 1989; Mghir, Freed, Raskin, & Katon, 1995; Nicholson, 1997; Weine, Becker, McGlashan, Laub, Lazrove, Vojvoda, & Hyman, 1995). Poor mental health, in turn, can lead to personal, familial, community and ethnic relations problems ranging from suicide and alcohol abuse to family break-up. Intergroup conflict typically develops in populations under conditions of stress. The emotional well-being of refugees new to Canada is not only of relevant concern to individuals and the health and social service system, but also to Canadian society as a whole.

Various scholars have documented the dimensions, stages and particular problems of what might be called the refugee experience (e.g., Fox, Cowell, & Montgomery, 1994, Kunz, 1981; Stein, 1986) and there is a growing body of research specific to refugee resettlement and adaptation to life in Canada (see e.g., Adelman, 1980; Chan & Indra, 1987; Nann, Johnson & Beiser, 1984a, 1984b). Nursing research with refugees has also grown as an attempt to improve the quality of nursing care of refugees and to prevent adaptation problems that refugees are vulnerable to (see e.g., Carrington & Proctor, 1995; Fox, Cowell, & Johnson, 1995; Fox & Kumchum, 1996; Lipson, 1992, 1993; Lipson & Omidian, 1997; Muecke, 1992). While the literature deals with such issues as their mental health status, economic and occupational adjustment, language, residence and community patterns, and culture and identity problems, few studies examine the ways in which individuals experience these phenomena or the meanings they find in these experiences. Although nursing researchers, with their emphasis on ethnographic and phenomenological research methodologies, are beginning to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of refugee experiences, most have tended to see refugees as a homogeneous group and have accentuated their commonality as refugees. Little qualitative research can be found documenting how, for example, certain subgroups of refugees experience resettlement. Because of differences in factors such as background, reasons for fleeing, ethnicity, and ideological perspectives, certain groups may experience resettlement differently. It is essential to analyze in greater depth the characteristics and dynamics involved in the resettlement and adaptation of different groups of refugees so that nurses and allied health and social service providers can better understand and respond to their particular needs.

A refugee population which appears to be a growing proportion of today's immigrants resettling in Canada is that of young political dissidents. Events such as the Tienanmen Square massacres in China and student uprisings in Myanmar have resulted in the forced resettlement of thousands of young political activists throughout Canada. These former revolutionaries, many of whom became politically active while attending school or university, differ from other more traditional refugees because of the reasons behind their migration, their level of education, and their occupational status. Unlike refugee groups comprised mainly of women and children

fleeing war and poverty, political refugees generally consist of single males fleeing persecution for their political beliefs and activities. They often refer to themselves as revolutionary activists having devoted a significant portion of their lives to a political cause. Many have levels of skill and education that produced prominence or success in their homeland. Some persons' backgrounds include renowned leadership roles in anti-government campaigns and armed revolutionary movements. As a result, most revolutionaries have suffered severe forms of violence and persecution, including temporary imprisonment and torture. While a wide range of pragmatic and ideological considerations characterize their decisions to leave their homeland, disagreement with government action and/or the refusal to accept those in power are common factors.

Fear of persecution, having to leave suddenly with little prior planning, and having little or no control over their eventual destinations, produce behaviours upon resettlement that cannot be compared with that of voluntary immigrants. Similarly, the experiences of refugees who have taken up arms and formed a revolutionary movement against their own government cannot be compared to those fleeing war and poverty. Political refugees' insistence on the overriding importance of a certain facet of belief or dogma, their dedication to achieve certain political, religious, or societal objectives, and their strong desire to return home are significant factors specific to the political refugee situation and its meaning. This point of view led me to conduct research on the meaning of resettlement for a group of student revolutionaries from Burma currently resettling in Vancouver, British Columbia, as political refugees.[1]

The meaning of resettlement for political refugees cannot be examined without considering the historical context within which their current realities are embedded. The following section, therefore, provides a brief overview of the events surrounding Burmese refugees' forced departure, exile, and eventual resettlement in Canada. Much of the background information comes from my personal knowledge of Burmese history and politics gained through a review of various historical documents, international newspapers and magazines, newsletters,

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[1] Following the 1988 coup, Burma was renamed Myanmar by the military regime in power, the State Law and Order Restoration Council. At the request of the participants of this research project, the name Burma is used.

and history books prior to the implementation of this study. The most important source of information, however, comes from my own observations and experiences working with Burmese refugees in Thailand. From 1990 to 1991, I worked as a public health nurse and program coordinator for a refugee assistance program dedicated to helping Burmese refugees in exile in Bangkok and along the Thai-Burmese border. While my experiences working with Burmese students in Thailand were not formally documented, they have become indelible memories. The insights gained from such experiences influence the way I interact with and care for refugees in Vancouver and overseas. They impact the way I perceive the world and how I interpret reality. It is largely through these past experiences that I interpret the experiences of Burmese students now resettling in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Background on Burma and the Student Exodus

Military coups, conflicts between the majority Burman population and various non-Burman ethnic minority groups, and economic and political isolation from the rest of the world have all been central themes in recent Burmese history. A colony of Britain since 1886, Burma won its independence in 1948 as a result of an independence movement led and advocated for by Burman nationalist Aung San. Aung San, the father of 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, pleaded for "unity in diversity" within the new Union of Burma and in a proposed constitution ceded a number of levels of local autonomy to the various minority nationalities. Before any plans could be implemented, however, Aung San and members of his cabinet were assassinated in 1947. Political unrest and insurgencies quickly followed. From 1948 to 1962, under Prime Minister U Nu, the government emphasized socialism and Buddhism and attempted to unify Burma, despite continued ethnic conflicts, economic difficulties and an ongoing communist insurgency.

In 1962, U Nu was deposed in a military coup by General Ne Win, who quickly established a one-party state under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Under harsh military rule and a policy of extreme political and economic isolation from the rest of the world, Burma's economy collapsed. Once known as the "rice bowl of Asia," Burma fell into the

category of Least Developed Nation as defined by the United Nations in 1987 (Clements & Kean, 1994). Characterized by violence, human rights abuses, annihilation of political opposition, and complete state ownership of the economy, Ne Win and his totalitarian regime controlled and oppressed the people of Burma for over 30 years. Attempts to protest or demonstrate were repeatedly put down.

In early 1988, the government demonetized the Burmese currency. Outraged by such a measure, college and university students revolted. The protests quickly escalated into mass public demonstrations against Ne Win's ruinous economic policies and repressive politics. Despite a twenty-six year ban on political activity, students, workers, and even monks joined in the protests and organized trade unions, political parties and national strikes. On August 8, 1988, following the resignation of Ne Win and a promise of free elections, the Burmese military staged a bloody crackdown against unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators on a scale that was to be matched only by the Chinese repression in Tienanmen Square in 1989. Although exact figures are unknown, sources estimate 3,000 to 5,000 students and other pro-democracy marchers were killed or injured throughout the uprisings (Litner, 1992; Tutu, 1993).

In September 1988, martial law was re-imposed, all state institutions, including the BSPP, were dissolved, and a 19-member State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was formed by the military junta. The SLORC then proceeded to conduct a nationwide search for all those involved in the opposition movement systematically seizing people from their homes, workplaces, and teashops. Many of those arrested were high-school or university students. Afraid of being arrested or even killed, thousands of students and pro-democracy activists fled to border areas. Determined to avenge the massacres, they linked up with armed ethnic-minority rebels where they learned the rudiments of guerilla warfare. The students quickly broke away from the leadership of the ethnic-minority insurgents and organized their own pro-democracy armies to continue their struggle for freedom and democracy. The largest and most widely recognized student dissident group became known as the All Burma Students Democractic Front (ABSDF). Although ABSDF members were mostly made up of young unmarried men who referred to themselves as students, it is generally acknowledged that not all

members of the "student" pro-democracy movement were attending educational institutions at the time of the uprisings. While dominated by university and high school students, ABSDF members also consisted of professionals, trades people, and displaced Burmese villagers.

Following the establishment of the ABSDF, camps resembling small villages were set up next to the headquarters of the ethnic minorities just inside the borders of India, China, and Thailand. During the initial months of exile, many students died from disease, malnutrition, and severe living conditions. While various relief agencies and church groups responded by providing basic humanitarian assistance in the form of food, mosquito netting, and medicine, it wasn't until 1990 that a recognized refugee assistance program was initiated. That year, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), an American non-profit refugee assistance organization, together with a host of other aid and development agencies, launched what would later become a large long-term emergency assistance program. Based out of Bangkok, Thailand, I was IRC's program coordinator from July 1990 to July 1991.

Under a clearly defined leadership structure and indirect financial assistance from IRC's program, the students eventually created highly organized communities with bamboo houses built on stilts, latrines, common eating areas, and a headquarters for radio communication and strategic planning. Some camps contained military training facilities,[2] small agricultural and animal husbandry projects, and basic health clinics operated by former medical students from Rangoon University. Some of the former university students became teachers for neighbouring ethnic minority school children. For the students themselves, a small bamboo jungle university was built near the Karen Headquarters of Manerplaw where dissidents could learn more about political change and democracy. The university hosted several visiting scholars from Europe and the United States, as well as numerous foreign volunteers offering English language classes.

For the majority of students, however, the reality of life in exile remained one of extreme hardship and suffering. Most spent their time on the front lines engaged in guerilla war-fare followed by short respites in the border camps. Many spent weeks recuperating in hospitals from gun-shot wounds, land-mine injuries, malaria or respiratory infections. Camps were frequently

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[2] IRC did not willingly support, endorse, or encourage military activities among those receiving assistance.

destroyed as a result of random attacks by the SLORC military or because of forced relocation orders by local authorities (the host government's army, the border police, the forestry police or other provincial authorities).

While many of the original students eventually returned to Rangoon where they most likely faced arrest and even torture (Amnesty International, 1994), others made their way into Thailand where they applied for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). With only a small amount of financial support available, most of the students were forced to live in extremely overcrowded conditions with minimal means of procuring transportation, clothing, or food. All of them lived in constant fear of detection by Thai authorities. Despite recognition as a "person of concern" to the UNHCR, Burmese asylum seekers were often arrested, prosecuted, and detained for illegal immigration. The only way they avoided prosecution was by paying bribes to the local Thai police (Amnesty International, 1994). Those who were unable to pay were detained in Thailand or forcibly returned to Burma where they may have faced serious human rights violations (Amnesty International, 1994). This was a direct contravention of the principle of non-refoulement, as stated in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (United Nations, 1967). The principle of non-refoulement refers to the duty of member countries to respect the rights of refugees, in particular to prevent the forced return of refugees to countries where their life or freedom may be threatened.

In 1993, in response to growing international criticism and increasing numbers of Burmese students seeking asylum in Thailand, a "safe area" was created by the Thai authorities near the Thai-Burmese border. Burmese students living in Thailand were asked to voluntarily register themselves in the camp or face arrest and deportation. A resettlement program was established for legitimate UNHCR recognized refugees wishing to relocate to third countries.

At the time of this writing, hundreds of students and ethnic minorities continue to wait for determination of their refugee status and acceptance for resettlement in a third country (Fox & Kumchum, 1996). Others continue to work illegally throughout Thailand in constant fear of arrest and deportation by Thai authorities. A determined few continue to fight as revolutionary

guerillas in the jungles of the Thai-Burmese border against an increasingly powerful military junta.

Since 1993, Canada has become the new home for an increasing number of these students. Although Canadian life may be an improvement over conditions left behind, Burmese refugees arriving to Canada continue to face enormous challenges as they attempt to adjust to a society and culture vastly different from their own. The students must now struggle to learn a new language, adapt to a foreign culture, secure employment, and somehow come to terms with the many losses associated with migration. Clearly, they, like other refugees, need much practical and emotional support throughout the resettlement period. There are, however, several unique aspects to the Burmese resettlement situation. First, there are very few Burmese living in Canada; hence, there is a limited community infrastructure to help these refugees establish themselves. In 1993, the Canadian government agreed, for the first time, to accept a mere 100 political refugees from Burma (Farrow, 1993). In 1997, there were only an estimated two to three thousand Burmese refugees living in Canada (Immigrant Services Society, personal communication, July 1997). The exceptionally small number of Burmese being accepted to Canada means a resettlement adjustment among few individuals who have endured similar migration conditions or who are undergoing a similar resettlement experience. The government policy of dispersing Burmese refugees among various Canadian cities further militates against the establishment and maintenance of social support networks among those who share similar experiences. Relatively young and often single, the students in Vancouver also lack support traditionally available through family and kinship. This lack of potential support is of particular significance in light of consistent research findings indicating the importance of family and social support networks in coping with the stresses of resettlement (Baker, 1993; Beiser, 1990a; D'Avanzo, Frye, and Froman, 1994). The other unique feature which sets the students apart from many other refugee groups in Canada, is the fact that many left their homeland with the purpose of dedicating their lives to achieving democracy in their homeland. They are determined to return to the country they love and cherish. This difference in ideological perspective is an

important factor influencing how these students experience resettlement in Canada and what meanings they have of the experience.

The Problem

The majority of individuals emigrating from Burma come to Canada as political refugees and desperately hope to return to Burma one day. With ongoing violence, repression, and political unrest in their country, returning home in the near future appears extremely unlikely. Burmese refugees in exile in Thailand, India, and China continue to flow into British Columbia (Immigrant Services Society, 1996). Given refugees' economic, language, and cultural difficulties and their mental anguish associated with past atrocities and loss of family (Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues Affecting Refugees, 1988a), their increased vulnerability to stress and poor mental health indicates the need for appropriate health care and social services. As nurses who provide care to individuals and respond to the needs of given populations, Burmese refugees' risk of adaptational problems and depression is extremely relevant. In order to improve the quality of care given and advocate for improved health and social service provision, understanding the subjective realities of these refugee's lives is important. What is the meaning of resettlement for young educated political refugees who long to return home? What does it mean to be a refugee in a country where no established ethnocultural community exists? What is their perception of the challenges faced upon resettlement and how do political refugees cope with such challenges? To date, no research has examined the resettlement experiences of political refugees from Burma.

Aim of Study

This exploratory research study examines the resettlement experience of a select sample of Burmese refugees in Vancouver, British Columbia. A phenomenological approach is used to understand the meaning of resettlement for political refugees in a context where few members of their ethnocultural group are present. The study further seeks to obtain Burmese refugees' perceptions of the adaptational challenges faced upon resettlement and the meanings they have of

them. Finally, this study examines political refugees' coping strategies as they attempt to adapt to an environment that is physically, culturally, and ethnically vastly different from that in which they came from and to which they desperately wish to return in the future.

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives of the Study

From examining the literature surrounding refugee resettlement and listening to refugees' stories of persecution, migration circumstances, and every-day experiences in Canada, one is struck by the complexity of factors contributing to the adjustment process. While a massive literature addresses the mental health and long-term adaptation of refugees, and looks at factors such as language and cultural differences, immigration policy, employment, and social support, the relative lack of qualitative research in the area has resulted in a lack of experiential description from the refugees' own perspective and a failure to consider the context that shapes such perspectives. Many of the concerns of refugees such as the Burmese are thus lost, as is the richness and vitality of their lived experiences. Without the views and perspectives of those living the experience, we are unable to generate particularly deep meaning out of the increasing number of quantitative, but few dimensioned, research findings currently being produced.

Within the qualitative paradigm, a phenomenological approach was chosen for this study. Grounded in existential philosophy, phenomenology is based on the belief that no single reality exists and that individuals have separate and unique realities (Massey, 1995). Reality is recognized, therefore, as being subjective. Subjectivity, in turn, means that the world becomes real through one's contact with it and meaning is acquired through interpretations of that contact. Truth is a composite of socially constructed realities and access to truth is a problem of access to human subjectivity (Munhall, 1994). The aim of phenomenology as a research method is to derive meaning by perceiving through the subject's reality (Munhall, 1993). As Rist (1979, p. 20) observes, "Stress is made on the need for the researcher to 'take the role of the other' and to understand the 'definition of the situation' from within the framework of the participants." This methodology accepts the intersubjectivity of researcher and subject and it is this intersubjectivity which takes into account the social nature of the research act. The researcher

and the subject bring to the situation different sets of background knowledge through which a given situation is interpreted.

The focus in phenomenology is on human involvement in the world, sometimes referred to as "lived experience." The experience (phenomenon) is described as it is lived, as free as possible from conceptual presuppositions and without consideration of various causal explanations (Oiler Boyd, 1993). Rather, efforts are made to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence (the term "essence" may be understood as a linguistic construction or description of a phenomenon) in an attempt to determine the meaning embodied in it (Van Manen, 1990).

In this inquiry, the discovery of meanings in political refugees' experiences of resettlement is intended to increase our knowledge and understanding. Phenomenology has guided this investigation of Burmese refugees' resettlement experiences and has helped to provide insight into their reality. Increased insight and understanding, in turn, assists in the planning and delivery of refugee mental health, refugee health care, and refugee social service delivery practices. It does so by sensitizing health and social service providers, policy makers, and program developers to the realities of life as a young educated political refugee in Canada.

From a nursing perspective, this research is very significant. Nurses, perhaps more than any other health professional group, work directly with refugees both in refugee camps and in resettlement. In Canada, public health nurses working in immigration, clinics, hospitals, and schools are often the refugees' first point of contact with the health care system. An increased understanding of their experiences could help reduce the risk of adaptation problems and depression, and could provide a basis for improving the quality of health care of refugee patients and clients.

An in-depth exploration of Burmese refugees' experiences sheds light on the problems and coping skills specific to political refugees, a group that has not been well studied and is likely misunderstood by health care personnel and service agencies. The methodological approach used is appropriate because so little is known about this group. The phenomenological approach represents an optimal first stage in understanding some of the complexities of the

relationship of adaptation to resettlement with one's identity as a political refugee and other life factors.

By becoming more informed about the perspectives and needs of political refugees, the quality of care that nurses give, professors teach, and managers provide will be improved. Exploratory research on little known populations such as the Burmese students, helps facilitate more equitable health care and service delivery among an increasingly diverse ethnocultural and socioeconomic society. By increasing our understanding of the needs and distinctiveness of political refugees versus other refugee and immigrant groups, nurses and other social service providers are better able to plan for and provide services that are accessible, appropriate, and at a calibre consistent with that offered other more familiar groups. With increased knowledge we are better able to advocate their needs as they have prioritized and to help them realize their full potential.

Despite the contribution to refugee research that this study makes, there are several limitations related to the exploratory nature of its design. As with any phenomenological study, there is the question surrounding the extent that my findings reflect my perspective rather than the participants whose experiences I have explored. As Muecke cautions, "Exploratory studies inherently risk telling more about the thinking and orientation of the researcher and the researcher's discipline and culture than about the people or domain studied because the researcher reports on areas known only superficially" (cited in Lipson, 1992, pg. 25). My inability to speak or understand Burmese and the students' limited English language proficiency increases this risk because of the difficulty validating complex experiences and their meanings with the participants. In addition, data may have been lost or altered when words desired by the students to describe a particular experience could not be retrieved because of their limited knowledge of English. Similar losses may have occurred with the use of an interpreter. I have attempted to reduce potential discrepancies between the meanings I have presumed and those lived by the students, through prolonged participant observation over an extended period of time and the use of key informants. My past experiences working with Burmese students in exile also enabled me to ground the interview data in historical context. My knowledge of Burmese politics and other

contextual factors helped me to gain the trust of the participants and obtain detail descriptions of experiences which, otherwise, would have been unretrievable.

Summary

The experience of having been a refugee combined with the challenges of adaptation to resettlement create mental health risks necessitating certain survival skills. Nurses and allied health and social service workers require information on the adaptation problems of refugees and a greater understanding of their resettlement experience in order to minimize such risks. While a great deal of research has been done on the experiences and problems of refugees during resettlement, most assume refugees are a homogeneous group. Given differences in background factors such as reasons for fleeing, level of education, occupational status, and ideological perspective, political refugees warrant separate examination.

In order to truly understand human experience of a complex nature such as adaptation to resettlement and its meaning, descriptions of the experience must come from those who have actually lived them. They must also be placed within the context of their surroundings. This study explores the resettlement experiences particular to Burmese political refugees in Vancouver. Using a phenomenological approach, the meaning of their resettlement is analysed within the context of their past experiences in Burma, their exile in Thailand, and their day-to-day lives in Vancouver. Challenges of adaptation and their meanings are analyzed from the perspective of political refugees who view their stay in Canada as temporary. The concept of opportunity is also analyzed from this perspective. The final chapter discusses the implications the study has for public health policy and for nursing practice, education, and future research.

Before turning to the participants' experiences, the following chapter examines the literature in relation to the acculturation and adaptation of refugees during resettlement. Factors influencing the resettlement experience are discussed including their potential impact on one's mental health and psychological adaptation.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on refugee resettlement and the adjustment process tend to fall into two major groups. There are those studies which focus on the refugees themselves: their health, mental health, language, occupational adjustment, residence and community patterns, culture and identity problems, and problems of specific subgroups such as women and children, and various measures of their progress and adjustment. The second group of studies focus on refugee policy and programs: types of health and social services, effectiveness of assistance programs, and government policies and their implications. Nursing research on refugees focus primarily on clinical care and communication problems (Mueke, 1992). Questions about how persons in highy stressed situations adjust to their radically new environment also constitute a major focus of nursing research (e.g., Fox, Cowell, Johnson, 1995; Fox, Cowell, & Montgomery, 1994; Lipson & Omidian, 1997). While these studies have resulted in a massive body of literature, they have also contributed to confusion, duplication, numerous theories, and overlapping definitions and models. For example, popular wisdom and much of behavioural science suggest that, since moving to a new place involves disruption, losses, and culture shock, immigration constitutes a stressful experience jeopardizing one's mental health. For refugees, the stress of migration and its accompanying mental health risk is considered even greater given the fact that, unlike immigrants, most refugees leave their homeland involuntarily under extremely dangerous and life-threatening circumstances. Empirical research examining the relationship between migration and mental health however, demonstrate that the process is much more complex than such a simple model suggests. For example, while most research report greater psychological distress among refugees and immigrants, others do not (see, for example, Berry & Blondel, 1982; Chan & Lam, 1983). Further, while research can be found outlining some of the psychological reactions to refugee and resettlement experiences including long-term processes of grief and mourning, heightened anxiety and depression, survivor guilt, and post-traumatic stress syndrome (e.g., Lin, 1986; Mghir, Freed, Rasken, & Katon, 1995), the point is scarcely noted that most refugees do not become mental health casualties (Canadian Task Force, 1988b).

Beiser (1991) explains such inconsistencies, in part, to methodological problems inherent in cross-cultural research. For example, because determination of mental health status is usually based on clinical data or community surveys, different cultural concepts of mental health and of "normality" are not taken into consideration. Further, results of community surveys often depend largely on the degree to which disease symptoms are recognized and reported in different cultural groups. Such responses may be influenced by factors such a socio-economic and educational status, religious beliefs, and the value attached to particular labels given to illness or emotional disorder (Friere, 1993).

Beiser reviewed the literature on the relationship between migration and mental health and concluded that migration is a condition of risk for developing mental disorder (Canadian Task Force, 1988b). He further concluded that for refugees, the jeopardy to emotional well-being is even greater. However, the historical and social contingencies surrounding the resettlement experience as well as personal strengths that individuals bring to the situation determine the amount of stress experienced and how such stress is dealt with.

Although is has not been prominent in studies of the refugee experience, I found the notion of acculturative/resettlement stress as a useful frame of reference to account for the variable mental health outcomes that have been observed among refugees. In order to gain a better appreciation of the experiences of political refugees from Burma as they fled their homeland and culture and begin to learn the demands of a new culture, a theoretical understanding of resettlement and its relationship to mental health is beneficial. This review will, therefore, present the stages of adaptation as outlined by Stein's model of refugee adjustment (1986) and the mental health risks associated with the process. This will be followed by an examination of the various factors which determine whether exposure to the risks of uprooting and forced relocation result in breakdown or personal fulfilment.

Pattern of Adjustment during Resettlement

Despite the number of variables affecting the refugee adaptation process, the concept that the psychological adjustment of refugees is socially and temporally patterned and predictable has

become widely accepted (Eisenstadt, 1954; Gonsalves, 1992; Gordon, 1964; Keller, 1975 ; Stein 1986; Tyhurst, 1977). While slight variances exist with respect to the number of stages identified, the model basically posits the following general pattern as outlined by Stein (1986).

Following the initial two to six month period of relief in the receiving country and experiencing what Tyhurst (1977) terms, "an overtly positive state of mind", the refugees will be confronted with the reality of what has been lost. For some, a high occupational and social status experienced at home will be replaced by an impoverished minority status. For others, there is the loss of a traditional way of life. They will confront the loss of their culture including their identity, customs, and habits. Every action taken during this stage requires careful consideration and examination. The loss or lack of knowledge about the whereabouts of close family members must also be faced. Compounding these feelings of loss is the awareness of forced separation and isolation from a familiar and supportive social network. The sense of personal loss is felt so acutely by some that family separation and reunification may become an obsessive mental concern interfering with one's ability to adapt to life in their new country or to make any logical plans for their future (Chan & Lam, 1983). For others, family reunification may provide the individual with a meaning, a justification, and a direction for the future (Chan & Lam, 1983).

Within six months, resettlement becomes consistently associated with a temporary and generalized disturbance of the refugees' personal and social functions. Tyhurst (1977) describes this as the "social displacement syndrome", characterized by a cluster of symptoms including paranoid behaviour, hypochondria, anxiety, depression, apathy, disorientation and impairment of interpersonal and social skills. The anxiety and frustration are at times so severe that many refugees consider returning home even though they fear the consequences (Zwingmann, 1973). Many refugees may also experience guilt about leaving behind others who continue to suffer in their homeland (Boehnlein, 1987; Carrington & Proctor, 1995; Keller, 1975).

Zwingmann (1973) identifies another behavioural syndrome frequently observed among refugees during this stage of their resettlement: an obsessive fixation with past experiences and events, and a preoccupation with and idealization of the days prior to the crisis which forced them to leave their homeland. Zwingmann refers to such a mental state as "nostalgic illusion" -

the past is idealized and glorified, while the present is ignored and overlooked, and the future devalued. Zwingmann believes that, while temporary and short-term nostalgic illusion can be beneficial in protecting the individual from the immediate impact of the crisis of loss being experienced through resettlement, long-term episodes blocking progression towards a future may lead to aggressive and antisocial behaviour. Individuals may begin to impose upon themselves self-withdrawal and isolation which in turn generate feelings of isolation, loneliness and marginality to the social environment.

Stein describes the next period of one or two years post-settlement, as a time of rebuilding. Refugees are described during this stage as displaying an impressive drive to recover what has been lost. Time, acculturation, language improvement, retraining, hard work and determination all help in overcoming some of the factors which caused the refugees' initial downward spiral. However, two key factors are highlighted and seen as significant with respect to this rebuilding stage. First, the qualities that led to success and prominence in their home country may facilitate success and upward mobility in their new country. Second, the refugee experience may make them more aggressive and innovative (Keller, 1975; Rumbaut, 1985).

Going to school, changing jobs, learning the language of the host country, and moving from their initial placement to an area of greater refugee concentration or to areas where members of their ethnic group reside are activities typical of this time period. Economic needs lead refugees to move beyond merely replicating life in the homeland to genuine culture learning. However, when cultural and language barriers leave refugees who are skilled workers or professionals unable to find equivalent employment, increased feelings of anger and resistance to learning the new culture may result (Gonsalves, 1992). Increased problems within the family, as well as associated changes and/or increases in levels of mental dysfunction are also likely to be experienced (Gonsalves, 1992).

In contrast to Stein's model, Lin, Tazuma, and Masuda (1979) claim that it isn't until after one year of resettlement, after refugees have become more or less comfortable with their immediate environment, that feelings of frustration and homesickness significantly increase. This is consistent with findings from a study examining the psychological adjustment and needs

of Southeast Asian refugee families in Ottawa (Nguyen, 1987). The study found that following the initial six month arrival period when the refugees were primarily pre-occupied with survival and physiological needs (food, clothing, housing, etc.), as well as the need to acquire a new language, efforts were turned towards achieving self-sufficiency and economic stability. It was only after this initial phase, after the basic satisfaction of physiological and security needs, that social needs emerged and dominated. Concerns for family re-unification, contact with members of the new society, cultural identity, and participation in ethnic organizations were identified during this one to three year post-settlement stage.

After four to five years, the major part of adjustment is completed and less change is likely to occur after this point (Stein, 1986; Gonsalves, 1992). The host country that the refugee experienced initially as new and exciting, then as confusing and even threatening, now becomes a routine backdrop for daily life. Language, norms, roles, and cultural traits have been acquired, retraining or education has been undertaken, and the refugee has worked tirelessly in an attempt at successfully adapting to the many new situations he is faced with. If the goal is not within reach at this point, the refugee is likely to abandon the effort. The drive and determination wanes and initial optimism is replaced with a sense of resignation to his or her current life situation. Hopes are often transferred to the next generation with the acknowledgement of the exodus and migration having been for the sake of the children. We are reminded, however, that such resignation does not necessarily mean happiness or successful acculturation. Many may feel adjusted enough to function in the new environment but remain disillusioned and marginalized (Stein, 1981).

Finally, after a decade or more of living in the new host society, a certain stability is obtained. The process of acculturation, that is, learning the culture and behaviour of the dominant society, and the recovery of lost status continues but at a slower pace. By now they have selected the particular values of their native culture to retain in their self-concepts, and they have come to respect and understand the values of their new country. They have achieved some compromise between their former life commitments and the possibilities of the new culture (Gonsalves, 1992). The struggle for refugees may not be over, however. Although more

longitudinal studies of refugee adaptation must be done, research has found that delayed reactions to past traumas and resettlement sometimes emerge during this later stage (Gonsalves, 1990). Further, family transitions, such as when their children enter adolescence, can be expected to produce new types of conflicts leading to emotional difficulties and feelings of loss (Gonsalves, 1992).

While the above categorizes the stages of adaptation and mental health problems that refugees typically experience during resettlement, it does little in the way of helping us to understand who among the new refugees are at risk of suffering emotional difficulties and, possibly, psychiatric disorder. As discussed in the opening section of this review, migration and resettlement are undoubtedly stressful. However, as findings from the following research literature demonstrate, factors such as the kinds of stresses endured, the availability of social support, and differences in personal resources and individual characteristics determine whether refugees experiencing resettlement succeed in realizing their ambitions, or whether those who fail, develop mental health illnesses.

Determinants of the Refugee Experience

In an attempt to clarify the relationship between resettlement and mental health, Rumbaut (1991) proposes a general model of the process of migration and adaptation, specifying key factors that influence mental health over time. The model posits that the refugee resettlement experience is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including: (1) political, economic, and social contexts of exit and entry, and (2) a variety of pre-arrival and post-arrival individual characteristics. The former include larger structural factors such as government policies, labour market conditions, racial tolerance by the host society, and the availability of an ethnic/community support system and/or adequate resettlement services. Individual characteristics encompass such variables as language and occupational skills, level of education, age and gender, year of arrival, social and family resources, and physical and mental health status. Other mitigating factors include the refugee's reason for and circumstances surrounding

the migration, traumatic events during flight, time spent and experiences in refugee camps, and the magnitude of cultural differences between the home and host countries.

Identifying specific factors and how they affect the adaptation and mental health status of refugees has been the focus of a vast number of studies. As Rumbaut's model suggests, the list is extensive; thus, I attempt here only a selective overview.

Factors Affecting Mental Health and Adaptation

Catastophic events prior to migration including torture, war trauma and prolonged internment in refugee camps are risk factors for mental health problems. Mollica, Wykshak, and Lavelle (1987) describe the psychosocial impact of war trauma and torture on IndoChinese refugees. They have found that many suffer from a long-term process of grief and mourning, heightened anxiety and depression, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Other research involving traumatized refugees - Bosnian, Afghan, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian- demonstrate a high rate of traumatic experiences and what the American Psychiatric Association's official nomenclature, the DSM-IV-R, calls "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD). (Boehnlein, 1987; Nicholson, 1997; Mghir, Freed, Raskin & Katon, 1995; Weine, Becker, McGlashan, Laub, Lazrove, Vojvoda, Hyman, 1995). PTSD is characterized by a set of symptoms that follow an individual's exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor in which "the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (p. 427). The response to the event involves intense fear, helplessness, or horror. As outlined in DSM IV - R, symptons of PTSD include a persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event (Criterion B), a persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and diminished responsiveness to the external world (Criterion C), and persistent symptoms of anxiety or increased arousal that were not present before the trauma. Nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia, social withdrawal, and prolonged apathetic and depressive syndrome are typical of the disorder. While the condition may last a long time, sufferers typically experience periods of relief that are interrupted by the recurrence of symptoms due to a particular stimulus that resembles or symbolizes an aspect of

the event (e.g., anniversaries of the traumatic event, newspaper articles about their homeland). Studies among Southeast Asian refugees provide the best evidence supporting associations between refugee trauma and PTSD as well as other psychiatric problems such as depression, dissociation, somatization, and anxiety (Kinzie, Boehnlein, Leung, Moore, Riley, & Smith, 1990; Mghir et al., 1995; Weine et al., 1995). For instance, Kinzie et al., (1990) found that 71 percent of clinic patients were diagnosed with PTSD, and 81 percent were diagnosed with depression.

A post-migration factor identified in the literature is unemployment and socioeconomic status. Research demonstrates that refugees, particularly during the first five to ten years of resettlement, experience high levels of unemployment (Beiser, Johnson, & Turner, 1993). Research also demonstrates higher levels of depression among refugees unemployed compared to those who are working (Beiser et al., 1993). In addition to providing income and security, employment provides individuals with resources to deal with the larger society, and these resources likely affect one's ability to function effectively in new circumstances (Williams & Berry, 1991).

Stressors inherent in the resettlement process itself is also a factor influencing mental health after emigration. Refugees face challenges of adapting to a new country with cultural norms and values significantly different form those of their homeland. As discussed in the opening section of this thesis, tasks involved in acculturation include learning a new language, finding work, redefining gender and work roles, and integrating the values and norms of the host society. A study of Afgan refugees suggest that the everyday hassles and annoyances associated with attempts to acculturate contribute more to stress, illness and depression than major life event changes (Lipson & Omidian, 1997). Perceived poor health status has also been identified as a major psychological stressor among refugees. Nicholson's study of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States suggests that these two factors, that is, current stress as a result of acculturative problems and perceived health status, are the strongest predictors of mental health outcomes (1997).

Stress as a result of uncertainty is also identified in the literature as a factor affecting refugee mental health. For those unsure of their fate, high rates of psychologic and psychiatric

distress may follow not knowing the outcome of application for formal refugee status in a foreign country (Silove, McIntosh, & Becker, 1993). Guilt, depression, and mounting despair is often characteristic of this situation (Carrington & Procter, 1995).

Social support as a determinant of emotional well-being during resettlement has also been studied extensively. Results indicate that a strong social support system is one of the best buffers against the negative effects of migration (Beiser, 1988, 1990a, 1990b; Lee, 1994). Refugees in Canada and the United States have several potential sources of assistance and support: relatives and friends, ethnocultural community groups, and social and health service agencies. The amount and quality of support actually received from these potential sources has been found to have a direct bearing on mental health (Baker, 1993; Beiser, 1988; Fox, Cowell, & Johnson, 1995).

Another factor is the orientation the host country displays towards newcomers. Many refugees in Canada find that most of the stresses and difficulties surrounding their resettlement are related to racial discrimination (Lee, 1994). Although Canada is guided by a Multiculturalism Policy (Multiculturalism Act, 1988), as well as a number of parallel provincial initiatives promoting integration and pluralism (see, for example, British Columbia Royal Commission on Health Care and Costs, 1991, p. C-38), the reception afforded refugees is often negative. Although available research has not established a direct causal relationship between discrimination and mental disorder, recent qualitative research identifies ethnic bias and social marginalization as a major source of stress contributing to poor mental health among refugees following resettlement (Lipson & Omidian, 1997).

The recognition that certain contingencies increase the risk of adaptation and mental health problems among refugees and that these contingencies are, in turn, affected by larger structural factors such as government policy, refugee programs, and quality and accessibility of services, has led to the publication of numerous reports and studies examining the types of health and social services available to refugees, the effectiveness of assistance programs, and government policies and their implications (see, for example, Adelman, 1991; Canadian Task Force, 1988a). Policies such as those restricting new migrants from settling in major

metropolitan areas where ethnic groups have already been estalished, or that restrict family class immigration affect the mental health of new arrivals. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that immigrants and refugees who settle in areas where their ethnic group has already been established, experience lower levels of distress, and are much less likely to be hospitalized for mental disorder than migrants who do not have such a community available to them. (Canadian Task Force, 1988b). Policies blocking access to high quality health care, social services, and education programs also affect the health and adaptation of refugees (Canadian Task Force, 1988b).

Beyond these social and political factors, numerous psychological variables play a role in the mental health and adaptation of refugees experiencing resettlement. These include the refugee's prior knowledge of the new language and culture, prior intercultural encounters of any kind, motives for resettling, and attitudes towards acculturation (Williams & Berry, 1991). Other prior attributes that have been suggested in the literature are one's level of education and employment, values, and self-esteem (Beiser, Turner, & Ganesan, 1989; Westermeyer, Vang, & Neider, 1983; Williams & Berry, 1991). Individual background characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and marital status are also considered relevant factors (Nicholson, 1997). Research investigating the effects of such psychological variables have found increased rates of depression and other mental health illnesses among the least-educated and English-proficient, those from rural backgrounds, and those of lower socioeconomic status (Rumbaut, 1991).

Burmese refugees arriving in Canada experience many contingencies which put them at risk for developing mental health problems. They have all experienced violence and trauma prior to and during their migration, they are separated from family, and they are isolated from individuals of a similar cultural background. However, the majority of these refugees are also relatively young, skilled, and educated. Most arrived in Canada with at least a minimum understanding of English. As revolutionary activists, the students' unwavering commitment to their political convictions, despite the hardships and suffering of jungle war fare, demonstrates a strength of character most of us can only imagine. Viewing migration simply as a risk to one's health and well-being is overly simplistic. As we have seen from the literature, there are so

many dimensions to the refugee migration phenomenon that it is only prudent to view each situation as unique. The context of life change and the meanings these particular individuals have of being a refugee in Canada, to what is lost as well as gained through their resettlement experience, must also be considered.

Summary

The literature review indicates that the mental health and adaptation of refugees is influenced not only by a series of pre- and post-migration stresses, but also by individuals' resources and characteristics. The literature illustrates that no one variable, but rather a number of complex interacting variables determine the success or failure of one's adaptation to resettlement and whether failure results in mental health disorder. Attitudes, coping strategies, and the appraisal that one makes of their experiences impact the amount of stress experienced.

While the literature on refugee resettlement and mental health has done much to increase our understanding of refugee adjustment and the problems faced by newcomers, few studies take these important subjective variables into consideration. Those that do often presume homogenous refugee communities. Little has been written about how "political" refugees respond to forced uprooting or what the refugee resettlement experience means to such an individual. At the time of this writing, research examining the resettlement experiences of refugees from the economically and politically isolated country of Burma could not be found.

In this study, my use of a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of Burmese refugees during resettlement, further substantiates the complexity of the relationship between the many social, cultural, economic, and political factors discussed above and their impact on refugee adaptation and mental health. As my findings will reveal, the Burmese students' past experiences of trauma and abuse, their identity as political activists, and their unrelenting desire to return home are particularly salient factors influencing how they perceive their adaptation in Canada, how they cope with the day-to-day stress of living in a foreign environment, and how they perceive the opportunities of resettlement.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

As described in Chapter One, this exploratory research study uses the phenomenological research approach. Major philosophical differences exist between phenomenology and the natural scientific approach. The natural scientific approach requires phenomena to be observable, measurable, and verifiable by other observers. The research method often involves testing and experimentation (Knaack, 1984). In contrast, the phenomenological perspective views the human not as an object apart from the world, but rather, in the context of his or her surroundings (Knaack, 1984). In phenomenology, the focus is on the processes of understanding and describing, rather than seeking to control or predict behaviour (Knaack, 1984). Because the researcher's task, using this approach, is to investigate and describe human experience in the way the phenomena appear to the individual (Munhall, 1993), and the data obtained should reflect the way in which participants view their world (Taylor, 1993), data for this study were gathered from Burmese refugees who have recently resettled in Vancouver, Canada.

The study consisted of a series of in-depth interviews with five student participants and three key informants within the Burmese community. The migration and resettlement experiences, as described by the participants, were transcribed and interpreted following Giorgi's (1975) approach to phenomenological analysis. Data obtained from participant observation of Burmese student dissidents living in exile in Bangkok and the Thai-Burmese border area, and my continuing involvement with the Burmese community in Vancouver, provided important contextual material for this study.

Selection of Participants

Participants were chosen on the basis of being political refugees who were known to have lived the experience. They were chosen specifically for their ability to answer the questions guiding this study. They were thus 'competent' to answer the study's questions by virtue of having lived the experience and by having fulfilled pre-selected criteria as indicated below. The number of participants was determined by the quality, completeness, and the amount of

information offered by participants (Morse, 1989), as well as by the saturation of conceptual categories. Saturation refers to the point where no new information emerges from the interviews (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). While it was my initial intent to interview a larger number, factors such as limited English language proficiency and difficulty accessing willing recruits prohibited a larger number of interviewees. Despite the limited number of participants, however, a core of phenomena was apparent in data derived from the five participants and new phenomena did not emerge during interviews with the last participant.

Criteria for Selection

The following criteria were used to guide participant selection. Each participant had to have: 1) lived in Burma throughout their childhood and prior to immigrating to Canada; 2) fled their homeland due to a well founded fear of persecution for their political beliefs and/or anti-government activities; 3) been enroled in a high-school or university at the time of their forced departure in Burma and/or have a minimum of a high-school education; 4) resettled in Canada within the last 2 - 3 years; and 5) the ability to communicate verbally in English.

Participant Recruitment

Key informants were sought from individuals employed or connected with the Immigrant Services Society in Vancouver, British Columbia and the Canadian Friends of Burma Organization of which I was a member at the time the field work was conducted. Participant Information Letters (see Appendix A) were distributed by such informants to potential participants. Members within the Burmese community who were known to me prior to the initiation of this research, also assisted with the recruitment of students willing to be interviewed. Utilizing the snowball sampling technique, a list of potential participants was compiled. Of 8 volunteers, 5 students met the inclusion criteria: 4 men and 1 woman.

Prior to commencing each interview, a consent form (Appendix B) was read and discussed with each participant. The content of the consent was translated verbally into Burmese for those who had minimal English reading proficiency. All participants were encouraged to ask

questions if the consent form was confusing or unclear or if they were concerned about their involvement in the study.

Characteristics of the Participants

Five individuals participated in this study. An overview of their demographic characteristics is contained in Table 1. The students' ages at the time of the interviews ranged from 25 to 42 years, with a mean of 32 years. Some were in their teens or early 20s when they left their homes and fled to Burma's border regions. At the time of the interviews, participants' family/marital status were as follows: concerning male students, two were single and two were married and living with their spouse. Only one of the male students had children. The only woman in the study was married and lived with her spouse and five year old son. The average level of education was 13 years.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

ITEM	N	ITEM	N
Gender			
Male	4	Currently in School (including ESL)	1
Female	1	Employed	3
Marital Status		Unemployed	1
Married	3	Length of Time in Canada	
Single	2	< 6 months	1
Age		6-12 months	2
20-29	2	12-24 months	2
30-39	2	>24 months	
40-49	1		
Education			
High School	2		
Technical School	1		
University	2		

When initially interviewed, the students had been in Canada an average of 13 months, with length of residence varying from three months to two years. Four of the five students were employed or were attending school during the course of this research. Of those employed, all held menial jobs in Richmond or Vancouver earning minimum wages or slightly above. One

respondent had been unemployed since his resettlement eight months previously, and the other, following a series of part-time jobs at a refugee resettlement agency, was enroled as a full-time student at a community college in Vancouver.

Data Collection Procedures

In-Depth Interviews

After informed consent was secured, in-depth interviews were initiated with each participant. The interviews were partially structured, incorporating a series of open-ended questions and/or probes developed in advance (see Appendix C). While the interview guide helped to establish the parameters of discussion, the basic interview strategy was to allow each participant to describe his experience in his or her own way. This open-ended interview technique allowed the respondents to formulate the issues and define their own critical dimensions. Non-directive techniques, such as silence or requesting more information, were used to pursue important topics. When I later transcribed the interviews, I incorporated my observations of participants' behaviours, interactions with others, and their home and community environment into the transcripts.

I conducted a total of 11 formal interviews with five participants. Each interview lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. All but one participant were interviewed twice. Most interviews took place in the homes of the participants or that of a close friend. One student had his subsequent interview in a local restaurant. Only one participant required the aid of an interpreter. For this he chose a fellow member of the Burmese community whom he trusted. All arrangements were made according to the wishes of the participants. Subsequent interviews were conducted two weeks to four months after the first interview. Most of the students interviewed knew of one another although they did not necessarily belong to the same social network or reside in the same geographical area of Vancouver. However, all had been involved in revolutionary activities as members of a student rebel organization in Burma and could speak to the experience of resettling in Canada as a political refugee. The choice of in-depth interviews

enabled me to gain rich detail and maintain a researcher-participant relationship that was sensitive to questions of personal experience.

A small tape-recorder was used to record each of the initial interviews. While advantageous in terms of allowing for an uninterrupted free-flowing dialogue, I found the use of a formal recording device to be somewhat inhibiting with regards to what the participants were willing to share with me. During interviews where a tape recorder was being utilized, for example, participants seemed hesitant to discuss negative experiences or feelings related to Canada or the country's immigration or social assistance system per se. Non-verbal behaviours such as quick glances towards the machine and a slight hesitancy before answering specific questions indicated to me that some of the students, despite repeated reassurances of confidentiality, may have been sceptical about the use of the recorded information. For others, the use of the recording device appeared to provide an opportunity to say thank-you to those who had assisted in their relocation rather than describing their feelings and experiences. Despite these limitations, the use of a recording device was essential during the first set of interviews due to the length of these interviews and the volume of material which resulted from them. More importantly, the recorded conversations enabled me to capture particularly salient descriptions of the resettlement experience exactly as the participants themselves described. The participants' own words were critical in my search for common meanings within the descriptions of experiences described.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informants are individuals who are well versed in the phenomenon of research interest and who are willing to share the information and insight with the researcher (Polit & Hungler, 1997). In this study, data obtained from interviews with key informants provided insight into the refugee resettlement experience and provided additional contextual material in which to interpret the interview data. Three key informants were interviewed. Two were Burmese refugee assistance workers employed at the Immigrant Service Society and the other was a Burmese health worker (former doctor in Burma) who had immigrated to Canada three

years ago. Each of the informants offered a unique perspective on the Burmese community in Vancouver as well as on the adaptational difficulties and opportunities experienced by recent arrivals.

Participant Observation

The literature stresses the need to immerse oneself in the situation in order to understand the "matrix of meanings" of those studied (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Thus, in addition to the in-depth interviews, my data collection also relied on participant-observation within the field of study. For over a year, I regularly attended Burmese cultural and social events, participated in several meetings of the Burma Democratic Organization, and accepted repeated invitations to the households of various select participants. This prolonged engagement in the field helped me to become increasingly aware of and observant of local cultural practices whenever possible. It also helped to establish and maintain a relationship of trust and communication during the conduct of this research, a relationship that is needed in order for the participant to feel comfortable in describing his experience (Van Manen, 1990). The relationship with the students was strengthened along the way, as evidenced by the increased amount of information gained during the second and third visit that was not revealed in the first visit. In particular, responses that could have been construed as somewhat negative in nature or that opposed popular consensus among the Burmese student community were much more likely to be stated at later meetings than earlier ones. My prior knowledge of the students' political and historical backgrounds further helped to establish a relationship of trust and open communication early on in our encounters.

While the descriptive and interpretative analysis and discussion of this study are based largely on the formal interviews, the participant observation and unrecorded conversations helped to reinforce the formal interview findings and to provide a broader context for interpretation. As time passed, I increasingly gained the true confidence of the participants, enabling me, through uninhibited dialogue, to immerse myself into their experience and eventually gain entry into their lifeworlds.

Data Analysis

Descriptions of the refugees' experiences were interpreted hermeneutically. Hermeneutics, sometimes called phenomenological-interpretive analysis, is a holistic approach to analysis that "involves the examination and interpretation of the interview data to understand the meanings and practices of people functioning as whole beings in specific situations" (Massey, 1995, p.100). It is based on the assumption that language is used by individuals to communicate their ideas about reality and that it is the researcher's task to uncover and understand the meanings embedded in such communications (Massey, 1995).

The following strategies, as outlined by Giorgi (1975) were followed in the analysis phase of this study. First, observations and interview data were transcribed, printed, and preserved on a word processor. While the transcription process did not capture all the vividness, the pacing, or the non-verbal aspects of the conversation, transcribing the interviews myself immediately following each of the interviews enabled me to easily recall particular aspects not heard on the tapes. Following transcription, each interview was read several times to get a sense of the whole and to begin to ascertain common themes emerging from the data. Data from scholarly literature, participant observation, and personal experiences adapting to resettlement within a foreign culture were brought into reflection. Themes were identified and categorized in order to classify the data. These general categories formed the basis of the study's findings. As the analysis progressed, "exemplars" were selected from the interview data. An exemplar, by definition, is a "vignette or story of the particular transaction that captures the meaning in the situation" (Benner, 1985, p. 10) so that it is recognizable in other situations. The exemplars chosen were placed on 5 x 8 index cards and categorized according to the dominant experience described, thus providing the opportunity for me to present particularly salient descriptions of the subject in the appropriate context. Relationships between themes were identified until no new themes emerged. A synthesis of the themes was then formulated into a comprehensive description of the particiants' experiences. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently.

Throughout the analytical and interpretation process, I was continually aware of my own perspective and the manner in which my subjective experiences influenced the meaning given to

the data. While many refugee studies are criticized for the lack of information about life events prior to the time when they arrive in the receiving country, my work as the coordinator for a Burmese refugee assistance program in Thailand during the early 1990s offered a unique opportunity to conduct first-hand observations of student dissident life prior to their migration to Canada. Thus, I was able to place the experiences of the participants within a realistic context rarely afforded most researchers.

Ensuring Rigour

To ensure rigour during the research process, the following procedures were undertaken. All descriptions and interpretations of the data collected were confirmed with participants following the first and final interviews to ensure that their telling of the experience and the meaning the experience held for them was accurately captured. To ensure procedural rigor, all elements were clearly presented throughout the research process and steps were reviewed under the supervision of a thesis committee. In order to allow participants time for reflections and expressions, none of the interviews were timed. Interviews often felt more like conversations than directed question and answer sessions. Throughout the analysis phase of the study, every attempt was made to explain how themes were developed. The incorporation of rich excerpts (exemplars) from the transcripts also allowed the reader to follow the course of analysis and the evolvement of themes. The schema or themes were also checked with the original data for proper fittingness and representation. The rejection of any data was also indicated. In the end, however, the real test of rigour is in the hands of the readers who have experienced the phenomenon. The political refugees who have participated in this study assure me that I, indeed, have captured the essentials of their experience and that my interpretations are ones that they relate to.

Ethical Considerations

The sensitivity of this inquiry requires that care be taken to protect the human rights of participants. This concern about protection and human rights was implemented by obtaining informed consent, assessing the effects of inquiry on participants throughout the research

process, and establishing referrals in cases of need. All participants were consistently reminded that the interviews and information provided would be kept strictly confidential and that their identities would never be revealed. Confidentiality was maintained by removing all names from the transcripts and hand-written notes, and implementing a numbered coding system to differentiate between participants. Pseudonyms were later assigned to each participant. Withdrawal from the study was an option available to them at any time throughout the research project although all of the original recruits agreed to be interviewed. Approval by the UNBC ethics committee was obtained prior to the conduct of this research project.

Summary

In an attempt to describe and understand the Burmese political refugee resettlement experience and its meaning, a phenomenological approach was used for this study. Descriptions of the refugees' experiences were obtained through a series of in-depth interviews with Burmese political refugees and key informants. Experiences were interpreted hermeneutically. Data obtained from participant observation within the field of study as well as personal observations of Burmese refugees' experiences prior to their arrival in Canada helped to reinforce the formal interview findings and to provide a broader context for interpretation.

The methods used for this study resulted in rich detailed descriptions of the resettlement experience from the perspective of the refugees themselves. As will be evidenced in chapters five through seven, these descriptions and the analysis which followed enabled me to understand the complexity of the relationship of adaptation to resettlement with one's identity as a political refugee and other life factors, an understanding that is not possible with quantitative methods alone. Through a phenomenological-interpretive approach, an increased understanding of the meaning of the political refugees' resettlement experience, of what was gained as well as lost, was achieved.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS

While Burmese students in Canada share many similar migration and resettlement experiences, they each have personal histories and backgrounds which give them unique identities and perspectives on the world. These identities, in turn, influence the meaning these students have of their experiences. In an attempt to better understand who these individuals are and the situations they currently find themselves in, a profile of each student is presented. Their stories are constructed from both participant observation data and from their responses to the questions on how and why they came to Canada, and what their resettlement experiences have been like as political refugees. Names and other identifying factors have been changed to insure the confidentiality of the participants.

Win

Win is 25 years old and lives in a suburb of Vancouver. He currently resides in the home of his refugee sponsor in a large four-bedroom house. A 30-year-old Burmese male student and a 17-year-old male refugee claimant from Sri Lanka also reside in the home. Each of the refugees have their own bedroom and they share a common TV and entertainment area separate from that of their sponsors. All four members of the household share the kitchen area and evening meals are often prepared and eaten together despite their differences in ethnicity and language. Win spends most of his time engaged in solitary activities such as reading, painting, listening to music, and watching TV. He attends a Christian church every Sunday but is also interested in the teachings of Buddha. He also has a keen interest in history and philosophy. On weekends, he spends time with other Burmese students either in their apartments or at various Vietnamese restaurants and east side cafes. He enjoys the peacefulness and solitude of being alone.

At the time of the first interview, Win had lived in Canada for eight months. With the help of a private sponsor from Ontario, Win resettled in the small town of Thunder Bay, Ontario. Because he knew a Burmese student who had also resettled there, Win asked to live with his

friend rather than with the sponsor. He was provided with money to cover his first month's rent plus an additional 30 dollars for expenses. He did not receive additional support from his sponsor thereafter.

With the financial support of his friend, Win was able to enrol in a six-month language and job skill training program sponsored by the Ontario government. The program provided four months of practical work experience. Win was placed in the merchandising department of a large drug store. Although it was for a short period, he gained insight into the Canadian job market and confidence in his abilities to work in Canada. Following the work term, however, he was unsuccessful in finding a job in Thunder Bay. After several months of unemployment, Win opted to move to Vancouver where job opportunities were perceived to be greater. Through another Burmese contact, Win moved into the home of Mr. Smith who has assumed the role of Win's new "refugee sponsor." Within one week of his arrival to British Columbia, Win found a job at a local recycling factory. Although he only earns a minimum wage, he feels fortunate to have found a job close to where he lives and in such a short period of time.

Life for Win has not always been this fortunate. Born in 1971 in a small township in the Karen State of Burma, Win's father died when he was 7 years old. Once a middle class family, the death of Win's father left the family with many financial difficulties. With the government's demonetisation of the country's currency in 1987, the family's situation worsened. With two sisters under his mother's care, Win was forced to drop out of university in order to help support the family. His dream was to become a doctor.

In 1988, during the massive anti-government protests in Rangoon, Win and 11 fellow students organized a strike committee in support of the pro-democracy movement spreading throughout the country. All were arrested by the local police the next day. With the help of the local townspeople, the students were quickly released. Despite the continued threat of arrest, Win was determined to see the end to the one-party dictatorship in his country. He continued his political activities including the organization of mass anti-government demonstrations. At one of the demonstrations, a photograph of Win was taken by a local journalist and placed in one of the

country's newspapers. When violence erupted and the door to door search for student activists began, Win felt he had no choice but to leave his family and head for the jungles.

Before Win could reach safety, however, he and a friend were arrested by local authorities. He was detained for three months in a local jail under difficult and harsh conditions. During his incarceration his anger and perseverance only strengthened. His determination to continue with the pro-democracy struggle intensified. Upon his release, Win joined an underground network of student activists as a messenger while working in the autobody industry in his hometown. Despite constant fear of discovery and arrest, he continued to participate in covert anti-government activities. In 1990, following the arrest of a close friend and underground activist, Win fled his township and began a one month trek to the Thai-Burma border. Walking through dense jungle, Win survived on wild fruits and rice acquired while passing through remote villages. He finally reached the rebel controlled border area where he joined the newly created student group, the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF). Based in a secluded border camp, Win endured over three years of strict military training and violent guerilla war-fare. Today, Win cannot bear to discuss his years as an armed revolutionary fighter except to say that he eventually grew tired and disillusioned with the armed tactics advocated by the ABSDF. In 1993, he left the armed wing of the organization to seek safety in Thailand. In a small border town, Win clandestinely worked for a Thai light bulb factory. Eventually he had enough money saved to purchase a bus ticket to Bangkok where he planned to apply for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Plans of obtaining asylum in Bangkok were not immediately realized, however. UNHCR officials rejected his application due, according to Win, to suspicions of his involvement with the Burmese military intelligence (Burmese dissident groups are believed to be highly infiltrated by spies). The suspicion was based, in part, on his English language proficiency, a skill generally associated with children of military families and/or the military elite. As a child, Win had studied English intensively through the private tutoring of a mentor and family friend. Win spent the next few years hiding out in Bangkok and working odd jobs illegally. Determined to be recognized as a refugee in need of protection, he repeatedly applied for status through the

UNHCR. While waiting, he continued to participate in high profile public awareness campaigns about the human rights abuse being committed in his country. His participation in a hunger strike to demand the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners in Burma resulted in his arrest and a six-month jail sentence served in Bangkok. During his imprisonment, Win and three other Burmese dissident students received life-threatening injuries following a brutal beating by 15 criminal detainees. No medical treatment was received and no action was taken against the assailants.

Following his release, Win registered with the Thai authorities as a Burmese student dissident and, like hundreds of other Burmese refugees in Thailand, was forced to live in an over-crowded specially designated "safe area" (refugee camp) near the Thai-Burma border. Called the Burmese Students' Centre, the camp provided shelter for Burmese men, women and children seeking asylum and wishing to resettle in third countries. Here, Win taught English to other refugees and killed time by reading and discussing politics. He describes refugee camp life as extremely boring and frustrating. He vehemently expresses hatred towards the Thai government for not allowing him and the other students to live freely in Thailand. He is outraged that Thailand does not permit demonstrations condemning the SLORC government. He is also angry because of what he perceives to be a lost opportunity. He believes that if he had been allowed to remain in Thailand rather than migrating to Canada, he would have been able to return to university.

After his sixth attempt, Win was finally accepted as a refugee for permanent asylum in Canada. For this 25 year-old, May 1995 marks the beginning of a new life. In Canada, he is determined to improve his life chances by taking advantage of opportunities denied him in Burma and Thailand.

One advantage Win has over many of the Burmese refugees in Vancouver is his knowledge and understanding of English. He is able to communicate and learn about Canada through his sponsor and is not dependent on interpreters in order to carry out daily tasks of living. He contributes his success in finding employment to a combination of luck and his English language proficiency.

At the time of the final writing of this thesis, one and one-half years following the initial interview, Win had changed jobs and was earning approximately $10.00 per hour. He had moved out of his sponsor's house to an apartment shared by two other Burmese students. He had obtained a provincial driver's licence and had purchased a second-hand car. He was also attending advanced ESL classes three times per week with the hope of improving his job opportunities and/or returning to school. He also had received a phone call from his mother at Christmas, his first contact with her since his departure from his homeland in 1990.

Htung

I met Htung, a single 33 year old male, for the first time at a Burmese Democratic Organization (BDO) meeting in Vancouver. Interestingly, he introduced himself as a political activist and member of the BDO - an organization formed by exiled Burmese students who have resettled in Vancouver. The first interview was conducted outside on the lawn of a house in East Vancouver prior to the business portion of the weekly BDO meeting.

Htung, like Win, had been in Canada for eight months at the time of the initial interview. Similarly, he had originally settled in another province prior to resettling in Vancouver.

Htung arrived in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in September 1995. He was met at the airport by an immigration counsellor and a Burmese student who had settled in Saskatoon a few months previously. The first two nights in Canada were spent alone in a local motel. Not knowing anyone in Saskatoon, and hearing rumours of brutally cold winters and poor job prospects in the region, Htung quickly decided to move to Vancouver. Using money he had received from the immigration counsellor for food and general living expenses, Htung bought a one-way bus ticket to Vancouver. Upon the bus's arrival, Htung simply presented the address of a student with whom he had been corresponding during his internment in the Thai refugee camp, to a local bystander. A city transit bus took him to within a few blocks of the house. To his friend's surprise, he showed up on his doorstep. Htung relays this story with great pride and amusement. He saw the experience as an adventure and an interesting learning opportunity. To Htung, everything was easy compared to life on the border.

Htung now shares a house with three Burmese students in East Vancouver. Each of his room-mates were known to him prior to his arrival through his involvement with the ABSDF. Following a brief stint as a kitchen helper, Htung quickly obtained a job as a cook at a local Japanese restaurant. One of his room-mates is also employed at the restaurant. Although Htung had no previous experience cooking Japanese food, he found that the owner and his friend were willing to teach him. Although he has never experienced unemployment in Canada, he sympathises with the many Burmese who have not been able to find work upon resettlement.

Htung is a keen and devoted member of the BDO. He spends most of his free time reading and writing about Burmese politics. He is a soft spoken but passionate man whose life appears to revolve around the students' political struggle. He is part of an extensive network of Burmese dissident refugees living throughout Canada and the world attempting to raise public awareness about human rights abuses in their homeland and the people's struggle for democracy. He has a personal history of high profile anti-government activities of which even his room-mates are unaware.

At the time of the final interviews, Htung had begun studying English through an ESL program offered to new immigrants in downtown Vancouver. Because his work at the restaurant requires that he work split shifts, morning and evening, he is able to attend classes during the afternoon. When he can find the time, he enjoys watching television as a way to learn English and keep track of world affairs.

Htung talked little of his life prior to the 1988 uprisings in his homeland. He preferred instead to discuss politics and the students' never-ending struggle. Throughout our interviews, however, bits and pieces of his background were revealed. Htung grew up in a family of nine children in a middle class district of the capital city, Rangoon. His father was a military leader for the Burmese government. His brother, sister, and brother-in-law were also employees of the state. Because of his father's role in the Burmese military, Htung's involvement in anti-SLORC activities is seen as exceptionally dangerous for members of his family remaining in Burma. If his identity becomes known to members of the SLORC, his family's safety would be in jeopardy. He lives with this fear every day.

Htung's decision to join the anti-government movement began following years of dissatisfaction with the poor working conditions and lack of opportunity in his job as a car press machine operator at a state-owned factory. When mass uprisings began to sweep the country in 1988, Htung saw his participation as an opportunity to fight for change. Anti-government demonstrations were seen as an opportunity to regain a sense of power. Despite his position within the government's military, Htung's father understood his son's frustration and supported his decision to join the protesters. However, his father also told him that such work was not quickly or easily accomplished, and once he joined he was never to return until such time that he could guarantee his family's safety. Htung vowed to keep that promise.

During the military coup in September 1988, Htung fled to his country's border. There, he spent three years as an armed revolutionary fighting against the heavily armed Burmese military before seeking exile in Thailand. Like many of the students, he suffered from malaria, skin infections and malnutrition while living in the jungle. His decision to leave the armed struggle was not an easy one. Of all the students interviewed, Htung displayed the greatest passion and conviction to the pro-democracy cause. In fact, during his self-imposed exile in Bangkok, he continued to be involved in demonstrations and other very serious and illegal anti-Burmese government activities. As a result he spent over one year in an Indian state prison. Because of the seriousness of these activities and the repercussions they had, he had no choice but to apply for refugee status and resettlement in a third country.

Min Tha

Min Tha, 29, was among the first group of political refugees from Burma to arrive to Vancouver. During our interviews she told stories of rape, torture, beatings and near starvation in her homeland. However, she rarely spoke about such atrocities in the context of her own personal experiences.

Min Tha's biography begins in 1966 in Rangoon, Burma. She was the only daughter of an educated businessman and a seamstress. She describes her childhood as relatively normal with fond memories of being surrounded by friends and family. Perhaps due to the influence of

her father, Min Tha found that she had an interest in business and economics. Upon high school graduation, she enroled in Rangoon University in the Faculty of Economics. In 1988, her third year at Rangoon University, Min Tha, along with her friends, joined the students on campus to protest against their country's government. Fearing harsh reprisals by the government for her participation in the demonstrations, Min Tha fled the capital shortly after the military coup in September 1988. She describes her twenty day journey through the mountainous terrain to reach the ethnic minority rebel camps as excruciatingly difficult. A city girl all her life, Min Tha knew little about life in the forest. Covered with mosquito bites, Min Tha, along with twenty-one other students, survived on fruit and banana tree juice.

Min Tha spent the next two and one-half years surviving in the jungle in an ABSDF-controlled camp. She was responsible for gathering information regarding impending attacks from the SLORC military. Although she did not fight as an armed soldier, her work involved many dangerous trips deep into enemy territory. Her camp was attacked and destroyed by the Burmese military several times. In 1990, Min Tha became seriously ill with malaria. She also discovered that she was pregnant. Desperate for proper medical attention, she sought refugee status and assistance from the UNHCR in Bangkok. Min Tha recovered and delivered a healthy baby boy in Bangkok, Thailand. Although she describes the birth of her son as a very happy experience, she was deeply saddened by the news of the death of the baby's father, a Burmese student she met on the border, just two months prior to their son's birth. She felt alone and afraid. She did not know if she would be capable of looking after a baby without help from her mother or "anyone else who knew about babies." She feared for her safety in Bangkok and worried about her and her son's future in exile.

Min Tha's fear for her safety proved to be legitimate. Shortly after the birth of her son, Thai authorities arrested her as an illegal immigrant. She spent the next year in a Bangkok detention centre separated from her newborn son. A female Thai friend she had become close to during her pregnancy volunteered to take care of her son while she served her sentence.

The last ordeal for Min Tha was capture by the Thai police and her forced deportation back to Burma. While en route in a boat heading to her homeland, she managed to escape from

her captors by jumping into the ocean. She was rescued by a Thai fisherman and eventually found safety within the walls of the newly established student "safe area" near Ratchaburi, Thailand. Here, re-united with her infant son, she married Oo Tin, a 33 year old Burmese man she had met while living in her former rebel camp. One year later, with her new husband and three year old son, Min Tha landed in Vancouver prepared to begin a new life in Canada.

At the time of the interviews, Min Tha and her family had been in Canada for several years. They lived in the top floor of a run-down house in Vancouver's East side. The house had little furniture and was desperately in need of repair. Other than a huge poster of Aung San Suu Kyi, the world renowned Burmese pro-democracy leader, and a tiny black and white photograph of Min Tha's mother, there was nothing adorning the bare and paint-chipped walls.

The family lived in obvious poverty. Desperate for food and rent money, they had been forced to sell the many donations of clothes, toys, and furniture received upon their arrival in 1993. At the time of the interviews, the family income was less than $14,000 per year. Min Tha talked a lot about the difficulties experienced during their first year in Canada. They had known no one except the four Burmese students who were among them when they arrived in Vancouver. She remembers feeling alone and "shut in". Despite assistance received by a few Burmese-Canadians who had heard about her arrival as well as that offered by the Immigrant Services Society, the isolation, language barrier, culture shock, and poverty took their toll. Min Tha and her husband fought continuously. Oo Tin tried to escape from his troubles through the use of alcohol. During their first year of settlement Min Tha recalls that they rarely left their house. She remembers feeling disillusioned and defeated.

With the passage of time and the arrival of more students in Vancouver, the family's circumstances began to appear brighter. Upon the completion of a six- month ESL program as well as a government-sponsored training course in tourism, Min Tha eventually found work as a chambermaid at a large downtown hotel. There, she met many women who were also new immigrants to Canada with whom she could share her experiences. She also became close friends with a Burmese woman who had immigrated to Vancouver with her Canadian-born

husband twenty years ago. Oo Tin found odd jobs in various hotels and restaurants as a dishwasher.

At the time of the research interviews, Oo Tin was unemployed. Min Tha describes her husband as extremely shy, with limited English and few job skills. Despite several attempts, his determination to learn English has always met with failure. He has given up on his attempts to learn English and refuses to attend any more classes. He now spends his days indoors watching television with other unemployed Burmese. He walks his son to and from school everyday and fills out the occasional application form or drops off resumes at potential employers. Min Tha is optimistic that something will eventually come along.

Optimism and hope are strengths of Min Tha. Despite the poverty and hardships experienced, she is determined to learn more and make the best of her situation. While she still entertains dreams of returning to university to complete her Economics degree, she acknowledges that the likelihood is slim. She instead tries to concentrate on the positive aspects of her life and involves herself in many Burmese community activities, including the planning and organizing of traditional Burmese dinners, parties, and dances. She also accepts invitations to speak to groups about the human rights abuses in her country and the students struggle to achieve democracy. Min Tha's true hope, however, is through her son. She states, "We try to learn more and achieve more, not for my life, but for my son's future. It's better for my son."

Kya Lwin

Kya Lwin is the eldest of the student participants interviewed for this study. He is 41 years old, married, and the father of two young daughters. He and his wife have been in Canada for one and one-half years. The family lives in a large bright three bedroom suite in a well-kept apartment building in Vancouver's east side neighbourhood. Because the building is part of a cooperative housing program, rent is affordable and the building is well maintained. Knowing the difficulties many of the new Burmese arrivals find themselves in, Kya Lwin feels extremely fortunate to have been accepted into the housing cooperative. It took one year for his application to be reviewed by BC Housing and for a vacancy to become available.

Kya Lwin is the only student interviewed who is enroled full-time in a post-secondary education program. At the time of the interviews, he was nearing the completion of a two-year automotive technician diploma program at a community college. While the hours are long and the course requires much time away from his young family, the sacrifice is seen as a small price to pay for the security of knowing he will soon qualify for well-paying, challenging jobs in Canada. Prior to this, the only work Kya Lwin had been offered was janitorial and occasional translation services for an immigrant service agency in Vancouver.

Kya Lwin felt grateful for the unwavering support received from his Burmese wife since their resettlement. She has agreed to take on a menial low-paying job at a printing company to help support the family while he pursues his studies. A student loan obtained through the community college covered Kya Lwin's tuition and school supplies. Kya Lwin also expressed gratitude for assistance provided by various members of the Burmese student community. A childless couple currently look after his children while he attends classes and his wife works.

Kya Lwin came to Canada, like the others, due to his fear of persecution by the Burmese government. His brother had been arrested and sentenced to ten years with hard labour. Once a senior technician in a government-owned steel factory and the leader of his own trade workers organization, Kya Lwin was forced to flee from his job, his home, and his family. He eventually made his way to one of the student rebel camps he had heard about in Rangoon and joined the ABSDF as a military and martial arts trainer. The next three years were spent in the jungles training students and fighting in the front lines against Burmese soldiers. He talked about the suffering he and the others endured during this time, as well as the sacrifices they were willing to make in order to continue their struggle. Eventually he gave up the armed struggle and sought refuge in Bangkok. He met and married his wife in Thailand during their internment in the student-designated refugee camp.

Kya Lwin remains extremely active in his attempts to raise awareness about the situation in his homeland. He is the current leader of the BDO in Vancouver and spends as much time as he can spare carrying out his duties within the organization. Kya Lwin and his wife provide practical assistance to new Burmese refugees resettling in B.C. They are involved in numerous

letter writing campaigns, lobbying activities, radio interviews, and fund-raising events. He dreams of one day returning to a democratic and peaceful homeland with his young family.

Thin

Thin is the most recent arrival to Canada among those interviewed. He had been in Canada for three months at the time of our first meeting and was the only student unemployed. To his regret, he remained unemployed throughout the research and writing phase of this study.

This 38 year old university educated man talked extensively about his past life in Burma and his involvement in anti-government activities. During the 1970s, he studied at Rangoon University in the faculty of Arts majoring in Burmese literature, language, and history. Due to his participation in a 1974 student uprising known as the U Thant Affair, he regretfully was unable to complete his degree. He was arrested and sent to the infamous Insein Jail for an undetermined number of years. Thin describes experiences of being beaten and tortured, memories, he claims, that he cannot escape. He attributes chronic health problems like arthritis and back pain to the torture experience.

Following his release, Thin worked briefly at a petroleum company before deciding to become a cook. He trained for two years under a famous chef at the Inlay Lake Hotel in Rangoon. The training was part of a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) initiative. He entertained dreams of working abroad as a famous chef. Ironically, the desire to see and experience the world from abroad, learn about different cultures and see new landscapes was always a private dream of his. While working as a cook apprentice, Thin decided to return to university to complete his degree. He believed that his life would hold many more opportunities if he held a university degree. Upon his return to school, however, Thin found himself getting caught up in the student political movement again. It was 1987 and the atmosphere was ripe for a major political uprising. Recognized by activists for his involvement in the U Thant Affair, he was quickly called upon to lead and organize student groups on campus and throughout his township. In 1988, he led numerous hunger strikes, demonstrations, and rallies until the military started shooting and rounding up student leaders. He hid for several months in a monastery in

central Burma until things "cooled down". Thin was asked to join Aung San Suu Kyi's newly formed National League for Democracy Party rather than the underground movement operating from the border. He continued to make speeches encouraging the people to stand up against the government. He endured several more arrests and beatings by SLORC soldiers during 1989 before finally escaping to the border. He never saw his parents and brother and sister again. In 1994 he applied for refugee status with the United Nations in Bangkok and lived out the next year and several months in the student designated safe area.

In December 1995, Thin and his wife were told that they had been accepted for resettlement in Canada. Upon hearing the news, he was overcome with happiness. He believed that he would finally be given the opportunity to complete his degree and to resume his cooking career. His dream of working abroad would soon be realized.

They arrived in Red Deer, Alberta, in the winter of 1996. After a few days they proceeded to Vancouver where the weather was perceived to be warmer, more jobs were thought to be available, and an established ethnic community was known to exist. They stayed with a member of the BDO for one month before moving into a basement suite in East Vancouver. Because they did not arrive directly to British Columbia from Thailand, they did not qualify for many of the provincial immigrant assistance programs that are normally offered to new refugees and immigrants. Had they stayed in Alberta, ESL and job skill training would have been provided. Further, services offered by the Immigrant Services Society are denied newcomers arriving from other provinces.

Hence, the first several months in Canada were met with many unforeseen difficulties. Neither Thin nor his wife speak English well, although they can understood it. Former qualifications and work experience are not recognized in Canada. They are poor and must rely on social assistance in order to survive. So far, life in Canada has not turned out like Thin had envisioned.

Summary

The ease with which Win and Kya Lwin appear to have resettled in Vancouver conceal many things. It does not, for example, reveal anything about the emotional state of these young refugees with respect to how they feel about themselves in their new life in Canada. This research was undertaken to discover as much as was practical about the Burmese refugees' lives and to learn about how they felt about themselves in their new lives. What is it really like to be a political refugee in Canada? A series of in-depth interviews with Win and the other four students enabled me to dig beyond the normal objective indicators of successful resettlement.

CHAPTER FIVE: A VIOLENT CHANGE OF CONTEXT: THE EXPERIENCE OF FORCED MIGRATION

As previously discussed, the refugee's present subjective experience is constructed within a broader context. Although the research questions guiding this study emphasized issues related to resettlement and adaptation in Canada, the students made sense of their experiences within a larger framework which included the events and circumstances surrounding their forced departure from their homeland. When asked to speak of their resettlement experience, most felt it imperative that I listen to and understand the events leading up to their expulsion from Burma including the intense persecution and suffering they have been forced to endure. Students' accounts of their journeys, fears, and what happened to them in their country of origin as well as during exile in Thailand, are important to this study. These experiences, which for many included imprisonment, torture, the disappearance of friends and family members, and the witnessing of atrocities, contribute to the students' meaning of being a refugee and strongly influence their resettlement experience in Canada. They influence the way in which they cope with the many losses associated with their migration and how they adapt to a radically changed social and physical environment. In essence, these past experiences provide a greater understanding of who these individuals are. The first section of the study's findings, therefore, deal with the students' past experiences in Burma and during exile in neighbouring Thailand.

Living with Memories of Political Repression & Violence

All of the students interviewed described past experiences of political repression and organized violence. These experiences left indelible memories. Political repression in this context refers to the feeling of persecution and terror that individuals in a population experience as a result of the policies and violent actions of a group in power. In this case, the group in power is the government in Burma, currently a military dictatorship known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (see Background on Burma in Chapter One). Through the systematic arrest and detention of political opponents, the SLORC is able to impose its totalitarian ideology and effectively control the population. Individuals and their families are frequently arrested,

imprisoned, beaten and sometimes killed for reasons of race, religion or ethnicity, for membership in a particular social or political group, or for voicing particular political opinions (Amnesty International, 1994).

Few of the student participants were willing or able to share with me how it "felt" to live under a violent and politically repressive system, perhaps due to the difficulty of articulating such complex feelings in one's second language. What the students were eager to share with me, however, were detailed descriptions of particular events which demonstrate the persecution and violence experienced. The students recalled such events with the utmost precision and detail. Individual names, places, and times were described at great length. The context was carefully described so that I would appreciate the circumstances they found themselves in. It was as if their stories had been replayed over and over in their minds, each time with increased clarity and detail. The following presents examples of the political repression and violence experienced by the participants of this study. These examples are described in terms of experiences in Burma, as well as escape, camp, and exile experiences. The students' own words illustrate best the antecedents to some of the emotional and adaptational difficulties they experience.

Several of the students described having been imprisoned or experiencing having family members imprisoned, losing friends and family members, observing atrocities, and fear of violence and even death as being reasons for leaving Burma. Win talked about the suffering endured as a result of his status as an ethnic minority in his country:

> As a young Shan in my country you are never safe. The army surrounds a village and demands all the young men. You have to pay a sum of money or you're taken away. Some never return. The conditions are very very bad. You never get paid and you hardly receive any food. They force you to work 16, sometimes 17 hours a day. They never let you rest. If you work too slowly they beat you. You beg for water, they beat you. You fall behind because you too weak to go on, they kill you. They [the army] have no conscience, no heart. We [ethnic minorities] are nothing to them.

These words allude to the collective suffering of ethnic minorities in Burma. As a young Shan man in his country, Win felt constantly in danger. Violent discriminatory experiences against his people produced feelings of demoralization and bitterness. He felt marginalized within his own country.

For members of Burma's ethnic minority groups, persecution and violence has been an ongoing reality since birth. Following the coup, however, the repression and brutality intensified. Human rights abuses against members of Burma's ethnic minorities occurred not only in the context of civil war with armed opposition groups, but also in the context of work and where they lived. The witnessing of young men forcibly being removed from their villages combined with rumors of brutality and torture, created intense feelings of fear and anxiety among the minorities. The fear was so powerful that many were willing to risk their lives in order to avoid being captured. Win described his harrowing escape:

> They stopped our bus and they try to arrest me. I shouted, "Hey, they're trying to arrest us as porters, so we must run. If you don't run you will surely die in the jungles!" Everyone jumped down from the bus and ran for their lives. The military started shooting at the crowd. I somehow escaped the bullets but once I reached this rice field (points to a hand-drawn map) some soldiers appeared from the jungle and started shooting from the front. So I can't go anywhere and at last I have only one choice - to go back across the river towards the township. But, I cannot swim. At this time it is the rainy season and the water is flowing seriously on this river. But I have no choice. I pray to God, 'God bless me and get me across this river. I flowed with the water and at last I grabbed onto a root over my head. I hid in the freezing water for 5 hours. I could hear the soldiers rounding up the people.

Many of the students reported observing atrocities. One student, for example, witnessed a close friend getting shot in the street during the military's retaliation on public demonstrators. The picture of his friend lying on the street in a blood soaked longyi is embedded in his memory forever. Htung described the same incident:

> We near the town hall. The soldiers are coming from all directions. We must not make a sound. My friend crouch under the bamboo house. I can see him and the soldiers looking for us. I close my eyes and pray not to be found. Then I hear the shots. When I open my eyes I see my friend being dragged away. I never seen him again.

Experiences of violence and persecution were also described in the context of Burmese daily life following the mass uprisings and the military's violent reaction to it. Interviews with the students revealed that the Burmese military had developed a protocol to detain suspected political dissidents. The secret intelligence of the military junta had compiled lists of suspects for arrest even before the coup. Some of the students reported having their picture taken by

journalists during the protests and later discovered their photo in the local newspaper under the police wanted category. After the coup, most of the activists were simply abducted at work or school and their whereabouts revealed only months later. Some were never heard from again. Others were denounced by tea shop owners and neighbours. Sometimes, the secret police would go to a suspect's house and conduct a thorough search or simply wait for their return from work. The suspects were generally taken away during the night, blindfolded, and taken away in a van where they were often beaten.

All of the male students described experiences of being beaten either with fists, gun butts, or in one case, a leather belt. The name of a particular prison was mentioned repeatedly during the interviews: Insein Prison, a jail located near the capital, Rangoon. Torture and solitary confinement were mentioned as routine practices within the jail. Thin complained of physical aftereffects of the beatings:

> The Burmese government arrest me and sent me to Insein Jail. They put me in a cell and the Burmese intelligence ask me questions that I could not answer. They beat me over and over but I couldn't answer the questions. I now have no hearing in this ear (points to ear).

Although only a few students volunteered to speak about their personal experiences during imprisonment, stories about the treatment inflicted upon fellow inmates were readily described. The students reported that those caught fighting, stealing, or trying to escape were beaten and placed in solitary confinement. Well known political prisoners were also put into solitary confinement cells during the first weeks or months of their sentence. With only a one foot square window, the cells received little light or fresh air. Kyaw Lwin described how some of the inmates suffered from extreme mental ill-health as a result of their experience:

> I spent 3 months in the jail. During that time a young boy, maybe 14 or 15 (years) was put in the solitary cell. He cried and cried begging to be released. You could hear him screaming everyday. They kept him there for nearly a month. When he was finally released he was sent to a hospital for the insane.

The sound of the young boy's mental anguish has become a disturbing and unforgettable memory for Kya Lwin and has greatly influenced his own experience of imprisonment.

In addition to students' experiences in their country of origin, some students spoke of their experiences in Thailand, their country of first asylum. Because the policy of the Thai government did not make any allowances for Burmese seeking refuge, the students were prosecuted and detained for illegal immigration regardless of their reason for being in the country. Obliged to go underground, the students' illegal situation caused extreme anxiety. Min Tha, one of the few females among the student revolutionaries, spoke of her personal experiences during exile in Thailand. Her story depicts hardship, suffering and danger:

> In 1990, I became pregnant and then I get malaria. I was so sick. After 7 months pregnant the father of child died on the border. I escape to Bangkok where I apply to UNHCR for refugee status. While I wait, my son was born but I arrested in Bangkok for one year. During this time a Thai friend look after my son. After I released from jail, Thai police sent us to the army side. There was no reporting to the UNHCR. Forty-one students sent to the Burmese side to the Burmese authorities. We fear for our lives. They say, "you are free" but we are not. They force us on a boat, a lot of ocean. They took the handcuffs off us so all the students jump into the water because we determined not to go back. The small fishing boat rescued us and took us back to the Thai side. Two students did not make it and arrested in Burma. They surely dead now [participant looks away].

Min Tha's experiences unveil profound human tragedy. The sharing of these painful memories was a testimony to her personal fortitude.

Conditions in the Burmese student-designated safe area (refugee camp) in Thailand were also described in terms of severe hardship and suffering. Treated like prisoners, the students were confined to a small compound far removed from Bangkok and other major centers. The camp was described as extremely overcrowded and dirty. They also faced the stresses of poor food, rationed water, a lack of adequate medicine and medical supplies, and extreme boredom. Htung reported that "conditions in the camp were the very worst."

The most difficult aspect of their camp experience, however, was the lack of security available to them. Thai policy denied UNHCR and other international agencies full access to the camp. The students reported that harassment, extortion, and assaults committed by Thai guards against students commonly occurred. Win related the following story:

> After it get dark, the UNHCR must leave the camp. Many things happen at this time. The Thais, they not like the Burmese. They threaten us, they steal our

> money and food. One commissioner, he take all the money, and they don't give even half of the [international] aid to the students. We end up with nothing. And so much violence. They harass and beat us if we don't do what they want. No one knows what goes on. If we tell about this kind of injustice we only get worse treatment the next night.

Win believed that the ill treatment received in Thailand was a direct result of the Thais' dislike for Burmese people. Fearing harsh reprisals if they complained, the students felt powerless to change the situation.

As discussed in the literature review, stresses of catastrophic proportion, such as those described above, may produce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health illnesses. Because of the violence, persecution, and, in some cases, torture suffered in Burma and Thailand, as well as atrocities observed during their combat and refugee camp experiences, many of the students in this study are at risk of suffering from PTSD. The interviews revealed that several of the participants are experiencing considerable emotional distress. Symptoms listed by the students consistent with PTSD include the inability to concentrate, difficulty falling asleep, outbursts of anger, and painful and intrusive memories of past traumatic events. Win talked about his disturbing dreams and the painful memories of his combat and detention experiences:

> Many people...many students arrive to the third country get mental disease because every time we think seriously about something that happened to us. Sometimes I speak to myself and I don't know what happened to me. People ask, "what did you say?" I don't even know I'm doing it. Every time I have a serious infection in my mind. I try to forget about it - the killings, when I was in IDC (Immigrant Detention Centre), the immigration people, the detainees, when they beat me up in the jail (pause). It's always on my mind. At night I have really bad dreams. But it's ok. I'm ok.

Although Win acknowledged mental health problems among his comrades and personal problems including intrusive memories, an inability to concentrate, and unknowingly talking to himself, he did not perceive himself as currently suffering from a mental health disorder; nor did he feel professional counselling or outside help was needed. Hence, although Win exhibits some symptoms consistent with a PTSD diagnosis, he does not perceive himself as suffering from a psychiatric illness requiring treatment or therapeutic counselling. According to Mollica, Wyshak, & Lavelle (1987), the reluctance to seek assistance from the formal mental health care

system is a typical phenomenon observed in Indochinese refugees who have experienced trauma or torture. While the reasons for this go beyond the scope of this thesis, researchers suggest that for refugees in general, such reluctance is due, in part, to a difference in the way the refugee defines mental health and a difference in how mental health needs are traditionally served within their cultural group (Beiser, 1991; Westermeyer, 1985). For Win and the other four participants, symptoms of PTSD and their reluctance to seek professional counselling does not appear to be impairing their ability to function in daily life. Although many of the students report suffering from occasional feelings of anxiety and sadness, painful recollections of past events, and, as my findings will reveal, never-ending feelings of fear, mistrust, and anger, most appear to be functioning adequately in their work, school, and social environments. One of the criteria of PTSD is impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The students willingness to discuss their past struggles further indicates that they may not meet the criteria for PTSD. Furthermore, the students' acknowledgement of anniversaries such as the August 8, 1988 student uprisings in Burma and their search through newspapers and other information sources for news about their homeland (symbols of past traumatic events) does not appear to be causing undue distress. While the emotional state of the students does not appear to meet the criteria of PTSD put forth by the American Psychiatric Association, they are, nevertheless, experiencing symptoms of stress.

When I asked the students how they coped with the painful memories of their past experiences, they described techniques such as meditating, reading philosophy, attending church and hanging out with friends. They also responded with statements such as, "I block them out" or "I try to forget them". While all of the students denied the need for emotional or mental health support, researchers have found that repression of symptoms may result in the re-emergence of the disorder years later. The condition is then considered chronic and is often more difficult to treat (Carroll & Foy 1992). While supportive counselling from friends, prayer, and meditation is important, it may be insufficient in some cases. Symptoms of PTSD are often reduced by reliving the trauma, understanding it in a political and social context, and integrating it into one's personal history. (Somnier & Genefke, 1986). Therapies such as relaxation and pleasant

imagery training and repeated imaginal presentation of the traumatic event until recollection of the scene no longer evokes high levels of anxiety, has also been shown to be effective in treating post-traumatic stress symptoms (Carroll & Foy, 1992). These require supportive therapeutic environments (Carroll & Foy, 1992). None of the students interviewed reported receiving or desiring that kind of support.

The ability to cope with painful memories of a catastrophic proportion is dependent, to a large extent, on the way in which one perceives such experiences and the meanings attached to them. In an attempt to understand the meaning of the students' past experiences as they have been described to me, I turn my attention now to the following questions. What does the experience of violence and political repression mean to those who risked their lives for the cause of freedom and democracy? What impact have the students' past experiences had on their resettlement and adaptation in Canada?

Never-Ending Fear & Mistrust

As I listened to and internalized the descriptions given of the students' past experiences, it became clear to me that the 1988 uprisings and subsequent coup in Burma represented a major crisis in their lives. The organized violence imposed by the government resulted in a complete and violent interruption of everything that had previously given meaning to their lives. Behaviours, representations, and relationships, which together contribute to a feeling of belonging to a country, a culture, and a social group, were suddenly and violently changed by the imposition of a totalitarian ideology of the government and army.

Following the military coup, everything changed for these individuals. The political and sociocultural context of their lives was in a state of turmoil and confusion. Having participated in anti-government demonstrations, the students feared for their lives and the safety of their families. The sudden disappearance of friends and family members, the systematic arrest of student protesters, and the witnessing of atrocities against unarmed civilians created a climate of unfathomable fear and mistrust. Htung, a former student at the Rangoon Institute of Technology, described the atmosphere in Burma as he remembers it before he left:

> Since the SLORC has come into power no one in my country dares talk about politics. Many people distrust even their closest friends. After awhile with so many people mysteriously disappearing you gradually stop saying anything. Everyone lives in constant fear of accusations by informers - then prison and torture. Fear dictates what you say and do.

Speaking as if he was still in Burma, Htung's words demonstrate the violent change of context experienced in his life following the coup. The life he had always known was suddenly and violently changed. While in Burma, a sense of fear and mistrust controlled him. He trusted no one. The fear of imprisonment directly impacted the behaviour and actions of this young student. Fear penetrated his thoughts and controlled the opinions he opted to voice. It controlled who he associated with and the kinds of activities he participated in. Htung's subjective reality became one of continual suspicion and mistrust, as evidenced in the following statement:

> Nowhere is it safe in Burma anymore...not even in the monasteries. The secret police are everywhere...disguised as monks, shop owners, even revolutionaries. Anyone can be a spy.

Everything in this man's life had been transformed. The places and people which had traditionally offered a sense of peace and security were no longer trusted. Daily interactions with people and the relationships Htung had developed since childhood took on different meanings. Even religious institutions, traditionally revered as symbols of peace and tolerance, were looked upon with grave suspicion.

For many of the students, feelings of paranoia continued throughout their transit and exile experiences. Thai officials were accused of conspiring with the SLORC military, the United Nations was believed to be using military spies as interpreters during the students' refugee determination hearings, and reporters were suspected of printing inaccurate stories and supplying information about the students' activities to the Burmese government. Even long time members of the students' own revolutionary organization were suspected of being spies.

The impact of living in an atmosphere shrouded by fear and suspicion is an important factor with respect to the students' present resettlement and adaptation experience in Canada. Indeed, the study's findings suggest that many of the students continue to experience feelings of fear and distrust despite months and even years of relative safety in Canada. Win, for example,

describes how he instinctively searches for places to hide whenever he hears the sound of sirens in Vancouver:

> I hear the siren and I think, 'where can I go? Where to hide?' My heart pounds you know. (laughing). I know I am safe but I still think like that.

Despite acknowledging his safety and security in his new country, feelings of panic and uncertainty are easily triggered.

A lack of trust for individuals holding positions of power and authority is also evident among the students, a direct result, no doubt, of years of mistrust of the government and military in their homeland. Canadian immigration officers and policy makers, for example, are viewed by the students as individuals with little integrity. According to the participants, heated exchanges between students and officers are common. When students are denied access to particular government sponsored-programs, many perceive the denial as a form of human rights abuse. Conversely, some students refuse services to which they are entitled because they do not trust certain government employees. Min Tha's husband, for example, refused to utilize the orientation services offered by a local resettlement agency or those of an employment counselling program. The lack of trust for figures of authority is seen as an important factor in the students' access to resettlement assistance and other services.

Persistent fear of the military dictatorship in their homeland was identified as a source of considerable stress and anxiety for the students of this study. A genuine fear of government reprisals has prevented some from contacting their families and loved ones in Burma. Many continue to believe that contact, even by phone or letter, would seriously jeopardize their family's safety. One student's fear included the belief that the SLORC had tapped his family's telephone lines. He also refuses to believe that the Burmese postal workers would deliver his mail without reading and reporting its contents to the authorities. As a result, he has had no contact with his family for nearly eight years. He lives with his own sense of loss and the knowledge that his unexplained absence is a source of pain and suffering to his family.

One of the most surprising and perhaps significant effects of the students' prolonged feelings of fear and mistrust is their influence on the development and maintenance of

relationships within the emerging Burmese ethnic community in Vancouver. Prior to the arrival of political refugees in 1993, the Burmese community consisted of a small number of immigrants who had voluntarily settled in Vancouver prior to the 1988 military coup. Although the community was extremely small and geographically dispersed, many of the individuals knew of one another and occasionally were brought together for events such as university and public lectures, religious holidays, and other special events dealing with Burma. Given the existence of this community, albeit extremely modest and uncohesive, and my review of the research indicating the importance of ethnic communities in refugee adaptation during resettlement (Baker, 1993; Gold, 1992), I began my interviews with the expectation that connections between students and established immigrants would provide a valuable source of support and mobility for new arrivals experiencing difficulty. The findings from this study, however, do not support this expectation. Rather, it seems that most Burmese immigrants are looked upon by the students with grave suspicion and, in some instances, contempt. Although occasional contact between immigrants and refugees occurs, contact is limited and selective.

Following further interviews with the student participants and other key informants, certain things began to emerge. It seems that because of differences in background, outlook, and most of all in the migration experience, many recent arrivals feel they have little to gain from links to the immigrant elite. It is perceived by the students that the immigrants know nothing about their pro-democracy struggle or the suffering they have endured for their people. Rather, they are described as the "urban elite" who think of nothing but their own economic gain. The immigrants are accused of avoiding pro-democracy activists for fear of jeopardizing personal investments held with the ruling military in Burma. Many are believed to have relatives in Burma who hold top positions with the ruling military junta and thus may be perceived by the students as being partly responsible for the atrocities occurring in their country. The students also complain that the pre-1988 cohort has created a snobbish and exclusive environment. The material success of this cohort is perhaps seen as beyond the reach of those who have recently arrived, thus fostering feelings of anger and resentment. The few immigrants who have

attempted to welcome and assist new refugees to Vancouver have been shunned by the students or are suspected of having ulterior motives.

This refugee/non-refugee hostility is having a huge impact, not only on the formation of a Burmese ethnic community, but also on the ability of refugee service providers to provide services to new arrivals. One of only two Burmese-speaking resettlement workers in Vancouver, for example, has found herself alienated from the student population due to rumours of her connection with the SLORC military. While the allegations are unfounded, the students have refused to acknowledge assistance from a financially successful Burmese immigrant. In the words of Kya Lwin, "she simply can not be trusted." The service providers themselves acknowledge the students' lack of trust as a serious issue hampering their ability to provide these refugees with appropriate and much needed assistance (Immigrant Services Society, personal communication, April 19, 1996).

In addition to the students' distrust of Burmese immigrants, the interviews revealed a high level of mutual suspicion among the students themselves. A number of new arrivals, for example, are accused by Win of not being "real" refugees:

> Some are not real refugees, are not freedom fighters. They did not sacrifice things, risk their lives in the jungles like we did. Some were living and working in Bangkok before the 1988 uprisings. They weren't even involved. And now they get refugee status. I was denied six times! Six times! Any many of my friends are still living in the jungle or are in Thai jails. It's not fair.

The above excerpt demonstrates the sense of general mistrust some of the students are experiencing and the animosity it has generated. For Win, feelings of inequity and betrayal, associated with the initial denial of his refugee status, are fervent. These feelings are compounded by his suspicion that new Burmese arrivals are settling in Canada as refugees even though they were never involved in the anti-government movement in their country. With so few students successfully migrating to third countries, Win firmly advocates that non-politicized refugees from Burma not be entitled to resettlement in countries of permanent asylum. This conviction may also be influenced by his perception that refugees who leave their homeland because of their desire to start a new life, do not suffer the same hardships and mental anguish as

determined revolutionary activists who flee because of a legitimate fear of persecution for their political and ideological convictions.

Win's comments lend insight into how the students perceive the meaning of a refugee in Thailand and Canada. It seems that to them the meaning of refugee is synonymous with being a revolutionary or political dissident. Being a revolutionary means having sacrificed one's family, job, education, and material possessions for the sole purpose of bringing about political change to one's country. For the Burmese, it means having participated in the 1988 student uprisings, as well as the violent armed struggle against the SLORC government. Burmese refugees in Canada are student revolutionaries who have been forcibly expelled from their homeland because of a legitimate fear of persecution related to their political beliefs and anti-government activities. They have become alienated from their homeland by their insistence on the overriding importance and passionate pursuit of bringing democracy to their country. Individuals who may have left Burma for economic gain or as a reaction to particular events are not considered to be revolutionaries by those interviewed for this study. Instead, these non-politicized refugees are considered opportunists who have taken advantage of historical circumstances and international refugee law. Worse, they are seen as potential members of the ruling military junta. The students interviewed view themselves as refugees because they consciously and purposefully rebelled against their government and risked their lives for the dream of creating a better life for themselves and the people of Burma. From their perspective, other types of refugees are not entitled to resettlement in Canada.

The suspicion, resentment, and cynicism voiced by the students, not surprisingly, has had an impact on the development of relationships within the student refugee community. Because their experiences in Burma and Thailand have taught them to be suspicious of those with power or with different ideological perspectives, and because their revolutionary groups have been suspected of being infiltrated with spies, the students arriving to Vancouver seem to be ceaselessly on the alert for provocateurs among themselves. During the course of this research, splits along ethnic, religious, and political lines have become evident. Burmese refugee enclaves, for instance, now exist in different geographic areas of Vancouver based on ethnic

status and region of origin. Further, while all the students strive for human rights and democracy in their homeland and express the need for unity and solidarity among the Burmese in general, divisiveness based on background factors like ideology and experience of migration exist.

Persisting Anger

In addition to the themes of fear and distrust, discussions concerning the students' past experiences of political repression and violence inevitably conjured up feelings of extreme anger, a powerful and persistent emotion influencing how they perceive themselves as refugees.

The students' anger stems from a profound and personal sense of injustice experienced in their homeland and their country of first asylum. They feel angry over their government's ruinous economic policies, the lack of basic rights accorded their people, and the fear and terror the military have instilled within the Burmese people. The students are incensed at the lack of opportunity for upward social mobility in Burma and the general lack of equality in their country. Htung's words express this hostility and frustration:

> In my country, we have two kinds of people - the military and the worker. My corporation is very important in my country because it supports the government. Many people from the ministry they send to our corporation. Like the president, vice-president, the production manager. They send from the military. They don't allow the rights of the workers. If the soldier he cannot work two days, its ok, no problem. But, for the worker, if he cannot work, it is a big problem. They don't give workers any chances! Only the military can move up in the company! The military take all the power and gives nothing to the people! I don't want to work for these people. I don't want to live like this!

Life in their homeland is seen as a continuous economic struggle with little hope of getting ahead. The fortunate few are those who come from upper class families and have political or military connections.

Resettlement in Canada, a country perceived as offering basic rights and freedoms, has reinforced the students' sense of injustice and inequality experienced in their homeland. As Win explains,

> Canada and Burma, this is opposite. The country of Canada is very peaceful and no civil wars and everyone has their rights. The government takes care of every single person. Even the people who don't have a job, the government take care by

> welfare or something like that. In our country, NOTHING! If we don't have a job we don't eat! The government steals the money from the people! Sometimes, you know, the cold soldiers, they kill the people!

The students feel outraged because of their government's corruption and its lack of ability to take care of its own people. Burma is seen, especially by the younger students, as a country offering little hope or opportunity. The students are angry because the people of Burma appear to be powerless to change the situation. Under the present regime, Burma offers little hope.

While the students' sense of hope and opportunity is further examined in Chapter Seven, it is important to acknowledge here, the role the students' past experience of anger played in the creation of their identity as revolutionaries and in the reestablishment of a sense of hope. It seems that the students have been able to regain some of the hope lost during the 1988 student massacres through their participation in the pro-democracy revolutionary movement. While fear was the main motivating factor in the students' decision to leave their homeland, accompanying anger fuelled their decision to fight back. Ideologically, the students refused to accept the contextual changes violently forced upon them by the totalitarian regime. When peaceful demonstrations failed to achieve their goal of bringing freedom and democracy to Burma, the only perceived alternative was to engage in civil war against their government. It was at this juncture that a new identity, that of a revolutionary, came into being. In Canada, persistent feelings of anger continue to fuel their support of revolutionary type activities.

I would also suggest that the outrage experienced by the students was, and continues to be, an important factor in their will to survive. From the comforts of his new home in Canada, Than describes the suffering experienced in the untamed jungles of Burma and his determination to survive:

> (laughing) So many times we had a soup that was just water and salt and maybe fish paste. That's it. And rice. I got so skinny. Most of the students got malaria and infections because not enough food, not enough medicine. On my mind we wanted democracy! We so angry! We want to fight against the military! It was always on our minds.

Despite the hardships associated with life as a revolutionary, the students' sought strength and solace in their cause. Persistent feelings of anger directed at their prosecutors, along with a vision of freedom and democracy in their beloved country, has given them the strength and

determination to endure and confront whatever challenges they are confronted with. For many, conviction and dedication to the cause has become their life's purpose.

The anger expressed towards their own government is equal in intensity to the anger expressed towards the Royal Thai government. Prior to their resettlement in Canada, the students had sought protection and freedom in neighbouring Thailand. However, the Thai government refused to accept them as political refugees and, instead, arrested and incarcerated them. The students continue to feel outrage as a result of this policy. In the words of Kya Lwin,

> We want the world to know how we are suffering in Burma. Thailand is a democratic country, so why doesn't it let us to express our needs and beliefs? They arrest us. We are not doing anything illegal!

Much of the anger which surfaced during discussions of their past, stems from Thailand's unwillingness to acknowledge the suffering of the Burmese people under a brutal military dictatorship. Participation in anti-SLORC activities in Bangkok is seen as the students' basic right within a democracy. The students perceive themselves as law abiding political activists, desperate to inform the world about what is going on in their country. They feel angry and frustrated because Thailand refuses to grant them the dignity and freedom they believe a democracy should espouse.

Emotions of anger and frustration intensified among the participants during discussions concerning the United Nation's inability to guarantee Burmese students protection in Thailand. Win recounted his humiliation at having been repeatedly rejected as a refugee by UNHCR officials:

> When I arrived to Bangkok and I applied to UNHCR they suspect me because of my English. They said, "even the university student can't speak English as well as you. Why are you a high school student and you speak English very well?" They thought I was military intelligence. I said (angrily), "I am NOT intelligence! I was born in the rebels area and I'm a rebel! I am NOT military intelligence. I am a real rebel and I was an activist in the 1988 uprisings! But, they gave me a rejection six times!

Win recalled the rejection of his refugee application with a sense of disbelief and outrage. The fact that he was born in a rebel-controlled area and participated in the movement to bring democracy to his country entitled him, in his opinion, to refugee status. Perhaps feeling guilty

for having abandoned the armed struggle, which implied a separation from the objective of his struggle, Win desperately sought acknowledgement for the personal sacrifices he had made for his country. The United Nations, with its perceived ability to protect and assist political exiles, represented hope for his future, a future with freedom and liberties far removed from the fear and threats experienced in Burma. The granting of refugee status was, among other things, an acknowledgement of his pain and suffering. The UNHCR's refusal to grant what he perceived to have been justly earned and thus owed him, was a refusal to acknowledge his experiences, including the suffering and sacrifices made. The United Nation's suspicion of his association with the Burmese military was an insult fostering further feelings of resentment.

The students' past experiences of anger as a result of being repeatedly denied formal refugee status is consistent with research findings indicating high rates of psychological distress among those who are uncertain about their refugee status (Silove et al., 1993). However, unlike some refugees, the students' anger does not appear to be a detrimental factor in their ability to survive the hardships of refugee life or to adapt to life in Canada. Further, while the literature identifies feelings of uncertainty as a stressor impacting refugee adaptation, it did not emerge as a theme in this study of political refugees from Burma.

In Canada, despite the security of knowing they are protected as legitimately recognized refugees, feelings of anger remain fervent in each of the students interviewed. The principles and beliefs each has sacrificed so much for continue to remain a dream. By the decision of their own government, the students remain outlawed and persecuted, compelled to abandon what is most loved and cherished and forced to live in and adjust once again to new circumstances.

Summary

As evidenced from the above narratives, the experience of forced migration is extremely complex. For this group of political refugees from Burma, events surrounding their forced expulsion from their homeland and their eventual migration to Canada have resulted in profound changes to the sociocultural context of their lives. The violence and persecution which has accompanied this change of context has resulted in the students' experiences being dominated by

a never-ending sense of fear and mistrust. In Vancouver, such experiences have had a profound impact on the emotional well-being and help-seeking behaviours of new Burmese arrivals. Stress, intrusive memories, and feelings of anxiety are reported. Fear of reprisals by their former government is preventing some students from contacting family and loved ones in Burma. The lack of contact with family members is a source of great suffering for the students in Vancouver.

Persistent feelings of fear and mistrust are also influencing the development and maintenance of relationships within the emerging Burmese ethnic community in Vancouver. The students' mistrust of Burmese immigrants and certain Burmese refugees has resulted in a fragmented and uncohesive Burmese community network in Vancouver. The lack of a supportive ethnic community is believed to be a detrimental factor in the students' adaptation in Canada. Refugee/non-refugee hostility is also seen as hampering the ability of local resettlement agencies to provide Burmese students with appropriate assistance during resettlement.

The change of context forced upon these students by their government has also meant experiences of persistent anger and frustration. The students desperately seek acknowledgement for the sacrifices they have made on behalf of their country. The anger experienced by these pro-democracy activists is seen to be an important factor in their decision to become revolutionaries. As armed revolutionaries, anger helped fuel their conviction and dedication to the cause which, in turn, provided them with the strength and will to survive. As political refugees in Canada, persistent anger is seen as helping provide the students with the strength and determination to face and overcome a new crisis; that is, resettlement and adaptation within a strange new land.

CHAPTER SIX: ADAPTATION WITHIN A STRANGE NEW LAND: THE EXPERIENCE OF RESETTLEMENT

For the students in this study, acceptance as a refugee for permanent resettlement meant the removal from an intolerable and threatening situation and an end to the never-ending suffering and violence. It meant freedom and liberty. Therefore, the students' first experiences upon their arrival in Canada were marked by happiness. But their arrival in a new country also marked the beginning of a new crisis: adaptation within a context that was completely unknown to them. For the first time in their lives, the students found themselves in a world that was physically, socially and culturally different from anything they had ever experienced. Additionally, leaving Burma implied a separation from the objective of their political struggle, as well as from the social, cultural, and family links which constituted the base of their identity. Everything remotely familiar to them was left behind. Accordingly, one of the principal experiences upon arrival in Canada was that of grief and bereavement for what had been lost.

This chapter analyses the students' experiences of loss and the meaning for the students of their personal losses. Within a context of loss, the students' adaptation to resettlement is then examined, including what they perceive to be the most difficult challenges faced since their arrival in Canada.

Loss, Uprootedness, and Identity Confusion

All of the students have left family behind, either in Thai refugee camps or in Burma. They have also been removed from a familiar social milieu within which they were born and raised, and from which they each developed and moulded a sense of personal and ethnic identity, and a sense of competence and self-esteem. Forced resettlement has meant the loss of such identity and competence. Departure from the armed revolution has accentuated their sense of loss; the sense of loss of being an active participant in a context with which one's place and role is given meaning, significance, purpose, and justification. As Win lamented,

> I was a revolutionary. For eight years I give my life for the people. We all did. Now my life is lost. I lost my family, there is still no democracy... everything is lost... (pause) everything (shaking his head).

This young man's sense of loss is so multi-faceted and all-encompassing that he has difficulty articulating its totality. He mourns the loss of the life he had once known in Burma. He grieves for the loss of his family, his culture, his ideological struggle...his identity. In the past, his role as a revolutionary and fighter had given him a sense of purpose. The prodemocracy cause had helped to justify his identity. Even though he had been forcibly separated from family and loved ones during his eight years as a political dissident, his sense of loss had been buffered by the presence of fellow revolutionaries and their united struggle. He had developed a sense of allegiance to the student revolutionary army and the set of sentiments and ideology underlying it. In Canada, removed from this social context, life's meaning and purpose lacks the same direction and intensity. He lacks a sense of identity except as a refugee. The failure to bring freedom and democracy to his homeland - a goal which had given the past eight years a sense of value and purpose - exacerbates his sense of loss. Upon resettlement then, devoid of a sense of identity and desperately missing those left behind, this student appears to be experiencing an overwhelming sense of grief and bereavement over the true extent of the loss his exile and resettlement represents.

The students' resettlement in Canada has also forced them to confront the loss of their culture, habits, values, and traditions. The following excerpt illustrates Thin's experience of loss and how cultural change is fostering a sense of isolation:

> My life is changed. I come here by zero. Negative. I don't even have a passport. It feel very strange. You know...(shaking his head). In Canada, everything different. The people, they all so different. In Asia we live more near each other and make time for the people. We share our days. (pause) Here, everyone stay to themselves. We not know the people. It very different in my country... it hard me for to know to go to talk about a job or how I go to school. We lose many things here in Canada.

The above narrative illustrates how pervasive the experience of loss can be. Thin speaks of loss in terms of the family, the social, and the cultural. He finds himself within a strange new

reality devoid of citizen status, no longer belonging to any group, lacking influence and connections, and language and cultural skills. He feels strangely alone.

The culture shock, which encompasses the students' sense of loss, may be particularly difficult for the Burmese, who did not think about, intend, or prepare for their resettlement in Canada. Rather, as they vehemently reminded me, they left their homeland to become revolutionaries, not to seek asylum as refugees in Thailand or Canada.

There is also the loss in materialistic and opportunistic terms: loss of property; loss of belongings; and, for some, a loss of a potential professional career within their homeland. Min Tha, for example, felt that academically she had achieved a lot in her home country. Although she admits to holding little hope for her country's developmental progress under the current military regime, she believes that personally, she may have had a promising future in business had she remained in Burma. In Canada, forced to work at menial jobs in order to survive, the likelihood of finishing her education is in doubt. The lost dream of becoming a businesswoman is difficult to come to terms with. For the older participants, the loss of personal belongings, including their house and property, is a painful reminder of how they were once relatively well-established and self-sufficient, only to lose it all. Their losses represents a loss of self-pride and a sense of achievement.

Perhaps the most acute and difficult sense of loss has to do with the students' awareness of their uprootedness from a culturally familiar and cohesive social network. Unlike the huge ethnic communities available to Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees in Vancouver, the students in this study are among only a few thousand Burmese refugees dispersed throughout Canada. (Immigrant Services Society, personal communication, April 19, 1996). In November 1993, only seven refugees from Burma lived in the city of Vancouver (Farrow, 1993). Min Tha, one of the few female students, describes the loneliness and disorientation experienced in the absence of a Burmese ethnocultural community during the early part of her resettlement:

> There was only seven of us [Burmese refugees]. I not met the others only before we come. I not know them before. We all very excited at first. But we arrive and not know anyone. Everything so different. Everything very difficult for us. In Burma, we many friends. I go to school and know many people. We arrive to

> Canada, and we afraid to go out. We don't know anything. My husband, we fight a lot. We had no one except ourselves. No friends, no family, where to go?

During her first years in Canada, Min Tha felt a sense of loss due to her separation from family and her uprootedness from a larger community comprised of neighbours, friends and acquaintances who share her ethnic identity. In Burma, as in many Southeast Asian societies, the individual is an integral and inseparable part of a larger network in social, emotional, economic, and cultural terms. In Canada, the absence of a cohesive ethnic community means that there are few people available for social or emotional support with which to buffer the novelty and loss associated with resettlement. The students' departure from a familiar social milieu which has special meaning and significance and where they have acquired a sense of personal competence and self-esteem, generates an acute sense of social dislocation and contributes to feelings of insecurity and loneliness. Loneliness and isolation, in turn, contribute to increased stress and relationship difficulties. In 1993, an absence of Burmese speaking refugees in Vancouver meant it was extremely difficult for Min Tha and her family to have received the kind of support they so desperately needed during the early stages of their resettlement.

Regardless of the year of their arrival and the availability of a relevant support network, the students often experienced a more acute sense of isolation during the initial stages of their resettlement. As they became accustomed to life in Canada, their isolation slowly began to lessen. Kya Lwin describes this feeling as follows:

> Its hard when we first come here. We speak English only little. We not want to go out. But after a while, our English better and we find what a good country Canada is. Everything easier than on the border.

Much of Kya Lwin's sense of isolation was experienced in the context of unfamiliarity. As he felt more familiar with his new surroundings, his confidence increased and his boundaries were extended. It appears then, that the process of familiarity was a necessary step in diminishing his seclusion. English language proficiency was an important factor in fostering such confidence and facilitating integration within Canadian society.

Consistent with Stein's adjustment model (1986), many of the students interviewed experienced feelings of loss and isolation more dramatically during the first year of their

resettlement. However, some have experienced different forms of isolation over the years. Win, for example, has found the process of meeting new friends very difficult despite having been in Canada for an extended time. His lack of friends has contributed to his experience of isolation and loneliness:

> It is very difficult to meet Canadians. I've been here over one and one-half year and I have no Canadian friends. No one. It so hard to meet people. I don't know how to do it. Sometimes (pause) I don't want to go out amongst Canadians. I'm not comfortable. And, the Canadians not interested in us and what we have to say. (pause) I spend much time alone because you know, I has got no family here. It is lonely here sometimes and I am homesick. But, I think about many things and read and go around by myself. Its ok.

Because of contrasts between cultures, values, attitudes, and lifestyle, Win feels there are few opportunities to meet and mix with Canadian-born individuals. Although he desperately wants to make friends outside of the Burmese community, his unfamiliarity with Canada's cultural and social norms makes him feel self conscious. He also believes Canadians are disinterested in establishing friendships with the Burmese which may further contribute to feelings of rejection and insecurity. He seems to prefer the security of being alone. This self-imposed withdrawal and isolation may be generating increased feelings of isolation, loneliness, and marginality to his new social environment.

A perception among some students that their new social environment is threatening is further compounding their experiences of isolation. As described earlier in this thesis, past experiences of repression and violence and the "underground" nature of their lives in Burma and Thailand, has led to never-ending feelings of fear and distrust among the student community in Vancouver. Increasing numbers of Burmese refugees arriving to this city directly from Burma or the rebel-controlled border areas, has meant that the students are increasingly on the alert for potential spies and other opponents. For some, the manifestation of their distrust is deliberate isolation.

Given my conceptualization of the sense of loss experienced by the students in emotional, economic, and interpersonal terms, as well as my attempt at deciphering the meaning for the students of their personal losses, a question arises as to how the students are going about coming

to terms with the losses suffered and how they are making the link from past-orientated grief over the losses and their adaptation to the present. How do the students perceive their adaptation to life in Canada? What do they see as their greatest challenges and what are the meanings of their success or failure in overcoming such challenges?

The Challenges of Adaptation

The findings suggest that, although there are individual differences among the students in terms of how they perceive their adaptation to date, each student characterizes the experience as extremely stressful. Not only does adaptation to resettlement involve the grieving and resolution of losses associated with leaving their homeland, it also requires the mastery of resettlement conditions such as finding suitable employment, learning English, and adjusting to a new culture and new roles.

The difficulties experienced by the students compare with those of most relatively new immigrants and refugees in that they experience culture shock, problems associated with a poor command of English, difficulties finding suitable work, and a perceived loss of status (Aroian, 1990; Beiser, 1991; Lipson, 1992; Nicholson, 1997; Stein, 1986). Of all the challenges discussed, however, the theme of occupational hardship and the accompanying loss of status was the most consistent and evoked the strongest emotional responses. All of the students interviewed, regardless of their current employment status, reported the task of finding a job in order to become economically self-sufficient as the greatest single challenge facing Burmese newcomers in Canada:

> The hardest thing about coming to Canada is finding the job. We cannot find jobs. (Win)

> The first year in Canada was very very difficult. I cried a lot...We could not find jobs. There no jobs for us. I feel useless. I angry and took it out on each other. Now I have job. Things better now. (Min Tha)

> You know in my country I have very good job. I support my family. I come here and I have nothing. I cannot do nothing...nothing [shakes his head]. (Thin)

The occupational difficulties experienced by the Burmese in Canada are a cause for concern in the context of their mental health and overall adjustment. Studies of migration show strong correlations between satisfactory employment following resettlement with emotional well-being (Beiser et al., 1993). Other studies have shown increased mortality rates, through accidental injury, suicide, and violence, and increased psychological symptoms and disorder (Brenner, 1987; Dooley & Catalano, 1984; D'Arcy, 1986). Unemployment has been linked to suicide, self-harm behaviours, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, apathy, lower self-esteem, humiliation and stigmatization, and increased alcohol usage (Linn, Sandifer, & Stein, 1985; Jackson, Stafford, Banks, & Warr, 1983). Indeed, the students in this study consistently and repeatedly identified unemployment and the task of finding a job as the most serious post-migration stressor affecting them since arriving in Canada.

In an attempt to understand the reasons behind the frequency of interview data related to this challenge and the intensity of the associated emotional responses, I explored in depth the students' occupational experiences and what working in Canada means to to them in the context of their overall resettlement experience.

Occupational Hardship

At the time of the interviews, the majority of the students in this study had been or were currently employed as unskilled labourers and/or service providers. Win Tha worked part-time as a hotel chambermaid, Htung was a cook for a Japanese restaurant, and Win drove a fork-lift for a recycling company. Kya Lwin, following a series of part-time jobs doing janitorial work and later translations for a refugee resettlement agency, was enroled full-time in a two year automotive technician program. Thin was unemployed and had remained so since his arrival to Canada nearly eight months previous to the final interview. He was relying on social assistance in order to meet his family's financial needs. All of the students interviewed received compensation at or only slight above minimum wage and most were required to work evenings and weekends.

Although most of the students have post-secondary education or technical/trade experience, the students do not represent professional migrants who have experienced a downward mobility in the Canadian labour force. Rather, they represent university students or skilled tradespeople with varying educational and/or training backgrounds. The occupations described in their homeland include a chef (Thin), a heavy-duty machine operator (Htung), and a senior technician for a government-owned steel factory (Kya Lwin). Thin and Kya Lwin have completed two years of post-secondary education, while Win and Htung have completed one year only. Min Tha was completing the third year of a four-year Economics degree at the time of her forced departure. When asked about their socio-economic status in Burma, all of the students stated that relative to the poverty prevalent in their country, they were considered middle class.

Despite their level of education and work experience, the students felt that upon arrival, they were ill prepared and lacked even the most basic of skills needed to find a job in Canada. Win recalls the difficulties he confronted during the first few months in his new country:

> For a person like me, you know, we don't have any experience about Canadian job market and we don't know what is a resume and also we don't know how to interview to the employer. Also, we don't have any phone skills or even how to use the phone book. Everything is new for us so we need to learn even the very basics.

During the early part of his resettlement experience, the lack of basic information made the simplest of tasks difficult. A lack of understanding about Canadian society and cultural norms, such as styles of social interaction, either made it difficult to look for a job or created confusion during job interviews. Numerous tasks had to be learned and mastered before access to jobs were possible in Canada. This initial period of disorientation and sense of unfamiliarity is referred to by Aroian (1990) as "novelty" and is a common phenomenon experienced by migrants during the initial resettlement period. The demands associated with novelty had not been anticipated by the students prior to arriving in Canada adding to their sense of frustration and disappointment. Min Tha is a case in point:

> I never expected it would be like this. I didn't know how to make an interview...how to talk to people to get a job...where to look. Everything so difficult at first...everything so different. It's hard to me to explain.

The students were surprised at their lack of knowledge about how to go about finding a job in their new country. There was an initial sense of shock at how difficult the simplest of tasks seemed to be. The learning and acquisition of basic Canadian norms, roles, and customs prior to being able to begin working was one of the many unexpected challenges associated with occupational adjustment in Canada.

While most of the students blamed their initial employment difficulties on the novelty of Canadian society and the need to develop basic job search skills, others found their job search hampered by their lack of Canadian work experience. According to Win,

> You know, wherever we go they ask for certification and experience...even the dishwashers - they want to know how much experience you have.

Similarly, Htung offered the following observation:

> But the daily jobs are very difficult for a person like me. They ask for the Canadian college graduation, the university graduation, and certificates and experience...and we have nothing. We come here by zero or negative (sarcastic laughter). We wish to work but [pause] the employer must accept us. We try the best we can.

The students have found that most employers, including many trades and professions, require proof of "Canadian experience" as an entry into the practice. Even finding menial work requiring few skills is considered difficult without previous work experience in Canada. The students feel frustrated because they find themselves in the difficult situation of not having the required experience yet being unable to secure employment where they might acquire it. Experience acquired in their homeland is usually discounted due to the lack of certification. Thin, for example, explained that he was trained to be a chef under an apprenticeship system and thus had not received formal certification in his homeland. The inability to produce documentation to support his experience is perceived as a major deterrent to finding work within the food and service industry.

During their first year in Canada, the students generally felt that their command of English was not adequate to function in a job requiring English. This lack of confidence has persisted for many despite the three to six months of intensive government-sponsored English

language training that most have received. While helpful, the language training available is considered to be too short in duration and fails to place enough emphasis on proficiency in occupationally related technical language. The students also said that they have few opportunities to practice their English outside of the classroom. Those who have moved to British Columbia from other parts of Canada are not entitled to government funded ESL training outside the province of original resettlement. As the following quote from Thin demonstrates, the lack of access to English language training is perceived as an immense and stressful barrier to employment in British Columbia:

> We not able to go to school and we not able to work. And we not able to work because we cannot get the education and language skills. What are we supposed to do!?

Thus, the students are caught in a "double bind." They need to improve their English but government policy is perceived as prohibiting further training. At the same time, they need to work to be able to afford the tuition charged for additional language training.

The students also make reference to the economic reality of Canada. Like Win, some attribute their employment problems simply to the nonavailability of jobs in general:

> I have many friends in the United States and unlike us in Canada, they are all doing well. In the States, they can get a job easily. Not the same Canada...They say there are too many jobs in the United States. They say the jobs are looking for the people and not the people looking for the jobs!

Burmese students' own perceptions of the causes of their unemployment are similar to the causes identified in large scale surveys conducted within various Indochinese refugee communities in Canada (Canadian Task Force, 1988b).

Despite the students' lack of confidence with respect to their language ability, their perceived lack of preparedness, problems involving certification and lack of work experience, only one of the five student participants was unemployed at the time of the recorded interviews. However, the students each cited numerous friends and members of the Burmese refugee community who continue to struggle with unemployment despite months and even years in Canada. Unfortunately, research involving employment rates among Burmese refugees in the general population is not available at the time of this writing.

Because of the number of occupational handicaps the students' perceive themselves as having in Canada, news of employment, even for menial labour, was acknowledged with a sense of disbelief. Win discusses his emotional reaction to the news of his success at finding a job in British Columbia:

> I was very surprised by this job and I want to say thank-you to the employer. I don't expect this position. I went down to the employment centre and I check out with the computer job bank and I got 4 or 5 jobs in the computer. I arrived home and I showed to my sponsor and he said you better apply this job, this job, this job...so, I try to prepare my resume and covering letter. And, I'm ready to send it to them. And I fax it to my employer. And, my employer he got the fax and he didn't make an interview to me. He said, tomorrow you have to come to work. That's it. (laughs) I was so so surprised. I had been trying hard to find a job but I didn't get anything. Then all of a sudden I did. I really didn't expect to get this job...I was so happy.

Win's initial experience was marked by surprise and happiness. His happiness was accompanied by an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude towards his new employer.

Having overcome what they perceive to be the greatest challenge facing Burmese refugees resettling in Canada, I became interested in what finding a job actually means to the students in terms of their overall adaptation to life in Canada.

As I reviewed the data, it became obvious that for those employed, the actual process of finding a job was but one of many issues faced in an attempt to overcome a much greater challenge: that of occupational and economic adaptation. To the participants, having a job did not necessarily mean economic or occupational success. As the interviews progressed, it became clear that the primary issue of concern for those currently employed was not finding a job, but rather finding a suitable job that met with previously held expectations and perceived potential. While finding their first job in Canada has been an unexpected and difficult hurdle to overcome, once a job is secured the issue seems to be not unemployment but underemployment; i.e, working at a level which, given one's background and training, is below what one might have expected. According to the research, underemployment poses similar mental health risks to unemployment (Lin, 1986). The extent of the risk, however, is dependent on what meaning the work has for the individual and therefore cannot be similarly applied to all types and groups of

individuals. For instance, after suffering the stresses of dissident and refugee life, does work still hold a high symbolic value for self-esteem? What meaning do political refugees from Burma have for working in Canada?

Menial Jobs

Questions tapping the students' perceptions of their job reveal that, although they feel very fortunate to have their jobs, they view the actual work as low quality, unstable, and poorly paid. The skills required are believed to be below the level of their perceived potential. This is not to suggest that the students do not derive a significant level of satisfaction from their jobs; rather, personal satisfaction from their work is derived from the income generated rather than satisfaction with a particular occupational identity. As Win responds, "the job?..its ok, I guess. Its fine...Anyway, I can stand by myself. I got a job and I have an income so I can now stand independently." Working, to these particular students, means that they are no longer dependent on others for their economic survival. While they seem somewhat dissatisfied with their actual jobs, earning a living seems to be helping them develop self-confidence. Working gives them a sense of self worth and confidence in their abilities as individuals; they feel able and competent to earn a living. Other than brief stints working illegally in Thailand, most have been dependent on outside assistance since their departure from Burma. Thus, work and the income being received gives the students a sense of independence and a feeling that they are capable of surviving on their own. It also helps to foster respect within their families and community as evidenced by the following statement by Kya Lwin: "Everyone knows ____. He has a very good job working with computers. He makes a lot of money. His family do very well now."

Some of the students brought up the topic of social assistance. Like Min Tha, they express the viewpoint that receiving welfare is degrading and should be avoided if possible: "We don't want the government's help. We don't want to be dependent. We are educated. There is no need."

Going on welfare is perceived by some members of the Burmese community as being dependent on others for survival. It is viewed as failure and is meant for those who lack

education and/or skills. For example, despite the fact that her husband has been laid off from his job as a dishwasher, Min Tha states that going on welfare is not an option for her family: "My husband, he will not go on welfare. He say he go back to Burma than get welfare in Canada." In an attempt to save face amongst the Burmese community, the family refuses to be stigmatized as welfare recipients despite the extra financial demands associated with having a young child at home. Only through Min Tha's part-time and inconsistent work as a chambermaid can the family survive.

The reluctance by some members of the Burmese refugee community to receive public assistance in the form of welfare is interesting given that the students have all received humanitarian assistance from the United Nations and other similar aid organizations during their time spent in rebel camps, refugee camps, and exile in Bangkok. In Canada, most refugees receive assistance in the form of government-sponsored English language education, job search and skill training, orientation, basic income maintenance, health services, and various interpretation and translation services. Entitlement to these services is viewed by the students as a basic human right. This attitude suggests that programs and services aimed specifically at immigrants and refugees are viewed very differently than the provincially funded welfare program. When the students talk about welfare recipients in Canada, there seems to be a general perception among them that such individuals are failures who have, for the most part, succumbed to poverty, government hand-outs, and even drug and alcohol abuse. The students do not want to be placed in a similar socioeconomic or government dependent category.

For those employed, the sense of self worth and confidence associated with working is accompanied with visions of future opportunities. The interviews revealed that many of the students view their current job as the first step towards achieving future goals. While the job itself does little to foster their self-esteem, having a job does much to increase their sense of opportunity. For some, the money earned from their jobs will enable them to return to college or university, which in turn, will lead to significantly improved job opportunities, greater financial security and job satisfaction. The workplace is also viewed as important in terms of developing certain skills that will be useful when they return to Burma.

Besides providing income and security, working in Canada also means that Burmese students in Vancouver have the means to contribute to the democracy movement in their homeland. Despite being geographically removed from the struggle, the income received means they can continue to fulfil what they feel is their personal and political obligation. Sending money to revolutionary groups left behind is a way to feel connected to the pro-democracy cause. Having made the decision to physically leave the revolutionary struggle on the border and resettle in a third country, the students can now, through the income earned by working, continue their overriding commitment of promoting political change and democracy in their homeland. The money they are earning and sending to comrades in Burma and Thailand may also be a way to relieve guilt feelings associated with leaving friends, family, and fellow revolutionaries behind. The following excerpt illustrates Kya Lwin's self-reproachment at having left his comrades behind in Burma's harsh and unforgiving borderline:

> I wanted to stay in Thailand because I can do many things for my country. But they [government in power] do not allow for me to stay in Thailand. They arrest us. So we come to Canada...Most of the students, they live on the borderline. But, where the food? Where the medicine? Where the education? The arms? It is very poor. They have many troubles. It is all jungle. We help the best we can.

Sending money to those who are not as fortunate may be a way for Kya Lwin to relieve his guilt for being allowed better conditions of survival. For the students experiencing severe financial difficulties in Vancouver, the inability to forward money to their revolutionary organization in Burma is as powerful a stressor as their own personal discomfort associated with being unemployed. The students' desire and perhaps "need" to send money to their comrades is consistent with my observations of Burmese students in exile in Thailand. Most of those who had abandoned the armed struggle to seek employment or refugee status in Bangkok were willing to endure considerable hardship in order that they be able to forward money to those committed to the armed conflict.

Accompanied Loss of Status

Despite the satisfaction obtained from being able to earn a living in Canada and to financially support the Burmese pro-democracy "cause", a great deal of disappointment, frustration, and even anger was expressed by the students concerning the occupational and economic reality of their lives. Most had expected to experience a return to, or even improvement in, their socio economic position held in Burma. Prior to their arrival, some believed that their resettlement in Canada would enable them to immediately return to university. Others envisioned earning a lot of money quickly by working for companies that required skilled and hard-working individuals that they perceive themselves to be. Much of the emotional distress and disappointment they are experiencing, therefore, may stem from high and perhaps unrealistic expectations regarding their new lives in Canada , or at least expectations that involve little time and effort to achieve. This, in part, is due to a general perception among the Burmese that they, as former university students and revolutionary leaders, are different from other refugee groups new to Canada. As relatively young educated individuals, they believe themselves to be academically and occupationally better prepared than many of the "regular" refugees coming from Asia. In the words of Sylvia, a key informant and former refugee,

> The students are very different than other refugee groups arriving. I'm involved with the Cambodian community with the work that I do [health worker] and I think that the Cambodians will be on social assistance for a long time. The whole family has been on social assistance for years now...(pause). Some of the Cambodians have been here since '79 and they've been on social assistance the whole time. Their English is very poor. They're all isolated in their own communities. And I know, from being in the camps, that some of the Burmese coming to Canada are like the Cambodians - from the villages and they lack education. For these people, their resettlement will be very difficult and it will be draining on the Canadian government. But for this group [the students], they are very different. Most of them only need a few more years of school. They all studied English as a second language since they were very young when they started school.. It really should be easier for them (personal communication, May 17, 1996).

It appears that the Burmese refugees involved in the student pro-democracy movement are perceived by both the staff at the resettlement agencies and the students themselves as being distinguishable from other refugees arriving from Southeast Asia and rural Burma. The students

have assumed a position of higher social status and, as revolutionaries, consider themselves leaders among their people. Although they acknowledge their lack of preparedness for Canada's labour market, the students still expect to maintain the social status held in Burma and within their revolutionary organizations. At the very least, they expect their occupational adjustment to be easier than it is for minimally educated refugees from rural Cambodia. So far, however, this has not been the case. Because of certain barriers believed to be inherent in Canada's resettlement system, mobility within the Canadian labour market is perceived as being very difficult to achieve. The frustration and anger expressed during the interviews therefore, is related not only to the loss of status the students' occupational experiences represent, but also that attempts to improve their situation are being blocked by factors believed to be beyond their control. In the words of Thin, "I cannot work because I can't go to school. And I can't go to school because they [the Canadian immigration system] won't allow me. They say I must work to support myself....[laughs sarcastically] The system doesn't work right." The students believe that in order to secure work in an occupation that is at least comparable to their occupation in their homeland, Canadian education, skills training, and further English language training is essential. Yet, because the Canadian government is not willing to sponsor them, the necessary education is perceived to be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. Considering the types of jobs they are holding and the hours spent working, the chances of acquiring such skills through night courses or college programs are slim. Without qualifying for retraining or skill upgrading programs, most of those interviewed believe they will be unable to improve their present occupational status and thus will remain in marginal jobs. Kya Lwin, however, is an exception. With the financial support of a full-time working spouse, he has the means to pursue training that will eventually enable him and his family to improve their socioeconomic position within Canada.

In addition to the perception that barriers inherent within the system are preventing occupational success from becoming a reality, another interesting phenomenon is evident here. There is a strong belief that the employment difficulties being experienced are the fault of someone or something else. In his review of the literature, Stein (1986) states that this "blaming

of the system" is a phenomenon frequently observed amongst refugees during resettlement. Beiser et al. (1993) suggest that such a "blame the system" ideology works to protect individuals from the assault to self-esteem that unemployment and underemployment often trigger. Stein (1986) theorizes that this tendency to blame the government for resettlement problems and accompanying lost status is related to the refugees' strong belief that they are owed something by someone. Since their prosecutors are unavailable, the refugees shift their demands to the government and helping agencies. Because the government and its agencies are not able to satisfy all the refugees' demands, the refugees become frustrated, suspicious and bitter. The following comment from a local resettlement worker seems to corroborate this theory:

> They [Burmese students] are very demanding. They're always complaining that they are not receiving enough. They want us to provide everything for them. I think they want to be compensated for their unjust suffering and sacrifices. (Thu Thu, Immigrant Service Society, personal communication, April 19, 1996)

In general, the Burmese students are perceived by local resettlement workers as being very difficult and demanding. Few were reported to have demonstrated initiative in attempting to overcome the barriers they identify. For example, few of the students interviewed practice their English outside of classroom hours, seek volunteer opportunities to gain local work experience, or inquire about the possibility of obtaining government student loans to help finance relevant education and training programs.

While the students interviewed did not complain to me about the resettlement services being received in Canada, a strong and bitter sense of dissatisfaction with Canadian employment and integration policies is clearly evident. As Thin reported,

> If the government allowed me to go to school then after 1 year I got a good job, a got a car, a house - I have everything. My life be very good. But the people from Canada some who are drinking who rely on welfare, they just behind me and maybe they jealous of me. They are behind me. That is the biggest challenge for the politicians. If we get better than the Canadians, because we work hard, they say we are stealing the jobs. They say, "the newcomers, they just come here and now they have a nice house and a car and everything".

Thin believes that the government's lack of financial support, in the form of educational grants and skills training, is a deliberate attempt at keeping the student refugees from becoming

economically successful. In essence, he seems to be accusing his new host government of trying to control and subjugate him and his fellow countrymen. Given the opportunity, he argues, Burmese students could surpass many host Canadians with respect to economic and social status. Within the current context of the high unemployment rate in Canada, Thin believes the Burmese would then be accused of stealing jobs from host Canadians resulting in racial tensions between the two groups. While not substantiated, recent press releases in Vancouver pertaining to negative attitudes of a few host Canadians towards wealthy new immigrants may be influencing his perception. Past experiences with powerful and corrupt governments may also be a factor. Regardless of what the students think about Canadian refugee policy and the factors influencing such perceptions, it is clear that the students perceive themselves as being highly competent individuals with an ability to succeed in their new environment. However, without the removal of key barriers, namely government policies inhibiting further English language training and skills/technical upgrading, the majority of the students believe they are destined to continue to work in menial, low status occupations.

Language - Being Out of Place

Language and communication difficulties, like occupational hardship, also emerged as a category related to the students' adaptation to resettlement. As discussed earlier, the students emphasize English language proficiency as a priority for successful resettlement, partly because English is needed to secure satisfactory jobs. In addition, the students feel that English proficiency is needed to assist them with non-working tasks of daily living and gain acceptance by host Canadians. While each of the students involved in this study has at least a basic understanding of English, their inability to express themselves fully and confidently has caused considerable frustration and distress. With the aid of an interpreter, Thin explains,

> When you don't speak the language, you cannot communicate. You are an outsider. To people who don't know me, I cannot explain who I am. Everything more difficult. Everything I depend on my friend, ___. It is very depressing.

Thin's inability to communicate with members of his new host country has generated feelings of isolation accompanied with increased dependence on others for communication. His increased

sense of dependency affects his self-esteem and has left him feeling demoralized. Unable to communicate in the language of his new host country, he feels misunderstood and alone. He has the sense of being a marginal person in society rather than a fully participating individual. The stress caused by this situation aggravates the traumatization of personal identity he has already undergone.

The lack of language proficiency also creates disadvantages in more concrete ways, as when trying to access much needed information and services. Thin discusses the problem of finding interpreters to accompany him to the doctor for assessment and treatment of an old knee injury:

> Before I go to doctor, I have to arrange interpreter--how I get one. This is big problem for me. I don't want to always ask my friend. He has his own family and job and everything. It is not easy to ask. I miss one appointment already.

Thin's poor English language ability is having a direct impact on his ability to access health care. Not wanting to be a burden, he is sometimes reluctant to ask friends for assistance. This reluctance has resulted in a delay in seeking treatment. The delay is a potential contributor to needless pain and suffering and a source of considerable anxiety for this student.

The greatest source of anxiety related to poor English language skills, however, is its relationship with the students' ability to secure satisfactory employment. Without adequate language skills, the students have discovered that employers are reluctant to hire them other than for low paying menial type jobs. As discussed previously, working is viewed by the students as an important source of self-worth and self-esteem. It is thought to be an integral step towards successful adaptation. When jobs are denied them, or available only within a low status unsatisfactory context, their mental health, and hence, their overall adaptation, is at risk.

Summary

The experience of resettlement in Canada represents a significant loss for young political refugees from Burma. The students grieve for the loss of their families and the lack of a familiar and cohesive social network. Their experience is dominated by isolation and loneliness. No

longer armed revolutionaries, resettlement means the loss of an important sense of identity and purpose in their lives.

In addition to experiences of grief and mourning for what has been lost, the students face multiple resettlement challenges in their attempts to adapt to their new lives overseas. Faced with numerous educational and employment barriers such as the lack of government sponsored English language and job skills training, the students are forced to work in menial, low paying jobs. While the students derive little meaning from their actual jobs, a sense of satisfaction is derived from the income earned and the opportunities it represents. Being able to earn a living provides the students with a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Sending money to comrades in Burma gives the students the sense that they are still contributing to the revolutionary cause in their homeland and relieves guilt feelings associated with having abandoned the armed struggle on the border.

Despite the satisfaction derived from earning a living, a strong sense of disillusionment related to the economic and occupational reality of their lives in Canada is evident in the words of the participants. Unrealistic expectations stemming from the students social position within the Burmese community is an important factor in how they perceive their adaptation to date. Problems associated with a poor command of English is also described by the students as an important adaptational challenge. The students' inability to communicate with host Canadians generates feelings of isolation and dependency. These experiences contribute to an overall sense of marginality.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CLINGING TO THE HOPE OF RETURNING TO THEIR HOMELAND

From the narratives given and the observations made during this research, I am struck by the complexity of the students' circumstances and the degree of hardship and suffering they have endured in the past, and the difficulties encountered in their present attempts to adapt to life in Canada. I am also struck by the personal strength these individuals display and their determination to succeed in a strange new world.

For political refugees from Burma, the ordeal of expatriation and resettlement has meant feelings of never-ending fear and mistrust, persistent anger, loss and uprootedness, occupational hardship, and loss of status. Despite such profound and devastating experiences, many also view their resettlement as one of accomplishment and opportunity. The students have been through the worst and survived. The hardships and sacrifices made on behalf of their country are viewed with a sense of pride and personal achievement. Resettlement to Canada means their future holds some form of hope. They believe they have more opportunity living in Canada than in Burma under a military dictatorship.

The final chapter of this study examines the theme of opportunity as seen by students individually and collectively. What is meant by opportunity and how does it contribute to the meaning of their resettlement experience? How does their sense of opportunity contribute to their ability to cope with both unresolved issues of the past and the multiple demands of the present?

Opportunity

Freedom

The most frequently discussed and perhaps meaningful sense of opportunity seems to be the students' experience of freedom. They perceive Canada to be a society offering equality, liberty, and democracy. This is not surprising given the absolute lack of educational, economic and basic human rights in Burma, the citizens of which have lived for years in fear of arrest, slavery, death, and political persecution by the totalitarian regime. Throughout the interviews,

all five participants spontaneously brought up the experience of freedom and what it affords them. The following narratives are examples of students' experiences:

> Everyday [in Canada] I experience freedom. On my mind always is freedom. I have stayed in many places since leaving Burma but always on my mind is freedom. That is what I wanted...although [in the past] my situation was never freedom. Do you know what I mean? Because in Thailand we were not legal. So I think on every student's mind in Thailand was freedom. Now for the first time in my life I have experienced freedom. (Htung)

> The best thing about my life here is the freedom. I can go where I want. I can do what I want. I feel safe. (Win)

> Canada is freedom and peace. There is laws and we don't worry about arrested. I read and discuss politics, no problem. We can talk freely about the situation in our country. (Kya Lwin)

For the first time in their lives, the students are experiencing a phenomenon most had previously only dreamed about. They feel free in the sense that their lives are no longer in danger, they can walk the streets without fearing detection and arrest, and can participate freely in political activities. They can attend meetings, meet with friends, and go where and when they please. Laws are available and perceived as just. They feel grateful for the safety and security Canada offers them.

Expanded Horizons

In addition to the experience of freedom, there are other more unexpected and paradoxical advantages accompanying their resettlement experience. For instance, while culture shock contributes to feelings of isolation, it also offers stimulation. In Htung's words,

> Everyday I see something or learn something I never see before. Things surprise me, everything so new and different. I see all the different kinds of people. I see the snow and feel the cold...it very interesting.

Resettlement offers the opportunity to live and experience things unavailable in Burma and Thailand. While at times very stressful, the novelty of a new culture and lifestyle piques their curiosity. Culture shock has broken the flow of their Asian way of life.

The students' sense of opportunity is also experienced in the context of learning. Their migration out of Burma has given them the opportunity to learn about the world from a variety of viewpoints and perspectives. Htung expresses this feeling well:

> In my country there is just one side. Because we don't know both sides. Because in my country there is just one TV, controlled by the military. We don't know about the outside world. We cannot compare. The Karen cause, the ethnic minority group, we don't know anything about them. Why are they fighting the military government? We don't learn anything about it in school, or in the news. Everything is controlled. Everybody thinks and knows the same thing. Now we can see from both sides.

In Burma, the students lived in a reality where movements were curtailed and access to information was restricted; they were virtually surrounded by a sea of propaganda fed to them by the state government. Moving from a highly suspicious and tightly controlled society to one that supports and encourages the sharing of ideas and information, has provided the students with a more objective perspective about the situation in their homeland. The students view their resettlement to Canada as an opportunity to learn within a context where a free press, free speech, and access to a wide variety of information are taken for granted. It is an opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding of the world. It is an opportunity to experience new self-growth and expanded horizons.

For students like Kya Lwin, resettlement in Canada is seen as an opportunity to enjoy personal growth through education and training. He believes his increased knowledge will eventually lead to a well-paying and challenging job where he will be respected and trusted by his fellow-workers. He will no longer be trapped by having to accept menial jobs. He will be able to provide a standard of living for his young family that would have been impossible to attain in his homeland. Resettlement is giving him the opportunity to improve his social status and experience luxuries never before deemed possible. Upon his planned return to his homeland, the skills acquired will be of great benefit for him personally as well as for the development of Bumra.

For most of the students, however, access to education and training is limited. The dream of achieving economic or occupational success is perceived by most as being beyond their reach.

For these particular students, opportunities of resettlement are viewed less in terms of personal growth and self-fulfillment within Canada than in terms of general knowledge acquisition with which to rebuild their homeland upon their return. The following statements are examples of how the majority of the students perceive opportunity:

> One thing is better in this country. It's democracy. I'm fighting for democracy. Many things about Canada we can learn. We want to learn from Canada to help rebuild our country. So its a great opportunity. (Htung)

> Everyone loves their country. As a democracy I would want to go back and help rebuild my country. Because living here is very very different than my country. Canadians are used to democracy. We want democracy like here. I want to share what I've experienced here in Canada. The freedom, the peace...with my people still in Burma. I have a long term plan. How can I help my community? (Win)

The students believe that with the skills and knowledge acquired through their resettlement experience, they will be in a better position to help their comrades in Burma and to assist in their country's political and economic development upon returning home. Their resettlement in Canada is providing them with the opportunity to learn about and experience freedoms, Western style business operations, and a democratic political system.

When asked about their future plans in Vancouver, the students distinguish between immediate and long-term planning. Their immediate plans are to achieve an adequate verbal proficiency in English (in order to improve their job prospects) and to continue working hard at their present jobs to accumulate capital with which to improve their material situation. They also seek to continue supporting those left behind on the border. While all of the students hope to further their education through college or university, they acknowledge that given their present situations, the likelihood is slim. Long term plans are simply to return to Burma. In the meantime they plan to continue to acquire information from others in the hope of developing a stock of knowledge about Canada, business opportunities, political systems, economics, and most importantly, the democratic process.

What is particularly interesting and poignant about the students' sense of opportunity, is that none of the students interviewed talked of opportunity in terms of a fulfilling and productive life within Canada. They still think in terms of a return to their homeland as opposed to looking

towards their future in their country of permanent asylum. What has become increasingly clear to me throughout this research project, is that to this particular group of politically motivated refugees, resettlement may not be perceived (or want to be perceived) as resettlement per se. Rather, the experience itself, that is living and learning to adapt in Canada, seems to be viewed as one more challenge, albeit an extremely difficult one, in a long list of challenges to be overcome in their never-ending struggle towards achieving democracy in their homeland. Resettlement in Canada is viewed by these students as a provisional and temporary state, resulting not from a pursuit of economic gain but from an escape from the Burmese nightmare and more importantly it seems, from their attempt at changing it. They are, after all, political refugees.

The plan to return for political reasons appears to be an important determining factor in the adaptation process for many Burmese refugees. The students point out that their problem is not that of adapting to Canadian society, but rather of adapting to their particular situation, which they consider to be temporary. The students are determined to make the most of their situation so that it will benefit their country and its people. Much of this determination stems from their sense of opportunity in Canada and the belief that they will indeed achieve their political objectives and return home. Increased knowledge, the development of new skills, and the freedom to work for the cause are providing the students with the strength to cope with the demands of the immediate present. These characteristics also allow them to rationalize the losses of the past.

Renewing a Sense of Identity

The students' sense of opportunity contributes to their resilience because it provides them with a sense of purpose. In turn, the sense of purpose - working towards achieving democracy and returning home - provides them with a renewed sense of identity and, more importantly, a sense of hope.

The study's findings reveal that the students' conversations with friends and spouses (if present) revolve almost exclusively around what they, as overseas Burmese and former revolutionaries, can do to help bring about democracy in their homeland. When they are not

working they are said to be participating in political meetings or discussing Burmese politics and their eventual return to Burma. The following statements came in response to questions concerning what Burmese students do during their free time in Canada:

> Everyday I think and read about politics. I meet with my friends to discuss the politics in Burma. Because this time is a very difficult for my country because they are holding convention for a new constitution. (Htung)

> We want democracy. We want what Canada has. We are political dissidents. We need to plan and make strategy. How can we bring freedom to our people? This is what we must concentrate on. (Kya Lwin)

Because the students are political refugees, they believe that they have an historic responsibility to collectively continue to work for the cause and compensate for their new found freedom by speaking up for those silenced at home.

The collective engagement in conversation related to their pro-democracy struggle provides these young students with a reason to gather together on a continual basis. As a result, several politically motivated organizations have recently evolved in Vancouver. The largest and most active group is known as the Burma Democratic Organization (BDO). The students' interest in Burmese politics is instrumental in developing and maintaining a certain degree of solidarity within a fearful and somewhat distrustful student community. Their collective dream to bring about political change in their beloved homeland provides an important source of emotional support and helps to renew a sense of identification and purpose during this time of social dislocation. Htung discusses the importance of his involvement in Burmese politics and, in particular, of BDO:

> Interviewer: Can you talk about the importance of the BDO in helping you to adjust to your new life in Canada?

> Htung: Yes, the BDO is very important to us. Because you know, we want democracy. We fight a long time for this reason. I want to continue to build towards democracy in my country.

> Interviewer: How often do you meet and what is done during these meetings?

> Htung: We meet every Sunday. The meeting is for the first hour or two. We talk about the Burmese politics and plan events to raise money to send to the

> border...We have many connections in Toronto, Thunder Bay, Halifax and Australia and United States...SLORC not legitimate government. We try to get international pressure against the government. Last month we organize the Burmese New Year and raise a lot of money. All the Burmese friends come. Canadians too. We eat Burmese food and watch the traditional dance. (shows me photographs of the party)

It seems that the formation of the BDO, and the students' active participation within it, is an attempt on behalf of the students to revive and reconstruct a world where they can re-establish a role again. The political group, with its clear, long term objective, helps the students to re-acquire a sense of purpose. It gives meaning back to their lives. The group, consisting exclusively of Burmese student refugees, also acts as a safe haven from the constant bombardment of new and unfamiliar "ways of doing things" in Canada. It is a base for emotional identification, and a source of energy needed to deal with what is sometimes perceived as a cold and isolating new reality. Traditional cultural events, such as the New Year's Celebration, provide the students with comfort and a sense of pride in their ethnic heritage. They contribute substantially to a sense of a Burmese self-image and a sense of belonging again.

The students' participation as revolutionary activists within the BDO also cushions the loss of social and occupational status. Recognition for achievements in their homeland is accorded within the organization. For example, Kya Lwin, a former prominent leader within the students' revolutionary army has assumed the leadership of the BDO. Others are acknowledged during BDO meetings with comments such as, "This is ___. He very good fighter. Very strong." Or, "___, he is the finance controller for BDO. In Burma he was a very good accountant."

Most importantly, the BDO provides the students with a project, a sense of direction, and a legitimate reason to endure and rationalize the many losses suffered and the hardships they continue to experience as they live out their first few years of resettlement in Canada. The losses and deprivations in the past, as well as the struggles and disappointments of the present, are only tolerable because of their vision of a future in their beloved homeland. Re-affirming their role in the political struggle while clinging to the notion that their resettlement experience in Canada is helping them prepare for their eventual return, reassures them that "all" has not been lost. Their lives still have some meaning. The pain and suffering experienced have not been in vain. After

all, as these students repeatedly reminded me, political refugees from Burma did not leave their homeland to seek a better life in Canada. They left to fight for a better life within Burma, a fight they feel sure they will win. As one student asked, "If the fight is removed, what was it all for?"

Summary

In addition to experiences of loss and occupational hardship, the students view their resettlement with a sense of accomplishment and opportunity. They perceive themselves as survivors. By resettling in Canada, the students experience freedom, democracy, and human rights on a daily basis. Living in Canada is giving them the opportunity to experience personal growth and expanded horizons. While differences in learning opportunities are evident among the students, all view the knowledge they are acquiring by merely living in such a society as being of benefit in Burma's future political and economic development. None of the students interviewed discussed opportunity in terms of a fulfilling and productive life within Canada. This temporary view of resettlement is believed to be an important factor in how they perceive their adaptation in Canada and in their ability to cope with the unanticipated nature of their losses and the challenges of the present. The lack of long term planning for a life in Canada has implications for the approaches and expectations of health and social service professionals trying to assist Burmese refugees in their effort to adapt to a Canadian context.

The students' involvement within refugee political organizations, such as the BDO, is an important source of identity for young revolutionaries, who, as discussed in Chapter Six, are experiencing tremendous loss as a result of their departure from their homeland and their separation from the armed struggle along their country's borders. In a context where fear and mistrust dominate, the BDO is a key source of emotional, ethnic, and practical support for the students in Vancouver. The group's activities also help the students' to re-establish their role as revolutionaries and gives them a renewed sense of purpose. Its goal to bring democracy to Burma remains the students' greatest source of hope. For many, returning home is what planning for the future is all about. By believing that they will achieve their political objectives and return home one day, the students have a legitimate reason to endure and rationalize the sufferings they

are currently going through as they attempt to adapt to their temporary life in Canada. The hardships and deprivations of the past and present are tolerable because, from their perspective, resettlement in Canada will ultimately lead to the fullfilment of their nations' dream.

CHAPTER EIGHT: RESETTLEMENT AS A SIMULTANEOUS EXPERIENCE OF LOSS AND RECONSTRUCTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY AND NURSING

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of resettlement as expressed through interviews with five recent political refugees from Burma. Although there is a body of knowledge addressing refugee adaptation to resettlement, few studies have examined the experiences from a phenomenological perspective or the perspective of a political refugee. No earlier studies examining the experiences of political refugees from Burma were found.

Researching resettlement experiences has provided insight into the challenges and issues faced by political refugees in Canada. This research portrays what it is like to be a political refugee in a context where few members of one's ethnocultural group are present. By rooting refugee experiences within the context of their past and present realities, we gain an overall sense of their vulnerability as well as their strengths.

Participants were recruited through contacts of the Immigrant Services Society and individuals previously known to me within the Burmese community. Utilizing the snowball sampling technique, five students were recruited as participants. Data collection involved a total of eleven in-depth interviews with the participants and three key informant interviews. A series of trigger questions (Appendix C) initiated the in-depth interview process. My personal observation of Burmese refugees' experiences along the Thai-Burmese border and in Bangkok, as well as participant observation within the field of study, helped to confirm the interview findings and provide a broader context for interpretation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to Giorgi's method of analysis (1975). Data were coded according to emerging themes and categories. Contact with many of the participants following the data collection stage allowed for subsequent clarification and validation.

Analysis of the participant observation and interview data suggests a resettlement experience which can be conceived as a simultaneous experience of loss and reconstruction requiring monumental coping strategies. On the one hand, the students look back and see

violence, fear, uprooting, and loss. They grieve for the multitudinal losses that their resettlement represents. At the same time, they look forward and see new horizons, freedoms, and a challenge to survive, adapt, and grow. They view their resettlement with a sense of accomplishment and opportunity despite the losses they have suffered and the hardships they are enduring as they attempt to adapt to a foreign culture and environment. While a complex set of social, cultural, economic, and political determinants have shaped the course of their resettlement experience, the importance of their past experiences in Burma and Thailand, as well as personal characteristics which help define them as political refugees, cannot be over-stated.

The findings reveal a profound sense of personal loss and bereavement in interpersonal, economic, emotional, and human terms. The students' sense of personal loss as a result of their forced departure from Burma and Thailand, is so acutely felt by some that, discussing their past and their obligation to return to rebuild their homeland has indeed become a primary mental preoccupation consuming a lot of time and energy. Methods for bringing about political change in Burma seems to be what planning for the future is all about. All discussions about their future involve returning to their homeland. An important research question arises as to the mental health impact of this pre-occupation with Burmese politics should their dream of achieving democracy in Burma and returning home not be realized? Is the students' sense of opportunity actually preventing some from achieving successful adaptation in Canada? Or, is the students' pre-occupation with returning home something to cling onto during very desperate times? Is it a temporary, but necessary adaptive strategy that provides the students with the strength to resolve their grief over the losses they have experienced and to overcome the many economic, cultural, and occupational challenges they now face in Canada?

While definitive answers to such questions require further research, the findings from this study seem to suggest that the students' pre-occupation with the prodemocracy "cause" is, indeed, a type of coping mechanism. Although some students reported suffering from symptoms consistent with what the American Psychiatric Association (1994) refers to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), none of the students interviewed perceive themselves as suffering from a mental health disorder. Further, most of the students interviewed appear to be functioning

relatively well socially and occupationally despite the profound losses and past traumas they have experienced. The lack of social impairment or antisocial behaviour is similar to Mghir's findings (Mghir et al., 1995). My hypothesis is that the support received from members of the Burma Democratic Organization (BDO) and the students' mental pre-occupation with achieving democracy in Burma and returning home, may be serving as a buffer against maladaptive behaviour that is often associated with psychological distress and/or PTSD in refugees.

The students' mental preoccupation with politics and returning home must also occur simultaneously with an attempt to adapt to Canadian society. Consistent with previous research (Rumbaut, 1989; 1991), traumatic premigration experiences are important factors in the students' adaptation process in Canada. Many are experiencing persistent feelings of fear, anger, and mistrust as a direct result of past experiences involving violence and human rights abuses. Many appear to be suffering considerable emotional distress. A persistent sense of fear and mistrust is a contributing factor in the students' experiences of isolation and loneliness.

In addition to their impact on the students' personal adjustment process in Canada, never-ending feelings of fear and mistrust are also having an impact on the development and maintenance of relationships within the Burmese ethnic community in Vancouver. While shared experiences and ideology encourage solidarity among the political refugees, the students' lack of trust appears to be discouraging large-scale community formation. Feelings of resentment and hostility are found to exist between Burmese immigrants and refugees, and, to a lesser extent, between the refugees themselves. Because members of one's own ethno-cultural group are important sources of social, economic, and cultural support (Baker, 1993), refugee/non-refugee hostility is believed to be a further challenge to the students' adjustment and mental well-being during resettlement.

Difficulties experienced by students in their every day lives in Canada are embedded within the context of past experiences and the loss of identity and family support. The difficulties associated with finding satisfactory employment contributes to their sense of loss and marginality. Many of the students feel isolated and disillusioned with the reality of their new lives in Canada. While past experiences and high, perhaps unrealistic expectations are factors

behind the students' sense of marginality, government policies restricting access to additional English-language and job skills training are also identified as important factors. The probability of assuming the kinds of jobs and/or careers they had initially envisioned is perceived by most as being remote. There is a sense of powerlessness in dealing with the Canadian educational and occupational system.

Despite the emotional and adaptational difficulties associated with traumatic past experiences, the life stress these Burmese students have experienced have made them into survivors. The challenges of the past have evoked displays of great personal fortitude. They are proud of the sacrifices they have made on behalf of their country. Resettlement is viewed with a sense of accomplishment, new growth, and opportunity to these political refugees from Burma. It is an opportunity to learn about the world, develop new skills and gain knowledge that will be helpful upon their return to their homeland. The opportunity to participate freely in activities related to their goal of bringing about freedom and democracy to their homeland has provided many with a renewed sense of identity and purpose. Resettlement has given them a sense of hope. While their unfinished fight renders the past more meaningful than the present, they are, nevertheless, determined to overcome whatever challenges lay ahead. As one courageous student states,

> If you go ahead there is a thick wall, but if you go back you will get bullet...When I left Burma, it was a thick wall in the pitch dark and no other way to going back to. I fight it back the difficult situation. Whether you like it or not you got no choice for now. You have to answer "fight back" or "give up". Each answer have some sacrifice. This is the real world, 90% is end with tragedy. If you give up that 90% is for you. If you fight back, the rest 10% winning is waiting for you. (Win)

Implications for Public Health Policy

This study provides insight into the reality of life as a political refugee during resettlement including the difficulties and opportunities encountered while attempting to adapt to Canadian society. This insight is an important contribution for a number of reasons. First, this research joins only a few others to fill the need for more phenomenological health related

research with refugees in Canada. Second, it is one of only a handful which focuses specifically on the experiences of political refugees and, specifically, the experiences of refugees from a politically and economically isolated country such as Burma. From a preventive and community health perspective, the findings raise a number of social, cultural, and policy issues that community health nurses and other health care and social service providers will need to deal with increasingly as more and more political refugees seek asylum within Canada.

The findings and conclusions of this study have several pragmatic and policy implications. The following list of recommendations addresses government policies at an international and national level from the perspective of primary and secondary prevention. Many should take place in community settings and involve programs and policy changes which must begin well before the refugees arrive in Canada.

International Level

1. The prevention of political refugees' mental health problems as a result of political violence and persecution requires political action from many levels. There is a need for increasing awareness among the international community, donor countries, and the Royal Thai government about the need to recognize those fleeing from Burma as "refugees" under the Geneva convention. This study and the students' own political awareness campaigns are contributions to this end. Working towards some sort of political solution that would allow for safe voluntary repatriation to Burma is also recommended.

2. Twenty-four hour supervision by UN security in the student designated "safe area" in Thailand would help ensure a safer environment for the students awaiting resettlement to country's of permanent asylum. The development of a system of mental health care in the camp and along the Thai-Burma border may also help those suffering from emotional difficulties before they develop into serious mental health disorders. Reducing the time refugees spend in crowded, isolated and restricted camps would also serve to decrease the risk of emotional and adaptational difficulties.

3. Educating refugees about Canadian culture, the psychosocial dynamics of being a refugee, and the expected course of "culture shock" is recommended prior to resettlement. Offering job search skills training and establishing minimal English language requirements for those of working age would also be beneficial.

National Level

1. The difficulties experienced by the students during their resettlement in Canada substantiates the need for both federal and provincial governments to change their policies regarding access to education and skills training programs. There needs to be improved access to English language courses and education programs including the provision of scholarships and loans to those wishing to finish their university or technical education. Similarly, programs offering familiar vocational training, on-the-job training, or useful work co-operative placements with pay within a few weeks of arrival would help skilled refugees gain Canadian work experience and utilize their existing expertise while acquiring new ones. Another alternative is for governments to fund and set up employment referral and counselling services within voluntary agencies and social service type organizations within the Burmese community. This would assist refugees in overcoming the barriers to employment and occupational mobility, and help to build on the community's own resourcefulness.

2. The difficulties experienced by the students as a result of an absent Burmese ethnic community substantiates the need for federal and provincial governments to change policies regarding the resettlement of newcomers to areas where members of his or her own ethnic community have previously settled. Recognizing that the presence of family affects individual well-being warrants a re-examination of Canada's family reunification policy.

3. In order to prevent mental health and social problems, ways must be found to develop and improve the natural social support systems at the family, kin, friendship and ethnic community levels (Chan, 1987). Methods for this preventive work include supporting and facilitating the formal organization of local self-help refugee groups as well as the development of various associations for special interest groups (e.g, Buddhist associations, former military

groups such as the BDO). The meetings foster communication, recreation, social support, and a sense of identity. Assisting political refugees to establish their own means of communication via newsletters and name-and-address lists would also foster linkages within the community. By supporting initiatives at the community level, the objective of increasing community morale and cohesion and reducing self-withdrawal and isolation in times of crises such as unemployment, may be achieved. As more and more Burmese arrive in Canada, continued attempts should be made to keep the Burmese students in touch with one another, with the resettlement organizations which serve them, and with the Burmese community at large in order to foster a sense of ethnic and personal identification and to provide them with a link to Canadian society.

Implications for Nursing

Nurses have a legitimate role in attempting to help eradicate political violence as a public health problem, as well as caring for those who have suffered under it. Federal and provincial nursing associations along with physicians, social workers, resettlement workers and other community organizations concerned about the adaptation and well-being of refugees, need to lobby at the international level, as well as the provincial and federal governments for programs and policy changes as described above.

Nursing Practice

1. The knowledge that the Burmese refugees' perceptions of their resettlement experiences are located within a broader context of meanings associated with their identity as revolutionaries, gives a nurse guidance in assessing the larger context of both the cultural group and refugee type, and what the meanings are for the specific individual. Nurses dealing with political refugees should elicit their clients' immigration history, length of time in the country, circumstances of flight and first asylum, and who and what was lost. This information is critical for understanding the political refugees' adjustment to resettlement and problems experienced. Care should be planned within the context of the broader meanings.

2. Nurses can provide a key role in identifying potential survivors of torture and referring them for appropriate treatment. It is important to assess for specific symptoms of PTSD and other mental health disorders, and the need for professional counselling. Some nurses may avoid the issue of violence and torture simply because they are reluctant to ask victims about their experiences for fear of upsetting them. Others treat such issues with disbelief. Nurses need to take an honest inventory of their belief systems involving human rights abuses, and violence-induced psychological trauma. As Lipson (1993) suggests, caregivers' unconscious reluctance to recognize the possibility of horrible trauma can be a factor in the misdiagnosis or failure to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. It is equally important, however, that nurses be sensitive to differences in how individuals from different cultures respond to uprootedness and loss, as well as the refugee response. Although symptoms of PTSD may sometimes appear, the refugees themselves may not necessarily recognize or define their problems as a mental health disorder requiring therapeutic counselling or treatment. Nurses must be aware of symptoms suggestive of psychiatric illness while simultaneously remaining sensitive to the appropriateness of placing the mental well-being of refugees within traditional western medical models which may not fit the refugees' perceptions.

3. The current shift to a community emphasis within the province's health care system means that community health nurses will increasingly become the point of entry into the system. Rather than waiting for the refugees to overcome the barriers to successful adaptation, community health nurses need to initiate contact with groups, like the Burmese, by expanding their boundaries and becoming more visible in the refugees' informal settings. Nurses need to fight against the tendency towards professional distancing by leaving their offices and clinics and spending time with refugees in their own environments. Acting as a guest lecturer in English-language training classes, participating in training sessions for refugee interpreters, and ensuring new arrivals are contacted by community health nurses through home-visits, school, and/or work-site visits are, but, a few examples. Informal contact through political organizations and important cultural events would help enhance the nurse's understanding of the refugees' cultural and political background. It is also important that program planning targeted towards assisting

refugees during resettlement involve the refugees themselves. Leaders and professionals among the refugees may discern issues that nurses do not apppreciate. Their active participation and collaboration should be started as early in the planning stage as possible. This will help establish trust and mutual respect.

4. In addressing such issues as unemployment and underemployment, loss and isolation, and vulnerability to emotional and social problems, it is important that nurses examine the root cause and devise actions aimed at facilitating change at the national and international level. These changes take time, commitment, and patience. In the meantime, it is important that nurses help empower communities to create social support networks for newcomers and to develop programs aimed at assisting refugees gain meaningful employment. Nurses need to join forces with other concerned health and social service professionals and refugee leaders to advocate for funding of projects and community development initiatives with existing organisations like the Immigrant Service Society and the student initiated Burmese Democratic Organization.

5. Nurses need to be kept up-to-date on services available to refugees. Nursing administration could play a role in the dissemination of information and the promotion of health among refugees. Nurses themselves could do much to inform government agencies, resettlement staff, social services, physicians, and others of their potential role in the health promotion of refugees.

Nursing Education

1. Because many of the defining characteristics of the resettlement experience for political refugees are embedded in the political domain, knowledge of the political factors influencing their behaviour and experiences is essential. In order for nurses to effectively advocate for political refugees and other groups, education about public policy, political processes, and lobbying is required.

2. In order that nursing move beyond that of providing technically based services, concepts such as loss, uprootedness, powerlessness, acculturation, and refugee adaptation need to

be included in nursing curricula. Ongoing staff development programs involving these concepts is also recommended.

Nursing Research

1. In addition to those identified in this study, there is a need for a more in-depth examination of the factors which seem to affect political refugees' resettlement and adaptation experience. Documentation of contextual factors such as family and community structure, religious/ethnic/political background, and Canadian society's receptiveness to political refugees is also recommended.

2. The small number of people in this study necessitates further research on other minority groups and political refugees in order to determine whether the findings are generalizable. In addition, the participants did not include refugees suffering from acute psychiatric and mental health problems related to traumatic premigration experiences and/or their inability to come to terms with the loss of or separation from loved ones, socio-economic losses, or lost opportunities. It is expected that a larger study would enable the inclusion of people who had a greater incidence of maladjustment and serious mental health problems. Studies involving those at greatest risk within the Burmese refugee community would be useful in the planning and delivery of appropriate health care and services.

3. The participants varied in their ability to speak English due, in part, to differences in proficiency prior to arrival and varying lengths of time in Canada. Repeating this study with a Burmese speaking researcher may be useful. More research is needed to determine the role of acculturation in accounting for the students' differences in their sense of opportunity, loss and isolation, and economic and occupational hardship.

In summary, findings from this phenomenological study reveal the kinds of difficulties and opportunities Burmese political refugees experience while attempting to adapt to resettlement in Vancouver. Insight has been gained into the meaning of resettlement from the perspective of a political refugee. An increased understanding into the challenges of settlement where there are few members of one's own ethnocultural group was also achieved. Although

providing a beginning, further study into the political refugees' perception of their resettlement and adaptation is needed in order to prevent needless suffering and to plan more effective, relevant care. To paraphrase Dr. Morton Beiser, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto and author of the Canadian Task Force Report (1988a) entitled After the Door Has Been Opened, it is imperative that newcomers be assured a welcome which, with the support of their families and communities, encourages their dreams and grants them the same hope of realization as Canadians would wish for themselves (cited in Adelman, 1991, p. 441).

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

My name is Colleen Jeffery. I am a community health nurse and a student in the graduate program in Community Health at the University of Northern British Columbia. In 1990/91, I worked as the Program Coordinator for a Burmese Refugee Assistance Program located on the Thai-Burma border. This program was sponsored by the International Rescue Committee, a non-profit humanitarian organization committed to assisting refugees in need of assistance. During my work with refugees and displaced persons from Burma, I became increasingly aware of the complex and vast number of issues affecting the health and well-being of individuals forced to flee their country to seek safety and security.

As a result of that experience and my current work as a public health nurse who is in frequent contact with refugees and immigrants, I am aware of the many problems refugees resettling in Canada encounter and the affect such problems may have on one's health and emotional well-being. I am also aware that certain groups of refugees may have specific issues and needs requiring particular care and attention by health care and social service professionals, refugee assistance workers, and those involved in program and policy development. Hence, I am conducting a study looking at how a particular group of refugees - former students from Burma - are adapting to their new life in Canada. I would, therefore, like to invite you to participate in my study. I have asked individuals within the Burmese community, to help me find former students who would be interested in participating. Your participation would involve about 2 meetings, approximately 1 hour in length with myself and a translator (if necessary), at a place and time that is good for you. I will ask you questions about your life as a refugee in Canada and your experiences accessing needed health and social services in Vancouver. Meetings will be tape-recorded with your permission and only myself, the translator (if necessary), and 2 professors overseeing my study will have access to the tapes. Your name will never be mentioned on tape or on written material--your identity will be protected.

YOU ARE UNDER NO OBLIGATION TO PARTICIPATE IN MY STUDY. REFUSAL TO PARTICIPATE WILL IN NO WAY JEOPARDIZE THE HELP YOU RECEIVE FROM ANY REFUGEE AGENCIES OR HEALTH RELATED ORGANIZATIONS. FURTHERMORE, SHOULD YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY, YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE STUDY AT ANY TIME. YOU ALSO HAVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS AND MAY REQUEST TO HAVE TAPES ERASED SHOULD YOU FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE PROVIDED.

If you wish more information about this study, I will be more than happy to meet with you (with a translator present, if necessary), to answer any of your questions. Please feel free to call me at 924-0488. Should you agree to participate in my study, your signature on a form will be needed, allowing me permission to interview you. Thank you for considering to participate in my study.

Sincerely,

Colleen Jeffery, RN BSN
Master of Science Candidate
in Community Health, UNBC
Telephone: 924-0488

Thesis Supervisor:
Dr. David Fish, Dean
Health & Human Sciences, UNBC
Telephone: 1-800-667-8622

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

BURMESE REFUGEES IN VANCOUVER: PERSONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR RESETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE

I understand that this research involves an exploration of Burmese refugees' experiences of resettlement in Vancouver, British Columbia. I understand that should I agree to be in this study, that I will be asked questions concerning problems affecting my health and well-being that I have faced since arriving to Canada. In addition, I am aware that I will be asked about how I cope with such problems and about my experiences accessing health care and social services resources in the community. I understand that there will be 1 or 2 meetings, each approximately one hour long, at a place and time that is good for me to talk to the researcher, Colleen Jeffery, about my experiences. I agree to have a Burmese translator present should a translator be needed and to have the meetings audio taped.

I AM AWARE THAT I DO NOT HAVE TO BE IN THIS STUDY. SHOULD I DECIDE TO BE IN THE STUDY, I HAVE THE RIGHT TO LEAVE THE STUDY AND TO HAVE TAPES ERASED AT ANY TIME. I AM AWARE THAT LEAVING THE STUDY WILL IN NO WAY JEOPARDIZE ANY HELP I AM CURRENTLY RECEIVING FROM ANY AGENCIES OR SOCIAL SERVICES, OR CAUSE FURTHER PROBLEMS IN GETTING HEALTH CARE.

I am aware that I can ask the researcher any questions that I have regarding the study. I am aware that my name will not be on any tapes or written material; my identity will be protected. I understand that only the researcher, 2 professors, and the translator (if needed) will have access to what I have said at the meetings. I understand, however, that this study will be published as the researcher's thesis and that papers may be written or presented regarding the study's findings.

My signature below shows that I have agreed to be in the study and that I have received a copy of this consent and the study's information letter.

Name _____ Signature _____

Date _____ Witness _____

Colleen Jeffery RN BSN
Master of Science Candidate
Community Health
Telephone: 924-0488

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Dr. David Fish, Dean
Health & Human Sciences
Telephone: 1-800-667-8622

APPENDIX C

The following open-ended interview questions/probes were utilized as a guide during the initial data collection phase of this study. (not necessarily asked in the order presented). As the data collection and analysis phase of this study progressed, questions tapping into the subjective meaning of their work and opportunity were used.

Sociodemocgrapphic information (necessary in order to gain a sense of who the refugees are). No statistical inferences were drawn from them.

- Age
- sex
- education
- occupation
- employment status
- marital status
- living arrangements
- family income
- length of time in Canada
- port of arrival
- religion

1. Tell me about your life in Burma and the circumstances from which you left Burma.

2. What has life been like for you since migrating from Burma?
   - What were your first impressions when you arrived to Canada?
   - What do you do in your spare time, as an occupation, recreation, etc.?
   - How do you meet Canadians?
   - How is life different than the one you left behind in Burma?

3. What does the word "refugee" mean to you? Do you identify yourself as a "refugee", "democracy activist", "student", "immigrant"...?

4. Is your new life in Canada what you had expected it would be prior to your arrival? If so, how is it similar? How is it different?

6. Tell me about some of the greatest problems/challenges you have faced since coming to Canada? What are your major concerns at this time?

7. How do you deal with these problems (probe re: coping strategies). Where do you and other Burmese refugees go for help?

8. What is your concept of health and mental health? What services (health/social/immigrant specific) have you used most frequently since coming to Canada? Are they helpful? What barriers do you or other members of the Burmese community face in accessing health and social service/voluntary agencies?

9. In your opinion, how can the needs of Burmese refugees, especially those who are young and educated such as yourself, be better met?

10. What are your expectations with respect to the future?