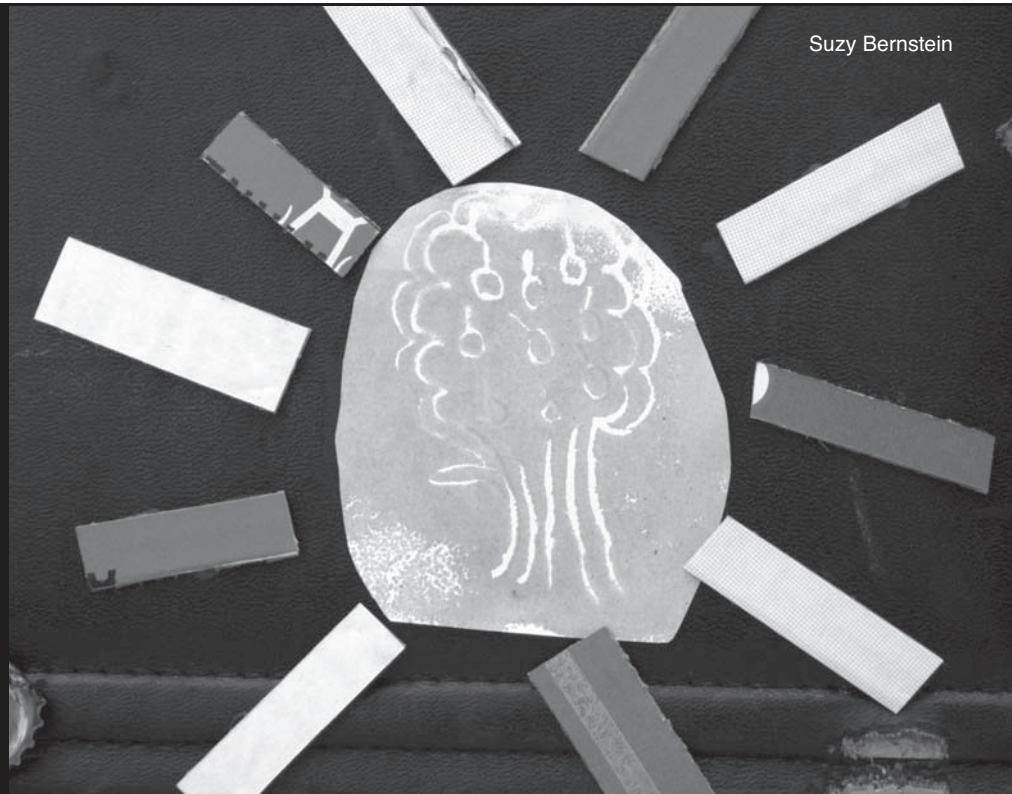


“I thought about this tree that is at my home”

The Suitcase Project and migrating children

South Africa gives little assistance to the thousands of traumatised and migrating children that enter its borders. **Glynis Clacherty** tells of the Suitcase Project that gives some of these children the space to heal and move on.



Suzy Bernstein

This tree in my suitcase, I call it the peace tree.

It is for peace and love. At my country I used every time to stand under a tree. I thought about this tree that is at my home. It means a lot to me. It was a very big tree. I used to stand under that tree. It was a mango tree. I would sit there with my sister. Then we can talk. It was close to our house, and when it was hot we would sit there nearly

the whole night and talk under that tree.

I made a special seat to sit in the tree, and I would sit in the tree and think. I was seven or ten, I think. That tree is a blessing on me. I think about that tree a lot, so I put it in my suitcase so I could take it with me wherever I go.

I lost my house where I used to live as a family, and now I am not living as a

family. I liked the gathering in this house as a family, because we gather and share what we have together – in mind, soul and in body. But now we cannot share. I lost the house. I cannot say I'll bring it back the same. I might replace it someday in the future, but it won't be the same as this. When my dream comes true and I finally make it, there will be a lot of trees in my house!



Suzy Bernstein

On the previous page these are the words of Pascal, a 15-year-old boy from DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) who now lives in Hillbrow in Johannesburg. Trees are often mentioned by children who belong to the Suitcase Project. There are big trees that they sheltered under when it rained, trees they climbed and fell out of. One boy remembers a tree he planted with his grandfather's help in the family garden in Burundi. He was little and his grandfather told him that he would one day see the tree grown and tall. But he and his brother fled the war in Burundi leaving the tree and his grandfather behind.

The Suitcase Project is an art and storytelling healing project in Hillbrow that works with migrant children and young people from the local area. The children come from Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Angola, Ethiopia, Somalia and Zimbabwe. Most of them are unaccompanied and living alone in Johannesburg. Some lost their parents in the war they escaped from, others were separated from parents on the

journey to South Africa, some of the older children came alone to find work and send money back to their families. The latter are often heads of their households.

Some of the younger children live with foster parents but most rent rooms with other young people in Hillbrow. Some manage to go to school and others spend their time doing part-time work or looking for work.

Most of the children and young people have been displaced by war. Initially the Project worked with refugee children who could access refugee status in South Africa, but more recently it has begun to work with Zimbabwean children who are coming to South Africa to look for work to support families in Zimbabwe. Many of these are orphans.

What characterises all of them is that they have been displaced. They have left behind people they love and familiar places and things. Many come from rural areas where they lived in cohesive, supportive communities.

They now find themselves in

one of the most violent and densely populated cities in Africa and they have to survive. Many children do not have proper papers, and spend their lives dodging the ever-present police who seek out illegal immigrants in Hillbrow. Members of the group have been arrested for not having papers and some have even ended up at Lindela Detention Centre and have been deported.

The struggle for money, for food and rent is ongoing and the older children often move from one shared room to another, moving when the person who is paying rent and buying food loses patience.

The children talk a lot too about the xenophobia they experience everyday.

In taxis people talk about them. They say things like, 'Here are refugees and they came to our country to steal our money and we don't have work because of them.' One day I was going to church and this lady in the taxi she did ask the driver, 'Why did you have to stop for her she is refugee!' They call us



Suzy Bernstein

makwerekere. If you do your research you will find that there are good people who don't call you lekwarekware. It is not everybody who like to say things like that. But it makes you to feel very bad inside when people say things like that to you."

The Suitcase Project, which started in 2000, uses an innovative art and storytelling approach to help the children and young people deal with some of these problems.

Firstly, the project is aimed at healing memories and giving young people a sense that there is more to their story than trauma and sadness. This work is done through old suitcases. The project began working with suitcases because, just as the migrant children have been on a journey, so too have the old suitcases and they give the children an object to work on that will resonate with their own experience.

Using many different art media such as drawing, painting, printing, wax resist and collage each child chooses a suitcase, and then they begin to tell the story of their present lives through the artwork on the outside of the suitcase.

Once they feel the outside is

finished, they begin working on the inside. The insides of the suitcases are about memories of their pasts - good memories and bad memories. The suitcase is a powerful way of creating some emotional distance between the traumatic things that happened to them as each week they can close the suitcase and leave the bad memories behind and get on with their present lives.

The artwork is then used as a focus for informal storytelling. Sometimes in small groups, sometimes alone, children bring a piece of artwork, sit under the tree in the school quad where they work and tell the story behind it. They are always given the choice to do this.

The children acknowledge the value of the storytelling as a healing thing. "It is a must to tell, because when a problem is in your heart there is no solution, and it makes you angry. But when you talk it makes you better."

Using the narrative therapy approach of Epston and White the storytelling allows the children and young people to begin seeing that they are not just victims of war or refugees with no power over their lives. As they recall their

home countries they begin to claim their own national identities, which they often hide because of xenophobia, and feel pride in their countries. They often put their country flags in the suitcases.

They also remember good memories like trees, grandparents and games they played. They also remember difficult things like running away, but sometimes reflecting on the story allows them to think about these traumatic events differently. For example, one Rwandan boy who ran away from Rwanda during the genocide spent a whole morning cutting out shoes from magazines to glue on to his suitcase. When he was asked "Paul, why all the shoes?" he answered, "They remind me that I walked. I walked and walked and walked. I was a small boy but I walked. They remind me that I was a survivor that things were very bad and I was only ten years old, but I walked and walked. And I survived. The shoes remind me of surviving."

He was beginning to see that he was a survivor and not a victim. This kind of healing work has allowed the children and young people to deal in some measure with their past and move on. As they move through the project many of the children have joined local churches and youth projects integrating with South African young people. Without the stepping stone the Project provides we believe they would stay hidden within their trauma and find it difficult to integrate.

The second aim of the Suitcase Project is advocacy. When the first group was formed in 2000 one young woman asked, "Help me make a book about my story. People need to know why we are here. We

REFUGEES IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has been a country of immigration for hundreds of years, and the country's mines and farms have relied on migrant labour from all over southern Africa. After a long history of persecuting the majority of its citizens and sending exiles throughout the world, the end of apartheid has made South Africa an attractive destination for significant numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from conflict-ridden countries across the continent.

There are presently almost 150 000 refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa. Though this number is small compared to the camps in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and elsewhere in Africa, many suspect that the true number of refugees in South Africa is much higher. The largest number, approximately 30 000, are from the DRC, with significant groups from Somalia, Angola, Burundi, Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as growing numbers of Zimbabweans.

The South African government, in collaboration with the UNHCR and other bodies, is helping to return Angolan and Rwandan refugees. Many of these are reluctant to leave, however, and are likely to join the hundreds of thousands of other undocumented migrants in the country.

Unlike most countries on the continent, South Africa does not maintain refugee camps and refugees get little direct assistance. Rather, the country has adopted a rights-based approach, which formally allows refugees the right to work, move freely within the country and access social services such as education and health care.

In practice, however, there are significant problems in accessing these rights. Many would-be asylum seekers are refused access to government offices if they cannot pay bribes. Others wait years to be granted formal refugee status, and then still face difficulties in acquiring identity documents and accessing services. Hostility from the police, government, service providers, and South African citizens makes life difficult, and some refugees have even been deported by an overzealous and corrupt immigration control system. The government has undertaken to reform this system, but change is slow in coming.

don't choose to come here. They need to know."

Most migrant children live on the edges of society, they remain hidden from view, largely to protect themselves. So one of the Project aims is to raise awareness about migrant children and the issues they face. The suitcases have been exhibited in a number of places. The first group of children also recorded some of their stories and these have been published in a book *The Suitcase Stories*.

"We made these suitcases for some of the people out there. There are rich people out there who live large. They don't know how poor people, like refugees, live. They don't know. They got to know."

LB

The Suitcase Project is run by the Reginald Orsmond Counselling Services (ROCS) and can be contacted on 011 673 1473. "The Suitcase Stories" is published by Double Storey Books and is available from Exclusive Books for R164 or can be ordered through www.exclusivebooks.co.za or www.kalabari.net

It has been shortlisted for the Sunday Times Alan Paton Award.

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