



THE 'ISRAELIS' OF UGANDA

A grassroots initiative has brought 120 South Sudanese refugee children previously deported from Israel to a boarding school in Kampala **By Bernard Dichek** *Kampala, Uganda*



COURTESY RAMI GUDOVITCH

Rami Gudovitch (center) with some of the 'Israeli' students at Trinity College in Kampala

TRINITY COLLEGE in Uganda's capital city of Kampala is a boarding school that follows the strictest of British educational traditions. Classes are taught in English, students wear neatly-pressed uniforms and corporal punishment is administered by some of the teachers for transgressions as slight as failing to do homework.

It seems like an odd place to hear Hebrew spoken, but that's what happens when deputy headmaster Alex Gumisiriza takes an Israeli visitor on a tour. As they enter each classroom, the students immediately jump to their feet.

"Good morning, class."

"Good morning, sir!"

"We have a visitor here from Israel," says Gumisiriza, turning to his guest who greets the class in Hebrew. Broad smiles spread across the faces of many of the students. "*Boker or,*" they reciprocate in Hebrew.

The Hebrew-speaking students at Trinity College are the children of South Sudanese refugees who were deported from Israel in 2012. How these youngsters – about 120 of them altogether – ended up in a boarding school in Kampala is a tale with many twists and turns, that sharply contrasts the warmth of grassroots Israelis with the cold shoulder of governments in Europe, Egypt and Israel.

The children are the second-generation

survivors of the genocide committed by Sudan's tyrannical President Omar al-Bashir in South Sudan and in the Darfur region of North Sudan. Since the early 1990s, al-Bashir's militias have killed or starved to death an estimated two million people, and caused many to flee north across the border into Egypt.

In Egypt, the refugees have often received harsh treatment, leading many to seek refuge in other countries. The desire to leave Egypt grew more intense in 2005 after dozens of Sudanese women and children were killed by police gunfire during a peaceful protest in front of the UN building in Cairo. Unable to reach Europe where



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governments refused to give them sanctuary, some of the refugees decided to make their way across the Sinai desert and try their luck in Israel.

In the short-run, it turned out to be a good decision. The Israeli government initially adopted a laissez-faire attitude. Groups of Israelis who sympathized with their suffering, especially student and youth movement organizations, befriended them and offered clothing and support. The hard-working refugees quickly found jobs, filling a shortage of workers for hotels and restaurants in Tel Aviv, Eilat, Arad, and other cities. The refugee children were soon attending local schools and striking up warm friendships with their Israeli classmates.

But as more and more Africans began to pour into Israel, including a large influx of Eritreans fleeing torture and the risk of death from Eritrea's dictatorial regime, groups of Israelis began to object to their presence, and politicians looked for ways to repatriate them to Africa.

When South Sudan declared its independence in 2011 and established diplomatic relations with Israel, interior minister Eli Yishai decided to send the South Sudanese

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refugees back to their native country, despite objections from the leaders of Israeli refugee organizations who protested that the situation in South Sudan was still too volatile and that their lives would be at risk.

"I couldn't understand why we had to leave Israel," Trinity College student Aywin Gabriel, 17, tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "All my friends were in Israel and I felt like it was my country," adds Gabriel, who lived in the southern town of Arad from the age of 8 to 15.

Almost overnight, Gabriel, along with 900 other South Sudanese refugees, who had lived in Israel for about seven years, found herself in Juba, one of the most im-

poverished cities in the world where living conditions had been further eroded by a decade of fighting.

"I came from a good place and suddenly there was nothing to eat. You had to boil water to drink it. There was no electricity or toilets and many were sick with malaria," Gabriel recalls. Within a few months of the children's arrival in Juba in 2012, some had already perished from diseases and others had lost their parents in renewed attacks by the militias.

"At night it was really scary, you could hear people being killed," says Gabriel.

The sounds of fighting in Juba could be heard as far away as Israel during phone conversations the refugees had with their Israeli friends.

Some of those friends decided to take action. "I knew we had to act quickly," Rami Gudovitch, an Israeli academic who for many years worked as a volunteer with the refugees, relates to *The Report*.

Jerusalem-born Gudovitch, 45, started making friends in Tel Aviv's refugee community in 2007 when he moved into a neighborhood where many refugees lived after returning from New York where he



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South Sudanese refugee students (above and left) at Trinity College in Kampala

had completed his PhD studies in analytic philosophy at Columbia University. His neighborly hospitality soon grew into unofficial advocacy work on behalf of the refugees in their struggles with the authorities.

Gudovitch became a well-known figure in Tel Aviv's Levinsky Park at the library for refugees and migrants where he read stories to young children. He also was among those who had tried to convince the government not to send the South Sudanese back to Juba.

After receiving more and more frantic phone calls from the deportees in Juba, Gudovitch worked out a rescue plan together with fellow refugee activist Lea Miller-Forstat, who had traveled to Juba to see the situation for herself.

"We managed to put a group of children and parents on a bus heading across the border into Uganda," he recalls. Following a harrowing 20-hour ride across bumpy unpaved roads, the children met Gudovitch in Kampala where they started knocking on doors looking for a school that would take them.

The institution that turned out to be the most promising was Trinity College, a

boarding school housing 600 students.

Gumisiriza relates that the children arrived just in the nick of time.

"When they arrived here, they had been through a kind of psychological torture, uprooted from one country after another," recalls Gumisiriza, adding that it was more than just their emotional condition that was at stake.

"I can't guarantee that any of them would still be alive if they had stayed in Juba," he says, pointing out that, because the children had grown up in Israel, they were especially vulnerable to the diseases prevalent in Africa. "If you were born in heaven and then are taken to hell, you may not survive for a single day," he wryly observes.

TODAY, MORE than two years after arriving in Kampala, the refugee children are still trying to sort out their feelings. They are grateful for having been rescued from the destitute conditions and fighting in Juba, but complain about the rigorous day-long classes at Trinity and the punishments. But their most dominant feeling is a longing for their friends in Israel and the Israeli way of life. They continue to speak

Hebrew among themselves, and they and their Ugandan classmates refer to them as "the Israelis."

"Sometimes I think it was good that we came here because we learn English the way it should be taught, but I want to go back to Israel," says Acho, 17, fighting back tears. "I'm sad because I know that I'll never be able to see my friends again. To this day, I don't understand why we had to leave, it all happened so suddenly."

Tedo, a tall athletically built teenager of 16, is especially disappointed that there are no basketball courts in Kampala since the sport is not played in Uganda.

"I thought that Israel was where I would make my dream of being a professional basketball player come true," he reminisces, noting that he played competitively in Tel Aviv and continues to be in touch via the Internet with Alon, his coach.

Among the long list of things in Israel Kur says he misses are "rollerskating, Mizrahi (Hebrew-Oriental) music and my teachers. The teachers in Israel were willing to talk to us about our personal problems and they would never physically punish us. At



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worst, they would call in your parents for a talk,” he points out.

Gumisiriza admits that dealing with the expectations of the children who were educated in Israeli schools has been an eye-opener for his staff.

“The kids from Israel are very assertive and open, which is contrary to the upbringing here in Africa,” he says. “These kids think that a teacher is somebody who is guiding them, almost as if the kids are the bosses. But here in Uganda the teacher is the boss and it is very challenging for them because they want an explanation for every decision. If somebody does wrong and you administer a punishment, it is horrible from their point of view.”

Gumisiriza adds that the school has tried to find ways to better understand the Israeli-educated kids by holding seminars with Gudovitch, who has tried to explain the Israeli system to them. “We have come to realize that they are not just trying to be rebellious or rude. They are just asking questions,” Gumisiriza says.

Gudovitch continues to make regular visits to see the children and provide them with advice. He and Miller-Forstat have joined forces with the “Become” organization to raise funding for the children’s tuition.

“Many of the contributors are Israelis who knew the children while living alongside them in the same poor neighborhoods in Israel,” says Gudovitch. “They themselves have limited financial resources, yet they continue to support the Sudanese kids as if they were their own children.”

Gumisiriza points out that he would like to think that the challenges the refugee children have faced may have molded them into the kind of people who someday will be able to go back to their country and change things. “They want to be doctors and social workers, to do the kind of work where you help other people.”

As for things changing in Israel, Gudovitch is not overly optimistic. Still, he believes there is some room for hope as

a result of the recent Supreme Court decision to overturn legislation that forced African refugees and migrants to be detained in a holding facility.

“It could be that the government may yet come to a more humane policy,” he says. “I am still hoping that the government will stop looking at the asylum seekers as enemies and recognize the moral opportunity in line with Jewish history that giving them refuge offers. By granting them work permits, they can contribute to the Israeli economy with working hands just like other residents.”

Today, Israel remains one of the few Western democracies that does not have a clear refugee policy, leaving refugees in a gray area.

It’s clear that a humanitarian policy of the kind that Gudovitch advocates would have saved the South Sudanese and their Israeli friends from much sorrow. It also could enrich Israeli society itself by gaining people with high-motivation and skills. ■

Little Light

The displaced South Sudanese students at Trinity College are not the first group in Kampala to receive rank-and-file support from Israelis. Since 2007, Little Light Uganda, an organization largely sponsored and run by Israelis, has been schooling children in the Kampala slum of Namuwongo.

“Because their parents can’t afford the school fees, most of the children in Namuwongo don’t go to school,” says Resty Kyomukama, explaining that it was Israeli visitors who wondered why the streets of Namuwongo were full of children during school hours that led to the founding of Little Light.

Today, Little Light runs a nursery program for 60 children aged 3-6, and an after-school leadership program for more than 90 children who go on to primary and high school.

The program has been staffed over the years by more than 50 post-army Israeli volunteers and sponsors that include kibbutzim, as well as Israeli individuals and companies. Kyomukama, who grew up in Namuwongo, is today a student in Jerusalem at Hebrew University’s Glocal Program in Community Development, a connection made through one of the Israeli volunteers at Little Light.

Yael Giar, currently doing a three-month volunteering stint, notes that her participation in the program has given her a chance to get to know Africa in a way that would not have been possible just from touring.

“It’s also given me ideas about directions for my university studies and career,” she adds.

B.D.



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