

# Working on the (Overground) Railroad

By Robert Neuhauser



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Non-professionally, he has been actively involved in race relations activity and refugee advocacy as well as the being the Quaker representative in the religious delegation to monitor the Paris Peace talks concerning ending the Vietnam War.

He is the father of four professional children, a boater, skier and designer and construction manager of his own home.

He has been a Torch member since 1966. Six of his papers have been published by *The Torch* magazine, and he has twice delivered the club's Paxton talk.

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Early in Ronald Reagan's administration, at a State Department conference convened in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with the military leaders of the Central American countries, a "no-nonsense military solution" to the political unrest in Central America was established. Refugees by the thousands, fearful for their lives, began to infiltrate through Mexico and our southern border, seeking refuge.

Refugees have long been welcomed into our country if their lives were in danger. However, in this instance, President Reagan's ambassadors were apparently instructed to withhold certification that any threats to civilian lives had been made by the governments in these countries; accordingly, entry into the United States was refused. Some skeptical activists who doubted these assertions tried to find those who were deported. Most deportees had disappeared or had been killed shortly after arrival "home."

Travel through Mexico was perilous, as their different garb set them apart. They were routinely taken advantage of or robbed. If they were accosted at the border, they were stripped of all valuables and sent back. It is unknown how

many did not survive the trip. One young man said he and a friend were riding north on a freight train and were apprehended by armed guards. They shot his companion, made him dig a grave, and then departed. He caught the next freight train and continued north.

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With a humanitarian crisis in the making, the religious communities in North America swung into action. A Quaker woman, Nancy Pocock,<sup>1</sup> persuaded Canadian immigration authorities to allow Central American refugees, shepherded by religious groups, entrance into Canada.

A Mennonite intentional community in Illinois, Reba Place Fellowship, sent two Spanish speaking members to the Texas border to assist those living in tents in the detention camps. Having been apprehended at the border, and their request for refugee status having been denied, these men and women were detained in tents under the blistering south Texas sun while waiting for their appeal hearings—probably with the anticipation that discomfort would persuade them to ask to be sent home. Waiting time for hearings was a year or more.

Jubilee Partners, another religious community (one still working with refugees today), established a refugee center on a vacant dairy farm in Comer, Georgia. It became a major part central distribution point of what was dubbed the Overground Railroad.

It operated something like this. The Friesens, a couple in Texas, interviewed detainees to see who would be amenable to settling in Canada. Ad hoc groups throughout the U.S. formed the Overground Railroad “stations” that would post bonds for the refugees, bonds refundable to the station when the refugee entered Canada or appeared for their appeal hearing a year or more later. (One such station was the Lancaster Interreligious Network for Central American Refugee Action [LINCARA], in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.) The folks in Comer periodically sent an old yellow school bus to Texas to bring bonded-out refugees to the distribution point at Comer. The Canadian Consul in Atlanta interviewed them, and if Canada approved, they were certified for entry into Canada as “landed immigrants.” All but *two* of the more than 1200 interviewed there were accepted. The Overground Railroad network then transported them to “stations” for their care until all of the paper work from Canada came through. The stations transported them to the Canadian Border. In due time, the bond money was returned and was then available to bail out another refugee.

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My involvement started when our Quaker Peace Committee asked me to be their representative on the LINCARA board. Shortly after, the chairperson resigned, and I was asked to take the chair position.

One of the first priorities was funding. Our Friends Meeting agreed to help fund LINCARA, and our treasurer volunteered to be LINCARA treasurer—all we needed now were contributors. The best way to attract contributions, we decided, was to let people hear the refugees’ stories. Board members volunteered to take refugees and a translator to different churches where they could tell of the death threats, their abandoned families, and their hazard-filled trip to the border.

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The first refugee I talked to was Jose from El Salvador, a school teacher. He had been in the Cathedral in San Salvador and witnessed the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero<sup>2</sup> by the military. He also saw the army sharpshooters on the balconies surrounding the Church

Plaza. As an eye witness, he was pursued into the church, where he escaped via a basement window and fled for his life, leaving behind a wife and three children. While in Lancaster, he arranged for his wife to sell their house and come to the U.S. via Mexico. She and the children arrived in Philadelphia via air and asked for asylum. Since she “turned herself in,” the family was allowed into the U.S. pending a future asylum hearing. A board member picked them up, reuniting the family before they entered Canada.

The LINCARA board was a working board. Each member had a task, such as housing, transportation, food, child care, health care, counseling or clothing. Each also had the responsibility of getting funds or volunteers through their own church denomination. We hired Spanish speaking workers who worked for a pittance to communicate with the refugees, take care of all of the paper work such as posting bonds, interviewing them for their stories, and telling them what the future held for them. Nearly 150 refugees went through our “station,” including two babies that were born here. We “lost” two people, one a fellow who always managed to get drunk because when sober he grieved for his family. He disappeared when he went to D.C. to “visit” his brother. We lost his bond money, but didn’t want to foist him onto Canada.

When Canadian paperwork came through for the refugees in our care, we’d borrow a van from a church, a supporter, or from the Mennonite Central committee,

which supported us grandly. A volunteer would take the two-day round trip to Lackawanna, just below the crossing into Canada. An activist convent of nuns had dedicated their old dormitory to refugees, where they waited until the nuns contacted Canadian officials and escorted them across the border to be admitted and handed off to one of the very responsible Canadian refugee committees. As Landed Immigrants, Canada provided them with superb social services.

Periodically, a van was dispatched on the long two-day trip to Jubilee Partners in Georgia to pick up a load of refugees who had been vetted by the Canadian Consul.

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Why did these refugees flee? Reading the interviews in LINCARA files is heart breaking.

A man from Guatemala had come home from an agricultural conference and found his entire village wiped out, including his entire family. He caught a bus out of town, which was stopped by an armed group. Everyone but the driver, he himself, and a boy were taken out and shot, and the bus was sent on its way. He headed North!

Another fellow was drafted into the El Salvador army in the “six by six draft”. A six by six truck drove through the town, grabbed every male above a given size, and inducted them into the army. At the end of training, a pair of El Salvador army men and two

“North American” soldiers brought a couple of captured rebels before the group and called the recruits up one by one to show them how to interrogate prisoners by bending their fingers back and breaking them, cutting off ears to make them talk, and other atrocities. Then the officials summoned the least enthusiastic “interrogators” and ordered them to slit the throats of the captives. The draftee left town and headed North, very fearful that we not publicize this information, which might cause his family to be wiped out if his story became public.<sup>3</sup>

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Elvia was a different case. A mother of six, her husband apparently was a part of the “Black Hands,” the government agents who picked out and “disappeared” suspected “rebels.” His body was found along the road outside of town, his head on the other side of the road. Elvia was advised to get out of town. She took the two little boys, leaving the three older children as well as an infant girl with her father, and was sent by

plane to Los Angeles. She was told to get off the plane in the U.S. and if the people went one way, she should go the other way. It worked, and she took her children to her brother’s home in Los Angeles. He, however, was on the other side of the political spectrum; he took in the children, and threw her out of the house. Somehow, she heard about LINCARA’s program and came by bus to Lancaster. She was eventually reunited with her infant child, but had no papers or Canadian entry permit. We opted to take her to Buffalo and have her cross the border and ask for asylum. Fortunately, a former couple from the Lancaster Friends Meeting living in Canada near the border agreed to be her sponsors. A doctor examined her when she arrived and found she had cervical cancer and was a couple of months pregnant. She delivered a two-pound baby girl. Both survived.

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My individual task, in addition to being chairperson, was to raise money and publicize LINCARA’s work. Given the pulpit on a Sunday morning, I started off singing, “Follow the Drinking Gourd” (the Big Dipper), the slave’s musical road map for the nighttime slave treks on the Underground Railroad going north in the 1800s. I gave the congregation a sketch of what the refugees faced and the perils of their journeys, as well as the future that awaited them in Canada *if* we could get the funds to bond them out of detention.

Raising bond money, which soon escalated to \$1000 or more

per person, was a challenge. I asked to talk to the financial board of several area churches, requesting loans of any unused special funds they might have that we guaranteed to return. We did sometimes lose bond money, but many sympathetic friends loaned us bonding money with no guarantee of it being returned. One refugee woman who wanted to visit her sister in Boston and then disappeared was our biggest loss. We think the INS evaluated her pretty thoroughly.

A crisis was thrust upon us when a refugee from El Salvador waiting to enter Canada came to our board meeting and asked us to help him go back to rescue his family. One of his sons, having been caught up in the “6x6 draft,” had deserted from the military because of what they had to do to their own citizens. A family in the nearby village had been in a similar situation, and the whole family was discovered dead outside of town. I consulted our Mexican Pastor/coordinator about the possibilities of spiriting them out of their country. He contacted, through his circle of friends, a professional “coyote” group, who agreed to get them to Mexico City for several thousand dollars.

LINCARA, we quickly realized, should not be burdened with this illegal plan, so a letter and phone calls went out to some freewheeling people who valued human lives more than certain laws, and the money was raised outside of LINCARA and dispatched.

The plan then became more complicated—would they pick up Elvia’s youngest while coming

through Guatemala and have the mother of the family care for her en route?—but that was only the first complication in a series that included a shakedown for a few hundred more dollars from the coyotes, the daughter of one of our board members in Mexico happening to be in Tucson at the right time, my being in an airplane club and being able to manage a rendezvous with a Mennonite business pilot, and one of the boys hooking up with a local girl who introduced him to drugs.

## A refugee from El Salvador asked us to help him go back to rescue his family.

After more developments than I have space to tell, I volunteered to take a van stuffed with five family members (as well as a full load of the possessions they picked up at the neighboring “thrift store”) to Canada. Since the father was entitled to go into Canada as a refugee, I decided to drive them across the border, drop them off at the Customs and Immigration office, and then deliver them to a refugee care group who were prepared to care for them. I was summoned into the immigration office and grilled about my lapse: they were supposed to cross the

border on their own. After assuring them that I was a member of a religious group that was caring for refugees who were flowing through our community, I was finally sent on my way.

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Sometimes refugees took matters into their own hands. Edgar, who had left his pregnant wife and a young daughter in El Salvador, was staying in a board member’s home along with a refugee woman whose husband had been on the other side of the violent clashes (she had headed North when her husband was found dead outside of town and her home machine gunned the next day). Edgar became very agitated, wound up in the hospital with a diagnosis of tension-strain, and elected to go to Canada as a “Border Presentation.” We took him to northern Vermont, and he crossed the border to Montreal, where he was taken under the wing of a local young man whose parents were supporters of LINCARA. Edgar immediately got two jobs; when he had enough money, he hired “coyotes” to bring his wife and two daughters to the U.S.

Soon I got a call in broken Spanish from Los Angeles telling me that Edgar’s family was in Los Angeles and that I had to send several hundred extra dollars or they would take the family back to Mexico. By now an old hand at this, I told them that I would turn them into the authorities if they tried, and we would not give them more money. A day or two later I got a call saying the family was safe. We arranged their air

fare to Philadelphia and made an appointment with Immigration for them to turn themselves in as refugees. We brought them to Lancaster, where we planned a welcoming party. Edgar's wife was a basket case! Deciphering her allusions, we gathered her trip through Central America had been an agony of privation, sickness, rape, and fear. My wife and the mother of Edgar's mentor in Montreal volunteered to take them to northern Vermont, along with two other refugees who showed up on our doorstep.

They stayed overnight in a motel. When they approached the border, they discovered that all of the papers the refugees possessed were missing. Back they went to ransack the motel's dumpster and then to the restaurant where they had breakfast, to be greeted by a waitress waving the package of papers! Then, against our instructions, they drove across the border to Canada and introduced the passengers as "border presentations".

Edgar was there to greet his family, and "there was not a dry eye in the entire office" until the refugee interviewer told them that Canada was shutting down the borders to new refugees because their system was clogged.

Something must have been protecting them all. The women loaded everyone up and went back to the US, a highly illegal maneuver. According to the law, the drivers would have been arrested for bringing illegal aliens into the US, the children would have been

put in foster care, and the mother put into prison. My wife went to the U.S. immigration desk, told the woman agent the whole story, and naively asked the woman if she could do anything about it.

The agent thought for a minute and said, "Let me make some calls, they owe me one." After more than two hours of anxious waiting, she came back saying, "Don't ask me how I did it, but they're *all* in, and I'm going with you to make sure they don't change their minds." The family was reunited and off to freedom in Montreal they went. Apparently, U.S. immigration also forgave the trespasses.

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With the passing of time, circumstances in U.S. and in Central America changed, and the Overground Railroad shut down. We disbanded LINCARA and deposited all of its files in the Lancaster Theological Seminary library, in tribute to the professors who had pointed out the plight of these refugees' conditions in their country of origin and had helped organize our community's response to the crisis. With a new refugee crisis appearing in the headlines, this story from more than thirty years ago may be helpful in thinking about the complex human realities that do not always make the headlines.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Pocock was awarded the Lester Pearson Award of her government for her action in getting the government policy established and helping to create a civilian cadre to assist them when they arrived.

<sup>2</sup> Assassinated March 24, 1980, San Salvador, El Salvador.

<sup>3</sup> I traveled to Washington but found no senators or representatives willing to look further into the allegations ("Central America Wars"). A letter to the Ambassador to find which American troops were in this area at the dates we provided, elicited the lie that we had no U.S. military persons in the country. (I have since talked to some marines who were "sheep dipped," i.e., given different identity papers and sent into the area to "train the troops.") We couldn't even get any of the local news people to investigate the story, including PBS or a Philadelphia news station.

#### WORKS CONSULTED AND FURTHER READING

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