2011 KENNETH RIVETT MEMORIAL EVENT: PERSONAL STORIES FROM SIX DECADES OF REFUGEE PROTECTION

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I was born in South Sudan and moved with my Dad, Mum, sisters, and brother to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. My Dad worked as an accountant in Saudi Arabia and made good income. I learnt to speak Arabic very well. I went to a good school where I was the only South Sudanese. I didn't know that I was different since I spoke Arabic like everybody else and my family was well off. I noticed though that I was darker than everybody else at school. I was the top of my class always. I noticed that some teachers were not happy with this, but that didn't mean anything to me. I played with my Arab friends from school and from the neighbourhood.

My Dad believed that South Sudanese had been denied equality and justice for a long time and the only way Sudanese people could live in harmony and peace in Sudan would be through a political change, even if it meant going to war. So we ended up in Ethiopia in Itang Refugee Camp. Itang Refugee Camp was located in Western Ethiopia in the border with Sudan.

Itang was the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) headquarters. Officially it was a refugee camp run by the UNHCR. In practice, it was the SPLA that provided security and administered the camp including food distribution. Itang Refugee Camp was highly militarised and it was the norm to see soldiers in full military gear patrolling the streets. SPLA commanders visited Itang on regular basis. We, children, were amazed when the SPLA commander-in-chief was visiting. There were soldiers and soldiers swarming the Refugee Camp. We would stand along the road waiting to see Dr. John. We would wait for a long time before we saw him. The soldiers carried weapons we had never seen before. We would talk about them and would try to work them out. We saw children of our age carrying guns. They walked proudly in uniform and all the girls loved them. We were always under pressure on such occasions to go and train, if only our families would let us.

Dr. John would make the point of talking to us kids. He told us that we were the future of Sudan, and that the war that is being fought was to free Sudan from the Arab domination. We were told that the Arab is the enemy and must be defeated. We were told that we would be the leaders of tomorrow and that we should work hard at school and serve the community, because leaders must work for the people. We were so excited that we were the leaders of tomorrow, and that we had a task ahead of us. Many of us had to build houses and fences for the community. This meant going into the forest to cut grass and wood for the SPLA officers to build their houses!

There was always tension in Itang. The Nuer and the Dinka had always argued over power. The Dinka thought they were the most civilised and educated. The Nuer loved power and saw the Dinka as an oppressive people who took what is rightly theirs. On one occasion, the Dinka and Nuer soldiers clashed. There were gunshots and for the rest of that night the Camp was transformed into a war zone. There was also tension between us 'refugees' and the local people especially the Anyuak. The Anyuak lived on the western Side of the Baro River and we, the refugees, settled on the Eastern side of the Baro River. It was not clear why we clashed with the Anyuak. I remembered the three-day clashes between 'us' and 'them' that cost the live of a few people!

Then Mangisto lost power in Ethiopian and our Ethiopian friends turned against us. All Sudanese people had to evacuate refugee camps in Ethiopia though some came back to the

camp shortly after that. The large majority walked back to Sudan. The war was nasty and the walk continued for months before arriving in Kenya. Kakuma Refugee Camp was opened. We used to hear about Kenya in Itang. It was the place to become educated. We read Kenyan text books in Ethiopia at school. When I arrived in Kakuma Refugee Camp, I could not write Arabic any more. I could still speak it but not so well. My English was getting better and replacing Arabic. There was no need to hold on to the language of the enemy!

Kakuma was a weird place. It was hot and dry. There was wind and dust all the time. I came to Kakuma to go to school. I jointed the only class seven that was available. The UNHCR was funding education in the camp through some Kenyan NGO. The schools started under trees. Just imagine sitting on dirt in an area infested with deadly scorpions and the wind blowing dust everywhere. The World Food Program (WFP) was in charge of food and from time to time the UNHCR withheld food so that refugees behaved. We didn't have food for weeks on one occasion because a UNHCR store was broken into and equipment and books worth millions of Kenyan Shillings got looted. The UNHCR decided that it was our fault and that there was no food for anyone until the culprits were handed over to the Kenyan police. The UNHCR was brutal to refugees in Kakuma. They built a massive compound that was accessible to UNHCR and NGO staff only. They had air-conditioned offices and nice residences. I couldn't believe that there was a massive swimming pool in the UNHCR compound until I went there. Water was rationed in the camp but not at UNHCR compound. We were told that there was donor fatigue, and that was why refugees were receiving ever dwindling amounts of food rations. Refugee teachers and staff were not paid their monthly incentives for months. It was at this same time that UNHCR was putting up a massive new compound!

I then arrived in Australia. It was so exciting because I hoped that all was going to go well. In the camp, we were told Australians were good people. We were told that we would be offered a house and a free wife. We were told that one could study or work or do whatever one wanted. We were told when you turn on the water tap you could choose by a push of a button what flows out: cold or hot water, alcohol drink, coffee, tea, you name it. The first shock for us was housing. There were no free houses waiting for us! I was sharing a room for five weeks after arrival with three others. Everything was strange and when I spoke to anyone the response was 'Can you say that again?' How rude! It was all so confusing. Then there were the stories of the mistreatment of the indigenous people. I didn't understand this because Australia was a good country and it treated everybody well. There were also stories of boat people. I learnt that the boat people were queue jumpers.

Australia was a big monster. I felt confused and betrayed. I decided to join university to drown my miseries and disappointments. I couldn't communicate to anyone at university for a while but I held on. I was able to charm some ladies who saw beyond my accent and colour. They thought I understood Chemistry 1A better than they did and so worked with me. That was a relief. At least I had something to offer. At least in this environment people can see beyond my accent or skin colour. That is why I am still studying nine years later.