

THE WOUND OF THE BORDER

25 years with the refugees



Jesuit Refugee Service

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This is how JRS workers described the situation in the Thai-Cambodia border refugee camps during the 1980s.

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation with a mission to accompany, serve and plead the cause of refugees and forcibly displaced people. Set up by the Society of Jesus in 1980 and now at work in over 50 countries, the priority of JRS is to accompany refugees whose needs are more urgent or forgotten.

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This group of refugees first inspired Fr Arrupe to establish JRS.*
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ADVOCATING ON BEHALF OF REFUGEES IN ZAMBIA

Raúl González SJ

Raúl González worked in Zambia between 2000 and 2002 as Advocacy Officer, after being part-time coordinator for JRS Latin America. In 2002 he worked in the International Office. Refugees from Central and Eastern Africa made their way to Southern Africa with the ultimate goal South Africa. Many got stuck in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and in South Africa. Xenophobic sentiments have emerged at a time when most of Africa is democratizing. The result has been the adoption of anti-refugee policies and practices by governments. It is in this context that JRS started projects for refugees living in urban areas in Zambia and South Africa in 1997.

When I joined the team of JRS Zambia in January 2000, I carried with me what I had known about the JRS in Latin America. Two years as regional coordinator there made me learn how advocacy work should be part of the accompaniment and service, right from the grass roots. The peculiarity of JRS Latin America as far back as the 80's was that, even in countries with a poor rule of law and immersed in conflicts that generated refugees, the teams always planned their advocacy work trying to influence the legislation and local policies, not limiting themselves to particular cases or situations. They did so participating in the local policies on displacement, directly or campaigning with other local church or human rights organisations and universities.

I arrived in Zambia asking myself whether it would be possible to do advocacy work on the general conditions which affect refugees, in an African context and in Zambia itself. As happens in Latin America, the possibility of accompanying refugees depends on the authorization of the host country. And contrary to Latin America, much of the staff of JRS is expatriate, which complicates things if we talk about participating in local policy and about a sensitive issue. My questions did not find easy answers.

Much of the advocacy work of JRS Zambia at the beginning of 2000 was linked to the limitation of refugees' rights. The most poignant problem was the detention of refugees who were living in urban contexts. The situation became more serious when government policies started to consider refugees as rejected and dangerous people.

Before 2000, JRS Zambia had developed advocacy work denouncing, at times with other agencies, the 'official version' on the treatment of refugees. Formation of the Zambian population had taken place in the areas affected by influxes of refugees, as well as involving the local church in aid to refugees.

Our strategy was presented to government officials, UNHCR and other agencies, in a meeting where we were invited to discuss the rights of refugees. We presented ourselves as an international organisation, and also as a work of a Province of the Society of Jesus, present in Zambia and Malawi for a long time. We were there to support the efforts of the local church, not to do a different work. Our objective was to have a refugee law which would facilitate integration of refugees in the long term.

The response of the churches and local organisations was excellent. A programme together with the diocese of Lusaka turned out to reduce significantly the detention time of refugees who were held for immigration reasons. Both the Catholic Secretariat and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace participated in lobbying initiatives to change the negative impact of refugee policies. The Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection published our proposals and supported our plans. The Catholic radio of Lusaka, Yatsani radio, broadcasted programmes on refugees. The local church also paved the way to its broad network of contacts with other churches. We met with the Christian Council and the Evangelical Fellowship, and a team of pastors started raising awareness among the Christian population.

With Catholic Relief Services, we organised workshops on refugee issues for Zambian people in several towns and villages with large influx of refugees, principally those close to the borders. These workshops were organised in the parishes and many people attended: government officials, local chiefs, leaders of local organisations, Catholics and people from other confessions. We offered our knowledge about refugees, their rights, their resources, and we dialogued with the Zambian communities about their vast experience in welcoming refugees. So the answer to my question was clear. It is possible to develop a grass roots advocacy work in countries with large influxes of refugees, even if they are very poor. My contribution had been to offer the strategic vision of JRS Latin America on advocacy.

Many things helped develop this work. Despite the changing of personnel, there was no discontinuity in the job. I was replaced by Michael Gallagher SJ, a person with much more experience than I, who continued and ex-

panded with great quality the initiatives already put in place. This continuity is decisive so that a long term work such as advocacy is really fruitful. Our work just reinforced the efforts already in place to build a more humane country. The local church, civil society and the Jesuit province have promoted justice and peace initiatives for a long time, so we only included the refugee issue in their agenda. A decisive element was the inclusion of Zambian staff to the advocacy work. People like Nshimbi Kabamba, Lillian Lupiya or Ruth Nambeya learned quickly and developed many delicate initiatives in a better way than the expatriates. They facilitated relationships and communication problems with the local authorities. Today, the policy officer in Zambia is a Zambian expert on refugees.

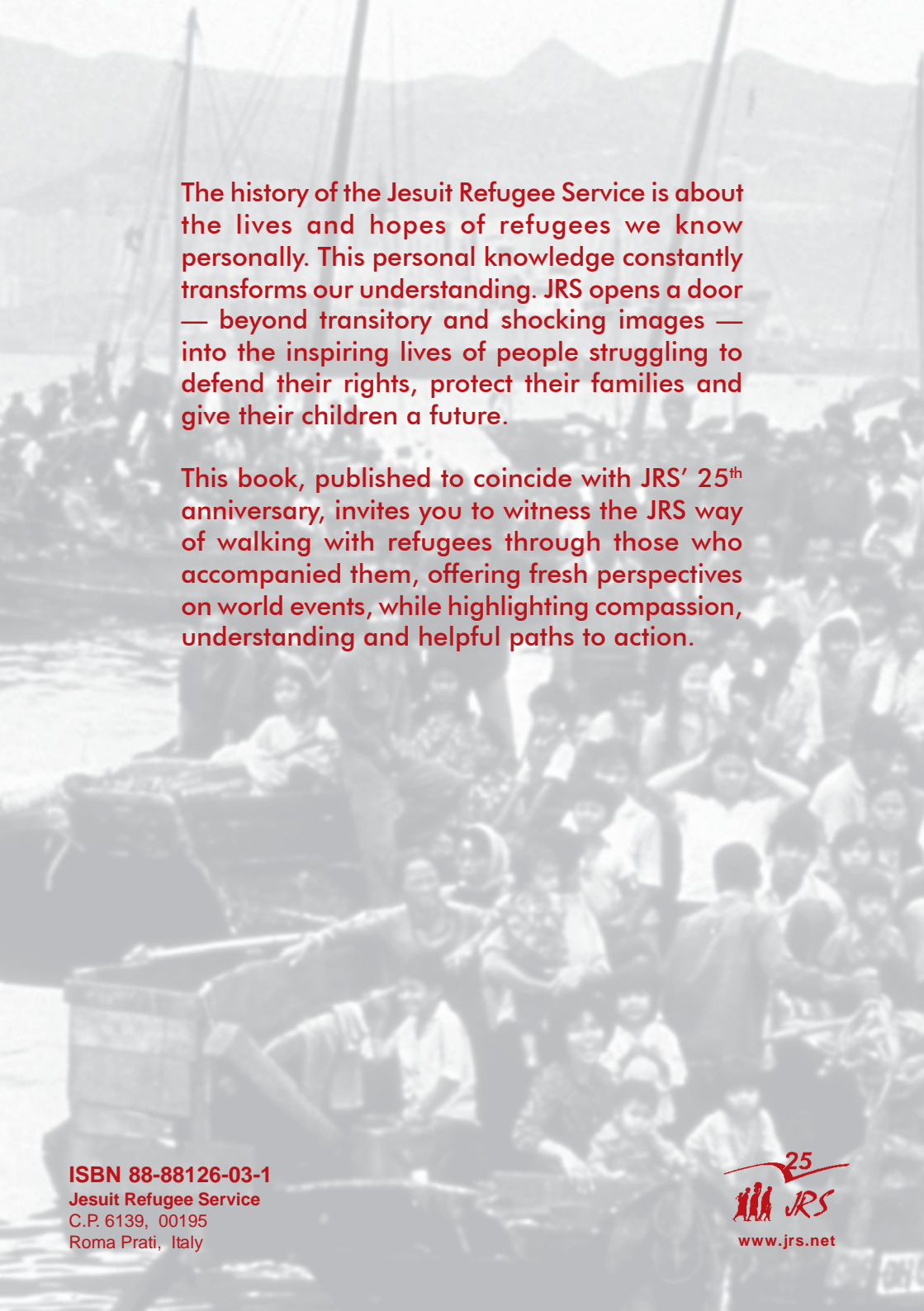
When I finished my mission in Zambia in mid 2002, I was called to set up a global advocacy strategic plan in the international office. I could witness that besides Latin America and Zambia, strong local advocacy work was also being done by JRS in other countries.

My memories go to cases in which we succeeded and others in which we failed. Together with the feelings every refugee leaves in the heart, I deeply thank the Zambians committed to faith and justice who accompanied and supported us in many ways. And of course, the strong conviction about local policy work as being crucial to the mission, complementary to the international efforts and as a way to serve refugees.

Internally displaced in southern Sudan

Don Doll SJ/JRS





The history of the Jesuit Refugee Service is about the lives and hopes of refugees we know personally. This personal knowledge constantly transforms our understanding. JRS opens a door — beyond transitory and shocking images — into the inspiring lives of people struggling to defend their rights, protect their families and give their children a future.

This book, published to coincide with JRS' 25th anniversary, invites you to witness the JRS way of walking with refugees through those who accompanied them, offering fresh perspectives on world events, while highlighting compassion, understanding and helpful paths to action.

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