"Mamma Nancy" Pocock

Friend to Refugees

BY LUCIANA RICCIUTELLI

On the front door of 52 Elgin Avenue there's a sign in Spanish indicating the house is open Monday to Friday from 9:00 to 5:00, Sunday by appointment only. The door opens into a long corridor. A beautifully woven wall-hanging is draped over the banister of the staircase. Embroidered on it are the words "Dios Benediga Este Hogar" (God Bless this House). A long line of dark haired men are leaning against the wall. They are Central American refugees waiting to speak to Walter, a refugee claimant from El Salvador, in the makeshift office at the end of the corridor. His job is to help the refugees find a place to live. An Ontario Housing grant helps to pay Walter's salary while he waits for the hearing which will determine his right to refugee status. At Nancy Pocock's home, nestled in the heart of one of Toronto's most desirable areas, a stone's throw from elegant Yorkville, it's a typical Tuesday afternoon.

Nancy Pocock is sitting at the head of an immense, antique dining room table. A mass of curly grey hair frames a gentle face that belies the piercing, intelligent eyes behind her glasses. She is on the telephone, making arrangements for the imminent arrival of two refugee families who are presently waiting at the Buffalo border. (One family is from Iran, the other, ironically, from Iraq). She seems unaware of the large orange tabby sprawled indifferently on the mountain of papers piled haphazardly all over the table. Another cat, black and sleek, slinks through the living room which is just as cluttered with books, children's toys, and a profusion of mementos from Latin American countries.

Nancy Pocock **Photo: Tino Costa**

People keep streaming in. Some enter the living room to kiss "Mama Nancy" hello and, obviously at home, pull up chairs at the table. "I know you! How are you?" she exclaims, rising to warmly embrace one of the visitors. Walter comes in to announce he's going out to get some lunch. "Do you want me to bring you something Mamma? Have you eaten?" He

kisses her too. As she sinks into the armchair next to me, one of the men at the table offers to answer the phone.

I have one story I must tell you. A woman came in the other day. She was tall, slim and very controlled. She wanted me to help her about her mother. Her mother is in prison in El Salvador and being tortured. She has a cousin there who is a lawyer and is doing his best to get her out. This woman then told me her story. It ended up that I cried. She didn't but I cried.

Her father was a teacher in the university and that's a crime because you're an example to young people. He had been killed. He had been kidnapped and they found his body later. She had seen the men who did it. She was also a teacher and so was also being threatened. She had to leave because she was going to be killed. Her husband had to go to the hospital for a serious operation. She had one child that she left with her mother and was eight months pregnant. She knew they were after her and it was just a matter of time before they killed her. So she left, on her own, pregnant, eight months.

She managed to get across to Mexico. They have coyotes [guides] there to take them cross the border. She was with another couple. They had to cross the Rio Grande River at night, swimming, and they saw helicopters flying over with bright lights to see if there were any refugees coming across. So she had to duck under water quite a bit to avoid the helicopter lights. They got to the other shore and she said she could hardly get out of the water, so they dragged her out. They had to get away from the border as quickly as possible. So they went as far as they could inland away from the river. She said she was crawling at the end. They got her to the place where they were to meet a car and she went into labour. She had her baby there, in a field, under a tree. The woman stayed with her until the baby was born. Then the car came and they had to leave but she wasn't able to. She had that baby under a tree and then, she said, it rained.

Well, that was when I burst into tears. I couldn't take any more. She was there all alone, with a newborn baby, in a field. A car came along the next morning and she said she looked so dreadful she was afraid they weren't going to stop. But they did and they were kind. They took her in and kept her and the baby for three months. Then she got to a religious group — the Jubilee Partners — that helped her to come to Canada. They have a farm where they care for people until they come to Canada. They got her here through the [Canadian] Consulate in Georgia.

The Presbyterian Church brought up her other child and her husband, who in the meantime had to have a kidney removed in the hospital. They are now in Canada as government sponsored refugees. But her mother is in prison and she needs money to bribe her out. I managed to get $800 American for her, but I hear that now it's not enough so I need another couple of hundred dollars to get her mother out of prison.

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Nancy Pocock has been a committed peace activist for over twenty years. Not only has she been involved with the Canadian Peace Research Institute and the Canadian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, she was also the founding member of Voice of Women, the Grindstone Island Peace Project and Project Ploughshare. Her efforts towards global peace have also taken another, even more tangible form. Nancy Pocock has devoted most of her life to working one-on-one with the victims of war, the refugees.

Surprisingly, she doesn't receive any subsidies from either the Provincial or Federal governments for the informal drop-in centre her home has become to numerous refugees from different parts of the world. "I wouldn't take government funding," she states emphatically. The money she needs to keep the centre operating comes from private donations and from the Quaker Service Committee, of which she is an active member. The $800 US "bribe-money" for the Salvadorian's mother was given to her from a "well-off" friend who simply asked "How much do you want and when do you need it?" Smiling, she adds that she rarely ever has to ask for anything. "Money seems to come when I need it." This elicits a second story about another Salvadorian woman who also came to Nancy for help.

She was pregnant. Her husband hadn't gotten out when she did. He was in Mexico. He'd been picked up by the Mexican police and put in prison. There was no way he could get out without bribery. And I didn't have it. But the same day, somebody from the United Church in Belleview called me and said they had some money left over from the last family they had sponsored and they wanted it used to reunify a family. I said, "You've come from God. I've got the family and I didn't know where to get the money." So she got her husband and the church adopted the family and helped them get settled. She had her baby just before he got here. The money seems to arrive when it's really needed. The very day she came to see me they phoned. That was quite something.

Together with her late husband, Jack Pocock, Nancy's involvement with refugees began in the sixties with their mutual objection to the Vietnam War and their support of American draft dodgers: "My daughter was in university then and they were hearing from American university students all the time. They got swamped and they came to us. My husband and I got together a committee and decided we could help them. For years there we had young Americans living in our home." They were the first refugees the Pococks welcomed into their home.

Their concern did not, however, stop there. They were both committed Quak-

ers and their involvement with the Quaker Service Committee (an outreach program) has always been intense. It was as a member of that committee that Nancy had the opportunity to visit Vietnam four times, becoming increasingly concerned with the plight of the Vietnamese. "We got Vietnamese refugees, people who had been sent to the States to be trained for warfare and then didn't want to go back to fight their own people. They deserted and came to Canada. We found we could get them across the border too." Many of these Vietnamese also found a home with the Pococks. She shrugs it off, "I have this big house and I didn't see why I shouldn't share it."

Nancy wasn't always a Quaker. Born in Chicago in 1910, she was raised in the United Church. When she moved to Canada she met and married Jack Pocock, a Canadian who had been brought up a Catholic. Neither were entirely satisfied with their respective faiths. When Jack returned from the Second World War as a confirmed pacifist, they actively searched for a religion they felt they could both believe in. They chose the Quakers, feeling it best satisfied their spiritual needs. They then divided their time between the gold and silver jewellery-making business they operated together and an always increasing commitment to the work of the Quaker Service Committee. Along with its concern for refugees, the Quaker Service Committee also works with prisoners, native Indians, and people in developing countries. "Quakers believe in living their religion," Nancy explains matter-of-factly.

After Jack's death in 1975, Nancy's involvement with the Quaker Service Committee deepened. Her interest in the Central American refugees was sparked about six years ago. Having just finished her term with the Quaker Service Committee in Toronto, Nancy decided to attend the American Friends Service Committee annual meeting in the United States. "There I met a friend from Dallas who asked what we were doing about the Salvadorian refugees. I replied that we had understood from our government that they hadn't wanted to come to Canada because it was too cold. She said "Well, my government is sending them back and they're being killed so I thought something should be done." Nancy decided to visit El Salvador and see for herself what was happening at the borders.

I got the idea we could bring them (the Salvadorian refugees) in through the Canadian Consulates in the United States. We already bring them in through the Embassies. I belong to the Inter-Church Committee for Refugees (an advocacy group) and we talked to the government about that. My friend from Dallas went back and spoke to the immigration official at the Canadian Consulate there and he was very open to the idea. It was resolved after much pushing and discussion. So now Salvadorians in danger can go to the Canadian Consulates in the States and apply for refugee status there.

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She points to one of the gentlemen at her table and explains he was one of the first to come as a result of the Inter-Church Committee's intervention. "I went to meet him and his family at the airport." Proudly, she adds, "He is now a Canadian citizen."' She seems pleased he's come by to say hello.

When I remark on the number of men in her home today, she explains that "the majority of refugees are men because they are in the most danger. But they all have families they leave behind. Then the family is in danger." She points to another Salvadorian also sitting at the dining room table:

He had to run. He left his wife and two children and she's been threatened. She's terrified. They tried to kidnap her. They were pulling her into a car and she managed to escape. She fled to Mexico. In Mexico it's awfully hard for refugees to stay because they don't want them there. She's in real danger. We tried to get her onto a plane because she's from Nicaragua and at that time they were letting Nicarauguans in without a visa. But the kids were born in El Salvador and as Salvadorians they have to get a visa. So now she's trying to go through the Canadian Embassy in Mexico and try to get accepted as a refugee herself because she is one. But because her husband is here as a refugee claimant and has no status, they don't want to bring his wife and children. They told her at the Embassy he was having his hearing tomorrow and they would know whether he would be allowed to stay. But the government has cancelled all hearings now because of the elections so she's stuck down there in danger with very little money — whatever he can send her. And she's likely to be deported to El Salvador if they catch her. There she's likely to be killed and she has two small children.

Nancy has told him she intends to speak to Barbara McDougall (Canada's Minister for Immigration), "who could do something about it if she wanted. They could be brought here tomorrow on a Minister's permit."

Recently, she's also been trying to help another man who had to leave his wife in Guatemala. "She was raped. They came in her house and asked where he was. They raped her and nearly burnt the house down. One of her children was almost suffocated. This is the kind of thing women have to go through. To get a family with small children out is almost impossible."

For single women, she adds, it's even harder:

It's quicker to get a family in than a single woman. The government has not wanted to bring women with children in because it's not as easy for them to find work. This is something we (the Inter-Church Committee for Refugees) have been pushing the government about for a long time. Now the government has started a new program called "Women at Risk" and we have yet to see the consequences of that. There's supposed

to be more money put aside for women in danger.

Refugees seem to find their way to Nancy Pocock's home easily. She is well known in the refugee community. She is shyly proud of the news that a recent arrival read an article about her in a magazine distributed in a Salvadorian university. Nancy, along with a number of volunteers, uses her network of contacts to bring refugees across the American border into Canada. Once they are here, she helps them arrange the necessary hearings which will determine their refugee status and later lead to landed immigrant status. In the meantime, she finds them places to live, assists them in getting work permits, as well as jobs, and sees that they enroll in English language classes. Refugee women, she is quick to point out, need very particular assistance. Many have children and therefore need to get on welfare, as well as find suitable daycare before they can attend English classes or find work. Not surprisingly, finding daycare is next to impossible — making it extremely difficult for refugee women to find jobs. Finding a single woman a safe place to live is also not easy. "Women are attacked. We made the mistake of putting young girls with families and often the man will make advances to the girl. Women have a difficult time in that way."

Women finally joining their husbands in Canada don't find it any easier. "The government doesn't give these women the same opportunity to learn English as they do the men. This is also something we've been fighting the government over because it leaves the women stuck in the house. The husband works and she doesn't." The fact that the husbands have been here much longer is also a problem:

A lot of marriages break up. A great many. If the man's been here for several years, when the woman gets here he's made a life for himself in a society she knows nothing about. She comes in and has to start from the beginning. I had one girl and she was quite young. She had one baby and another one less than one year since the first. Her husband was just pining for her, getting thinner and thinner by the day. Finally she got here and she was so pregnant and the first baby was still not walking. They were government sponsored. He was doing his English and was away all day. Two tiny babies. She was stuck out in Jane and Finch, in a big high-rise, 9th or 11th floor, no Salvadorians around, no other Spanish-speaking women.

She tried to commit suicide. I had to go out. I got an emergency call. I went out and managed to get her up and walking. She had taken sleeping pills. I managed to find a Spanish-speaking social worker there at a drop-in centre for her. Now she's wonderful. The kids are four and five. She's going to school now, learning English. They've got Ontario Housing. He's working and they're doing just fine. Their relationship is very strong. They're very happy. She was almost defeated by it, but she pulled herself out. It was very hard. He'd been here for some time, living with a bunch of men.

Nancy explains that Central American culture is very different:

The women have their own society, their own close ties, their own support system. If she'd been at home she'd have her mother, her mother-in-law, her sisters, her cousins, her aunts, who would all be helping her with the babies. They have that strong feminine society that supports the other females so they don't need to ask for government support. They come here and that's all gone, so they have to learn a whole new way of life.

She remains in awe, however, of these women who do manage to get out. Having to deal with grim realities, horrendous experiences and often struggling against insurmountable odds, they are unquestionably "survivors:"

There's a wonderful woman from Guatemala. She lived in the country there. She's about thirty-eight, a small, very neat, nice-looking woman. She was in trouble for something her brother had done. Usually the women are not so politically active themselves. It's usually the male relatives that get them in trouble. Her brother had fled. He's been here for some time. She was being harassed by the army. Living in the country, she knew her way into Mexico. She got across the Mexican border illegally and she got to the US border, which is very difficult. She went across the mountains. She walked across on her own. No coyote. No help. She hitchhiked all the way up to Canada. It took her two or three months. She worked a

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bit and got a bit of money. She hitchhiked and said she never took a ride with a man alone, just with a family or a couple. She didn't speak any English. She said, "I learned to say 'eat' and they'd feed me." She got up to Michigan and there she was befriended by people at a school for handicapped children. They took her in for a while and raised a few dollars for her. People brought her across the (Canadian) border at night. They stuck her in the trunk of a car and brought her across and she was dropped on my desk.

And she was so calm, so soft. But when she started telling me her story she just broke down and cried. She had done it all on her own. We got her a place to stay. She's going to school now, learning English. I'm sure as soon as she is able to work, she will.

Later Nancy comments that the meeting with her friend in Dallas was a pivotal one. Of her work with refugees, she remarks: "I felt the Lord meant me to do it. I don't speak Spanish, but I have a rapport with them and they understand me. I can save lives. That's something." Chuckling, she adds, "I'd be bored just sitting around."

The respect and esteem these refugees feel for the woman they affectionately call "Mamma Nancy" is palpable. Although it was the Central Americans that first started calling her "Mamma Nancy," she tells me that the first Vietnamese refugees she and her husband welcomed into their home also liked to refer to them paternally. They were having dinner with a Vietnamese family whom during the course of the meal, humbly asked them for "a great favour." "Can we call you mother and father? That was the great favour you see...," she nods, a benevolent smile washing over her face.

The refugee community is, in fact, a community without elders. Rarely do the elderly parents of refugees ever join their families abroad. In countries where the extended family is cherished, most refugees find themselves in a strange new continent deprived of the respected and loved members of their family. It is not surprising, then, that for almost all the refugees Nancy worked with, she's becomes both the mother and grandmother. "I knew a Ugandan woman and she'd been in prison and raped constantly. She was a wreck. You'd look at her and she'd start to cry. She'd just cling to me and say, "You're just like my mother." I had a girl helping me then who replied, "Yes, Nancy's an all-purpose mother."

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Nancy's work with refugees has not gone without recognition. In 1978 Vietnam gave her a medal for friendship and early in 1987, the Giraffe Project, an American group which honours community activists, presented her with the Giraffe Award for sticking her neck out. Her most prestigious award, however, came in November 1987 when she was honoured with the Pearson Peace Prize Medal in recognition of her efforts toward global peace, and more importantly, her selfless dedication to the plight of refugees. The Pearson Peace Prize Medal was established by the late Prime Minister Pearson to honour Canadians who actively worked for issues dear to Pearson's own heart (aid to developing countries, help for refugees, mediated settlements to disputes, and efforts directed towards peaceful change worldwide). Nancy was thrilled, but also very surprised, to receive the award. "It was very funny because a lot of what I do is against the government," she chuckles. Ironically, Nancy had worked actively against Pearson's decision to allow the Bomarc missile, an atomic weapon, in Canada by organizing protests and urging anyone who would listen to vote against him in his 1963 election campaign. She is especially pleased, however, that the award drew a great deal of media attention, not only to her work, but more importantly, to refugee issues.

Nevertheless, Nancy feels her greatest rewards come from the refugees themselves. The second time I met with her it's just after her birthday. On the 24th of October, Nancy Pocock turned 78. The house is full of flowers. Beaming, she points to a vase of long-stemmed roses on the dinning room table and proudly informs me they're from her 'boys.' "I've had more birthdays this year..." she laughs contentedly. "Ali, an Iranian who translates for her, cooked Persian food on Monday and lots of people came by. On Thursday I went to Ottawa and came back at 6:00. At 8:00 they had a party for me at Friends House (the Quaker Centre on Bedford Avenue). "About fifty refugees had gathered to celebrate her birthday in grand style. Two bands from El Salvador and two more from Guatemala provided the entertainment. "Someone had baked a huge cake and then we had a special Salvadorian cake, too."

Her coffee table is littered with numerous flyers bearing the title: *Bill C-84: Briefing Church Workers on New Penalties and Possible Seizure of Vehicles and Office Files & Equipment.* It warns church workers that new legislation is currently in effect where by any church worker convicted of helping a refugee by suggesting in any way the refugee come to Canada without valid documents, may face stiff penalties of up to a $10,000 fine and six months in prison. If ten or more refugees are involved (i.e. a family) the penalties may be stiffer ($500,000 fine and ten years in prison). When I comment about the implications of this bill to her own work, and ask if she fears being arrested, she laughs out loud, "I'd just love to be arrested! It would be great if they did. It would be good to let the public

find out."

On a more serious note, she expresses her concern for the graver consequences of Bill C-55, Canada's controversial new immigration and refugee policy. "Now it's going to be much harder (for refugees to get into Canada). They're not going to be able to do it. First World countries are just dumping refugees on the Third World. Look at Pakistan — they have taken all the Afghanis, while we're shutting our doors to them. Europe has also closed its doors."

On 1 January 1989, Bill C-55 went into effect. Under the $100 million plan, announced by Immigration Minister Barbara McDougall, a two-member government panel, consisting of an immigration adjudicator and a member of the new Immigration and Refugee Board, will hear each refugee claim separately over the next two years. Claimants will continue to be judged according to the 1951 United Nations convention relating to refugees, which states that a "convention refugee" is someone who, because of well-founded fear of persecution due to her/his race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinions, is unwilling or unable to return to her/his country of nationality or former habitual residence.

Under the new policy, once a person arrives in Canada and makes a refugee claim, s/he will be given a quick security check by an immigration officer, and then booked for a hearing that is supposed to take place within 72 hours. If either of the two panel members agree the person before them is a genuine refugee (according to the terms of the 1951 United Nations convention), the refugee claimant will be allowed to stay in Canada and go on to a more detailed hearing. If both reject the claim, the would-be refugee will be asked to leave the country. Technically, humanitarian or compassionate grounds will not be considered. Nevertheless, the law hasn't changed with respect to the "discretionary power" that allows the Minister of Immigration to permit anybody into the country that s/he wants to.

There is concern for the number of claimants that will be rejected, because the new policy does not address the "humanitarian" treatment of people who may have been in Canada for some time, but may be here illegally. McDougall has ruled out amnesty. There are 85,000 claimants presently on the waiting list. It is doubtful whether all those cases can be heard within the two-year time frame indicated by McDougall.

Nancy Pocock has another story to tell me. This one doesn't have a happy ending:

A Salvadorian woman came to see me today who cried and cried. That's why the tissue is on the table. She's been here for two years and she hasn't got any status. They put her on a Minister's permit when she came and they renewed it for another year because she didn't know enough to ask for refugee status. So she has no status at all after being here for two years and her children are still in El Salvador. She can't bring them here until she has status. And now they're in danger. They're being threatened. There are people being killed around them and she's very upset. So she sat and cried. And I couldn't help her because there's no way we can bring them in now because of the new laws that will be in place the 1st of January. There's about three hundred people waiting in Buffalo to get in and no chance for new people to get in. She hasn't the money to bring them anyway. They have to get a visa from the Canadian immigration official in El Salvador and they'll never get it. The law has been passed. They're going to screen people out — a very complicated procedure — before they get into Canada so there's just no way. They (her children) are now thirteen and fourteen — the right age for the army to get them.

Nancy and I are sharing a meal in a fashionable restaurant in Yorkville. We marvel at the extraordinary price of a bottle of wine. She tells me a story about having returned from Vietnam and entered a drugstore to buy some shampoo. Facing an entire wall of haircare products she remembers having felt physically ill. She had just come from a country where people were starving to death. Turning to look at me, she adds:

We (Canadians) say we have a wonderful reputation for refugees, but we don't. It has only been in the last few years that we've been good to them. But before that we shut people out. Look at the Chinese: we brought the men in to work, but we wouldn't let them bring their families. I remember when every town in Canada had a Chinese laundry and a Chinese restaurant but no children, no wives. I remember wheeling Julie, my little girl, down to Chinatown and they'd come out of their store and make such a fuss over her because they didn't have their own babies here. It was sad.

For Nancy Pocock, the refugee situation in Canada, and all over the world, is still a very sad and sorry affair.

Anyone who wants to make a donation towards the work of the Quaker Service Committee and Nancy's work with refugees can forward a cheque made payable to "Nancy Pocock" at 52 Elgin Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Receipts for income tax purposes will be issued.

CHRIS WIND

Suspended

she sits in the third row
at the second desk
wearing one of those new shirts
with words on it —
her words are in black and blue:
all dressed up and nowhere to go.

the laws of her country won't allow
her ever to go back
and the laws of this country won't
allow her to go forward
until she looks like, speaks like, acts
like, thinks and feels like
us.

the first one is easy,
she has done it already.
the second two are more difficult
though she is learning in my class,
and she is trying hard.
but the last two are almost impossible
—
and she cries with each cut across the
grain:
she is made in Taiwan.