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.

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 across 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 re-

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moved 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.

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 Pocks 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 arguing and discussion. So now Salvadorean in danger can go to the Canadian Consulates in the States and apply for refugee status there.

"THEY CAME INTO HER HOUSE AND ASKED WHERE HER HUSBAND WAS. THEY RAPED HER AND NEARLY BURNED THE HOUSE DOWN. ONE OF HER CHILDREN WAS ALMOST SUCCOFACED. THIS IS THE KIND OF THING WOMEN HAVE TO GO THROUGH."

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 threat-
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. Finding a single woman a safe place to live is also not easy.

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 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 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
“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.’”

...
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 Afghans, 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 Salvadorean 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. Not much 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

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.