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Parvathi Arasanayagam

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In a Refugee camp - Extracts from a Diary

Abstract
28 July 1983 Reach the refugee camp dazed and weary. The refugee camp is a school, everything is silent. We sign in at the entrance our names and address. I wonder whether our house still exists. Through the dark and gloomy exteriors of the building, I see a long queue of people holding tin plates. They all look inmates of a concentration camp and I want to run away. They look at us with dazed and sunken eyes, dressed in shabby clothes. Our new home is a classroom on the first floor, overlooking a square, which is a hive of activity. Rice is being cooked in a large cauldron over a wood fire, while refugees are holding out plates and being served boiled rice and sambara from buckets.
PARVATHI ARASANAYAGAM

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28 July 1983
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Our fellow refugees greet us with sympathetic smiles and listen to our dilemma of being hunted out of our house. It’s a relief to be surrounded by friends.

Soon we too are invited to partake of this late lunch. I’m thirsty, but have no tumbler to drink from, however a reserve policeman offers us a glass of plain tea which I take up to mother.

Night is setting in. We have received terse orders to remain silent and keep all windows shut. The glaring rays of a flare fixed on a tree outside lights up the whole room.

At about eleven p.m. the dinner call resounds through the corridors. We hastily awake and join the long queues. Not hungry, but everyone is enjoying the rice and sambar. I see children eating rice off the palms of their hands. There are not enough plates.

12.00 p.m. Two men who introduce themselves as Douglas and Janaka from a sangaramaya have brought a pail of milk. They say their society is against the use of violence on Tamils. Everyone is suspicious of them and are reluctant to drink the milk. Father however goes forward and has a glass of milk. The milk test has passed. Soon all drink the hot sweetened milk.

29 July 1983
Got up at about 5 o’clock. There are only a few toilets for nearly a thousand refugees.

There’s no breakfast. We are hungry. One of our friends has brought
a bag full of bread, which we cut into hunks and distribute among the children. The adults have to manage without breakfast.

Lunch is served at about four o’clock. We have lost our appetites.

Night. – Tension and fear of an attack on the camp. Someone has seen something move up the grassy embankment. Soon a policeman is sent up to investigate, he returns to say that there’s nobody. It is only a branch of a tree blowing in the breeze.

30 July 1983

Negative feelings are kept at bay. During visiting hours there’s a steady stream of visitors, who bring food and lunch packets. Someone tells my mother that he has brought some food and clothes for the refugees, but there is no-one to distribute them. Soon the room becomes a centre for refugee clothes. New life is infused into us. The apathy and lack of motivation is dwindling and the inmates cook and work hard all day. A kind of order prevails – a new spirit seems to have taken over, the desire to live, to find a new meaning to life, existence ...

A doctor has brought tins of infant milkfood. We then boil a cauldron of water and prepare the milk. We do not have firewood and so we use broken up desks and even chairs. Parents line up to get their infant’s share of the milk. The bottles they clutch are filthy and need to be sterilised. We finish at about 5 o’clock. Walk back to our ‘new home’. It is even more crowded today. Families huddle together listening to the BBC news broadcast on Sri Lanka. Later on we prepare to sleep. Many sleep on the bare floor. It is cold tonight.