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## POINT OF VIEW | History suggests refugees can only make Canada a better place: Joe Schlesinger

Past experience suggests Syrian refugees will enrich Canada

By Joe Schlesinger, for CBC News Posted: Dec 06, 2015 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Dec 06, 2015 3:47 PM ET



A Syrian refugee boy stands in front of his family's tent in the Al Zaatari refugee camp in the Jordanian city of Mafraq, near the border with Syria on Nov. 29, 2015. (Muhammad Hamed/Reuters)

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A recent poll by the Angus Reid Institute suggests almost a third of Canadians oppose the admission of Syrian refugees. No surprise there. It was my experience that new immigrants are not always welcome and are often even resented.

That was certainly the case when I arrived in Canada 65 years ago in the first wave of immigrants following the turmoil in Europe after the end of the Second World War. We were the DPs, displaced persons, a term often preceded by a swear word.

- **Arrival of Syrian refugees a 'defining moment' for Canada, GG says**
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If I were to offer advice to those about to arrive, I would say: Just be patient. Canadians eventually come around. Yesterday's outsiders become part of the mainstream. They start successful businesses. Some even rise to join the elites — and then give back to Canada through generous charitable projects.

If I were to counsel Canadians who are wary of receiving today's refugees, I'd tell them: Let's not kid ourselves. Canada needs them. In fact, we have always needed refugees.

This country was built — and changed for the better — by refugees. This was true nearly two centuries ago, when Ireland's potato famine and land clearances in the Scottish Highlands forced more than a million people to our shores. Like the Syrians today, many died from ships sinking, disease and starvation along the way.

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**Joe Schlesinger**  
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Joe Schlesinger was a foreign correspondent for CBC for 28 years, covering natural disasters, political upheavals and conflicts from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf. In 2009, the Canadian Journalism Foundation honoured Schlesinger for his body of work.

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You might argue that right now, with the Canadian economy in the doldrums and unemployment at seven per cent, we hardly need more people in the labour market.



A Vietnamese refugee mother tends to her sick child as she arrives at a village in Thailand in 1977. More than 100,000 Vietnamese boat people, as they were called, were eventually accepted in Canada. (Eddie Adams/Associated Press)

But we do. We do because of the population tsunami that is about to hit us. Close to a third of Canadians are baby boomers. By the time the last of them reaches 65 in 15 years the proportion of seniors is expected to account for nearly a quarter of Canada's population.

Sure, many Canadian seniors are still working. The 60s, we are told, are the new 40s and all that. But that's far outweighed by another factor — the problems of our growing life expectancy. As the aging of Canadians grows through the 80s and beyond, it brings with it ever-growing debilities, diseases that will put an intolerable drain on our health-care budgets.

Only a younger, highly creative society can cope with this burden. And we've been lucky in having a whole run of them.

## Newcomers strengthen Canada

We've had Ukrainians, who at the beginning of the 20th century planted the wheat that turned the Prairies into one of the world's greatest breadbaskets.

Sixty years ago, when Canada admitted 37,000 Hungarian refugees fleeing the invasion of their country by Soviet forces, the newcomers brought with them a whole forestry school to the University of B.C. that helped improve B.C. forestry practices.

A decade later, it was the turn of the Vietnamese boat people fleeing the fall of Saigon to communist forces. The more than 100,000 Vietnamese who came here have succeeded on many fronts. Just one example: nail salons established by Vietnamese women became thriving businesses in cities across Canada and **changed the manicure industry**.

But the Syrians, we are told, are different. There may be terrorists among them. Well, that's a scary oldie too. When the Hungarians came there was no talk of terrorists. What made folks suspicious and worried the authorities then was the possibility of communist agents and spies. And that faded quickly.



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Hungarian refugees are interviewed by officials of the Canadian Embassy visa section in a dance hall that was rented for the emergency in 1956, after the Hungarian Revolution. (Rosemary Gilliat/National Archives of Canada)

Relax, folks! There are bound to be problems with this newest wave of refugees. There always are. But like the rest of us — be we immigrants ourselves or descendants of immigrants — the newcomers will eventually blend into the great Canadian mosaic.

When my ship landed in Quebec City all those decades ago, I noticed a huge sign saying "Drink Canada Dry." Looked to me like I was being challenged to take to boozing. What I didn't realize was how hard that would be.

It was often impossible to get an alcoholic drink. In some places, you could get beer — and mostly it was just beer — only if you also had something to eat. In others, you could buy a beer but nothing with it.

As for women, they could only get into a pub if escorted by a man. And on Sundays, of course, not a drop anywhere.

Times change. So do we.

And like the rest of us, the newcomers will make this country a better place.



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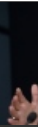
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