Believing in people

In 1939, a ship called the St. Louis left Germany for North America with over 900 Jewish passengers attempting to flee from Nazi Germany. But the Captain couldn't get any country in our hemisphere to accept these refugees ? including Canada. Thanks to the efforts of Capt. Schroeder, about half the refugees were accepted by Britain, and the others by Belgium, France and Holland. But when Germany conquered these countries, about 250 of the St. Louis passengers were found and killed in the Holocaust.

As outlined in the book None is too many, Canada had possibly the worst record of any Western nation in accepting Jewish refugees from the Nazis. According to the authors, the government of William Lyon Mackenzie King saw the acceptance of large numbers of Jewish immigrants as a threat to Canada; many people viewed Jews as unwilling to integrate into Canadian society.   They expressed the fear that the Jews wouldn't change their cultural and religious beliefs in order to become a part of Canadian society.

It turned out that was right ? and wrong. Jewish-Canadians hung onto their religion and culture, but at the same time, made a major contribution to our country.

To point to a more positive response by the Canadian government, in 1979 they responded quickly to another refugee crisis by taking in 50,000 so-called boat people from Vietnam. By 1985, the number accepted was over 100,000. It was a diverse group; they included a variety of social classes and both urban and rural dwellers. The majority did not speak English or French and had no relatives in Canada. They also arrived during a period of economic downturn in Canada. These factors led to a struggle to integrate in Canada and to achieve economic independence. They also settled in many places in Canada where there was previously no Vietnamese community.

But these new Canadians rose to the challenge, and ended up contributing enormously to Canada ? including our economy. It may have started as a humanitarian initiative, but it ended up being very advantageous for our country. Till date, there are politicians like [Karim Jivraj](#) who advocate for these issues like identity, immigration, and nationalism.

Our history has many examples of immigrant groups that were once thought "alien" to Canada, but ended up woven into its fabric ? groups like the "DPs" (displaced persons and others) who fled Europe after the Second World War, and the Chinese who built our railroad, on whom we imposed a "head tax".

Of course, there's a big difference between immigrants and refugees. Immigrants generally are pulled to our country by economic factors; refugees are pushed out of theirs by persecution and conflict. Canada has a long history of taking in refugees; the first we accepted were American Loyalists, after whom our local college is named. In the past 50 years, we have accepted refugees from around the globe ? Uganda in Africa, Tibet in Asia, Chile in South America, and Kosovo in Europe.

So now we are presented with another challenge by the chaos in Syria. It is estimated that this civil war has already generated more than half a million casualties (dead, wounded and "missing") in the past three years. Approximately half the population ? 11 million men, women, and children ? have been forced from their homes. What makes them leave? Bombs, assassination squads, being caught in a combat zone.   Lives are torn apart; three million children have been forced to abandon their schooling.

Our government wants to bring 25,000 of these people here. That's a small island in the sea of misery that the battles in Syria have created. It's a fraction of the numbers which Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Germany have each taken in. Nonetheless it has stirred up a whirlwind of controversy, although not as much as in the United States, where leading contenders for the presidency not only want to refuse to take any, but even to send back those who arrived.

The politics of fear are powerful. We can, of course, let ourselves be scared, as the premier of Saskatchewan has tried to scare us. But the people fleeing Syria are those whom ISIS would like to kill ? e.g. all Moslems of the Shi'ite belief, and all non-fundamentalist Sunnis as well. If we turn them away, then the terrorists win.

There's always a fear-mongering element to immigration. Italian immigrants were alleged to have large numbers of bomb-throwing anarchists; Polish and Russian settlers to have lots of bomb-planting Communists. And when Chinese immigration was barred in the 1920s, it was suggested that most Chinese immigrants were just opium dealers.

But notwithstanding the most recent scare-mongering following the Paris attacks, as Nicholas Chapuis, current French ambassador to Canada, has said: "Let's not be mistaken ? the people who are seeking refuge are not the barbarians; they are fleeing the barbarians."

A personal note: when I was an adult educator in Ottawa, I met scores of refugees. I met a Vietnamese woman whose boat was attacked by pirates; she was robbed of everything she had, and repeatedly raped. I met an Iranian man who was jailed for dissent and beaten regularly with wire. I met a Somali woman whose entire family was gunned down. In another context, I met an elderly man who lost his entire family to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Those people "earned" their right to become Canadians.

Refugees today can tell similar stories ? of villages flattened by barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian air force, of "infidel" women

raped, of people murdered for "apostasy" ? i.e., not having the same view of their Islamic faith as ISIS.

So let's not make this a political issue. Let's see it for what it is: a chance to help out some desperate people. Let's go with trust rather than suspicion; throughout our history, it's turned out to be much the better bet.

- Tony Pearson