

The Power of a Refugee Camp: A view on a Czech “Refugee Reality”

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Is it possible to grasp the situation of refugees in a Czech refugee camp with the help of theoretical concepts that have been developed in research among refugees from Burundi living in Tanzania? It seems unlikely – what can a Czech “residential center” have in common with a refugee camp in the African country? One of the aims of this article is to demonstrate that although conditions of refugees in Africa are in many aspects different from the situation of refugees coming to a Central European country such as the Czech Republic, some mechanisms of managing “the refugee problem” are identical – in so called Third world countries as well as in Europe. American anthropologist Liisa Malkki explores these mechanisms drawing on her long-term fieldwork among refugees fleeing genocide in Burundi and Rwanda. She describes processes of depoliticization and subsequent dehumanization of refugees that occur in refugee-camp environments. They are supported by portraying refugees in media without political and historical contexts of their escape and by presenting forced migration as an exclusively humanitarian and apolitical issue. Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher, discusses similar problems as Malkki though on a more general level. He introduces a concept of a *bare life* – life separated from the context of civic rights and reduced to a vulnerable and easily manageable entity. In my view, this concept can be used to help grasp the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in today’s European societies.

In this text, I argue that placing a particular situation of Czech asylum seekers living in a refugee camp into the above outlined theoretical framework can bring a new and interesting perspective on a Czech “refugee reality.” First, I will briefly introduce the work of Malkki and Agamben. In their texts, among others, they deal with the following questions: How the media constructs our perception and notion of refugees? How are refugees approached by state and international institutions which have a mandate to manage the “refugee problem”? And what is the impact of these constructions on actual lives of forced migrants? Inspired by their arguments and drawing on my own fieldwork in one of the Czech refugee camps, I will attempt to critically explore ways of managing forced migration in the Czech Republic in the second part of this text.

From refugees as a specific social category to refugees as passive recipients of care

Liisa Malkki states that the term “refugee,” as it is currently used, was constituted in the last half-century. The Second World War forced millions of people to leave their homes and subsequent developments showed that managing such a high number of refugees is impossible without the use of standardized administrative procedures of

international legal force. The establishment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees has embodied these procedures. For example, the first general definition of a refugee was formulated in the 1951 Convention.¹ Thus, refugees began to exist as a specific social category and at the same time a problem of global significance (Malkki, 1995).

After-war refugee camps that were established to accommodate a high number of refugees started to function as standard devices for managing a mass displacement. First, they operated as military institutions but later they moved under the direction of humanitarian organizations and forced migration gradually became considered an almost exclusively humanitarian problem. These refugee camps enabled the process of the standardization of refugee management because they made a high number of refugees available for research, documentation and intervention (Malkki, 1995). Thus, a complex problem of forced migration has seemed to be concentrated into a particular bounded space. Malkki concludes that the term refugee as we use it today has been formed in the refugee camps. They have been established as generally applicable technologies of power that, apart from offering temporary protection, primarily discipline and control moves of people (Malkki, 1995: 500).

Standardization has not been limited only to ways of managing refugee crises. It can also be traced in refugees' representation in the media. Malkki claims that there exists internationally intelligible refugee imagery. She identifies some dangerous tendencies in the ways refugees are usually portrayed – visual representation of displaced people prevails over placing them in particular political and historical contexts and over using refugees' own expressions to describe their situation (Malkki, 1996: 386). We can see refugees' faces in newspapers, magazines, television programs, in bulletins of humanitarian organizations. Their pictures are often presented on photo exhibitions, winning international awards... as if these impressive faces were telling us all about people's suffering, as if there was nothing else needed to understand them – no further information. Malkki suggests that this imbalance between passive representation of refugees and placing them in a particular context and reproducing their own words reflects and in a way sustains refugees' limited power to decide about their lives and in particular about a kind of help they need. For example, Malkki argues that the visual prominence of women and children as embodiments of "refugeeness" in media and in the publications of humanitarian organizations has to do not just with the fact that most world refugees are women and children, but also with the particular institutionalized expectation of helplessness as a crucial refugee characteristic (Malkki, 1996: 388). She concludes

¹ According to the 1951 Convention, a refugee is a person residing outside his or her country of nationality, who is unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or a political opinion.

that it is this type of representation that places refugees in a world “without the gravities of history and politics that can ultimately become a deeply dehumanizing environment for refugees, even as it shelters” (Malkki, 1995: 518).

Malkki also criticizes the tendency to use the categories of “the refugee” and “the refugee camp” as ideal-typical figures that exist in a social void. She illustrates how refugees are often portrayed as an uprooted, alienated, suffering and, at the same time, nameless and silent mass of people (Malkki, 1996). Being used in this way, “the term ‘refugee’ denotes an objectified, undifferentiated mass that is meaningful primarily as an aberration of categories and an object of ‘therapeutic interventions’” (Malkki, 1997: 65). Through deprivation of the wider social and historical context of their lives, refugees are reduced to the basic “raw” needs (Malkki, 1996: 378). Consequently, in the face of the national and international organizations whose objects of care and control they are, “refugees suffer from a peculiar kind of speechlessness” (Malkki, 1996: 386). In refugee camps, those raw needs are usually identical to basic material needs. It is important to acknowledge that this reduction to materiality has a substantial impact on refugees’ ability to decide about their own lives actively. Moreover, backing their passivity makes them more easily manipulable and thus vulnerable in the hands of refugee camp officials.

Giorgio Agamben addresses similar issues as Malkki. He introduces the term *homo sacer* to depict the form of human life which is deprived of the politicized aspect of life, most clearly represented by the notion of citizenship. He uses the term *bare life* to describe the vulnerability and tractability of such a form of life (Agamben, 1998). By his account, a “bare life” is a result of a separation of human and political rights.

[T]he very rights of man that once made sense as the presupposition of the rights of the citizen are now progressively separated from and used outside the context of citizenship, for the sake of the supposed representation and protection of a bare life that is more and more driven to the margins of the nation-states. (Agamben, 1998: 132-133)

Agamben argues that this separation is supported mainly by humanitarian organizations which can only grasp human life in the figure of bare life (Agamben, 1998: 133). I think that his description aptly characterizes the situation of refugees in today’s European societies, especially those who live in refugee camps.

Indeed, by relating the depoliticizing mechanisms described by Malkki and Agamben to the institution of a refugee camp, these camps seem like a convenient environment where refugees can be deprived of the political and social context to which they once belonged. I think one of the consequences of processes described by Malkki and Agamben is a paradoxical situation when refugees are on the basis of international agreements and standards accepted by the nation states but at the same time, especially due to a specific environment of refugee camps, they are deprived of political and social aspects of their lives. They are reduced to their material needs and thus excluded from

social participation and integration into the life of a host society. To put it in a simplified way, refugees are formally accepted to be thereafter excluded.

The power of the Czech refugee camp

Let's now consider how the above outlined conclusions relate to a refugee reality in the Czech Republic. It is not my aim here to describe and evaluate Czech asylum policies; I will focus on depicting the "management of refugees" in the Czech refugee camp called Zastávka u Brna. Czech refugee camps are not all the same and therefore it would be problematic to draw any generalizing conclusions.² However, I will use the example of this particular camp, situate it into the context of Malkki's and Agamben's arguments and attempt to identify some mechanisms that can, in my view, stand for a common denominator of general approach to refugees in the Czech Republic. I argue that apart from formal regulations of refugees' rights and obligations which can be found in the 1951 Convention, Czech asylum law or in internal rules of particular refugee camps, there exists also a number of less formal regulations which are difficult to notice at first sight. Nonetheless, their impact on the lives of refugees is fundamental. In the following analysis, I draw on my three-year experience in the Zastávka camp (2000-2003) where I worked as an NGO social worker. Another important source of insight into the camp mechanisms was my fieldwork accomplished in April 2004 when I lived in the camp continuously for two weeks.³

Zastávka is a residential center with the capacity of about 250 places. Like other refugee camps, it is run by the Refugee Facilities Administration (RFA) which is a section of the Ministry of interior. At the time of my two-week stay in the camp, the majority of the camp inhabitants were refugees from Chechnya. It is hard to say how long asylum seekers usually stay in the camp. If they do not decide to finish their asylum procedure in advance (usually by moving to another country – either they choose to travel further to the West, or they decide to return home), they can live here for one year or even more. It is forbidden for asylum seekers to work for the first year after they ask for asylum. The only legal way to earn some money during the first year is work in the camp. Refugees are offered cleaning the residential buildings, washing dishes in the canteen or working in the camp library. However, this opportunity is given only to a very small number of

² There are three types of refugee camps, or how they are formally called – asylum facilities, where refugees are placed in different stages of the asylum procedure. Every single asylum seeker has to go through *quarantine reception center* where the asylum procedure is initiated. Next, if refugees do not have enough sources to find a private accommodation, they are placed into a *residential center* where they wait for their application to be decided. Finally, those who are granted refugee status can use temporary accommodation in an *integration center*. The following description focuses on the residential center Zastávka u Brna. Nevertheless, the conditions in other residential centers are similar.

³ I conducted this research as a part of my MA thesis focused on changes of gender relations in the Chechen families in the Czech Republic due to their experience of forced migration and life in the camp (Szczepaniková, 2004).

refugees. As a “salary” they receive increased pocket money which normally consists of about 0.35 EUR per day.⁴ Thus, the majority of asylum seekers who cannot or do not want to work illegally are totally dependent on the material assistance of the camp.

Material assistance consists of full board three times a day in the canteen. Because of hygienic regulations adopted by the camp administration in the last two years, all food has to be consumed in the canteen and cannot be taken into the asylum seekers’ rooms. Refugees often criticize this rule. They are not used to Czech “institutional” food and would prefer to choose their diet on their own or at least to have the right to consume it in their camp rooms. Many would prefer to cook their own food. Although it is not forbidden by the camp rules, refugees usually cannot afford it on 0.35 EUR per day.

Apart from the full board, the RFA provides other services such as basic health care, assistance of social workers, psychological counseling, and cooperates with NGOs who offer legal, psychological and social counseling and organize leisure-time activities for the asylum seekers in the camp. In contrast to the quarantine reception center, asylum seekers living in a residential center such as Zastávka are free to leave at any time.

Recently, a new system of surveillance has been installed in the camp. Cameras are placed in each floor’s corridor in all camp’s residential buildings. When refugees leave the camp they have to give their identification cards to the entrance guards. Every time they do so they can see the screen displaying what is happening in all the surveilled corridors. Camp guards are supposed to observe this screen 24 hours a day. In this way, asylum seekers can never forget that they are being monitored; an atmosphere of constant control and surveillance is established. At first sight, one could consider it as a step to increase asylum seekers’ security in the camp. However, during my stay in the camp, I have been assured several times that even with this device, the camp officials have not been able to protect refugees from violence. Rather than a sense of security, the feeling of alienation between the camp officials and the refugees is enhanced by this constant surveillance. According to French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault such a “hierarchical observation” is one of the crucial elements of disciplinary power exercised by modern oppressive institutions (Foucault, 1975/1984: 188-189).

Malkki states that refugee status may be perceived as a protection or as a constraint, depending on the social context (Malkki, 2002: 358). Drawing on my fieldwork in the camp, I claim that the refugees in the Zastávka camp indeed experienced it as both a measure of protection and as a constraint. At the very beginning of their stay in the camp, refugees were mostly satisfied because they have been given a possibility to live in a safe space, with no need to run away unexpectedly and to escape bombing or other dangers as in their home country. However, after a short time they started to experience

⁴ So the person who is working in the camp can get about 0.70 EUR per day.

darker aspects of the camp life – protection slowly changed into a constant feeling of restrictions and repression.

Just before I started my fieldwork in April 2004, a new rule was adopted in the camp. The director of the camp decided to forbid asylum seekers to use televisions in their rooms. The proclaimed reason was to cut down the camp's spending. This came after more than ten years when refugees were free to buy and watch televisions in their rooms. Television has a special importance for refugees in the camp, it is often the only direct source of information and it helps them to learn the Czech language. Thus, almost every refugee family had already managed to save some money and buy a television at the time when the new rule was adopted. In order to secure adherence of the rule, the director confiscated all televisions that were found in asylum seekers' rooms, placed them in the cellar of the administrative building, and promised that they will be returned when the asylum seekers will be leaving the camp. This is quite absurd because the majority of refugees who finally decided to leave the camp wished to cross the borders and apply for asylum in Austria or further in the Western Europe. For such a journey, they took only the most important things with them, certainly not their television. Moreover, this rule was adopted at the time when the refugee camp was half empty and the expenses for the use of televisions could not be very high.⁵

This rule raised a lot of disagreement and anger among the refugees and it became a base for their complaints about demeaning treatment by camp officials (for the majority of asylum seekers, they are the only Czechs they meet). Camp inhabitants expressed anger and helplessness because they did not see any possibility to resist such treatment. They were afraid that protest against the rule could negatively influence the decision concerning their application for asylum. The confiscation of refugees' televisions is in my view an evident violation of their right to own property. I think that the fact that they could be deprived from this right so easily refers to the concept described above of a "bare life." Refugees are systematically excluded from the world of social and political rights and they are reduced to an extremely vulnerable bare life. This absurd television ban also enforces refugees' reduction to materiality which has fundamental impacts on their ability to integrate into the host society and to actively make decisions concerning their own lives. This further decreases their potential to overcome the pathological social isolation of the camp.⁶ To what extent can all this be justified by a marginal reduction of camp spending? This is up to reader's assessment.

It seems obvious that life in the camp puts refugees into a vulnerable position. Many of them live in total uncertainty about their future, in social isolation, with a scarce

⁵ Although there is a television room available in the camp, I learnt from my informants that it is always occupied by a particular group of asylum seekers (usually single males) who decide which channel will be watched. For example women and children almost never enter it.

⁶ In some other residential centers, there are even removed electric outlets from refugees' rooms. Refugees are thus unable to use any kind of electrical appliance in their rooms.

amount of information about the outside world. However, what is most painful is the experience of losing control over one's life which is represented for example by the fact that refugees cannot decide about their diet. Although the camp provides the basic material needs, asylum seekers are not thought of as responsible individuals able to decide independently about their own lives. Refugees as passive recipients of care become easily controllable and manageable; there is a danger that their political and social rights will be violated without penalty. Their social exclusion has a devastating influence on their ability to integrate into Czech society and to be accepted as its full and equal members. In this sense, I find Malkki's and Agamben's conclusions to be valid for the Czech refugee reality.

Nonetheless, it would be unfair to neglect RFA's and NGO's efforts to improve the situation of refugees in the Czech Republic. They try to make the refugees' stay in the camp more bearable by organizing educational and leisure-time activities. They also attempt to improve often xenophobic and hostile attitudes of the Czech society towards refugees. They organize annual public excursions into the camps when people from outside the camps can acquaint themselves with the conditions of the camp as well as exhibitions of refugee children's art work and events when refugees can present "their culture" in front of a Czech audience. However, I think that we should also remain critical towards these meritorious attempts. For example, in the majority of cases, the presentation of refugees' culture is reduced to tasting of their national food or listening to traditional music. Socio-political aspects of the refugees' presence in the Czech Republic and their prospects to stay in the country are usually not discussed at these events. It is important to bear in mind that such a form of representation can easily become a part of the process of the refugees' depoliticization that has been described by Malkki and Agamben.

Finally, after presenting a critical view on the Czech "refugee reality," the question about a possible improvement of refugees' position should be discussed. I think that if the refugees' competences and willingness to integrate are to be prevented in the period of uncertainty during their stay in the camp, asylum seekers have to be given more opportunities to actively participate on decisions that determine their life. They should be treated as responsible individuals rather than as potential problem-makers. First step could be for example to enable refugees to cook for themselves and to give them more power to decide about the conditions in the camp so that they can better suit their actual needs. Although changes in this direction can be expensive or administratively difficult to implement, I am convinced that their outcomes would be advantageous not only for the refugees but also for the Czech society. Among others, such steps could increase the possibility that recognized refugees will be (even after they have left the camp) still able to start an independent and self-reliant life and that they will not remain in the position of passive recipients of care.

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